

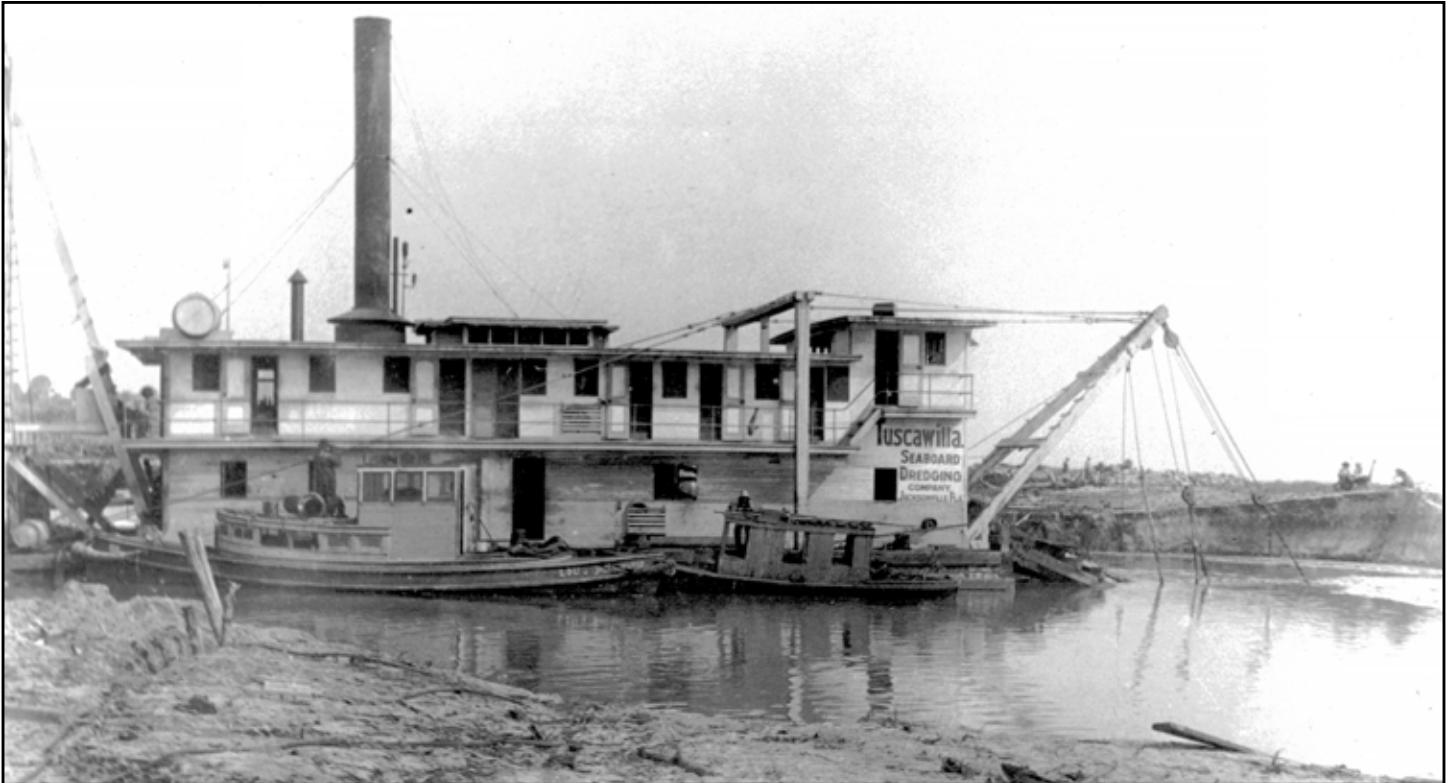


The Historical Quarterly

of The St. Lucie Historical Society, Inc.

Vol. 39 No. 2

Spring 2021



The dredge vessel Tuskawilla at work on the Fort Pierce Inlet, early in 1921.

New Fort Pierce Inlet brought a century of progress to local communities

by Jean Ellen Wilson

Can you imagine a landlocked City of Fort Pierce? In 1910 the Sunrise City found itself without a path to the sea.

An ingress to the “Ays River” was shown on Spanish maps in the 1500s. For the next 300 years, it was the most dependable entry to the Indian River south of Mosquito Inlet at what is now New Smyrna. By 1845, the maps were calling the natural entrance to the river the Indian River Inlet. It was opposite the village of Old St. Lucie.

Schooners used it to supply U.S. troops during the Seminole Wars. During the Civil War, Union gunboats patrolled off its mouth bent on stopping Confederate blockade runners.

After the Civil War, the settlement at Old St. Lucie and the few houses that would become the town of Fort Pierce began to grow with the arrival of landowners of the Deep South ruined by the war and Yankees attracted by the possibilities on this southern frontier.

INSIDE: A grand celebration, a daring parachute jump, glimpses of early 1920s life, plus inlet history timeline.

One of the first “snowbirds” to invest here was U.S. Sen. Matthew Quay of Pennsylvania. He used his considerable influence to procure government funds to improve the old natural inlet in 1894 and again in 1903. Through the first decade of the 20th century, the sand and silt continued to pile up until there came a time when vessels had to be pulled across Hutchinson Island by manpower or mules.

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Welcome - New Members

Sue Favorite, Membership Chairman

New (or returned) members include:
Steven Jones, Barbara Secor, Lihua (Lily) & Bo Wang

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of The St. Lucie Historical Society, Inc.

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The President's Message

by Nancy Bennett

We hope you'll enjoy this expanded edition of our Historical Quarterly, saluting the 100th anniversary of the Fort Pierce Inlet's opening. This led to development of our seaport as a major economic boost. Various community groups are planning their own inlet celebrations in the coming weeks and we hope SLHS members will participate in as many as possible.

Recently a nice note came from SLHS member **Dr. Ann Cali** (DMHS class of 1960), who is winding up a distinguished career as a professor and research scientist at Rutgers University in New Jersey. She writes: "I so enjoy the SLHS Quarterly! I feel like I have made a visit to Fort Pierce every time I get one! Thank you, Nancy, for saving and developing the museum and to all who contribute to make it such a great place! Keep up the great work you do. I'm a little far to volunteer so enclosed is a little donation."

Thank you, Ann, for your kind words and support. All your friends here miss you and hope to see you again soon.

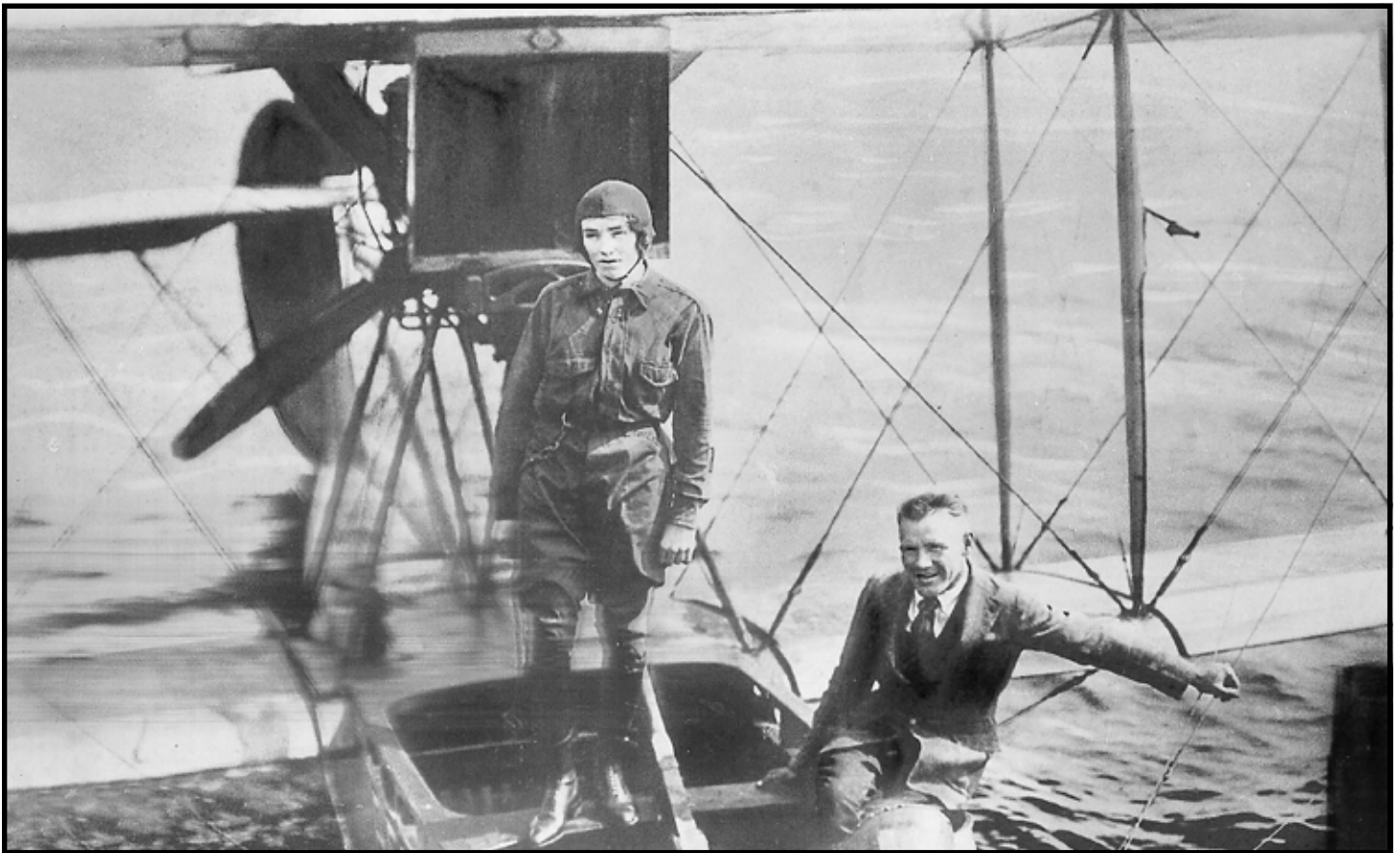
Each year during the St. Lucie County Fair, SLHS members greet visitors at our exhibit. This year's fair volunteers included **Ellen and Richard Lynch, Robyn Hutchinson, Maggie Summerlin, Beverly Traub, Katy Purcell, Bob Burdge, John Honea, Sue Favorite, Bob Davis and Ted Burrows**. Thanks to them all. We greatly appreciate the work of **Harry Quatraro**, who prepared our exhibit.

Soon our society's main activity season will end and we'll take our usual summer break. This past year has been very difficult for everyone. Fortunately, as more people get vaccinated against this dangerous COVID virus, we can hope for better days ahead. We're planning to resume our normal society activities in September. Until then, stay safe. Δ

Bulletin Boosters

Help support a lively and useful SLHS Historical Quarterly. A \$10 donation will add your name to the Bulletin Boosters roster for a full year of Quarterly editions. Please give your \$10 donation to Treasurer Bob Burdge. Many thanks. Names of current bulletin Boosters are listed below (with expiration month and year).

Ann Cali	4/23	Richard & Nancy Sheets	4/21	Frank H. & LeVan Fee	10/21	Rick & Lisa Modine	10/21
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Bob Davis	1/22	Claude & Cindy Baker	10/21	Tracy Curtis	10/21		
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Madeline Davis in early publicity photo for her parachute jumps

Daring local parachutist dazzles crowd at celebration for inlet opening

by Joanne Davis Blandford

A *Fort Pierce News-Tribune* article from Tuesday, May 10, 1921 read "The Atlantic and the Indian River are married! The wedding ceremony took place Sunday evening about 8 o'clock when the high tide washed through the small remaining barrier of sand and swept dredge barges, boats and all before it." The opening of the Fort Pierce inlet offered a wealth of opportunity to the growing city of Fort Pierce and the surrounding community. To celebrate, activities were planned throughout the day on Thursday, May 12. Businesses and homes were decorated with bunting; boat rides were given for spectators to inspect the inlet; band performances dotted the morning and afternoon; a barbecue dinner was prepared; a celebratory baseball game commenced with West Palm Beach rivals; and a carnival and street dance wrapped up festivities that evening.

The highlight of the celebration, however, took place at 9:30 that morning when onlookers gathered to catch a glimpse of 24-year-old **Madeline Davis** parachuting from a plane high above them. A summarized version appeared in the *News-Tribune* a day after the event on Friday, May 13:

Miss Davis took her place in the seaplane at 9:25 and shortly after the motor started and the plane was off. Back and forth the plane moved above the town while the big whistle on the ice plant added its clamor to the general excitement. Reaching a height of 1,400 feet, Miss Davis climbed out on the wing, arranged her parachute, hung over the side of the wing for a moment and then dropped into space. The parachute dragged after and for a moment seemed in danger of not opening. The thousands of spectators held their breath in suspense, then the chute opened and Miss Davis performed some trapeze stunts as the flight to the ground was made... Miss Davis displayed considerable nerve and the people are enthusiastic over her ability and bravery. She has made many drops but none at Fort Pierce. Being a Fort Pierce young lady, Miss Davis was greeted with cheers when the drop was successfully made. Her professional name is Madeline Belmont and she has won distinction in many drops in other states.

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Inlet... continued from page 1

Fort Pierce leaders, recognizing the threat to the economy, founded the Fort Pierce Inlet District in 1919, voters approved an \$80,000 bond issue, and property was purchased at Tucker's Cove. Three additional bond issues were passed over the next few years to complete the work, finally adding up to a total of \$1,850,000 voters were willing to pay to have an inlet.

Initial dredging began in 1920, then halted while the jetties were built. The dredge Tusawilla appeared on the river in the spring of 1921 and recommenced the project on April 19.

The News Tribune issue of May 10, 1921 reported: "THE ATLANTIC AND INDIAN RIVER ARE MARRIED! The wedding ceremony took place Sunday evening (May 8) about 8 o'clock when the high tide washed through the small remaining barrier of sand and swept dredge, barge, boats and all before it, cleaning out the sandy beach and practically finishing the inlet."

This happened on May 8, 1921. Hence, Saturday, May 8, 2021, is the 100th anniversary of the New Fort Pierce Inlet.

Since that spring evening of 1921, the inlet has served

us well — access to the ocean for commercial and sports fishing, for sail and motor cruising, for divers seeking the underwater experience or Spanish treasure. In the 1930s, large cargo ships came through the Indian River Inlet; in the 1940s, military vessels coursed through when the amphibious training base was on the island. Through the inlet, the holds of ships have been filled with Indian River grapefruit and with goods bound for the Bahamas.

Now, we have Derecktor Shipyards, which will bring to the seaport the most powerful mobile boat hoist in the world to lift the luxury yachts the company will repair and refit. With Derecktor as its anchor, the local economy should be improved by other businesses that enterprise will attract.

So much of who we are and what we will be is dependent upon the 100-year-old Fort Pierce Inlet and plans are afoot to celebrate its centennial. Hopefully, marking this anniversary with a series of events will be a means of educating the public as to the value of the water path between the jetties at Fort Pierce and commemorate the civic-minded leaders who came together a century ago to build it. Δ

New book on Fort Capron adds valuable information

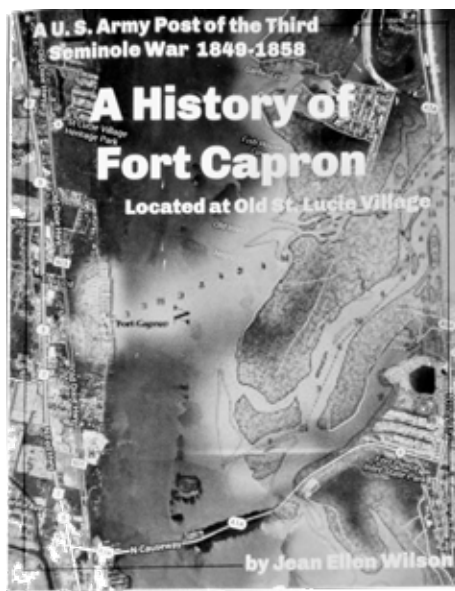
Fort Capron, a U.S. Army post during the Third Seminole War, was an active military base far longer than Fort Pierce. From early 1850 to mid-1858, Fort Capron anchored the eastern end of a cross-state chain of army camps. Following the Second Seminole War (1835-1842), renewed clashes in 1849 forced some homesteaders to flee. The army returned and built new forts to protect white settlers and keep the remaining Seminoles penned deep in the southern part of the peninsula.

Fort Capron consisted of several buildings on a tract estimated at up to 40 acres, opposite the narrow and shallow Indian River Inlet. The fort was named for **Erastus Capron**, a U.S. Army officer killed during the Mexican War. Over the years, residents of St. Lucie Village have recovered some artifacts left behind by soldiers, yet the public's knowledge of Fort Capron has been sketchy at best.

More information is now available, the product of several years of research by local historian **Jean Ellen**

Wilson. Her new book, *A History of Fort Capron*, provides additional data from army records, letters, diaries and other primary sources. The book will help readers appreciate the difficulties of pioneer life in wild Florida – for settlers and soldiers. From Fort Capron, soldiers went on patrol and also forwarded supplies to other outposts. A soldier's life here was often lonely and grubby. Discipline was harsh, mail was slow, pay was sporadic, rations scant and of uneven quality.

This new book expands our knowledge of the final stage of hostilities with the Seminoles, in the crucial years leading up to the Civil War. Several officers who served at Fort Capron went on to prominent roles – either in Union blue or Confederate gray. The book is priced at \$20, available from the author or at the museum. Δ



Parachutist... continued from page 3

I grew up hearing stories of Madeline's bravery and toughness. She was my great-aunt, sister to my grandfather, **Claude Davis**. Unfortunately, by the time I realized how amazing her path was, the people who had firsthand knowledge of her were gone. Thankfully, some of our greatest local reporters (**Joe Crankshaw, Charles Miley, Anne Wilder**) from the last century did know the importance of preserving these memories and did so. From their accounts and my own genealogical research, the story of Madeline's adventurous young life can be retold.

Madeline was born in Kansas around 1898 and lived in Nebraska for a while. They were a farming family and Madeline worked hard from a young age helping her ailing father seed the fields. Later they owned a hotel in Peru, Neb. where they obtained an unbroke horse as payment for a debt. She was determined to train the horse to ride in order to herd the hotel's two cows from the field each day. She was thrown three times before the horse allowed her to ride it. This will to succeed was a trait that would follow her through life.

The family came to Florida by covered wagon in 1915 after selling the hotel in Nebraska. Their destination was Boca Raton but they settled for a brief time in Wauchula. My grandfather was born during this stay and my great-grandfather, **Albert Davis**, began carpenter work to support his family. One of the family stories was of how Madeline rode bareback on the family's horse to bring the doctor back for my grandfather's birth. It was pitch-black that night and the doctor navigated his vehicle by following the lantern she held as she rode.

Her interest in aerial stunts began as a young girl when she witnessed a person jump from a balloon and parachute to earth at a county fair in Nebraska. It peaked again when she was almost 20 while the family was in Indianapolis during World War I. She saw this stunt again at a carnival and approached the person in charge to inquire if she could get a job performing stunts. They told her she was not strong enough. She responded by finding a nearby rope hanging from the support beam of the tent and climbed hand over hand to the top and back down again. "Is that strong enough?" she asked, and in 1916 she made her first jump for the Belmont Sisters Balloon Co.

The Davis family settled in Fort Pierce two years later. The 1920 census lists the family as living in downtown Fort Pierce and Madeline was employed as a cook. Her mother, **Olive**, made pies for the Old Dixie Cafeteria and earned the nickname "Pie Davis." Albert continued in carpentry work. During the summers Madeline would leave Fort Pierce and travel with the carnival performing

all over the country. Her stunts were progressing from parachuting from balloons to airplanes and in those days stunt jumpers did not wear chutes until moments before the jump:

*"We packed it into a canvas bag about the size of a five-gallon washtub and fastened it way out of the wing," he (Madeline's brother, **Montra Davis**) said. "We folded the canvas – it wasn't silk – back and forth until we got to the ropes. Then we used newspapers to layer the ropes so they wouldn't tangle when she jumped." The whole rig, complete with a trapeze but no harness, was fastened to the wing of a pusher-propeller seaplane. Madeline and the pilot would take off, reach about 2,000 feet and then she would walk out, sit down on the trapeze and jump off the wing. (Joe Crankshaw, *Tales of the Treasure Coast*, Miami Herald, Aug. 10, 1986) Montra was describing the prep for Madeline's jump over Fort Pierce in 1921.*

As reported by Crankshaw: *"The plane rumbled away from Cobb's Dock, raced across the Indian River and lifted off at 9 a.m., according to newspaper reports... 'It had to fly back and forth about five times to get enough altitude,' Montra Davis said. 'Then she jumped. We could see the newspapers flying all over as the chute spilled out and long before we could see the parachute itself.' Madeline drifted down, waving to the crowd and trying to guide the parachute to a careful landing. 'It was marvelous coming down but a lot faster than she expected,' Davis said.*

*"Madeline landed in a field near Second Street in downtown Fort Pierce, where she was met by her family and a man named **Bill Creed**, who had brought his Model T sedan to pick her up before the crowd could swarm over her.*

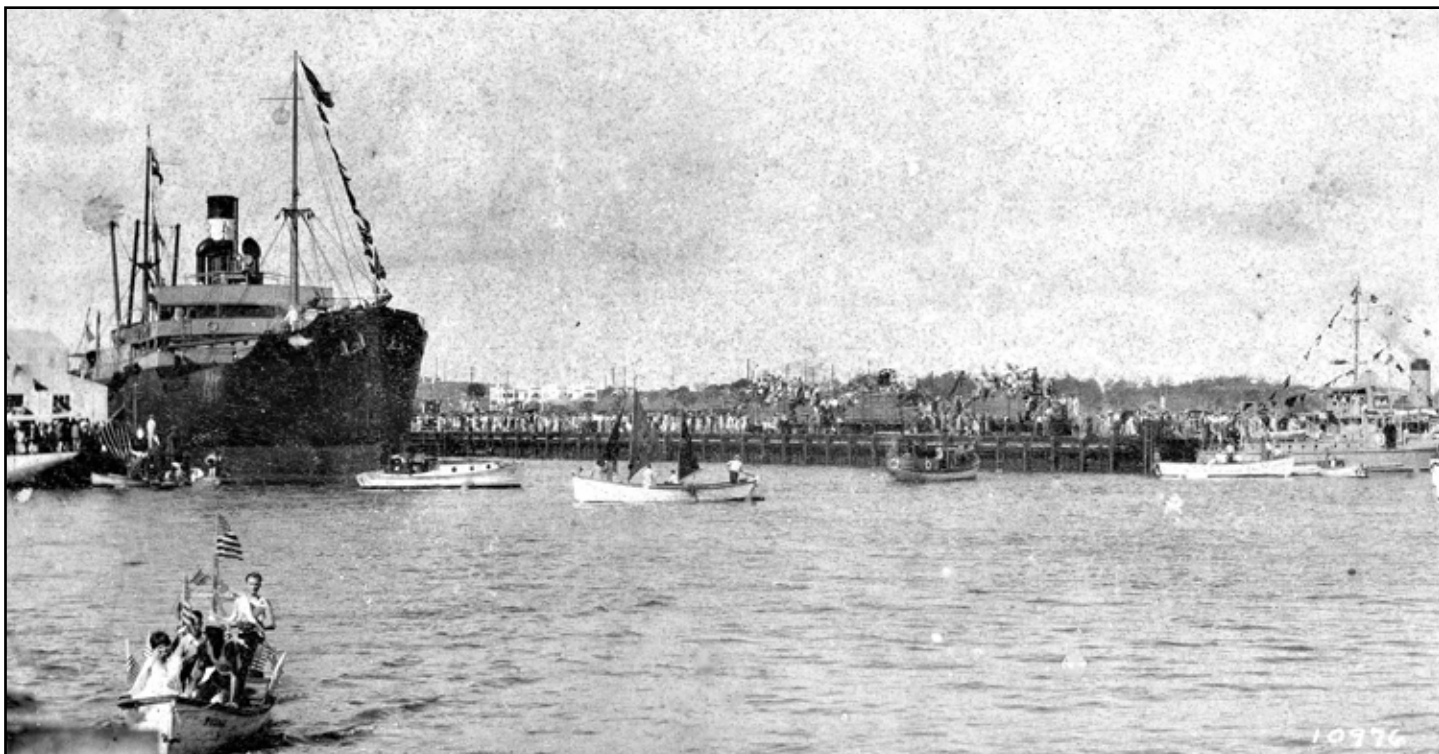
By October 1921 Madeline was attempting a new stunt and auditioning to be a performer in **Ruth Law's** Flying Circus. Here is an excerpt from an Oct. 5, 1921 *New York Times* article:

The trio practiced for half an hour before they made the actual test. Miss Law drove the car at about 45 miles an hour back and forth along the road and the aviator, slowing down to automobile speed, flew close to the earth over the motorists several times.

By this time it was late afternoon and the day was becoming dark, but Miss Davis insisted on going through with the test.

The crowd held its breath as the two machines shot down the wide boulevard for the final trip, the automobile with its passengers a good distance in advance of the airplane. Miss Law bent over the wheel to hold the car in the center of the road. Miss Davis, her face determined and hands clenched on the side of the car, waited.

... continued on page 7



Steamship Betty Weems at dockside amid celebration as Port of Fort Pierce opens to oceangoing commercial traffic in February 1930.

1920s a time of great hopes for development of seaport

The decade of the 1920s was one of optimism for residents of Fort Pierce and St. Lucie County. Following the end of World War One, population growth was on the way, road and drainage improvements were being made and new buildings were going up. Most significantly, the community was about to realize a long-time dream: permanent and reliable access to the ocean through a new man-made inlet. This would be vital to the area's commercial fishing interests and offered the possibility of a seaport for oceangoing trade.

As the 1920s dawned, Fort Pierce was still a relatively tiny town, with only 2,115 residents according to that year's U.S. Census. The city limits extended only as far west as 17th Street. The county's entire population was around 6,000. St. Lucie County then enclosed a larger area because neighboring Indian River and Martin counties were not created until 1925.

A Fort Pierce city directory published in that era listed St. Lucie County's other "towns and villages" as Ankona, Eden, Eldred, Fellsmere, Jensen, Orchid, Oslo, Quay, Rio, Roseland, St. Lucie, Sebastian, Vero, Viking, Wabasso and White City.

The city had two newspapers, the weekly *Fort Pierce News* (subscription \$1.50 per year) and the

semi-weekly *St. Lucie County Tribune* (subscription \$2.00 per year). Eventually they would merge to become the more familiar *News-Tribune*.

There was telephone service, but of course no dialing. Callers had to ask a live operator for a connection – usually a two- or three-digit number. For example, the P.P. Cobb general store downtown, advertised as "the favorite shopping place" had the phone number 78.

The entire state of Florida had just 968,470 residents according to the 1920 census, but that soon would change as the twenties real-estate boom picked up speed. In St. Lucie County, as elsewhere, new neighborhoods were planned, building lots surveyed and homes built – at least until the boom collapsed following hurricanes in 1926 and 1928.

Around the new inlet, work continued throughout the decade to enlarge the navigation channel and ship turning basin, and to erect cargo handling facilities. Much of that work was done by the Fort Pierce Financing and Construction Co., in which **Edwin Binney** had a substantial investment. That company built the first wooden bridge across the Indian River in 1925. Also that year the Beach Casino was built near the south jetty and it would remain a familiar

... continued on page 7

Parachutist... continued from page 5

Behind them roared the airplane, first speeding up to a short distance behind the automobile, and then slowing so that it was going only a little faster. Slowly the dangling rope crept closer to Miss Davis's grasp. She jumped and caught the bottom rung of the rope ladder. She swung to and fro a moment, but her strength was not great enough to enable her to climb up the ladder and board the plane. As she tried to climb, her hands slipped and she fell to earth.

Madeline died of a fractured skull. Newspapers across the country ran stories about her fatal accident. Her body was shipped home to Fort Pierce and buried in Riverview Memorial Park overlooking the Indian River close to downtown.

At the funeral, Ruth Law quoted Madeline as having said, "There is nothing on land or in the air that I am afraid of. I have been flying for the last two years and doing all sorts of stunts in the air, and parachute jumping. Now I want to do something different; something that nobody else does, at least that no other woman does. If I can learn to take the leap from an automobile to an airplane, I ought to be a big attraction for your company."

An earlier version of this article was published in Focus, the official monthly newspaper of Main Street Fort Pierce. Joanne Davis Blandford is editor of Focus. Δ

Remembrances

Katie Enns

Longtime Historical Society member **Catherine Ann Duster Enns**, known as "Katie" to her many friends, died Feb. 20 at her Fort Pierce home.

She was born July 22, 1930 in Cedar Rapids, Iowa and arrived in Fort Pierce soon after her 1952 graduation from Marquette University in Milwaukee, Wis.

She spent her career as a speech therapist in local schools, the first of her profession employed by the St. Lucie County School District. The district currently has 48 such professionals, now known as speech pathologists. She also was active in St. Anastasia Catholic Church and served on the A.E. Backus Museum and Gallery board of directors. She was a founding member of the Florida Speech and Hearing Association.

Her husband **Robert "Bob" Enns**, who died in 1990, was editor of the *Fort Pierce News-Tribune*. She is survived by six children. Δ

1st OCEANGOING SHIP... continued from page 6

landmark for decades.

Here are a few key dates in seaport development:

Feb. 25, 1919 – Fort Pierce Inlet District formed.

May 31, 1919 -- \$80,000 bond issue approved.

May 14, 1920 – Inlet dredging proceeding eastward reaches a point 50 feet from ocean, and work on jetties begins.

April 19, 1921 – Dredge Tuscowilla begins final work to connect Indian River with the ocean.

May 8, 1921 – Lagoon and ocean are joined.

May 12, 1921 – Big celebration.

July 2, 1923 – \$220,000 bond issue approved.

June 12, 1925 – \$400,000 bond issue approved.

June 18, 1926 -- \$500,000 bond issue approved.

February 1927 – Fort Pierce Financing and Construction Co. authorizes \$60,000 more to complete channel and turning basin.

Feb. 1, 1930 -- The Port of Fort Pierce was officially opened to oceangoing commerce. The first cargo vessel to enter on that date was the four-masted schooner Catherine C. Scott. A few days later the steamship Betty Weems arrived. The Port of Fort Pierce was open for business. Δ

Feedback

Here are some recent visitors' comments about the St. Lucie County Regional History Center, compiled from the guest book:

Ed Killer, Jensen Beach: "One of my favorite museums anywhere."

Tony & Lauren Price, Orlando: "Love the detail on the Seminoles!"

Allen Duvall, Burkesville, KY: "Enjoyed it thoroughly."

Beverly Wichman, Highlands, NC: "Wonderful! Entertaining & educational."

Teddy Willems, Fort Pierce: "Great time!"

Paridos Family, Bassett, VA: "Wonderful experience!"

Rich & Meg Sabulsky, Allentown, PA: "Great homage to the area's history!"

Terry Horn, Bridgeport, AL: "Great! The hosts were very helpful!"

Paola Maggioncaldo, Lima, Peru: "Very interesting."

Ken & Debbie Echternach, Fort Pierce: "Enjoy each visit." Δ

St. Lucie Historical Society, Inc.
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St. Lucie Historical Society, Inc.

Please join us in preserving our local heritage for future generations.

Name _____

Spouse's Name _____

Names and ages of minor children:

Address _____

City/State/Zip _____

Home Telephone _____

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I/We wish to join the Society at the level indicated below.
Membership is from September through August.

New Renewal Individual (\$20.00)

Family (\$25.00) Business (\$50.00)

Please make checks payable to:

St. Lucie Historical Society, Inc
P O Box 578

Fort Pierce, Florida 34954-0578

For Information telephone: (772) 461-8020

General Meeting are held at:

The Elks Lodge

635 South 5th Street

Fort Pierce, Florida 34950

Society General Meetings are held on the 3rd Thursday of the month, from September through May. A meal is provided before the meeting at the price of \$12.00 per person. Reservations must be made for these meals no later than two days in advance of the meeting. To make reservations telephone (772) 461-8020 and leave a message. Reservations and your RSVP information by e-mail to: dinner@stluciehistoricalsociety.net. Dinner begins at 5:30 P.M. and the General Meeting Starts at 6:00 P.M.

Volunteers are Needed

If you have 3 1/2 hours that you can give once a week either in the morning or afternoon, please consider volunteering at the Museum.

Admission, to the museum, for St. Lucie Historical Society members is FREE. So come and take a tour.

The latest exhibit is St Lucie Families-Crafters of Local History.

The Pineapple Patch Gift Shop has a large selection of books of Florida historical value, cards, handmade Seminole Indian dolls, and baubles made by volunteers.

Museum Hours:

Tuesday through Saturday, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.