6-1-1992

The Carousel of Progress: Palmetto, Florida, during the 1920s and 1930s

Barbara Stephenson

University of South Florida

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/tampabayhistory

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/tampabayhistory/vol14/iss1/4

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Open Access Journals at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Tampa Bay History by an authorized editor of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact scholarcommons@usf.edu.
THE CAROUSEL OF PROGRESS: PALMETTO, FLORIDA, DURING THE 1920s AND 1930s
by Barbara Stephenson

From boom to bust, the 1920s and 1930s offered a unique chapter in Florida's history. Indeed, the story is too big to compress easily into a single chapter. By tracing the experiences of one community from the turn of the century through the thirties, this article highlights some social and economic themes of these decades and provides a perspective from one rural Florida community.

Palmetto was a well established, bustling agricultural community by the 1920s. Situated on the north bank of the Manatee River opposite Bradenton, its location was idyllic. Red-bricked Main Street, which stretched north from the riverfront, was Palmetto's principal artery. At the north end of Main Street stood the public library which was established in 1914 with funds from the Carnegie Corporation. From the steps of the library, townfolk could point with pride to buildings which signaled the town's modernity: a dry goods store, two banks, a grocery store, a Western Union office, the Oaks Hotel, a bakery, a jewelry store, two drug stores, a theatre, a hardware store, a barber shop, and the Fruit Growers' Express office. Indeed, the weekly Palmetto News boasted in 1915 that Palmetto then had twenty-nine blocks paved with brick, making it "one of the best paved little cities in the state." The following year when Lloyd's Drug Store opened, the News announced that "neatness and sanitation were the main points." The store featured cool drinks from a fountain, and an orchestra furnished music for the opening. It was, the writer continued, "up to date in every respect ... the fixtures and equipment being of the very latest style and design." The city fathers took considerable pride in Palmetto's lack of provinciality. Continuing south on Main Street to the riverfront, a visitor could take a left at Bay Street, which led to the Seaboard railroad depot. Here passengers waited for the train to Tampa or Jacksonville, and boxcars overflowed with fresh fruits and vegetables destined for northern markets.

Although few southern cities escaped some measure of regional boosterism, life in the 1920s in Palmetto still paced itself to the rural rhythms of the land, dating back to the nineteenth century. Because many settlers of this community had arrived in the mid-1800s, there had been ample time to establish local patterns and traditions. After the Second Seminole War in 1842, the area had opened for settlement by whites. Building a home on the south side of the Manatee River, Josiah Gates and his family arrived first. In 1855 the Village of Manatee was designated as the county seat of the new Manatee County, which had been carved out of Hillsborough County. Since that time, agriculture had played a significant role in the lives of its citizens.

Rich soil, a mild climate and the wide, navigable Manatee River which led to the Gulf of Mexico, all contributed to a lively, diverse economy. Initially, the cattle and sugar cane industries proliferated. However, in 1864, the sugar cane mills were destroyed by Union soldiers as they moved through Florida searching for Confederate officers.

Aided by man made drainage systems and Florida's abundant artesian水流, citrus and vegetable crops flourished after the Civil War. As faster ships and, eventually, the railroad
expanded commerce, settlers discovered that northerners were prepared to pay high prices for fresh vegetables. The rich soil lent itself to a wide variety: celery, cabbage, beans, beets, corn, eggplant, peppers, sweet potatoes, and, later, watermelon and strawberries. But it was the tomato which would eventually become the county’s number one cash crop. By the turn of the century, the county’s tomato and cabbage crops ranked second in earnings in Florida.4

Manatee County also developed a significant floral industry by the turn of the century. Fern, hibiscus, asters, and gladiolas were sold commercially. The agricultural and floral industries received a significant boost during this period with the construction of ice plants in the county, thus making possible cooled railroad cars and warehouse precoolers.

Hoping to prosper in this southern climate, Talbot Sharp Pollard moved his family from Indiana to Palmetto in 1896. The town had about 400 residents at that time. In a letter dated May 19, 1899, Pollard described his plans to his son-in-law:

I want to put out a grove. I have the land well adapted to grove culture. I also want to set a pinery. I want to clear more land and drain better what is cleared. I have something like 15 acres fenced. The expense of clearing, draining, and fencing, and setting out in fruit, will be pretty heavy. I don't know just what, but I do know in five years from planting it will be a fortune. In
the meantime, vegetables may be grown between the trees. This crop will yield a handsome profit. I was told by a man who owns 8 acres, no better than mine, that since last August when he began working his land, he had sold $1300 worth of vegetables off of the 8 acres and every acre was now in crop of tomatoes just coming in. A piece of land 40 acres, which was offered to me for $800 when I was first here; about 9 acres of this 40 sold last week for $3000. It is cleared and fenced and has an artesian well on it. I speak of these few cases that you may see that it is this that helps to influence my making this my home, besides health. An immense crop of vegetables is being marketed now at handsome prices. Oates [sic] corn are very good. Oates just about as good as Ind. grows. Corn probably 40 or 50 bu. per acre not half cultivated. Rice promises from 40 to 60 bu. per acre.5

Although Palmetto had a population of only about 1,200 in 1910, it served as a nucleus for the surrounding rural communities of Manatee County. By this time the town could boast three churches, a school, a hotel, a variety of stores, a dressmaker, four packing houses, two blacksmiths, two livery stables, paved streets and sidewalks, electric lights, telephones, a public park, an ice factory, a lodge hall, "several secret organizations," and "an empty jail."6 Unimproved land in the city could be bought for about ten dollars an acre.

But changes were coming quickly to small southern towns by the turn of the century, as America's industrial revolution initiated a tidal wave of change that had rippling effects. As one Palmetto pastor lamented in 1916, "some members do not attend the services and others are worldly and others care more for the lodges and the picture shows than the House of God."7 More changes came with the extension of the railroad from Tampa to Palmetto in 1918. This line provided greater access to markets and eased transportation both to and from the area. Improving access to towns south of the river, a wooden bridge connecting Palmetto to Bradenton was constructed in 1919 over the Manatee River.

Inevitably, though, heartache and disappointment did occasionally bring a reversal of fortunes. In the early 1900s Palmetto was hit by the scourges of scarlet fever, typhoid fever, and diphtheria. From 1901 to 1908 social events were kept to a minimum, and church activities were temporarily suspended in an effort to limit the spread of disease. In 1921, claims of the discovery of underground oil and gas reserves just west of town created great excitement. The local publisher was not alone when he predicted that "Palmetto's future is now assured" and that thousands would "flock to the city."8 The claims, unfortunately, proved false. Further misfortune visited that same year when a major hurricane came inland, destroying the bridge between Palmetto and Bradenton and wreaking other havoc in the area.

These crises, often short-lived, were soon forgotten. By 1920 tourists had discovered the state, and the little town of Palmetto reaped the benefits. According to one local historian, "it seemed that all the people of the midwest and farming regions of the North were coming to Florida to spend the winter in their trailers."9 Palmetto had no place for these "tin can tourists" to camp, so in November 1920 the city set aside an area for this purpose. The annual trek, fueling the twin industries of tourism and real estate, continued until the depression years.

Lured by the accounts of friends who had visited the area, intrigued by Florida sunshine and sand, and spurred in the 1920s by the mobility of Henry Ford's inexpensive cars, the numbers of
immigrants to the state steadily increased. The boom of the early twenties sent land values skyrocketing. In 1920 a 40-acre parcel of Florida land sold for about $45; four years later it sold for $40,000. During the "Florida Boom," it was estimated that in 1925 the state spent $400 million on building construction; $50 million on railway track and equipment; and $7.5 million on 286 miles of new state highway. Moreover, tourists spent $250 million in Florida during the 1924-25 winter season. This cycle of gambling, greed and glut continued until the Florida bust in 1926.

In an effort to cash in on the land boom, Palmetto used a Chamber of Commerce magazine published in 1924 to lure new residents. It boasted: "The homes of this city are surrounded by ample grounds. There is no crowding. Spacious yards and flowers and shrubbery and shading trees give the appearance of coolness and comfort to the houses." It also mentioned that "Palmetto has two schools for white children," churches and a library. While the state's population increased by fifty-one percent during the 1920s, almost 1,000 of those new residents moved to Palmetto, raising the city's total from 2,046 to 3,043, an increase of 48.7 percent.

Construction was booming. The Palmetto News in 1925 rolled off the press with this warning from the Palmetto Building and Loan: "Nothing is needed worse by this city ... for the cry for more houses has been growing louder." A visitor to the city at that time could have heard the local folks debating a proposed ten-mile scenic driveway along the riverfront or a $50,000 bond for water works. He or she might have attended a local WCTU lecture or walked down to the docks and watched the boats of the Favorite Line ply the river, bringing passengers and freight from Tampa and St. Petersburg. He or she might have heard a rumor of a new hotel or watched Sheriff "Pistol Pete" Bowdoin drive into town with a dismantled still tied to his Model T Ford.

Eager for a chance to snatch the brass ring, Palmettoans were confidently riding the carousel of progress. Responding to demands for streets, sidewalks, sanitary sewer systems, and water mains, Palmetto, like most every other booming Florida city, issued serial bonds. The 1923 state legislature had authorized cities to construct these improvements, assess the property owners, issue liens on the property, then issue bonds against the liens. The Florida Supreme Court eventually declared this illegal, and cities were forced to issue long-term refunding bonds for which they would be totally responsible. Making payments on these bonds was not difficult during the heady days of Florida's land boom.

However, by the end of the 1920s the state of Florida was showing signs of a deepening recession. Nailhead rust had all but destroyed the tomato crops of 1925 and 1926. The land bust of 1926 had sent real estate speculators reeling. A hurricane on September 18, 1926, swept Florida's east coast leaving almost 18,000 people homeless and an $80 million path of destruction. Another hurricane in 1928 left 15,000 people homeless and caused $25 million in property losses. Then, in 1929, the Mediterranean fruit fly made its debut in Florida, bringing disaster to citrus crops. In Palmetto one pastor observed in April 1928 that the "financial depression has hindered the work of all departments" and that his church had lost quite a few members.

Indeed, Palmetto City Council minutes for October 11, 1927, indicate that when the 1927 fiscal year ended, $20,000 of a total $78,000 tax levy was unpaid on account of the unusual financial...
In turn, the city was unable to pay some of its notes. Later records show that the city was also unable to meet its obligation due March 1928 on a bond issued three years earlier for street and sewer improvements. The city council voted to seek a loan from the Manatee County State Bank.

Palmetto residents optimistically considered these events temporary setbacks. Few realized that Florida's troubled economy or the Wall Street panic of October 29, 1929, were portents of the disastrous years ahead. In the winter of 1929-30, readers of the Palmetto News learned of the increasing popularity of miniature golf in Florida, while radio sports fans listened to the World Series. They were pleasantly distracted by Palmetto News accounts of tree sitters, flagpole sitters, and Marathon dancers.

Ambitious plans for city improvements were still being considered. Records of city council meetings reflect a business-as-usual attitude. Council members set new rates for the "tourist camp," declared open privies a nuisance, and, passed an ordinance providing for the inspection of meats sold in the city.
However, if then-Mayor Mann or any one of the other council members had been able to see the future, they might have been shocked by what lay ahead for Palmetto. A summary of city finances for the period 1927-37 shows a precipitous decline.\textsuperscript{23}

The South, with its economy resting precariously on agriculture, was hit especially hard by the Great Depression. Southern agriculture had been hurt by a severe drought in 1930 and 1931, and the Depression drove cotton prices and production to record lows. Although Manatee County farmers were not tied to the unprofitable cotton crops, they were not spared the severe effects of a nation in economic turmoil.

Peter Harllee was a young man in Manatee County during those years. He attended the University of Florida from 1931 to 1932 but hard times necessitated his return to the family farm. As Harllee recalled, "You can imagine what the conditions were during the Depression. At the end of that one year [1932], I came back and started working on the farm, with my brother and my father…. People were starving to death around here … no welfare, no anything. If your neighbor or church didn't take care of you … you just went in need."\textsuperscript{24} He added that his father tried to see to it that "nobody [on the farm] would lose their job."\textsuperscript{25}
Although many residents were idled by the Great Depression, the remainder held jobs and shared what they could. Traditional southern neighborliness proved more helpful than federal programs. Palmetto native Dorothy Scott Janes, granddaughter of Talbot and Vitula Pollard, recalled fond memories of Halloween street parties and huge and frequent family gatherings. Asked about the Depression, she remembered:

People that farmed gave vegetables and fruit to people. Anybody that wanted them, could go out and pick what was left in the fields. Also, a lot of people had small gardens in their yards, We may have fared better than a lot of communities because there were so many farms. The North was still buying and labor was cheap [here].... In those days ’ there were a lot of tramps. They would hop a freight and get off in Palmetto and go to people’s back doors. We lived close to the railroad, and they would end up at our house first. We gave out many a plate of food. Mother [Mary Pollard Scott] and Grandmother [Vitula Pollard] never turned anybody down.... We raised our own chickens, had our own eggs and there was a local cattle business. Between all that, the community didn’t suffer so much.26

In 1930, Dorothy Scott met a handsome man who had driven to Palmetto in his Model A for the tomato season. They were married in late 1931 at the Palmetto Methodist Church. Her husband, Milam Gillette Janes, had the rich Manatee County soil flowing through his veins. His grandfather, credited with raising the first tomatoes sold commercially in the county, had settled the farming community of Gillette, just east of Palmetto, in the late 1840s. And Milam James's father, who was a packing house supervisor, was, according to Janes, "quite active in all lines of fruits and vegetables which made me become a fruit picker."27

Milam James described those depression years when he was a fruit picker.

It was piece work.... I made pretty good just wrapping tomatoes and "fruit tramping," as it was called.... At the time [in 193111 was working temporarily ... in a soda fountain shop ... on Flagler Street in Miami ... waiting for the tomato crop to come in [in the Everglades]. Then [after his marriage] we went on out to Mississippi. Just to show you how different things are, we got an apartment and told them I was there for the tomato season and it would be a week before we went to work. They said, "That's all right." Then I stopped to get some gas at a filling station and the man said, "I see you're from Florida." I said, "Yea, I'm here to put up some tomatoes." "Looks like you're 'bout ready for a new set of tires." I said, "Yea, as soon as I go to work I'll get a set." He said, "Well, don't wait 'til then. We'll put 'em on now." That's the difference than the way it is today. We didn't have electric refrigeration then either so he told me to go to the ice plant and "they'll give you a book of tickets and you can pay them after you go to work. And go to the grocery store and charge your groceries." After we got through in Mississippi, we'd go to Maryland and put up tomatoes there.... The second year we went back to Mississippi, we boarded out.... It was a lovely home and the family had a big garden in the back yard and they charged $5.00 a week for a great big room and three meals a day.... We enjoyed that very much.... We got along fine and ... everybody helped each other.28

His wife Dorothy recalled that at one point they went to Atlanta and her husband tried to find a job but "people were walking the streets." Eventually in the summer of 1936, the couple returned to Palmetto, where he went to work running a large farm operation.29
As the newlyweds were following the seasons elsewhere, Palmetto’s carousel was gearing down, slipping into slow motion. The city government, like most others across the country, spent the thirties struggling to maintain city services with a shrinking budget. Some city employees found themselves out of work, and salaries for others were reduced annually in the ensuing years.

A diminishing tax base inevitably led to cuts in city services. In 1931, the city offered taxpayers a forty percent discount to pay delinquent taxes so the "City [could] realize some ready fund[s] with which to carry on its government and meet its outstanding obligations." In April 1933 the city requested the Florida Employment Relief Council to provide labor for the grading of certain streets which had become "almost impassable." By 1933 the city had upped the ante, hoping to lure property owners into paying their delinquent taxes; the city raised the discount to fifty percent if bills were paid in cash.

Meanwhile, sentiment in this rural community continued to support Prohibition, although rumor had it that bootleg liquor provided some residents with a source of income. Local preachers inveighed against repeal and on February 15, 1933, Palmetto Methodists established a Temperance and Social Service Committee. It went on record as opposed to any "repeal or nullification." By then, too, Huey Long's message regarding "sharing the wealth" had reached down to this southernmost state. The January 8, 1932, issue of the News carried the following editorial: "The money power has the country by the throat and there is no way to shake it loose. Ours will never be a government for the people until this hoarding of wealth is forbidden - until a limit is placed on what a man can make and keep. When that limit is reached the balance should be taken for taxes."

Late in 1932, the situation looked grim. That year the Palmetto State Bank closed, and the Bank of Terra Ceia, which did not survive the Depression, was paying off its depositors. A public auction was advertised for the sale of land in Manatee County for delinquent taxes. A survey of building permits for Palmetto showed a drop to zero from 2,500 in 1931.

As Frank Freidel pointed out in *F.D.R. and the South*, the South figured largely and vitally in Franklin D. Roosevelt's political destiny. Manatee County would not disappoint him: In 1932, 2,900 local voters helped send Roosevelt to the White House.

As Roosevelt's New Deal took shape, Americans' prospects began to look promising. One of the most successful New Deal programs, especially in the South, was the National Recovery Act (NRA), which had the potential to eliminate wage differentials. Southern states had lured industry to the region with the promise of low wages. By establishing a minimum wage, the NRA code was a boon to workers like Sterling Hall. He had gone to work for Excelsior Ice Company in Palmetto in 1931 for $1.00 per day. After the NRA established a minimum wage, the company was required to raise his salary to $11.25 per week, and he was paid extra for "icing the cars."

New Deal programs to provide work relief came in the form of the Works Progress Administration (WPA), the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), the Civil Works Administration (CWA), and the National Youth Administration (NYA). The *Palmetto News* reported on January 5, 1934, that the state CWA had approved over $2 million worth of work in Florida, about
$137,000 of which was targeted for Manatee County. Statewide about 100,000 men worked for the CWA.\textsuperscript{41}

In January 1934, one of Palmetto’s first CWA projects began with the construction (from salvaged material) of a cafeteria for Palmetto’s high school.\textsuperscript{42} Other city and county projects included construction of a school house in Samoset (CWA), three road projects (WPA), and a new Palmetto high school gymnasium (WPA). During a CWA excavation conducted by the Smithsonian’s archaeology department, an Indian temple was unearthed at a nearby farm in Parrish.\textsuperscript{43} By the end of 1935, the Sixth District of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration was handling WPA projects from a local office and had established night classes in a rear room of the Palmetto City Hall. Federal relief programs had enrolled “529 whites and 120 Negro CCC workers” from Manatee County who were expected to go to Ocala to work.\textsuperscript{44}

By the mid-thirties cities like Palmetto were stretched to the limit trying to meet payments on public debt with an ever-shrinking tax base. By the start of the 1934 tax year, Manatee County collections had dropped to the point where taxes on only 74,008 acres out of 474,287 acres had...
been paid for 1933. In 1935, the city of Palmetto was forced to enter into a contract for a $1 million bond refund.

As the focus of the New Deal shifted from recovery to reform and as some programs floundered due to mismanagement, resistance began stirring in some quarters. The South, which had feverishly supported Roosevelt’s election and presidency, "developed, in time, an embarrassing ambivalence toward Roosevelt and the New Deal." The Palmetto News reflected the growing criticism in an editorial on December 19, 1935.

The delay in rebuilding the Bayshore Road, which is the shortest route from the Manatee River section to Tampa, is cause for much criticism here and is just another item checked up against the government handling of any worthwhile project with relief labor under one of the alphabet agencies. This road has been closed to the public for about six months and we understand that only 3/4 miles have been completed ... and such as this is gradually disgusting many and turning them against trying to do anything with relief labor that is allowed to take its own sweet time in completing.

At the close of 1935, the U.S. Census reported 3,095 people living in Palmetto - only fifty-two more than five years earlier. Growth had come to a near halt, but there were also signs of improvement. Through the final years of the decade, real estate values started to inch upward, property began to come off the delinquent tax rolls, and the sale of tomato crops rebounded. Indeed, a local news item declared in May 1935 that "the packing houses are beehives of activity, giving employment to hundreds of men and women."

According to issues of the Palmetto News in the mid-1930s, races were being held on the river on Sundays and the Apte Brothers canning plant was operating to capacity. Gus Sonnenberg, former heavyweight boxing champion of the world, was scheduled to fight Dick Lever at the Municipal Auditorium, and Will Rogers was starring in "In Old Kentucky" at the local theater.

No residents of Palmetto starved to death during the Great Depression. Having avoided the disastrous effects of single-crop specialization, Palmetto had always enjoyed a diverse agricultural economy which proved beneficial in the long run. People grew much of their own food and fished in the surrounding rivers and bays. They learned to save, survive, and make do.
Both farmers and local residents, who always had a stake in the welfare of the community and displayed southern neighborliness, became a hedge against privation.

However, the Depression was so severe that neither federal dollars nor countless "alphabet agencies" could revive the nation's economy. It would, in fact, take the massive demands of preparations for World War II to improve the national economy and, with it, Palmetto’s local economy.

Despite national recovery, long-term changes spelled continued decline for Palmetto's economy. Mechanized farms reduced the need for labor; trucks instead of railroad cars carried produce to the North; citrus lost favor as a result of unpredictable winters; and refrigeration eliminated the need for ice plants. These factors virtually wiped out three of the four largest industries - and employers - in Palmetto: railroads, citrus groves, and ice plants.

With the decline of agriculture came a diminishing need for packing houses. This pattern was repeated with the many other small industries connected to agriculture. One by one, small businesses along Main Street closed their doors. Today, Palmetto, which had hitched its fate to the coattails of agriculture and had survived natural disasters, epidemics, and the Great Depression, awaits its turn on the carousel and another chance to grasp the elusive brass ring.

![Parrish's Garage in Palmetto, c. 1930.](image)

Photograph courtesy of the Manatee County Historical Society.
NOTES


2 Ibid., August 18, 1916: 1.


5 Talbot S. Pollard, Letter, May 19, 1899.

6 Palmetto News, April 22, 1910.


8 Palmetto News, November 11, 1921: 1.

9 Ruth E. Abel, One Hundred Years in Palmetto (Palmetto: Centennial Association, 1967), 113.

10 Walter P. Fuller, This Was Florida’s Boom (St. Petersburg: Times Publishing Company, 1954), 7.


12 Almanac, 1934, 541.

13 Palmetto (Bradenton: Evening Herald, 1924), 4.

14 Almanac, 1934, 249-71.


16 Fuller, This Was Florida’s Boom, 63.

17 Almanac, 1933, 545.

18 Almanac, 1932, 493.

19 Ibid.


21 Palmetto City Council minutes, October 11, 1927, Palmetto City Archives.

22 Ibid., February 27, 1928.

23 Ibid., 1927-1938.


25 Ibid.

26 Dorothy S. Janes, personal interview by Barbara Stephenson, November 9, 1990.

28 Milam Janes interview.
29 Dorothy Janes interview.
30 Palmetto City Council minutes, May 19, 1931.
31 Ibid., April 18, 1933.
32 Ibid., November 7, 1933.
33 Alice Meyers, personal interview by Barbara Stephenson, November 9 1990.
36 Ibid., June 10, 1932: 1.
37 Ibid., July 22, 1932: 1.
39 Almanac, 1934, 869.
40 A. Sterling Hall, personal interview by Alice Meyers, 1985.
42 Ibid., December 26, 1935: 7.
44 Ibid., December 26, 1935: 1.
46 Palmetto City Council minutes, November 12, 1935.
47 Freidel, F.D.R. and the South, 35.