



*But the pull of the Mangrove Coast is not its history, for neither the historians nor its own people have laid claim or put great value on its past. Its attractions lie in its intangibles: the gleam of the white sand, the softness of southwest winds, pink and turquoise sunsets, and the abiding simplicity of its people. In some curious way, the coast has managed to retain a simplicity in standards and outlook that seems to date back to the early days of the century or, perhaps, instinctively to reach forward into the decades ahead of us all.*

—The Mangrove Coast  
*Karl A. Bickel*  
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# INTRODUCTION



*The ship's figurehead is a statue or carving decorating the bow of a ship.*

The Sarasota Bay system — barrier islands and estuaries from Anna Maria Sound south to Lemon Bay — is perhaps the most precious jewel of the southwest Florida coast. This 56-mile stretch of Gulf of Mexico coastline comprises a generally narrow and shallow string of bays, estuaries, lagoons, inlets and islands.

In some areas the human population densely occupies the shore and even the water; in others, the original occupants — most visibly shorebirds, fish, dolphins and manatees — are often sighted. Some areas have lush seagrass meadows and thriving mangrove islands, while others have barren bay bottoms and shores hardened by seawalls protecting fabulously expensive land that did not even exist mere decades ago. Some areas have shorelines and channels that have changed little in the past 100 years, and others now have extensive waterways created by man.

The Gulf Intracoastal Waterway (ICW) provides direct passage through the entire Sarasota Bay system, linking natural deep water sections through a series of manmade channels, canals and cuts. The ICW was originally intended to facilitate commercial shipping to and along the southwest Florida coast and to join the region with the rest of the intracoastal network that now stretches from Maine to Texas. Today, however, the vast majority of the Gulf ICW's functionality is devoted to recreational activities: power boating, sailing, fishing, water skiing, kayaking and canoeing.

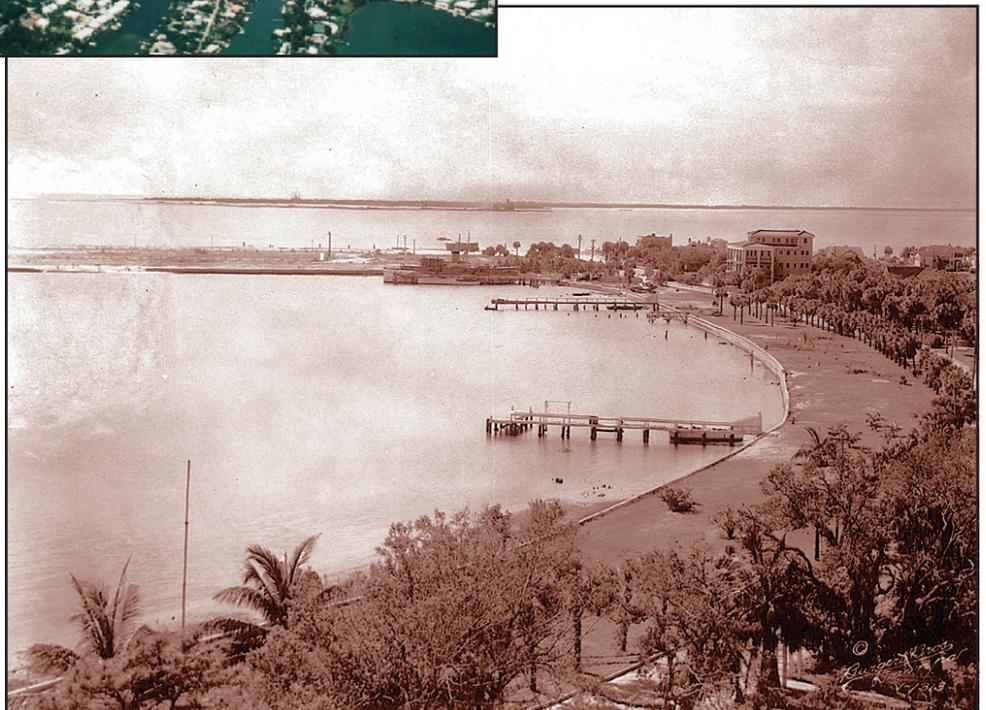
When the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers began dredging in 1890 what would eventually become the ICW, they would hardly have imagined the ultimate extent of the task they had commenced. Alterations to the waterway continue today from Tampa Bay to Gasparilla Sound. The channel, which once hopscotched from one bay to another along sparsely populated mainland shores and virtually deserted barrier islands, punctuated by shallows, oyster bars, mangrove thickets and other barriers originally impassable, would eventually form a continuously navigable waterway for sizable vessels. The ICW's development paralleled — and contributed to — a population boom that remains one of the most vigorous in the United States. Shallow parts of the estuary bottom were dredged and redeposited to enlarge existing islands or create new islets and in many cases covering bay habitats. This newly created shoreline ultimately became highly valued waterfront home sites for thousands of people. At the same time, it altered the environmental characteristics of the estuary, where the fresh water from the land mixes with the saltwater from the sea.



Aerial views of Sarasota Bay.



Sarasota Island Park anchorage.



Sarasota bayfront. October 7, 1926.

Ca'd'Zan.  
John and  
Mable  
Ringling  
winter home.

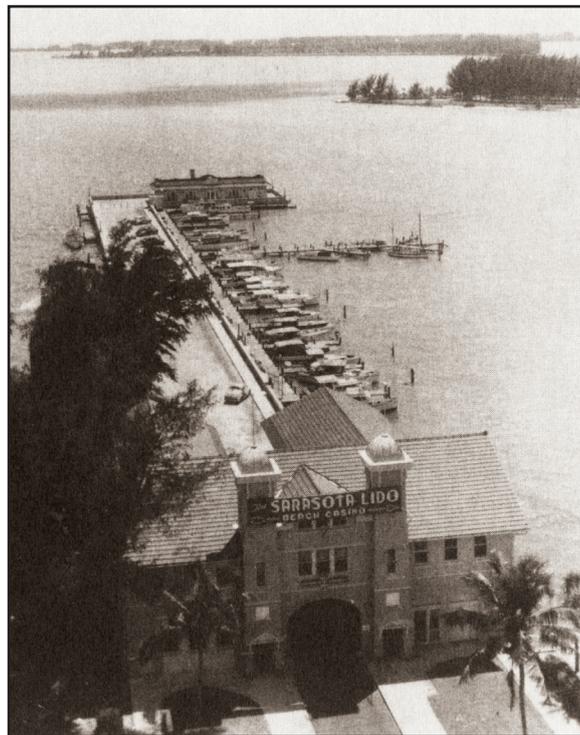


Some of most compelling attractions of the region are the bays and beaches. Sailors find the large, deep reaches of Big Sarasota Bay a perfect “lake” for afternoon regattas. Cruising mariners have safe anchorages scattered throughout the region, and fine waterfront amenities abound. Fishermen wade or boat to thousands of secret holes where they catch redfish, trout, snook, tarpon and many other species. Water skiers slalom in the protected areas near City Island or Skiers Island. The area near Long Bar Point in Big Sarasota Bay is ideal for canoeing and kayaking, and the winding shore of North Casey Key and the nearby Neville Marine Preserve offer some of the nation’s best birding.

From the vantage of the shore or a boat on the waters of the Sarasota Bay system, the dawn sun peeks through the trees on the mainland. During the day, the high buildings of Sarasota, seaside Venice and other urban areas glint kaleidoscopically. Sunsets on the sparkling Gulf of Mexico rival those anywhere on earth. Boaters and shore residents appreciate the beauty of the system, but also see the effects of man’s presence from waterfront development. They have expressed a desire for further insights into the region and for a means to share these insights with each other and with visitors.



Cortez fishing village.



The Hover Arcade, at the foot of lower Main Street in Sarasota, was built by Dr. Walter Hover and two of his brothers in 1913. It was later purchased by the city and housed City Hall. When Sarasota County was created in 1921, the arcade served temporarily as the courthouse. It was destroyed in the late 1960s.

This book and the pocket guide and map, “Sarasota Bay Blueways: Recreational Opportunities around the Bay” provide a window to the past and present Sarasota Bay system. Historical maps and photographs illustrate the changes occurring from the “pre-development” period of the late 1800s to today. The historical development of the ICW is explored, from the first major dredging effort in 1890 to the major residence and business developments of the 1960s and 1970s to the beach renourishment projects of today. Prominent features of the Sarasota Bay system from Anna Maria Island to Lemon Bay are described in words, pictures and maps.

A chapter is devoted to inlets, their dynamics and their importance to the bay system. Distances between these passes that link the bays and Gulf are provided from the mariner’s perspective, as well as to offer a better understanding of the vital role inlets play in the estuarine environment.

A “snapshot” of land-based coastal development and its importance to the bay system uses the city of Venice as an example. With more than 80 percent of the bay water area having changed (deepened, shoaled, disappeared, etc.) in its vicinity, Venice represents the extreme case of altering land and water for shoreline growth.



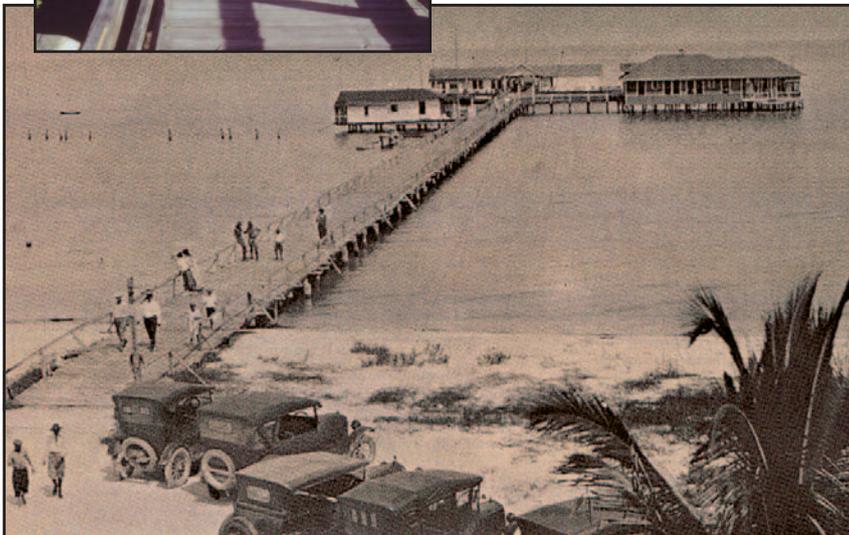
Beachcombers on Anna Maria Island in the early 1900s.

A juxtaposition of development practices other than Venice is provided in the working waterfront of the village of Cortez. This area, homesteaded in the 1880s by a group of fishermen originally from North Carolina, has changed little in the past 100 years, and many of the village's homes, shops and fish houses are included in the U.S. Registry of Historic Places.

Nautical charts are important tools mariners use to safely reach unfamiliar destinations and to find the way

home. Charting Sarasota Bay describes historical and modern means of determining water depths and locations of coastal landmarks. How marvelous today's hand-held Global Positioning Systems and solid state electronic depth sounders are, compared to the need for almost 7,000 "pole soundings" of Sarasota Bay depths in order to compile a hydrographic chart in earlier times!

Caspersen Beach



Anna Maria Pier and cottages in 1924. Stretching nearly 800 feet into Tampa Bay, the pier also served as a walkway for the two adjacent "cottages." The two cottages later fell into disrepair and were torn down prior to the piers being rebuilt in the 1930s.

The importance of seagrass beds and mangroves is also discussed, and the potential seagrass coverage of 1890s Sarasota Bay is illustrated for comparison with actual distribution today. A map also provides a look at areas of seagrass that have suffered damage, largely from propeller scarring.

The Sarasota Bay system of tomorrow? Through the efforts of federal, state, regional and local authorities, as well as private interests, the Sarasota Bay system is changing. The days of rampant waterfront growth through massive dredge and fill projects have come to a halt. Today, we focus on improving the quality of the bay while maintaining a delicate balance among shore development, waterway use and environmental integrity. We have learned that our actions on the land and water affect bay resources; to our regret, we see that the effects are usually adverse. A growing awareness exists among the area's residents that Paradise could easily be lost without a widespread feeling of stewardship and continuing efforts to restore and maintain the bay. Shorefront zoning changes and regional waterway management systems are being implemented to foster sustainable use, with the ultimate goal of attaining that balance where nature and people can coexist far into the future.



Venice Fishing Pier.

This is the first in a series of publications that will cover the waterways of southwest Florida. Other publications, produced by the West Coast Inland Navigation District and the Florida Sea Grant Program, will explore adjoining waterways. These publications are in support of the State of Florida's Blueways initiative, which is a program to encourage stewardship of the state's recreational waterways.