

# DAYS GONE BY

## History of Palm Bay

Monthly Article

March 2008

### FROM TILLMAN to PALM BAY

The advent of new drainage practices in the early 1920's brought a surge of investment and new people to Tillman. The Melbourne-Tillman Drainage District (MTDD) was established under the 1913 Drainage Acts of Florida. The system of 180 miles of canals and fifteen miles of levees was designed to "drain thirty to forty thousand acres of previously uninhabitable land west of Tillman".

The Plan of Reclamation for the MTDD, designed by George P. Hills and approved by the state legislators, was organized by a local group of Melbourne businessmen. The plan was to drain nearly 100 square miles of the low marshland on the east side of the St. Johns River. MTDD bonds were issued in the amount of 1.5 million dollars in October 1922. Lots were sold even as the canals and levees were being built.

Primarily planned for large truck farms and citrus groves, sales were drawn into the speculative avalanche of the Florida Land Boom from 1924 until early 1926. The plan was to farm large acreage of land in the "back country" and live in the thriving communities of Malabar, Melbourne, or Tillman. Acreage which had sold for forty dollars in 1914 was selling for one hundred dollars in 1924. The land was still not properly drained for tillage or production.

Settlers waited for their profits. Prospects for the area in 1924 looked

better than those of Miami; Brevard was the center, the crossroads of Florida. Water supply was plentiful and type soil judged excellent for growing tomatoes, beans, and other winter vegetables.

The Florida Land Boom was at its peak. Developers seeking to capitalize on the boom decided to organize the town of Tillman. Tillmanites crowded into German-speaking farm worker John Meyer's 1913 built frame house on Pollak and Miller Streets for a mass meeting. Before it was over a decision was reached to charter the twenty-five family town of sandy trails and freely wandering cattle.

The name Tillman did not really spark the image of a tropical paradise necessary for land sales. So when the town was organized, Lock Davidson suggested that the town be chartered as Palm Bay rather than Tillman. The boundaries took in the original town of Tillman, five miles south from Melbourne's southern boundary on U. S. 1 and 3.5 miles west from the Indian River.

Another version of the naming of the town given by Mrs. Laura Hiott was that "Margaret Wilkins Carter one day walked out her front door, looked at the beautiful bay lined with palm trees and said, disdainfully, 'Tillman! Why do they call it Tillman? They should call it Palm Bay!'"

And still another version of the naming of the town is that Dr. Edwin Macy, a homopathic physician and an uncle of Mrs. Knecht was the one who suggested the name change.

No matter how the town actually derived its name, on December 16, 1925, the U.S. Postal Department announced that the name of the Post Office of Tillman was changed to Palm Bay.

On June 2, 1926, a special act of the Florida legislature chartered the town as Palm Bay. It was replatted in 1926.

Appointed as interim mayor was William Knecht, patriarch of a German-speaking clan of farmers from Oklahoma. The 57 year old Meyer--a carpenter at World War I army boot camps who hailed from Santa Claus, Indiana--was tapped as the temporary town clerk.

In elections about half a year later, city bay fisherman and U. S. 1 gas station owner Captain Alexander J. Goode--fast friend of a millionaire New York banker--became mayor, and voters named as town clerk D. D. Dorman, operator of a snowbird cottage camp on U. S. 1 and Palm Bay Road. Mayor Goode was affectionately called Captain Goode due to the fact that he was a captain for the Coast-Wise Shipping firm.

"All over Florida, there was riveting and pounding. Practically everybody and his brother was a real estate agent, and the rest of them were buying land. But it was all on paper, and the bottom dropped out," said John

Meyer's son, Pius, whose residence was the frame house across from St. Joseph's Catholic Church.

The new town fathers floated \$100,000 worth of bonds to pave at least seven sandy streets while other workmen set about cleaning and widening brush-choked paths like Pollak and Hickory Avenues.

Armed with a transit, new city employee Pius Meyer, 16, set about surveying street heights for a mule-drawn sand scooper, grading, among other byways, Hessey Avenue, Main Street, and Palm Bay Road (then called Orange Avenue from U. S. 1 to Florida East Coast Railroad, Carter Avenue from the tracks to Helen Street, and Marl Road beyond that).

After Meyer, wearing knee-high boots against rattlers, had placed his marking stakes and boards, and the road beds were graded--steamrollers then pressed down layers of tar, limestone-like ojus rock, and nuggets of iron slag. Paving took about a year in all, overseen by former World War I RAF flying ace H. Jenkins, then a Cocoa engineer.

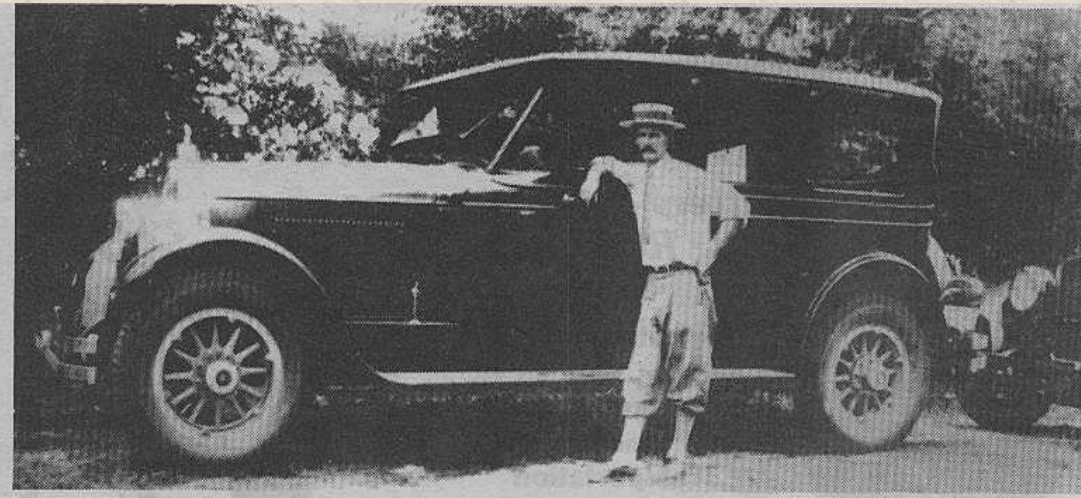
The year 1926 dealt Florida, Palm Bay and the drainage program both natural and financial setbacks. The great hurricane of that year caused extensive damage and flooding, destroying much of the developments and slowing dragline operations. Tourists and speculators who had crowded the trains and new roads of the state had been frightened by the devastation of the storm. The extensive damage to property and injured and deaths tarnished the image real estate

promoters had created of Florida as a haven of natural beauty. The charm of Florida land lost its appeal.

A shipping strike caused delays in the supply of construction materials, the shipping of produce and inspection trips by prospective land owners. The hopes of 1924 vanished and reflected in the non-payment of taxes. Foreclosures were instituted. Land sold for \$1.00 per acre. The Drainage District went into receivership, businesses closed. Palm Bay defaulted on its bonds.

Many families sustained themselves once more by living off the river and the land. Cowmen, as Florida cowboys are called, bought land close to the town.

The town was dissolved by a special act of the Legislature on May 9, 1929; the county took over the governmental functions. Blocks of land were sold for taxes as the Great Depression in the 1930's descended on Florida.



Captain Alexander J. Goode, the town's first mayor, is shown decked out in straw hat, knee socks, and knickers beside his spanking new 1926 Mormon-model auto.

*(to be continued next month ...)*