

Gasparilla Train Trestle Report

The discovery of phosphate rock in the Peace River and tarpon fishing is accredited for the development of the town of Boca Grande in 1885. In the beginning, phosphate was mined in the river and transported by small barges to Port Boca Grande. There it was loaded on to schooners and distributed worldwide.

A Boston company called American Agricultural Chemical Company (AACCo) owned much of the land in the Peace River valley being mined for phosphate. By 1904, the company had decided to build a rail line to expedite shipping to Boca Grande. In February of 1905, an AACCo official, an engineer from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, and dozens of laborers landed on the island and began surveying and construction of the railroad.

The Charlotte Harbor and Northern Railway (CH&N), a subsidiary of AACCo was completed on June 30, 1907. By 1911, AACCo had complete the construction of the 1,000-foot-long phosphate dock at the south end of the island.

The CH&N not only brought phosphate supplies to Gasparilla Island; it also brought wealthy people from the north. By 1910, Boca Grande Pass was already famous for its unequalled fishing. The AACCo saw the potential Gasparilla Island beyond the port and began to develop the village of Boca Grande.

During World War II, tons of ammunition and supplies were transported on the railways and loaded onto British and Allied ships. Underwater mines were assembled in Placida, loaded onto ships at port and used to defend against German U-boats patrolling the Gulf of Mexico.

Commercial activities at the port peaked in the 1960s and early 1970s. In 1969, the port ranked fourth in the State of Florida for the tonnage of materials handled.

Construction of the Boca Grande Causeway took place from 1952-1958 to replace a car and pedestrian ferry service. The railroad continued to bring winter visitors to the island until completion of the road causeway in 1958. Rail passenger service to Boca Grande ended on April 12, 1959. The railroad continued to run work trains to the south end until the phosphate port closed in 1979.

In 1982, Charlotte County received ownership of the trestles from CSX (formerly Seaboard Coast Line and Atlantic Coast Line) in an agreement. Overall, the length of the trestle from the mainland at Placida

to Gasparilla Island is approximately 10,600 feet. Soil from the bay bottom was excavated and used to protect the sections of the trestle structure, creating two narrow peninsulas at each end and two narrow spoil islands within Gasparilla Sound. About 4,500 feet of the structure is buried and protected by fill. Approximately 6,100 feet of trestle remains exposed to open water and the elements.

Placida Fishing Pier (north) and the Boca Grande Fishing Pier (south) were constructed by the County on top of the existing trestle in 1985. The lengths of the piers are 650 feet and 400 feet, respectively. The Intracoastal Waterway channel crosses the trestle near the end of the Placida Pier. The concrete bridge-tender's watchtower is still intact; however, the steel bascule span was removed in the mid-1980s and sold. About 4,000 feet south is a steel swing bridge span permanently open to allow boaters access through Gasparilla Pass.