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Tampa Bay History

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## FORT MYERS AND LEE COUNTY IN 1897

*Editors' Note:* During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, leading newspapers engaged in the now familiar practice of boosting both their own sales and Florida development by printing expansive special editions. Handsomely illustrated, these editions featured portraits of prominent Floridians and colorful descriptions of far-flung cities and towns. Often written by outside reporters with an eye for telling detail, the resulting articles offer glimpses of various communities at a particular point in time. The following article, originally entitled "Fort Myers and the Beautiful Caloosahatchee," appeared in the "South Florida and Christmas Edition" of Jacksonville's *Florida Times-Union and Citizen*, published on December 19, 1897. One of the original issues is preserved in Special Collections of the University of South Florida Library.

South Florida is considered as a semi-tropical region, but if there is any particular section of the State that should be thus classed more than another, it is that lying south of the Caloosahatchee River, in Lee County, and the islands that extend southward to Key West. Here may be found a land that is not unlike the tropical islands of the Gulf of Mexico, for many of the tropical fruits found growing in the West Indies, and which are found nowhere else in the United States, thrive and bear fruit throughout Lee County equally as well as in their native soil.

Up to within a few years ago this was practically an unknown land. A few hundred settlers had wandered this way, chiefly for the purpose of carrying on the stock business, and enthusiastic sportsmen, who always seek out the least-frequented locations in which to hunt and fish, had found this the ideal spot for hunting the deer, turkey, and panther, and to take delight in playing with the many kinds of game fish that filled the waters.

But Lee County was destined to suddenly come into more prominence; and this was brought about through the great misfortune that befell the State in the winter of 1894-95. The world knows the history of that terrible calamity to a brave people—the loss of their orange groves, the labors of years gone in one night. So terrible and unexpected was the blow that even the people of Florida would not believe that any portion had escaped the icy blast from the north, such as was never known to have visited this flowery land before. The truth was Florida as a whole had not been doomed even temporarily, and soon skeptics began to believe that there was a line beyond which dangerous breezes do not penetrate—the Caloosahatchee River. This was brought about mainly by an exhibit at the South Florida Fair at Orlando, held March 19 to 23, 1895, six weeks after the damaging freeze of February 8 of that year. At that fair orange blossoms, ripe oranges, lemons, and grapefruit, coconuts, and a great variety of vegetables were displayed to the amazement of the thousands who came to the fair.

From that time people began to believe that there was a new section of Florida to be opened up, where fruits and vegetables could be produced without the dangers to be encountered in old, settled parts of the State, and as a result, in the three years that have passed the growth and development of Lee County have been wonderful.

The seat of the county government, business, educational, and social center of the county, has always been the town of Fort Myers. It has a place in history as being a military post in the Indian wars.



**Jehu J. Blount's General Store, located at First and Hendry Streets in Fort Myers, shown in 1886.**

Photograph from *Yesterday's Fort Myers* by Marian Godown and Alberta Rawchuck.

Fort Myers is situated on the south bank of the Caloosahatchee River, which stream heads out of the great Lake Okeechobee, and runs west into the Gulf of Mexico at Punta Rassa. The river has a width of one and a half to two miles at Fort Myers. It is reached over one of the prettiest water routes to be found in the State, and the ride on the Plant Line steamer *St. Lucie*, from Punta Gorda, is always considered a very delightful experience. The boat has comfortable berths, excellent meals are served, and the genial commander, Captain H. Fischer and his crew are very alert to the comfort of their passengers. This, together with the novel scenery, consisting of many glimpses of the deep, blue Gulf and pretty islands stretched along the coast, make this one of the most enchanting trips for the Northern tourist.

One may easily imagine, as he approaches the town of Fort Myers, that he is about to land on a tropical island of the Gulf. It is unlike any other portion of the peninsula that he has visited. It is a veritable tropical garden, and even the thriving places of business are hemmed in by dense growth, unfamiliar to the visitor who has never traveled in a tropical clime. Tall trees loom up above the house tops, with large glossy leaves. They are the avocado or alligator pear trees of the warmer countries, flourishing and producing the peculiar fruit that is beginning to be considered a great delicacy by the educated American palate.

Then, as the visitor finds himself in the town, he notices many other trees that he has not become familiar with in his travels in Florida. They are the coconut, sapodilla, mango, tamarind,

date palm, sugar-apple, seagrape, Barbadoes gooseberry, and other varieties from the tropics. The flower gardens, too, have a different look, for poincianas, alamandas, etc., predominate, and furnish a variety of color that cannot be found in the gardens of colder regions.

In addition to this, orange groves are to be seen on all sides, the orange, grapefruit, and lemon trees in all the glory of matured trees, with no scars to tell of setbacks, while the limbs bend low with the ripe fruit. Many of these orange trees are twenty-five years old, and there has never been any interruption in their fruit production from the time they first began to bear. Nestling these gardens and orange groves are pretty cottages, the homes of the people of this thrifty little tropical city, the whole presenting a scene that delights the visitor, who invariably pronounces it the prettiest town in the State.

The population of Fort Myers is about 1,000. A neat courthouse building is situated in the center of the town. The county is entirely free from debt, has sufficient cash in the treasury to pay for all running expenses, and the tax rate is as low as any.

The county is also blessed with a good set of officials, who are serving the people faithfully. They are William M. Hendry, Clerk of the Circuit Court; Thomas W. Langford, Sheriff; J. S. Singletary, Tax Collector; James Evans, Tax Assessor; Robert A. Henderson, Treasurer; George W. Powell, County Judge; W. W. Bostick, Superintendent of Schools; T. M. Park, F.J. Wilson and J. J. Chapman, members of the school board. The county's legislative Representative is Captain F. A. Hendry of Fort Thompson.

The town government is composed as follows: Mayor Jas. L. Harn; Clerk and Treasurer T. H. Levens; Marshal and Collector Frank Carson; Assessor C. W. Thompson; Justice of the Peace H. N. Selly.

The town is well supplied with nearly every feature that goes to make up a progressive city. The Fort Myers hotel is just receiving the finishing touches, and will throw open its doors to the public on January 1, 1898. It takes the place of the old Hendry House, and has all modern appointments, including airy rooms, large halls, large verandas, electric lights, hot and cold baths, fire protection, etc. Connected with the house will be billiard rooms and bowling alleys, wharf, boats, and every facility to enjoy the great hunting and fishing of this neighborhood. Game will be a feature of the table. The hotel has been erected by H. O'Neill, the well-known merchant prince of New York.



**Francis Asbury Hendry.**

Photograph courtesy of Fort Myers Historical Museum.



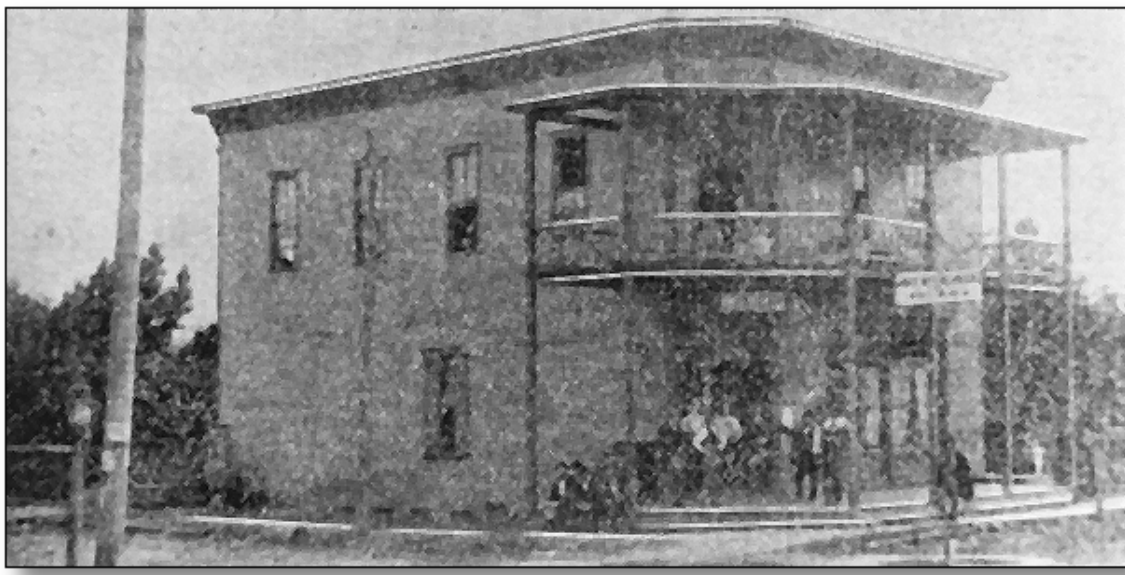
**Hendry House which was destroyed to make room for a new hotel.**

Photograph from *Yesterday's Fort Myers* by Marian Godown and Alberta Rawchuck.

A smaller hotel is the Inn, conducted by Mrs. L. Gomm, where tourists will find excellent accommodations at moderate rates. Conveniences will also be found here for the tarpon fisherman, the house being located directly on the river. A number of boarding houses are also open to the public, where good accommodations can be secured at reasonable rates.

Parties who are looking for locations to settle, or investments, can be guided in their efforts by consulting either of the two reliable land agents located here. J. S. Singletary is one of the oldest residents of the county, and knows each parcel of land "by heart." He is known as explorer, pathfinder and surveyor, and best of all, his statements are strictly reliable. W. C. Battey has brought many capitalists to Lee County, and has done a great work in the setting up and starting of new enterprises in the county. He gives his entire attention to these lines.

One of the successful enterprises of Fort Myers is the Seminole Canning Factory, established some years ago by W. P. Gardner & Son. The firm has a large canning plant, tin shop, etc., and makes a specialty of guava jellies and preserved guavas, supplying large grocery firms in New York, Philadelphia, and throughout the South. This firm is also at present engaged in putting in an electric light plant, and before the new year is ushered in the town will take a jump from kerosene lamps to electric lights.



Office of the *Fort Myers Press*, from *Florida Times-Union and Citizen*, December 19, 1897.

One of the best weekly newspapers in the State is published here. It is a neatly printed eight-page paper, giving all the news of town and country. It is published by Isaacs & Stout, and edited by Philip Isaacs.

The stock business has always been an important one in Lee County, and lately, since the great demand for beef cattle has come from Cuba, the stock men have been reaping a rich harvest. The leading men in the business are James E. Hendry and Dr. T. E. Langford. They buy beef cattle, and own their own schooners, shipping hundreds of live cattle to Key West and Cuban markets each week.

The merchants keep as well-selected stocks of goods as can be found in any portion of the country. H. E. Heitman is one of the progressive business men of the town. He is now having erected the first brick house in the county, and will open up a first-class grocery store therein on January 1. He handles the choicest line of groceries on the southern west coast, and has established a reputation for his goods among the yachtsmen cruising along the west coast in the winter season. He conducts a first-class store, in connection with his grocery store, and he is also proprietor of the livery stable, where good teams and carriages may be secured.

W. R. Washburn conducts the Lightning News Depot, carries a full line of jewelry, silverware, etc., and is headquarters for the tarpon fishermen, keeping a supply of the best rods, reels, and lines for this sport. Captain Powell manages the Silver King Saloon and billiard rooms.

There are two drug stores. Dr. E. M. Williams, the proprietor of one, is also the photographer of the place, and his excellent landscape views are being sought far and wide. He has as fine a collection of views of Florida scenery as can be found in the State. There are also several blacksmiths, two meat markets, several restaurants, oyster saloons, the Gem tonsorial shop and



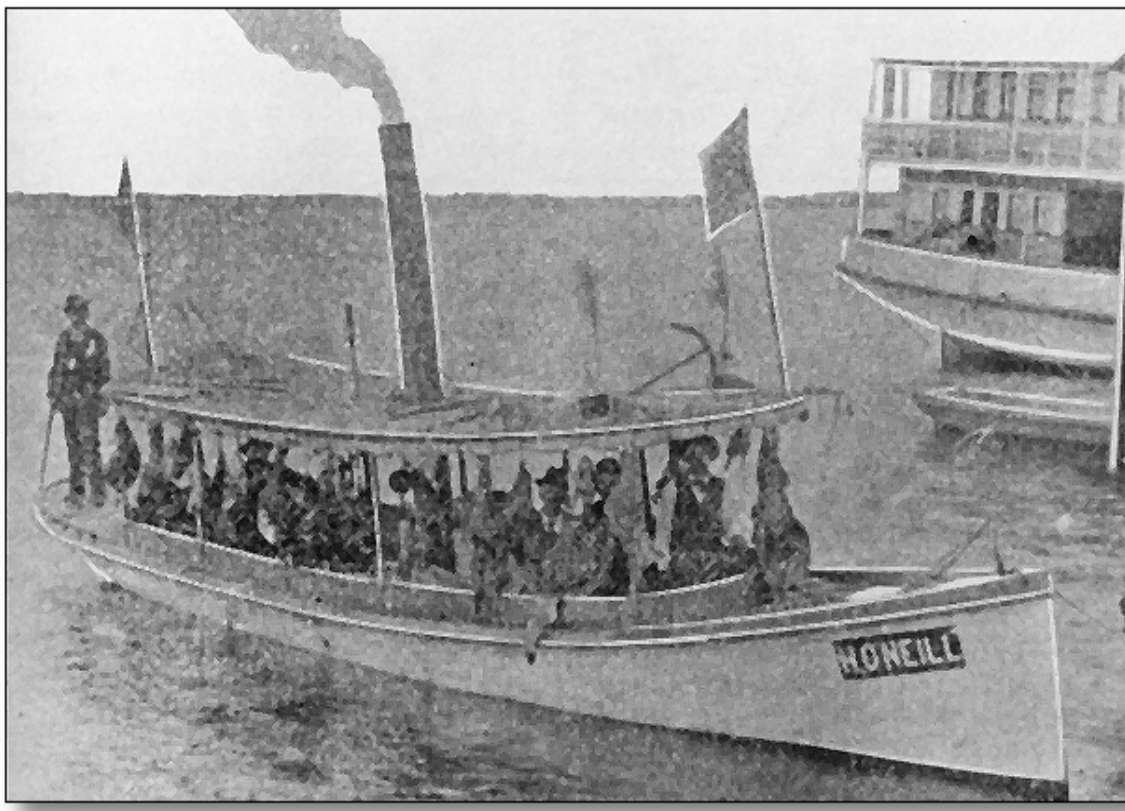
**The Heitman Building under construction, from *Florida Times-Union and Citizen*, December 19, 1897.**

bath room. There are lodges of three secret orders, the Masons, Knights of Pythias, and Woodmen of the World.

The religious and educational welfare of the people is well looked after, there being Methodist, Baptist, Episcopal, and Catholic Churches, and also two churches for the colored people. The public school is well attended, and is graded into four classes, with a good instructor in each class.

Another business that brings in a large revenue is the shipping of alligator and other hides, which are brought in from the Indian camps in the Everglades.

Men with an eye to business often wonder at the amount of business transacted in Fort Myers, as apparently there is no back country from which to draw trade. They overlook the fact that this town is the central trading point for a great territory lying along the Caloosahatchee River from Fort Thompson on the east and extending down the coast to Marco Island, covering altogether a territory by water of fully 150 miles, the greater part of which finds its natural trading at Fort Myers. As the county increases in population, the mail-order business from points along the regular steamer lines grows larger and larger, and is now looked upon as a regular feature by all the business men.



**H. O'Neill's pleasure boat, from *Florida Times-Union and Citizen*, December 19, 1897.**

Every place in Florida claims to be the paradise of sportsmen, but cold facts and figures, and honest records show that Fort Myers can rightfully claim to be the leading tarpon fishing resort of the country, for more tarpon have been taken here with rod and reel than all other places in the State combined. Sportsmen have made yearly pilgrimages to Fort Myers from Europe and all parts of the United States, to experience the thrilling sensations of playing and landing with rod and reel, the gamest of all fish—the great silver king. Titled Englishmen, members of New York's 400, and men of national reputation in politics, religion, literature, and mercantile pursuits have indulged in the sport and conquered the monster silver tarpon, and pronounced it the greatest sport in their experience. As many as four hundred tarpon have been taken here in one season with the rod and reel.

Besides the tarpon there are other great monsters like the sawfish, devilfish, jewfish, and sharks, and in the way of small fishing, many varieties of game fish are captured. The season lasts from January to June, but the best months for the sport are April and May, at which season the river and bays are alive with tarpon.

Every one has heard of or traveled on the St. Johns and Ocklawaha Rivers, and the scenery along these streams has been heralded over the wide world for its beauty. But how many have taken the trip up the Caloosahatchee River? Those who have pronounced the scenery far beyond



that to be found along Florida's other famous rivers, and a trip on the regular mail steamer, the *Gray Eagle*, owned by the Menge Bros., is certainly one of the great delights of a Florida tour.

A few miles up from Fort Myers, Orange River, the most important tributary, enters the main river. On this tributary are located some of the most magnificent orange groves to be found in the State. A few miles up is the village and postoffice of Buckingham. Here for several miles, bearing groves line the river on both sides. They stand there as proof that no freeze ever affected them, for many trees are thirty feet high, and their spread of branches is fully that distance across.

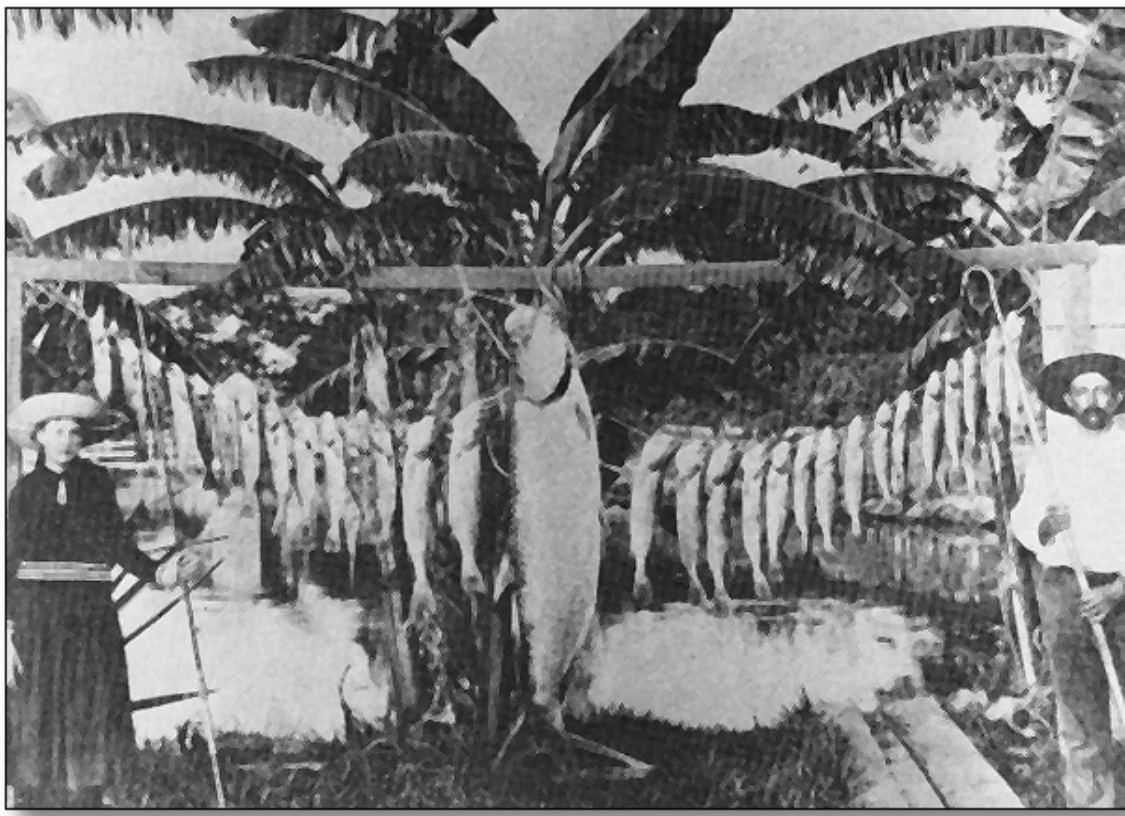
This section appears to be the home, par excellence, of the grapefruit, for nowhere else does it thrive as it does here, and this fruit always commands the highest market price. Among the large growers here are men who have made the citrus section famous, and the Orange River will, no doubt, become famous for oranges. The soil along here is some of the richest to be found in the State, and in addition to citrus fruit, sugar cane and other crops help to enrich the farmers. A couple of hours ride up the Caloosahatchee brings the traveler to Caloosa.

This is the beginning of the great orange section on the river, and from here to Fort Thompson the scene is an ever-changing one, with thrifty orange groves breaking its scenery at short intervals on either bank. At Caloosa, A. M. McGregor, the Standard Oil magnate, is making some extensive improvements. He has one hundred acres planted in orange grove, a large plantation, and is conducting experiments in the growing of Cuban tobacco. He has also several bearing orange groves in different parts of the county, and has a beautiful winter residence in the western end of Fort Myers, adjoining the beautiful grounds and winter home of Thomas A. Edison, the wizard.

From Caloosa to the thriving village of Alva, there is a succession of orange groves, including some of the most productive trees in the county. At Alva there are a postoffice, school, church, etc. It is the largest settlement on the river above Fort Myers. This section is growing very rapidly, and a wonderful change has been going on, the heavy hammocks giving way for orange groves, for the experience of the past has shown that it is a safe locality to grow citrus fruit. There are thousands of acres of suitable orange lands in this section, and at the rate groves are being set out, all the available lands will be planted in orange groves in a few years.

This condition of affairs continues up the river to Fort Denaud. Above Fort Denaud there are not such large bodies suitable for orange culture, but the lands are rich and produce fine crops of sugar cane, etc. At Fort Denaud there are a postoffice, general store, sawmill, school, etc., and the village is steadily growing in population, and keeping pace with the rapid growth of the section farther down. Along here the banks of the river are very steep, rising to a height of fifteen to twenty feet.

Fort Thompson is the head of the steamboat mail route. There is a postoffice here and a store near by. Fort Thompson lies in a beautiful green prairie, dotted all over with great oaks. The grass is rich and nutritious, and stock grow fat upon it. It is one of the most picturesque spots along this pretty country, and visitors should not fail to see it. Hunters will find the country round about rich in game of all kinds.



**Fish caught in one day by thirteen-year-old Annie Holloway, from *Florida Times-Union and Citizen*. December 19, 1897.**

Beyond Fort Thompson are the canals and chain of lakes forming the connection with Lake Okeechobee. Thirty miles south are the homes of the Seminole Indians, who are rapidly becoming civilized, and are living in peace and plenty, unlike their Western brothers, who refuse steadily to accept or ask any financial assistance from the Government.

Lee County claims a large share of the Gulf coast. . . . There is a chain of islands lying off the main land, forming inland sounds of salt water, where small steamers and sloops may navigate in safety.

The largest and most important of these is Sanibel Island. In the past two or three years this island has become a resort for winter visitors. On one side stretches the shell beach of the Gulf for fourteen miles, and on the other the still waters of Pine Island Sound. There are now two postoffices on the island, schools, churches, a good hotel and several boarding houses, Southern Express office, two general stores, etc. Wharfs extend out into the Gulf and two steamboat wharfs are on the sound side, the regular mail steamers from Fort Myers to Punta Gorda landing here daily except Sunday. Shell gathering, surf bathing, boating, fishing, clam and oyster digging are some of the things to amuse and occupy the people, but the principal and universal business is the growing of early vegetables—principally tomatoes—for Northern markets.

That bugaboo of Floridians, the “frost line,” is not dreaded here, for the frosts never settle on this island, and the vegetable grower commences to plant his first crop of tomatoes in August without giving a thought of winter or frosts. On the first of November, when the rest of the country is preparing for the approach of the blizzard, the Sanibelite begins shipping fresh, ripe tomatoes to market, shipping right up through the Christmas holidays, only stopping long enough to observe the anniversary birth of the Savior.

During the month of November just past, 1,034 crates of tomatoes were shipped North. These figures are from the books of the steamer St. Lucie. The last shipment in November consisted of over 300 crates. During December shipments will increase with every trip, until the capacity of the steamers will be taxed to their utmost. It is estimated that the crop will reach 150,000 crates. The Sanibel trucker usually grows two crops, one in the fall and another in the spring, and even the second crop is started to market several weeks in advance of the trucking points farther up the State.

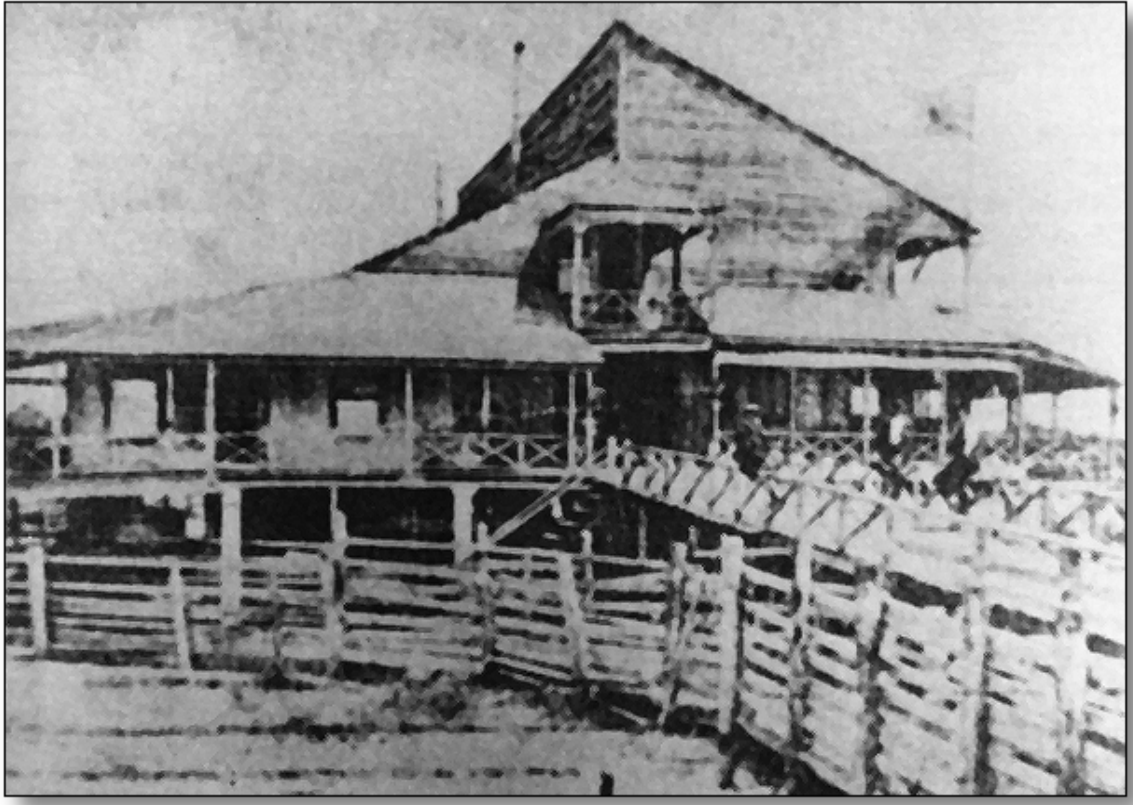
Just across from Sanibel is Pine Island. The principal point on this island is St. James City, a great resort for sportsmen who love all kinds of fishing.

At the mouth of the Caloosahatchee River, situated on the point of the main land, opposite the light house on the eastern end of Sanibel Island, is Punta Rassa. While there is little in the way of a town to be found here, this little place plays an important part in the welfare of the county and the country at large. For years it has been the cable station, from whence the cable crosses the Gulf to Key West and Cuba. All of the Cuban war news has to pass through this office, and in case of a break in the lines, the dispatches must all be “relayed” at this office. George R. Shultz has been in charge of this office for nearly thirty years, W. H. McDonald being his assistant. Mr. Shultz is also quarantine officer, customs collector for this sub-port, and the ever genial proprietor of the Tarpon House at Punta Rassa.

What recollection this old house brings up to the memory of the many well-known men of the world who have enjoyed its hospitality. The long string, of names would include some of New York’s leading business men, United States Senators, etc. They come for the good treatment and the fishing, the like of which is not to be found around Florida’s 1,200 islands. . . .

Below Punta Rassa are the islands of Estero and Mound Key, and on the main land is Estero Creek, where is located the Teed colony, known as the Koreshan Unity. Twenty miles south of Punta Rassa is Naples-on-the-Gulf, the pretty winter resort owned by Colonel W. H. Haldeman, proprietor of the Louisville Courier-Journal, of which Henry Watterson is editor. Naples lies directly on the open Gulf, with no islands intervening. A long dock extends out into the blue waters. Here is situated a well furnished hotel where guests enjoy surf bathing in winter, and fishing, hunting, etc., to their hearts’ content. Colonel Haldeman also has his private cottage here, and each winter comes here with his interesting family to rest and enjoy himself.

Ten miles below Naples is Marco Island, the beginning of the Ten Thousand islands that dot the Gulf. Here many thrifty farmers are growing early vegetables, sugar cane and tropical fruits for market. Captain W. L. Collier owns the largest bearing coconut grove at this place. He is also an extensive shipbuilder and merchant, and a couple of years ago built a handsome hotel on the



**Old Tarpon House at Punta Rassa.**

Photograph from *Yesterday's Fort Myers* by Marian Godown and Alberta Rawchuck.

island. All the tropical fruits grow in great luxuriance on the island, the leading fruits being coconuts, alligator pears, sapodillas, bananas, and pineapples.