

## Overview of Manatee County History

by Cathy Slusser

Manatee county's rich heritage centers around the Manatee River. Named for the Manatee, a mammal commonly referred to as a sea cow, the river winds for fifty-five miles from Tampa Bay to the northeast corner of Manatee County.

Evidence that early Manatee County inhabitants depended on the Manatee River as early as 8,000 B.C. can be found in the burial, midden and temple mounds located along the river's banks.

For centuries, Indian tribes were left alone to enjoy the Florida and Manatee County wilderness until the beginning of Spanish exploration of Florida. Many people believe that one of the first of these explorers, Hernando DeSoto, entered the mouth of the Manatee River on May 25, 1539. From this site, he journeyed forth through Florida and into the Southeastern North American continent.

Upon accepting ownership of the Florida territories, the United States government began a program to encourage the settlement of Florida and to control the Seminole Indian uprisings. Enticed by the offer of free land, pioneers began arriving in the Manatee River region. The first settler to arrive in the area, Josiah Gates, sailed six miles up the river until he arrived at a site on the south side of the river near what is today called 15th Street East. Gates chose to homestead this area in 1841 and returned with his family a year later to establish the Village of Manatee.

Despite many problems, by 1855 enough settlers had followed

Gates into the area to justify the establishment of a new county.

At its creation, Manatee County consisted of 5,000 square miles and extended from the Gulf of Mexico to Lake Okeechobee. The county was governed from a small frame courthouse built in Manatee in 1860. This building is now a part of the Manatee Village Historical Park.

Shortly afterwards, Civil War disrupted life in Manatee County. It took Manatee County almost a decade to recover from the effects of the war, but by the 1880's, growth begun prior to the war had continued. In 1880, approximately 2,800 people lived in the sprawling county. Agriculture remained the county's chief source of income. Population swelled, and by 1878, Bradenton was large enough to warrant a post office. Also during this time, the fishing village of Cortez was established.

The turn of the century brought progress to Manatee County in the form of electricity, trolley cars, railroads, telephone, telegraph and automobiles.

In the early 1920's, Manatee County, along with the entire State of Florida, experienced a tremendous period of rapid growth. Within the first five years of that decade, the county's population more than tripled. Many buildings were constructed during this growth period. Tourism also profited during this decade, and the "tin can tourist camp" at Braden Castle was established. "Tin can tourists" were named for their habits of spending the winter living in housecars built on Model T Ford chassis. Manatee County saw its boom go bust in the middle of the 1920's. However, Manatee County's agricultural base continued to

provide a livelihood for many of its residents.

Prosperity returned in the 1940's. The citrus industry grew during this period as the military requisitioned large quantities of canned and processed fruit. At the end of World War II, Manatee County's population and tourist industry soared along with that of the entire state.

By the end of the decade, Manatee County was on its way to becoming the thriving community it is today. However, the community still retains the charm and simplicity of the river settlement established by Josiah Gates in the 1840's. Just as the Manatee River winds its way throughout Manatee County, its history and heritage intermingle with our county's modern day lifestyle.

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