

History of Estero Boundaries

BY LAURA TICHY-SMITH

Special to Florida Weekly

A church in the former community of Coconut and ruckus swirled around the possible incorporation of Estero, a place that had experienced a recent influx of new residents holding their own vision about development of the area, with disagreements about boundaries and which longstanding property holders might care to become a part of the municipality.



STATE ARCHIVES OF FLORIDA PHOTORhetoric

These issues sound similar to those depicted in recent headlines about the Pelican Landing annexation debate and the call for an Estero incorporation referendum, which goes on the ballot in November after its recent approval by the Florida Legislature.

But this squabbling actually was part of a debate from 1904 — Estero’s original date of incorporation by Cyrus Teed and members of his Koreshan Unity settlement, according to the book “Early Estero” by Quentin Quesnell. The histories of Estero and Bonita Springs both reflect earlier incorporations — and dissolutions of those incorporated municipalities — with historical boundaries that differed from the territories now up for debate.

The Hyatt Regency Coconut Point Resort & Spa looms over a trailered boat parked at the Weeks Fish Camp area. Mr. Teed’s city of Estero encompassed 110 square miles — the largest incorporated city in the state at the time, according to Mr. Quesnell’s book. The city limits ran from nearly what’s now Gladiolus Drive south of Fort Myers to around Shangri-La Road in Bonita Springs and included the Estero Island site of the current Town of Fort Myers Beach. The incorporation only lasted until 1907, when the state Legislature dissolved it at the request of Lee County government.



LAURA TICHY-SMITH/SPECIAL TO FLORIDA WEEKLY

As to the area of Bonita Springs’ first incorporation that lasted from 1925 to 1934, Charlie Strader, communications liaison for the Bonita Springs Historical Society, said the boundaries ran somewhat close to the current downtown old Bonita, although a little more to the east.

Joe Fernandez and his son Joe E. “Bud” Fernandez at the fishing village of Coconut with their catch of 1,000 pounds of mullet. “If you want to know the reason they built there, just look at the flood maps,” Mr. Strader said. “The (Tamiami) Trail coming through shifted it.”



FERNANDEZ FAMILY ARCHIVE/SPECIAL TO FLORIDA WEEKLY

In the middle of the current debate about the boundary separating Bonita Springs and Estero lies a forgotten third

settlement — a village called Coconut, the land of which is being absorbed by the two larger neighbors. The remnants of this forgotten village are located where the western end of Coconut Road meets Estero Bay, an area now graced by the Hyatt Regency Coconut Point Resort & Spa.

Marlene Fernandez, archivist and preservationist for the Estero Historical Society, said Coconut had been a commercial fishing village and the area included Weeks Fish Camp and the Smoot Fish House. She said part of the Hyatt complex now occupies the land where the fish house once stood. Families who were associated with the fishing village, besides the Weeks and Smoots, included the Johnsons and Fernandezes. Ms. Fernandez said some descendants still live in the area, including those in her own family and that of Tom Smoot, an attorney in Fort Myers.

“The Johnson Cemetery on Spring Creek Road off of Coconut Road was originally called Coconut Cemetery,” Ms. Fernandez said.

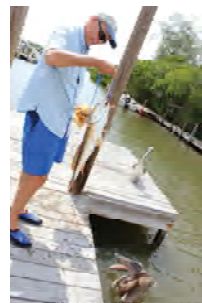
The residents of the fishing village shared ties with the two communities on either side.



The Estero boundary sign on U.S. 41.

“I once asked the old timers there where they went when they needed supplies, such as flour or salt, if they went to Bonita or Fort Myers,” Mr. Strader said. “They said they traded at the Koreshan store because it could be reached by boat.”

Pelicans have their hopes for a piece of Steve Bitteringer’s 26-inch redfish. The seasonal resident is a kayaker who said the closing of Hickory Bait & Tackle saddens him because its launch was one of the last places on Estero Bay open to the general boating public. Ms. Fernandez concurred, but she said that the building of the Tamiami Trail in 1927 opened additional opportunities and made it much easier to visit Bonita Springs, Estero and Fort Myers because these places were made accessible by automobile. She said the road might have even helped the village by allowing people to come out to Coconut to fish.



Steve Bitteringer’s 26-inch redfish.

“Old man Hub Johnson had little skiffs he rented to the winter visitors and supplemented his Social Security that way,” she said. Why did the village go into decline? Ms. Fernandez offered several reasons, most having to do with a downturn in fishing and the deaths of the older generation. “When the owner of the fish house died, his boys didn’t want to take it up,” she said. “Fishing was a hard life and a meager living, and people want more than that these days. The Weeks moved away when the Hyatt came in.” Today, little is left of the village of Coconut. The fish camp has a few homes and trailers, and the Hickory Bait & Tackle Shop closed permanently April 30 to make way for a larger canal and a new restaurant. “Age has a way of getting rid of things,” Ms. Fernandez said. “People die, and others don’t want to take it up.”