

The building of the Florida Southern Railroad southward from Bartow to Punta Gorda in 1886 brought about a wave of immigration to the small settlements located along the route of the line, and they began prospering during the 1890's. These towns included Wauchula, Bowling Green, Zolfo Springs, Fort Meade, Arcadia and Fort Ogden, and Punta Gorda.²

The frontier has always been the haven of religions not fully understood or appreciated by more conservative groups. History has recorded the movement of Mormons to Utah, the Quakers to Pennsylvania, and the Pilgrims to Plymouth in search of a place where their religion might be practiced without hindrance by others. Southwestern Florida was to be a haven for one such group. In 1894, Dr. Cyrus Read Teed decided to come to Florida with the members of his sect, known as the Koreshan Unity. This group believed that the earth was a hollow sphere and all life, including the sun, moon, and stars, was contained within this sphere. Teed's followers were requested to sacrifice their family life, become celibate, and give up their possessions.

A settlement was opened at Estero during 1893-94 for the Koreshans, and two hundred of them from New York, Illinois, and California came to live there. L. W. Bubbett, who settled at Estero in 1895, recalled how the place seemed to be so much a part of the wilderness. Deer, turkeys, oysters, and fish were the principal items of food, but there were long stretches of no food and no money and much sickness from bad water. Pine was cut on the mainland and floated to the sawmill on Estero Island, or Fort Myers Beach, as it is now called.³ Some of the settlers became disillusioned while living in the large ramshackle frame dormitories, leading a celibate life, and living in a communistic society with Teed the only wealthy person. The only contact the community had with the outside world was by means of a boat. Cyrus Teed was respected as a great leader by his followers, but the newspaper editor at nearby Fort Myers was not so certain.⁴ His newspaper reported that many citizens in Chicago wanted to lynch Teed, and some husbands were most angry when they told about their marriages which were wrecked by Teed. Sidney C. Miller sued Teed for \$110,000 when his wife joined Teed's group, or "harem," as the Fort Myers newspaper called it.⁵ After the death of Teed in 1908 the settlement declined to a point where it was no longer an effective force. One outstanding feature of the colony was its

excellent newspaper, *The American Eagle*. Allen Andrews, the editor, built the paper into one of the best small-town newspapers in the United States.

The Ten Thousand Islands have long been a haven for those who wished to escape from civilized life and find a refuge where they could not be disturbed. During the Civil War, deserters from the Confederate Army hid in the mazes of the island and remained there long after the fighting had ceased.⁶ At times those who had committed crimes in other communities fled to the haven offered by the Ten Thousand group and supported themselves by hunting and trapping. Sometimes they killed one another in disputes concerning claims to hides or bird rookeries.

One of the most depraved persons to establish himself near the Ten Thousand Islands was a man named Watson, who opened a sugar plantation at Chatham Bend, about eighteen miles south of Chokoloskee. He would go to Fort Myers and other towns to obtain employees for his plantation and kill the workers when they demanded their pay. Finally one Negro escaped and told the people at Chokoloskee what had happened. When Watson came to Smallwood's store at Chokoloskee to obtain supplies, he was killed by an aroused mob.⁷

The people living along the coastline and on the islands near Fort Myers and Charlotte Harbor were forced to depend entirely upon sail and motor shipping for their supplies. There were several well-known boat operators who helped supply the needs of the islanders. Captain William Collier owned two large two-masted schooners which operated from Tampa to Chokoloskee and Marco to Key West.⁸ Edward Wotitzky sold dry goods to the fishermen and others all along the coast. The boat would be anchored at some trading point, and prospective customers visited the ship by rowboat or canoe. Wotitzky's base of operations was Punta Gorda, and he became Charlotte County's first Supervisor of Registration.⁹

Most unique of the coastal trade boats was the mailboat which operated from Naples to settlements in the Ten Thousand Islands. John Whidden, who operated the boat prior to World War I, has related his adventures in a most interesting account:¹⁰

During the winter I made daily trips but only three times a week in summer. My first boat was too small so I got a 22-foot boat with a 8-foot beam and a 8-horse engine. I could carry ten or

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