

Venice-Nokomis rode high in the '20s



Real History
Jeff Lahard
Sarasota Herald-Tribune
USA TODAY NETWORK

The territory that formed the county of Sarasota had within it several small villages each striving to be self-sustaining: Bee Ridge, Fruitville, Sarasota Heights, Vamo, Englewood, Nokomis, Venice, among them.

While most of these have been absorbed into Sarasota long ago and are either forgotten altogether or known today mostly as roads — Bee Ridge Road, Fruitville Road, Vamo Road — a few of the others were caught up in the boom and rode the crest while it lasted.

Dr. Fred Albee, an internationally renowned bone surgeon, fell in love with the area around Nokomis and Venice after a visit in 1917. The paper reported that he was so impressed with the beauty there that he decided to build his winter home, Palm Point, a seven-acre estate in Nokomis.

In March of 1917, Albee and his friend, Ellis W. Nash, platted the Nokomis Subdivision near Dona Bay and Roberts Bay, adjacent to the Seaboard Air Line tracks. His plans for buying more acreage to develop were put on hold when America entered World War I in 1917. He was commissioned a colonel and treated wounded soldiers in France for the duration of the war.

After he returned, he began buying up large parcels of acreage and soon owned most of the land in Nokomis and Venice. In 1921 he hired architect Thomas Reed Martin to design the Pollyanna Inn at Dona Bay and re-platted the subdivision, adding many new lots.

Albee, considered the "Father of Nokomis," advertised his development as the White City or the Pearl City as his plans called for all of the homes there to be of white stucco.

As the boom took hold, he sold his Venice property to the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers, a union based in Cleveland which sought to increase the money in their coffers by investing in Florida's burgeoning real estate market. At the time, it seemed a sure bet.

At the peak of the boom Venice and Nokomis were hyphenated, Venice-Nokomis, and advertised by the Roger Rice Company as "The Magic White City on The Gulf."

Rice's ads underscored the frenetic nature of '20s era real estate. "HOW DOES YOUR BRAIN WORK?" it began and went on to inform who became rich here: "The way you answer that important question will indicate whether you will succeed in Florida or whether you will fail. Is your brain sluggish or snappy? A quick brain cannot help but win. Do you think in split seconds, or do you lose opportunities by clocking your decisions by the day. You've got to think, and quickly in these days in Florida."

As an example of ever soaring profits made by those with "snappy brains," This Week In Sarasota reported on March 4, 1926: "In 1913 Mrs. Elizabeth Schutt purchased the mainland peninsula north of Casey's pass for \$1,500. Last year Mr. Roe sold a portion of it to Louis Polakow for the sum of \$15,000. He resold it to Mrs. Edith L. Just for a consideration of \$80,000 and Mrs. Just held title to it about one week when it was sold to the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers for \$150,000."

The E. Beeler Realty Company sold Enchanted Isles, "Florida's Most Beautiful Home sites," in Nokomis. A full page advertisement, complete with a pen and ink drawing of a winged fairy standing near palm trees, spreading flowers with one hand and waving a wand over Enchanted Isles with the other.

The text explained Nokomis' potential: "The City of Nokomis is at this time the only city on the West Coast that can truthfully advertise the fact that it is located on the Gulf shores and on a beach second to none, with the finest bathing pavilion that has ever been completed on the West Coast." With home sites fronting Roberts Bay and Donna Bay, the Beeler Realty Company offered to pay the transportation costs from anywhere in the United States for those who purchased a lot there.

Organized in 1863, the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers was a formidable organization which sponsored large corporate undertakings in its home base of Cleveland and which owned the Equitable building in New York, then the largest office building in the world. They had grand plans for Venice.

Florida Gov. John W. Martin greeted the Brotherhood telling them, "It is particularly pleasing to me to bid the officers and personnel of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers, that stalwart, brave, big-minded group of men welcome to the State of Florida."

The Times-Union of Jacksonville re-



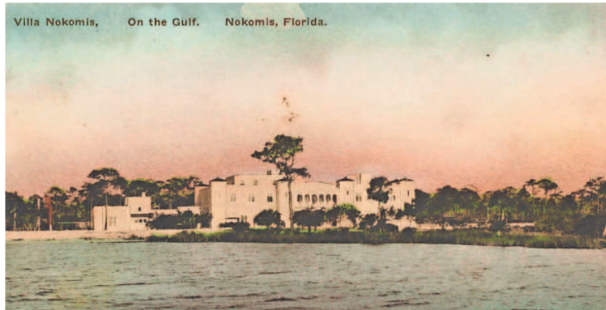
Hotel Venice at the peak of the real estate boom. COURTESY PHOTOS



Dr. Fred Albee internationally famous bone surgeon, considered the Father of Nokomis.



Venice Avenue, ca. 1926



Villa Nokomis, On the Gulf. Nokomis, Florida.

Pollyanna Inn designed for Dr. Albee by prolific architect Thomas Reed Martin.

ported they purchased 27,000 acres and called the transaction "undoubtedly freighted with potentialities as great as have attended any one transaction ever made in the state of Florida."

The purchase price was reportedly \$3,250,000 with \$5,000,000 more slated for development. It was prophesied that 50,000 rail men with their families would move there as they retired.

John Nolen & Associates of Cambridge, Mass. one of the country's most respected city planners, was commissioned to lay out the community, with Prentiss French, a noted landscape architect, hired on to beautify the area. An early promotional booklet promised that as Prentiss, a graduate of the Harvard School of Landscape Architecture had just returned from three months study of landscaping in Mediterranean countries, "The best that Europe offers in the way of attractive settings for homes will thus be available to residents at Venice."

Nolen said of the project, "Your city here marks the beginning of a new day in city planning, not only for Florida, but for all the country." Heavily promoted within the Brotherhood's organization and to the public through brochures, pamphlets, and newspaper advertisements.

In 1926, James E. Alden wrote a booklet entitled, "A New Life of Independence" which extolled the good life that waited in Venice-Nokomis. An illustration shows a young couple, the woman frowning down at the list of bills her husband has to contend with, presumably in their northern home, and notes, "The woman is thrifty, but expenses are high where they live. They must spend money just to keep their places in local social affairs. And this sort of outlay doesn't bring anything at the end of the year. In this book is described a new life of independence for people such as

these — people with the energy and keenness to take advantage of the opportunity at Venice."

As per Nolen's plan, within just two years Venice filled with three grand hotels (Hotel Venice, Hotel Parkview and Hotel San Marco), apartments, a bank, restaurants, parks, lovely homes and buildings which had to be approved by the architectural firm of Walker and Gillette, farms, paved streets, beaches, a golf course, civic center, railway station, the Albee Sanitarium, and every other amenity of a successful city and was in-

corporated in 1926.

The end came swiftly, leaving behind a nearly bankrupt Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and what amounted to a ghost town, filled with everything except people.

It was the Brotherhood's sad fate to become involved in Florida real estate at the tail end of the boom. Their hard work and high hopes were all for naught for them, but Nolen's beautifully designed city would be enjoyed by later generations.

SEAFOOD EATERY IN SOUTHSIDE VILLAGE

WHETHER YOU'RE COMING OR GOING - EAT LOCAL AND FRESH

REEF CAKES

Open Tuesday - Friday 11am to 9pm
Saturday 3 to 9pm
Closed Sundays & Mondays

1812 S. Osprey Ave. Sarasota, FL 34239
941-444-7968
[ORDER ONLINE - ReefCakes.com](https://www.ReefCakes.com)