



One Town's Origins: The History of Kissimmee

Before European settlers set foot in Florida, the Kissimmee Valley region of Central Florida was inhabited by a Native American tribe called the Jororo. The name Kissimmee can be traced back to the language of the Jororo people and means "long water." There were approximately 350,000 people living in Florida when the Spanish arrived in 1513. In the centuries to follow, war, disease, oppression, and slavery reduced the Native Floridian population to virtually nothing.

At that time, Central Florida's terrain was very different from the drained, arable pastures and farmlands that dot the region today. Before the drainage project of the late-19th century, Central Florida was swampland, scattered with pinewood and palmetto flat land prairies. The headwaters of the Florida Everglades expanded as far north as Lake Tohopekaliga. It was here that the Creeks and other Native peoples of the South-Central United States fled in the mid- to late-18th century. The Seminole Indians, a conglomeration of Native American peoples and escaped slaves, settled in the Kissimmee River Valley and in the swamplands of Central and South Florida because of their tactically defensible positions.

Before the Civil War (1861–1865), few settlers had moved further south than what is today, Orlando. Cattlemen and their families were making their way in the scrublands and swamps of Central Florida, but few others ventured to the area. It wasn't until after the Civil War that the area began to see an uptick in its European-descended population. Veterans from both the Union and Confederate armies and fortune seekers from as far north as Canada began to pour into Central Florida to try to tame the wilds of the land. The pinewood scrublands would soon be transformed by the industry of man. The manufacture of turpentine became a large operation in Central Florida and later in the mid-1880s, one man would change the landscape of the Kissimmee River Valley forever.

Hamilton Disston purchased 4 million acres of land from the State of Florida in 1881 for 25 cents an acre. Soon after, he began to dredge a canal, widen the waterways between Lake Tohopekaliga and Lake Okeechobee, and drain the swamplands of the Kissimmee River Valley. Disston set up the headquarters for his operations in a small lakefront pioneer settlement called Allendale. By 1884, Allendale had been incorporated and renamed as Kissimmee City. Its time as a boomtown was just beginning. Kissimmee became a hub of commerce and trade.

The town became an early port for steamboats plying the Kissimmee River from Lake Tohopekaliga to Okeechobee. Later in 1882, trains travelling from Sanford were connected to Kissimmee, and by 1885, Kissimmee was connected to Tampa on the Gulf Coast. At this time the largest hotel south of Jacksonville, the Tropical (later renamed the Kissimmee) Hotel, was built on the shores of East Lake Tohopekaliga and hosted many celebrities of the day including President Chester Arthur. The rise of the railroad spelled a slow death for the steamboat and shifted cargo and passenger transport away from the wharves; by 1920, nearly all of the steamboats had disappeared from the Kissimmee River.

In 1887, three short years after Kissimmee City incorporated, Osceola County was created from the southern part of Orange and western portion of Brevard Counties, and Kissimmee became the county seat. At the time, the County was home to 815 residents and by 1890, that number had tripled to

2,445. Kissimmee was bustling with life, and Broadway was home to a number of establishments including: a one room school house, the First United Methodist Church, and W.B. Makinson's Hardware. The courthouse, built in 1890, has the distinction of being the oldest in the State with continued use from its construction. That same year, electricity was brought to Kissimmee with initial rates costing three cents per hour, or \$7.50 per month.

The first Chamber of Commerce was elected in 1924 and ten years later, the Cattleman's Association was established. A second land boom occurred shortly after the First World War (1914–1918) and continued until the Great Depression settled over the Country in 1929. At this time, the community pulled together, and neighbors helped neighbors to survive the harsh times.

In 1943, the Monument of States, located on Monument Ave was completed by Dr. Charles W. Bressler-Pettis and J.C. Fisher. Dr Bressler-Pettis hoped that the monument would become an inspiration for American solidarity during the dark days of the Second World War. At the same time, the United States Air Force moved into Kissimmee and Central Florida, establishing air bases and training fields for pilots; like others in the area, this is why Kissimmee Gateway Airport was established. To raise funds for the War effort, the first Silver Spurs Rodeo was held on July 4, 1944, admission was the purchase of one war bond.

After the war, life began to return to normal in Kissimmee, with the city's focus shifting back to tourism as a means of producing capital. By the early 1950s, Kissimmee's lakes and rivers were teeming with tourists and the rise of the automobile brought an influx of new residents and visitors alike. In 1971, the Walt Disney Company opened their second theme park just outside of Kissimmee. The opening of Walt Disney World sparked a period of unprecedented growth for Kissimmee. Over the next decade, the city would grow from 1,120 residents to 15,490 (173% increase). By 1990, 30,050 people called Kissimmee home. In 2018, 71,000 people live in Kissimmee, FL.

Growing from its Native American then cattle roots, through the trials and tribulations of living on the edge of civilization, Kissimmee has become one of the major tourist capitals of the World.

Sources

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