

Published Thursday, October 13, 2005

GHOST TOWN

Late 1800s 'Big Freeze' Ends Lake County Community's Brief Existence

By LINDA CHARLTON
The REPORTER

GROVELAND

The first big land boom of Lake County went bust in a flurry of split trees and wilted plants otherwise known as the "Big Freeze" of 1894-95.

While the effects of the freeze were felt all over the county (and the state), nowhere was the effect more dramatic than in the little town known as Villa City.

By the end of 1895, as a direct result of the freeze, there was no Villa City.

Villa City is the featured town in a new Ghost Town exhibit in Tavares at the Lake County Historical Museum, which is on the first floor of the historic courthouse. The exhibit also charts the roughly 150 other ghost towns in the county, documents a series of possibly spooky happenings in the area, and displays part of local historian Clayton Bishop's vast collection of post cards. In this case, the 33 post cards all are postmarked from towns that no longer exist, towns such as Albert, Monte Vista, South Clermont, Mohawk and, of course, Villa City.

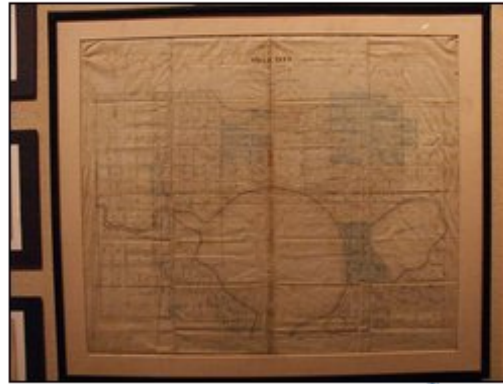
Villa City was founded by George T. King, a sales executive from the Colgate Co. He knew Lake County because it was part of his sales territory. As King's great-grandson, Howard King of Sanford, says, "When he started getting rheumatism, he started looking around for a place to live."

In June 1884, King bought land in an area north of present-day Groveland, roughly between Lake Morgan and Lake Emma. He platted a town, selling lots for homes in the town and acreage for groves outside the town.

By 1895, the town had a church, a photographic studio, a post office, a dispensary (drug store), 35 houses and a lumber mill.

The residents of Villa City, for the most part, were northerners with money, according to Howard King. For most of them, their properties were investments first, home sites second. They expected to make a lot of money in citrus, in part, because there was no such thing as a hard freeze in Lake County.

"That's what they were told up north," King says.



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The plat map for Villa City.

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King also says that his great-granddad had plans to mine the high-quality kaolin that was in the bed of the Palatlahaha River, and the red ocher that was on its shores. None of that happened. The freeze got in the way.

In 1894, Christmas was warm. On Dec. 29, there was a freeze.

There was no major damage from that freeze, which was followed by another warm spell. When the second freeze came on the evening of Feb. 7 (the museum exhibit lists a temperature of 14 degrees) trees in the area were full of sap and prepped for spring.

The day after the freak cold snap, temperatures rose to the 80s and many trees literally burst open. Soon after, a lot of settlers simply left.

Some Florida Department of Agriculture records say it took 15 years for citrus production in the state to once again reach the pre-freeze level of five million boxes per year.

According to Howard King, a lot of property reverted to the state because of unpaid taxes. Some of the buildings at Villa City were dismantled by residents. They salvaged the wood. They salvaged the glass. King says that some of the buildings were used for years by local hunters. The last house standing of the original Villa City was the Archibald Gano house, torn down in 1968.

King says that Gano was a loner, whose Villa City home was the only home in the area before George King moved down. Gano had a lumber mill and milled wood for the developing town, but he didn't like having all those new settlers moving in, so he moved to the outskirts of Clermont. After Villa City became a ghost town, he moved back there and had his house moved down by his lumber mill on the Palatlahaha. The mill closed in the 1920s.

King says even today there are old-growth logs in the river near the old mill. Gano would sink the logs to protect them from termites, then float them as needed.

Speaking of the Villa City area today, King says its about as populated as it was 120 years ago.

While Villa City is the best known of the South Lake ghost towns, it is certainly not the only one. To name just a few:

- ◆ Albert was on the northwest shore of Lake Louisa.
- ◆ South Clermont was slightly to the west of Albert.
- ◆ Monte Vista was on the southwest shore of Lake Minnehaha, and Orange Mountain and Monterrey were in the same general area.
- ◆ Empire, south of Groveland, is known at this point only for the Empire Primitive Baptist Church. Constituted in 1871, it is the oldest church in South Lake.
- ◆ The intersection at State Road 33 and County Road 561 (south of Clermont) has been known by two different names: Klaffer's Corner and Hatcher's Corner.

Linda Charlton is a feature writer. She can be reached at The Reporter office at 863-421-5577.