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Fort DeSoto built during Spanish-American War

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Photouring Florida

By HAMPTON DUNN



FORT DESOTO BUILT DURING SPANISH-AMERICAN WAR

By HAMPTON DUNN

ST. PETERSBURG --- Mullet Key and its neighboring keys have been hosts to military units since the Civil War, but Fort DeSoto itself was not built until 1898, the year the U.S. and Spain fought it out over Cuba's independence.

The area where the fort is located is the gateway to Tampa Bay and has been strategic spot for many years. One of the first noted visitors was Ponce de Leon, who anchored his ship off the island and scraped the barnacles from the vessel. That was in 1513, during his first exploration of Florida. He came back here in 1821, was challenged by fierce native Indians on the key, and was mortally wounded.

Another distinguished visitor came to the Fort DeSoto site in February, 1849. He was a young Lieutenant Colonel who had just made a brilliant record in the Mexican War, his name: Robert E. Lee. He was on a mission for the U.S. Army Engineers. He thought the island an important position militarily and recommended that Egmont, Mullet, and Passage Keys be reserved for coastal defenses. During the Civil War, Federal forces were garrisoned here as a blockade headquarters and this became a haven for Union sympathizers, glad to escape hostile Central Florida rebels.

Fort DeSoto construction took two years. It was armed with eight 12-inch mortars which never fired a single shot at the enemy. During World War I, the fort was activated as a Coast Artillery Training Center. It also was used by the military in World War II as an Air Force Gunnery and Bombing Training Center.

Today, the fort and surrounding area form a huge recreational complex operated by Pinellas County.

