



Photouring Florida

By HAMPTON DUNN



PONCE DE LEON MORTALLY WOUNDED AT FORT DE SOTO

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FORT DE SOTO PARK --- Today this recreational complex is "an 834-acre chunk of Gulf island trimmed with seven miles of precious beach," as one newsman describe it. But behind Fort DeSoto's six keys are more than 400 years of stirring history.

Florida's very first white visitor had an unfriendly visit here back in the 16th century. Ponce de Leon, the gallant Spanish conquistador who discovered the Sunshine State at St. Augustine in 1513, came on around the peninsula (he thought it was an island) and stopped over at Mullet Key here to clean the barnacles off the bottom of his ship. Hostile Indians attacked the visitors, who fired the ship's cannon for defense. De Leon returned to Spain and came back to Florida in 1521, again visiting Mullet Key. This time, the Indians were more fierce and a poisonous arrow from one of their warriors mortally wounded the explorer.

This gateway to the great Tampa Bay figured in coastal defenses after the U. S. took over Florida in the 1800s. A distinguished visitor was Lt. Col. Robert E. Lee, fresh from a brilliant record in the Mexican War, who brought a party of officers here in 1849. He recommended that Egmont, Mullett and Passage Keys be reserved for coastal defense. The island was garrisoned by Federal forces during the Civil war.

Fort DeSoto was begun in 1898, during the Spanish-American War and was finished two years later. Although well armed with eight 12-inch mortars, never a single shot was fired at the enemy. Today a magnificent park entertains numerous visitors.

