Polk County

COUNTY SEAT: Bartow

POPULATION: 178,700


POLK COUNTY is located in central Florida, its 1,310,720 acres bordered by Pasco, Sumter, Lake, Osceola, Highlands, Hardee, and Hillsborough counties. One of the State's largest counties in area, 40 miles in width and 50 miles in length, it is situated almost in the center of the peninsula. Bartow, the county seat, is 14 miles south of Lakeland, the leading city of the county, and 46 miles east of Tampa.

The elevation above sea level is 115 feet at Bartow and 215 feet at Lakeland. The highest recorded elevation in the State is at Bok Tower, in Lake Wales, 325 feet above sea level. Average annual rainfall at Bartow is 55.31 inches; at Lakeland, 49.21 inches. The heaviest rainfall is in June, July, August, and September. Annual average temperature is 72.2 degrees at the county seat, with an average high of 81.8 degrees in August and an average low of 61.1 degrees in January. At Lakeland the annual average temperature is 73.1 degrees, from an average high of 82.0 degrees in July to an average low of 62.1 degrees in January.

Citrus growing, packing and canning, phosphate mining, general agriculture, cattle raising, and tourists provide Polk County with diversified sources of income. Approximately one-third of the citrus produced in Florida is grown in Polk County. Winter Haven, the site of the Florida Citrus Exposition, is the center of the citrus growing section. In 1955-56, acreage devoted to citrus in Polk County led all other counties, with 108,900 acres. Oranges and other citrus products are grown, processed, canned, concentrated, and shipped; citrus candy is manufactured here for sale throughout the nation. In addition, grapefruits, tangerines, lemons, limes, Japanese persimmons, strawberries, and other fruits are grown extensively. The main offices of the Citrus Inspection Division of the State Department of Agriculture and of the Fruit and Vegetable Markets are located in Winter Haven. The Florida Citrus Commission is located at Lakeland.

Lakeland is the retail and wholesale center for a prosperous mining section. About 69 per cent of the world's supply of phosphate is mined in Polk County and is used largely as fertilizer containing phosphoric acid. Sand mining for building purposes and the manufacture of concrete and cement products is also an important industry. Other mineral resources are peat and clay. A paper-bag company and other light industries are located here.
Truck crops are grown and shipped in large quantities, the principal vegetables being peppers, cabbage, lettuce, tomatoes, string beans, eggplants, watermelons, and cucumbers. Leading staple crops are corn, Irish potatoes, sweet potatoes, field peas, velvet beans, and forage. In 1954 there were 4,020 farms in the county embracing 1,247,725 acres of farm lands. A 1955-56 survey lists 3,950 acres devoted to vegetables, 2,800 acres to watermelons. Cattle and poultry raising are also major sources of income, with 922,426 acres in pasture land in 1954. The 771,000 acres of commercial forest lands represent 64.4 per cent of the total county area, and income from timber, sawmills, and allied enterprises is important to the county’s economy.

Lakeland, the site of Florida Southern College (designed by Frank Lloyd Wright) and the National Carpenters and Joiners Home, enjoys a year-round tourist trade, as does the entire county. Thousands of tourists and visitors from throughout the nation come to the county each year to take advantage of the temperate year-round climate, the 300 easily accessible lakes in the area noted for fishing, and other attractions. The Detroit Tigers hold spring training at Lakeland, and world-famed Cypress Gardens is located in Winter Haven. The Singing Tower at Lake Wales a gift to the nation by the late Edward Bok, is a structure of rare architectural beauty and musical interest.

Assessed valuation of Polk County was $290,900,766 in 1956. Retail sales in that year totalled $177,653,000, and banking resources were $130,344,000. Total annual wages in 1956 amounted to $102,447,251. Effective buying income was $1,322 per capita and $214,447,000 for the county in 1956.

Many varieties of fresh-water fish are caught in the 300 lakes in the county, and the hunter finds quail, turkey, rabbit, fox, raccoon, dove, deer, squirrel, and duck here. U. S. highways 17 and 92 and Florida highways 17, 25, 33, 35, 37, 60, 540, 542, 547, 559, and 630 enter the county. The Seaboard Airline Railway and the Atlantic Coast Line provide rail service and Trailways Motor Lines and Greyhound Lines provide bus transportation. Scheduled air service is provided by National Airlines.

There are seventy-seven elementary and secondary schools in the county, with an enrollment of 38,002 pupils in 1956-57. There are over five hundred hospital beds available. Three daily newspapers, the Lakeland Ledger, Lake Wales Daily Highlander, and Winter Haven News-Chief, and twelve weekly newspapers are published here. The weekly newspapers are Auburndale Journal, Auburndale Press, Bartow Democrat (published twice weekly), Fort Meade Leader, Highland News, Haines City Herald, Lake Wales News, Ridge Shopping Bulletin, Sunday Highlander, American Press, Mulberry Press, and Winter Haven Herald.

Varied cultural, recreational, and sports facilities are available. The annual Orange Cup Regatta and the annual Santa Claus Bowl game are held here. The county has many public libraries, golf courses, parks, baseball diamonds, and swimming pools. There are churches representing every major denomination, many in imposing sanctuaries, and an annual Passion Play is presented in Lake Wales.

Polk County, formed in 1861, was named for James K. Polk, President of the United States. Bartow, formed in the old Indian days of Florida’s early history, was once a fort for the defense and protection of white settlers. First known as Pease Creek, it was later named for General Francis S. Bartow, the first Confederate general to fall during the War Between the States. An army post, Fort Davenport, was located near the city of Davenport. Fort Meade, located to protect settlers on the north side of Peace River, was named for Lieutenant George G. Meade, who later gained fame as a general in the Union Army. The old fort still stands.