

CAPE HAZE PIONEER TRAIL

On November 20, 1999, a ribbon was cut to officially open the first phase of the Cape Haze Pioneer Trail, located along the historical Charlotte Harbor & Northern Railroad easement parallel to County Road 771/Gasparilla Road on the Cape Haze peninsula in Charlotte County. The recreational trail was the brainchild of Ann Mercer, and the north trailhead is dedicated to Dr. Robert D. and Ann Mercer. About 8.5 miles in length today, the Cape Haze Pioneer Trail is managed by Charlotte County Community Services.

RAILROAD HISTORY

The Peace River Phosphate Company (owned by the American Agriculture Chemical Company of New York) built the Charlotte Harbor and Northern Railroad here in the early 1900s, primarily to ship phosphate ore from the mining areas inland at Mulberry through Arcadia to Gasparilla Island for further transport in deep-water ships from the Gulf of Mexico.

Beginning in 1905, the railroad company built structures to serve its line and to house its workers during the construction effort. Track was laid from Arcadia in a southwesterly direction to Gasparilla Island, and the long wooden railroad trestle at Gasparilla Pass became known as Placida Bridge. Railroad depots were built at Charlotte (now Murdock), Southland (now El Jobean), McCall, Placida and Boca Grande, and small communities sprouted up at these locations. The line was completed to Boca Grande on June 30, 1907, and then the rails were extended to South Boca Grande. By late 1908, a post office was established at South Boca Grande, and shipments of phosphate "rock" began from the loading dock in 1911.

At first the railroad thrived. Charlotte Harbor & Northern Railroad built two wholesale fish houses along its track at the north end of Gasparilla Island in 1914, followed by sixteen rental homes for Peacon Cove fishermen in 1916. Seaboard Air Line Railroad (held by Seaboard All Florida Railway Corp.) purchased the Charlotte Harbor & Northern Railroad in 1925, transporting vacationers and phosphate.

In 1946, the Charlotte County section continued to operate profitably, but times changed during the latter half of the 1900s and it fell into disrepair. The Charlotte Harbor & Northern Railroad was dubbed the "Cold, Hungry and Naked" by locals - perhaps due to the low wages that were paid to their workers or due to other signs of decline, or both. In 1967, Seaboard Air Line merged with Atlantic Coast Line, to become the Seaboard Coast Line. Rail service to Boca Grande was discontinued in 1971, and the track was abandoned in 1988.

MCCALL SECTION HOUSE

McCall was platted as a railroad town in the general area of today's Mercer Trailhead of the Cape Haze Pioneer Trail. It was named for C. B. McCall, who was a general freight and passenger agent at Boca Grande. The major building in McCall was a two-story railroad depot, which was called the Section Station. The McCall Section House was a residence constructed about 1905 by the Charlotte Harbor and Northern Railroad at mile marker 81. This one-story

structure had a brick chimney and several rooms to house the section foreman and his family.

In 1909, a small store was built in McCall by John Densten, and later that year he was made postmaster. Early settlers built a one-room school and two churches of different denominations. Along with a turpentine camp and a sawmill, McCall was a flourishing little railroad town in the 1920's. Wild hogs caught in nearby woods and watermelons grown on local farms were shipped from the McCall depot. The cattle trail through McCall ended at Cattle Dock Point, located just a short distance away along the Myakka River. Both the railroad and the cattle trail were important to commerce on the Cape Haze peninsula during the early 20th century.

In 1928, McCall became a non-stop station. Around the same time, cattleman Arthur "A.C." Frizzell started buying properties surrounding the railroad in McCall. Between 1928 and 1934, Frizzell demolished most of the homes. The McCall Section House was the last remaining structure associated with the railroad in McCall, until it burned down in 2004. Now, the intersection at County Road 771 and State Road 776 is the only visible remnant of McCall to passersby.

PLACIDA BUNK HOUSE

Placida has roots as a fishing camp in the 1870s, and additional settlers came to the community with the arrival of the Charlotte Harbor and Northern Railroad. Postal service was extended to Placida in 1907, although service was erratic. A bunk house for railroad section workers was constructed about the same year, near the mouth of Coral Creek, and it is known today as the Placida Bunk House. The 2-story wood frame Florida Vernacular structure was constructed of local materials. Decay-resistant pine heartwood kept it standing through decades of weather and neglect. A round wooden water cistern stood next to it for many years. The Placida Bunk House also served as the first local school, a post office, an early church and a residence for several local families over time. Members of the Futch, Goff and Bass families have shared memories about everyday life there during several eras of the 1900s.

In 2005, the Placida Bunk House was acquired by Charlotte County. Relocated twice for its protection during the Coral Creek Bridge realignment project, it now sits at the Mercer Trailhead of the Cape Haze Pioneer Trail in McCall, at a location consistent with its original placement near the railroad tracks in Placida. A Preservation Plan was completed in 2008 to help Charlotte County preserve and protect it as an important local landmark.

Today, the historic Placida Bunk House is the only structure left in Charlotte County associated with the Charlotte Harbor & Northern Railroad. Both the bunk house and the railroad have been recorded in the Florida Master Site File for historical resources. Future plans are to rehabilitate the Placida Bunk House for use as a trailside stop and an interpretive center for public exhibits and heritage education programs, where visitors and residents can learn about our unique 20th century history and experience a way of life that no longer exists in Florida.

- Charlotte County Historical Center, 2012

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CAPE HAZE PIONEER TRAIL

Along a Circa 1907 Railway

