

The Historical Quarterly of The St. Lucie Historical Society, Inc.

Vol. 34 No. 2

Summer 2016

Keeping cool in the good old days

By Jean Ellen Wilson

In the 1940s, our family lived in a farmhouse on Okeechobee Road. The design of this structure was the first line of defense against the heat. It was built off the ground so air could circulate under the house. Windows were placed to channel the north and east breezes throughout the first floor. There was a one room upper story with six windows opening to each of the four points on the compass allowing the capture of the least stirring of the wind. There was a deep porch on the north and east sides of the house shading the kitchen and dining room from any direct sun. Incidentally, a solar panel provided hot water 360 days a year. It is a mystery to me why I'm constantly told that this way of heating water is today prohibitively expensive.

Jean Ellen Wilson Page 4

By Hart Cowles Stephenson

1940's

– As a toddler, romping in the local beach surf before the Navy took over. Then, going to Casa Caprona spillway where families went to enjoy relaxing in the cool tannin-tinted creek water. Next, Guettler's pool on Orange Avenue Extension for Red Cross swimming and diving lessons.

– Also, many yard sprinkler soakings and splashing in the big wash tub in the back yard. Granny Cooper letting us put wash cloths on the block of ice delivered to her porch (to later be placed in the icebox) and then draping the cool cloths around our grit-ringed necks.

– Going with our mother to the community freezer building and walking sans jacket and shoes

Hart Stephenson Page 5

John Gorrie: Florida's cool-air man

By Ted Burrows

We're in the summer doldrums, when most folks linger in air-conditioned places and reach for icy drinks from the fridge. In this sweltering season, let's raise a toast to a long-ago Floridian whose bright idea helps keep us cool today.

In 1833 John Gorrie, M.D. arrived in the gulf coast cotton port of Apalachicola and established a medical practice. Apalachicola was an inferno in summer. Most of Florida then was a stifling mosquito-infested wilderness where malaria and yellow fever menaced residents each summer. Gorrie cared for seriously ill patients in a small clinic at his home. He believed he could make the sufferers more comfortable and help reduce their fevers by lowering the clinic's temperature.



In 1841 Gorrie began tinkering. By 1849 he had applied for patents on a rudimentary steam-powered machine that actually could create ice and circulate cool air through the sickroom. In the summer of 1850 he demonstrated his machine for an amazed group of visiting cotton buyers by making ice to cool their drinks. Gorrie even dreamed of some day preserving food by freezing it solid. What a concept! Yet he had trouble finding investors to put his invention into production.

At this time Northern businessmen had a profitable trade -- hewing large blocks of ice from New England ponds each winter, packing sawdust around the blocks in well-insulated containers, then shipping them to Southern cities for sale. A machine that

Gorrie Page 5

Welcome New Members

Sue Favorite, Membership Chairman

Lindsay & Joan McClenny, Spencer Gilbert, Victoria Bush, Aileen Carter, Nate Braese, Charlene & Rupert Koblegard, Klip & Sherry Klueppelberg, James Wilson, Sharon and Willie Ortiz, Tom & Regina Baumker

The Historical Quarterly of The St. Lucie Historical Society, Inc. Officers and Board of Directors

President: Nancy Bennett
First Vice President: John Gordon
Second Vice President: Sue Favorite
Secretary: Deborah Billis
Treasurer: Bob Burdge
Parliamentarian: Maggie Minchew
Historian/Chaplain: Jack Favorite

Nancy Bennett, Deborah Billis, Bob Burdge, Ted Burrows, Richard Coffman, John Culverhouse, Joe Crankshaw, Jack Favorite, Sue Favorite, Robyn Hutchinson, John Gordon, Ernie Merrill, Maggie Minchew, Lucille Rights, Jean Ellen Wilson

The Historical Quarterly Staff

Editors: Mary Schrader
 Ted Burrows
 Mose Sanders
Staff: Sue Favorite
Feature Writers: Charles Gibson
 Terry Howard
 Rick Modine
 Adrienne Moore
 Lucille Rights
 Hart Stephenson
 Jean Ellen Wilson
Photography: Fred Ebner

The Society is a Florida Corporation exempt from federal income tax under section 501(a) of the Internal Revenue Code as an organization described in Section 501(c)(3). The Society is also classified as a public charity under 509(a)(2).

Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinion of The St. Lucie Historical Society, Inc., P O Box 578, Fort Pierce, Fl. 34954, Telephone (772) 461-8020, stluciehistoricalsociety.net

The President's Message

by Nancy Bennett

I want to thank the volunteers who make it possible to keep the museum open and to present information to the public at the many community activities we attend. The forty plus individuals who give their time to keep us going were honored at our volunteer appreciation luncheon at Gator Trace on April 12. We recognized each volunteer's contribution and presented certificates of appreciation. Please consider joining us and helping in our efforts to introduce as many people as possible to the history of the area.

Summer is here and with it some changes in our activities. The Bud Adams Cultural Center exhibit at the P. P. Cobb store will be open



Museum Volunteers Appreciation Luncheon - Jennifer Angling, Matt Baum, Nancy Bennett. Photo Credit Fred Ebner

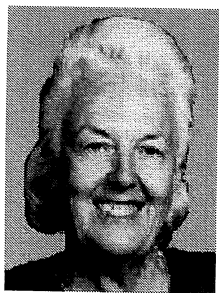
on Saturday from 10-2 only for the summer months. Also, there will be no dinner programs until September. We will be sending notices to members before that meeting.

We have enjoyed a year of meetings with a variety of enjoyable and informative speakers. We want to thank **Robyn Hutchinson** for her tireless efforts in procuring such a wide range of interesting presenters. **Sue Favorite** notifies members of the monthly meetings, takes reservations, and greets us at the door. Many thanks to her for her hard work and dedication. Δ

Legendary Sites of Saint Lucie County

The Robinson House

By Lucille Rights



Do you remember the lovely old two-story wooden house on the corner of Indian River Drive and Midway Road? It was damaged by two hurricanes in 2004 and abandoned by the owners. It was called the Robinson House and built around 1897. Irene Robinson, daughter of the builder, was born there in 1904 and in 1980 wrote a letter about the house and her family to the then owners, Mr. and Mrs. Geheke. My copy tells that "the house was built by my father from cypress lumber off a wrecked barge in the river.... He got a job as Florida East Coast Railroad agent at the little White City Depot which was right behind the house."

Several preservation groups tried to save the house but were never successful. Finally after years of neglect it was demolished. Charles Hayek, a local preservationist, saved the cypress wood walls, trim around the windows, newel post and railings from the stairway, the wood floor and a piece of the gingerbread decoration. And he knew exactly what to do with all that wood.

A group of three small historic buildings on North 2nd Street just across the street from the Platts/Backus house, now the Main Street headquarters, were in terrible shape. They had been the office and studio of the Hill family's Florida Photographic Concern. Always taking pictures with their glass negative cameras, the Hill family recorded every aspect of life in early Florida. Most of the old pictures you see in books and around town were taken by them. Luckily Charles Hayek bought the group of buildings and used the Robinson wood to restore the two wooden buildings. The interior wood is beautiful and well worth seeing. A local

Robinson Page 4

In memoriam Dan R. Gardner

Daniel R. Gardner, a longtime member and enthusiastic supporter of the St. Lucie Historical Society, died May 13th at age 80.

Dan Gardner regularly volunteered as a docent at the St. Lucie County Regional History Center, where he delighted in showing visitors through his childhood home, the historic Gardner House on the center's grounds. He provided a wealth of first-hand information about the distinctive wood frame building, its occupants and furnishings.

He was born Oct. 26, 1935 in Fort Pierce, to Maurice A. and Bertha B. Gardner. The family owned the home, built in 1907, when it was located on the mainland along what is now U.S. 1. In more recent times the carefully restored home has been a showplace for tourists and school children visiting the history center.

Dan Gardner was interred at the White City Cemetery on May 20. According to his wishes, memorial donations may be made to the St. Lucie Historical Society, P.O. Box 578, Fort Pierce, FL 34954-0578Δ

Harley G. Cowles

Harley G. Cowles, a loyal member of the St. Lucie Historical Society and supporter of community improvement work, died May 23 at age 72. A Fort Pierce native, he was a 1962 graduate of Dan McCarty High School and was among early graduates of the new Indian River Junior (now State) College. He earned a bachelor's degree from the University of South Florida.

Harley Cowles served in the U.S. Air Force and was a Vietnam veteran. Much of his later career was spent in administrative positions with the St. Lucie County Sheriff's office.

In addition to supporting the work of the Historical Society, he was active in various civic projects. Harley Cowles was a founder of the highly successful Fort Pierce Downtown Farmers' Market and served as that organization's president.

His funeral service was on May 29 in Fort Pierce. According to his wishes, memorial donations may be made to the St. Lucie County Humane Society, 100 Savannah Rd., Fort Pierce, Fl. 34982.Δ

Early ice plants aided fishing industry

By Jean Ellen Wilson

Along the lower Indian River, fish were plentiful in pioneer days. Fishing had long been a way to make a living, but preserving the catch on its way to consumers to the north was a problem.

In 1893, the local fish dealers complained about an overhead cost of \$20.00 per ton to get ice delivered to Fort Pierce. In 1896, an ice storage facility was built. Four years later, Miami Ice Works moved their operation from that place to Fort Pierce and by December 1900, the plant was producing ice. One year later, a solid carload of fish, 10,800 mullet in six tons of ice left the FEC station at Fort Pierce.

For some reason, the ice plant ceased to operate in 1904, but a new company, the St. Lucie Ice Co., resumed manufacturing ice in 1905. Two enterprising locals formed a company, outfitted a wagon, and began delivering ice.△



Photo Credit, Tom Baumker Collection

Jean Ellen Wilson Page 1

We had an ice box. Since we lived in the country, there was no door-to-door delivery, but my father worked in town and would bring home a block from the Royal Palm Ice Company on Avenue B twice a week.

We had an artesian well on the property with a dirt crater some 20 feet from rim to rim. On the hottest days we would turn the wheel on the pump, sulfa water would cascade into the pool and we would jump in the water. We did not know how to swim, the water was dirty, and we shared the mud with frogs and other varmints, but it was fun and cooling.

At that time, the ocean beach was closed to civilians as the Amphibious Naval Base occupied Hutchinson Island so our swimming venues were limited. The old Holmes pool in town, so popular in earlier times, was closed by then, so our sulfa hole was the best we could do except that once we got to go to Guettler's pool out Orange Avenue.

The next house we had, still without air-conditioning, had an attic fan installed in a hall and that sucked the hot air out of the house.

Other ways to keep cool? In church, you would see people using hand fans in unison. In fact, local businesses used give-away paper fans for advertising. Odom's Bar was proudly one of the first airconditioned escapes from the heat as was, a little later, the Sunrise Theatre. There were signs on the doors: "It's Cool Inside."

When we were a little older, we would go by the ice plant where one of the obliging workers would use tongs to bring out a block of ice and set it in the wash tub you had put in the trunk of the car. With sodas and a stick of butter iced down, we'd go by Bell Bakery and get a loaf of fresh bread-and with the aroma of baking in the air, we'd head for a day at the beach.△

Robinson House Page 3

brewery business occupies the site.△

"Preserving our historic buildings preserves the character of our city. The more buildings we can preserve maintains our sense of history and is an attraction for locals and visitors alike." Charles Hayek.

Hart Stephenson Page 1

to our locker. Left a lot of calloused skin on the frozen floor!

1950's

– Moved to the Ten-Mile Creek area and enjoyed daily swims near the Eleven-Mile Road bridge, always having one kid on “gator watch” duty. Loading kids into our canoe and paddling downstream to Midway Road and swimming until someone came to pick up the canoe and its occupants. Had to hold onto the creosote-covered bridge pilings when a boat came through; we were “tarred” but never feathered!

– As teens, riding bikes from our Baird cousins’ house on North Seventh Street to Shamrock Pool. Only cool time was in the pool; travel time was heatstroke level! Having a parent drop us off in the morning at South Beach jetty where we spent all day swimming and riding inner tubes to the jetty’s end.

– Riding in car, two parents, five kids, with all windows wide open. Even so, everyone perspired, so clothes were more than damp.

– Paper fans imprinted with funeral home ads, put to good use during both church and funeral services. Free advertising for the devil?

– Sitting on the back steps hand-cranking an ice cream churn. The cylinder was super cold; the churner super hot! Reward came later.

1960's

– Air conditioning wasn’t installed in most homes/offices/venues until late sixties, early seventies, so life in the summer months remained borderline tolerable. But we didn’t know any other existence, so we survived in spite of our superheated climate.

Do I miss the “old days” and our lifestyle? I survived, but wish never to return. However, survival instincts kicked in during the aftermath of the three wicked women who blew through 10 years ago when I “camped out” on my patio for three weeks, sans A/C and electricity-dependent appliances. Cold showers were actually welcome relief! A Dante moment: Hades revisited!Δ

Gorrie Page 1

could produce ice easily and cheaply would ruin their lucrative venture, so they began a campaign of ridicule against Gorrie and his work. Gene M. Burnett in “Florida’s Past, Vol. 1” quotes a New York writer as scoffing, “There is a crank down in Apalachicola, Florida, a Dr. John Gorrie, who claims he can make ice as good as God Almighty.”

Gorrie tried unsuccessfully for almost seven years to find financial backing to produce and market his ice-making device. Then, discouraged and saddled with debts, he secluded himself back in Apalachicola where he died in 1855 at age 51. His patents eventually expired.

Gorrie had pioneered the basic concepts of mechanical refrigeration. Decades later, other technical innovators refined and adapted Gorrie’s designs, making possible large commercial ice-making machines and systems capable of cooling entire buildings. Even so, it wasn’t until after World War Two that most Americans had refrigerators in their kitchens. Not until the late 1950s were air-conditioning systems commonly built into new homes.

At about that time, a mass migration to Florida picked up speed. Was that just a coincidence? Perhaps not entirely. Without air conditioning, without a fridge full of cold drinks, how many of today’s year-round residents would put up with South Florida’s long steamy summers?

In Statuary Hall at the U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C., stand stone likenesses of luminaries from every state. John Gorrie, M.D. is one representing Florida. Many visitors probably pass and wonder, “Who’s he?” Most have never heard of him. Yet he deserves to be remembered in every hotel, movie theater, condominium, supermarket and saloon where today’s Floridians congregate in cool comfort.

Gorrie could not possibly have foreseen our state as it is today. But long ago, his genius set in motion a technological revolution that made Florida habitable in all seasons.Δ