

SNOWBIRDS OF THE 1880s

Submitted by Village of Richfield Springs Historian Harriett Geywits

Long before there was the convenience of planes or the advent of automobiles and the highways to accommodate them, there were many places in Florida that could accommodate tourists from the more northern climates. It seems strange to think of people traveling from the colder months of the north to the warmer climes in the early years of the 19th century. However, we know that those who were financially able to do so - did - not only to escape the cold, but to also take advantage of the same type of resort living that they found in places like Richfield Springs.

One of their destinations was a place called Enterprise. These visitors would make their way to Jacksonville, Florida by train or boat and then took one of the many steamers that ran between Jacksonville and ports on the St. Johns River. The voyage was long. At times the boat would make good progress through the wider expanses of the river which were really very small lakes and then work slowly along narrow channels where the river made many bends and, at times, was filled with obstructions. Here progress was slow, but the passengers found entertainment in watching the wildlife which swarmed in the warm water. Big alligators, disturbed by the chugging of the engines, would slide from the muddy banks into the stream and occasionally would get tangled up in the steamer's paddle wheel. Various varieties of snakes dropped into the water for concealment or made their way back into the jungle-like area.

A description of an early journey to the settlement of Enterprise was given by Samuel Hale in a report to the Richfield Springs MERCURY. He stated: "Lake Monroe, about a hundred and thirty-five miles south of Jacksonville but many more miles by the river, was the terminus of the boat's journey. It landed at the post of Enterprise on the northern shore of the lake. Enterprise was selected by the early comers for the establishment of a town because several fine springs were found there and the shore of the lake afforded good sites for extensive docks and necessary buildings."

Enterprise is situated on the northern shore of Lake Monroe between the cities of DeBary and Deltona. It was once the head of navigation on the St. Johns River. Florida was acquired by the United States in 1821 and the Seminole inhabitants were displaced by the Armed Occupation Act which granted acreage to any settler who would clear, cultivate and hold five acres for five years. Over 200,000 acres were opened for development.

Over one thousand people applied for land, one of whom was Cornelius Taylor, a timber agent. In 1841, he and about twenty others founded Enterprise. Taylor built an inn to attract visitors and furnished it with the best of furniture. Orange groves were set out and a gristmill and sawmill established. The sawmill was needed to handle the southern live oak lumber that was in demand by the US Navy for warships. Truck gardens were started and everything was done to make the place one to be desired by the travelers from the north.

In 1851, Jacob Brock (1811-1876) bought land a mile east of the original settlement where he built a wharf and marked out lots and streets. He was a steamboat captain and was well aware of the tourist potential of the sulfur springs at Enterprise because of having transported invalids there. It was the last stop for the steamer on the river trip which would leave Jacksonville on a Saturday morning, for example, for the two hundred plus mile trip up the river,



stopping at Palatka overnight and arriving at Enterprise on Sunday. In 1854, he built the Brock House which would accommodate fifty guests.

Then came the Civil War (1861-1865) when the Union Army set out to capture the Confederate steamboats on the St. Johns River. One of those steamers, named by Captain Brock after his daughter 'Hattie', was built to carry eight hundred bales of cotton and had luxury cabins for one hundred passengers. He supported Southern interests and was able to avoid capture as he transported people and goods for the Confederate cause until 1864 when the steamer was seized by Union forces and Brock was arrested. Following the war, he was released and resumed his steamboat operations, bringing tourists on their journey up the St. Johns River.

Following the war, Florida experienced a growth in tourism with Enterprise becoming a fashionable resort and sportsmen's paradise for fish and game. The people came by boatloads and train.

"The register of the hotel shows the signatures of several famous men, many of whom had also been visitors at Richfield. A large number of members of Tammany Hall made the trip to Enterprise in a body and to accommodate them, the management of the hotel built an annex which was named in their honor. Other winter guests were President Ulysses S. Grant, President Grover Cleveland and members of the Vanderbilt family.

Resident of Richfield Springs became interested in Enterprise either for business or because of its attractiveness as a winter resort. In 1880, Senator A. R. Elwood of Richfield and his brother J. B. Elwood of New York visited the thriving resort on Lake Monroe. The hotel register in 1892 was signed by Mr. and Mrs. Edgar Cary of Richfield Springs. The granddaughter of Senator A. R. Elwood, Mrs. William T. Welden, Mrs. William Flanagan, and Dr. and Mrs. Faust DeLong of Richfield Springs were among those who visited Enterprise when the winter winds blew in the north."

The railroads reaching the area created a big trading center for the Lake Monroe section. Hundreds of carloads of celery, lettuce and other truck crops were sent out. A number of northern people built homes for themselves along the highway bordering the shore of the lake.

Enterprise gradually lost its popularity at about the same time as Richfield and the Hotel Brock was razed in 1937. In 2006 the area was declared a historic district and it remains a quiet community with an interesting history.