

Step Back in Time

The Sanibel Historical Village and Museum

by Lynn Wallen

Tucked away on a side street on Sanibel Island is the entrance to a time warp. If you pass through the portal to the Sanibel Historical Village and Museum, you'll find yourself transported to the turn of the last century, when a handful of hardy farmers and merchants created the community that, much later, became famous as a paradise vacation destination. Immerse yourself for an hour or two in a simpler, quieter time on Sanibel. Imagine that era—the sound of screen doors slamming in the afternoon stillness, the taste of dinner fresh from the garden behind the house, the scent of key limes and grapefruits wafting across the island, and the only light at night sparkling from the starry sky.

What was life on Sanibel like before tourists? Who lived here? When did they settle on the island? Where did they shop? How did they build their houses before air conditioning and building codes?

If you are a visitor, discovering pioneer life at the Historical Village provides a rewarding break from sunning, shelling, and golfing. If you live here, learning about the island “back then” is a poignant reminder of how things always change—for the better and for the worse.

The earliest settlers didn't remain. About thirty American “colonists” landed on Sanibel in 1833, long after the indigenous Calusa Indians had been



Then and now: Miss Charlotta's Tearoom was more than just a waiting area for ferry-goers. Folks gathered for refreshments and to share the local gossip.

driven off and sixteenth-century Spanish explorers had moved on. The colonists apparently found no way to make a living, for most were gone by 1837, and no one remained by 1844. Two brothers, William and George Allen, started a castor bean plantation in 1868, and the 1870 census recorded only two residents

of the island, William and his son. They most likely left after the 1873 hurricane surged the island and destroyed their crop. The lighthouse was built in 1884, and its keepers and their families were the only official residents until 1888. (Cuban fishermen maintained seasonal camps for many years.)

Homesteaders arrived in the late 1880s and established a farming community.

“There never was a village on Sanibel,” observes Alex Werner, a docent at the Historical Village. “Of the 11,000 acres on Sanibel, only 5,000 were ‘farmable.’ That means thirty-one homesteads were scattered across the island.”

Women's names were on most of the homestead deeds. “U.S. law said you couldn't homestead if you had ever borne arms against the government, which eliminated anyone who had fought for

