

A Brief History of the Everglades City Area

by MARYA REPKO

Who were the first settlers? And, how did they live?

Why is there a City here? And, why is it so elegantly designed with a grandiose neo-classical building at the center?

Who was Barron Collier? And, what was he doing here?

Why was it called the Tamiami Trail? How was it built? And, why was it so important?

In this second edition, there is a profusion of historical pictures to complement the author's well-received text which describes the struggles of pioneers, Collier's building of the City and the Trail in the 1920's, the growth of Chokoloskee, and the farming and logging industries in the outlying towns of Ochopee, Copeland, and Jerome. The area still has a unique character in its rural setting and the book outlines the changes that have taken place up to Hurricane Wilma.

Author Marya Repko grew up in Hadlyme, Connecticut, but spent most of her adult life in Europe as a software engineer. When she discovered Everglades City, she felt at home immediately and moved there after retirement in 2000. She is active in the Everglades Society for Historic Preservation and founder of ECity Publishing.

This is neither a guide book nor an academic tome ... it is exactly what the title says, a concise history of the area. The extensive index makes it a handy reference and the list of sources provides readers a starting point to dig deeper into the history of this fascinating area.

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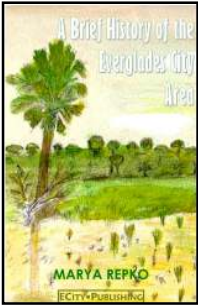
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INTRODUCTION

Everglades City, Chokoloskee, and the Ten-Thousand Islands are steeped in history and more than a little mystery and romance. Who could have thought that Potato Creek, a tiny outpost in Florida's "Last Frontier", would one day be a county seat – except, of course, a Tennessee-born advertising mogul with the imposing name of Barron Gift Collier.

Evidence of shell mounds and ancient canals point to the area's occupation in ancient times, probably by the Calusa Indians. More recently, it was a sanctuary for Indians during the Seminole wars. And it was a refuge for runaway slaves, deserters from the Civil War and fugitives from the law.

It was a scattering of small hard-working communities who supplied produce from farming, fishing, hunting and forestry to markets north and south.

It had its own ex-pirate, living on his own key, and its own infamous gentleman killer, the subject of historical novels. Later, it was a safe haven for moonshiners and bootleggers, a playground for Al Capone's buddies, and a convenient backwater for smuggling drugs and illegal aliens.

It flourished in the Florida boom as civilization reached south with the completion of the Tamiami Trail and the Atlantic Coast Line railroad, attracting sportsmen for hunting and fishing.

What happened? The Depression crushed the economy; hurricanes discouraged settlers; changes in the Glades eco-system denuded the land of fertility and wildlife; tourists and snow-birds were drawn to the beaches elsewhere in Southwest Florida.

What remains is the old-world elegance of the Rod & Gun Lodge and the legacy of town planning: the wide avenues, the circle, and the impressive Court House building. History can be found in the Museum (housed in the former laundry), in the Smallwood Store, and in unpreserved relics like Monroe Station along the Trail.