

## BIG PINE KEY HISTORY BY GEORGE BORN

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Let's take a look at the history — and its tangible remains — on Big Pine Key. In the earliest days, the land was not spoken for, and a few bold souls — squatters, really — moved in. For example, two families called Big Pine home in 1843. By 1870, the population was reduced to only one person: George Wilson, a white man, who worked burning charcoal, an important early trade in the Lower Keys.

The first survey of land on Big Pine took place in 1873, paving the way for secure land ownership. William Wood became the first official property owner on Big Pine in 1882, when he bought 31 acres for \$1.25 per acre — a parcel now in the Key Deer Refuge. Other buyers joined him in the next few decades.

Big changes came to Big Pine during the building of the Overseas Railway from 1905 to 1912. Hundreds of workers descended on the area, living in crude quarters, eating at a common mess hall and erecting a large water tank. At that time, one late, great landmark, the Big Pine Inn, was already standing, accommodating railway personnel. A big hurricane in 1909 set back but did not stop construction. Interestingly, it was around this time that metal screens became common — a savior to all who were battling swarms of mosquitoes. By 1912, the railway was complete to Key West.

While the Big Pine Inn is lost — the victim of a fire in 1978 — a few vestiges of the railroad era still exist. The Spanish Harbor Railway Bridge consists of 77 concrete-arch spans crossing 3,311 feet to West Summerland Key. Closed to vehicular traffic in 1982, it is now used in part as a fishing pier.

Additionally, the ruins of an old mess hall used by railway workers stand on the eastern shore of Big Pine, in the woods off Warner Street, facing the water. Meanwhile, the home of a woman who used to cook for the railway workers — Maggie Atwell — is now in Key West, forming a part of the Flagler Historeum on Caroline Street. And a railway Mile Marker on the oceanside of the highway on Big Pine notes the 30 miles to Key West and the 492 miles to Jacksonville.

Other means of transport opened up in the next few years: The county approved a bond issue in 1917 to build a single-lane dirt road on Big Pine. Ferry service to and from No Name Key began five years later. By 1928, workers completed the first Overseas Highway, utilizing a series of wooden bridges linking the Lower Keys to Key West.

A new local industry came to Big Pine in 1923. Hydenoil built a shark processing plant on the eastern shore of the island. A mostly African-American workforce captured sharks in nearby waters for oil, skin and other products.

The 1920s also saw a new interest in real estate. Speculators platted out new subdivisions on Big Pine, although they built nothing. But by 1926, all the land that would be sold on Big Pine was sold to the island's first generation of property owners.

The following decade brought the Great Depression and subsequent ills. The Hydenoil plant closed in 1931, while the Labor Day hurricane of 1935 destroyed the railroad.

The No Name Pub, a ramshackle frame-vernacular building on North Watson Boulevard, reportedly dates from this era. Although it seems out of the way now, the main road went right by its front door, when motorists took the ferry at nearby No Name Key.

Similarly, the Palm Villa subdivision, just south of Watson Boulevard, grew near the old highway. A few one-story vernacular houses survive: 30457 Palm Dr., a frame structure with a low-pitch gable roof; 30423 Oleander Blvd., a masonry building with a flat roof; and 30434 and 30458 Oleander Blvd., two more frame houses with gable roofs.

By 1938, workers completed the new Overseas Highway, utilizing the former railroad bridges and right-of-way. As a result, the ferry from No Name Key ceased operations, and traffic on Big Pine shifted to the new road — U.S. 1.

During World War II, the Navy completed the pipeline to bring fresh water to the Keys. The water metering station on the Gulfside of the highway at Mile Marker 30 reflects this effort. It is a concrete, one-story, Moderne-style rectangular structure, utilizing glass block.

The post-war era saw a marked increase in development on Big Pine. Bradley Real Estate began marketing property on the island around 1950. The Lower Keys Property Owners Association was organized in 1951, constructing a building on Bogie Road. And the Sands subdivision saw new growth, too: A surviving one-story, frame-vernacular house with a low-pitch gable roof still stands at 31336 Avenue E.

A huge change took place on Big Pine in 1953, when City Electric brought power lines to the island. At the time, there were 53 customers on Big Pine — and real estate values increased dramatically.

At the same time, the character of the landscape was changing, and some of Big Pine's earliest inhabitants — the Key deer — were feeling the pinch. By 1947, fewer than 50 deer remained due to hunting and loss of habitat. In response to this, the Key Deer Refuge began on rented land in 1954. Three years later, Congress established a permanent national wildlife refuge, which also helped to preserve some of the historically open and undeveloped quality of the island.

Today, we can appreciate both change and continuity on Big Pine, from the rough squatter days of the 19th century to the quiet subdivisions of today.

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