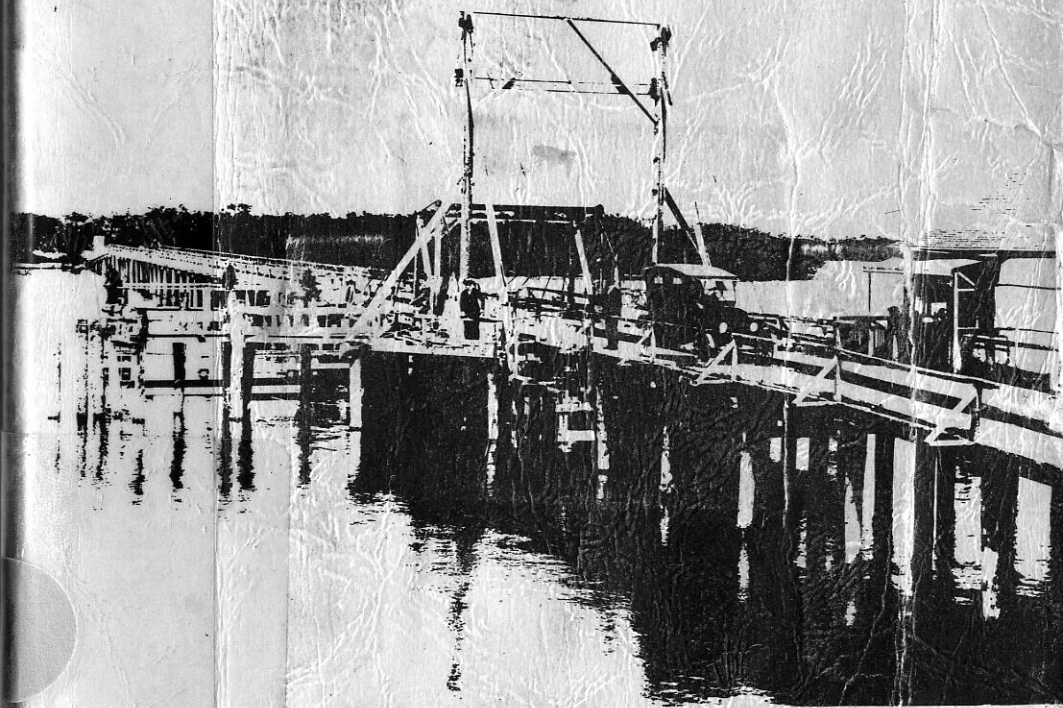


History  
of  
Fort Myers Beach  
Florida



by

Rolfe F. Schell

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# History of Fort Myers Beach, Florida

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Outstanding in their help and interest were Ruth and Jeff Brame whose interest I indulged for hours reminiscing and counter checking happenings from the mid-forties on.

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Of course no historian could work without reference works which were obtained by librarian Jayne P. Coles of the Fort Myers Beach Free Public Library.

Rolfe F. Schell

## CHAPTER ONE

## Prehistoric Times

The earliest evidence of prehistoric life on what is now Florida, dates to the Cretaceous Period some 120 million years ago. A well core brought up by the Amerada Petroleum Corporation in 1955, contained a partial skeleton of an aquatic turtle from a depth of 9,210 feet.

Paleontological evidence in the Crystal River area of Florida reveals that during the later Eocene Period, the now extinct whale-like *Basilosaurus* swam in the Atlantic Ocean and Gulf of Mexico. Over forty feet in length, with an eel-like form for aquatic speed and maneuverability, they were the predecessors of the true whales of the Pleistocene Period. The *Basilosaurus* had serrated teeth, much like the present day shark.

Excavations in the Gilchrist County area disclosed that during the more recent Miocene Period, Florida sported a small three-toed horse (*Parahippus*), large bear rivaling the famed Kodiak in bulk and powerful teeth (*Amphicyon*), coyote-like dogs (*Tomarctus* and *Cynodesmus*) and long-snouted camels (*Floridatragulus*).

Farther north, in Leon County, during the same period, rhinoceros (*Aphelops*) and camels (*Northokemus*) were found.

Nearer to Estero Island (then in the center of the peninsula), in Bone Valley of Polk County, was unveiled stratification from upper Miocene through lower Pleistocene Periods, a most unusual condition which tends to indicate a cataclysm during this period.

Vertebrates, known only to the Pliocene, are intermingled with those of the later Pleistocene. The time span between the upper Miocene and lower Pleistocene represents some eight million years!



During the Pleistocene Period, when the Great Ice Age was upon the land and south Florida was a permanent winter resort, it must have looked much like the Great Plains of Africa during the 1800's with mammoths, mastodons, tapirs, bison, horses, rhinoceroses, camels, antelopes, giant sloths and saber tooth tigers roaming about. The horse, extinct when the Spanish explorers arrived, was in great abundance from the Eocene Period until 10,000 years ago. What caused the extinction is not known, but possibly the Ice Age or disease was the reason.

The "shoreline" of the "island" of Estero was then approximately eighty miles from the Gulf of Mexico. According to sedimentation tables, that was approximately 17,000 years ago. The elevation then would have been about 380 feet and the "island" located somewhere in the middle of the peninsula.

About 7,000 years later the waters of the Gulf of Mexico rose to where "Estero Island" was but 12 miles from the Gulf with an elevation of 60 feet.

Like all of the Gulf Coast areas, Florida has experienced a subsidence of land caused by earth movements, glaciation, deglaciation, erosion and deposition. It is the latter, deposition, in the form of sedimentation which is causing the present slow change in water depth. At a rate of 0.1 mm. per year (4" per century), this subsidence has gradually brought the Gulf of Mexico to where it now surrounds an exquisite parcel of land known as Estero Island. On this causeway-connected island of 3/8 of a mile wide by seven miles long, are the finest, safest beaches in the world.

During this period of 170 centuries, while the land area of the west coast of Florida was changing dramatically, the east coast changed little but for a decrease in elevation as the deep coastal water of the Atlantic permitted little shoreline difference. On the west coast, where are now low lying sandy beaches, were pine and mahogany forests preceded by jungles or veldt.

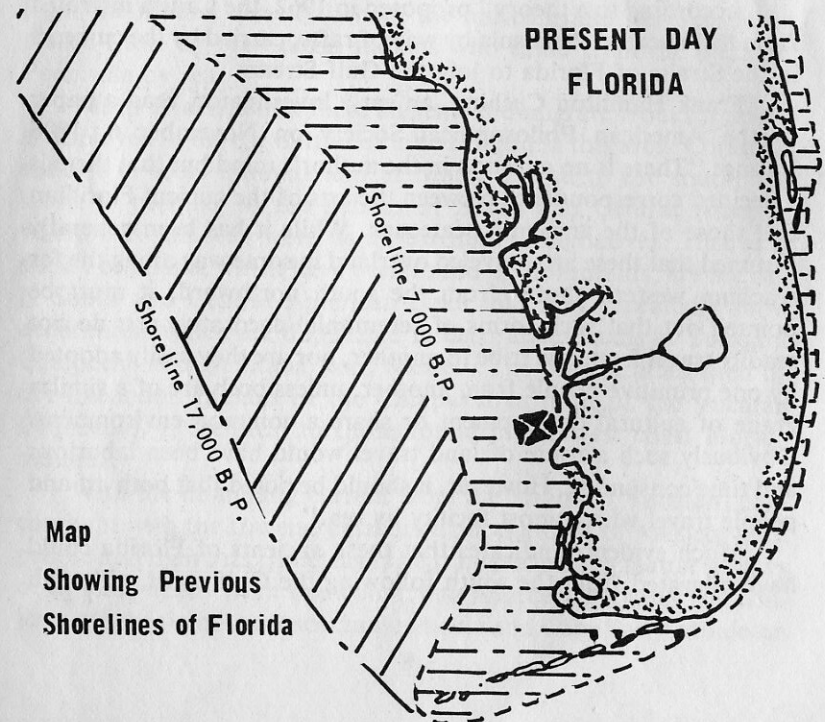
As the centuries passed, and the Gulf rose, the pines were driven inland seeking higher and drier land. The Spanish and early settlers cut down the mahogany trees for local consumption and export to the Old World until today there are scarcely a few score in the state.

Even today, signs of great pine trees are occasionally unearthed by erosion or violent storms, and their stumps are seen at or below the water's edge indicating that not too long ago there was

higher ground where the placid waters lap the salt-white shore.

On the bay side of the island, the subsidence has been far more rapid, caused by the connection of the Caloosahatchee with Lake Okeechobee in 1884-1888. In early times this long bay, which is the lower part of the Caloosahatchee, was called Bahia de Espiritu Santo by the Spanish. Prior to its connection to Lake Okeechobee, the "river" consisted of a narrow bay extending seventeen miles from the Gulf of Mexico to Beautiful Island above Fort Myers. From Beautiful Island and eastward, there was a flat, shallow drainage slough to the now extinct Lake Flirt. The river to Espiritu Santo Bay (now the Caloosahatchee River) flowed only during rainy seasons and for six months of the year could be easily waded across. The deeper true bay, of course, remained just that, a tidal bay.

By 1888 Hamilton Disston had finished the canal to Lake Okeechobee, and with the deepening of the slough to Espiritu Santo Bay at Beautiful Island, water commerce began, along with tons of silt into Estero Bay. It was, incidentally, this bay which afforded Hernando de Soto a safe harbor on his landing on May 30, 1539. Possibly others before and after him have used this same bay for their haven.



## CHAPTER TWO

100 B. C. to 1513 A. D.

Sometime about two thousand years ago, possibly earlier, the first settlers arrived at or near Estero Island. At that time, the elevation, according to William C. Lazarus's land subsidence tables, was 11 feet. On neighboring Mound Key, the elevation was 43 feet. It was on Mound Key where the Calusa or Caalus Indians first settled and later was founded the fort of San Anton by Pedro Menéndez de Avilá in late 1566.

According to a theory I proposed in 1962, the Calusa migrated from the Yucatán Peninsula by way of rafts, carried by the currents in the Straits of Florida to join the Gulf Stream.

Frank Hamilton Cushing, an early investigator, read a paper to the American Philosophical Society on November 6, 1896 stating: "There is no question in the author's mind but that there is a decided correspondence between the arts of the ancient Floridian and those of the ancient Yucatecans. While it has been generally assumed that these arts traveled overland in some way along the far reaching western shores from the south northward, it must be pointed out that such forms of ceremonial decorative arts do not readily travel from one tribe to another, nor are they easily adopted by one primitive people from another, unless both are of a similar grade of cultural development or share a common environment. Obviously such a route of land travel would have been laborious and time consuming. However, it should be noted that both art and people travel with utmost facility by sea."

Much evidence indicates that these ancients of Florida could have migrated from the south following the Gulf coast, although

100 B. C. to 1513 A. D.

previous popular theories contend that they came from the far north. As pointed out by Mr. Cushing, it is improbable indeed that the trek of several thousands of miles from the Guatemala area where the Quiche Maya and even farther remote Yucatán of the Yucatecan Maya could have been made without very radical changes in both life styles as well as art and religion. Most tribes travel as necessity dictates, based mainly on the agricultural or hunting needs. When the land, for lack of fertility, has become unproductive, or an area is fished or hunted out, then it is time for the tribe to move onward. This process, as it can be visualized, could take years, perhaps centuries to travel 1,000 miles, let alone the 4,000 miles from Guatemala.

That there are mounds and artifacts in the northern part of Florida, Mississippi, Alabama, etc. is not necessarily an indication of an overland trek, but more probably of sea landings from either direct voyages from Mexico and Yucatán or from the south Florida coast.

In the little museum of Fort Walton Beach, Florida, there are artifacts which, if displayed in Mexico, would be claimed as early Mayan. The artifacts were excavated by Eulee and William Lazarus from the mound directly behind the museum and were probably placed there by pre-Calusa Indians who came from the Yucatán Peninsula by sea.

Much evidence that these ancients did migrate from the south is displayed in the ear button or labret found in this area. Common enough in local mounds and at Marco Island to the south, the labret is peculiar to the natives of South and Central America where it is still seen worn as an earring by the natives. Throwing sticks, or atlatls, which have been found in the mounds, are not only South and Central American types, but they repeatedly show decorations which are duplicated in decorative details in Yucatán, Campeche and Quintana Roo, Mexico. The present atlatl used by the Lacondon Indians of the Chiapas area (part of the Yucatán Peninsula), is identical to those found in the west coast Florida mounds.

With the dominant current from the Straits of Yucatán, concomitant with the traverse currents from the Gulf of Mexico, such people and their arts could easily be transported in a matter of days or at least weeks from one country to another. Between Isla Mujeres off the tip of the Yucatán Peninsula and Cape San Antonio on



western Cuba, I have seen northward currents in excess of 35 miles per day. By drifting into the Gulf Stream to the north of Cabo Catoche about 25 degrees latitude, a raft would normally be carried eastward making a landfall anywhere from the Florida Keys to Cape Romano south of Marco Island.

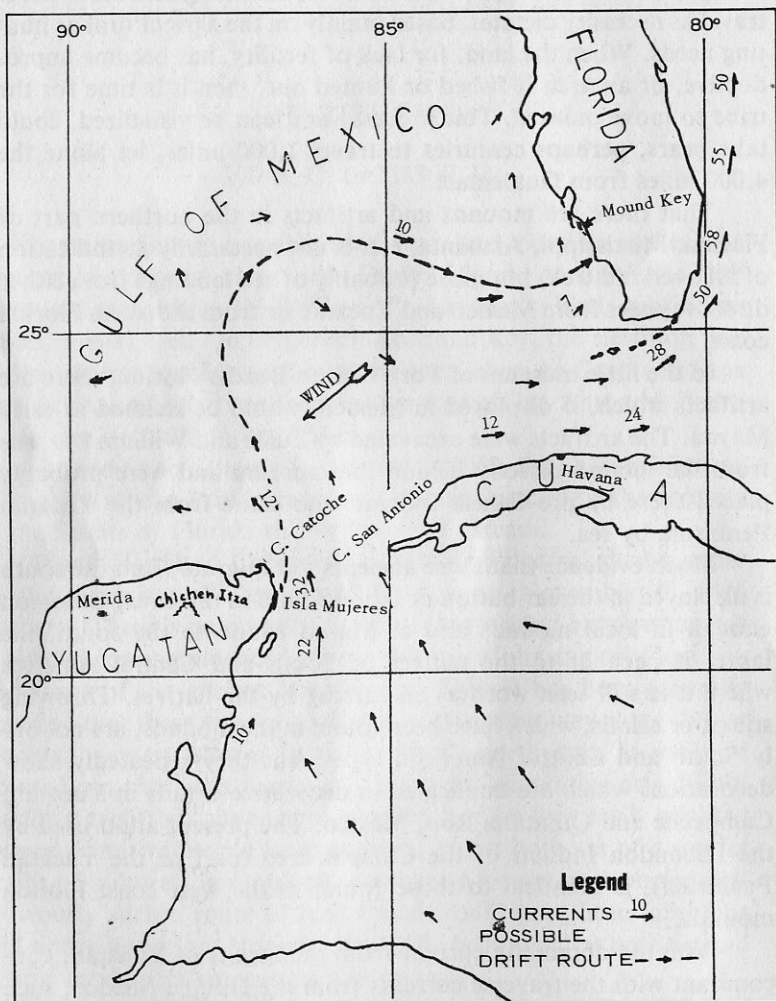


Chart showing ocean currents and possible drift of raft from Isla Mujeres, Mexico to Cape Romano, Florida.

On one of his voyages to the Indies, Christopher Columbus noted a particular type of bees wax in Cuba. Asking about it, he was informed that the wax was not from Cuba, but from the Mayas of Yucatán. Commerce between Cuba and Yucatán was apparently well established in the 1400's.

Canoes of great size and seaworthiness were encountered by the Great Admiral. On his third crossing, he encountered freighting canoes with cabins amidships. On his last voyage, near Bonacco, he overtook a canoe as long - "as a galley and 8 feet broad with a crew of 25 plus numerous women and children." There was a palm-thatched watertight structure in the center of the canoe. In Jamaica he found canoes up to 96 feet long and 8 feet of beam, made from a single tree trunk. While such canoes do not ply the seas today, modern Jamaican dugouts made from the silk-cotton tree hold 15 paddlers and considerable freight. With sand ballast and a sail, these canoes can make up to 15 knots.

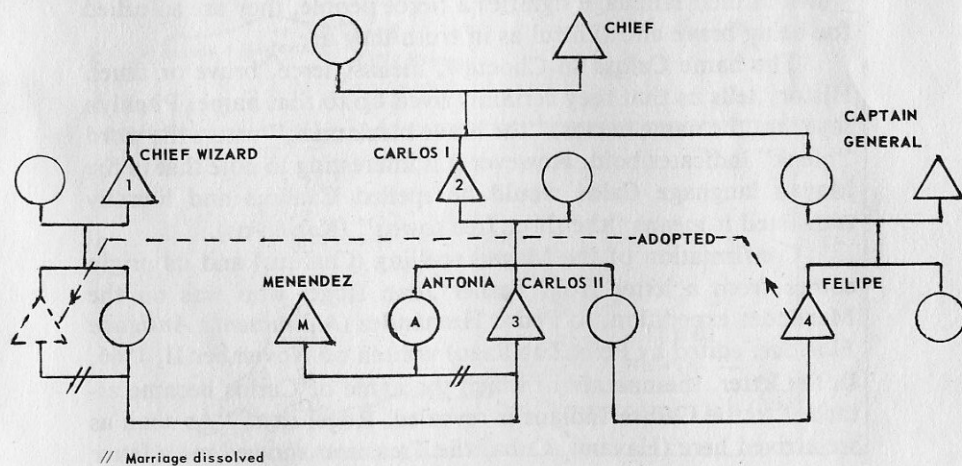
The name Calusa has been passed down through historic records as Calos, Caloosa, Callos, Carlos, Calusa and Caalus. An early report made in the 1560's by Hernando d'Escalante Fontaneda who was taken captive at the age of 13 by the Indians in 1545 and held captive for 17 years. He wrote in his memoirs after escaping: "In the territory of the Carlos, a province of Indians, which in their language signifies a fierce people, they are so called for being brave and skillful as in truth they are."

The name Calusa in Choctaw, means fierce, brave or cruel. History tells us that they certainly lived up to that name. Pitchlyn says that the name means, "the brave black man," where the word "black" indicates bold. However it is interesting to note that in the Mayan language Calos would be spelled Caaluus and literally translated it means "the three free towns" (Kah-lo-os).

Confirmation of the Mayan spelling (Caaluus) and its origin comes from a letter from Father Juan Rogel who was on the Menéndez expedition, to Pedro Hernández (*Monumenta Antiquae Floridae*, edited by Felix Zubillago) written on November 11, 1566. In the letter, the manner in which the name of Carlos became attached to the Calusa Indians is revealed. Rogel says: "As soon as we arrived here (Havana, Cuba) the Treasurer showed me a letter from the Governor (Menéndez) which stated that when I arrive here, if I should care to go to Florida, that I could go to the province of a king, which is here close by, to which you may go in two

days, from there to Havana, which they call Caalus, which the Spanish corrupting the word, call Carlos..."

While there is the probability that there were pre-Calusa on and around Estero Island (Fort Myers Beach), little evidence has been uncovered. However on neighboring Mound Key, located in the bay southeast of Fort Myers Beach, there has been an abundance of pre-Columbian artifacts uncovered indicating habitation dating for possibly over 2,000 years prior to the Spanish and early American settlers. Being 32 feet lower in elevation, Fort Myers Beach was exposed to the ravages of hurricanes and therefore probably used only for winter camping and hunting forays. There were several large mounds on the island, notably at the bay side of Connecticut Avenue, Bahia Via and smaller ones in the Bay Beach area. All of these were so-called kitchen middens where shards and edible shellfish remains are found as evidence of an early occupation. On the mound at Bahia Via, removed for the shell used to construct nearby streets and to extend Estero Boulevard in 1956, an obsidian pendant was found indicating that the Calusa here were trading with others from possibly Yucatán via Central America.



// Marriage dissolved

ASCENSION OF CACIQUES DURING THE 1500'S

## CHAPTER THREE

### The Spanish Explorers 1513 to 1720

When the first Spanish explorers arrived in this area the Calusa were well entrenched on Mound Key with winter camps situated on Estero Island. History records the arrival of Juan Ponce de León on the east coast of Florida on April 8, 1513 and a few weeks later, on May 23, he had skirted the Florida Keys, passed the Tortugas and was in the area of Charlotte Harbor, Sanibel Island and Estero Island. Whether or not he made a formal landing on Estero Island is not recorded, but he spent 22 days exploring this area, so in all probability he did investigate that island before his return to Cuba on June 15. On September 27, 1514, he received a patent from the King appointing him adelantado of La Florida. Returning to Florida in 1521, he revisited the same area he had explored in June of 1513, with the intent of building houses and a town on the "island of Florida" and to issue a summons to the Indians to embrace the Christian faith. This summons was to be made three times, and if they did not respond positively, he was given the king's permission to attack and to enslave the Indians.

Before Juan Ponce de León's return to the west coast of Florida, several other explorers arrived, bent on discovery, trade and slaves. In 1516, Diego Miruelo and Hernando de Cordoba (1517) were among these early explorers. Finding fierce natives, but no gold, they left the area and directed their efforts to Yucatán and Mexico.

In 1519, Francisco de Garay had four caravels under the command of Alonzo Alvares de Pineda to search for a western passage (the then believed northern limits of the island of Florida) from the



Gulf side. He coasted the Florida shores until he came to the Mississippi River where he spend 40 days trading with the peaceful natives.

In 1520 Lucus Vasquez de Ayllon had his Captain Francisco Gordillon explore the east coast, but Gordillon took to slave capturing and later Ayllon secured a patent from Spain to a settlement near Cape Fear, which like the others, proved impractical to maintain.

In February of 1521, with ships and 200 men, Juan Ponce de León set sail from Puerto Rico where he was Military Captain. With him he had missionaries, domestic animals and farm implements to establish a permanent settlement on west coast Florida. Effecting a landing either in Charlotte Harbor or near Punta Rassa (more probably the latter because subsequent Spanish explorers used that landfall) he established a settlement which was attacked by the Calusa and the Spanish were driven back. During the attack, Juan Ponce was seriously wounded. He returned to Cuba where he died from the wounds.

Whether or not Panfilo de Narváez set foot on Estero Island is debateable, but that he was in the close vicinity seems very probable based on historical records and artifacts.

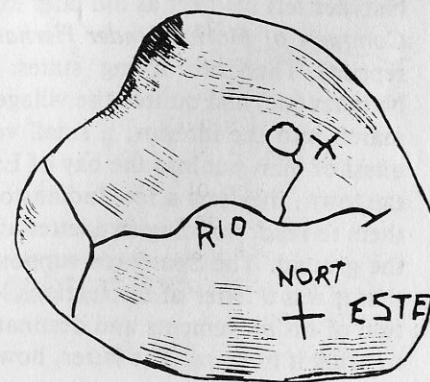
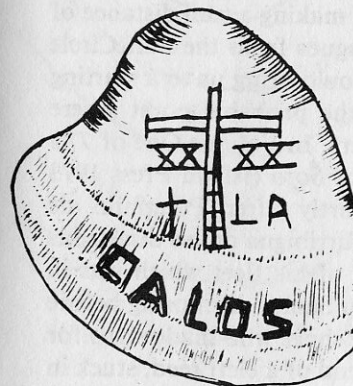
In December of 1526, Panfilo de Narváez received his patent from King Charles V. The position of adelantado (expedition chief with right of lands) was transferred from Juan Ponce de León to him and his territory expanded to include all that between Florida and the Rio de las Palmas in Mexico. Narváez set sail from Spain in June of 1527 with 600 priests, soldiers and lay people. With him was Cabeza de Vaca, treasurer of the expedition and second in command.

Panfilo de Narváez landed on April 12, 1528 in the same area as Juan Ponce de León had and after taking the country in the King's name without opposition, tried to acquaint the uncomprehending natives with Christianity. The hostiles retreated to their wilderness and Narváez, with 300 men, marched inland. He directed the fleet of four caravels and a brigantine to sail northward to find the Rio de las Palmas, or a convenient harbor where they should await his arrival by land. Should he not arrive within the stipulated time, they were told to return to Havana to replenish supplies and return.

The story of Narváez' hardships is well documented in *The*

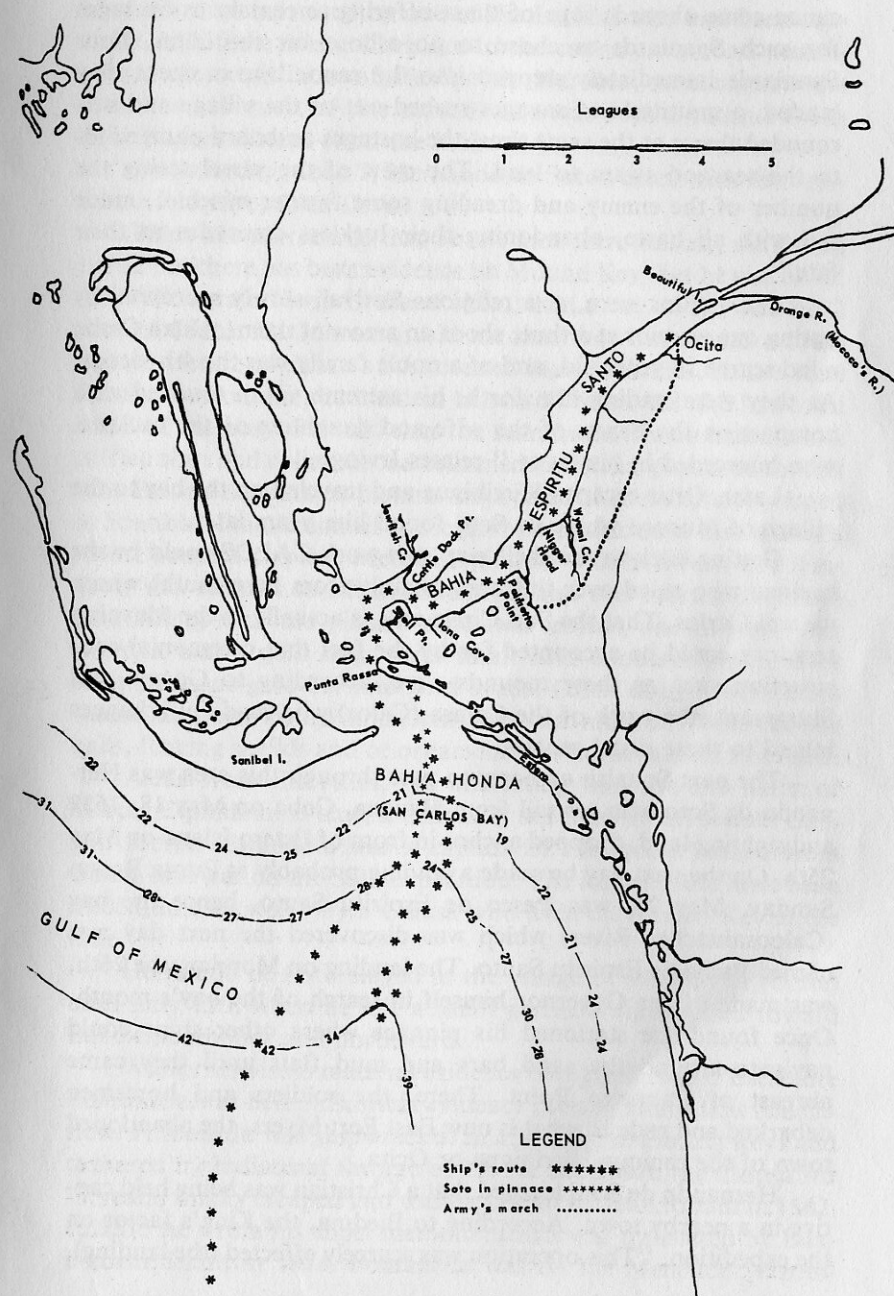
*Conquest of Florida* by Theodore Irving (Island Press 1973). What has been left out was the route taken by the explorer with his faithful and protesting pilot Alvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca. That Narváez landed in the Caloosahatchee River leaves little doubt after the find by John Fales of Sarasota in 1961 with the Florida Archaeological Society. In one of the mounds near Lake Okeechobee, a large clam shell was uncovered which had a map scratched into the inside. On the outside was a Christian cross. Under the arms of the cross are a set of Roman numerals for 20 (XX,XX). Below these numerals is a plus sign and the letters LA. Below the whole cross is the word CALOS. On the map side, there appears to be a coastline to the extreme left, with a winding line marked RIO extending to the right. After a decided bend in this rio or river, there is either a trail or river branching off to the north, ending in a circle with an X beside it. The main river itself ends in a short, but deeper line. On the lower right corner is a compass rose with the words NORTE (north) and ESTE (east).

Inasmuch as Panfilo de Narváez was the only explorer up to that time to have taken an inland route, this shell artifact was either left by one of his men or was dropped by someone and picked up by an Indian and carried to the spot where Fales found it. The latter is improbable as the artifact is not interesting enough for an Indian to bother picking up, let alone carry for miles.



Garcilaso de la Vega wrote in his *La Florida* in 1723 that Hernando de Soto was following along the same route taken by Narváez. How he knew, was not divulged, but all chroniclers agree that at Apalache (Tallahassee) Soto did find where Narváez had built his boats for the final leg of that ill-fated expedition.

The interesting part is how well this artifact-map fits into the picture. The double Roman numeral for 20 adds up to 40 and the plus sign indicates something more, or it could mean 20, or 20-plus as 40 would be written XL. The abbreviation LA could be for leagues. Therefore a distance of 40 plus leagues or 20 to 20-plus leagues is indicated. The line on the west side of the map could only be the Gulf of Mexico, and because of its configuration and location of the find, the RIO could be none but the Caloosahatchee. In fact, the curve in the river is just west of La Belle. Whether the line to the north is a branch of the river (there is one at La Belle) or the route taken to the circle doesn't matter. The circle could, and probably does, indicate the Sun Circle mound village and the X is where they were. This premise would reject the possibility of the artifact having been carried from another location but rather conclude that it was made on the spot. The short, deeper line at the extreme east of the map would probably be an indication of the headwaters of the Caloosahatchee at Lake Flirt. However, the 40 leagues is not the distance from the Sun Circle Mound to the Gulf of Mexico. The airline distance is about 22.8 leagues and following the river would add another 2.6 leagues, making a trail distance of 25.4 leagues. Twenty or twenty-plus leagues from the Sun Circle Mounds, following the river and bay, would bring us to a starting point at East Fort Myers which was the probable point where Narváez left his fleet as did later explorers. In Volume One of *The Conquest of Florida Under Hernando de Soto* (Island Press 1973 reprint) Theodore Irving states: "Shortly after Pamphilo de Narváez (sic) had quitted the village of Hirrihigua on his disastrous march into the interior, a small vessels of his fleet which was in quest of him, put into the bay of Espiritu Santo. Anchoring before the town, they saw a few Indians on the shore who made signs for them to land, pointing to a letter at the end of a cleft reed, stuck in the ground. The Spaniards supposing, and probably with justice, that it was a letter of instructions left by Narváez, giving information of his movements and destination, made signs for the Indians to bring it to them. The latter, however, refused, but getting into a





canoe came aboard, four of them offering to remain as hostages for such Spaniards as chose to go ashore for the letter. Four Spaniards immediately stepped into the canoe, the moment they landed, a multitude of savages rushed out of the village and surrounded them; at the same time, the hostages on board plunged into the sea and swam to land. The crew of the vessel seeing the number of the enemy and dreading some further mischief, made sail with all haste, abandoning their luckless comrades to their fate."

The victims were, at a religious festival, slowly murdered by letting one warrior at a time, shoot an arrow at them. "Juan Ortiz, a lad scarce 18 years old, and of a noble family was the 4th victim. As they were leading him forth, his extreme youth touched with compassion the hearts of the wife and daughters of the cacique, who interceded in his favor," relates Irving.

Later, Ortiz escaped Hirrihigua and traveled up the bay to the village of Mucoso where de Soto found him years later.

Getting back to the shell map, the work CALOS could be the cacique who ruled over this area (mainly from here south) whom we call Carlos. That the Sun Circle area is actually in the Mayaimi territory could be accounted for by the fact that ceremonial construction such as these mounds were, according to Goggin and Sturtevant, the work of the Calusa (Calos) who made pilgrimages inland to these ritual centers.

The next Spanish explorer to pass through this area was Hernando de Soto who set sail from Havana, Cuba on May 18, 1539 and sighting land, dropped anchor in front of Estero Island on May 25th. On the next day he made a landing probably at Punta Rassa. Sunday, May 25, was Pasco de Espiritu Santo, hence the bay (Caloosahatchee River) which was discovered the next day was named Bahia de Espiritu Santo. The landing on Monday, the 26th, was made by the Governor himself in search of the bay's mouth. Once found, he stationed his pinnace where other ships could navigate around the sand bars and mud flats until they came abreast of Palmetto Point. There, the soldiers and horsemen debarked and rode to what is now East Fort Myers, the abandoned town of the cacique Hirrihigua or Ocita.

Hernando de Soto learned that a Christian was being held captive in a nearby town. According to Biedma, the King's factor on the expedition, "This operation was scarcely effected (the landing),

when we were informed by one of the Indians who had been captured, that there was a Christian in the country who had accompanied the expedition of Panfilo de Narváez; messengers were dispatched in quest of this person, who was with a cacique living eight leagues distant from the harbour."

On Saturday, June 7, Hernando de Soto visited with the now-released captive, Juan Ortiz.

There are no records that Soto's men were actually on Estero Island but there has been evidence on Mound Key that he was close. In 1890 Captain Elwin E. Damkohler, then a boy of 12, with the 2 sons of Frank M. Johnson, told me that they had found a brass framed picture of a man's bust dressed in dark clothes. At the time Damkohler told me the incident he was 77 years old and had total recall of memory. He said that the man in the frame had a white ruffled shirt and collar, broad brimmed hat with a plume on the left side. Behind the painted picture was a piece of folded paper printed in Spanish. Translation of the legible parts disclosed that it was a report about a Captain Mercer Espindola who had been at a banquet, was enroute to Milan, Spain (?) and was harrassed by bandits. Along with the picture were two crosses, one of gold, one silver, a man's gold ring, three small bells connected by a silver chain and one gold bar and gold beads. Other objects were brass shields, broken sword hilts, parts of old muskets, iron cannon balls, fencing sheilds and or ornaments for horse saddles and reins.

Aside from the relics, the interesting fact was the name of Mercer Espindola. If true, it definitely ties Soto to this area as Captain Mercer Espindola was a captain of the guard hailing from Genoa and was on the Soto expedition. The locket could have been traded, lost or stolen by a Calusa who lived on Mound Key at the time.

Hernando de Soto stayed at the village of Hirrihigua (Ocita) until July 15th when he left a small garrison and headed toward Lake Okeechobee and northward.

While there is no material evidence that Hernando d'Escalante Fontaneda was here, historical evidence points toward that conclusion. Fontaneda was shipwrecked in 1545 on the Florida Keys and captured by Indians at the age of 13. He lived with the Calusa for 17 years, finally escaped and was picked up by Jean Ribaut in 1562. In 1575 he wrote his short memoirs which was translated by Buckingham Smith in 1854. Fontaneda was on the Menéndez expedi-

tion, but there was no mention of his knowledge of the area being utilized by the adelantado. However, Fontaneda claimed he spoke four languages (of the Calusa and surrounding Indians) which must have been a great help to Menéndez.

Pedro Menéndez de Aviles y Alonso de la Campa arrived on the west coast of Florida, probably in the area of Bonita Beach, on February 17, 1566. His ship was searching for Christians and in particular his son Juan, who was lost in a wreck off Bermuda two years earlier with a plate fleet from Mexico to Spain.

Sailing near shore, Menéndez was accosted by a man in a canoe who called out in Spanish. He, and 11 other Christians, were captives of a cacique called Carlos in a nearby village. Following the man's directions, Menéndez found the island village of Caalus or Carlos as the Spaniard called him.

López de Velasco (*Geografía de las Indias 1571-1574*) describes the location of Carlos' village as: - "Its entrance is very narrow and filled with shallows so that one cannot enter except by boats (as opposed to ships); within is a space of 4-5 leagues (10 -13 miles) in perimeter although all is subject to tidal flooding; in the middle (of this bay) is a small island about a half league (1.3 miles) around, with other islets around it, on it the cacique Carlos had his throne, and now his successors have theirs."

A further pinpointing of the village of Carlos is supplied by Meras (*La Florida*, p. 150) who says that Menéndez traveled 50 leagues (131.5 miles) beyond San Antonio (the fort Menéndez set up at the island village of Carlos) to another harbor searching for shipwrecked Christians. The last northern harbor in this area of any importance would be Tampa Bay where cacique Tocobago lived. One hundred and thirty-one miles south of this harbor would be in the Sanibel-Estero Island area.

While López de Velasco's description might fit the Caloosahatchee in the "narrow entrance, filled with shallows," it has to be ruled out by the size of the island, - "half a league around." However, the bay behind Estero Island meets the requisites.

The entrance Big Carlos Pass, from the sea could have been difficult to find if the sand bars were built up to the south, as they were a few years ago before Lover's Key was formed. Presently, another flora covered bar is forming on the north side of the pass. In 1566 the water level was about eight inches higher than today, making navigation slightly easier.

It has been proposed that Pine Island to the north of the

Caloosahatchee was the location of Fort San Antonio, but it does not fit the description of being about a half league in perimeter.

Velasco further states that Menéndez built a Spanish settlement of 36 houses on the island in the Bay of Carlos.

Returning to Menéndez' first encounter with cacique Carlos, he invited him to come aboard his brigantine. Actually, it was Carlos II as his father King Carlos, had died before the Spanish came to Florida. Carlos II brought 20 warriors with him and Menéndez gave him brightly colored clothing and in exchange received a silver bar reputed to be worth 200 ducats (about \$7,500 present day dollars).

Menéndez was invited to visit Carlos II, which he did after his return from Tocobago's village in Tampa Bay. His visit was attended by a great and gala affair. All Indians in the neighboring areas had been requested by Carlos II to attend in order to put up a great show of strength for the Spaniards. The adelantado himself, not to be outdone, brought 200 armed men, 2 fifers and a drummer, 3 trumpeters and a violinist in addition to singers and dancers.

As the evening wore on, Carlos II presented Menéndez with his older sister Antonia in marriage. Antonia, as she was named by the Spanish, had also been a former wife of her brother Carlos II. Menéndez, already married, and not wishing to couple with the not-too-comely sister, tried to refuse, but in the end was forced for diplomatic reasons to accept. The marriage was announced and consummated that evening. Later the bride was sent back to Havana for education in Christianity while her husband left to further explore the peninsula. Later, he returned her to her brother, who, incensed that there was no child and offended by the adelantado's neglect of his sister, told the Spanish to leave his country.

Menéndez was not inclined to be driven from his vantage point and on March 3, 1567 he ordered Captain Francisco Reinoso to construct a fortress and the necessary outbuildings for a mission. He named it San Antonio after the Saint of Lost Christians as documented by Father Juan Rogel who was at the time in charge of the mission. Rogel (Doc. 85, *Monumenta Antiquae Floridae*) in a letter to Hieronymo Ruiz del Portillo wrote "...I received (your letter) while at Fort San Antonio which is what they call Carlos in Florida..." Further on he writes "...from the Fort of San Antonio of Florida where I gave news of the death of the cacique Carlos."

The fort and mission buildings were apparently constructed on a hill - a very distinguishing feature in this part of Florida - as



documented in *Monumenta Antiquae Floridae* in a report again by Father Rogel:

"The Indians had conceived a great hatred for me as I had discovered their secrets and profaned their religion; so much so that they tried to coax me outside of the fort and carry me to their temple and sacrifice me there, showing their people that no matter what trouble we were, we would adore their idols, and they were intent upon climbing up to our fort with their face masks, coming from a little hill where their houses were to the hill where our fort was, between which there was a small valley through which the procession passed with the women singing praises. Thus they proceeded to the fort where I came out and reprimanded them. I called to them not to climb, but they came anyway. As they attempted to rush the fort, I went inside, warning Captain Francisco Reinoso who came out with a half-lance and knocked one of the leaders in the head, unmasking him. Seeing their idol treated so, the Indians rushed to their huts for arms, but upon returning to the fort, found the Spanish garrison ready." (Doc. 139).

Apparently two hills were involved, although there could have been others not mentioned. One, upon which the fort and mission was built, and the other where the Indians lived, a domicilliary mound perhaps. Strategically, the best location for a fort would be on a hill commanding the area both visually and physically. On Mound Key there are just such hills, the tallest being some 37 feet above sea level.

The population of southwest Florida, controlled by Carlos II, was estimated by Father Antonio Sedeño in 1570 to be under 2,000, spread out over 30 villages. He refers to the Province of Carlos II as having 24 different languages, making communications very difficult for the missionaries.

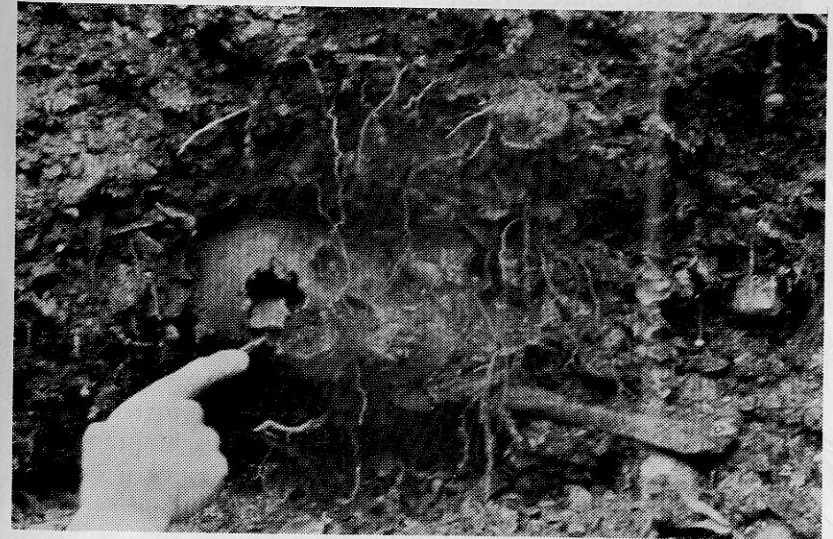
King Carlos II was killed by order of Captain Reinoso. The actual execution was done by Pedro Menéndez Marquez, a nephew of the adelantado, in July of 1567. Carlos II was succeeded by his adopted son Don Filipe, who was able to starve the Spanish through a scorched earth policy to the point that they left Fort San Antonio in December of 1568. The attempt to Christianize the Indians had failed miserably and neither the water passage to the Atlantic nor the great gold mines Menéndez sought were ever realized.

The Calusa were left alone (only investigated for possible missionary work in 1680) except for Spanish traders who came after Menéndez, who were not anxious to conquer, but to trade trinkets, cloth, knives, etc. for alligator hides, deer skins, dried fish and turtle meat.

That the nation of the Calusa did not survive and flourish was due in part to small pox brought by the Spanish. The unknown disease killed hundreds and further complications were added with yellow fever and measles. It is debatable whether the Calusa had venereal diseases or caught them from the explorers. The Maya are known to have had them, prior to Cortez, so probably the Calusa were no exception.

As the English moved southward in the late 1600's and early 1700's from the Colonies, slavers pushed deep into Florida, past Lake Okechobee, taking Calusas for slaves. How many the English slavers caught is not recorded, but the chances are it did not last too long as the proud Calusas, unlike the African blacks, made poor slaves, refusing to eat and dying rather than submit to the humiliation of the white man's subjugation.

The last of this fierce, proud race fought along with the Seminoles in the early 1800's and those who were not exiled to the far west, escaped to the Caribbean islands where they have been assimilated by the Carib natives.



Skull uncovered in shell mound at end of Connecticut Street. Photo by author.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### The Pirates 1720-1821

There is little doubt about the intensity of the pirate traffic along the west coast of Florida during the late 1700's and early 1800's. The group included the LaFitte brothers, Gaspar, Rackam, Black Caesar, Bru Baker and many others.

There seems to be some doubt about José Gaspar's authenticity because several old maps, dating prior to his arrival on this coast and one in particular, prior to this birth, bear the name of Gasparilla. Possibly José Gaspar adopted the nickname of Gasparilla which had already been given to the island where he made his base. Little of Gaspar's exploits include Estero Island although the name of Cayo Pelau, Boca Grande, Captiva and Sanibel Islands are prominent in tales of this infamous pirate.

However, one Captain Rackam, known as "Calico Jack," features in early Estero Island history. Captain Rackam, well-known and well-liked pirate from the Carolinas, married the daughter of a rich plantation owner. He and his bride, Anne, were on their honeymoon cruise near Cuba when they were attacked by a Spanish bark. One shot from the attacker felled their mainmast. A storm arose, blowing them up into the Gulf of Mexico and by sailing with forestaysail and missen, they arrived near Estero Island. According to *History of Highwaymen and Pyrates* by Johnson 1818: "...and so they saw a place of deep water between two islands and made such haste as they could to enter. They discovered there on one island a priest of the Roman church who was ministering to the savages thereabouts. The priest was by the name of Father

Amedeo, and he made the pyrates welcome as best he might.

"The island where they did visit to do away with the damage of shot and storm was called Estero Island and up a small river of the same name, there were many tall trees suitable after much labour to be carved into a mast and spars. While the ship's carpenter and crew did labour mightily to refit the vessel, Calico Jack and the woman, Anne Bonny, did make merry for many days on the island where they had a dwelling made of sticks and palms." The year was 1720 when this first honeymoon couple came to Fort Myers Beach.

Sometime between 1812 and 1817 Henri Caesar, or "Caesar le Grand" as he like to be called, was entrenched on Sanibel Island. The one-time slave, also known as "Black Caesar" is reported to have amassed a great fortune with his band of English and Cuban pirates.

According to a story told by Juan Gómez, the old hermit who died in 1900 at the age of 122, Black Caesar and Gaspar (based at Boca Grande to the north) had a falling out. Several of Caesar's men raided the prison stockade on Captiva Island which belonged to Gaspar. They took two women - one who was being held for ransom. Gaspar ordered Caesar to leave at once. Fearing retribution and being weaker in men and guns, Caesar le Grande burned his village and set sail south with his men, never to be heard from again.

In 1819 Gaspar's Brotherhood voted to break up after hearing news that Spain had sold Florida to the Americans. Half of the Brotherhood took their share of the loot and sailed south in the *Josito*. Bru Baker, the American Navy officer who had joined Gaspar earlier, left on the *Andre Follet* for Argentina.

According to legend and history, José Gaspar literally retired at the age of 65 on a calm day in early November of 1821. He and his men who had not left, had worked the old *Doña Rosalia* for another two years when they decided it was time to break up entirely. They were loading their ship with the remaining treasure when the lookout spotted a ship off shore. It was Monday, November 5th, and the ship, becalmed a couple of leagues off the mouth of Boca Grande Pass looked like a merchantman - easy prey even for the barnacle-encrusted *Doña Rosalia*.

Halting the loading operation of their ill-gotten treasure, José and his men set sail after the helpless ship, leaving a few men in-



cluding his uncle León, ashore. When they were within grappling distance, the "helpless" merchantman dropped false sides of canvas and revealed a row of gun ports of an American Naval vessel, the *Enterprise*.

Commanded by Lt. Lawrence Kearny, the *Enterprise* shattered the aged hull of the *Doña Rosalia*, and José, wrapping a length of anchor chain about his waist, went to his watery grave off Gasparilla Island followed by a fortune estimated to be at least 15 million pieces of eight. (About \$267 million in 1980 dollars).

His uncle and buccaneer brother, León, witnessing the defeat from where he stood dismayed on the shore, quickly loaded the remaining longboats with supplies and treasure and sailed south through Pine Island Sound and behind Estero Island to escape to the Isle of Pines off Cuba where he spent his remaining days.

One pirate, Black Augustus, took his portion of the loot and stayed on at Black Island at the south end of Estero Island. How many others, nor how much treasure was hastily concealed in the mangrove islands, or was left unrecovered for lack of time, may remain forever unknown. However, speculation is that not all of the gold pieces went down with the *Doña Rosalia* on that sunny November day, and many are to this day, buried somewhere on the islands in the shallow bay area. It is known that one of the favorite burial spots of the pirates were the islands with prominent features such as tall trees or mounds. Estero Island had both of these features in the 1800's.

Often, due to their weight, the copper treasure chests (Gaspar was reported to have had 20 made for him in Cuba and shipped to Boca Grande) were floated into the ancient Calusa canals in longboats where they were sunk and marked with a copper-capped pole for future recovery.

On Estero Island, in a shallow grave at the end of Connecticut Avenue, two skeletons were uncovered in January 1958. I was fortunate in being there to assist. The mound was a kitchen midden, not a burial mound, so that the two skeletons were probably not Indians. The graves were so shallow that it further convinced me that these were not Calusa dead. In all probability these bones were of two pirates who helped bury or sink a long boat with treasure and were killed so they would tell no one about it, or try to recover it themselves. One conclusive bit of evidence substantiates this supposition. The two bodies were lying with their skulls near their rib

cages where they had dropped in their shallow graves after being lopped off with a cutlass.

Black Augustus, a Portugese pirate, who had banded with Gaspar, fled with León Gaspar on that same November 5, 1821, escaping hanging by the *Enterprise's* Commander Lt. Kearny. Passing behind Estero Island to escape detection, he stopped at Black Island (present day name after Black Augustus) at the southern end of Estero Island. Here, Black decided to take his chances of survival rather than to accompany the rest to Isle of Pines. Disembarking with his share of the treasure, he made his way through the tangled mangrove to the strip of high ground where he built a hut. Here, for the balance of his life, he remained puttering over his vegetable garden and fishing from the shore.

In the early 1870's, John Butterfield and his family squatted on Mound Key, fished and sold egret feathers. Often he passed close to Black's island. From time to time he caught glimpses of Black Augustus, peering from his recluse. Gradually, Augustus gained confidence and one day signaled for Butterfield to come ashore. In Spanish, he tried to tell Butterfield that he wished to trade his vegetables for sugar, coffee, grits and other luxuries he had not seen for nearly half a century. Finally, through sign language, a trade agreement was made and periodically John Butterfield would return with his sharpie filled with tomatoes, beans and okra in exchange for flour, grits or sugar.

For the next ten years, until 1884, John Butterfield saw Black Augustus at regular intervals. He would leave a sack of grits at the little dock on the bay side of the island if the old man wasn't there, and the next time by he'd receive fresh vegetables from Augustus.

He watched the old man slowly failing, crippled with arthritis to the point where he could hardly walk and at times crawled like an animal. Then, one day in 1885, he left some store goods on the dock as Augustus wasn't around. The next day he sailed by and the groceries were still on the dock. Landing, he found the old man dying in his thatched hut. He and Mrs. Butterfield cared for the old pirate in his last hours, doing what little they could to make him comfortable. As he neared the end, he motioned them closer and pointed to the earthen floor, making digging motions. Then he died.

After Augustus was buried in the sandy ridge on Black Island, John and his wife dug in the dingy light of the old shack. A half

meter below the floor, John Butterfield hit something hard. Outside, in the blazing sunlight he blinked at the large, heavy, round object he held. Where the shovel had hit it, there was a gleaming yellow gash. The surface showed the texture of the pot in which it had been molded. Black Augustus, in fear of hanging for piracy, had melted his share of the treasure into that flat-topped ball about five inches in diameter, thus destroying the evidence of its origin.

Juan Gómez, born on Maderia Island in 1778, was another of José Gaspar's crew at one time. In 1801, he was on the *Vila Rica* which was blown off course by a September storm. The ship was captured by Gaspar and Gómez taken to serve as a cabin boy. Later, on an assignment for Gaspar in Spain, Gómez was conscripted into Napoleon's army. Defecting, he sailed back to the Carolinas. A year later he was recaptured on a slaver by one of Gaspar's captains. Again, he was spared and turned over to Gaspar at Boca Grande.

When Gaspar was taken by the *Enterprise* in 1821, Gómez sailed south to Panther Key, north of Everglades City. There he stayed until 1825. Picked up by a ship, he was taken to Havana, Cuba. He shipped out from Havana on a slaver until 1831. He was involved in a political upheaval in Cuba and left for St. Augustine. At the age of 57, in 1835, he joined Col. Zackary Taylor and fought Indians for three years.

What Juan Gómez did for the next 17 years is not clear, but in 1855 he was back on Panther Key. He was reported to always be well supplied with money until his later years. He claimed to have done blockade running during the Civil War, but he would have been 87 years old in 1865.

In 1884, at the age of 106, he married a well educated woman of 78 years. Apparently the fabulous treasure Gómez talked of had exhausted itself or he could no longer find the various caches, for Captain William D. Collier of Marco Island found the Gómez couple almost starving on one of his visits to Panther Key.

A few years before his death, the county commissioners, at the insistence of Collier, authorized him to give Gómez and his wife eight dollars worth of groceries or clothing from his store each month.

Gómez died in July of 1900 at the age of 122, when he got his foot caught in the drawstring of a cast net which he had thrown over some mullet.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Seminole War 1835 to 1843

With the purchase of Florida from Spain in 1821, the area was opened for settlement. Unfortunately there were prior claimants—the Indians. The Calusa, joined by the Yamasses, Choctaws, Yuchis, Mikasukis and the newly formed “free people,” the Seminoles.

As pressures increased from the settlers infiltrating from Georgia, Alabama, the Carolinas and northward, these Indians were pushed southward until they rebelled, and on December 28, 1835, attacked the small group under Major Francis L. Dade who were enroute to Fort King from Fort Brooke, Tampa. The Fourth Regiment of Infantry under Dade, Captain Franzier's Second Regiment of Artillery and Captain Gardiner's Company of Second Artillery were attacked about 65 miles north of Fort Brooke at 8:00 a.m. and within 6 hours were annihilated excepting four who escaped. The 107 men killed, enraged the Americans and Federal reinforcements were rushed in, joined by Florida Volunteers. This war was the beginning of what became known as The Second Seminole War although the first short skirmish was in 1817 before the United States owned Florida.

Most battles with the Indians were fought in their style, seldom fighting in the open. The last open battle was with “Old Rough and Ready” Col. Zachary Taylor on December 25, 1837. Col. Taylor had 1067 men against an unknown number of Mikasukis and Seminoles. This Battle of Lake Okeechobee lasted all day with the Americans suffering 26 dead and 112 wounded. The Indians, greatly



outnumbered, fled toward dark around the east side of the lake into the swamps on the south side.

In 1838, Col. Persifer Smith established three supply depots, one at Punta Rassa (then Fort Dulaney), one on the north side of the Caloosahatchee River (Fort T.B. Adams), and the third a little upstream on the south side (Fort Denaud). To the south, in the Big Cypress, he established Fort Keais and on his return north, set up Fort Thompson just west of Lake Flirt.

After three years, the Seminole Indian War had cooled and a "treaty" was arranged by General Macomb on May 17, 1838 at Fort King. General Macomb told the Indians they were to have the territory from Charlotte Harbor and the Peace River on the north to Lake Okeechobee and Shark River on the east. The western line included all the Gulf coast. The Indians accepted and promised to move into the territory within 60 days.

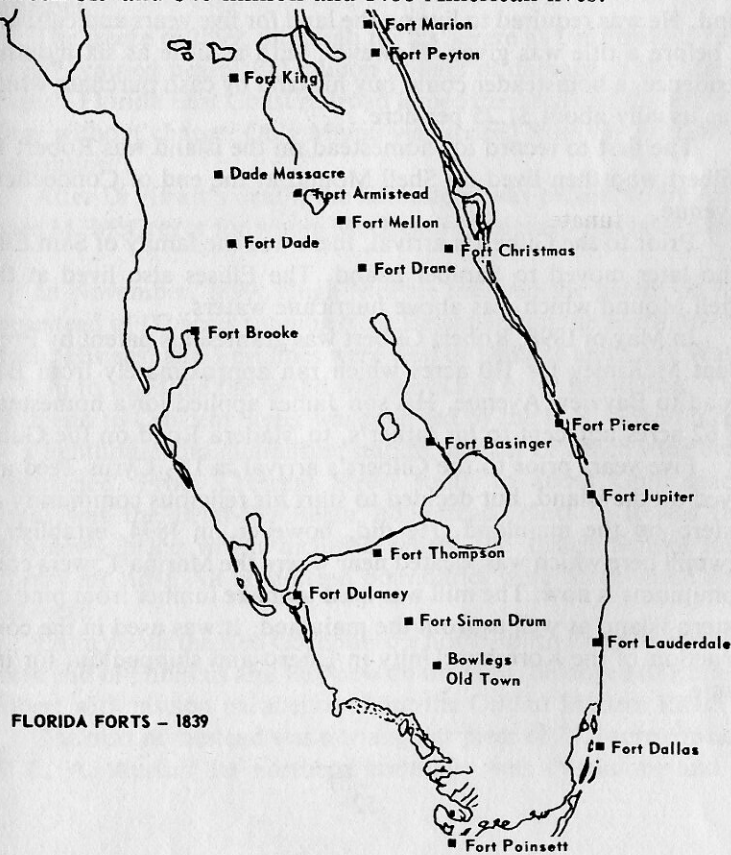
Near the northern end of the present Cape Coral bridge, an Indian trading post was set up. The Trading House, as it was referred to, was to be part of the accord. Lieutenant Col. William S. Harney, with 26 infantry, 6 civilians and a large supply of Indian goods, arrived in early July, 1838. Along the shore of the Caloosahatchee, a log building was erected and the now-friendly Indians visited to see their new store being constructed.

Unfortunately, General Macomb's word was false. He retracted the informal "treaty" saying the reservation was only intended to be temporary and that the Indians were to be captured and deported as soon as they arrived. The news got to the Indians and infuriated by the deception, they attacked the new trading post. On July 22, before dawn, over 200 Indians attacked with complete surprise, stabbing the soldiers to death in their beds. Col. Harney and eight soldiers escaped in the darkness. Using a rowboat and the sloop anchored near the shore, they got to Fort Dulany at Punta Rassa that morning. That night Harney returned and found the bodies of eight scalped. Fourteen bodies massacred that night were never found. The Indians were richer by \$3,000 worth of goods, \$1,000 in cash and 14 Colt rifles and ammunition.

All sorts of schemes were devised to track down the Indians from Col. Zachary Taylor's installing 53 new block houses connected by wagon roads at 20 mile intervals, to importing 33 Cuban slave-hunting bloodhounds.

After Taylor's leaving Florida, at his request in May 1840, ex-

peditions were sent to Lake Okeechobee from Fort Denaud and Fort Harvie (later called Fort Myers). Excepting Col. Harney's attack from Fort Dallas (now Miami) on the village of the leader of the Trading House Massacre, where he hung practically everyone, only a few Indians were captured. By 1840 the U.S. Navy and Marines were operating on Lake Okeechobee. On October 19, 1841, the best fort in Florida, Fort Dulany at Punta Rassa, was nearly destroyed by hurricane-driven water. Instead of rebuilding it, the commanding officer, Captain H. McKavitt was instructed to go up the river and select a new site. On November 4th he started the new post of Fort Harvie in memory of Lt. John H. Harvie, one of his officers who died of malaria two months before. Fort Harvie was abandoned on March 21, 1842. An agreement was made with the few remaining Indians to give them the identical territory General Macomb had promised. The Indians again agreed. The war was over. In seven years 3,930 Indians had been deported at a cost of between \$19 and \$40 million and 1466 American lives.



## CHAPTER SIX

The Homesteaders  
1898 - 1918

Although there were various settlers on Estero Island prior to 1898, there were none with legal homesteads. The Homestead Act of 1862 provided that any head of the family or a person 21 years old could declare his intention to claim as much as 160 acres of public land. He was required to live on the land for five years and cultivate it before a title was given. However, with as little as six month's residence, a homesteader could buy his land by cash purchase which was usually about \$1.25 per acre.

The first to record for homestead on the island was Robert B. Gilbert who then lived on Shell Mound at the end of Connecticut Avenue.

Prior to the Gilbert's arrival, there was the family of Sam Ellis who later moved to Sanibel Island. The Ellises also lived at the Shell Mound which was above hurricane waters.

In May of 1898, Robert Gilbert was granted his patent by President McKinley for 110 acres which ran approximately from Bay Road to Bayview Avenue. His son James applied for a homestead of 62 acres adjacent to his father's, to Madera Road on the Gulf.

Five years prior to the Gilbert's arrival, a Dr. Cyrus Teed arrived on the island, but decided to start his religious community at Estero on the mainland. He did, however, in 1894, establish a sawmill here which was located near where the Marina Towers condominiums is now. The mill was used to make lumber from pine on Estero Island as well as from the mainland. It was used in the construction of the Koreshan Unity in Estero and shipped out for income.

The Koreshans, as Teed called his group, had a novel concept of the earth in that they believed we live on the inside of the hollow sphere. In fact, they pretty well prove their theory in the book authored by Koresh (Cyrus Teed) *The Cellular Cosmogony* (Koreshan Unity, Inc. 1922). They purchased large acreage in Estero and had large holdings on Mound Key and Fort Myers Beach.

Dr. James M. Bratt died in August of 1899, just before his claim was proved up. He held 183 acres with 56 acres under cultivation in tomatoes. In those days, the islands, -Sanibel, Pine, Estero, etc. were very popular for vegetable growing. Shipping of the produce was easy with the shallow draft sharpies and larger vessels could dock at some locations. Unfortunately for Dr. Bratt, as he was about to harvest his crop, the area encountered a severe freeze and from the 56 acres he was able to salvage only 42 bushels of tomatoes.

The freeze of 1899, although not as severe as the previous one of 1897, caused nearly 100 million dollars of damage in the state. Flager's Florida East Coast railroad issued free seed and hauled fertilizer without charge. Only Miami was spared from the near-total devastation.

After Dr. Bratt's death, the homestead was picked up by Ambrose M. McGregor for whom McGregor Boulevard was later named.

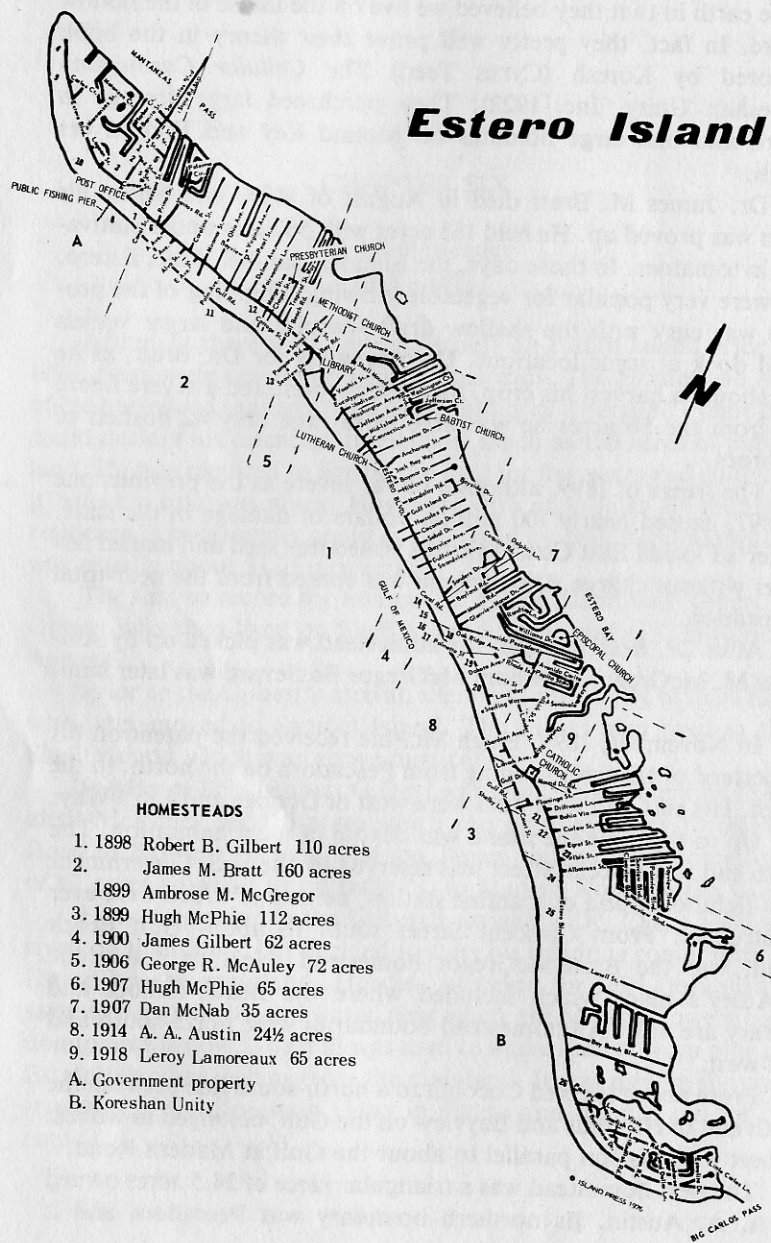
In November, 1899, Hugh McPhie received the patent on his homestead of 112 acres running from Pescadora on the north, to the beach. His east and west lines were west of Dundee and Lazy Way.

Up to this time the island was devoid of most habitation. The north end to Crescent Street was reserved by the U.S. Government for a lighthouse and quarantine station, neither of which were ever constructed. From Crescent Street south to about Gulf Beach Road, was the Bratt-McGregor homestead. Next to it was the McAuley's place which included where the Beach School and Library are now. All homestead boundaries were north-south and east-west.

From about the Red Coconut to a north-south line between the north end of Hibiscus and Bayview on the Gulf, belonged to Robert Gilbert with his son parallel to about the Gulf at Madera Road.

The next homestead was a triangular piece of 24.5 acres owned by A. A. Austin. Its northern boundary was Pescadora and it





bounded the western side of Hugh McPhie's homestead to the Gulf.

To the east of McPhie's was the property owned by Leroy Lamoreaux. He held 65 acres which is now mostly owned by the Catholic church.

Lamoreaux's property ran south only to the curve in Estero Boulevard in front of the Church of the Ascension. South of that, and extending to the bay, was the second homestead of McPhie. His 65 acres property was bounded on the south by Fairview Boulevard. Farther south, most of the vacant land was controlled by the Koreshan Unity.

In June, 1906, George R. McAuley homesteaded 72 acres next to Ambrose McGregor, filling the gap between the Gilbert's and McGregor.

In June of the next year, Hugh McPhie obtained his second homestead of 65 acres running to the bay at right angles to his first property. Here he built his beachfront home where he lived, and died peacefully in 1947, reclining in a chair in the shade of his coconut grove.

About this same time, another Scotsman, Dan McNab, received a patent on 35 acres east of James Gilbert and north of Pescadora.

In 1914, Albert A. Austin homesteaded 24.5 acres south of McNab and west of McPhie's property. Austin, an Indianian, had come to the area to join the Koreshan Unity movement, but decided to take up living on Estero Island in lieu of the rather strict life of the Unity. However, as soon as he proved up his land he was in the market to sell. LeRoy Lamoreaux learned of his wish and his brother bought the small tract.

Leroy Lamoreaux was the last to homestead although he had arrived on June 12, 1894 in Estero at the Koreshan Unity. In December he was sent to Estero Island to install the saw mill from Fort Myers at the south end of the island. At the age of 36, in 1914, he applied for a homestead and had it proved up by 1918 when he received the patent. His homestead was east of McPhie's first one and bounded by Pescadora on the north. The rectangular piece contained 65 acres. Some of the Rankin limes raised by Mr. Lamoreaux are still growing on my property on Bahia Via. The trees were moved in the early 1950's and are probably 60 years old.

In the early 1900's life style on Fort Myers Beach consisted of fishing, gardening and doing anything to eke out an existence.

There were ample mosquitos from both the salt marshes as well as the numerous small ponds which dotted the island. The only relief was found in citronella and a smudge pot. The latter, a gallon can with damp sand in the bottom, was filled with rags, pine needles or leaves which were ignited and allowed to smolder, sending off dense clouds of smoke. If you could stand the smoke, which the mosquitos couldn't, you got relief. Mosquitos were definitely bad. I remember collecting a five dollar bet (three days wages) one evening, that my cracker friend Merl Kitchens, couldn't stand outside with swimming trunks on for five minutes. Merl is the kind of fellow who will do anything to win a bet. One day he drank five quarts of milk in Thompson's Red Front store in five minutes on a bet. Anyway, within a minute, his body was nearly invisible from the covering of the tiny insects. At the end of three minutes he gave up and ran for the Gulf and relief. And that was as late as 1938!

Hurricanes occasionally hit the area. Actually, there were only two in these times, one on September 25, 1894 and the other on October 17, 1910. Two years prior to the 1910 hurricane, Cyrus A. Teed, then calling himself Koresh, died. His followers buried him at the south end of Estero Island at La Pirata Point. The tomb was unusual in that it consisted of three foot thick walls of brick and cement and a floor of the same thickness, all reinforced with iron bars. The body of the founder was placed in an ordinary tin bath tub. No coffin was built for him as he had promised his followers that he would arise shortly after his death. The tub was placed on a wooden slab of cypress and the tomb sealed. A light burned on the top of the tomb while watchmen took turns guarding it day and night.

The storm of October 17, 1910 was recalled by George Underhill who was a boy at the time. He recalls his father nailing boards across the windows of their home as tidal water was coming in around the building. That year was probably the first time anyone on Estero Island had "battened down" for a hurricane.

In 1911, the first semblance of development, as we know it today, was started by Harold C. Case. It was about a mile and a half wide piece of property with Connecticut Avenue in its center. At that time, the shell road ended at Connecticut Avenue. In order to travel farther southward you turned onto the beach, which at low tide could accommodate six-lane traffic. The subdivision took in all of Gilbert's and McAuley's homesteads. What is now Estero

Boulevard was called Eucalyptus Avenue.

Just east of the present telephone building on Estero Boulevard the first well was drilled for the Case Subdivision. An elevated wooden tank of cypress and a windmill pump made up Fort Myers Beach's first water system. The system served 25 houses eventually and was built by Harry A. Laycock.

In 1912 Doctor and Mrs. William Winkler built the first hotel. Many years later it was called the Beach Hotel and, as this is being written, will be torn down to make way for two condominiums. Doctor Winkler had a nurse, Martha Redd, whom he admired and left a tract of land adjacent to the hotel, running to the bay. Martha had the oldest concrete block house on the island. It was torn down in 1979, but her bay property was purchased to make the Matanzas Pass Wilderness Preserve.

In 1913 the Case Subdivision was redivided. A fifty-foot road was platted on the beachfront running from School Avenue to Strandview Avenue. The road was never put in and eventually the beachfront lots ran to the high tide mark, not just to the road as previously plotted.

The second subdivision was started in 1916 by Thomas P. Hill on the former McGregor homestead. It ran from Crescent street to south of Gulf Beach Road. Inasmuch as the beachfront was the only high ground, these were the prime lots. The mangrove and palmettos on the rear of the subdivision, being less desirable, were divided up into 10-acre lots with the hopes that they might sell.

Lots on Estero Island sold slowly and it wasn't until three years later that Captains E.E. Damkohler and C.S. Fickland started the Seagrape Subdivision on Mango and Chapel Streets. It was about this time that Estero Island started to blossom out. It was called Crescent Beach and with the coming Florida Land Boom, took on national popularity.



Just south of Red Coconut Trailer Park during 1926 hurricane.

Courtesy of William H. Grace, II



## CHAPTER SEVEN

Pre and Post Boom  
1920-1928

In the 1920's Hugh McPhie was said to have been offered a million dollars, the equivalent of perhaps 80 million today, for his holdings. Actually, that would come down to \$5659 per acre, about a tenth of today's prices. Anyway, he didn't accept the million dollars, but did finally sell his first 112 acre homestead in 1940 for a paltry \$40,000. This points out the fantastically inflated values which existed during and just prior to the famous Florida Land Boom. The \$40,000 for his 112 acres was considered a very good price at \$357 per acre in 1940. Florida was then coming out of the 1938 depression and \$347 was a great deal of money for an acre of land. Fifty foot lots on the island were selling for \$80 with an artesian well, shell paved street and electric power.

In April, Thomas H. Phillips platted the Crescent Park Addition which was Crescent Street and Primo Drive.

Later, developer Phillips put part of the Case Subdivision on the market as Eucalyptus Park. The lots were then the popular 20 foot size, which could be sold at high prices, but not large enough to build on. In the mid to late twenties no one was interested in building, only in selling and reselling.

In September, 1920, the Tropical News, a semiweekly newspaper in Fort Myers announced, "Air Field on Crescent Beach." It went on to state that aviators from Arcadia as well as other parts of the state could land here. Where the field was is not stated, but it was a start of tourism.

The same month a large dragline was shipped in "to throw up grade at Crescent Beach." The Iona Drainage District arranged to

give the overburden to the newly formed Crescent Beach Road and Bridge Commission Company. The overburden came from a drainage ditch along side of the proposed Beach to McGregor Boulevard road which went along Bunche Beach.

Before the month of September was out, piling were readied for the new Crescent Beach Bridge. Seven hundred feet long, the toll bridge would connect what is now San Carlos Island (then the mainland) with Estero Island. On the 29th of September, the bridge permit was received from the War Department, dated September 21, 1920.

In November shell was placed on the surface of the new road which went along the shore at Bunche Beach and joined McGregor Boulevard about where the Bunche Beach road does today.

By January 21, 1921, the bridge was half completed. On that same day the proposal was made by Hugh McDover to have a ferry across the Caloosahatchee River from Fort Myers to connect with the new highway to the northern part of the state. Actually, Crescent Beach got their bridge completed years before Fort Myers had one near the city.

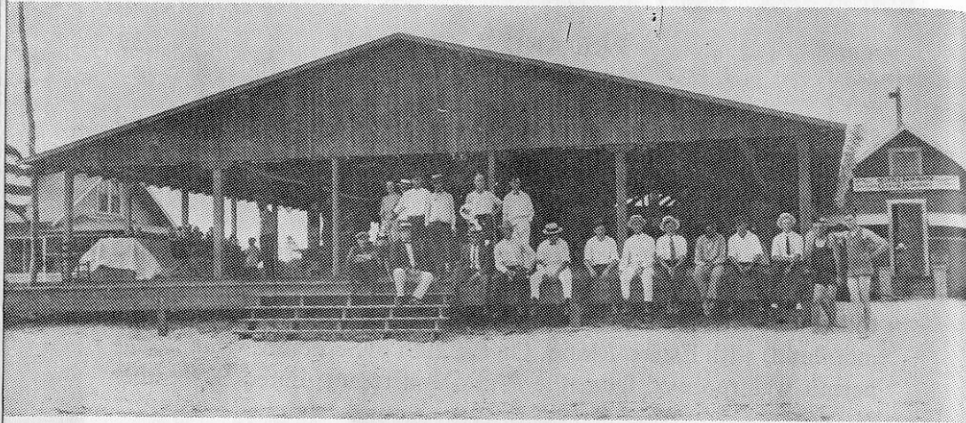
While the piling were being placed for the new bridge, T. H. Phillips was not wasting any time. On March 8, 1921 it was announced that he would build a 70 foot by 70 foot casino on the Gulf front. The two story building would have bath houses and bath rooms on the lower ground floor and an electric light plant would be installed. There would be a 100 foot board walk on the beachfront. This was the beginning of the present Gulf Shore Inn.

By April the bridge lacked only fender piling, approaches and the tender's house. On April 19th, the beach road from McGregor Boulevard was nearly completed. A small bridge across Hickory Creek was all that was lacking.

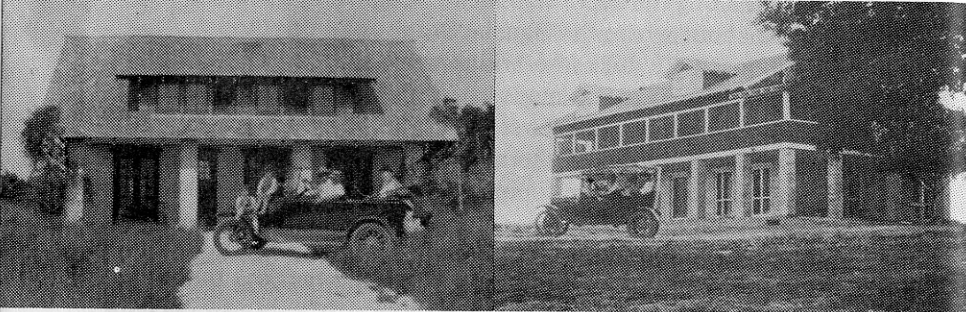
On May 6 the first auto passed over the Crescent Beach road to Crescent Beach from Fort Myers in just one hour. However, it wasn't until May 31 that the bridge was officially open to the public for a toll of 50¢ for up to 5 people. A 10¢ per person charge was added for crowded cars. To this, of course, was added the ubiquitous 8% of War Tax.

On that memorable Tuesday, 97 cars passed over the bridge, and they claimed Crescent Beach to be equal to Ormond and Daytona, not quite the truth, but very complimentary. Receipts were \$53.00.





Jack Delysle's pavilion, restaurant and bath house in 1921. *Courtesy William H. Grace II.*



William H. Case home on Shell Mound about 1910. (right) Remodeled in the 1920's. *Courtesy William H. Grace, II.*



First (toll) bridge to Crescent Beach, 1921. Bridge tender's house at right. San Carlos On The Gulf development at far end of bridge. Road to Fort Myers off to left along Bunche Beach. *Courtesy Carl R. Roberts*

During the month of June, 1921, the beach was crowded. At times there were over 100 people bathing at one time, and the cars with their pneumatic tires were speeding up and down, keeping near the water's edge for firmer "pavement."

On the 17th of the month contracts were let for a 500 foot pleasure pier on the Gulf in front of the Phillips Casino. Arches would be made to allow for the passage of cars as there were no good roads on the sandy island. The pier was started on July 19, 1921. Two diving platforms were installed in the Gulf near the pier. Phillip's Casino.

Farther south, near Connecticut Avenue, a 50 foot square cafe and a 65 foot square dancing pavilion were under construction by a newcomer, Captain Jack Delysle.

Delysle, an enterprising promoter, arranged to have bus service every day from Fort Myers. The round trip fare was \$1.50. It was over 30 years before regular bus service was again to operate to the beach. He also announced that he was building a large hotel called the Seminole Sands alongside of his casino on the beach. The 100 room hotel called for a bath room for every room and a wide verandah around the entire building.

By July 1921 plans were for construction of a permanent road from McGregor Boulevard to the Beach. Captain Elwin E. Damkohler, originator of the plan, said it would provide a full 16 feet wide pavement, equal or better than McGregor Boulevard. The cost was estimated to be \$36,000 and people began donating bricks for the paving.

That month, Tom Phillips, in partnership with Harry Fiedler of Chicago, started the first canal on the island. It ran to within 300 feet of the beach, was 1,500 feet long, 60 feet wide and 5 feet deep with a 2,000 foot shell surfaced road (First Street and Crescent Street) alongside. Dave Ireland got the contract.

Not to be outdone by Phillips and Fiedler, Captain Jack Delysle bought the Case property near the center of the island. He cleared the undergrowth, drilled an artesian well, filled mosquito ponds, planted seed beds and prepared a vegetable garden for his Casino Hotel. The hotel, when actually built, was two stories with 50 rooms facing outside.

The Fort Myers Press in October, 1921 stated that: "Crescent Beach Center Of Most Intense Development in Florida Today."

On October 26, a severe hurricane hit Crescent Beach and the



Lee County area. The newspapers reported it to be the worst since the 1910 storm, perhaps as bad as the October 6, 1873 blow. Truck crops were ruined and the water in Fort Myers was the highest in recorded history. The grassline at the Beach was pushed back a hundred feet and considerable damage was done to the few buildings located on the island. The Seminole Sands Casino and bath house were ruined as were several cottages. The road on the mainland which paralleled the shore, was destroyed.

Among the land marks devastated by the hurricane was the tomb of Koresh (Dr. Cyrus Teed) at La Pirata Point. "Only Portions Of Dr. Teed's Remains Are Found," headlined the Tropical News. After the storm had abated, the plank to which the "zinc casket had been attached, was found, but the casket was completely disappeared," stated the paper. "The waves piled up until the guards (of the tomb) had to flee for their lives, barely making their way to safety. At dawn, the tomb was gone." Actually, the report was slightly exaggerated as bricks and the foundation of the tomb were quite in evidence for several years afterward.

By January of 1922, most of the storm damage had been repaired with the road, bridge and most cottages back in shape. It was of the "repaired" beach that 2,000 feet of professional movies were taken for publicity and shown throughout the country.

On June 3, 1922 telephone service was initiated to Crescent Beach. The pay station, located near the home of bridge tender Hammond at the toll bridge across Matanzas Pass, charged 25¢ to call Fort Myers, plus 5¢ War Tax. Shortly afterwards, a telephone was installed in the rebuilt Seminole Sands Casino and rapidly extended to several cottages.

By May, 1923 the Phillips-Fiedler Pavillion and bath house had been rebuilt after being nearly destroyed in October of 1921.

Near the Seminole Sands Casino, water service was offered by the old Laycock water plant, built for the Case Subdivision, which was purchased by Simmons Richardson. Later, his son-in-law, Gene Washburn, ran the plant until the 1960's. Several small wells were connected together to give an adequate supply at a fee of \$3.00 per month.

On June 25, 1923, the Beach had grown to such popularity that over 200 automobiles crossed the Matanzas Pass bridge.

On November 26, 1923 Captain E.E. Damkohler's road improvement project was realized when shell surfacing of the Crescent

Beach road was started from McGregor Boulevard.

The Florida Land Boom was beginning to shape up and Lee County had grown to the point where it was necessary to have a budget of \$261,595!

The largest development proposed was that of Thomas H. Phillips, San Carlos On The Gulf, which was located on what is now called San Carlos Island. At that time, it was part of the mainland.

On March 10, 1924 Phillips announced his newest project. It was to have an entrance from McGregor Boulevard near Iona (the present road) and have a hard surfaced road. The County Commissioners let bids and in November the road was actually begun. Phillips described his dream as having 100 foot wide streets, sidewalks and a coquina rock arch near the toll bridge.

At the entrance near Iona, another Spanish styled coquina monument was erected with a large bronze bell hung in a small arch. Near the water, north east of the bridge, a two story hotel was planned with a large restaurant. It was the next year before any of these dreams were partially realized.

On April 7, 1924 it was announced the J.H. Nelson's Casino (the former Phillips' Casino) on Crescent Beach would have Thursday night dances. The casino had a "specially enlarged dance floor" with a "first class orchestra." A big red bus left the Central filling station on Main Street in Fort Myers at 8:00 p.m. every Thursday "for those not going in private machines."

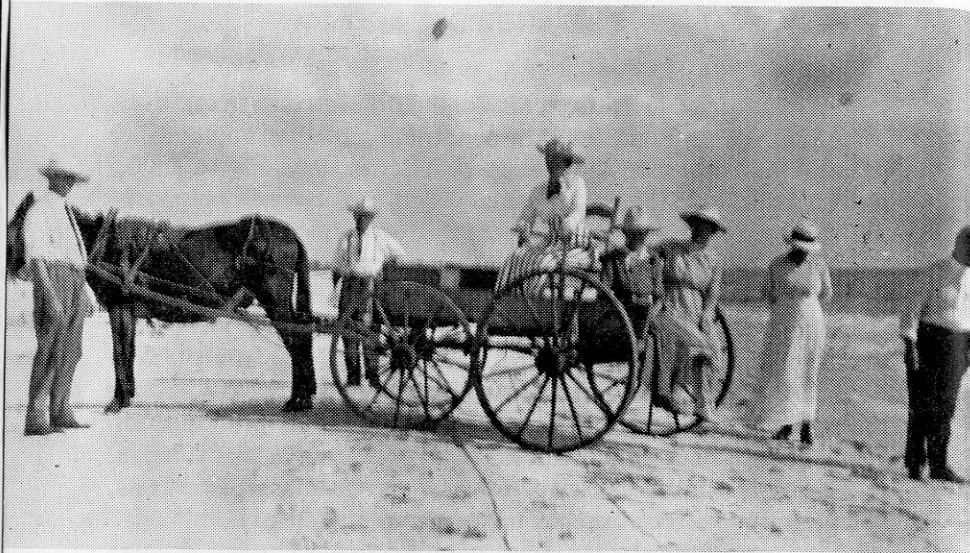
The first Thursday night dance, the Fort Myers Press said, would be great because: "Al Colcord, weatherman, has promised to deliver his choicest Fort Myers brand for the event. The Gulf has promised to provide a low tide so that the beach will be extremely suitable for promenading between dances."

On June 12th the Gulf Construction Company (Dave W. Ireland) contracted to build 3,000 feet of seawall for the San Carlos On The Gulf Company. The wall started at the bridge and meandered north and east on the northern side of the development.

Postal service started on Crescent Beach on Monday, September 1, 1924. Postmaster Halgrim requested that rural boxes be installed before delivery would be made. Prior mail service was by boat delivered to the marina at the south end of the island which was operated by the Koreshans.

The first casualty from fire occurred at 5:00 a.m. on October





William H. Case (left) and party on Crescent Beach about 1921.

*Courtesy William H. Grace II*



1924 touring group from Punta Gorda in front of Nelson's Casino. Signs read "Punta Gorda on to Ft. Myers".

*Courtesy Marion B. Godown*

2, 1924. The Jack Delysle Seminole Sands Casino and the cottage next to it owned by Dr. V.H. Voorhis were burned to the ground. Apparently a spark from a beachside bonfire started the conflagration.

By the end of the year, real estate sales in Lee County had hit an all time record of over \$4 million dollars for the month of December alone.

On January 25, 1925, W.W. Watson started Watson's Subdivision on Del Mar Avenue in the old T.P. Hill Subdivision. The lots measured 25 by 80 feet with a 40 foot wide road in contrast to the 18 foot road of the Miramar development made in May.

It wasn't until March of 1925 that the foundations of San Carlos On The Gulf hotel were poured. The 200-room hotel was designed in a Spanish motif of concrete and native stone.

In mid-March, Charles Bradley of Estero sold an 8-acre tract on Créscent Beach to Billy Clark of Clark's Broadway Shows for \$13,000. Mr. Clark announced plans to have a large air hanger from Charleston Field razed and brought down to take a permanent place on Estero Island as a pavillion and dance hall. The scheme was never realized.

On April 13th Crescent Beach had its first automobile accident. W.C. Robbins of Bartow smashed his Lincoln coupe into the rear of V. Kelley's Overland touring car which was backing out from a line of parked cars on the beach. The accident occurred in front of Nelson's casino and although no one was seriously injured, the Lincoln coupe was.

Although the rest of Florida was booming in real estate, things were still a little slow at Crescent Beach so on April 30, 1925 Tom Phillips announced in the Fort Myers Press that you could: "Own Your Own Home In San Carlos On The Gulf, Fort Myers' Waterfront Subdivision Deluxe. \$1,000 cash or negotiable securities will enable you to finance both the plot and home under the plan we are now offering to 10 homebuilders or investors." There were apparently no takers.

On the 13th of May the Miramar Subdivision, controlled by the Triange Land Company, announced tht 32 of the lots were sold before the blue prints of the plat were received by the firm. The entire subdivision consisted of 70 lots 50 by 100 feet. All of the lots were to have water and sewerage connections within the sidewalk line. Other amenities were concrete sidewalks, paved streets with



curbing and two coconut palms and two Australian pines planted on every lot. The subdivision was restricted and no house costing less than \$2,000 for both workmanship and materials would be permitted. A 20 foot building line was established and the private street "may be closed by four gates at the arch entrance for four hours a day to permit inhabitants of the subdivision to take a siesta."

A few days later Gulf Heights Subdivision was put on the market by John W. Hendry of the Hendry Brothers Real Estate firm. Prices ranged from \$350 to \$1,050 and 10 days later, on May 25th, there were only three beachfront lots unsold.

By July of 1925 the boom was on in earnest and land sold in Fort Myers for a new high of \$9,000 per acre. That same time, the Fort Myers Tropical News spoke of Crescent Beach as "Fort Myers Beach" in an article about low tides. For the next 10 years Crescent Beach and Fort Myers Beach were used interchangeably, but by the late thirties only the Post Office acknowledged Crescent Beach.

Two Fort Myers business men, Frank W. Tippins, Jr. and W.C. Robertson announced on August 13th that they were undertaking a \$100,000 program for Crescent Beach. Tippins, son of Sheriff Tippins, was very popular and their program received great fanfare. The location of the project was to be in Gulf Heights Subdivision. Plans called for a two-story masonry structure measuring 135 by 140 feet in Spanish and Moorish architecture.

In late August 1925, the Gulf View Plaza development was opened by the Cross Realty Company of Fort Myers. They were the first to use the name of Fort Myers Beach. The subdivision, which had been on the market 16 days, was practically sold out. Frank X. Cross, president of the company announced: "Soon we may expect to hear of fortunes being made for homesites being made on this beach as is done at Daytona and Miami. Last week a 60 foot lot sold for \$125,000 at Daytona." It was nearly 55 years later before that price was equaled on Fort Myers Beach.

On September 23rd the Barnwell Realty Company took over sales for a New York combine who paid \$1,820,000 for 728 acres from the San Carlos On The Gulf Company. The company established operations with H.J. Rogers, advertising manager of the New York Telephone Company, to head up the Crescent Beach office. They planned to continue with the hotel, wide streets and other acoutrements envisioned by the T.H. Phillips group.

Two days later the Fort Myers Press carried an ad for the

"Bradford Beach Estates, Fort Myers Beach, Gulf to Bay Development, Deluxe, thousands of lots. Only a limited number on the beach." A table of existing lot prices centered the ad reading: "Price of lots. Miami-\$2,000 beachfront foot. Daytona-\$2,000. Sarasota-\$750. Naples-\$700. Fort Myers Beach-\$40 to \$120 per foot."

Frank Green built the first real grocery store at First and Crescent Streets. Actually George Sanders had a store of sorts at his marina on the bay at Sander's Drive. George, who arrived just after World War I, was an original member of the Koreshan Unity at Estero, but broke away to start the first marine ways on the island. It was in operation from 1926 through 1978.

1926 saw the Florida Land Boom taper off and Crescent Beach settle down for a long period of slow development. The new highway from Iona at McGregor Boulevard was started and completed the next year.

The hurricane of September 18, 1926 washed out the wooden toll bridge and a temporary one was put in its place until the new concrete bridge with steel swing was installed in 1928. The pier was washed out also and was rebuilt in 1928.

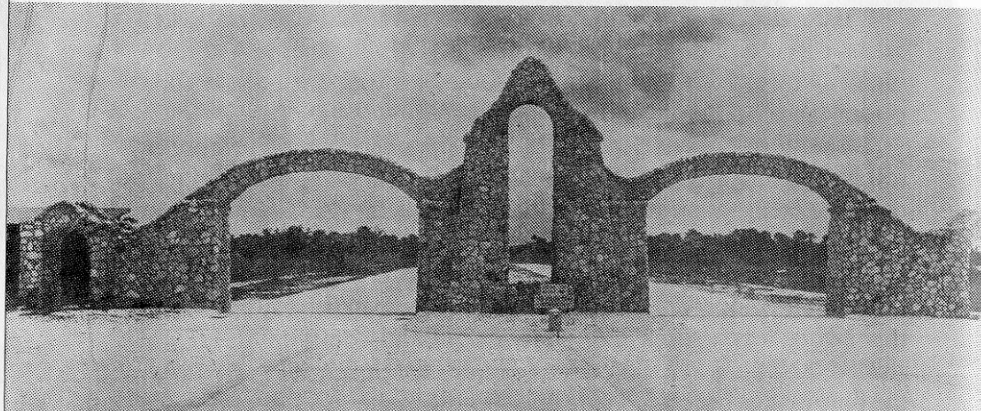
The installation of the steel swing bridge was supplied by the Champion Bridge Company of Ohio. Somewhere, the story of how this swing was a used one from Fort Lauderdale or Stuart got started, and persisted until it was demolished in late 1979. Actually, the new bridge lasted 51 years and went through a series of renovations and upgradings. It was originally a "key-wind" type which was operated by a large key-like lever turned by two men walking around the stem. It took about 15 minutes to open or close and eventually was converted to operate electrically.

The 1926 storm opened up a pass north of the San Carlos On The Gulf development to what was known as the Nigger Hole, a great fishing spot. Now a separate island, San Carlos On The Gulf was called just San Carlos Island and the new pass was named Hurricane Pass. Recently the pass has been called Pelican Harbor. The wooden bridge placed over the pass in 1928 was replanked, repiled and otherwise replaced periodically until the concrete one was finished in January of 1980.

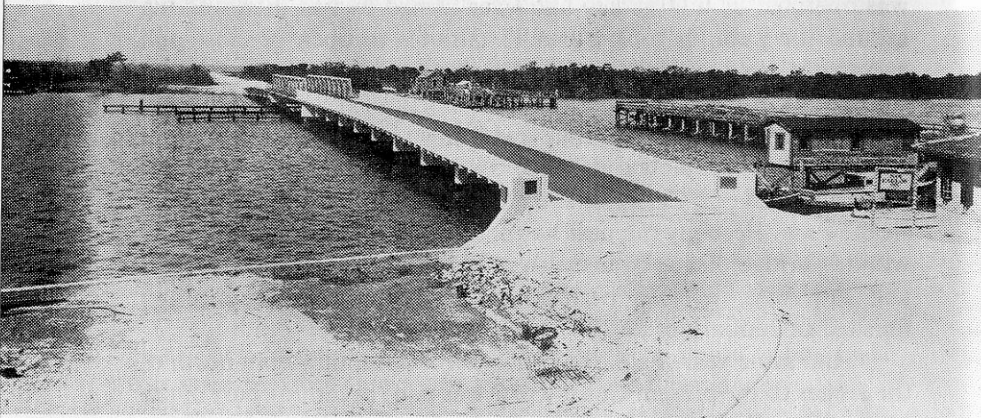
That same year, 1926, the concrete road running from north of the arches to the present County pier was laid, becoming part of the present San Carlos Boulevard.

The Green's grocery store was damaged by the 1926 hurricane and was taken over by W.E. Bradley and later run by the Denmans. It boasted of the first gasoline pump on the island. In the early thirties Dave W. Ireland bought the store, tore it down and built a modern grocery store and filling station at the location where the Anchor Inn stands today.

A new hotel was added by C. Bradley called the "Port Washington." The two-story wooden structure stood next to the Beach Marine Garage, about where the Beach Pharmacy and Variety Store are presently. The 50 rooms all faced out on porches and I remember renting one in 1936 for a dollar a night.



Arches installed by Tom Phillips for his San Carlos on the Gulf development in 1928.  
Courtesy A.B. "Buck" Fernandez.



Steel swing bridge, San Carlos Inn and remains of old wooden toll bridge. Estero Island on far side. Sign reads: Chicken Dinner \$1, Cold drinks 5¢, beef sandwich 15¢.

Courtesy of A.B. "Buck" Fernandez

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### The Depression 1930-1939

In February 1930 Winkler's subdivision was started, running between Bay Street and the Gulf Echo Motel's present location. The Beach Library and Elementary school stand on it today.

That same year H.A. "Bert" Waite bought the Winkler Hotel, changed the name to Beach Hotel and repaired the hotel pier damaged in 1926. In the late thirties a small restaurant was operating on the pier. The pier was later controlled by the Sun Gazers who called it the Sunshine Fishing Pier. It was first leased to Dr. W.E. Crutcher who opened a 12 by 20 foot store on it to sell bait and food, etc. In 1932 it came under the control of the Clyde Gonzales Trust and renamed the Clyde Gonzales Pier. In 1933 Capt. L.E. Lowe took over the lease until the pier was badly damaged in 1944.

In 1930 the Fort Myers Beach Property Owner's Association was started to advance the needs of a growing community and to beautify public and private grounds. The Association wasn't formally incorporated until October 1931, but they got started with President H.A. Waite at the helm. Their first big project was to plant 600 coconut palms along Estero Boulevard and San Carlos Boulevard. It took several months to wrangle the best price for the palms. Some of the members thought they should sprout them and sell them to the F.M.B.P.O.A. for 5¢ a piece. One nursery bid in at a dollar each with a donation of \$150 to the association if they got the job. Finally, the palms were purchased, planted for 35¢ each. They were three year old palms and shortly made the boulevards



look very tropical. The sixty property owners of the association started a long list of improvements which carried into future years.

During these early depression years many small industries sprang up. One of the most unique was that of Luke Gate's Ko-Kee-Na canning factory. The plant was located at the north corner of Connecticut Avenue and Estero Boulevard. Whenever the tide was right, people would gather the tiny coquina shells with screen-bottom boxes and tote them to the "factory" where they would be made into Ko-Kee-Na broth. It was sold all over the nation and for a few years was a great business.

Sometime in the early thirties, several fishermen built stilt houses and a fish house in the bay between Coon Key and Estero Island in front of the Bay Beach Condominium. They were occupied when I first boated here in 1936 and the remnants of the pilings are still visible at low tide. This type of "squatting" was very popular and flourished in Pine Island Sound until the mid-1960's.

South of the Hugh McPhie homestead there was an old barracks or Legion building which was converted into the "Cannibal Club." Although there are no records of it, I remember that at high tide you couldn't either get away or get there by car as the only road was the beach.

It wasn't until 1932 that the first voting precinct was established on Estero Island. There was still no church and religious gatherings were held at Dr. Virgil H. Voorhis' Red Coconut Trailer Park pavillion. A non-sectarian Sunday school was established, and that year Santa Claus arrived by boat - another of the Property Owner's ideas. That early practice had to be discontinued in the fifties after Santa fell out of the boat one year due to getting too much in the spirit of things.

The F.M.B.P.O.A. gathered forces and got electricity run out to the island. The association also noted that with nearly a hundred families (in the season) that garbage disposal would soon be necessary. Until then all garbage was "dug in" and periodically covered over by each owner. This practice continued until the 1950's when mandatory collection was imposed.

Along with garbage collection, the Property Owner's Association thought it would be nice to have a form of mosquito control, if possible. Eventually, in 1947, Murray Thwaites and Jeff Brame got one started through voluntary contributions.

Before the end of 1933, telegraph service was available. It was located at J. Watt Harris' Real Estate Office across from Pompano Road on Estero Boulevard. Telegrams came in by telephone and his wife, a delightful Creole woman, would type them up. Next door to Harris' house and office was Anne's Doughnut Shop where Myrna Loy hung out one season.

C. Littleton Yent built a store where the Cotton Shop now stands. It was of frame construction, one story with a wooden floor. It was first run as a "jook joint" (where a juke box or record player was located) and sold beer and bottled mixed hard drinks. Later it was a grocery store and a hamburger restaurant. From the grocery store evolved another store, Thompson's Red Front Grocery, when Yent sold out and he and his son-in-law Al Thompson joined forces. One of my first jobs on the island was to put a concrete sidewalk in front of the Jook Joint.

During these years Lee County was pretty much wide open concerning gambling and its associated ramifications. Almost every shop, including the barber shops in Fort Myers had slot machines in the rear, or some more bolder, had the one-armed bandits by the front door. People were easy going and everyone greeted you with a "Hi! yawl," and departed with "Hurry back, y'ear."

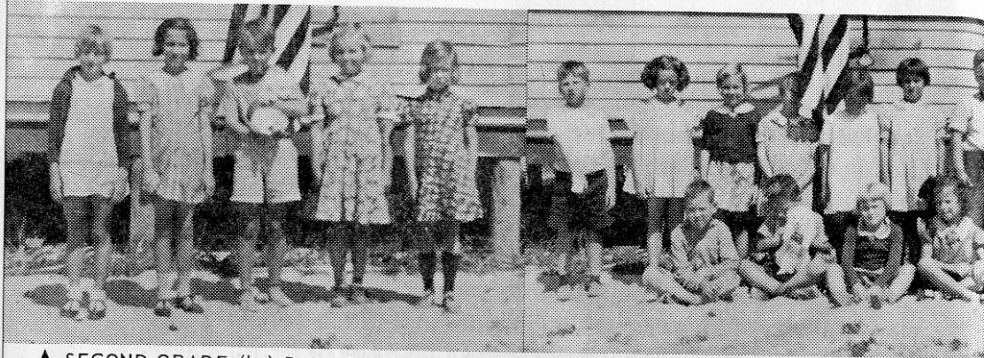
Mrs. Ann Turner brought her honeymoon houseboat to the beach in 1933 and moved it onto the land where the Pelican Hotel now stands. In fact, "Ma" Turner's houseboat was, and perhaps still is, a part of the hotel-restaurant complex. The hotel was later purchased by Miss Von Lawrence who later married Gene Bartholomew. In 1955 it was sold to Don Zimmer and Garrett Reasoner. The Reasoner family presently operate it.

The Great Depression further dampened the shattered land prices after the boom collapsed. In 1934 there was a Grand Auction Sale on the first canal which Phillips had financed in 1921. The 25 foot lots were bid only \$35 each so the owner had the auction stopped and no lots were sold. The minimum acceptable price was \$50.

In April 1935, Winkler started a second subdivision east of his first one between Gulf Beach Road and Bay Road. Sales were slow as lots were a drug in the market.

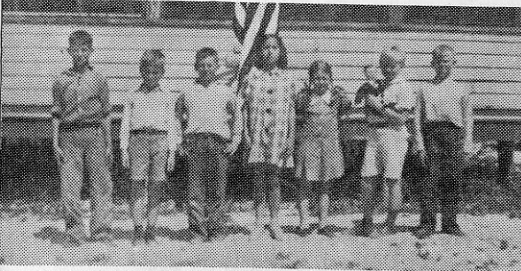
The Fort Myers Beach Property Owner's Association brought up the question of incorporation for the first time on October 10, 1935 but decided that it was too early to do anything about, so they shelved it for another ten years.





▲ SECOND GRADE (l-r) Betty Reese, Dolores Santini, Robert Morford, Mina Jane Geddes, Truda Barba.

▲ FIRST GRADE (sitting l-r) Buster Blakeley, Alfred McClenithan, Betty Jane Canady, Nell Santini. (standing l-r) Jimmie Reece, Lynn Barba, Josephine Canady, Robley Geddes, Mae LaVerne Yoemans, Francis J. Santini, Robert Fine.



◀ THIRD GRADE (l-r) Leonard A. Santini, Jr., Ralph G. Kingston, Jr. David L. Yoemans, Blanche Santini, Ellen McDuff, Page Twiss, Oscar W. McClenithan.

*Photos courtesy Lois Alexander Congdon.*



▲ Entire 1937-1938 Fort Myers Beach School in front of Page Cottage.  
▼ 1938 Lee County school bus at Fort Myers Beach.



By 1936 real estate sales had started to pick up again and Hugh McPhie started his subdivision south of Sterling Way running to Flamingo Street. The main development was on the beach side. Lots were sold and a few houses were built, forming a sort of suburb to the main part of Fort Myers Beach village. A road was platted and sandy ruts with occasional shell-filled pot holes made fair access during the wet months. In the summer months, the dry soil forced the few settlers to again take to the beach from where the road started at Connecticut Avenue. McPhie Park didn't really develop before the early 1950's.

It wasn't until April 1936 that the first mission was established. Dr. William C. Kennedy who was pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Fort Myers started the work. Land was donated by Ella Neems and the building by Ulrich Eberhardt and later it was called the Chapel By The Sea. The first services were held on April 1938.

In 1937 the first beach school was started through the efforts of mesdames Canady, Harris, Kingston, Yoemans, Geddes, Santini, Reese and McClenithan.

The 1937 school was located in the Page Cottage at the end of Chapel Street. In these days, there were no street signs and everyone was in whatever cottage sported the owner's name.

Mrs. Page rented the cottage to the group for \$27 a month which was later raised to \$35. Of this, Miss Lois Alexander, the first and only teacher, paid \$12.50 per month to live in the cottage. The County furnished a desk and paid Miss Alexander's salary of \$80 monthly. The school was named Mayhew Page after the son of Mrs. Page who died a few days after the school was formed. For the first two months, the mothers of the pupils paid the balance of the rent. The first year there were three grades with 23 students.

In 1938 the little school had outgrown its usefulness and funds were raised to build a larger one. M.R. Pence donated land through the McPhie Corporation near McPhie Park where the Woman's Club is now located. The two-room building was constructed by the W.P.A. with materials donated by friends and funds raised by the Property Owners Association. Bingo games were held at Voorhis Red Coconut Trailer Park pavilion to augment monies donated. The county furnished the furniture and the mothers repainted it and bought a piano. Mr. and Mrs. Al Williams gave a Victrola and Mrs. J. Watt Harris supplied records. The fund raising was supervised by Mr. Geddes, Pence and Kingston. A second teacher, Miss



Ardys Klenzing was added to the "staff" of two. Later, a lunchroom was added. In 1942 Miss Alexander left to join her husband, James Congdon, whom she had recently married. Mrs. Congdon returned as a teacher in 1962. In Miss Alexander's place Mrs. Rodger Shawcross and Mrs. Alvin Bassett were added to the staff of the rapidly growing school.

1938 saw Johnson's Beach Drug and Fountain Service selling ice cream sodas and milk shakes for 10¢.

That year C.L. Yent sold his Pelican grocery store (the Cotton Shop) to Harry Steel. Al Thompson built a new grocery store on Estero Boulevard at the corner of Ohio Street which is now the Golden Greek Restaurant. My first printing effort was to make handbills for the Red Front Grocery Store. Next door to it, Yent's son Rufus started a laundry, the building of which is now the Four Horsemen Lounge incorporated with the Golden Greek Restaurant.

Littleton Yent started small cottages on Pearl Street and Harry Steel tore down the frame Pelican building and built one of concrete and coquina rock. During the war years of 1941-45 it was a hamburger eatery and general meeting place for the "war widows" whose husbands were at Page and Buckingham Fields. Next, it was a grocery store with a meat market, succeeded by a photo shop and bakery. It also housed the second post office when owned by Dave Kronquist. Today it is the Cotton Shop.

Yent, with the help of his two sons, Rufus and Bill, started the Yent Subdivision on Pearl Street. Noni Burt had the first postoffice in her beachwear shop on the southern corner of Pearl and Estero Boulevard. Forty by eighty foot lots in the new subdivision sold for \$80. I bought the first two and built the first house with plastered walls and solar hot water heating on the island. That same year Yent started the Beachcomber Cottages on the south side of Pearl Street. The material cost was \$100 per cottage. In 1938 lumber ran as low as \$8 per thousand board feet. It was so green that hand saws had to be constantly "oiled" with a pop bottle of kerosene stoppered with a wick of Australian pine needles. Nails driven into the unseasoned wood in the morning, had to be redriven again in the afternoon as the sun's heat pushed them out as much as half an inch.

On April 10, 1938 the first services at the newly formed Chapel-By-The-Sea were held with Rev. Linn officiating. The church, an

outgrowth of the mission started by Dr. William G. Kennedy two years before, was built with funds supplied by local residents.

The old Phillips Casino, later owned by J.H. Nelson, was renamed the Gulf Shore Inn. It was purchased and remodeled by Ralph Brigham. He and his wife Connie, converted the ground floor into a restaurant which flourished until the 1944 hurricane wiped it out and damaged Nettie's Place on the north side. Nettie's restaurant was one of the first restaurants on the island. It was owned and run by the Pavese family and served the best Italian food in Lee County. On the Estero Boulevard side of the Pavese beachfront lot, Rocco, Nettie's husband, had a tiny one chair barbershop which was only opened on Sundays. The remainder of the week Rocco cut hair in Fort Myers on First Street.

The Beach Cinema was started in 1938. It was located across the street on San Carlos Boulevard from Jenk's Place. The San Carlos Marina dry storage shed takes its place today. Mrs. Mary Hayes Davis of LaBelle owned the theatre. She would bring films from there to the Beach. The theatre had benches in the front for the children and a balcony for the colored. As I recall, the admission was 15¢ and pop corn was a nickel. When Mrs. Davis died, she left the theatre to the trust of the Mary Help of Christians School in Tampa. Inasmuch as it was nearly impossible for the trustees to operate it from there, they sold it to Mrs. Catherine King who had theatres in Fort Myers and LaBelle.

Walter Jenkins' bar across the street was the first hard liquor tavern on the island (actually on San Carlos Island). It changed hands and names several times before Norman Auto converted it to an auto parts store. Next to Jenk's Place was the first bowling alley, built in 1939. There were no automatic pin machines and I remember Tom Bill Green setting pins for a dime a game. The 1944 hurricane flooded the alleys and warped them so badly that it was changed into a restaurant called the Driftwood Inn and later the San Carlos Inn.

Formal garbage collection was started by Tom Watson who had his youngsters help. One, about 12 years old, perched on pillows, would drive the rickety truck while Mr. Watson and several offspring of 8 to 12 years would help load the truck. The charge was \$1.50 per month. Tom fed the "select" garbage to his hogs in Iona. If Tom didn't stop to chat, the pick-up was quite rapid, but on some days he'd talk himself into a second day's collecting.

In late December 1938, the shell surface of Estero Boulevard was paved with asphalt as far as Connecticut Avenue.

In 1939 a custom was started in a small way which continued for many years. It was on that July 4th that Charles Green, Bob Fuller and I pooled our fireworks and held a "public" display at the north end of the island. In the years that followed, others joined in and finally public donations were sought to increase and continue the custom. In 1979 the public fireworks were put on by the Bonita Springs and Fort Myers Beach Rotary Clubs at Carl Johnson Park on Black Island.

On the north corner of Estero Boulevard and Pearl Street, Rufus Yent and his brother Bill started a restaurant and gasoline station. Although it didn't last long, this was the beginning of Rufus' Sandwiches and Salads which continues still in Fort Myers.

That fall of 1939 I started the first hydroponics farm in the county—perhaps in the state. Merl Kitchens and I worked by correspondence with a chap on Wake Island in the Pacific who was developing the process to get green vegetables for Pan American Airlines, which stopped there. The early freeze of 1940 made vegetables scarce and Merl and I had the only available tomatoes from our heated hydroponic tanks. They sold at the incredible price of 39¢ a pound!



Scene at Fort Myers Beach in late 1930's.

## CHAPTER NINE

### Permanent Settlement Begins 1940-1953

In 1940 Hugh McPhie added to his McPhie Park and the road south from Connecticut Avenue was improved, although not paved.

The first listing of Fort Myers Beach in the official U.S. Census showed a population of 473 people.

That same year a manse was added to the Chapel-by-the-Sea and Reverend Linn was replaced by Reverend D. Jenkins Williams who became the first resident minister, serving until May 1941.

1941 saw Jack and Esther Power starting their subdivision on Mandalay Road. It was called Gulf Island Manor and ran to Bayside Drive with Gulf Island Drive in the center. A park was planned for the residents and access to the beach with a "community" sun shelter. The development provided for maintenance, making it one of the first post-boom subdivisions to foresee the future problems.

That same year, Colonel Marion Battle, Leonard Santini, Harry Fagen and Bert Waite developed Gulf Bay View Subdivision consisting of Virginia Avenue and Ohio Avenue with a canal between them.

1942 caught Fort Myers Beach in a rent freeze with summer rent rates all year 'round. The military occupied nearly everything available. Houses which were normally getting \$150 a month during the peak season, got as little as \$45 with all equipment supplied.

By 1943 there were four hotels and some fishing type camps on Fort Myers Beach. The Commodore, Pelican, Beach and Gulf Shore accommodated half the tourism of the 1940's. Aside from



these hotels, other cottages and camps—the forerunners of motels—were Doc Wilson's San Carlos Lodge, Charlie Nelson's Silver Sands, Murray Thwaites's Beachcomber and L.C. Thrailkill's Side-O-Sea. Gasoline was rationed and tourism was slow until 1947.

In 1944 a dehydration plant was built on the mainland near the "wooden bridge." The plant was made for drying fish and was part of the war effort. It was designed and supervised by Dr. James who was residing on Shell Mound at the end of Connecticut Avenue. Dr. James had a research laboratory on Shell Mound with a staff of four doing marine and other research. After the war, the dehydration plant was purchased by Sextus Campton and used for the manufacture of aluminum windows.

On October 10, 1944 a bad hurricane hit the area. Water in Fort Myers rose to several feet on First Street and considerable damage was caused by the high wind. On the island, the damage was severe. Water rose over the island and wave action removed the pier in front of the Beach Hotel and the pier at the end of San Carlos Boulevard was damaged. For the next decade there was at least one hurricane to hit the island each year. The 1944 storm wiped out the ground floor dining room of the Gulf Shore Inn and the Brigham's rebuilt their new dining room on stilts to the south of the Inn.

In 1945 the F.M.B.P.O.A. (Property Owners Association) attempted to incorporate the settlement. Only 142 voters were interested and the effort failed with 75 against and 67 for, the incorporating.

Kenneth G. Lewis opened Lewis' Department Store on Estero Boulevard, where the San Bar Beach Apartments are now, on November 19, 1945. The store, as the name implied, sold a little of everything from hardware to groceries. Later, Lewis moved his store south to the corner of Sterling Way where it is presently housing Frank L. Porter Realty. Ken and Dot Lewis were very active in community affairs and especially in the Coast Guard Auxiliary.

In late 1946 Ruth and Jeff Brame started their Gulfview Shop. Noni Burt, who had the first beachwear shop closed, and Ruth bought her stock. They advertised the store as "The Little Store that had Everything" which included beer, Western Union, hamburgers, hot soup, groceries, fishing tackle, shells and beachwear to name a few of the items.

After Jeff Brame had his store started, Murray Thwaites talked him into starting a mosquito control. During that summer, business was slow so Jeff agreed to help. Ruth tended shop, and when things really got slow, she'd leave change on the counter and retire to her living quarters at the rear. Patrons would help themselves to what they needed, make change and go about their business.

Meanwhile Murray and Jeff were out soliciting funds for the new mosquito control. Urged by the Property Owners Association they started their campaign by each pledging \$100, then showed the pledge list to other more affluent residents. Matching Murray and Jeff's pledges, soon there was enough to get the program started with an orchard sprayer and an old surplus army jeep. Distillate and DDT were used for insecticide. It was very effective and for sometime there were no mosquitos, but automobiles left near the street had to be wiped down often as the oily mixture dried on them.

The nucleus of the American Legion was formed in 1947 by Rugus Yent, Travis Cowart, Walter Richards, and J.T. Chapman. They met in an old barracks building where the Moss Marina is now. They struggled along for four years, gathering followers until they had enough strength to receive a charter.

Jeff Brame had improved the telegram business by having everyone who came to the beach, register in case of a telegram arriving. Jeff delivered wherever his client was. His red army jeep was seemingly everywhere. On one occasion he delivered a telegram by swimming to the boat anchored near Sander's boatyard. Another time he borrowed a boat to deliver to a fisherman who was by the black can buoy, fishing. Apparently his efforts were rewarded for the Gulfview Shop got a teletype machine in the latter part of 1947.

In late 1947 another hurricane hit the island, putting it under water. On that fateful Friday, October 17th, Nettie's Place was badly damaged. Dozens of houses were twisted on their foundations, docks smashed and boats lost. The old landmark of Hugh McPhie's house in the "coconut grove," as his homestead was referred to, was destroyed. His home was located where the Carousel Motel is. Despite the hurricane, 1947 ended up a quiet year. As Jeff Brame put it, "Estero Boulevard was so quiet in 1947 you could hear gophers (land turtles) chomping on grass fifty feet away."

By 1947 the elementary school had outgrown its usefulness and property was purchased in the Winkler Subdivision on Oak Street

for the present school. A wooden school building from Bayshore was moved in to become the auditorium and six class rooms, plus an office. In February of 1948 teachers and students moved into the "new" building. That same year, the P.T.A., formerly known as the Parents Club, was officially born with everyone working hard toward a lunchroom which was completed in 1952.

With no further use for the old school, the School Board gave the building to the people of the community for use as a community hall.

Prior to 1948 there was no fire protection nearer than Fort Myers. Don Zimmer, who had bought the Red Coconut Trailer Park from Dr. Voorhis in 1946, donated a Navy surplus fire truck to the community. Earl "Pop" Howie was the Chief and Jeff Brame, Captain. Among the volunteers were Tommy Jennings, Harry Quigg, Bruce Campbell, and Col. O'Brian. There were no fire hydrants so if the truck ran dry, canals were used as an endless water source as well as the Gulf of Mexico for the beachfront homes.

Leonard Santini purchased the south end of the island from Driftwood Lane for \$43,000 from the Koreshan Unity in 1948. He sold the first 200 foot parcel to Victor De Lafrenier and the second 250 feet to me. At the time, everyone thought we were crazy to pay \$65 a front foot to the proposed Estero Boulevard, but only a few years later it had doubled in price and as this is being written is about 30 times that price.

At the north end of the island, John Waltman and Thomas H. Phillips purchased all of the property excepting that around Snug Harbor for \$40,000.

Again, the Fort Myers Beach Property Owner's Association tried to have the residents vote for incorporation. This time 204 voters turned the issue down more emphatically with 143 to 61.

During 1948 officials from New York's Western Union Company arrived at the Beach to inspect the little Western Union office at the Gulf View Shop which had made the greatest growth of any W.U. office in the United States.

Coley Westbrook opened the first men's wear shop that year. It was located where Norman's T.V. is now. Later, Joe Busta bought Westbrook out and continued the line, adding beachwear and rental bicycles. He, in turn, sold out to Kay Purinton in the early fifties and she changed the stock to women's wear, renaming the shop "The Islander Store."

During Lent of 1949, Father Richard Brown of Fort Myers conducted services for the Episcopal Mission in the Community Hall. These Lenten services heralded the beginning of the second church on the island.

On April 16, 1949 Bergen Van Brunt took office as president of the newly incorporated Beach Improvement Association, an outgrowth of the former F.M.B.P.O.A.

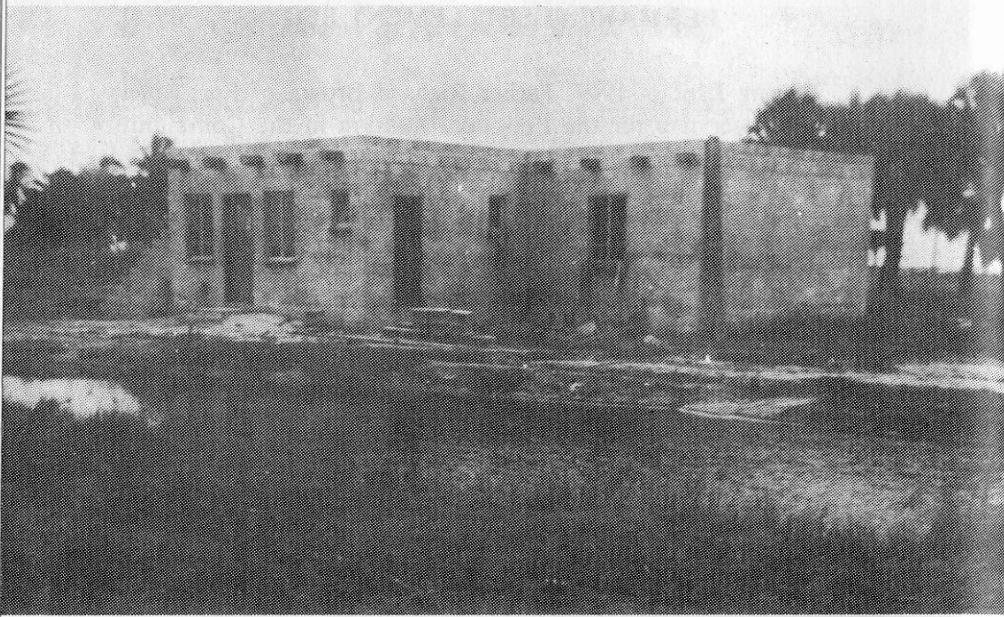
That year, the State Legislature enacted a law whereby a tax district could be set up for certain community services. With a favorable vote of 155 to 7, the Beach Mosquito Control District was formed under this Enabling Act. The district covered all of Estero and San Carlos Islands. Bill Tooley, Jewell Ursoleo and Travis Cowart were elected directors, or commissioners as they were later called. A two mill tax was levied which amounted to about \$4,500. Bill Tooley recruited all of the property owners to help fog their lots with lawn mowers. An injection device was developed which put the DDT mixture into the hot exhaust pipe, emitting great clouds of mosquito-killing smoke. The Mosquito Control contributed the insecticide to those wishing to help reduce the hoards of mosquitos. In 1977 the budget reached a peak of \$104,806.97 on a millage of 0.736. A re-evaluation and increased building plus eliminating breeding areas reduced the 1979 budget to only \$59,904.43, about the same amount spent 30 years before per capita. Prudent administration of this agency has nearly eliminated the mosquito problem and brought the per capital cost from \$6.32 to \$5.99 in 30 years. Accounting for inflation, this is about \$2.09 in 1949 dollars.

Shortly after the Mosquito District was formed, the volunteer fire department got on the bandwagon and formed the Fort Myers Beach Fire Department under a Fort Myers Beach Fire District Enabling Act. Since "Pop" Howie and Jeff Brame's start, the old fire department had grown to where "Pop" was still Chief, but Nick Bruglio was appointed Assistant Chief; Al Lea, Second Captain; Frank Gala, Third Captain; and Bob Smith, Treasurer-secretary. Their equipment still consisted of the surplus truck, a jeep with hose and pump, plus many volunteers.

The Enabling Act gave the district power to levy a tax not exceeding two mills nor \$6,000 the first year. The present 1979 budget calls for \$552,343.62, an increase of 920%. The actual per capita cost has risen from \$8.44 to over \$55.00 due to the inclusion of the rescue squad.

With the beginning of a new decade Island Shores at the north





The Rancho del Mar, second motel on Ft. Myers Beach, under construction in June 1949.



"Ma" Turner's honeymoon houseboat became the Pelican Hotel. Picture in 1950's.

end of the island was started. It developed slowly, mainly with a mixture of cottages and rental-cottages, until the Pink Shell complex entered the scene in 1953 and the area prospered.

In 1949 Dave Eldridge built the Mermaid Club. Artist Morgan Dennis made the original mermaid figure which still serves as its trademark and logo.

During 1949 the first two modern motels were under construction, both opening in 1950. Pete Petersen's Skyline Motel was the first to open. It was on the Gulf where the Top-of-the-Mast parking lot is today. The second to open was my Rancho del Mar next to McPhie's old home. The Outrigger stands today where it was formerly. The Rancho was beyond the paved road, which had been extended in 1944 to McPhie Park, and had no access to it until early 1951. At that time, the community ended at the curve in front of the Catholic Church which was Leroy Lamoreau's property. The Beach Lumber (later Franklin Lumber) occupied the only building there which is now a realty and storage business.

The Rancho del Mar was the first accommodation to have a swimming pool. For two years it also had a restaurant. Two street lights were installed as an example of the street lighting I was trying to inaugurate on the island. The lights were put in by the Florida Power and Light Company for the "Community of Rancho del Mar" and for eight years, paid for by me. Finally, with the help of the local Rotary Club, I was able to get the whole island to vote for a millage under the Enabling Act, to have lights installed on the main streets as far as the bowling alley north to the south end of Laguna Shores.

The swing bridge at Matanzas Pass was electrified in the fall of 1950 so that the manual turning was no longer necessary, speeding up the traffic problem caused by the increased number of boats and cars. Worry about bridge failure became the phobia of many residents and repeatedly proved to be a real problem in the future.

Talk of a new bridge started, and Dr. Fred Snider and I conferred with Governor LeRoy Collins about a feasibility study for a bridge at the south end of the island. It was 13 years before the actual bridges were started.

The waterworks owned and operated by Simmons Richardson was taken over after his death by Gene Washburn, George E. Allen and John Waltman.

One evening in 1950 a dozen boating enthusiasts gathered and



formed the Beach Yacht Club with Paul Fell as Commander. Others on the Board of Directors were Mrs. Paul Fell, Joe Ainsworth, Jack Power, Hugh Whytes, Bobby Goetz and Rolfe Schell. One of the first projects of the new club was the erection of channel markers in the bay. Weekly rendezvous to Bonita, Mound Key and Sanibel were and still are enjoyed by its members.

To add to the boat traffic, pink gold was discovered in the Tortugas and dozens of shrimp boats arrived at Fort Myers Beach for their home port. Shrimping became a new source of income for the island community. As many as 150 ships were operating from the Estero Island and Fort Myers area within a year. By 1953, 17.32 million pounds of shrimp were being caught and brought into the island port. That is enough shrimp to give every resident in 24 towns the size of Miami, a pound of shrimp.

The shrimping industry brought in many associated industries. Groceries alone were a big item. When the fleet was getting ready to leave for a Campeche, Mexico run, they would literally clean out the grocery stores at the beach. It became necessary for them to shop in Fort Myers until the Carlos Bay Food Way opened. A trip to Campeche required 20 tons of ice, 2,000 gallons of fuel and 80 hours of travel each way for a 17 day trip. Ten nights of fishing would bring in up to 10,000 pounds of headed shrimp. Icing down was a problem as one boat used as much ice as the entire Fort Myers Farmer's Market. Ice was "imported" from as far away as Key West.

Unfortunately, overproduction in 1951 dropped the price of shrimp to 27¢ a pound and it was several years before it started its seemingly never-ending climb. In those years 4.4 million pounds of shrimp were brought in from the Tortugas and 12.9 million from the Campeche beds.

Harris' garbage service was taken over by Glen Carver in 1950. Harris had been doing Tom Watson's route started in 1937. Watson had gone into residential building and had given up garbage collection. Regular garbage trucks were used by Carver, replacing the old flatbed Chevy with wooden sides and the collection fee was doubled.

That year the 1950 U.S. Census showed a fifty percent population increase since 1940, reaching the staggering figure of 711 residents.

On October 21, 1950 the purchase of the County Park was

completed, paying Thomas H. Phillips \$16,000 for the beach to Estero Boulevard property.

The water company installed two new wells and wooden tanks to increase their capacity. One tank was located at Lagoon Circle where the present main buildings are while the other, torn down several years ago, located on Ohio Avenue behind the Thompson's Red Front Grocery store (now the Golden Greek Restaurant).

The Fort Myers Beach Woman's Club was the outgrowth of many endeavors which finally culminated in the formation of the organization. About 40 women, all interested in civic, social and hobby-type undertakings, spearheaded by Helen Kavanaugh, Elearnore Stansbury, Lucy McGee and Helen Van Brunt formed the club. On October 9, 1950 they formally organized with Helen Kavanaugh serving as president for the first two years. Eleanore Stansbury, Lucy McGee, Jane Newton, and Edith Shawcross were among the first officers. United in the idea that the civic interests of Fort Myers Beach could be bettered, they backed the B.I.A. and other organizations working toward a better Beach. Their many efforts include the annual Christmas tree and presents for the children, fashion shows, card parties, island beautification in cooperation with the garden club, helping to form the Beach Library, rebuilding the Community Hall after Hurricane Donna, and a list too long to enumerate.

Christmas still found Santa arriving by boat, now landing in the new County Park and sponsored by the Fort Myers Beach Woman's Club.

In early 1951, Walter C. Thomas arrived on the Beach. He purchased a house and 91 foot lot of Estero Boulevard where Island Photography is located, for \$6,700. There "WC," as he was referred to, built the first full hardware store. The upper part of the piling house was living quarters and underneath he made the Beach Hardware. One small problem for tall customers was that the sill of the floor above made the entrance door of the store very low. Also, the floor of the store was a few inches below the surface of the boulevard. During hard rains water ran in and Walt had to build an asphalt dam in front of the door. Even this was not totally effective as there was a deep puddle in front of the store and each passing car would throw water over Walt's dam. Walt kept the store under his house for about a year and a half before moving to the new Bigelow Shopping Center.



On April 16th the American Legion was granted its charter after struggling four years for recognition. The new post was designated as #274 and given the name of Melvin Cowart after the son of Ollie Cowart who had been killed in action. The Post's first commander was Rufus Yent. The barracks building at Moss Marina location where they had been meeting, was moved to Second Street at the corner of Crescent Street where it eventually became the Candle Mill Corner. Since its inception, the Auxiliary of the Legion has held a "shrimp boil" during the Beach Shrimp Festival.

Dave Eldridge sold the Mermaid Club to Jim and Mary Galloway in 1951. They ran it until their untimely death in a murder and fire at the north end of the island.



Mary and Jim Galloway at the Mermaid Club bar.

At the south end of the island the Laguna Shores Subdivision was started in 1951. A large tract of swamp was filled in and a shell road was extended from the Beach Lumber Company to the end of the Island. At that time, the County Commissioners asked for a minimum of 100 foot right-of-way in anticipation of future road problems. Already, the narrow 40 foot width was a problem and the purchasing of highway land had begun at the older north end of the island.

At Laguna Shores a modern water plant was installed for they were not within reach of the existing water service. Streets were asphalted, an innovation except for Estero Boulevard, in 1951. This was the first really complete subdivision since the boom. The renaissance of real estate had begun.

The Federal Housing Administration approved the sites in Laguna Shores and several homes were built. This was the first FHA approval on Estero Island.

That same year Holliday Shores (now Holiday Heights) was begun by Captain Guy C. Holliday.

In 1951 the second newspaper (in March 1939, the Beach School News laid claim to be the first Beach newspaper) was started. It was called the Beach Bulletin and was a weekly, distributed without charge. Actually it was like a shopper with news. It was personally delivered to every house by its owner, Barrett Brown, aided by several small youngsters. Later, as the paper grew, it applied for a second class postal permit and was sold at stores and to subscribers.

The Episcopal mission was formed, holding its first meeting in the old dehydration plant (then an aluminum window plant) on San Carlos Island. Cyril Shawcross, Frank M. Hitner, Rodger Shawcross, Richmond M. Harby, James A. Gwyn and Harry K. Davison were on the first Board of Directors. Father Brown and Father John Hull conducted services. Bishop Moses was called upon for the confirmations which were made in the old factory back room.

In early 1951, William A. Henry moved down from Louisville and started the Beach Art School on Bahia Via. Mr. Henry, now a famous land and seascape artist, later helped form the Beach Art Association. He had attained early fame when he painted a mural in the Bahamas for the Duke and Duchess of Windsor which was reproduced in a national magazine. However, in the starting years

on the Beach, Bill often paid off his bills with a painting or mural. Many of these early originals which were used for less than \$50 in debtiness are now worth up to \$800.

In late 1951 the Beach Art Association was formed. Evelina Green was the charter president with Board members Margarite Quave, secretary; Eleanor Stansbury, recording secretary; Elizabeth Hitner, vice president; Rolfe Schell, treasurer; with Everett Waid, David Stahl and William A. Henry completing the roster. The first Art Association building was a palm-thatched chickee which the members made. It was on property next to the Branham Shell Museum (now the Flamingo Motel) on Estero Boulevard. In the chickee, outdoor shows were given and fundraising parties were held. Later, the Association raised enough funds to purchase property on Donora Street and build a permanent building.

During the early days of the Art Association several other well-known artists joined. Morgan Dennis from Provincetown, Massachusetts, moved down and built a house near where Holiday Inn stands. He was probably best known for his scotty dogs nationally advertised by Black and White whiskey. Morgan also wrote and illustrated several books, designed hand puppets and did etchings as well as his work in watercolors. Marion Waid, noted portrait painter, studied at the Art Students League in New York and Washington State College. She and her husband Everett, gave free sketch classes through the Art Association. Before coming to the Beach, Mr. Waid was president of the Art Students League in New York. Another talented artist, Peter Kerr of the Tyler School of Fine Arts, joined in the formative period, Watercolorist, teacher and owner of the Nantucket Art School, Kerr is presently commissioned to do the bronze eagle for the Charles Lindberg Memorial for the Matanzas Pass Wilderness Preserve entrance.

Toward the end of 1951 the first part of Charlie Bigelow's shopping center was completed and Col. Joseph Kavanaugh and his wife Helen started the first shop, the "El Mercado." That Christmas there was a community Christmas party at "El Mercado Square." The Woman's Club furnished and decorated the tree, the American Legion bought candy and the Legion Auxiliary distributed bags of sweets and toys to the island youngsters. Music was supplied by the Junior Choir of the Chapel-by-the-Sea and the whole community joined in.

In 1952 the first attempt to start a library on the Beach was made by Marge Smith Quigg. Unfortunately, the library project didn't succeed and it was a year later before it was reattempted.

During the summer a group of businessmen headed by myself started the forerunner of the Chamber of Commerce. The organization was called the BBA—the Beach Business Association. The purpose of the organization was to aid both tourists and accommodations during the busy season. Previously, there had been a complete lack of coordination and both the tourist as well as the accommodation owners were suffering. A palm-thatched booth was built by the members at the intersection of Gladiolus Drive and U.S. 41. Brochures from hotels and motels were distributed from the booth. Later, the BBA sent out requests for a doctor for the community and one of the interviewees, Dr. Maurice Borow, came in response. Unfortunately, being from New Jersey, it wasn't until the following year that he received his Florida State license. However, "Dr. Maurey" practiced without recompense for nearly a year so that the residents would have medical facilities. He was severely criticised by some in Fort Myers, but he should be forever remembered for his unstinting devotion to medicine and to the people of the Beach. Later he set up a clinic and filled his own prescriptions before starting the Beach Medical Center. With "Dr. Maurey," a patient's health came first and as a result of too much charity to the ill, he died practically penniless.

Also under the BBA, J.B. "Bill" Olivier and I erected the first street signs on the island. They were yellow signs with black letters on square yellow posts. At the same time Avocado Street was renamed Chapel Street.

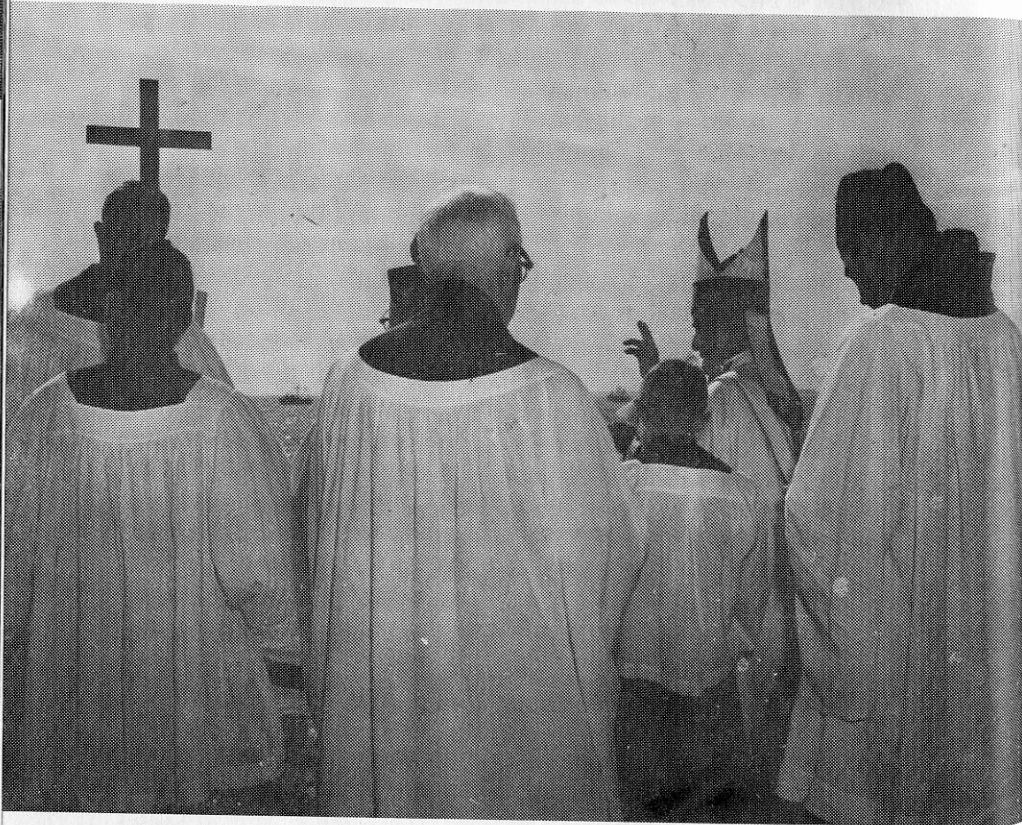
During the spring of 1952 a baseball club for the younger set was started by Walter C. Thomas, Jake Theisen, Joe Busta, Lloyd Jennings, Tony Arthur, Forrest Arthur and Pete McCagg. It was called the "Sons of the Beach" and was the forerunner of the formal Little League. When the Little League was formed Gene Goetz became very active both physically as well as financially, supplying uniforms for the youngsters.

Late in the season, a small tropical storm hit the island, finishing off Nettie's restaurant. It was rebuilt by Nettie's daughter Rose, and her husband Eddie Pacelli. The new building was erected on Estero Boulevard on the rear of the Pavese lot. The new place was called the Surf Club.



Again, Christmas was celebrated publicly in the new County Park with a lighted Christmas tree, following the custom started twenty years before.

On December 21, 1952, Father John Hull of the Episcopal Church, Charles Green and John Ferguson started the Blessing of the Fleet at Fort Myers Beach. The ceremonies were conducted at the docks of the Columbia Fish Company which were located on the island side, under the present highrise bridge. Right Reverend H.I. Loutitt, Bishop of South Florida Diocese of Episcopal Churches, came down for the occasion. With the exception of the following year, this blessing has continued annually. The following year it was decided that it should be held during the Edison Pageant of Light which Fort Myers held during February.



Blessing of the Fleet in 1955 with Bishop Hargrave and Father John Hull.

## CHAPTER TEN

### Modernization 1953-1980

An era of improvements began in 1953 on Fort Myers Beach. The basic necessities were already provided and the community started looking for modernization and sophistication of what they had.

On January 6 the Lions Club of Fort Myers Beach was chartered. The Charter Night was held on the 15th at the Lions Den in Fort Myers. Among the 45 charter members were President Rufus Yent, Tailtwister Rodger Shawcross, First Vice President Ned Hill, Second Vice President Carl Kragh, Third Vice President, "Doc" Wilson, Secretary-treasurer Don Zimmer, Lion Tamer Art Hamel, Jr., and Board of Directors Walter Thomas, Bill Kunkle, Olen Bee and Rolfe Schell.

Perhaps the best known community project of the Lions Club has been the taking over of the Shrimp Festival in 1958-59.

In 1953 Holliday Heights was opened by Captain Guy C. Holliday, the developer. Holliday had trouble getting his subdivision opened (it was started in 1951) because several canals which were dug to raise the land, were dug in what he considered the wrong place. They had to be filled and redug. All of the canals had seawalls and the "Heights" boasted of the highest elevation on the island excepting the shell mound at Connecticut Avenue. Today, the incorrect spelling has been changed to Holiday Heights.

The Washburn-Waltman-Allen waterworks installed larger pipes of transite and new wells were dug. The new water plant on Lagoon Circle added a softening system and until the Florida Cities

Water Company took over, the village water was softened.

An attempt to incorporate the island community was made in 1953 after a hiatus of eight years. Paul Lewis, who was developing at the south end of the island, was interested in incorporating only that end of the island. He thought it would be reasonable to have two towns on an island seven miles long, and if the north end and San Carlos Island didn't want to incorporate, then why not the south end?

In the final count, however, incorporation was defeated again, with only 62 for and 294 against the issue. Perhaps, if only the south end had tried, it would have succeeded.

Again, gale winds put Estero Island under two feet of water. This freak of nature has happened dozens, perhaps hundreds of times over the past years. A full or new moon in conjunction with a strong south to southwest wind piles the Gulf up in the bay until it pours over, inundating everything. These unusually high tides occur mostly in the late winter and fall, seldom in the summer.

After two years in the Bigelow Shopping Center, the Beach Hardware moved back to Walt Thomas' house, or rather under it. Walt had free coffee for any who wanted it—he drank incessantly from the 50-cup urn. If you needed to borrow tools, Walt had a shop in the rear of the store and his tools to go with it, for the asking. One of the most unusual things was the way Walt sold his handmade fishing rigs. As a proficient and inveterate fisherman, Walt hand wrapped one of the best spinning rods in the state. Many of the locals couldn't afford the price of the rod so Walt would give it to them with the stipulation that they fish for trout where he told them to and pay for the rod with the sale of their catches. It was amazing how quickly his tackle was paid off in this manner. And trout was selling for only 25¢ a pound!

Jeff and Ruth Brame opened their 4-star Gulf View Trailer Park with over 200 varieties of trees and plants to beautify it. Ruth says Jeff spent more on the fertilizer than she did on their food. The park was a delight and the only reason it was not rated five stars is that Jeff didn't want to put in a recreation building.

The County instituted a zoning board for the area including Estero and San Carlos Islands. Publisher Barrett Brown and Arthur Snodgrass represented the Beach on the Board. Local control of the zoning lasted only a few years when the County decided to have the Commissioners take over with local advisors to aid them.

The only year that the Blessing of the Fleet was skipped was 1953 although it was done a few days before and a month after the year.

Leslie T. Ahrenholz opened his law office in the new Bigelow Center. Until Les arrived, legal business was done with attorneys in Fort Myers, although a lawyer, Watt Lawler, lived on the Beach. Watt didn't have an office here, but he was very active on many issues including that of incorporation.

A third newspaper was started by two young men, Bill and Brad Stewart. Unlike the Beach Bulletin, their Beach Progress was printed on newsprint and it was in tabloid form. Also, it was printed on the Beach, which was actually the first printing shop here. The paper had no advertising on the front page, and it was not given away. Unfortunately, the Beach Progress was a few years ahead of its time and the Beach was too small for two weeklies. The offices and print shop were located where the Beach Pharmacy is in Bigelow Center.

In December 1953 Robert C. Davis started the Pink Shell Family Resort at the north end of the island. From a small beginning, it has grown steadily, adding cottages and condominiums until in March 1980 it had 225 units.

The 1954 Blessing of the Fleet was held in February in conjunction with the Fort Myers' Edison Pageant of Light. The last weekend of the pageant was called Beach Day by the islanders. There was a beauty contest, turtle races, shuffleboard contests, tennis competition, etc. The women of the St. Raphael's Episcopal Church started the custom of making and selling "shrimp rolls," a type of shrimp salad mixture in a bun, at the annual blessing. The blessing was held on the bay side again with the boats passing through the open swing bridge as they received the benediction.

The first weather station was installed at the Gulf View Shop and checked by Jeff Brame. Before this installation, the U.S. Government had one at the intersection of McGregor Boulevard and San Carlos Boulevard.

On April 28, 1955 the Fort Myers Beach Rotary Club was granted its charter. Rolfe F. Schell was president for the first and second years with Edwin Baker, Theodore D. Palmer, Joseph B. Kavanaugh, Arthur K. Knudsen and Walter C. Thomas completing the first Board of Directors. The Charter Night was held on May 12 at the San Carlos Inn restaurant on San Carlos Island. The club has



done much in community service locally and abroad. In 1958 they started a library on the Isle of Women, Quintana Roo, Mexico and in 1978 built the nature overlook on the bay at the Martha Redd property now called the Matanzas Pass Wilderness Preserve. The Rotary Pavilion provides an opportunity for residents and visitors to watch bay birds such as the roseate spoonbill feeding on the flats nearby.



Festooned shrimp boat in 1958 Blessing of the Fleet.

The second and successful try at forming the Beach library was started in 1955. This time, the project was spearheaded by Ruth Shenk Healy. She appealed to the Woman's Club, who voted to give \$300 toward the establishment of a community library.

On June 22 Mrs. Healy, Marge Smith Quigg, Clare Taylor, Katherine Hyatt and Majorie Guess formed the first library Board of Directors. This all-women group rented the tiny former real estate office of W. Clemson "Clem" McGee. The building is located just south of Norman's T.V. The rent of \$300 per year was decided upon and Clem and Lucy McGee donated half. The other half was paid by the Woman's Club.

On September 25th with 1,200 books, the little library opened to the public. The building was so small that if more than five people entered at the same time, Marge Quigg, the librarian, had to step outside so they could browse about.

In 1955 the Batholomews sold the Pelican Hotel to Don Zimmer and Garrett Reasoner. Ester and "Attic" Reasoner managed it until their son and daughter-in-law took over.

R. Stile Davis opened his dental offices in Laguna Shores, completing the necessary basic medical needs of the community. Stiles had problems in expanding too quickly. He tried to have a second office in Naples, and would fly between the two places in a small plane which he landed on an "airstrip" near the present Holiday Inn. Life apparently became too hectic and he left in 1958.

By 1956 the Beach Library had grown considerably. They had accumulated over 2,000 volumes of "accessioned" books with another thousand unaccessioned. Mrs. James Miller took over as librarian and began looking for another location. The membership charge was dropped, and it became the first free public library in Lee County.

In July of 1957 the Clem McGee building had become too small and another cottage was rented for \$75 per month. Within a few months after moving in, books were stacked in the cottage's kitchen sink and bath tub.

In 1957 a new charter for incorporation was presented to the residents. This innovation had a limitation of two mill taxation attached to it. After much heated debate, the voters turned it down by 309 votes against 221 for. This was the closest, percentagewise that the issue had come, to passing.

County-wide mosquito control was presented by the state



legislation and while Lee County went along, Fort Myers Beach, fearing loss of their identity, voted to stay with their own, albeit somewhat inadequate, mosquito control. The county, using aerial dispersion of their insecticides, were able to cover large areas, while the Beach with their ground fogging, was slow and cost the taxpayers nearly twice as much as the county control. However, by 1979, the ratio was down to a third of the county's taxation.

With the increase in population, recreational boating surged ahead and by 1957 the U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary was formed. The first commander was Bob South. The Auxiliary's main service was search and rescue and local boat inspection. They were extremely active inasmuch as there was no Coast Guard within a hundred miles until 1963.

The Fort Myers Beach Art Association moved its Art Center from the Gulf View Gallery to 706 San Carlos Boulevard on February 16, 1958. The building was the old commercial laundry built in the late forties. It had recently been occupied as a sheet metal shop, the "Buckeye Building" and presently is the S & S Plumbing shop. At the formal opening, the group held an outdoor showing alongside of the building.

In 1959 the first co-operative apartment, the "Privateer" was built on Estero Island. It was the forerunner of the present highrise condominium which started shortly afterward.

The Beach Library, having more than outgrown its new quarters, made plans for raising funds for purchasing their own property. A white elephant sale was decided upon and on March 21, 1959 the first of the annual library auctions and white elephant sales was held. The first one took place in the old Beach Theater where the San Carlos Marina dry storage building is presently. A small fortune of \$1,357.24 was raised and a supporter of the library had promised to match anything up to \$1,000 raised. Since the first library auction, the event has been looked upon by residents and visitors as an outstanding annual event. Recent receipts are in the \$5,000 area and are very helpful to the library.

With the proceeds of the first auction four lots were purchased on Bay Street and plans for a modern, air conditioned, concrete building were made. All of the island's associations joined in, donating funds and labor. Ground was broken on May 31, 1960 and the building of 2,600 square feet was finished on July 28, 1961.

In September, before the library building was completed, Hur-

ricane Donna arrived with winds of 140-185 miles per hour. At the south end of the island, where the storm passed over, entire roofs were lifted from newly constructed concrete houses. Beachfront homes were demolished, gutted or moved across Estero Boulevard, depending upon their elevation and construction. Weeks went by before all services were again operational, but by the winter season, everything was readied for the incoming tourists.

Concern about another hurricane like Donna caused public meetings to be held for the building of a bridge at the south end of the island as an alternative escape route. The "old timers," some who had stayed on the island through Donna, were not too impressed, and feared that a route southward would spoil the tranquility of their "dead-end" island. The newer residents, frightened by the damage a strong hurricane can cause, clamored for a causeway and bridge to the south but they were not rewarded by their efforts for several years to come.

One of the effects of Donna was the demolishing of the McDowell packing plant. The new zoning laws would not permit its owners to rebuild. Two years before, the Columbia Fish house on First Street had burned down and not been replaced. Shrimpers were concerned, but gradually the packing and freezing process moved to Tampa where facilities were greater.

The fourth try at incorporation was held in 1960. This time the 1957 charter, with its two mill limitation, was used and again, but the issue was defeated by 50 votes.

Concern about building and land filling caused the Conservation Association to be formed with Ace Lee as its first president. The basic anxiety of the Association was that of the environmental protection of Ostego (San Carlos) Bay. Up to this time, the body of water behind the island had been known as Ostego Bay, but gradually it was called San Carlos Bay until today, the old name is seldom used. Actually, on the older charts, San Carlos Bay is that area between the southern tip of Sanibel Island and the southern tip of Estero Island.

The newly formed Conservation Association undertook to set up bulkhead lines on the bay as their first project. It was many years before the actual lines were established.

In 1960 the U.S. Census was again taken, resulting in an increase of 350% in ten years to 2,464 population.

In 1962 the rescue squad was started as a volunteer unit of the



Beach Fire Department. For some time it was considered a separate entity from the fire department and was a non-profit corporation. Unfortunately for the taxpayers, this branch of the fire department consumes the greatest amount of the over half million dollar budget due to its extensive ambulance and first aid service preponderantly utilized by the tourist.

When the President announced on October 22, 1962 that Cuban missile sites were in preparation, residents of south Florida became apprehensive. Two days later hundreds of war planes were shuttling day and night over the Beach on their way to bolster defenses at Key West and Homestead. Lee County declared that fall-out shelters would not be taxed and many started construction on these hopefully-never-to-be-used shelters.

On March 26th, a Hudson River ferry, the *Stoney Point*, was towed into the bay to become a floating shrimp packing house for the Tringali Co. Actually, the old ferry boat was used more for offices than packing, but the beginning of an industry brought the Belcher Oil Company to the area to build an oil terminal for fueling the shrimp boats and domestic heating.

On June 25, 1963, the U.S. Coast Guard station was opened on San Carlos Island with a \$50,000 house boat for the station headquarters. D.G. Rash was the Chief Boson with nine men under him.

During August the causeways and bridges were started at the south end of the island to connect with Bonita Beach via Black Island. On July 4th, two years later, the formal opening made traveling from south U.S. 41 through Bonita Beach to the island possible and traffic on Estero Boulevard increased considerably. There were many times when cars were backed up from the Matanzas Pass bridge for three miles in both directions.

The original two and a half acres donated to the Beach School by Mr. M.R. Pence in 1938 were sold to the Fort Myers Beach Woman's Club for \$12,000.

On September 19th the Church of the Ascension started construction. Designed by Nelson A. Faerber of Naples, the unorthodox plicated roof church seats 300 persons. It was completed on February 21, 1965 and completely torn down and rebuilt during 1979.

The Volunteer Rescue Squad departed from its non-profit status in September of 1963 when it dissolved and became a part of the tax district through the Enabling Act. No longer volunteer non-



Daisy Anne's Restaurant, haunt of Myrna Loy in the '30's. Water tank rear right, was behind the Golden Greek Restaurant.

Beach scene in the '40's. Visible are (l.) Steele's Grocery (r.) Gulf Shore Inn behind Nettie's Place.





profit, it could not offer tax deductions to contributors. Although many donators were apparently not told of this, in 1980 the IRS decided that those who had used their contributions as deductible would be allowed as they were taken unwittingly and in good faith.

October 3, 1963 saw 46 m.p.h. winds put two feet of sea water over the island in the downtown section.

On February 27th the Annual 1964 Shrimp Festival saw a record of 53 entries in the Gopher Race. That was topped two days later by the U.S. Navy's Blue Angels performance in front of the public beach before a crowd of 25,000.

February 1965 saw the beginning of the Calvary Baptist Church on Connecticut Avenue, and the same month Rev. Oswald H. Trinklein conducted services for the Lutheran Mission at the Woman's Club.

In 1965 the water plant, which had been supervised by Gene Washburn with silent partners George E. Allen and John Waltman, was sold to the Florida Cities Water Company.

That same year, the county-wide library system voted to include the Beach Library. The Beach Library was to have their own tax district with a half mill tax. Of the 977 possible freeholders who could vote, 710 voted on the issue with 678 in favor and only 32 opposed.

In late April 1965, plans were announced for a new shopping center on Estero Boulevard between Donora and Voorhis Streets. The \$350,000 complex planned to have 33,000 square feet of shopping area and parking for 220 cars. The first and only store constructed was Thompson's IGA, now renamed the Mini-Mart.

In June the telephone company gave the Beach a new exchange—MOhawk, which was kept until 1970.

On a blustery Wednesday, September 15, 1965, Betsy waved as she passed nearby causing 84 m.p.h. winds and making the Coast Guard tow their new floating station up the Caloosahatchee out of harm's way.

On October 31st the Beach Methodist Church broke ground with Rev. John J. Rooks of Lakeland giving the commemorative service.

In March of 1966 the Beach Methodist Church opened, consecrated by Bishop James W. Henley on April 17 with over 500 parishioners attending.

April saw plans announced for 20 apartments near Hibiscus St. "Four on a Floor" was the appellation of this \$420,000 project.

Apartments were to range from \$12,000 to \$16,000. A starting date was never announced.

On December 15th some prankster turned on seven fire hydrants, draining all of the water from the stand tank. The next morning no one had water until the pumps were started to refill the tank.

In May 1967 another gale put the island under two feet of salt water.

This year the Estero Island Committee, under E. Carlisle Hunter, announced they were looking for a new name for Ft. Myers Beach. Later, the crusade was taken up by Sidney King.

During 1967 the Community Organizations Projects (C.O.P.) was started. A group of civic-minded people from various organizations united to raise funds for a community center. \$1,300 was immediately raised and a thirteen act show was put on to augment their funds. Outstanding performances were Jerry Ursoleo's pantomime of Lawrence Tibbett's "Barber of Seville," the Merry Wanas Dance line in their Spanish costumes, Hattie Patzke's singing "San Francisco" and Kjell Pedersen's "Pennies From Heaven." Billy Thomas was hailed as an outstanding solo drummer.

On August 17, 1967 the Privateer opened two of its six building complex. Developer Aaron Johnson was the first with a condominium concept on Fort Myers Beach.

On September 21st the Beach National Bank was chartered. It took up temporary quarters in a trailer on October 31, 1968.

In late December, a free shopping guide, "The Mad Shopper," made its debut. Kay Purinton took the photographs and collected ad material, while I wrote copy and set the ads. Later Kay quit and I did all of the jobs for one year including the printing and delivering.

In January 1968, the George D. Theisen V.F.W. Post #10097 was granted its charter with "Whitney" Reimick as Commander. Chet Townsend, Guy Doolittle, Lloyd Sorensen and William Ripple were among the organizers. The charter night was held at the old Beach Oyster Bar Restaurant at the south end of the island where the Marina Towers now stands. In 1969 the V.F.W. purchased two acres on Pine Ridge Road where they are presently located.

On February 22 ground was broken for the Beach Art Association building on Donora Street. President Mira Sakrison used a "golden" spade to turn the soil symbolizing the beginning of construction of the Art Center.



On February 23, 1968 the Ft. Myers Beach Rotary Club put on a "Rotary Feria," a fair commemorating DeSoto's landing in the area. Members made a mid-way replete with dozens of skill games. Photographic, home baking and canning, musical, psychedelic dancing, walkathon, ceramics, musical combos and Spanish type beard and singing contests were sponsored with cups and ribbons given to winners. Frozen out by rain and cold on the 23-24th, the fair was repeated on March 1-2.

The Annual Shrimp Festival the following day had a record crowd of 25,000, equaled only by the Blue Angels of 1964. The shrimp fleet blessing was done by Rt. Rev. William L. Hargrove, assisted by Fr. Clifford A. Comfort of Saint Raphael's Episcopal Church.

On March 29th 12-channel Cable T.V. came to the Beach through the South Florida Cable T.V., Inc. A 12-set demonstration was held at their Estero Boulevard offices in the old Ken Lewis's Trading Post building.

The first "quick print" printing shop on the island was started by Sylvia Hill in May as an adjunct to her secretarial services.

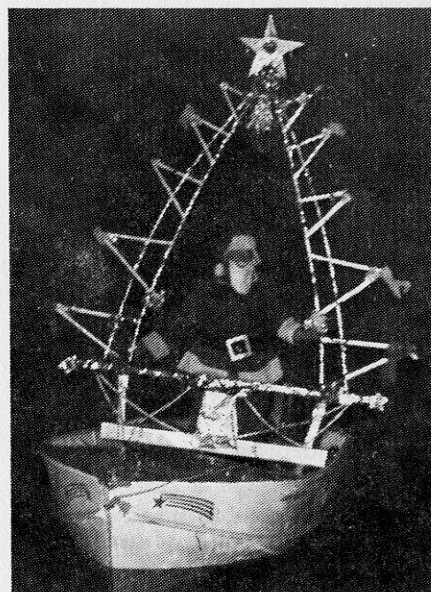
In May of 1968 Leonard Santini announced plans for the Estero Island Plaza, later called Villa Santini Plaza, at the southern end of the island.

In June, co-chairman Aaron Johnson and George Turner held an open discussion on a sewerage plant for the island.

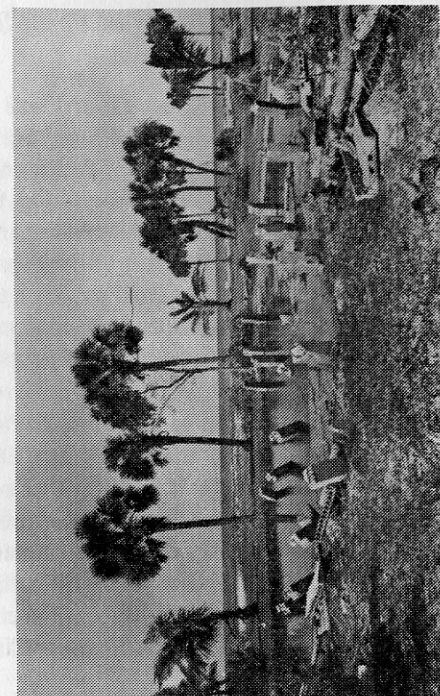
July 26, 1968 the *Stoney Point* ferry—now packing plant—burned to the water, ending the first floating fishery at the Beach.

In February Cape Coral had organized the Kiwanis Club here and on May 31 it held its first regular meeting, receiving its charter on September 9 at the Commodore Hotel. Ralph H. Chase was the first president. Charter members and officers were James Alexander, James Campbell, Rev. C.A. Comfort, Don Cotherman, Terry Kilmer, George Turner, Dave Yoemans, Robert A. Kilmer, Mort Pottlitzer, Bill McCoy, Paul Moushey and Arnold Shower. That first year they started the project of selling Christmas trees which continues today.

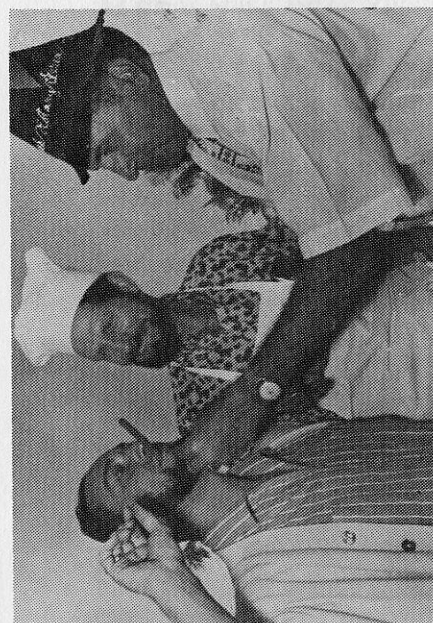
The San Carlos Bay Power Squadron was formed on December 9, 1968 with Kenneth W. Lowell AP as Commander; John F. DeReis S Lt. Commander; P/C William S Allen N Educational Officer; Frank Stafford AP Administration Officer; Robert F. Ball S First Lt. Treasurer. There were 33 founding members.



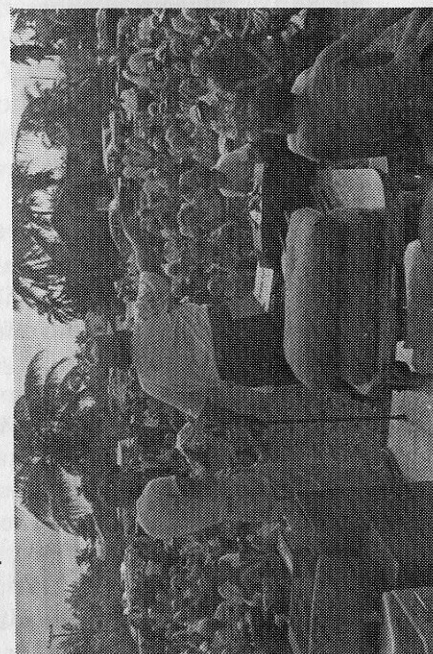
Sonta arrived by boat in the '50's.



Hurricane Donna left little to clean up around this stilt house!



Jerry Ursoleo measures John Lombardo's beard for Rotary Feria while author looks on.



1969 Beach Library auction netted \$4,800.



While the Coast Guard was ferrying Santa Claus from their floating headquarters to Snug Harbor's docks, campers were huddled on the beach at the south end of the island around bon fires.

January 1969 was heralded with an announcement that over \$600,000 worth of Leonardo Arms condominiums had been sold before construction got underway in March—a tribute to James A. Newton's one-upmanship.

In March Leonard Santini offered access from Estero Boulevard to the bay for the proposed mid-island bridge, but there were no takers.

On the 23rd of that month the Beach National Bank opened at its present quarters with Ralph Dandridge president.

A few days later, the completely renovated Band Box was opened by Nick Minarich of Naples. The new name was, naturally, Nick's. This lounge had been started by Godfrey Santini—then called Godfrey's. It was changed to the Calypso by Bob Johnson, the Band Box by Joe DeSalvo, repurchased by John Lombardo, changed to Nick's, then the Squire's Club and at the moment it is called the Le'Ni.

In April the 1969 estimate of the proposed sewer cost was raised to \$4,186,740 with a connection fee of \$250 per house and a \$4 monthly charge.

By May, the struggling C.O.P. had raised \$5,000 and was looking for a lot to build a hall or community center upon.

On June 9, 1969 the Holiday Inn opened without fanfare. That night 87 guests dined in the new restaurant and 18 rooms were rented.

On June 26, the Kiwanis Club started the Beach Doctors Clinic, Inc., a non-profit corporation to establish medical facilities here. The corporation was headed by Mort Pottlitzer. In November, Leonard Santini offered an acre of land on Estero Boulevard for the clinic.

In August Liza Minelli, James Brown and Ken Howard were here filming parts of "Tell Me That You Love Me Junie Moon."

That same month saw the start of our little theatre group, the Beach Players. Marilyn Aberth was the first president and their first effort was "Hasty Heart." The Beach Players have become a cultural asset to the community.

In December, the U.S. Post Office was opened in the Bigelow Center and the Buy Lo grocery store mailed out their weekly ad which had "2 pounds of sugar for 5¢, 6-pack of beer for 89¢, coffee

49¢ a pound and Tee-bone steak \$1.39."

On December 1, 1969, the St. Peter's Lutheran Church was chartered. Reverend Dale Lau had started the mission in February 1967 and ground was broken in November 1970.

January 19, 1970 saw the sewer vote lose with 534 to 409 votes.

The February Beach Library auction topped \$5,200 and shortly afterward they had funds enough to double their building area.

On March 7, 1970 the Beach witnessed a 91% solar eclipse at 11:52 a.m. The Mad Shopper had a piece of exposed film attached to every copy with instructions for viewing the eclipse.

Three days later, the state engineers took soundings for the mid-island bridge. Reports said that it will be between either Madera and Williams or Mid-Island and the Church of the Ascension and would connect on the other side of the bay with an extension of Winkler Road on the mainland.

March 26, 1970 dumped eight inches of rain on the island, bringing the March total to a record 19 inches. The normal rainfall for this month is 2.62 inches. This was the heaviest March rain in 100 years.

April 26 the U.S. Coast & Geodetic Survey team started charting the Estero Bay from Bunche Beach to Wiggins Pass, updating the charts of the 1880's. Lt. Brent H. Trughber, who supervised the work, said that forthcoming Small Craft Chart #856 would have the new data.

In June the final street lights were installed and for the first time the entire island from Laguna Shores to the Bowling Alley was aglow at night.

In July the telephone company gave non-toll service (although base rates were raised) between the Beach and Ft. Myers, Alva, N. Ft. Myers, Pine Island and Cape Coral. Shortly afterward, Sanibel and Captiva Islands were brought into the system. Again, the Beach phone numbers were changed, this time from MOhawk to prefix 463.

The 1970 U.S. Census showed a population of 4,305 for the Beach and San Carlos Island. This was a 74% increase in ten years.

An interesting pollution study was completed in August. Twenty locations were examined with the following results. Gulf of Mexico side: Pink Shell 292, N. end of public beach 46, middle of public beach 208, S. end of public beach 101, Estero Island Inn 168, Neptune Inn 43, Pelican Hotel 50, Beach Hotel 54, Commodore



Hotel 43, Holiday Inn 82, Leonardo Arms 26. On the bay side: Pink Shell 15, Third Street lagoon 901, First Canal 38, Pearl Street docks 26, E. end Tropical Shores 89, Donora Canal 836, Beach Mosquito Canal 23, Fairview Isles 30, Laguna Shores 26. The maximum acceptable level of contamination is 1,000. Ten years later, a spot study, after the sewers were in operation showed that pollution in the public beach area had risen 374%.

On December 15th the Western Union discontinued direct service with the island. Telegraph service is now by telephone only from Fort Myers.

In January of 1971, the famous dolphin trainer, Jack Scarpuzzi, headquartered with his animals near Fish Tale Marina. Later, Jack took his talents to Cape Coral's Waltzing Waters where he is presently.

In February, the 65 foot 270-passenger *Arcadian* cruise ship started trips around the island and to Sanibel. Owner Doug MacQuinn hoped to return every year from Maine, but first year's results were too meager.

On June 4, 1971 the 210-seat Jerry Lewis Cinema was opened by Richard and Marilyn Aberth in the Villa Santini Plaza. The first picture was the *Aristocrats*.

July found the red tide (*gymnomium brevis*) hurting the Beach economy. The last red tide of any size was in 1952.

The first highrise motel, the Island Towers, owned by Welsey Robertson and Bud Nelson, opened on October 2nd with six stories and 40-units. Later, it joined the "interval ownership" fad.

During March of 1972 tons of seaweed were washed ashore and the county brought in road equipment to remove it. Near the Holiday Inn there were piles stacked over 30 feet high.

In April another bus service was started by J.M. Ailes with his Tropic Transit. The 18-passenger minibus made four trips daily to Fort Myers. In August of 1963, Cecil Cutrell had tried a bus service along with his Black and White taxi service, but it did not succeed. Ailes' bus service folded a couple of years after it started.

In April, Jerry Ursoleo offered \$50,000 toward the sewer system if it was started by January 1973. Jerry's offer was not executed.

In June 1972 Hurricane Agnes was 150 miles off shore, but did severe damage to the County Public Beach, eroding back 5 feet.

Growth of population was weighing heavily on the minds of

the "old timers" (some of them residents of only a few years) so a poll was taken. Of the 1324 people questioned, 71.14% thought that crowding the island with high density (condominiums) would lower property values. 32.4% said they'd leave if the Beach ever becomes a "Miami" with high rises, etc. Apparently neither prediction has happened.

That month, the U.S. Corps of Engineers brought the dredge "Ideal" to deepen the Matanzas Pass channel. The spoil was dumped onto the public beach, replacing what it had lost in June. A new spoil island was created in the bay across from Moss Marina.

An updated estimate of the sewer costs was offered in August, putting the figure at \$8,930,800 with a connection fee of \$100 and service of \$6.75 monthly. With this announcement, an assessment of 9¢ per square foot of property was suggested.

The highrise bridge over Matanzas Pass was still in the distance, but County Commissioner James Sweeney proclaimed in September: "I think it is possible that we will have both bridges to Fort Myers Beach in the year 1973." It could have been possible, but 1973 came and went with neither bridges nor sewer started.

In October 1972 the County Commissioners approved a \$50 million residential Estero Bay development by Robert Troutman of Bay Associates, Ltd. The Estuaries would have 1,300 single residences and 10 units-per-acre complexes adding another 500 in the final concept. The buildings would occupy only 14% of the land and most of the land was swampy mangrove where many of the local mosquitos were breeding.

In December the sewer bonds were finally approved 801 to 299. The \$8.93 million bond issue was more than double the original 1969 estimate and no one was aware that the issue was open ended and would soar much higher in the final stages.

Conservation groups, including the Beach Bulletin, took a stand against the Estuaries by Troutman on the basis that the state was giving away part of the aquatic preserve. Probably no one who joined the hue and cry had ever set foot, much less sloshed through the area they were crying to keep. However, the state cabinet promised to protect the Estero Bay aquatic preserve and said they would review the situation.

In early 1973 the Beach Fire Department, whose budget was up to \$144,712.36 asked that the millage be raised to three mills allowing the budget to rise to \$300,000 under the existing assessment.

On August 16 the first Family Fun Festival was held with torch runners sprinting the length of the island. A fishing derby, long distance swim from the Neptune Inn to the pier and other contests made the three day festival a success.

In November 1973, the Estuaries development was again held up pending the establishment of a bulkhead line in the back bay area.

That November saw gasoline lines at every filling station from the pre-dawn hours until stations were dry. No gasoline was sold on Sundays and only two dollars worth to a customer.

For three weeks the Hurricane Pass bridge was closed nightly for extensive repairs in early February, 1974. Late travelers had to detour through Bonita Springs during the severe gasoline shortage.

In May, the long awaited asphalt sidewalks were begun, although they were not intended for bicycle traffic. Later, they were replaced with concrete "bike paths."

June 1974 saw heavy rains and high winds which damaged the beachfront with another large loss of sand.

August saw the first motel, the Skyline, razed to become a parking lot for the Spinnaker Lounge & Restaurant. A few days later it was announced that the highrise bridge construction would start in November 1975 and would be completed in April of 1976.

The arch, old landmark on San Carlos Island, being in the path of the new bridge, was destined to be demolished or moved. The Jaycees tried valiantly to raise the estimated \$50,000 to move it, but were unsuccessful.

In February 1975 the bridge construction date was again moved up. This time February 1976 was to be the starting date with 18 months to complete. During the entire decade of the seventies, the mid-island bridge, the highrise bridge at Matanzas Pass and the sewer system were the topic of the day.

In February the Beach Chamber of Commerce broke away from its affiliation with the Lee County Chamber and became an independent entity.

On May 6, 1975 the Estero Chapter of the American Business Women's Association received its charter with 25 members. Donna Sims was the first president, Mercedes Overholster, vice president; Anna Mae Frenzik, corresponding secretary and Dot Hobson recording secretary. Shortly after the club's formation, Edith O'Berry was given the honor of being selected as one of the top ten business

women in the nation. The organization devotes its energies toward awarding scholarships to deserving women.

In July 1975, John Dunning, who had purchased the Martha Redd bay property, donated 20 acres to the Matanzas Pass Wilderness Project and \$15,000 had been raised toward the purchase of additional land for \$117,000.

The old swing bridge constantly presented problems and in September it was jammed for seven hours due to mechanical failure. Again everybody had to detour through Bonita Springs to go north to Fort Myers.

Along with the bridge problems, the County pier became condemned and was closed to the public. It was estimated that \$40,000 would repair it or \$120,000 would be necessary to replace it with a prestressed concrete pier. Unfortunately this came at a time when the County budget was low and so it stayed closed until funds were available. A full year later the new concrete one was completed.

The County Commissioners met in June 1976 and rejected the Estuaries project.

It was not until July of 1976 that a final feasibility study was completed on the mid-island bridge. Costs were pegged at \$7.8 million for a landfill causeway and \$12.1 million for an elevated roadbed. Traffic flow was thought to be only 2125 cars daily and even with a 25¢ toll the project could not become a reality.

Further delays with the Department of Transportation postponed the start of the new bridge until the summer of 1977. Actually it was September 19, 1977 when the first piling were finally driven for the \$6.5 million span.

In November 1976 the Rancho del Mar motel was razed and the debris donated to the new fishing reef which Mike Yakubik and Curly Waller had been working on for years. The new reef was partially opened in September of 1978. It is located 1.6 miles off Redfish Pass.

The new Key Estero Island Shopping Plaza opened in December 1976 with space for 35 stores plus a large restaurant.

On January 20, 1977 the mercury dropped to 0°C. on the island and snowflakes were seen in Miami.

Late in March 1977, a 14-story resort with revolving restaurant was announced for the south end of Estero Island. Although plans called for completion in December 1977, construction had not started in early 1980.



The Matanzas Pass Wilderness Preserve gained momentum with a \$11,700 grant from the Gannett Foundation plus gifts of \$5,000 from Ann M. Lindberg and \$10,000 from the Louise Crane Foundation. The purchase price was reduced to \$105,000. With these gifts, the preserve became a reality and nature walks and bridges along with the Rotary Pavilion were started.

Seagrape Plaza announced plans for a shopping complex of 18 shops which were completed the following year.

In August 1977 Robert Troutman resigned from the Estuaries project and Cowan Associates took up the ball. In early 1980 the Court of Appeals gave the final go ahead with the ultimatum that the county would have to purchase the property or give the required permits to build. The case is still pending re-appeal by the county.

November of 1977 witnessed a drastic drop in the wholesale price of shrimp from \$3.80 a pound to \$2.80. Within a year the prices were back, but with the 1980 closing of the Campeche fishing grounds, shrimping was not the bountiful business it had been for the past 25 years.

In December the \$11.9 million sewer contract was let and construction began, tying up traffic already aggravated by the bridge construction. The first sewer connections were made in May of 1979. The connection fees remained at the 1972 estimate, but the assessment was raised from an original nothing to 13¢ per square foot of property and the service fee was raised to \$8 per month.

During 1978 the swing bridge began to crumble from pile driving of the adjacent new bridge and traffic was slowed to 5 m.p.h. with deputies on 24 hours a day for strict enforcement. Everyone prayed it would last until the new span was completed. Heavy traffic was detoured through Bonita Springs and signs were erected stating: "Love Thy Bridge" so cars would proceed with caution across the steel span.

A special census was taken by the county in September 1978 which showed the permanent population of the Beach to be 6,164. People complained that the mini-census was taken at the wrong time of the year, understating the actual population. Unfortunately, there are still many "residents" of the Beach who do not qualify by living here seven months of the year and they were not counted by the census takers.

On October 5th the move to change the name of the Beach to Estero Island was defeated in a referendum vote.

In January 1979 the Matanzas Pass Wilderness Preserve was officially opened.

Interval ownership, brought over from Europe, had caught on in the county, and in February the first ones were started here. As the fad increased in popularity motels were bought, converted into small apartments and sold for as low as \$1,900—for one week's use a year.

In April the wooden bridge at Hurricane Pass was removed and half of the new concrete one was put into use.

In July 1979, Universal Films scouted the island, considering it for the location of the filming of their picture "Condominium." Those who had read the book were not too elated with the idea of such a close connection.

On July 4th, the Rotary Club of Bonita Springs and that of Fort Myers Beach put on a display of fireworks witnessed by over 5,000 people.

The first weekend in September brought Hurricane David close enough to frighten everyone and cancel the Family Fun Festival. It was rescheduled for October, but lost impact due to the off-season date.

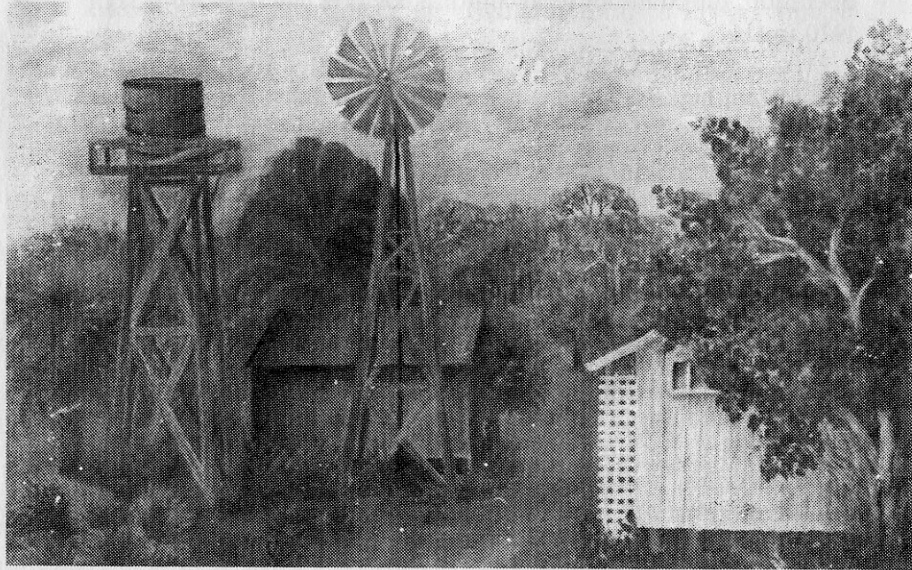
In September another set of pollution tests were taken at the County Park and public beach. Despite the new sewer system's operation, the count for fecal coliform bacteria had risen from 31 in 1970 to 116.

At 6 p.m. on October 15, 1979 traffic started to flow over the new 65 foot highrise Matanzas Pass span. Actually, the bridge was put into service before it was finished as the old swing bridge was dangerously near its end. In late February the final lights were installed on the new span.

The area had begun to slow its growth pattern for several reasons. Land was getting scarce and extremely expensive. Lots which sold in the fifties for \$5,000 were asking \$40,000. Beachfront had risen to over \$2,000 per running foot. Building restrictions and new building codes made for higher housing costs. Although water has not yet become a problem, in the foreseeable future it might limit growth to a zero rate. What the next decade will bring can only be surmised, but the law of probability states that it will continue in the direction it is heading with more and more condominiums and less motels until its image changes from a tourist resort to a permanent residential community.

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Harry Laycock's water plant was wind powered in 1912.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rolfe Finch Schell is what you call a character.

He's tousel-haired and tall, with a ready grin—the absent minded professor type you might expect to hunch over a workbench at night, concocting wonderful inventions while the neighbors sleep.

At the age of 12, when most kids were out playing baseball, Schell was laboring over his first television set. Building it that is, in 1929.

In 1934 and just out of prep school, Schell came to Fort Myers Beach, fell in love with the area and motorcycled back the next year from his home in Keeseville, New York. After attending Cornell and Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute he returned to start the area's (perhaps the state's) first hydroponics plant.

Returning to New York City he worked as a petroleum engineer, radio studio engineer and radio director.

After a few years he moved to Monterrey, Mexico where he was chief radio announcer for XERA, a paint chemist and operated his flourescent light manufacturing plant—all at the same time!

At the beginning of the '50's Schell returned to the Beach, cleared land and built the Rancho del Mar Motel. He sold it in 1956 and became a freelance writer, publishing over 120 articles and 10 books on health, history (Mayan and Spanish explorers), juvenile, photography and travel.



He, and his wife Lois, live in the rambling Colonial house (which he designed and helped build in 30 days) on a large lot overlooking Estero Bay. He is presently designing a complete solar system for central heat and hot water, and working on a historical novel of this area.

**Randy White**

*Fort Myers News-Press*