

# A SLICE OF DELRAY HISTORY!



From the Delray Beach Historical Society

## 1900-1927: Incorporation and Heritage

At the turn of the twentieth century, much of the East Coast of the country had been settled. In many cases, coastal communities were urbane and sophisticated. By comparison, South Florida was still in its pioneer stage. The Linton settlement, founded in 1895, had changed its name to "Delray," but in spite of being largely an agricultural center, the beginnings of a fully formed community existed. In 1905, local farmers formed a cooperative to build and operate a canning plant to process seasonal crops, such as pineapples and tomatoes. This was big news and helped put Delray on the map. The town's first permanent physician, J.R.(Roy) Cason, settled in Delray in 1905. Later in life, he claimed that the reason he established his practice in town was because the canning plant signaled that Delray had a solid future.

The population of Delray was first counted in the 1910 U.S. Census. The total recorded population was 904. A high percentage of working residents listed occupations related to farming or fishing. At least a dozen small farms were owned by African Americans. (The Tropical Sun newspaper remarked in 1908 that "this number is expected to expand significantly.") A group of 49 Bahamians and their families operated a fishing camp on the beach. A slim majority (52%) of the population were white; although many were native Floridians or had come from nearby southern states, a significant number had immigrated from the Midwest and Northeast, with the state of Michigan topping the list. Quite a few residents listed their nationality as first- or second-generation German.

The town was tiny, the buildings were small, low profile, and built in a rural vernacular manner. The native landscape was comprised of vast expanses of white sand, scrub pine, saw palmettos, cabbage palm and sea grapes. Plenty of room still existed for growth, and land could be bought inexpensively.

## Incorporation

In 1908 a petition to incorporate Delray failed to get sufficient votes in a November election. Another petition by Delray Beach citizens in 1909 recommended that Delray replace West Palm Beach as the temporary county seat of the new Palm Beach County. Local businessman Henry Sterling offered to convert his commercial buildings on Atlantic Avenue to offices for a county seat. The opportunity for Delray to play a leading role in the new Palm Beach County was apparent. With Henry Sterling's moral and financial support, community leader John Shaw Sundy was dispatched to West Palm Beach to carry Delray's petition that the permanent county seat be located in Delray. While the proposition never really had a chance of succeeding, due notice was provided that Delray wanted to play an important role in the future of Palm Beach County.

Another petition to incorporate Delray at the end of that year again failed in an election vote held on January 11, 1910. But local citizens driven by the determination of William Washington Blackmer (known in town as " W.W."), who was the leader behind the incorporation movement from the beginning, were not discouraged. On September 4, 1911, a meeting was held at the Ladies Improvement Association Hall in the 400 block of East Atlantic Avenue to organize the third vote for incorporation. Meeting minutes (maintained in Delray Beach Historical Society Archives) reveal a simple, methodical process of gaining support for the first charter.

Twenty-six registered voters attended the meeting. W.W. Blackmer was appointed meeting Chairman. Mr. Blackmer, a respected citizen, had lived in Delray since 1895 when he first traveled to Linton with William S.Linton, a U.S.Congressman from Saginaw, Michigan, as part of a small party of settlers. Mr. Linton accompanied the settlers to the town he was developing. After William Linton returned to Michigan for good in 1897, Blackmer and his wife Nellie proposed a new name for the community based upon the Detroit suburb of Del Rey, the northern home of several pioneers. Joseph W. Acton, from New Jersey, was appointed Secretary. Acton had been brought to town by Henry Sterling, a prominent local businessman, to run the winter canning plant.

The meeting closed with a motion to put the decision on incorporation up for a popular vote. Voting day was chosen for October 9, 1911 at 7PM, allowing required 30 day advertised notice in "Palm Beach County" a West Palm Beach newspaper with some circulation in Delray. Fifty-seven voters were qualified to cast their ballots on decision day. A two-thirds majority was required to approve incorporation. A motion to vote was offered by John A. Zeder. Mr. Blackmer appointed John Shaw Sundy and John Zill as tellers. Fifty-six votes were cast for incorporation, with one blank or abstaining vote.

Following the affirmative vote, the fifty-seven voters chose town officers. They elected John Sundy mayor with no opposition. Among eleven candidates nominated, the voters

selected five aldermen by majority vote: Thomas M. McCrae, Dr. John R. Cason Jr., J. W. Acton, John S. Wuepper, and Heliodore J. Wackerman. George Green, an African American from Florida's panhandle, just missed making the cut. The new clerk, W.W. Blackmer, was the only nominee for that office. Joseph Walker defeated two opponents for the job of Marshall (coincidentally James S. Walker, a neighbor, but no relation we know of, and C.C. Myers).

Dr. Cason offered a resolution that a seal for the town be designed. He suggested a plain circle around the words "Town of Delray, Florida" and "Incorporated A.D. 1911". The seal arrived from Jacksonville within a few days. Articles of Incorporation were recorded by the county before the end of the year.

## 1911-1915

During the years just before and after incorporation, the first bridge across the canal—now known as the Intracoastal Waterway—was constructed replacing a hand-pulled lighter that was the only practical way to get to the beach; a jail was built by new-comer Frank J. Schrader in 1911 replacing the need for occasionally using a boxcar to house miscreants; two young women, Mrs. James M. Cromer and Mrs. T. Allen (Emma) Tasker started a local newspaper, the Delray Progress; and the Tenbrook family built a theater for silent films called the Bijou. The first bank, the Bank of Delray, opened in 1912. Electric lights and city water became available with the help of the town's first bond issue. A few people had telephone service, but the telephone book was just a half-page long.

Churches and civic groups that had been formed before incorporation recruited new members and took on new tasks. The Ladies Improvement Association focused on infrastructure, establishing the first library, and supporting a new school in 1913. In 1915, Albert Miller became the first fire chief of a fledgling all-volunteer fire department. The equipment consisted of a hose reel on wheels that volunteers pulled through the streets and connected to the nearest well. In the same year the first four graduates of Delray High School earned their diplomas.

The permanent population continued to expand slowly, about sixty people per year.

From its very beginnings, Linton/Delray gained and lost population as settlers battled both the elements and economic conditions—intense heat, occasional freezes, irritating insects, hurricanes, drought, and volatile pricing for key crops. The hardy survived and quite a few prospered. In the early 1900s Delray promoted itself as the agricultural capital of South Florida because of its large shipments of pineapples, tomatoes and other produce. Local advertisements used the term, "Banner Town of Palm Beach County."

During this era, the main source of non-farm employment in Delray was the canning plant. The area's initial key commodity was pineapples. After the Spanish-American War, Cuba supplanted South Florida as the principal grower of pineapples for east coast markets. Around 1915, the canning plant was sold to the Snider Ketchup Company and converted exclusively to tomato processing. A quotation from the book, *Incomparable Delray Beach* by Cecil and Margoann Farrar states... "Delray's air, once sweet with pineapple fragrance, became pungent with the smell of tomatoes and spices. The factory was the town's center of activity, and when quitting time came for the day, and workers poured out on to the street, it looked like the whole town had spent the day making ketchup."

## World War I

As the settlement period came to a close, events happening in Europe would affect the population of Delray. In 1917 a group of young men enlisted together in the Second Florida National Guard in West Palm Beach. They were assigned to the Dixie Division at Camp Wheeler in Macon, Georgia. The youngest volunteer was seventeen-year-old Lonnie Cook, patriarch of a family retail business, called Hands, on Atlantic Avenue. In another quotation from *Incomparable Delray Beach* the Farrars described the mood of town during the war in this way: "The farmers found it difficult to make a living during the war period with their sons away. They had no help in the fields, and crops suffered from lack of attention. Some of the men went to Jacksonville and Charleston, South Carolina, to find work in the shipyards. The people left behind missed their loved ones, and a feeling of sadness and quiet permeated the little town."

## The 1920s Florida Real Estate Boom

After World War I ended, life returned to normal. A spirit of optimism revived, and in its own way, Delray was caught up in "Roaring 20s" enthusiasm. Beginning in 1922, the town was gripped by the Florida Real Estate Boom. Property values exploded. Farm land was converted into larger and larger real estate developments. Matt Gracey, a local realtor whose uncle started a Delray real estate business in 1925, recalls that a real estate agent could be recognized by his attire. Wearing golf knickers became the trademark of a successful real estate agent, and plenty of knickers were seen on Delray streets.

Store owners and residents alike improved their properties. The downtown streetscape transformed from bare-boned frame storefronts to a lovely resort town filled with palm trees. The Atlantic Avenue view east to the ocean rivaled any Palm Beach or French Riviera promenade. Local brochures promoted Delray as the "Ocean City" bragging that the Atlantic Ocean was closer to the center of town than any town or city in America.

Delray developers, such as Lyter H. Bradshaw (The Kentucky House), E.H. Scott (Seacrest Hotel – now the Opal), and Henry Sterling (Casa Del Rey) built new hotels on Atlantic

Avenue. The hotels were mainly constructed in the Spanish style popular in the Boom, and common in nearby Palm Beach and Boca Raton. A star in new resort construction was Albert T. Repp's "Alterep", now the Colony Hotel on Atlantic Avenue, which opened March 1, 1926, just a few months before the real estate bust began.

In 1923, development of the town of Gulf Stream began on the coast just north of Delray. The prominent Phipps family envisioned this planned community to be a "quieter version of Palm Beach." The exclusive Gulf Stream Golf Club was established in 1924, followed later by a massive polo fields complex that became the Winter Polo Capital in the United States. As the clubs, stables, and winter estates were being built in the 1920s, it was estimated that 10% of Delray's skilled tradesmen and service workers were employed in the development of Gulf Stream properties.

Gulf Stream was incorporated in 1925. The halo effect of the Gulf Stream development on the barrier island accelerated residential growth along Delray's oceanfront. In the early 1920s, residents living by the beach had incorporated land east of the Intracoastal as "Delray Beach", so they could borrow funds for capital improvements at rates lower than warranted by Delray's shaky credit rating. The two communities were joined and rechartered as Delray Beach on December 14, 1927.

## Perspective

October 9th, 2020 marks the 109th year of incorporation for Delray Beach. The census population is now nearly 70,000 residents. The farms have virtually disappeared. There are now thousands of hotel rooms, and more are coming. Delray is a small city that still calls itself "an historic village-by-the-sea." This distinction is apparent in attitude, in architecture, cultural expression and in lifestyle. One wonders what the 56 citizens who voted for incorporation in 1911 would think of their little town today. We can reflect that experiences of settlement, incorporation, adversity and success, formed strong community ties that shaped the city of today.