

Railroads were the dream of Venice pioneers

By Pam Johnson

A few daring individualists arrived in the Venice area in the 19th Century with few possessions but their dreams. They arrived by boat, by wagon and by foot. In 1903, the Seaboard Air Line Railway extended its service to Sarasota, terminating at a station on Fruitville Road.

Over the next eight years, the tracks inched their way south. It was not until 1911 that they reached Venice. But when they did, what a difference they made.

The earliest settlers living in what was the southern end of Manatee County - Sarasota



The first tracks reached Venice in 1911. They terminated just north of Tampa Avenue on Nokomis Avenue.

County was not established until 1921 - pinned their hopes on truck farming. It took weeks to transport their fruits and vegetables by boat to northern markets. And, boats were much faster than the automobile, in which a trip to Tampa took 18 hours.

With the arrival of trains came faster communication, commerce and economic development. Mail arrived in a more time-

ly fashion, while car loads of produce were shipped north in days, instead of weeks. It enabled residents to visit the families they left behind up north, and welcome more visitors to rent their spare rooms. The train would be Venice's portal to the modern world.

A year earlier, a progressive thinking woman, Bertha Honore Palmer, bought more than 80,000 acres of land in the Osprey, Laurel, Nokomis and Venice area. It was this wealthy, international socialite and widow from Chicago who insisted the train tracks be built to the area south of Roberts Bay. It was her dream to see the

construction of a modern and beautiful city by the sea, with its center in what is today, Nokomis, but then was known as Venice.

The train was so welcomed by the longest residents of the area that one pioneer, Joseph Lord, donated the right-of-way through his land in Laurel.

George Higel, son of pioneer Frank Higel, wrote a column for The Times under the pen name of Nemo. During the early part of 1911 he watched the work on the new train terminus from the front porch of his home located on what is now Madrid Street.

"The station is to be located in what from childhood we have known as the Sapling Thicket, which is now all cut down. Though

we look for better things, we confess we miss the thicket," he reported.

The Seaboard Air Line Railway was already being used by those who traveled to its southern terminus in Sarasota.

Everyone seemed to believe they would be seeing trains leaving the station from the new southern terminus in Venice by summer, but an unexpected shortage of iron slowed the progress of the tracks being built from Osprey. By August, the residents of the area could hear the train's whistle and see the smoke from its smoke stack, but it still had not arrived in Venice.

In September, the bridges across Dona Bay were completed. Nemo declared "At last the iron steed has penetrated the suburbs of Venice, and we feel thankful. But, after all, as the great chain or railroads penetrate every nook and corner, how much smaller becomes God's country."

On Oct. 5, 1911, Nemo wrote:

Some 25 years ago, when a mere lad in our very early teens, we were transported from the City of Brotherly Love and transplanted within a half mile of where we now write...Even in those early days Even in those early days railroads were prophesied, and in the intervening years, our hopes have been almost realized, only to be crushed to earth again. Ofttimes, railroad magnates penetrated our county, right of ways were blazed. Saturday evening we stood upon the veranda and looked upon the

Railroads, continued



The train station as it looked in 1927, 85 years ago.

first passenger train to leave Venice.

The new station was located near the current intersection of St. Augustine and Tampa avenues. J.H. Turberville served as the first station agent.

By the 1920s, the freight trains arrived daily with cars of building materials to sustain the frantic pace of development of John Nolen's planned city being built by the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers.

As part of the city's plan, the train station was moved east to Seaboard. It was designed by Walker and Gillette, and built in the adopted Northern Italian Renaissance architectural style selected by Nolen.

The building provided racially segregated waiting rooms and outdoor platform, as was the custom of the day. The Y-track facilitated the reversal of the trains at this "end of the line."

Once Hotel Venice was erected, passenger trains arrived with speculators and investors.

The development of the city and the construction of the new train depot went hand in hand. Both city and depot share their 85th anniversaries this year. The train depot is on the City of Venice Local Register of Historic Places and a favorite of tourists.

Although construction came to a screaming halt in 1927, the trains continued to transport goods and passengers in and out of Venice.

In 1933, Kentucky Military Institute of Lyndon, Ky., established a winter campus in Venice. Its cadets and teachers - and even some parents who rented mother-in-law suites in town - arrived on the train shortly after New Year's Day and stayed until Easter. KMI turned abandoned buildings - including the Hotel Venice, San Marco Hotel and Orange Blossom Garage - into dormitories, class-



Kentucky Military Institute cadets say goodbye to friends they met in Venice as the train gets ready to pull out of the station for the annual spring trip back to Lyndon, Ky.

rooms and gymnasium. Their drills through the center of town (what is now Centennial Park) became major attractions for the residents and visitors of the area.

The cadets from KMI and the young men at the local high school found themselves in competition on the basketball court and in getting the attention of the young ladies in Venice. KMI was a mainstay of Venice social life until 1971, when the train left with cadets onboard for the last time.



Children read the placard at the Gunther Gebel-Williams statue at the Historic Venice Train Depot.

Photo by Pam Johnson

Railroads, continued



The Venice Train Station in 1942 served the war effort by receiving military equipment for use at the Venice Army Air Base.

Photo courtesy of Venice Museum and Archives

The railroad track brought others who had a huge impact on the development of the little town John Nolen designed. From 1942 - 1945, airmen based at the Army Air Base (what today is Venice Municipal Airport) arrived and departed from the train station.

Tourists, speculators, businessmen and residents would continue to use the rails until 1971, when the last passenger train left the Venice station. But the circus continued to roll in each year.

In 1960, the Ringling and Barnum & Bailey Circus moved its winter headquarters from Sarasota to Venice. There, at the large white arena built on airport property, the circus practiced new



Ringling and Barnum & Bailey Circus arrived at the Venice Train Station every year to plan the shows for the next season at its winter headquarters in Venice.

Photo courtesy of Venice Museum and Archives

shows for the coming season in newly designed costumes, entertaining the folks lucky enough to live in Venice. People living in Golden Beach could

hear the roaring of the lions and the noises from elephants in the evenings.

The entire town turned out for the grandest parade of all. Each year the circus arrived by train, unloaded its precious cargo and escorted the remarkable creatures over the bridge and down the street to their winter home.

That was an annual event until 1992. The Department of Transportation declared the tracks unsafe for use. The circus and railroad refused to pay to have them refurbished. The city said taxpayers' money should not be used to pay the expenses of private enterprise. The circus moved its winter

headquarters. In 1997, the last freight train left Venice. Venetians would not hear the train whistle again.

By this time the beautiful Northern Italian Renaissance train station was worn and ragged, its walls decorated in graffiti and its rooms used to shelter the homeless, teenage partiers and drug users. The wire fence around it made it look more like a prison than the grande dame it had once been. It hadn't served passengers for about two decades.

In 1985, Rollins Coakley and the Venice Heritage Foundation began to spread the idea of restoring the building. Many said the building was too far gone, it would be better razed, and that it was way too expensive to restore.

Nevertheless, Coakley's enthusiasm was shared by Betty Hauser Arnall, whose family arrived with the Brotherhood of

Railroads, continued

Locomotive Engineers in the 1920s and who founded the Venice Archives and Historical Collection; Claire Suter, whose father was an early mayor; then-city planner, Chuck Place; Dr. Ron Higel, descendent of pioneers; and Janet Snyder Matthews, author and local historian and director of the Division of Historical Resources, Florida Department of State. They garnered interest from architects and preservationists, such as Linda Stevenson.

Acquiring the property was complicated. The railway station and its tracks were owned by CSX Transportation Inc. and leased from them by Seminole Gulf Railway.

The city and the county tried to negotiate a sale without success.

In 1996, Venice City Council agreed to support the restoration, with encouragement from its Historic Commission (now the Historic Preservation Board) and Economic Development Advisory Board. The Venice Area Historic Preservation League (now the Venice Area Historical Society), Sarasota County Department of Historical Resources, Sarasota County Historical Commission, Sarasota Alliance for Historical Preservation, Venice Area Archives and Historical Collection, the Sierra Club, Venice Area Chamber of Commerce and Venice MainStreet joined the effort.

Phil Ellis, an area financial consultant, represented the chamber of commerce Government Issues and Economic Develop-

ment Committee and its 20/20 Task Force. He was also a member of a new chamber committee, Venice Beatification, formed to improve the public landscaping in Venice. One of its first projects was to begin planning and construction of a linear park along the Intracoastal Waterway. The restored historic train station would be an integral part of that project as a trailhead. The committee, which later morphed into Venice Area Beautification Inc. (VABI), began working with West Coast Inland Navigational District to use the land on the edge of the Intracoastal Waterway for a bicycle/hiking trail.

Today, the Venetian Waterway Park (the name was suggested by Jean Trammell) extends on both sides of the ICW.

On the west side, it is 5 miles of scenic sidewalk from Caspersen Beach to Hatchett Creek Bridge. On the east side, it stretches from Shamrock Park to the train depot.

From 1994-1999, Ellis continued efforts to negotiate an agreement with the railroad companies. At last, Sarasota County purchased the train station and a little more than 3 acres for \$327,700.

The \$2.3 million renovation was completed in 2003 and the property was listed on the Venice Register of Historic Places.

The county's SCAT bus system began using the property for



Rollins Coakley and then-Mayor Dean Calamaras speak at the groundbreaking ceremony as the restoration of the train station gets under way.

Photo by Pam Johnson

its South County transfer station at the end of that year. Later, the county purchased the tracks from the depot to Clark Road in Sarasota and in 2008 the Legacy Trail was opened.

Today, the bicycle and walking trail connects to the Venetian Waterway Park at the depot to make 14 miles of uninterrupted trail where no motor vehicles are allowed.

Throughout the winter season, Monday through Wednesday, volunteer docents provide free tours of the train station, its caboose, and its statue to honor circus star Gunther Gebel-Williams.



The restoration of the Historic Venice Train Depot was completed in 2004.

Photo by Pam Johnson