

## Earliest Days

Prior to the coming of the white man the southern tip of Florida was the hunting and fishing ground of the Caloosa Indians. Nothing is known of the origin of the Caloosas, but some authorities accept the theory that they came indirectly from Mexico and Central America, having been driven from their own land by the Aztec invasion.

That the Caloosas inhabited many of the Florida west coast islands is evidenced by the shell mounds left by them. These mounds are the kitchen middens or perhaps the ceremonial grounds of the natives whose main source of food was the sea. Conch, clam, scallop and oyster shells left from thousands and thousands of seafood dinners rise high.

Of the three such mounds originally on Estero Island, only one remains today. This one on the Bay at the end of Connecticut Street, known, naturally enough, as "The Shell Mound," is the highest point on the Island. Little remains of one left on the Bay near Egret Street, as most of it was hauled away to make the first roads in the McPhie Park subdivision. The third one, farther down the Bay, almost opposite the Caribbean Motel, was used as foundation material for Estero Boulevard from Flamingo Street to the south end of the Island.

Several shell mounds still exist on Dog Key and on Mound Key. The latter key, now part of the Koreshan State Park, has the largest ones in this area.

No real exploration of the Gulf coast was made for many years after America was discovered, although a few Spanish vessels had been wrecked along the shores after being blown off course from Cuba and South America by storms and hurricanes. Survivors often were made captive by the Indians, and one of these, taken prisoner in 1545, later wrote the history of his seventeen years spent with the Caloosas. Although the exact spot of his captivity is not known, there is no doubt that much of the time was spent in this vicinity. The memoirs of this man, HERNANDO FONTANEDA, are considered one of the best accounts of the early days in this region.

As far as is known, JUAN PONCE de LEON and his men were the first to see Florida, and they gave it its name. They landed near St. Augustine on the

east coast on April 2, 1513. On May 24, 1513, they made a landing on the west coast not far from here. Perhaps at Punta Razza, where Ponce de Leon careened his ship to clean the bottom before returning to Puerto Rico. Eight years elapsed before he came to Florida again. Although it is not known just where he made his landing in 1521, still in search of the Fountain of Youth, it is believed to have been somewhere between Venice and Punta Rassa.

The Caloosas, fed up with Spaniards, bitterly resisted the landing and in the battle which followed, DeLeon was struck by an arrow and badly wounded. The Spaniards took to their ship and sailed for Cuba where their leader died.

Next to come into the area was DE NARVAEZ in 1528. Then came HERNANDO DE SOTO in 1539, both seeking gold. There is no accurate account of where these Spaniards landed, but since no gold was found, neither stayed long.

In 1566 a Spaniard named MENENDEZ arrived in these waters and immediately locked horns with CARLOS, the Chief of the Caloosas. Before the year was up, the newcomers treacherously killed Carlos and twenty of his leading men. It was from the Indian Chief in this event that we get the name Carlos, for which are named Carlos Bay, Carlos Pass. San Carlos Island, and others. Matanzas Pass undoubtedly derives its name from the Spanish word meaning "slaughter," commemorating the murder of Chief Carlos and his followers near this point.

These events happened some 400 years ago and accounts of that time were vague and badly kept, so it would hardly be right to say they happened on this island, but they did occur in this neighborhood and do fit in with our early history.

For many years it was thought that DeSoto landed somewhere around the Tampa Bay area, but recent translations of old Spanish and Portuguese manuscripts by Rolfe Schell, lead him to conclude that Estero Island or the immediate vicinity could well have been the location of the landing rather than further north.