

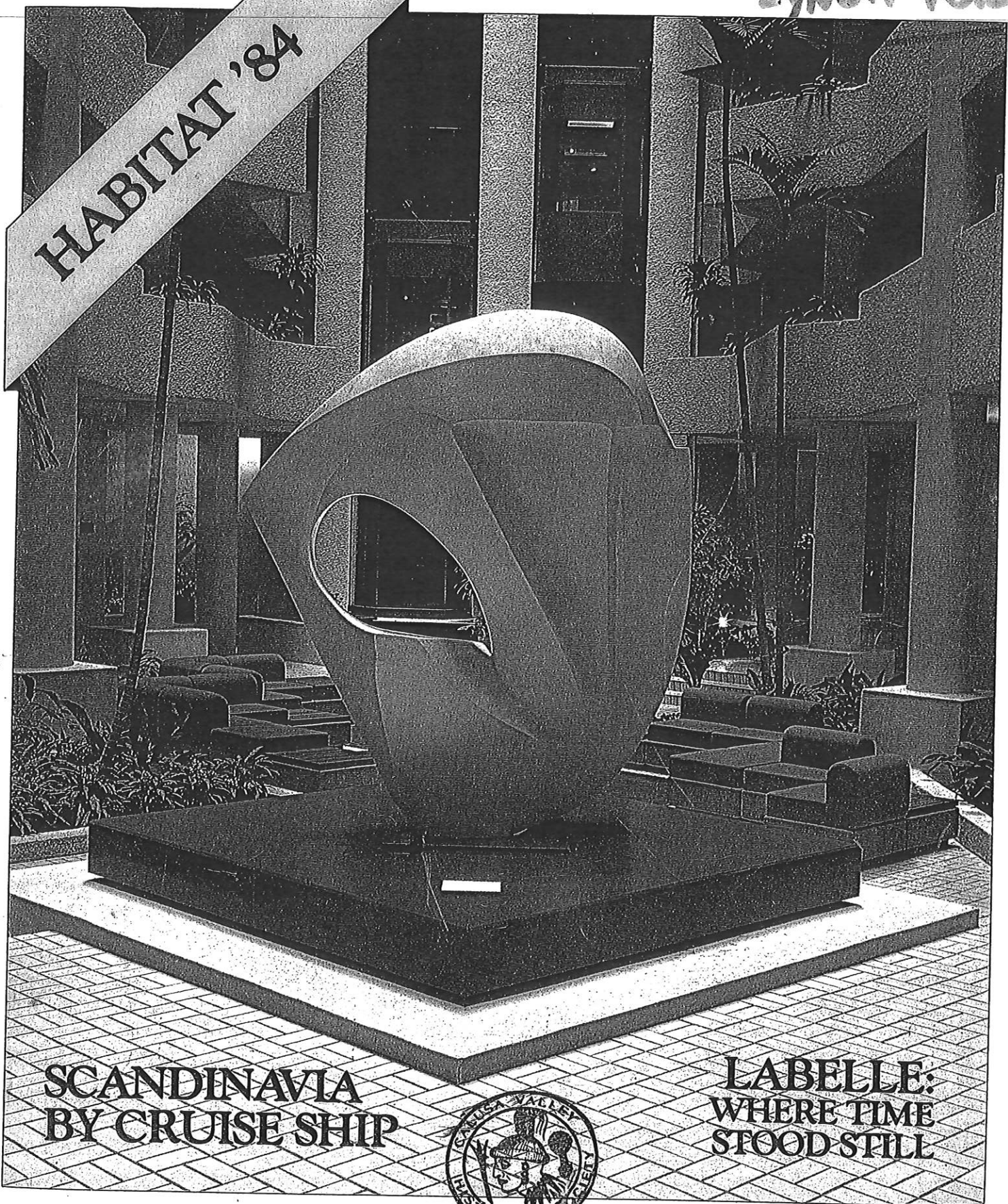
# GULF SHORE LIFE

THE MAGAZINE OF SOUTHWEST FLORIDA

FEBRUARY 1984/\$2.

LYNDA RIDG

HABITAT '84



SCANDINAVIA  
BY CRUISE SHIP



LABELLE:  
WHERE TIME  
STOOD STILL

# GULFSHORE LIFE

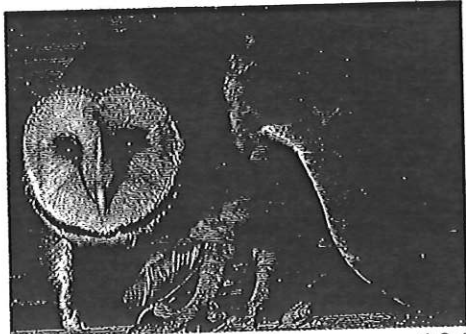
THE MAGAZINE OF SOUTHWEST FLORIDA

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*The atrium lobby of Esplanade, a highrise condominium that sits beside the sparkling Gulf in Naples. Photographed by Mark Harmel.*

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# LABELLE

THE TOWN WHERE TIME STOOD STILL





It has survived frontier perils,  
floods, and "divine retribution"  
for an act of injustice.

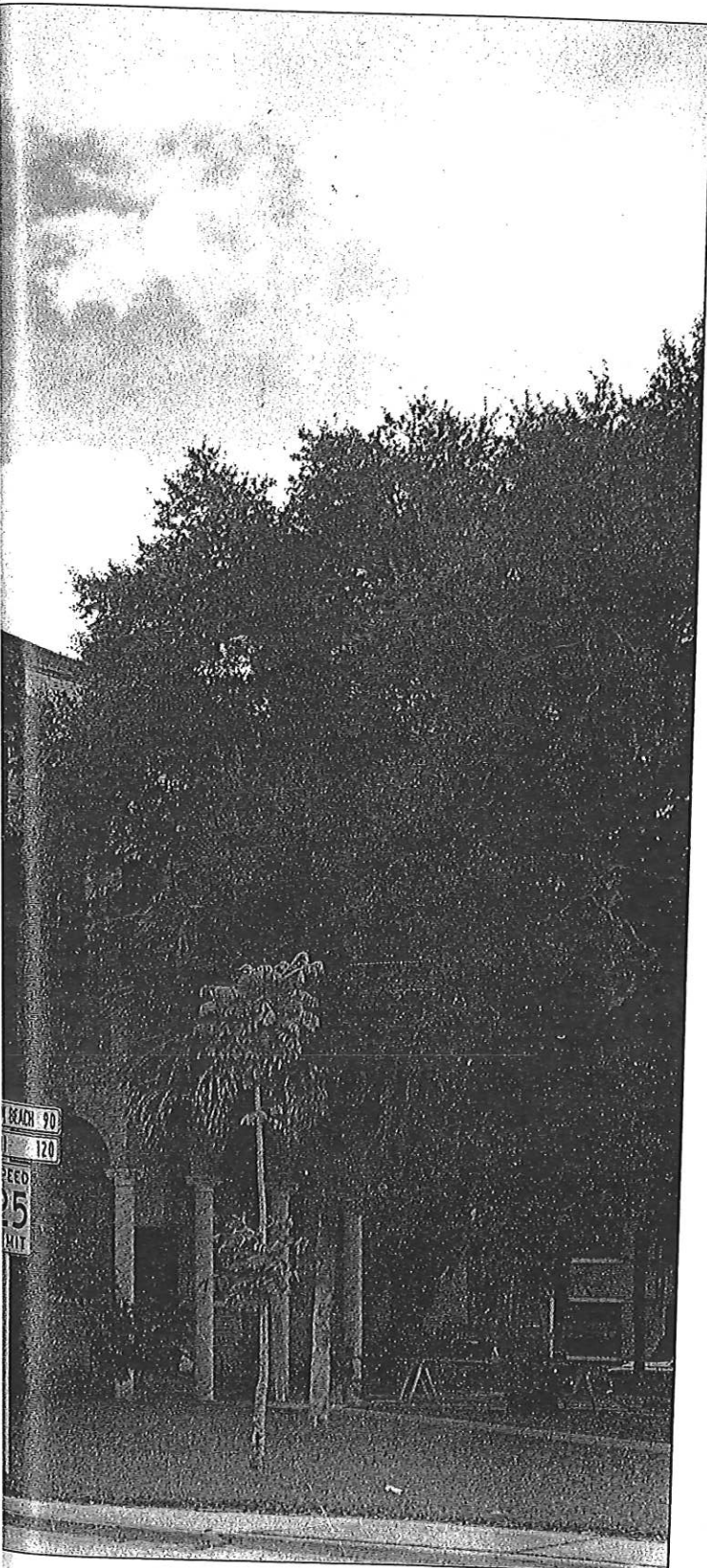
BY TSANI YONAH

**I**t was near noon on June 3, 1926, and the midday sun lay heavily upon the little Southwest Florida village of LaBelle. Few people were stirring on the dusty main street that led from a small cluster of shops and stores near the bank of the Caloosahatchee River directly to the front of the brave new Hendry County courthouse that was almost completed, with its tall clock tower the most visible landmark for miles above the flat, sandy terrain.

A mud-splattered Model T chugged by, trailing a billowing plume of white dust. As it vanished from sight, there was little to be heard except the clanging of a blacksmith's hammer and the rattle of harness as a freight wagon pulled up to the landing near the Everett Hotel where men were unloading crates from a steamboat tied up at the city dock. In the little frame and clapboard houses, many of them thatched, that nestled among the towering oak trees whose massive, moss-laden

*Continued on next page*

*After lightning struck the courthouse clock again and again ~~finally destroying the tower in 1929~~ the clockworks were dismantled and stored ~~for 45 years~~ in the basement of the ill-fated building.*







The steamboat "Thomas A. Edison" on the Caloosahatchee River, circa 1910.

branches hung almost to the ground, housewives went about their chores amid a sultry silence broken only by the bumbling drone of flies bumping against door and window screens.

A mile or so out of town, a crew of black workmen were laboring with picks, shovels, and sledges, constructing the foundation of a road that would eventually be called Palm Beach Boulevard (now State Highway 80), leading eastward from Fort Myers, through LaBelle, to Palm Beach on the Atlantic coast.

The men worked desultorily in the oppressive heat, sweat making rivulets down their dusty faces and heavily muscled shoulders, and they glanced frequently at the white foreman, hoping for the signal to break for lunch. The foreman stood off to the side away from the choking dust, leaning against the trunk of a pine tree whose meager shade kept the sun from boiling the contents of the men's dinner pails that were piled beneath it.

The working men watched envious-

ly as the foreman pulled a bottle from his hip pocket, drank deeply, then wiped his mouth with the back of his hand before replacing the cap. Their water keg had been empty for hours, and there would be no more until the truck returned to fill it. The foreman put the bottle back in his pocket, then pulled out his watch and studied it.

A short time later, the foreman again consulted his watch and whistled the long-awaited signal. The workers dropped their tools, stretched cramped backs, and hurried to get their dinner pails. One man, driven by thirst, watched until the foreman looked away, then slipped into the palmetto scrub and was quickly out of sight.

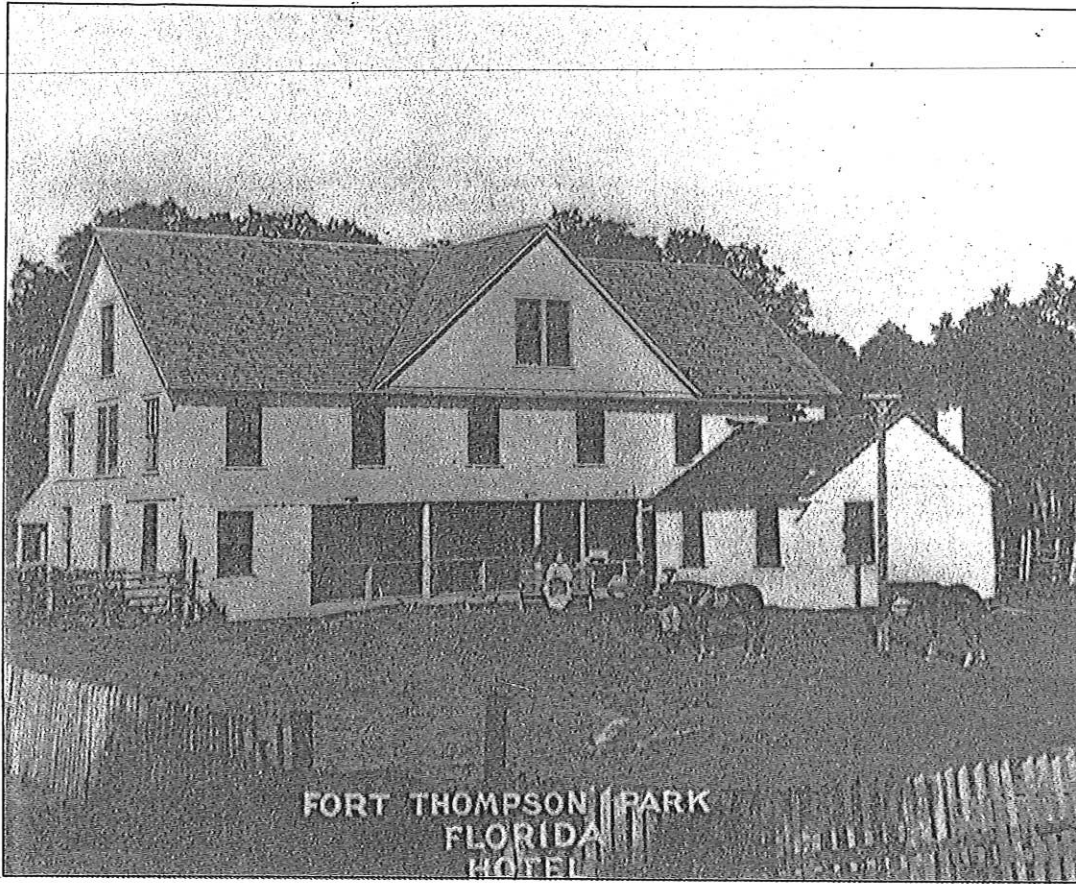
The woman was ironing in the kitchen. The heat of the iron and the pot of greens simmering on the back of the wood-burning stove made the room almost unbearable. Her cotton dress clung to her body, and occasionally she stopped pushing the iron to wipe away the damp tendrils of hair that

hung into her eyes. The ironing board stood in the doorway, opened wide to admit any stray breeze that might come by.

Suddenly, the woman heard a noise and looked up to see a huge black man standing before her, his dirty, sweat-streaked face split in what he thought was an ingratiating smile—but to her was a heart-stopping leer. Before the man could say a word, she gave an ear-splitting scream and hurled the iron at him. The Negro clutched his shoulder, looked down in disbelief at the burn where the hot iron had struck him, then thrust out his hands beseechingly.

"Ma'am, I ain't... Oh, Gawd! Ma'am, I jes' want some water... my Gawd!"

But the woman whirled and gone. The front door banged open and she was off down the road running, screaming for help. The man stood horror stricken for an instant, then turned and stumbled off into the scrub.



Capt. Hendry's first house at Fort Thompson, later enlarged to the Fort Thompson Park Hotel after 1903.

Word spread rapidly through the little town, and streets that had been silent and empty just moments before were now thronged with angry, shouting people. Men poured into town in rattling trucks, in wagons, and on horseback, carrying rifles, shotguns, and pistols. Others who were unarmed rushed home for weapons. The story flew among them, growing wilder and more terrible with each repetition. A woman had been attacked and raped. A white woman—and by a *black* man.

There was much shouting, cursing, and threatening; then the men fanned out to search. The black man would be found, and then they would show him. They would show *all* of them!

Amid the ensuing tumult, a triumphant shout went up. They had found the man hiding in the garage at the house of J.R. Doty, town banker who would later be elected city commissioner. As the terrified man was surrounded, he was able to do no more than throw up his arms and scream

before a shotgun exploded in his face.

The man's body was tied to the back of a car and dragged through the city streets, guns blasting as men fired round after round into the trailing corpse. At the edge of town, the ragged, bloody body was hanged to a pine tree, and the jeering, screaming mob eagerly counted the bullet holes. He had been shot more than 75 times.

Before the day was over, the state militia had to be called in to restore order. The corpse was finally cut down, and someone painted the tree black as a warning. As the day waned, however, reason, reinforced by the rifles of the guardsmen, began to return. The woman "victim" was questioned again, and, of course, the truth was finally known. Then the men who had stormed into town bent on vengeance slipped quietly away hoping no one had recognized them. More than one glance was directed at the blackened tree that would stand, until it was finally cut down, not as a "warning," but as the emblem of a town's

shame.

Ironically, the story does not end there. For years to come, the citizens of LaBelle were to be reminded again and again, in a strange and eerie way, of the tragic events of that violent afternoon.

In that part of Florida, between the east and west coasts, there was no building more imposing than the new Hendry County courthouse in LaBelle. The territory had been wrested from Lee County after years of wrangling and political infighting, and the new county was created by act of the Florida legislature in 1923, named for Captain Francis Asbury Hendry, a veteran of the Seminole and Civil Wars and one of the first settlers in the area. Until the courthouse was completed, county administration was a makeshift affair, with commissioners and officials meeting at the Everett Hotel and various other locations around town. Citizens wanted their new courthouse to reflect their pride in

*Continued on next page*



# LABELLE

Continued



*Shopping day in LaBelle, around 1930. People got used to annual floods, and life went on as usual. The gentlemen on the corner may have been waiting for a bus.*

their new county and their hard won independence. That pride was to become a bitter pill to swallow.

Not long after the lynching, the spring weather was unseasonably hot and dry. There had been little rain, which was unusual for that time of year, and farmers began anxiously watching the sky. Finally, to their relief, clouds began forming, and a welcome rain was anticipated. As the clouds built up, towering higher and blacker, rolling and boiling in the sky, the sun was blotted out, and the afternoon seemed like dusk. Thunder boomed and rumbled in the distance, but when the rain came, it was but a few spattering drops, barely enough to dampen the dust in the streets.

Suddenly, there was a shattering crash that seemed to shake the earth, followed by the strange tolling of a bell. Lightning had struck the courthouse clock tower, smashing and burning the clock works and motor, and the vibrations of its bell seemed to linger as the storm swiftly passed and

the clouds rolled away.

It was an accident of nature, of course, and the county commissioners quickly had the clock repaired. Then it happened again—and again. The wiring was reinspected, lightning rods were installed on the tower and the courthouse roof, every conceivable precaution was taken, but nothing seemed to do any good. Repeatedly the clock was repaired, and each time, lightning smashed again into the tower.

In the months following the lynching, an attempt was made to prosecute those responsible, and eventually about a dozen men were indicted. The black man had been shot so many times, the evidence was so conflicting, and so many people were involved that the judge declared it was impossible to fix the blame on any particular individuals. There were no convictions; the case was dismissed.

After the trial, the story began to circulate—although it wasn't much discussed in LaBelle—that the repeated

lightning strikes on the courthouse weren't really "accidents of nature" at all, but a sign of God's anger against the town.

"Bosh!" snorted the county commissioners, and repaired the clock, and each time, lightning struck again. Then on July 4, 1929, as the citizens were preparing to observe the holiday, there came a bolt so vicious and so terrifying that everyone in town was stunned. People rushed into the courthouse and stood aghast at what met their eyes. The lightning had smashed a large section of cornice stone from the top of the tower. The huge chunk of material had crashed through the roof and buried itself in the floor—almost on top of the judge's bench in the courtroom where the abortive trial had been held.

This time, there was no ignoring the charge of "divine retribution." Newspapers across the state picked up the story and pointed fingers at LaBelle, and the legend spread the time would stand still and the town



*There was even a place to tie your boat up at the court house. At least you could fish, while waiting to pay your taxes. (The hands were still on the clock.)*

would live with its guilt until God's anger was appeased. In desperation, the commissioners had the clock dismantled and its works stored in the courthouse basement. They even removed the hands from the clock, and only the four faces and numerals remained, mute and useless. The tall tower was still a landmark, visible from every direction. But now many citizens averted their eyes when they approached, for its presence was a grim and constant reminder of the events of that terrible day. There was only one small consolation. At least now, when the subject of the clock came up, county commissioners could say, "Of course it doesn't work. There is no clock!"

Years passed and many changes took place in LaBelle and Hendry County. The town grew and new people seemed to arrive in droves as land sales boomed in Southwest Florida and all over the state. Some folks prospered and stayed; others went broke and moved on. Old people died, and

babies were born. Life went on. People stopped talking about the lynching—they didn't want to be reminded of it—and newcomers never heard of it. They became so accustomed to seeing the courthouse clock without hands that some even began to assume there had never been any. At least one book was published with a photograph of the courthouse and the notation that things were so "easygoing" in LaBelle that the "clock did not bother to keep time."

Perhaps God was being appeased, and perhaps it even helped when the old bell was removed from the clock tower and donated to the new First Baptist Church. In fact, that may have been the turning point, for after the bell was hung in the church steeple, lightning never again struck the clock tower.

There is nothing like being sure, though, and folks in LaBelle had grown cautious over the years. Besides, no one really wanted to be the first to "test" the wrath of God. But as

more years passed, tentative feelers were sent out, a word was dropped here and there, and eventually, an idea began to take form. Finally, it came to pass. Almost fearfully, new works were installed in the clock tower, and hands were placed on the faces. Newcomers watched curiously, and old-timers literally held their breath as the switch was thrown and the gears began turning on the courthouse clock, on Saturday, February 22, 1975, at 3 p.m.—almost the same hour the lynching had taken place 49 years before.

Time had started again in LaBelle, but many people would say, with considerable justification, that although the *hours* were not being marked, the *years* had not passed unnoticed. From its humble beginnings, struggling to survive as the "orphan stepchild" of Lee County, Hendry County has emerged as one of the richest counties in the state in per capita income, and one of the top agricultural producing

*Continued on next page*



*The Everett Hotel which stood near the steamboat landing at LaBelle. Built in 1910, it had the only "indoor bathrooms" east of Fort Myers. Thomas A. Edison. Henry Ford and Harvey Firestone were among the noted guests who frequently stayed there. Ford later owned the hotel.*



areas in the nation.

It all began around the turn of the century, in the early 1800s, when Pierre Denaud, a French trapper, paddled up the Caloosahatchee River in search of game. It was beautiful country, and he liked what he saw. Besides, game was everywhere. Denaud staked out a sizeable claim for himself and set up a trading post where he did a brisk business in trading with the Indians for furs, hides, and plumes.

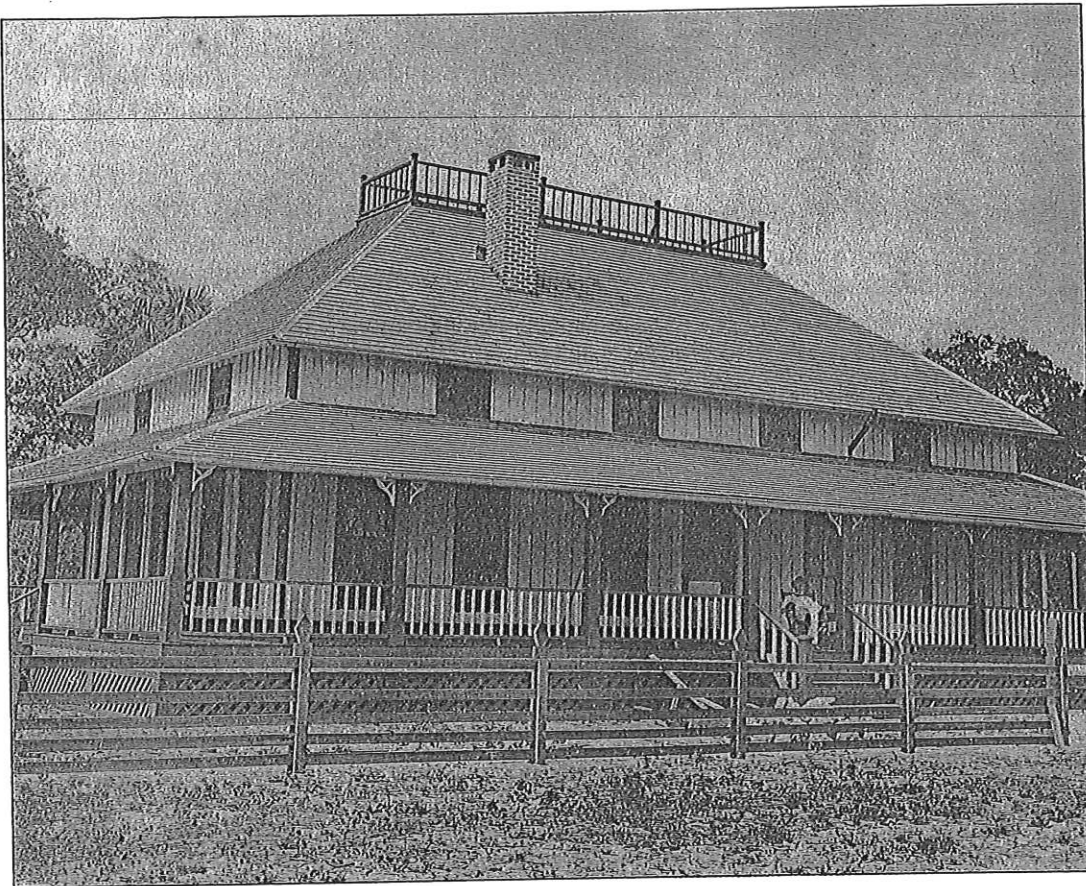
While a few people seemed to want to live in peace with the Indians, most did not. During the Second Seminole War (1835-1842), forts were constructed along the Caloosahatchee River. There was Fort Dulany, located at the mouth of the river, which would eventually become Punta Rassa. Up-river was Fort Harvie, but the name would later be changed to Fort Myers. Further inland was Fort Denaud, named for the old Indian trader, then Fort Simmons, Fort Adams, and furthestmost upriver at the limits of navigation was Fort Thompson.

Fort Thompson was first erected in late 1837, and was named for Lieutenant Colonel Alexander R. Thompson, who was killed December 25, 1837, in the Battle of Okeechobee. Like most other forts in the area, Thompson was little more than a palisade of pine tree trunks stuck in the ground, with some earthworks thrown up around them. And like most of the other forts, it was built with little or no consideration given to the terrain, the river, or the climate. It was a mistake, because almost all the forts had to be hastily abandoned when the rainy season set in and the river reached flood stage. Fort Thompson was first used only about two months, and then was evacuated. A dispatch sent back to headquarters by an army survey party sent out to map the area in 1841 explains why. When they reached the area where the fort was supposed to be, they finally located the tops of the walls—six feet under water.

In 1851, the father of Francis Asbury Hendry moved his family from

Georgia to Hillsboro County, Florida, near Tampa. Young Hendry was 18 at the time. The following year, he married and established a home and small cattle ranch on the Peace River near the protection of Fort Meade.

In 1854, Hendry became a scout and dispatch rider for the Army and was sent to Fort Harvie. In early 1855, he was assigned to Fort Thompson, which had been rebuilt and re-activated for the Third Seminole War. The fort was located at the lower end of a large, shallow, marshy lake, which was originally called Lake Thompson. Its name was changed about 1847 to Lake Flirt, in honor of a naval vessel that had sailed up the river almost to the lake in 1841, but the army continued to call it Lake Thompson. They also persisted in calling it the "Carlos-A-Hatchee" River. At the lowest end of the lake, a limestone falls formed a natural dam for the water, and below, a series of shoals provided the best fording place across the river. It was at these shoals that the fort was located.



*House built by Capt. Francis A. Hendry at LaBelle in 1914, but he never lived in it. The old captain himself is sitting on the front porch. After Hendry died in 1917, the house was purchased by John M. Slaton, former governor of Georgia, as a summer home.*

and beyond which only canoes and the shallowest draft vessels could go.

It was Second Lieutenant George Hartsuff, commanding Company I at Fort Thompson, who was given the dubious distinction of starting the Third Seminole War. Hartsuff was leading a survey party through the Big Cypress Swamp when they discovered the camp belonging to Holatto Micco, or "Billy Bowlegs," chief of the Seminoles. The men deliberately ran their survey line through Bowlegs' garden, cut down his plants and banana trees, and shot up his pumpkins, "just to see how old Billy would cut up." When the chief confronted the men with the destruction, they readily admitted it and as much as dared him to do something about it. He had had enough, and he did something. The Indians fell upon the soldiers. Several were killed, and Hartsuff was badly wounded. He and a few survivors managed to drag themselves back to Fort Myers, and the army vowed death and destruction to all

Indians.

At Fort Thompson, Hendry was given the task of establishing a wagon trail overland to Fort Meade, and he traveled the route numerous times guiding supply trains. He fell in love with the countryside, and vowed someday to return.

In 1858, Billy Bowlegs' beloved granddaughter, along with a number of Indian women and children, was captured by the army and held hostage. The chief was forced to capitulate, and on May 4, he and many of the surviving members of his tribe sadly boarded a ship at Fort Myers to be transported to Oklahoma. Although a few Indians remained in hiding deep in the Everglades, the United States declared itself the victor, and the war was ended. The Caloosahatchee forts were again abandoned—for the last time.

When the war ended, Hendry returned to his cattle and was elected a state senator from Polk County. But there was more trouble ahead. In 1861,

Florida joined the Confederacy, and Hendry raised a troop of cavalry to defend his homeland. He served as a captain during the Civil War, and after the surrender, he again returned to the Peace River.

He had not forgotten the land around the Caloosahatchee, however, and in 1870, he moved his now considerable herds back to old Fort Thompson. Not only was the grazing land good, but it was easier to cross the river and trail the cattle south, then westward to Punta Rassa where they were loaded aboard ships to market.

In 1873, Hendry moved his family to Fort Myers and traveled frequently from there to Fort Thompson to supervise his ranch. He built a substantial house there to use during his visits, and eyeing the fertile wetlands in the area, advocated draining and reclaiming the land for agriculture.

Others had the same idea, and in 1881, Hamilton Disston was awarded a contract by the state, giving him a

*Continued on next page*





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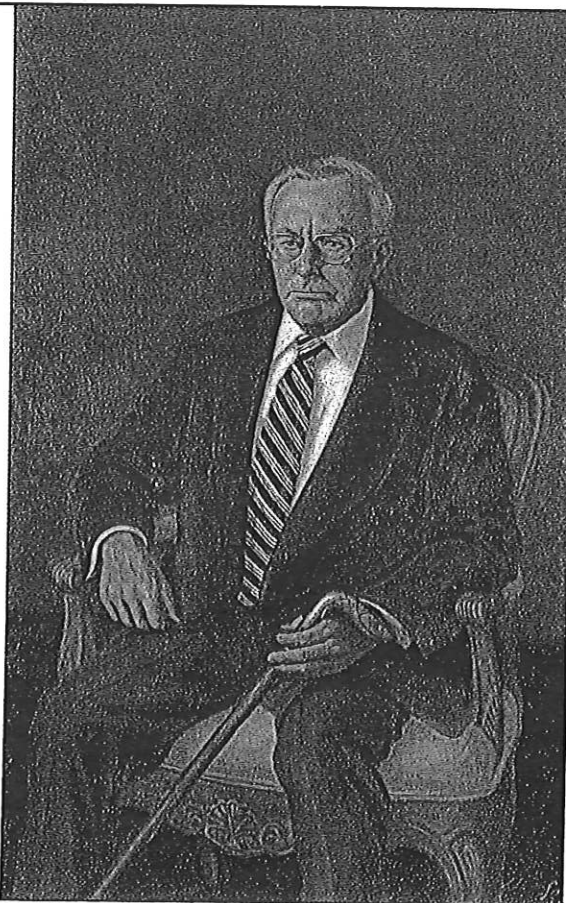
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## LABELLE

Continued

substantial portion of any land that he could drain. Disston believed sugar cane could be grown and foresaw thousands of acres available for his use if he could get the water off them. He began dredging the Caloosahatchee, and by 1883 had reached Fort Thompson. He dynamited the falls and released Lake Flirt. Until then, the river had flowed clean and clear, but as the water gushed through the blasted dam, the river was changed forever into a muddy stream.

Ironically, although the Indians obviously had found a secret route through Lake Flirt upstream to Lake Okechobee, white men were never able to discover it. Now as water flowed out of the marshes, the prehistoric channel of the river, hidden for thousands of years in the watery grassland, was finally revealed.

In 1855, the famous inventor Thomas Alva Edison first came to Fort Myers and was so enamored with the area that he bought property within 24 hours. Returning north, he did not get back to Fort Myers until 1901, when he arrived on the steamer *H.B. Plant*. The captain chuffed up to the wharf with all flags flying and the whistle tied down to announce he was bringing the great man back "home." Edison returned almost every winter thereafter and was to figure largely in the future of LaBelle.

On August 12, 1885, the city of Fort Myers was incorporated, and Hendry was elected to the town council. Since all of the western portion of Florida south of the Caloosahatchee River was part of Monroe County at that time, the county seat was Key West, and the territory was impossibly large to govern. Besides, the folks in Key West, where a large percentage of Florida's population lived at that time, paid little attention to citizens living so far away. Fort Myers began agitating for independence.

The final straw came when the Fort Myers schoolhouse burned down, and a delegation was sent south to ask for assistance in building a new one. The commissioners in Key West told them they "ought to take better care of county property" and sent them back without a cent.

In May 1887, Captain Hendry was the first to be notified by telegram that

Lee County, named for Hendry's beloved commander, had been formed. It was a large territory, extending eastward halfway across Lake Okeechobee, and Hendry was elected one of the first commissioners of the new county.

In 1889, Hendry moved his family to Fort Thompson, and it was about that time when he laid out the town and gave it its name, LaBelle. It is easy to believe the name might have come from the old Frenchman Pierre Denaud, who looked at the area and exclaimed, "C'est La Belle!"—it's beautiful. But most folks agree the town was named for two of Hendry's daughters, Laura and Belle. At any rate, it *was* beautiful, and it didn't take folks long to find out about it.

Settlers began to arrive, a few shops sprang up, and most of the people lived in thatched Indian-style chickees until more permanent homes could be built. In 1890, LaBelle's first school—a chickee—was built, and the structure was also later used by the first church, a Methodist Episcopal congregation. Later, Hendry donated land to build a more proper house of worship.

By 1901, steamboats were plying the river regularly, bringing passengers and freight from Fort Myers, and they also brought sightseers. There was little to do in Fort Myers, and the bored citizens enjoyed excursions up the river. It was also interesting to find out how the "other half" lived. Thomas Edison was one who came, and he returned often as a guest of Captain Hendry at Fort Thompson. Steamboats *Thomas A. Edison* and *The City of Athens* were among those seen frequently tied up at the dock.

Around 1900, a young bachelor named Everett E. Goodno arrived in the area from Kansas. Doctors had told him he must take his mother to a warmer climate for her health or she would not live much longer. Goodno came to Fort Myers and bought a citrus grove upriver between there and LaBelle. In 1903, he sold the grove for a considerable profit and bought out the holdings of Captain Hendry, including the Fort Thompson property and the entire townsite of LaBelle. Hendry and his wife, saddened by the recent death of one of their children,



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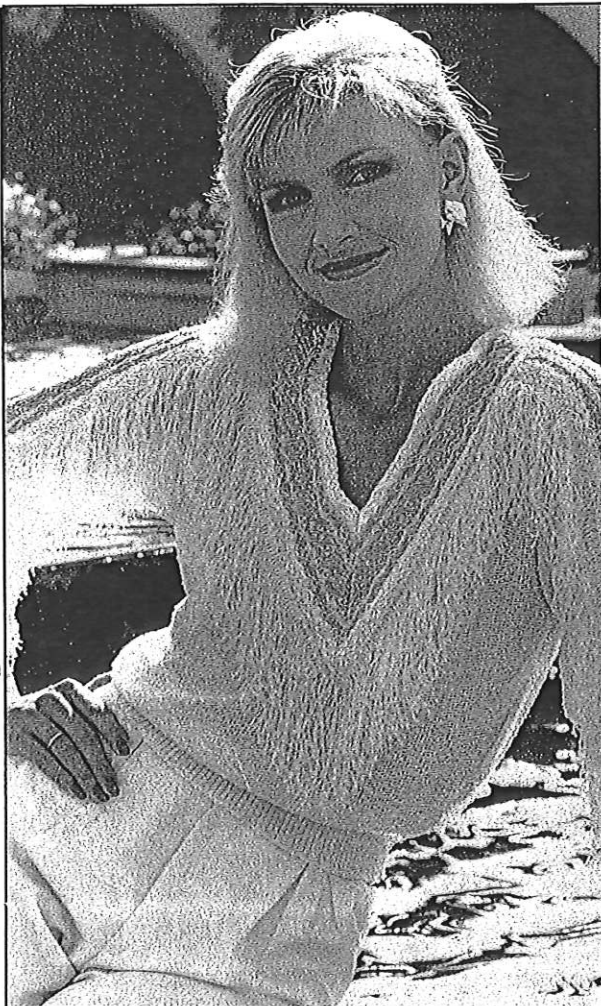
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**LABELLE**

*Continued*

returned to an apartment in Fort Myers. The climate at LaBelle must have been beautiful for Mrs. Goodno. She lived to be more than 100.

Goodno enlarged Hendry's house at Fort Thompson and turned it into the Fort Thompson Park Hotel. He also built an ice plant to serve the fishing boats headed for Lake Okeechobee and an electric plant that provided power for the town of LaBelle. The plant was shut down each night at 10 p.m., and the lights always flicked on and off for a few minutes before to remind folks who didn't have sense enough to go to bed that it was time to light their lamps.

From 1910 to 1913, the Caloosahatchee was dredged again, under the Federal Rivers and Harbors Act, and the channel deepened to accommodate larger boats. Ever the promoter, Goodno cast an eye to the future and decided it was time the town had another hotel. Besides, he had all that land to sell, and more boats would mean more people and more prospective buyers.

In 1910, he built the Everett Hotel, named for himself, a 22-room inn that boasted a large dining room and the only indoor toilets east of Fort Myers. There were two of them, in fact: one for "gents" and one for "ladies." Now there were accommodations more suitable for the gentry of Fort Myers, and many came upriver to spend the night or even several days. Edison, who had sometimes brought a friend named Henry Ford to stay at the Fort Thompson Park Hotel, became a frequent guest at the Everett Hotel, as did Ford and another industrialist, Harvey Firestone. Goodno also began attracting prospective real estate buyers to town, providing accommodations at his hotel as part of the attraction.

A glib and imaginative salesman, Goodno had answers to every question and hated to see a deal slip through his fingers. When one prospect asked him about the high water marks—about six feet up on trees along the river—Goodno solemnly informed him that was just an example of the livestock that could be raised in the area. The marks were "made by pigs who scratched themselves against the trees." As a result, many land transactions were closed at the Everett

Hotel with Yankees who later found out the real truth, frequently to their sorrow.

With all these visitors to impress, LaBelle found it had a problem of its own. There were no fence laws, and cattle and hogs roamed the streets at will. After several gardens were destroyed and a few mishaps when buggies were overturned by running over pigs snoozing in the streets, it was decided something must be done. In 1911, LaBelle was incorporated, and Dr. A. Mitchell became the first mayor. The primary reason for incorporation was to pass an ordinance making it illegal to allow livestock to roam loose in city limits. A city marshal was appointed, presumably with authority to run animals out of town. The next year, the ordinance was expanded to include dogs, for every family seemed to own at least a dozen or more, and a dog tag has been found dated 1913. Strangely, after the single law was passed, there seemed to be no further use for a city government, and the whole thing passed into oblivion until 1925 when the city was again incorporated and a charter was issued.

By 1913, work on the river had been completed, and steamboats could travel upriver, across Lake Okeechobee, and all the way to Fort Lauderdale. It was not until later that the route was changed to the St. Lucie canal. In 1914, Captain Hendry decided to return to LaBelle and commissioned B.F. Magill to build him a house on the river. Hendry supervised every stage of the construction and personally selected every board. It was said the lumber was so hard it could not be drilled. It was a handsome three-bedroom house with a cupola and a broad front porch, and Hendry was proud of it. But he never got to live in it. His health was bad, and he never made the move back. Captain Hendry died on February 12, 1917, at the age of 86. He had been a state senator, city commissioner for Fort Myers, county commissioner for Lee County, state representative for six terms, and mayor of Fort Myers. While some said that Goodno was the real developer of LaBelle, it was Hendry who had given most of his life in service to the area, and he well deserved to have the

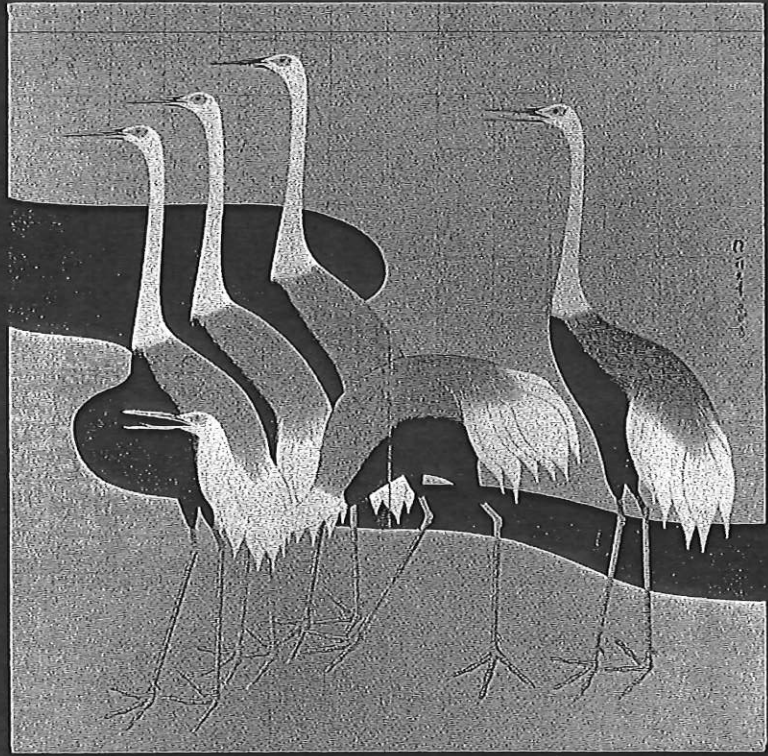
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## LABELLE

Continued

county named for him six years later.

It was not long before people began looking in that direction. Lee County had forgotten the hard times it had as part of Monroe County, and folks in Fort Myers became as interested as those in Key West. All the money was being spent on improvements in the city, and folks inland were as much as told to shift for themselves. One Lee County commissioner was quoted as saying, "Those people over there around Lake Okeechobee will have their own counties one day anyway. There is no sense in spending our tax money on them." This attitude did not go over well in LaBelle where folks were paying taxes and where there were holes in the streets deep enough to hide a cow. And the town needed a new school.

The movement to form a new county began, and in 1922, after several defeats in the legislature (Barron Collier was also trying to break his area away from Lee County), LaBelle businessmen organized a newspaper to promote the idea. It was called *The Caloosahatchee Current*. Paul L. Eddy, the school principal, was editor, and he did not forget the job he was hired to do. Almost every page of every issue had an article advocating the need for the new county.

In 1923, the legislature acted, and the bills were passed. In two days, Lee County lost more than two million acres of its territory as Collier and Hendry Counties were created, and the future seemed bright for both of them.

It was to be a good future, but there were no guarantees it would be an easy one. South Florida was still a frontier, and life could be pretty basic around LaBelle. It was and is cattle country, and cowboys are seldom drawing room dandies. Boots, spurs, and ten-gallon hats were the mode of dress, often topped off with six shooters and the long bull whips used in the brush rather than the ropes cowboys used out West. Cattle drives were long and hard, and so were the sprees at the end of them when the men got their pay. Tempers flared easily, and a sign posted in the Clewiston Inn announced, "Saturday night dances from 9-11 p.m. Fights from 11 p.m.-2 a.m." Both events were usually well



Becky is shown here in a shop in Bombay, India, where she is selecting cashmere shawls and tunics, all hand embroidered.

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tended.

The river remained an important part of life in LaBelle throughout the 1920s until roads made it easier to travel. But the river could be treacherous, and until the Army Corps of Engineers finally pulled its fangs for good, its rampages could be swift and violent. People in LaBelle learned to expect and live with annual flooding, and for weeks each year, they traveled the main street in boats or waded chest deep in water, often towing their children in washtubs behind them. Large yachts tied up to the front columns of the Everett Hotel, and people waded through the lobby to register. Townspeople shopped in stores where goods were stacked on the highest shelves or tied to the ceilings to keep them dry, and many a hopeful farmer who never did see a six-foot hog washed out of town towing his belongings on a raft, cursing E.E. Goodno with every step.

There were some benefits, however. When the water was high, watermelon farmers upriver could save themselves the trouble and expense of hauling the fruit to market. They simply cut the melons and rolled them into the river, where they floated downstream to the dock to be fished out and loaded on boats for Fort Myers. One farmer, anxious to get his crop in before the boat left, heaved his melons into the river so zealously that he flung himself in as well. The swift current whipped him downstream where astonished deckhands dragged him, whooping and wheezing, onto the dock and rained him out. He was told his melons could go as freight, but he would have to buy a ticket if he expected to ride along with them.

E.E. Goodno, still a promoter, had new schemes in mind and planned the development of Marco Island. By now a good friend of Henry Ford, he mortgaged all his property to the auto manufacturer to finance the venture. Perhaps it was too soon or Goodno was not the man for the job, but the project went bust. Ford foreclosed and took over the property, including land around the Fort Thompson and Everett hotels, but kept Goodno on as manager.

Ford was frequently in town, and as

*Continued on next page*



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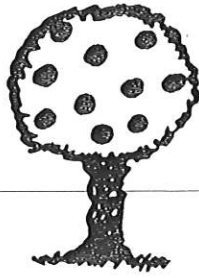


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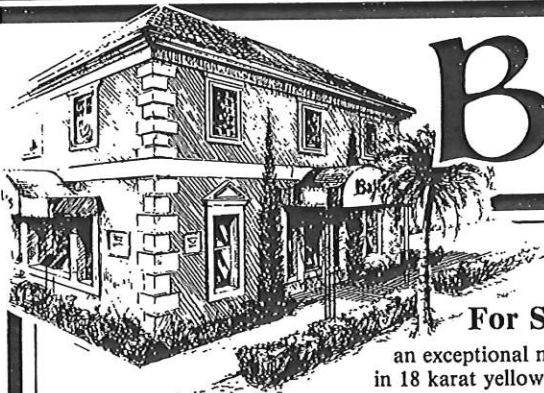
he usually brought guests with him, he rode from Fort Myers in a big Lincoln touring car. But he never trusted it. Each time, he insisted on being followed by a Model T—just in case that other thing broke down! He and Thomas Edison remained fast friends throughout their lives and frequently played cards far into the night at the Everett Hotel with their friend, Harvey Firestone, until Edison's hearing got so bad he could not continue.

At one time, Ford and Edison tried raising rubber trees near LaBelle. The trees thrived, but the costs of labor were too great, and the venture was abandoned. Edison, always the inventor, also experimented at making synthetic rubber from sunflowers, which he grew on Ford's land, but that didn't work either. For some reason, rubber magnate Firestone never joined in any of these projects.

Ford was regarded as a "good neighbor" in LaBelle and always enjoyed coming there and owning property. Things went well until he decided he wanted to inspect his land. He collected Goodno, and off they went—in a Model T—to look things over. Ford was surprised to see a lot of cows grazing and asked Goodno when they had gotten into cattle ranching. The manager admitted he had leased grazing rights to Joe B. Hendry, a relative of Captain Hendry. Ford, who had not seen a penny of the leasing payments, fired him on the spot.

Goodno was replaced by Ralph W. Kingston, the inventor of the carburetor used on the Model T, and Joe Hendry, who really did not care who his landlord was, continued to lease the land until Ford sold out to him in 1940. Hendry acquired more land and was eventually considered the largest cattle rancher in the state. He shipped hundreds of thousands of cattle to market bearing his famous "door key" brand. He also acquired the hotel and he and his family lived at Fort Thompson until it burned. The Everett Hotel was remodeled and renamed the Riverside Hotel, and continued to operate through the war until it also burned. (WWII)

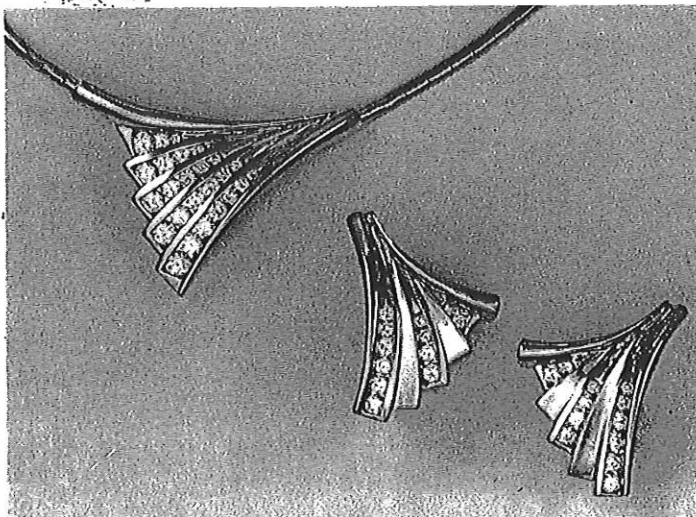
After Hendry's death, his property was divided, and his daughter, Lou, inherited a share. She and her husband, Barney Barron, sold more of the



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30,000 acres to the General Development Corporation for the Port LaBelle project in 1972, and the giant subdivision attracts scores of families to the LaBelle area each year. In a sense, through its acquisition of the Hendry property, the corporation is continuing the tradition begun by Captain A. Hendry almost a hundred years ago—and on the same land.

In 1966, the LaBelle Jaycees wanted to take on a project that would promote the community while also helping to preserve the history of the area. The idea of the Swamp Cabbage Festival was conceived. Swamp cabbage, as it was known to the early Florida "crackers," is the bud or "heart" of the Sabal palm, which is also the Florida state tree. The early settlers learned about the vegetable from the Indians, and it was a staple item in the diet of many people who often had little else to eat. Today, it is often sold in fancy restaurants and delicatessens as "heart of palm," but by whatever name it is called, properly prepared, it is delicious.

To obtain swamp cabbage, the tree is cut down and the fronds and outer part cut away, leaving the pure white bud. It can be cooked, pickled, or eaten raw. Floridians who are familiar with it usually cook it like cabbage, with a little pork or bacon, and it goes great with almost anything.

The Sabal palm is not a protected tree, growing by the millions all over the state. Experts swear that because of the way it reproduces itself, four or five new trees will grow back for every one cut down.

This year, the 18th Annual Swamp Cabbage Festival will be held the last full weekend in February (24, 25, and 26), and there will be rodeos, square dances, barbecues, Indian exhibits, and a country music show, as well as a big parade that attracts thousands of spectators, and, of course, plenty of swamp cabbage for everyone to try.

In addition to being "just plain fun," the festival is important because it commemorates the pioneer days of LaBelle, as well as the frontier spirit of Southwest Florida. While moving forward with progress, it is sometimes wise to slow down and take a look back at the past. Because chances are time will never again stand still. □



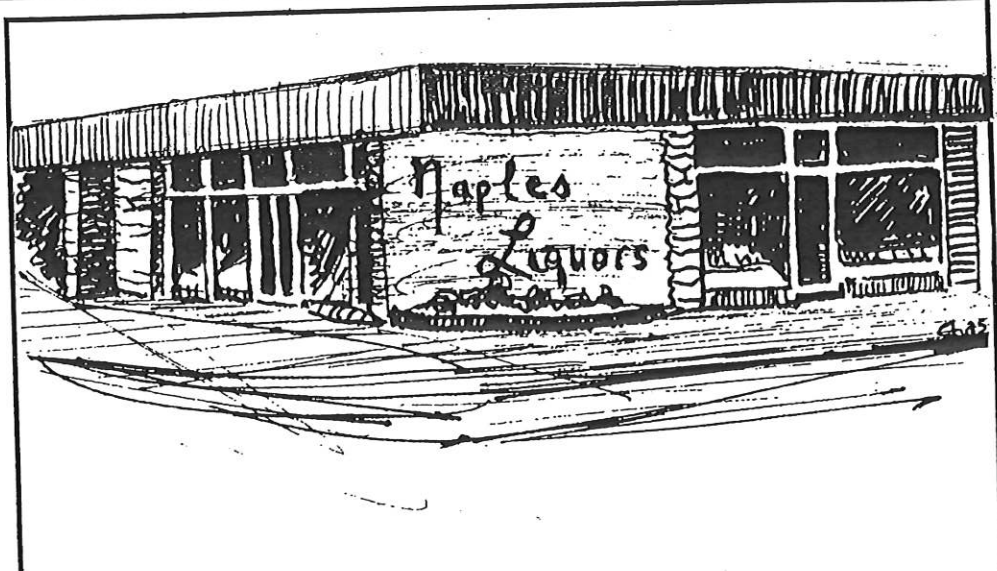
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