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A NOTE ON BOCA GRANDE

by Charles Dana Gibson

After reading, "Boca Grande, Its Railroad Heritage," by Jeanne P. Reidy, (*TBH*, 4, Spring/Summer 1982, pp. 21-32.) I feel the following comments are warranted.

Boca Grande is not a natural deep water port; rather, the "natural" depth on the entrance bar prior to the first dredging in 1912 was nineteen feet. Prior to 1912, deep draft ships had their cargoes topped off seaward of the bar. See records of the Army Corps of Engineers preceded by at least half a dozen surveys dating from the 1771-74 mapping of Bernard Romans.

Captains I. W. and William Johnson were not the first pilots for the area, much less acting as such in 1888. They were preceded by a few years by Captain Peter Nelson, an ex-Danish seaman who operated from Cayo Costa (the island which forms the southern boundary of the entrance into Charlotte Harbor). In 1904, Nelson and the Johnsons were jointly and officially appointed as pilots by the Commissioners of Lee County although all parties had acted as pilots prior to that time. See *Eldridge's Coast Pilot*, No. 2, Southern Section, 1883, updated to 1890, states that in 1890 in Charlotte Harbor, Florida, "There are no pilots here." An additional source is *Florida's Vanishing Era* by E. H. D. Pearse which has, on page 44, her diary excerpts for 1900-01. Also Minute Records of Lee County Commissioners, February 3, 1904, Minute Book 2, Page 316.

The author's claim of who were island residents in 1888 is totally misleading. In 1888 there was no "lighthouse keeper and his family," for the simple reason that in 1888, there was no lighthouse. Moneys for the construction of the lighthouse were not allocated by Congress until 1888. The lighthouse first operated on December 31, 1890. See U.S. Lighthouse Service Records, National Archives. There were however a number of fishing people living on the island's northern end. They lived at or near the site of the Peacon Fish Ranch which itself had been in operation at least since 1877 and which is known to have still been operating under Peacon's management as late as 1896. This was a permanent type installation. See George B. Goode, *The Fisheries and Fishing Industries of The U.S.*, Sect. II, Government Printing Office, 1887. Interview with: Raymond Lowe, island resident, whose brother was born at Peacon's Ranch in 1912 and whose father worked for Peacons, circa 1895-97.

The island received its name probably from a Spanish missionary priest (circa 1500s) namely one "Friar Gaspar." See early maps and charts as well as Blunt's *American Coast Pilot*, 15th Edition, 1847, New York.

The author states that when L. M. Fouts and party stepped ashore on Gasparilla Island in 1905, they were joining "the lighthouse keeper and his family and the assistant keeper and his family" (and obviously the port personnel and pilots at South Boca, Grande). She does not mention the rest of the residents on the island, namely those who importantly had homesteaded there and who had been issued patents on their lands:

William Smith, patent issued 1891

John R. Peacon, patent issued 1901

J. Wynn, patent issued 1892

R. Wotizki, patent issued 1892
James Newsome, patent issued 1892

These patents were issued for homesteads which were on lands on the central section of the island from present-day First Street to the Lee/Charlotte county line. See abstracts of subject real estate parcels; also Lee County land records.

The author's dependence on Karl P. Abbott as a source is disappointing. Abbott's account was written many years after the fact and apparently from memory. Had Ms. Reidy thoroughly reviewed more authoritative sources such as the American Agricultural Chemical Company (now Connoco) files, she would have found many materials to separate fact from fiction.

Also, she did not avail herself of the voluminous War Department Records which discuss in detail the railroad's right of way, phosphate terminal leaseholds, etc. These files are imperative reference and the best background source for anyone wishing to piece together and understand the island's early development.

The author completely ignored the activities of the Boca Grande Land Company, an AAC Co. subsidiary. The "Land Company," through its sales offices, was the entity responsible for land sales following AAC Co.'s takeover of Gasparilla Island ownership, at least that part not remaining under War Department control. She failed to explore, through scholarly research, how Boca Grande was "packaged" by AAC Co.; thus she has overlooked the planning of the island for its dual purpose, ie., a resort and a phosphate port. She also seems to be unaware of the intrigue which went into that "packaging" and thus leaves the reader with an erroneous understanding of those early days. For example, at one point, and as part of the intrigue, the northern one third of the island was held under a patent grant given by the government to the Santa Fe Pacific Railroad.