

# WHY IS THERE A CITY HERE?

## The Story of Everglades City, Florida



*Until the Tamiami Trail (US-41) was completed, the only public access to this area was by water.* In 1923, Barron Collier promised that if his million-acre land holding were granted county status, he would complete the section of road between Naples and the Dade County line. Since he had to transport material and people by boat, one of his first projects was to deepen the river. He then filled in the land with more dredging and laid out the streets, soon building a city which served as the engineering headquarters for the Trail's construction and also as the county seat.

Long before that, **Native Americans** fleeing from the Indian Wars and escaped slaves from the Confederate States had found refuge among the mangroves. The banks of the river were farmed after the Civil War, originally by defecting soldiers. Other immigrants came south in search of a frost-free climate.

One of the first permanent white settlers was **William Smith Allen**, a Connecticut Yankee living in Key West. He began growing vegetables along the river in 1870 and sent them to Key West, the closest large center of population and the "local" port for onward shipping to New York.

By 1889 the Storter family owned most of what is now Everglades City. **George Storter, Jr.**, had bought out Allen. He and his brother **Robert Bembery Storter** grew sugar cane which they reduced to syrup for export in tins made by their father. George also started a Trading Post frequented by local Indians and provided lodging for sports fishermen in what had been Allen's house and is now the Rod & Gun.

Throughout the **Ten Thousand Islands** little frontier communities thrived in the wilderness. Besides farming, they hunted wild turkey, boar and deer; fished for clams and mullet; sold raccoon and alligator skins and egret feathers.

**Water** was the primary means of transport. The Everglade Post Office, established in 1893, sent and received mail by boat. Produce was shipped under sail. The occasional passenger included the school teacher, visiting doctor, and roving preacher.



Into this environment came **Barron Gift Collier**, a wealthy Tennessee advertising mogul. He was introduced to the area by a friend who grew grapefruit 13 miles to the north at Deep Lake and had built a rail system to carry his cargo to the river.

Collier bought out the Storters in 1921 and hired **David Graham Copeland** as his chief engineer and manager. The re-named Rod & Gun served as their headquarters until the town was furnished with a bank, Post & Telegraph office, bakery, laundry, administration offices and the Everglades Inn which housed a department store (the Manhattan Mercantile, owned by Collier), pharmacy and restaurant. The new **county seat** was located in the imposing Court House building on the circle.

Dwellings were built for the workers but owned, like almost everything else, by the **Collier Corporation**. Locals still remember that when a shipment of paint came into town, they wondered what color their homes would be that year

What Collier and Copeland accomplished in the short span between 1923 (the establishment of the County) and 1928 (the opening of the Tamiami Trail) was amazing. Besides building the town and completing the road, they also linked a full-gauge railroad to the Atlantic Coast Line network.

The **Tamiami Trail**, begun in 1915 to join **Tampa** to **Miami**, was financed and built by the counties. Collier's 76 miles went through uncharted swamp which was found to have solid limestone under it, blasted by millions of tons of dynamite. Dredges dug canals to provide fill for the road bed.

The project had to be self-sufficient. Engineers in **Port DuPont**, on the west bank of the river, maintained the dredges and built floating trailers for the crews on the front line. Workers battled foot-rot from standing in water all day and the inevitable mosquitoes. The local hospital, staffed by Collier with resident doctor and nurses, treated illnesses and accidents.

Good times were to be had in the **Everglades Club**, the community center, whose façade has been replicated in the Museum of the Everglades. Movies were shown on Saturday nights and religious services held on Sundays. There were sing-alongs, dances, and concerts performed by local prisoners.



Unfortunately, the 1929 Depression and the collapse of the Florida land boom put an end to the prosperity. Barron Collier died in 1939, leaving control of his companies to his three sons. In 1947 the **Everglades National Park** took over the waters traditionally used by local commercial fishermen. In 1959, the railroad stopped delivering goods and passengers to the Depot (now a restaurant).

The town of Everglades became a **City** in 1953 when the Collier Corporation diversified and encouraged local independence. Residents bought the houses they lived in. The electricity generating plant, water management, and airport became the responsibility of the new city.

After a referendum in 1959, the county seat moved to the more populous Naples area. The bank moved to Immokalee. The Collier Corporation headquarters also left the town.

Today, **fishing and tourism** predominate. Stone crabbers are busy from October to May, providing freshly-harvested delicacies to restaurants here as well as in Miami and other big cities. Sports fishing folk come for the weekend or the winter. Tourists stop at the Western Gateway Visitors' Center of the Everglades National Park to learn about nature in the unspoiled mangroves.

The City has pride in its history and tries to balance growth with the maintenance of a **friendly atmosphere**. We still stop to chat when we collect our mail every day at the Post Office. There's a welcoming "How're ya?" in the grocery, a discussion in the hardware store, and a wave from the driver of an on-coming car. Perhaps our isolation in the Everglades still fosters a spirit of self-reliance and an awareness of community.

## **READ MORE ABOUT US**

*Crackers in the Glade* by Rob Storter, 2000.

*Tamiami Trail* by Collier County Museums, 2003.

*A Brief History of the Everglades City Area* by Marya Repko, 2005.

## **TOUR THE CITY**

Walk or drive around with a copy of our guide *Historic Buildings around Everglades City.*

## **SEE AN ORIGINAL TRAIL DREDGE**

at Collier Seminole State Park, Routes 41 & 92

## **VISIT THE MUSEUM**

The old laundry building at 105 West Broadway is open 10:00am – 4:00pm, Tuesday – Saturday



## **PRESENTED BY**

*Friends of the Museum of the Everglades*

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