

Venice Beach drew tourists from the start

By Pam Johnson

The beach has always been a draw for Venice. The Gulf of Mexico provided the earliest settlers with a means of transportation and a source of food and income. Its beaches were places to congregate, enjoy nature and water recreation, and view beautiful sunsets.

During the year of 1926, the beach continued to draw tourists and those interested in investing in real estate or purchasing a home in which to live.

The Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and its contractor, Fuller Construction, were making John Nolen's planned city a reality. As a new town sprouted from the ground, seemingly overnight, so the population of Venice grew. In one year, Venice went from a population of 100 to more than 4,000. People - the newcomers and those who had been here for years - often gathered at the beach to get to know each other. Their combined efforts to see the little town turn into a city were fortified with shared casseroles and pies enjoyed around a bonfire. Perhaps they, too, watched for the flash of green in their sunsets.

In those days, the pace of life in Venice was almost jarring. The BLE acquired 53,000 acres of land, more than even they dreamed could be developed in their immediate future. The land stretched from the gulf to the Myakka River, and from Roberts Bay to the area where Venice



The first beach house - or casino as they were called - was built in 1925 by Dr. Fred Albee. It was located adjacent to where the Chancy Howard Park walkover is today near Madrid Street.

Municipal Airport is today. Some of that land was purchased from Dr. Fred Albee, the famous orthopedic surgeon who invented bone grafting. Albee's dream of building a city brought his fellow Harvard graduate and famed city planner, Nolen, to the area. At the time, Albee's vision for Venice centered around what is now Nokomis.

When Albee sold his land to the BLE, the location of the vision shifted to south of Roberts Bay.

Ledgier and French of New York were employed to market the luxury beach town.

Neighborhoods such as Venezia, Gulf View and Edgewood seemed to increase in size daily.

Businesses took readily to the infant downtown. There was a post office, drug store, grocery store and even a dress shop in early 1926. A public school was opened near Tampa Avenue and St. Augustine Street for 60 students in late fall.

Among the first buildings to go up were two beautiful

Italianate hotels, the Hotel Venice, now an assisted living care facility, located on the corner of Tampa Avenue and Nassau Street, and the Park View Hotel, located where the current post office is on West Venice Avenue. They imbued the Northern Italian Renaissance architectural style selected for the entire new city.

The orangerie, a courtyard lined with most orange trees just outside the doors of the dining room at the Hotel Venice, became



Dr. Fred Albee

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the city's center of social life as well as a venue to entertain would-be property owners. Large homes, between the downtown and the beach, were built as spec homes, in which potential buyers could imagine themselves living. A golf course and country club on the making on the site that would later become Country Club Estates and the Publix shopping center.

On Sept. 18, 1926 a hurricane slammed into the area pulling green citrus fruit from their trees and sending them through the air like missiles from a drone. The storm toppled ancient trees, ripped new roofs from their buildings and flooded most of the area. It destroyed Knights Chapel in Nokomis, which had served as the place of worship for most of the earliest families for more than two decades. The church was rebuilt the following year on land that Dr. Albee donated, where today's Venice-Nokomis Methodist Church stands.

At Venice beach, the first bath house, built by Dr. Albee, was damaged and its pieces used to build another bath house near today's Chauncy Howard Park.

Years later, a new bath house, or "casino" as it was called, was built in the Italian style at the west end of Venice Avenue. The upstairs of that building served as city hall. Decades after, it was replaced by the Sarasota School of Architecture structure that is there today.

The BLE was undaunted by the 1926 hurricane. Its promoters declared Venice had missed most



Twin of the Hotel Venice, the Park View Hotel on Venice Avenue served as Dr. Albee's medical center. It was torn down in the 1960s.

of the storm's wrath and construction resumed. The Seaboard train station (now on the Intracoastal Waterway that didn't exist at the time) was completed, along with family apartments on Barcelona Avenue; and the Orange Blossom garage and gas station was planned for the corner of Tampa Avenue and the new Tamiami Trail. (It would later serve as the gymnasium for the Kentucky Military Institute and the Venice Theatre.)

The town council - Venice had been incorporated as a town the year before - met at the Hotel Venice on Monday nights. The governor appointed Ed Worthington the first mayor of the town and most of the other council members were employees of the BLE.

The mayor was responsible

for appointing town positions of town clerk, treasurer, fire chief, engineer, inspector, superintendent of public grounds and buildings, public health officer, tax collector and night policeman.

The town's first fire chief, John Haladay, boasted of its modern fire engine, a 1926 American LaFrance, which could hold and pump 700 gallons of water.

In February 1927, the little booming town of Venice was incorporated as a city. The entire town celebrated at the beach at a barbecue on Feb. 27.

As a new city, the council set out to adopt the first ordinances. Among its first actions, the council created

building, plumbing and electrical codes, garbage regulations, a pound for stray animals, and instituted higher occupational licenses



Mayor Ed Worthington

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for outside businesses to give local businesses the edge.

The Venice Chamber of Commerce was formed with Stanton Ennes as its first president. Its treasurer was James T. Blalock, president of the Venice-Nokomis Bank. Later he served as mayor of the city and a park near the community center is named for him. Stephen Albee, Dr. Albee's brother, and Walter Dunn, an early settler, also served on the board.

To draw tourists to Venice there were special events, such as a tarpon tournament, dance contests and other entertainment.

George Webb, vice president of BLE Investment, went to Miami to try to lure the owners of the Biltmore Hotel to build a resort on the south end of the new city.

Ironically, the boom was about to come to a screeching halt.

In a few short months, two of the five hotels already built in Venice were closed. For the next decade, the town would remain as

it was in 1927 with about 141 apartments, 188 houses and numerous 5-acre truck-farm sites with wells for irrigation.

By summer, an audit of the BLE showed a loss of \$4 million. It was obvious the little city's growth was stymied.

There were so many overgrown vacant lots that brush fires became a dominant issue. The American LaFrance, today known as "Old Betsy," earned its keep. A flashing red light and siren was placed on the top of the Johnson-Schoolcraft Building, which housed the drug store and soda fountain on the corner of Nokomis and Venice avenues. The light and siren alerted the volunteer firefighters of another call.

By Christmas, life as Venetians had known it for the past two years had drastically changed. Poverty was becoming



Chief John Haladay was proud of the modern fire engine, "Old Betsy," which still has a place in today's parades.

more evident than it had been in Venice's primitive era. Deputy Sheriff Pete Edge took needy children to Woolworth's to choose a gift.

A "welfare committee" was formed to collect food and clothing for those who had none. Those who were better off no longer dressed in their finest apparel to attend elaborate dinners at the Hotel Venice. Instead, once again they opted for shared potluck dinners on the beach. And so it would be throughout the Great Depression for the few hundred people who stayed in Venice.



The Venice Beach Casino, which housed City Hall upstairs, welcomed beach goers from the 1920s until the 1960s, when it was torn down to make way for a modern structure.

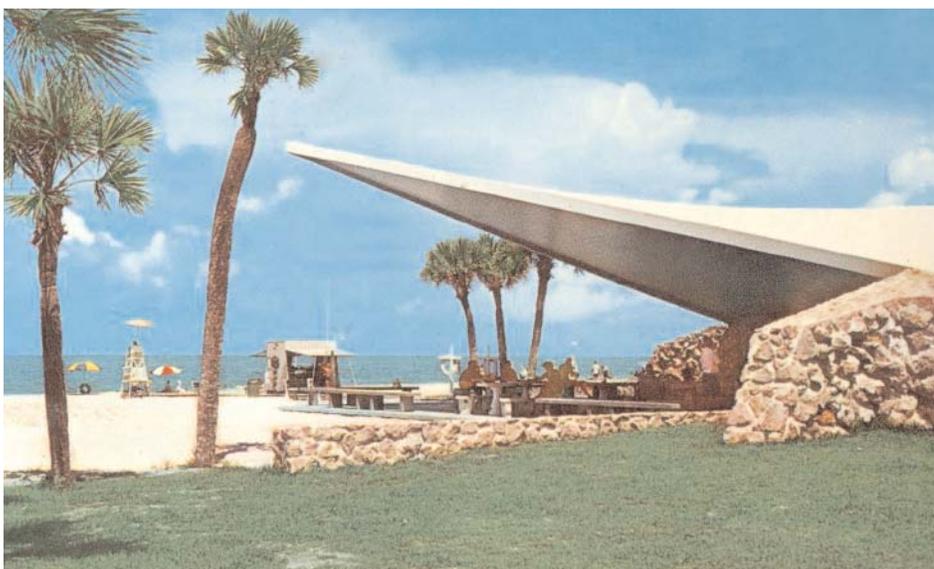
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Like the rest of the nation, the economy didn't really pick up until the late 1950s and early 1960s. As if in celebration of a new day, the old casino was torn down, city hall moved to a small 1950s structure on Venice Avenue (where the current city hall is located) and a new hyperbolic paraboloid pavilion was built at the west end of Venice Avenue. It was dedicated Feb. 8, 1964.



Longtime Venice residents gather at the beach in the 1930s. In front, from left, J.L. Dunn, Ben Dunn, Isa Dunn, unknown, Harlee and Jack Harn in front of their mother Irma, Stephen Albee Jr., Minnie Belle Curry, Gertrude Bear Curry, Freyling Albee (father of Dr. Fred and Stephen Sr.). Back row, from left, Stephen Albee Sr., Mary and Frank Curry, Roland Curry, Duke and Blanche Torreyson, Belle Schutt, Louise Coffin, Charles Curry, Clara Belle Bear Curry, Walter Dunn, Mina Bear Dunn and Berine Lee. The Currys, Dunns and Harns were among the original homesteading families.



The 1964 beach pavilion was a modern statement.

For more information about the earliest years of Venice, read "Venice: Journey From Horse and Chaise," by Janet Snyder Matthews.