

The Story of Fort Myers

The History of the Land of the Caloosahatchee
and Southwest Florida

by Karl H. Grismer

*1. Fort Myers, Fla. - History
17*

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of the 1949 edition
with a foreword
by Ernest W. Hall

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COVER: Parade on First Street, Fort Myers, Florida, February 22, 1912.

Courtesy of Carl Roberts.

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FOREWORD

"The Story of Fort Myers" by Karl H. Grismer is an important history of southwest Florida in general and of Lee County and Fort Myers in particular, from Pre-Columbian times to 1949. Considerable information is given concerning the Caloosa Indians and their early contact with the Spanish explorers.

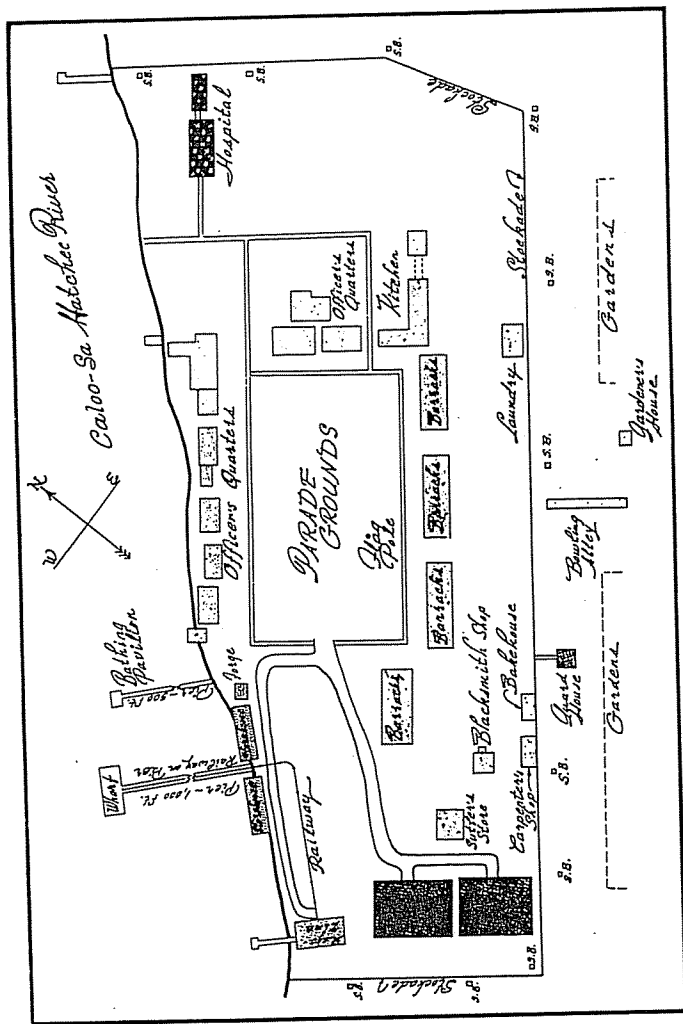
The decline of the Caloosas (mostly from diseases brought in by the Spanish), the Second Seminole War, the establishment of Fort Myers in 1850, the Third Seminole War and the departure from Fort Myers of Billy Bowlegs and 203 other Seminoles, and Union Troops in Fort Myers during the Civil War: all are important episodes in this book, as are the following events.

Shortly after the Civil War, the first permanent settlers arrived in Fort Myers. Lee County was created in 1887 from Monroe County with Fort Myers the county seat. During the Florida Boom in 1923, Hendry and Collier Counties were created from Lee County by legislative act. The national depression of the 1930's and America's entrance into World War II brought many profound changes to Southwest Florida.

The Southwest Florida Historical Society, headquartered in Fort Myers, realizing the importance of preserving the history, the culture and the heritage of Fort Myers and Southwest Florida for native Floridians and newcomers alike is now reprinting this important historical book: "The Story of Fort Myers" by Karl H. Grismer.

Ernest W. Hall
Southwest Florida Historical Society

MAR 16 1984



Taken from an old Army map by Ben E. Conners
MAP OF FORT MYERS AS IT WAS IN 1856—During the last years of the Seminole War Fort Myers was one of the largest forts in South Florida. Various buildings in the fort are shown on this map, originally drawn for Capt. Winfield Scott Hancock in 1856. Sentry boxes near the stockade are indicated by "S. B." The 1,000-foot pier was located close to the present Hendry Street and the hospital just west of the present Fowler.

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of repairing all makes of autos. He owned a marine ways and machine shop at the end of the Hendry Street dock but many car owners, particularly women, were afraid to run their cars out to his place, so he set up a garage on Jackson Street. Old timers say their cars were in King's garage almost as much of the time as they were on the road.

Despite the execrable roads which then plagued motorists, the number of car owners slowly increased. Several agencies were opened. One of the first was a Ford agency. And one of the first customers of the Ford establishment was the famous Henry Ford himself.

The motor king came to Fort Myers in February, 1914, accompanied by John Burroughs, the noted writer and naturalist, to visit Edison. Before he left Detroit he sent an order to the Fort Myers Ford dealer to have three "Tin Lizzies" ready for him on his arrival. Ford and Burroughs came in on Monday, February 23, and were greeted by a crowd of more than two thousand persons. They were escorted to the Edison home by every automobile owner in town—all 31 of them. The parade was headed by the three Fords Henry had ordered. He gave one of them to Edison, the second to Burroughs, and kept the third for his own use. For many, many years thereafter he drove the car around Fort Myers whenever he came to town. He was asked often why he didn't replace it with a newer model and always replied: "Shucks, why should I? A Ford never wears out."

Perhaps foreseeing the day when automobiles would be "mowing 'em down" in Fort Myers, Carl F. Roberts in 1908 decided that something should be done about Fort Myers' down-at-the-heels cemetery. He said it was a disgrace to the community—and it was.

The first cemetery in Fort Myers was opened by the Hendry family during the 1870's. It was located far out in the country near the edge of Billy's Creek at what is now Henderson Avenue, south of the present cemetery. Members of the Hendry family and their kinfolk have been buried there ever since.

To provide a cemetery for the public, the Fort Myers Cemetery Company was organized in 1886 by Capt. F. A. Hendry, W. P. Gardner, W. M. Hendry, T. E. Langford and J. J. Blount. A forty-acre tract at the present location was purchased from Major James Evans for \$50 and town residents began making burials there.

Practically nothing was done to improve the cemetery, however, until 1908 when Roberts, owner of the town's only funeral establishment, began criticising its appearance. Incorporators of the company then living appointed him as their agent. Under his direction, the entire plot was grubbed and cleared, driveways were graded, a concrete fence was erected, the plot was re-surveyed, and stakes set at all lot corners, and a large map was drawn to show the location of every grave.

To pay for the improvements, Roberts was authorized by the company incorporators to levy assessments against the lot owners. Some of them paid but many of them didn't. By the end of 1910 Roberts found he had spent \$836 more than he had received, so he decided he would let

somebody else do the work. The Woman's Civic Club undertook the maintenance task and during 1912 gave entertainments of all kinds to raise money.

While Roberts was working hard in 1908 to beautify the cemetery, a nationally famous man died in Lee County who had no intention of ever being buried in Lee County ground, or anywhere else, because he was "immortal." That man was Dr. Cyrus R. Teed, the one and only "Koresh."

The Rise and Fall of New Jerusalem

Few motorists who drive today through the picturesque little hamlet of Estero realize that it once was the site of one of the world's strangest, most grandiose, weirdest communistic developments—New Jerusalem, whose inhabitants thought they lived inside the earth.

The founder of New Jerusalem was Dr. Cyrus R. Teed, described in the Chicago Herald in April, 1894, as "an undersized, smooth shaven man of 54 whose brown, restless eyes glow and burn like live coals. He directs the destinies of a 'new race of men,' the 'sons of God.' He exerts a strange, mesmerizing influence over his converts, particularly the other sex."

Teed was variously termed a religious fanatic or a fraud of top rank. Whatever he was, he won converts—and all their earthly possessions.

Born on a farm in Delaware County, New York, on October 18, 1839, Teed became an ardent Baptist early in life, like all his ancestors. He studied medicine with an uncle in Utica and later entered the New York Electric Medical College. During the Civil War he served in some kind of a medical corps.

In 1870, Dr. Teed "discovered" what he called "cellular cosmogony"—to most people an incomprehensible jumble of scientific, sociological and philosophical balderdash. Among other things, the learned doctor preached that the earth is a hollow sphere, 7,000 miles in diameter, and that the sun and moon and stars are all inside this sphere, along with all living and growing things.

Dr. Teed was first heard of publicly in Chicago in 1886 where he founded "The College of Life" and began to promulgate his doctrines. He soon had a flock of followers who gave up their family ties and all their possessions. He named his organization the "Society Arch Triumphant" and proclaimed himself "Cyrus, the Messenger," a composite of Christ, Buddha and all other Messiahs.

Deciding that the name "Cyrus" was not impressive enough, Dr. Teed later adopted the Hebrew equivalent of Cyrus—"Koresh." And he called his organization the Koreshan Unity.

The Chicago Herald reported that in April, 1894, Koresh had 4,000 followers and had collected \$60,000 in California alone. The first haven for his converts was at Washington Heights, near Chicago. Three out of four of his members were women. All money taken in went to the Koreshan Unity and the expenditure of it was supposed to be handled by twenty-five trustees—but the Herald said it wasn't.

"Dr. Teed is the absolute, irresponsible, immaculate and inviolate high muck-a-muck if there ever was one," said the Herald. "He is addressed with awe and trembling. . . . Neither his acts nor his motives are inquired into and his word is law—the only law."

Early in the 1890's Dr. Teed announced to his followers that the Lord had instructed him to go to Florida and establish a home for the Koreshans at Estero where Gustav Damkoehler had given him 300 acres of fine land and where he had bought 1,000 acres more with Koreshan funds. He said that the Florida home of the Koreshans was to be called New Jerusalem.

The Koreshan holdings were surveyed during the winter of 1893-94 and New Jerusalem was platted, with streets 400 feet in width, marvelous parks, and an area large enough to accommodate 8,000,000 Koreshans!

Thirty colonists were sent to Estero during that same winter and erected a few cottages and other small buildings. The main building program started the following year. A sawmill was put in operation and huge frame dormitories were erected, one for the men and one for the women, because, being celibates, husbands and wives were to live separately. A huge dining hall also was constructed, along with a print shop and many other structures.

Dr. Teed never approached his goal of 8,000,000 followers who wanted to inhabit New Jerusalem. Actually, only two hundred decided to live celibate lives and turn over everything they had to Dr. Teed's care. Many of those who did, later regretted their decision. Time and again the Fort Myers Press carried stories about Koreshans who had left the colony after trying in vain to get their money back. The paper also carried stories about Koreshans committing suicide.

The Press condemned Koresh unmercifully and so did newspapers throughout the country. For instance, the Tallahassee Sun said March 16, 1907: "Teed is not the first rascal who has made religion a cloak for his designs against the property and personal liberty of others. But he is the only one now allowed to do business in the state."

During 1908 the nation's press began bearing down on Teed harder than ever. Many newspapers sent correspondents to Estero to investigate his colony. Teed said he was being "crucified." The newspapers bore down more. And then Teed died—on Tuesday, December 22, 1908.

All activities at New Jerusalem were halted. No one talked above a whisper. He had told his followers that he was immortal; that after his "physical death" he would rise again, and ascend to Heaven, and that all the faithful would go with him. Everyone prayed. A constant watch was kept over his body. After two days his followers began having horrible suspicions. The body of their beloved messiah was beginning to decay—and give forth noisome odors. And then, after four days, Dr. William Hanson, acting health officer of Lee County, appeared in New Jerusalem and issued orders that Koresh be buried forthwith.

Reluctantly and sorrowfully, the Koreshans heeded the demand. They secured a bathtub, put the body of Koresh into it and placed it in a brick reinforced concrete tomb at the end of Estero Island. There it re-

mained, year after year, until the great hurricane of October 25, 1921. Waves swept over the island and when the storm died down, the tomb of Koresh was gone. Not a trace of his remains was ever found.

A few of Teed's zealous followers continued to carry on the colony after his death. They farmed and they fished, and lived exemplary lives. Their newspaper, the American Eagle, edited by Allen Andrews, became one of the best horticultural papers in the country. But the number of Koreshans steadily dwindled. By late 1947, when they began fighting among themselves and engaging in a lawsuit regarding ownership of Koreshan property, only twelve of the original members remained.

New Jerusalem had risen—but it also fell.

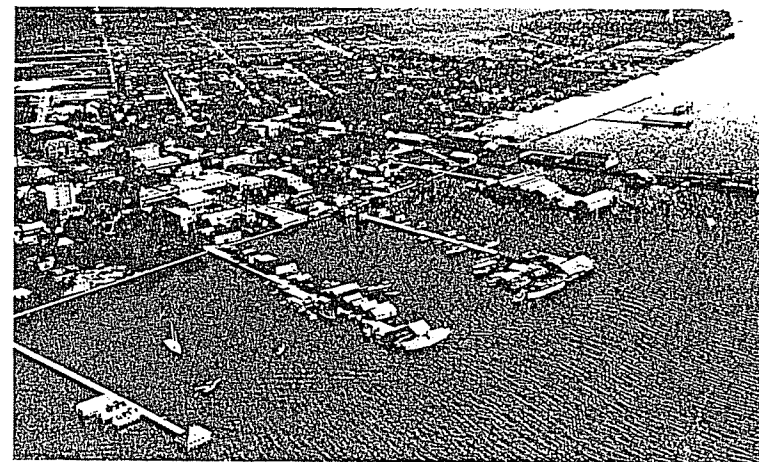
Then There Came a Boomlet

The mysterious Everglades, long the inaccessible refuge of the wily Indian, furnished the spark in 1909 for setting off a Florida boomlet.

After Hamilton Disston's ill-fated drainage venture during the 1880's nothing was done to reclaim the Glades for more than fifteen years. Work was resumed under the direction of one of the most colorful men in Florida's political history—Napoleon B. Broward.

Famed for his exploits as a smuggler of munitions to the hard-pressed Cuban patriots in the days before the Spanish-American War, Broward ran for governor in 1904 on the platform of "the Glades must be reclaimed for the people." He was elected after a bitter campaign and soon after he took office, dredging operations were resumed.

Broward knew next to nothing about the engineering problems involved and neither did his subordinates but they were favored by Nature.



Downtown Fort Myers and the waterfront as they appeared from the air in 1924, before construction of the Yacht Basin.

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