

COLLIER COUNTY MUSEUM  
ORIGINAL

# *Ochopee Post Office Dedication*

*Collier County, Florida*

*February 25, 1995*



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Today we are celebrating the dedication of the Ochopee Post Office as a Collier County Historic Property. As one of our nation's smallest post offices, it is a regular stop on the south Florida tourist circuit. But in the 1930s and 40s, it was more than just a post office. Ochopee was a community built by visions and dreams which for years brought happiness and good fortune to its residents.

The Ochopee dream began when the completion of the Tamiami Trail opened up the southernmost frontier to development. In 1928, Edgar C. Gaunt was a successful truck farmer in Miami who came from a long line of Quaker farmers in the northeast. He saw opportunity in the wide fields of sawgrass prairie and purchased several hundred acres of what is now Ochopee to make a farm that he could pass on to his son James where they would grow winter tomatoes to sell up north. They enlisted the help of their friends. Ralph H. Brown married James' sister Daisy and came into the business, contributing his financial expertise. Raymond Cail, a carpenter who could do almost anything, built many of the buildings in Ochopee and did some farming of his own. These people had a sense of mission, opportunity, and fairness that gave Ochopee a community which former residents have described as nearly utopian.

It began in a wilderness of wet prairie and mosquitos, by sinking poles into the marl to build housing for the field workers they would need for farming. Growth was rapid and at the end of only two years, Ochopee could boast of more than a dozen buildings; a general store, a packing house, a boarding house, a cafe, a garage, a bulk plant, a barn for the mules, it's own utility plant and of course, the workers quarters and several houses for the white folks. Ochopee's population swelled eventually to a seasonal high of 1200 people. Every year, the seed beds were planted and the mules plowed the fields. Black and Seminole (and in later years, Hispanic) workers planted, fertilized and harvested the tomatoes. Gaunt Company prospered during a time when the rest of the country was plunging into the Great Depression. Although inequality and segregation still existed, the basic sense of decency and good will towards all people created a place where people of all races and classes could improve their lives and follow their dreams.

In the fall of 1932, Ochopee got its first post office, located about a half mile west of its current location, on what was then the Jaudon farm. Captain Jaudon was the first postmaster. Before this time, residents of Ochopee had to travel to Everglades (City) to get their mail. About a year later, the post office was moved into the northeast corner of the Gaunt Company Store. Sidney Brown, Sr., who managed the store, became the postmaster, a position he was to retain for the next 37 years. The store was a center of activity in the community. Food staples were displayed on shelves along the east side of the store, behind a counter. You would place an order with Mr. Brown who would scoop up beans, rice or flour onto a scale and wrap your purchases in paper. At the back of the store hung carcasses of pork and beef which



*Captain Jaudon in front the Gaunt Company Store.  
The post office was located to the left of the front door.*

would be cut to order right before your eyes. On the west wall were the dry goods, the brightly colored fabrics attractive to the Seminole seamstresses and pots and hardware. Children came in after school to buy penny candy. The field workers bought supper makings with "babbitt", the company coin. And everyone picked up their mail.



*Mr. Sidney Brown (right) inside the original Gaunt Company Store.*

Former residents reap a rich harvest of fond memories. Were you lucky enough to be able to ask them, you would hear about a time when you could lie in the middle of the Tamiami Trail at night to watch shooting stars.

Or how you could spend an hour with a pole on the side of the canal and come home with a bushel of fish. There were community gardens and fish fries at the barbecue pit. Older boys went out hunting with their dads for wild turkey and venison. It was a place where children could play freely and a toddler could crawl up for a nap on a stack of mail bags in the post office.

One cool night in 1953, a fire broke out in the Ochopee boarding house. A transient guest fell asleep smoking and it didn't take long for the tiny embers to ignite and devour the weathered wood building. The blaze spread

quickly to the general store which, despite the heroic efforts of all the town's residents throughout the night, also burned to the ground. Many folks feel this fire marked the beginning of the end for Ochopee. Several seasons of drought and blight and rapidly rising labor costs hurt the farming business which was moved to Immokalee. Ralph H. Brown died of a heart attack in 1955. In the 1960s, the packing house, Ochopee Garage and Ochopee Cafe, all historic buildings, were demolished in order to widen the Tamiami

Trail. When the National Park Service established the Big Cypress Preserve in the 1970s, other buildings were sold and moved away. The oldest original building in Ochopee is the Raymond Cail house. Built in 1939 it is located on the north side of the Tamiami Trail, just a little bit west of the post office.

The most famous building, however, is the little post office. Right after the fire, realizing that life must go on, a tool shed was brought from the north side of the canal to stand on the site of the burned store. Mr. Cail built in the counter and cubby holes for the mail. Mr. Brown hung up the Trailways Bus stop sign and grew orchids on that post. When they widened the Tamiami Trail, the little building was toted back on a wheel barrow. And there it sits to this day. Naomi Lewis is the postmistress now and Gerri Fish drives the 123 mile rural route it serves. But the location marked by the highway sign "Ochopee" shows no indication of the thriving, caring community that once stood there.

It is ironic that Ochopee's present fame revolves around this little post office, whose very existence symbolizes the end of the dreams for those who lived here. The community of Ochopee has all but passed away. But this tiny post office, dedicated today as a Collier County Historic Property, has risen out of the flames like a phoenix. May it now preserve for all future visitors the memory of Ochopee dreams.