Okeechobee County's Early Communities

By Judge William Hendry

Okeechobee County was created by legislative act in 1917, which, in turn, was ratified by voters in a special election conducted on August 7, 1917, in only those parts of Osceola, Palm Beach and St. Lucie counties described in the legislative act. Within the boundary of the new county were the City of Okeechobee, as the county seat, and several unincorporated hamlets or villages, some dating back to the Civil War years of the 1860s.

Basinger and Fort Drum are the only unincorporated communities still active as such. Fort Drum has a cemetery and Basinger has a cemetery and a community center. Each formerly had a post office and a two-room schoolhouse, and both have been polling places for many years. The smaller former communities may have had one or more of these features to identify it as a community: a one-room rural school, a post office, a railroad station, a polling place, or a store or industry. Information about these communities is very limited, and photos are almost nonexistent. The location of each is shown on the map, right.

Osowaw
Osowaw is said to mean “bird” in the Seminole language. Osowaw began as a village called Midway, settled in the late 1800s by some of the Swain, McLaughlin, Hare, Padgett and other families. Midway was located between Fort Drum and Olney in Brevard County at that time. The community was known to have had a one-room school in 1894. Osowaw began as a station on the Kissimmee Valley Branch of the Florida East Coast Railroad in 1914 and bypassed Midway by a mile or so to the east. The area became part of St. Lucie County in 1905, and by 1916 a plat was filed, developing real estate on each side of the railroad called “Osowaw.” This area became Okeechobee County in August 1917, and by 1922 there were only seven lots of this subdivision listed on the county tax roll. By 1919, the Midway school became Osowaw school. The post office, established in 1917, was discontinued in August 1922. In 1936, the school was consolidated with the Fort Drum school, and the railroad was gone by 1946.

Greeley
Greeley was a town site of the Southern Colonization Company, with a station on the South Florida & Gulf Railroad about five miles north of Basinger. There is no record of a post office there, but the school board of Osceola County authorized a one-room rural school there in 1911. A room from Basinger School #28, also in Osceola County at that time, was removed and relocated to Greeley. Neither the school nor the railroad was in operation when the area became part of Okeechobee County in August 1917. The rails were removed, the roadbed became the Peavine Trail, and the town site is now pasture.

Sherman
The community of Sherman was located about four miles southeast of the City of Okeechobee near State Road 710 (formerly the “Old Jupiter Trail”). The community began as “Oak Grove” in 1914 when a school and a church were built there. A deed for the school property was never obtained by the school board of St. Lucie County, so the exact location is not known. The 1916 enrollment was reported to be 37 pupils. In 1924, Walter C. Sherman, president of the St. Andrews Bay Lumber Co., purchased more than 1,000 acres and constructed and operated a large lumber mill there. According to the Miami Herald, April 30, 1926, the mill employed over 1,000 men and produced 200,000 board feet of lumber per day. A post office was established in 1925 with F.H. Baggott as postmaster. Mr. Baggott was bookkeeper for the mill and served as a county commissioner from 1927 to 1933 and school superintendent from 1933 to 1937. From 1926 to 1932, the polling place at Sherman was the barber shop. Several subdivision plats were filed and many homes constructed, as well as a hotel and boardinghouses, making Sherman the largest unincorporated community in the county. The mill was badly damaged by the 1928 hurricane, but the school was destroyed, as well as the community house and more than 50 homes. By 1937, the mill had closed as well as the post office, and the community of Sherman just faded away. In 1938, over 1,000 acres of the mill property was sold to Wesley Harvey, a cattleman, and most of the property is pasture today.
Olney

The village of Olney was located on U.S. 441 about a mile south of the Okeechobee-Osceola County line and about eight miles northwest of Fort Drum. It has been written that James Tippen Padgett, who served as a lieutenant in the Ninth Regiment Florida Infantry, founded the community of Olney soon after the Civil War and received a homestead patent in 1891 for 160 acres. Mr. Padgett operated a general store and served as postmaster. The post office was established in 1895 and was discontinued in 1915.

According to Brevard County School Board records, a rural, one-room school was listed there as #15, Drum Creek, and later renamed Orangedale. By 1905, Olney became part of St. Lucie County and the school, due to low attendance, was consolidated with the Midway school in 1913. The Midway community became known as Osowaw in 1914.

As of 2017, there are few homes and a communication tower in the former village of Olney, but the store and service station there have been closed many years.

Opal

According to historian Albert DeVane of Lake Placid, “Opal” was a Seminole word meaning owl. The community of Opal was located about five miles northeast of the City of Okeechobee. Soon after 1900, H.H. Hancock, Peter Raulerson, L.M. Raulerson and others established seedling orange and grapefruit groves in the area that became Opal in 1914 when the Kissimmee Valley Branch of the Florida East Coast Railroad arrived and a station and water tank were constructed. There were also several patches of sugarcane and one or more syrup mills in this area. By 1923, a post office was established, but was discontinued by the end of 1926. For a brief time, a number of families working for the McNeill turpentine company still lived in the area, and their children attended the colored school at the logging camp. During the 1940s, Opal was a popular hiking and camping area enjoyed by the Okeechobee Boy Scouts troop. The railroad was discontinued by 1946, and the area now is devoted to cattle and citrus.

Hilolo

According to DeVane of Lake Placid, “hilolo” was a Seminole word meaning white ibis. In 1914, Hilolo began as a station on the Kissimmee Valley Branch of the Florida East Coast Railroad, with terminus at Okeechobee. Hilolo was located about five miles south of Fort Drum. In the 1920s, a logging camp was established there by the lumber mill at Sherman. As a result of this population increase, a post office was established there in July 1926. In April 1928, the school board agreed to establish a rural school there; patrons of the community were to furnish a one-room schoolhouse and the school board to provide the teacher. The 1928-29 school term enrolled 12 girls and seven boys. The board of county commissioners designated a voting precinct there in 1930, with voting at the schoolhouse. The 1930 U.S. Census recorded about 170 persons at Hilolo, but there is no record of the school after 1931. The Hilolo post office was discontinued in January 1931 and the railroad was discontinued by 1946, leaving Hilolo as a road junction serving some ranches and citrus groves.

Utopia

Clifford Joseph Clements, born 1870, established Utopia in Dade County in 1897. He built a home, operated a general store, taught school and became postmaster there. Utopia and a small adjoining area on Lake Okeechobee extending west to the Kissimmee River became part of Palm Beach County in 1909. In 1912, the school board authorized the first school building, ordering the materials from Fort Myers, which were delivered to Utopia by boat across Lake Okeechobee. The 1915 city directory of West Palm Beach, which included the Village of Utopia, Precinct No. 8, listed 14 families there, including Drawdy, Hulsey, Rudd and Carlisle Thomas.

The Palm Beach County Commission on July 3, 1917, adopted a resolution calling for a special election on August 7, 1917, to determine whether the voters of Utopia and adjoining area were to become part of Okeechobee County. The polling place was designated as Clements Store at Utopia, and the election officials were Howard Crouch, Harmon Jordan, J.F. Douglas and C.J. Clements.

The post office, established in 1908, was discontinued in December 1921 and the school closed in 1925. Utopia is now a highway intersection connecting U.S. 441 and SR 710 by County Road 15B, and the primary industry of the area appears to be mobile home parks.