

Livelihoods

FISHING: Commercial fishing was the major inducement for the first settlers coming here, the chief crop being mullet. However, Gulf and Bay waters teemed with trout, reds, grouper, snook and a multitude of others. Snook, incidentally, was not considered an edible fish until the last few years. "Old timers" still pass it up in favor of almost any other.

In the Bay at the south end of the Island near Big Carlos Pass, piling on which houses had been built can still be seen. Fishermen lived in these and in one near Black Island. Children from these homes attended school on Mound Key where at that time thrived a settlement of sixty or seventy people. Supplies were brought in and fish and vegetables taken off by "run boats" from the Punta Gorda Fish Company which had collection points all throughout this part of the west coast.

Black Island was the home of fishermen, also, and as a young man, the popular fishing guide, Buck Fernandez, and his brother lived there for a number of years. One of their houses was burned out by a competitor and another was swept away in a storm after which the brothers moved to safer ground.

The discovery of "pink gold" in the nearby Dry Tortugas in 1950 brought a great influx of fishing boats, people, and industry. Due to its accessibility by land and water, Fort Myers Beach became one of the largest shrimp ports in the world--perhaps the largest. After the beds at Tortugas became "fished out" and less profitable, the boats branched out to fish the Campeche area, and while many of the craft are away for weeks or even months at a time, some 300 trawlers make this home port and bring in over three and a half million pounds of shrimp each year.

A few years ago a rough but productive shrimp bed was discovered lying just off shore in the Gulf not far from the South end of Sanibel. Much of the fine shrimp eaten locally are taken from these beds and at night the lights of the trawlers may be seen bobbing about in the Gulf.

Many of the young-adults of today earned their first spending money building shipping boxes, icing, weighing, shucking or packing shrimp. Once two plants were on Estero Island; the Columbia Fish House, south of the

bridge, was destroyed by fire and Hurricane Donna took McDowell Packing House in 1960. Due to zoning restrictions, neither could be rebuilt.

The tiny clam known as the Coquina is our most common shellfish, and from it sprang one of the Island's few pre-war industries. A Coquina broth factory was established by Luke Gates in a building at Connecticut and Estero originally erected as a service building for a proposed casino which did not materialize. Workers gathered the little shells on the beach, took them to the factory where they were processed and the broth canned. When World War II erupted and the packers were unable to obtain cans, the project was discontinued and never resumed. People who remember the delicate oyster-like broth say it was a fine product, and Gates, the owner, claims it was the best thing ever invented for a pick-me-up after a rough night.

Sports fishing has been one of the primary attractions for tourists with shelling on the beach and swimming close seconds. The snook in Estero Bay are as big and sassy as you can find anywhere. Sporty reds, trout, ladyfish and jacks are 'most any place you want to wet a hook. In the Gulf, mackerel abound. Kingfish, bonito, grouper and tarpon are here in season. The canny local fisherman knows where to go for precious pompano. At any time of the year some kind of fish are here for the catching.

Local marinas have boats and motors for rent and sale. Headboats carrying up to fifty people are available for a day's fishing on the Gulf at reasonable prices. Charter boats are more expensive, though the cost is not prohibitive, and the fisherman may return with a better catch.

We believe that our Estero Bay, with its maze of islands and water, is the most beautiful part of Florida.

THE SAWMILL: About the year 1894, the Koreshan Unity established a saw mill on the south end of Estero Island near the spot where the restaurant and marina now stand, and where the Bonita causeway takes off. Logs were brought to the mill from the island as well as from the wooded areas around the Bay. The lumber produced was used by the Koreshans for their early buildings and some was sold to the early settlers. A short distance northeast of the sawmill was a boat yard and marine ways where boats of all kinds, used by the Koreshans and other fishermen of the time, were built. A number of houses and ways for the use of the workmen and their families

were erected near the mill and it was here that mail was first delivered to Fort Myers Beach. It was brought in by schooner from Punta Gorda, which was the end of the railroad at that time. Fort Myers did not get the railroad until 1904.

There is some discrepancy in the recollections of two of the old timers as to who was the first postmaster at the Beach. Allen Andrews in his book, "A Yankee Pioneer in Florida" says that he was the postmaster. Leroy Lamoreaux mentions in his reminiscences that the first postmistress "whose name I cannot recall, married the first mail carrier to bring the mail from Fort Myers to the mill by boat." Both Andrews and Lamoreaux came from Chicago to join the Koreshan Unity about the same time.

A photograph of birds on the tidal flats appears at this point in the book (p.22)