

## Homesteaders and Settlers

"This land is free..." so the rumor ran."Come to Florida, come to Estero Island. Live on this land five years; clear it; farm it; improve it---and it is yours."

As far as is known, the Sam Ellis family was the first white family to stay on Estero Island. Mr. and Mrs. Ellis and her son George Underhill lived on the Shell Mound on the Bay at Connecticut for several years during the middle seventies. However, instead of settling here, they went to Sanibel where they homesteaded a tract of land at the head of Tarpon Bay. This first George was the father of George Underhill who returned to the Beach as a young man and has lived and reared his family here. At the time the Ellises lived on Connecticut, there was one family each on Estero Island, Black Island, Mound Key and Dog Key.

The names of many old timers are remembered as "Homesteaders" but for one reason or another most of them failed to "prore up" on the land. Some became discouraged and left, some sold out their rights to the claim and several were "discouraged" when their property and buildings were repeatedly damaged or destroyed under mysterious circumstances. The United States Department of the Interior has provided the author with photostatic copies of the patents of those who actually acquired land on Estero Island through Homesteading.

The first homestead in the area was that of Frank M. Johnson and included all of Mound Key. The patent was issued by President Benjamin Harrison in November 1891. The first to file for homestead rights on Estero Island was Robert B. Gilbert who was granted his patent in May of 1898 during the presidency of William McKinley. The grant comprised 172 acres starting at a point near Bay Street and, on the Gulfside, ran to a point near Bayland Road. The area took in some very choice property in the central part of the Island and included "Shell Mound" which was the Gilbert homesite.

Dr. James M. Bratt of New York state filed for the second homestead, but before he proved his claim he died, and in August of 1899, patent for the land. about 150 acres, was granted to Ambrose M. McGregor for whom McGregor Boulevard was named. On this piece of land, Dr. Bratt attempted

to raise tomatoes. He had prospects of a wonderful first crop but the night before harvesting was to begin a hard freeze ruined the field. Only a few bushels were salvaged and this ended commercial farming on Estero Island. In 1899 a freeze hit Florida which sent the thermometer down to two below zero at Tallahassee, killing the tender trees which previous freezes had missed. It was so cold in south Florida during the 1899 freeze that thousands of chilled migratory birds fell out of the sky and froze to death on the ground. This area, at present the most populated of any on the Island, extended from Crescent Street to a point just east of Tropical Shores Road and later became the T.P. Hill Subdivision.

The only homesteader whose name is still in use on the Island was granted the third patent. In November 1899, Hugh McPhie, a Scotsman proved up on an irregular shaped piece of land, about 112 acres, bounded roughly by Flamingo Street and Fairview Isles. The old McPhie homesite was situated in a beautiful coconut grove just south of Rancho DelMar. The old house and its flowing well remained until it was destroyed by the storm of 1947. The lovely site remained a favorite picnic spot for many years before it was closed off because of misuse by the public.

It was not until June 1906, that George R. McAuley was issued a patent on seventy-two acres just south and east of Dr. Bratt's, starting near Tropical Shores, it ran almost to the Beach fire station where it joined the Gilbert homestead. On this tract stand our school and public library. Theodore Roosevelt was president when this patent was granted.

A year later, June 1907, Hugh McPhie proved up his second claim. Later this was made into a sub-division and called McPhie Park. The tract ran from the Gulf near Aberdeen Street to Avenida Pescadora, thence to the end of Seminole Way and back to the Gulf on Gulf Drive. Located in this section was our early school house, later converted into what is now our Community House. The patent for this sixty-five acre piece was the first issued by the government in which blank spaces for names and dates were filled in by typewriter. Patents prior to this one were filled in by hand writing.

Unclaimed by other homesteaders was a triangular piece of land with a wide stretch of gulffront starting about Aberdeen Street and running north to a point near the Commodore Hotel. This was proved up by Albert A. Austin in 1914 under President Woodrow Wilson. Dakota Street was about the center

of the tract comprising a little over twenty-four acres. Leroy P. Lamoreaux, the last of the homesteaders, commented. "Al was an Indiana glassblower who came down here to join the Koreshan Unity, and judging by some of the things he told me, I think getting away from his wife was an incentive."

Lamoreaux's brother later bought this claim from Austin.

Lamoreaux came to the Koreshans at Estero as a lad of fourteen in 1894. He filed claim to about 65 acres between the two McPhie tracts and proved it up in 1913, The Catholic Church of The Ascension is located on this land which was sold to them by Lamoreaux.

Hugh McPhie probably realized more from his properties than any of the others for, with the exception of Lamoreaux, he held onto them longer. It is said that during the boom of the 1920's he was offered half a million for his holdings but he turned it down. Late in life, when he subdivided McPhie Park, a good many lots were sold at a moderate price, and a few years before he died he sold some forty lots in the Park and nearly all his original homestead for forty thousand dollars.