

## **Tampa Bay and the Palmetto Prairies**

**By Lars Andersen**

Three of the earliest expeditions into North America began on the sandy beaches of southwest Florida near Tampa Bay and Charlotte Harbor. For the next three hundred years, while the rest of Florida and the entire North American continent were being explored and settled, this region remained a wilderness. It wasn't until the late 1800's that the discovery of phosphate, coupled with a newly arrived railroad and the perks of a "grand little war," brought civilization pouring into Florida's last frontier.

In the first decades of exploration, it had more to do with bad directions than a lack of interest which kept the Europeans away. Spain's official navigational guide, the *Espejo*, compiled in the 1520's, mistakenly placed Tampa Bay about 90 miles north of its actual location. This error would be the source of confusion for explorers and map makers for years to come. Panfilo de Narvaez' expedition of 1528 ended in disaster when the explorer landed at Tampa Bay, but thought he was ninety miles to the south. He decided to march his men overland, sending his ships and supplies ahead to the bay to wait for them. The ships never found the bay or Narvaez.. Other explorers, such as de Soto and Menendez had better information and found Tampa Bay with no problem.

At the time of these first incursions into south Florida, the powerful Calusa tribe controlled most of the coastal region from Tampa Bay southward. The abundance of fish, mussels and other seafood on which they subsisted allowed the Indians time for other, loftier pursuits. Large temple mounds and systems of canals, many of which can still be seen, along with beautifully elaborate carvings attest to a highly evolved culture. Ironically, many of the ornaments and carvings that have survived the test of time were made from silver and other metals salvaged from wrecked European ships.

As the age of exploration subsided and the Spaniards began making themselves at home in their new Florida holdings, most of their attention was focused on the agricultural regions to the north. Missionaries and fishermen were about the only whites the Indians of southwest Florida had to deal with. Nevertheless, introduced diseases and the steady pressure of a swelling European presence eventually brought an end to the Calusas and the other south Florida tribes by the 1700's.

As with the rest of Florida, the void left by vanquished natives was initially filled by migrating bands of Creek Indians, eager to minimize contact with white settlers. But the expanding white population was close behind. When Florida became a Territory of the United States in 1821, settlers poured in and tensions quickly escalated. In 1824, the Senate ratified the Treaty of Moultrie Creek establishing a reservation for the Indians in central Florida. Its boundaries were deliberately drawn to keep any of the Indian lands from being closer than twenty miles from the coast. This was intended to prevent trade between the Indians and Cuban merchants, their primary source of arms and ammunition. In an effort to guard against any such shipments reaching the Indians, and to watch for runaway slaves heading for Cuba, the government established Ft. Brooke on Tampa Bay

in 1824. This was the first white settlement on Tampa Bay, and was the cornerstone around which a small community grew that would one day become the city of Tampa

In the end, all attempts at coexistence between the whites and Indians failed. Ft. Brooke's role changed from watching over the Indians to being a staging ground for the U.S. forces during the Seminole Wars and a port of debarkation for sending them out west to the "Indian Territories."

With the Seminoles gone, the vast "palmetto prairie" regions between Tampa and Lake Okechobee were now available. It was flat country with miles upon miles of palmetto thickets and a variety of native grasses. Occasional scrub oak hammocks and widely scattered pine trees were the only relief in this otherwise wide-open range. Cattle ranchers from north Florida quickly relocated their operations. The animals of choice were the so-called "cracker cattle." Tough and wiry, these cows were descended from livestock that had escaped the larder of early explorers and mission-era ranchos of north Florida. They had adapted well to Florida's hot climate and sandy soils and were perfectly suited for their new life on the palmetto prairies.

For the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and into the 20<sup>th</sup>, central Florida was open range. As wild and untamed as any corner of the 'wild west,' the palmetto prairie spawned a new breed of Floridians – the cow hunters. Most were young men who didn't mind hard work and living in their saddle for three or four months at a time. By day they would range the woods and prairies rounding up cattle, branding them and driving them to market. By night they'd regroup at camp, eat, swap a few stories and stretch out under the stars to rest up for the next day's work. One of the tools of the trade were long whips which they cracked to keep the animals in line. It was for this reason they were nicknamed "crackers."

Soon, nearly 250 cattle per week were being shipped from Tampa. The town was growing - slowly. By 1880, Tampa's 720 residents were feeling optimistic about the town's future, but they could not have imagined the changes the decade would bring. In 1883, Henry Plant began construction of the South Florida Railroad that would connect Tampa to the nation's rail network. That same year, phosphate was discovered in central Florida creating an economic boom throughout the state. And, to top it all off, the Fort Brooke military reservation was deactivated, opening its sixteen square miles of prime Tampa Bay real estate to development. By the end of the decade, bolstered further by a fledgling cigar industry and designation as an official port of entry, Tampa's population had grown to nearly six thousand.

At the turn of the century, Tampa experienced brief period of activity and prosperity as the U.S. geared up for an invasion of Cuba. In the short term, the influx of over 30,000 soldiers, laborers and war correspondents boosted the economy of the city. As it turned out, the Spanish-American War lasted only about ten weeks, but Tampa's new "big city" status was firmly established.

Elsewhere around the bay and along the coast, other communities sprang up in the last decades of the 1800's. Spur lines from Tampa's rail terminus allowed the growing population to disperse to places such as the new town of St. Petersburg. Along the coast, the region's new prosperity revitalized a low key fishery economy that had existed for decades. One of the more unique enterprises was sponge diving. In the early 1900's, a Greek sponge wholesaler, realizing there was an untapped wealth of sponges in the waters off of Tarpon Springs, imported a crew of experienced Greek sponge divers and an industry was born. In addition to their unique talents for deep-water diving, the Greeks brought their culture. Even today, decades after declining demand for natural sponges caused the industry to collapse, sponges are selling well on the streets of Tarpon Springs - not as scrubbing utensils but as gifts for a thriving tourist trade.

In just over a century, the Tampa Bay area has grown from a quiet backwater, to a huge metropolis with a population of nearly 2.4 million people. Cattle still graze the palmetto prairies in vast numbers and fishermen still fish the off shore waters. Many of the smaller communities that were established in the early flush of expansion have redefined themselves. Ybor City and Tarpon Springs, no longer the havens of cigar rollers and sponge divers, have maintained their architectural and cultural uniqueness and are becoming popular enclaves of art studios and curio shops.

Today, unlike the Spanish explorers, tourists are having no trouble finding Tampa Bay. They bask on the beaches, visit theme parks and explore the local art galleries. In all of these places, whether it's at the animal shows of Bush Gardens or on the walls of art galleries, where pictures of somber eyed manatees and baby sea turtles gaze across rooms filled with tourists, they are reminded of the greatest challenge facing the Tampa Bay area today – preservation of it's fragile natural environment.