

## About our History



## HISTORY OF BELLE GLADE

( Article Courtesy of Belle Glade Chamber of Commerce )

The earliest known inhabitants of the [Belle Glade](#) area were the Calusa Indians. Their prehistoric habitation and burial mounds are located just west of [Belle Glade](#) in Chosen which is known by many as the "Indian Mound." These sites were excavated by the Smithsonian Institution during the early

1930's and later by archeologists from the Florida State Museum in Gainesville. The Seminole Indians generally associated with this part of Florida are descendants of tribes from Georgia and Alabama who moved further and further south as state and federal governments pushed for expansion and development of new lands. It was the Seminole who gave the lake region the name of "Okeechobee land," meaning Land of Big Water.

In 1912, construction began in an effort to control Lake Okeechobee's flood waters. In 1913, three major canals were completed: the Hillsboro Canal, the North New River Canal and the Miami Canal. Along with canal construction workers, the first real settlers began to arrive and establish communities where drainage was easier. Boat transportation was the only means available at the time. Small settlements popped up at the junction between the North New River Canal and the Hillsboro Canal, now referred to as South Bay. The Torry Island general store opened and soon after a post office was added inside where mail was brought from Ft. Lauderdale twice a week by boat. In 1917 only 12 families lived in South Bay. To the north of South Bay, [Belle Glade](#), which was originally called Hillsboro, and Pahokee, first known as East Beach and then Ridgeway Beach, began to become settled.

The neighboring communities continued to grow but it wasn't until the railroad arrived that any real permanent structures were built. After the closing of the Torry Island post office, [Belle Glade](#) applied and was permitted an official post office in 1921. Between the mail boat and the railroad, crowds began to come to the small developments.



Belle Glade Post Office c.1940

## **Belle Glade Post Office 1920's**

On September 16, 1928, a hurricane more devastating than any storm before came through and almost wiped Belle Glade off the map. The fierce winds pushed all the water from the northern part of the lake down south drenching the Glades. Water rose four to eight feet in just an hour. In some places, water reached as high as 25 feet above sea level. Houses were ripped off their foundation and torn apart by the

surging water and raging winds.

It is estimated that 2,500 people died as a result of the hurricane and a statue today commemorates those who perished.

The high death toll gained national attention, which eventually resulted in the construction of the Hoover Dike to control Lake Okeechobee flooding. The dike proved worthy surviving the severe storm of 1947, assuring people that the lake waters no longer posed a threat to residents nearby.

Following the hurricane of 1928, the true pioneers picked up and started over planting new crops. One pioneer in particular had an active role in the development of the Glades prior to and after the storm. Lawrence E. Will, along with four others, started the settlement of Okeelanta where he cleared sawgrass for farming. He became a licensed boat operator and helped provide transportation between the Glades settlements. He later settled in Belle Glade and opened an automobile dealership with a service and parts store. Will continued to play an instrumental role as a member of the town council and part-time fire chief for 30 years. He eventually became known as the Cracker Historian writing several books on the history of the Glades.

## **HER FUTURE**

### **HER SOIL IS HER FORTUNE...**

Farming lands were slowly extended and roads paved. Packinghouses were created by farmers as a way to easily and efficiently pack truckload after truckload into crates to be placed in railroad cars for shipment to the market. Market demands and production played a major role in changes in crops.

In the 1930s beans were the money crop, with excess beans being able to be frozen and canned. In 1945 amidst World War II, German prisoners of war (POWs) were sent to a camp east

of Belle Glade and next to the Everglades Experiment Station. The war prisoners worked in a bean-canning factory or in the sugar cane fields. Local farmers had to be persuaded to hire the men for just 80 cents a day.



Over time, farmers began to look at other crops for diversification and as a way to stabilize the economy. Celery and sweet corn became popular crops that turned into moneymakers. At the same time, beef cattle sales increased and in 1960 the Sugar Cane Growers Cooperative of Florida Inc. was formed to add stability to the Glades' agricultural industry.

With a history as rich as its soil, Belle Glade continues to be diverse and unique. Existing side by side through good water management, sport fishing and a thriving agricultural industry are each closely tied to

Lake Okeechobee.

The Belle Glade Marina Campground has become a home away from home for many visitors who want to try their luck catching one of the "Big O's" famous wide mouth bass. The campground offers 350 campsites, tent camping, boat ramps, picnic facilities and miniature golf. It is in walking distance to a challenging 18-hole public golf course.

Over the years and into today, the Glades maintains being a major hub of the Florida Heartland as one of the country's top suppliers of vegetables, fruits and sugar cane. Although green beans led the way at one time, today's most important crops are celery, lettuce, sweet corn, and sugar cane. The area is also well known for its ornamental cane fields and sod farms.

Today, Belle Glade maintains its agricultural and "small town" roots. The current population represents many diverse ethnic backgrounds and is just under 18,000 residents.

Belle Glade has five elementary schools, 1 middle school, 1 high school, and a private school as well as a campus of Palm Beach State College.

Belle Glade has a local theater, the Dolly Hand Cultural Arts Center, that has been providing the community with quality arts and entertainment since 1982 and a local museum, the Lawrence E. Will Museum of the Glades, with a collection of artifacts from the Seminoles, early pioneer settlements, agricultural tools and innovations, the early hurricanes of the 20th century, and local history records through the 1960s.

Belle Glade is not short on stars, little tidbits such as author Zora Neale Hurston being a resident of the Glade while writing her novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and the abundance of NFL talent that has come out of the "Muck City," including, Kelvin Benjamin, Jessie Hester, Santonio Holmes, Ray McDonald, Fred Taylor, Deonte Thompson, keep this rural lake town unique, diverse, and so inviting.

Belle Glade is the largest city within the 2,862,00-acre subtropical Everglades in the heartland of Florida. Originally known as Hillsboro, Belle Glade was incorporated in 1928 with a population of less than 500. The earliest known inhabitants of the Belle Glade area were the Calusa Indians. Their prehistoric habitation and burial mounds are located just west of Belle Glade in Chosen which is known by many as the "Indian Mound." These sites were excavated by the Smithsonian Institution during the early 1930's and later by archaeologists from the Florida State Museum in Gainesville. The Seminole Indians generally associated with this part of Florida are descendants of tribes from Georgia and Alabama who moved further and further south as white men pushed for expansion and development of new lands. It was the Seminole who gave the lake region the name of "Okeechobee land," meaning Land of Big Water.

Florida became a territory in 1821 and a state of the union in 1845. Although there was a boom in land sales in this area, many of the purchasers were disillusioned with drainage problems most of the land reverted back to the state. by 1912, construction had begun on three major canals for controlling Lake Okeechobee's floodwaters. Canals completed in 1913 were the Hillsboro, the North New River, and the Miami Canal.

One of the colorful versions concerning the naming of the community tells that a blackboard was placed in a hotel lobby where suggestions could be written on the board. The suggestion receiving the most votes was that it should be called Belle Glade since the settlement was "the belle of the Glades. "The Hillsboro Community Council was formed in 1919 and operated as the town's governing body until its incorporation on April 9, 1928.

This council was directly responsible for the location here of Everglades Experiment Station, a University of Florida agricultural research and experiment station. The center's name was recently changed to Agricultural Research and Education Center. On September 16, 1928, a storm more devastating than any other predecessor blew in from the coast and left monumental destruction. The force of the wind simply pushed all the water from the northern portion of the lake and sent it surging madly through the area, like tipping a giant saucer full of water onto the earth. Approximately 2,500 people died in the hurricane and a statue today commemorates those who perished.

The loss of life caused by the storm brought to national prominence the need for Lake Okeechobee flood control. Following President Herbert Hoover's visit in 1929, federal and state



governments agreed to undertake the construction of a levee. Today, the Hoover Dike includes approximately 85 miles of levee whose height varies from 34 feet upward. It is 22 feet above sea level and it is at least five feet above the highest point that the lake has ever reached.

Along with flood control, two important activities have contributed to Belle Glade's progress. Existing side by side through good water management, sport fishing and a thriving agricultural industry are each closely tied to Lake Okeechobee.

The Belle Glade Marina Campground has become a home away from home for many visitors who want to try their luck catching of the "Big O's" famous wide mouth bass. The campground offers 350 campsites, tent camping, boat ramps, picnic facilities and miniature golf. It is in walking distance to a challenging 18-hole public golf course.

From those earliest days to the present, agriculture has played an equally important part in the area's development. Although green beans led the way at one time, today's most important crops are celery, lettuce, sweet corn, and sugar cane. The area is well known for its ornamental and sod farms



## **OUR BEGINNINGS**

Florida became a territory in 1821 and a state of the union in 1845. As a result of the Indian Wars in the 1830's that forced the Seminoles into the swamp, land became of interest. The Florida Legislature began pushing for the drainage of land. This led to the Swamp Act of 1850 being passed, which granted roughly 20 million acres to the state for public use.

The northern lake areas began to thrive as the area became a prime cattle industry location. Land sales boomed and populations rose. However, the southern lake area, including the Glades, remained relatively quiet with a few inhabitants per square mile. The population mainly consisted of fishermen and hunters who relied on the land for survival.

Soon reports began to surface about the rich black soil that covered the wet lands in the southern end of Lake Okeechobee. This brought much attention to Hamilton Disston, a wealthy Pennsylvania industrialist who made a deal with the state to drain overflowed land along Lake Okeechobee for development. He purchased four million acres for a mere 25 cents per acre.

Disston was responsible for the placing of drainage canals all the way around the lake. He also helped establish a sugar plantation along with scientific studies into the growing of fruits and

vegetables. With the development of land increasing, land sales began to take off. It was said that many salesmen were selling “land by the gallon” because of all the water that still remained on the land. The salesmen pushed the land as being fertile and ready for instant cultivation.

Sales scandals, failing promotions and the untimely death of Disston in early 1896 put an end to land development and any further land drainage expected. As a result, most of the land reverted back to the state.



## **BELLE GLADE IS FORMED AND A HURRICANE ALMOST TAKES HER AWAY**

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the town's governing body until its incorporation on April 9, 1928.

The Council was responsible for the location of the Everglades Experiment Station, an agricultural research and experiment station established by the University of Florida. It was this very station that discovered the key ingredient that was missing from the muck soil to make it unbelievably fertile as previously thought and touted as. When copper was added to the 90 percent organic soil crops increased drastically. However, it was not until the devastating hurricane of 1928 that vegetable crops reached true prominence.

## **External Links:**

[City of Belle Glade on Wikipedia](#)

[City of Belle Glade on Facebook](#)

[City of Belle Glade on Youtube](#)

[City of Belle Glade on Instagram](#)