



The Historical Quarterly

of The St. Lucie Historical Society, Inc.

Vol. 40 No. 1

Winter 2022



David Alexander (left) and Todd Backus run along the Peterson fish house dock.

Indian River was paradise for adventurous local boys

By Terry L. Howard

Early Fort Pierce residents referred to the Indian River Lagoon as The Indian River or just The River. For three young men growing up on The River from the 1920's through the depression and war years, life was a wonderful adventure on a rich and pristine waterway.

J.C. Monroe was born July 23, 1918. At age three until the 1926 hurricane destroyed it, J.C. lived in a houseboat on the west shore of the Indian River between Taylor Creek and Moore's Creek, with his mother and three brothers.

After school when commercial fishing boats caught huge catches of mackerel, J.C. would gut fish at Peterson's fish house dock over the Indian River, often until dark. He said it seemed like the fish house was "plumb full of fish."

J.C. says he was a good swimmer. After about age five, he and his pals would swim and "cut the fool" in Taylor Creek. He said back then the water in Taylor Creek was clear and clean and had a white sandy bottom. He said that today it is full of fertilizers from upstream and the bottom of Taylor Creek is thick layers of mud.

On the other hand, Moore's creek back then was filled with "raw sewage and gunk ... they had three big sewer pipes along with Moore's Creek delivering raw sewage from Fort Pierce neighborhoods into the Indian River."

With a small drag net J.C. and his brother started their first bait business. Once they each made a few dollars,

they'd go to the "show" and buy candy and sodas and forget about the bait business.

All of the boys had small sailing skiffs called "moths." They'd catch all sorts of fish, clams and oysters and what they didn't eat they would sell to Peterson's fish house. J.C. remembered skipping school one day and sailing his skiff down the Indian River to Mud Creek. The wind dropped out and he didn't get home till 9 o'clock at night. He said, "I really got a whoppin' that day. Whoop! I got a good one."

J.C. used to catch 20 or 30 trout in the river at a time trolling pork rinds on a hook. He used two hand lines off the corners of his moth sailboat. He mostly sold them to Peterson's Fish house.

His friends, **Todd Backus**, "**Beanie**" **Backus** (the renowned Florida landscape artist), **George Backus** and **Harry Hill** (An early Fort Pierce photographer) all had sailing skiffs and on Sundays they'd race them up and down the Indian River.

J.C. Monroe enlisted and served in the U.S. Navy in the Pacific during World War Two. After the war he spent his life as a commercial fisherman. He said, "It was a great life and I loved it."

Johnny Jones, another commercial fishing legend, was born Aug. 17, 1927 in St. Lucie, a village north of Fort Pierce, on land that his great- great- grandfather, Major

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Welcome - New Members

Sue Favorite, Membership Chairman

New members: Jim Freeman, Linda Hevey

Returned members: Wendy Kastner
Berger, Toombs, Elam and Gaines, CPAs

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).

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

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The President's Message

by Nancy Bennett

Happy New Year to all our members! We hope you all enjoyed a wonderful Christmas.

Once again, our society was represented in the annual Fort Pierce Christmas parade early in December. Many thanks to **John and Dana Langel** for letting us use their classic 1966 Land Rover.

There are still some exciting events ahead for us. We're looking forward to the annual St. Lucie County Fair, coming in late February and early March. We'll have a sign-up sheet available for those who want to volunteer to staff our exhibit booth.

Speaking of volunteers, our need is getting more urgent all the time. If we can't find enough people to staff the museum and help with other activities, we risk not being able to function effectively. If you can devote a few hours each week to our historical society, please let me know or contact one of our board members.

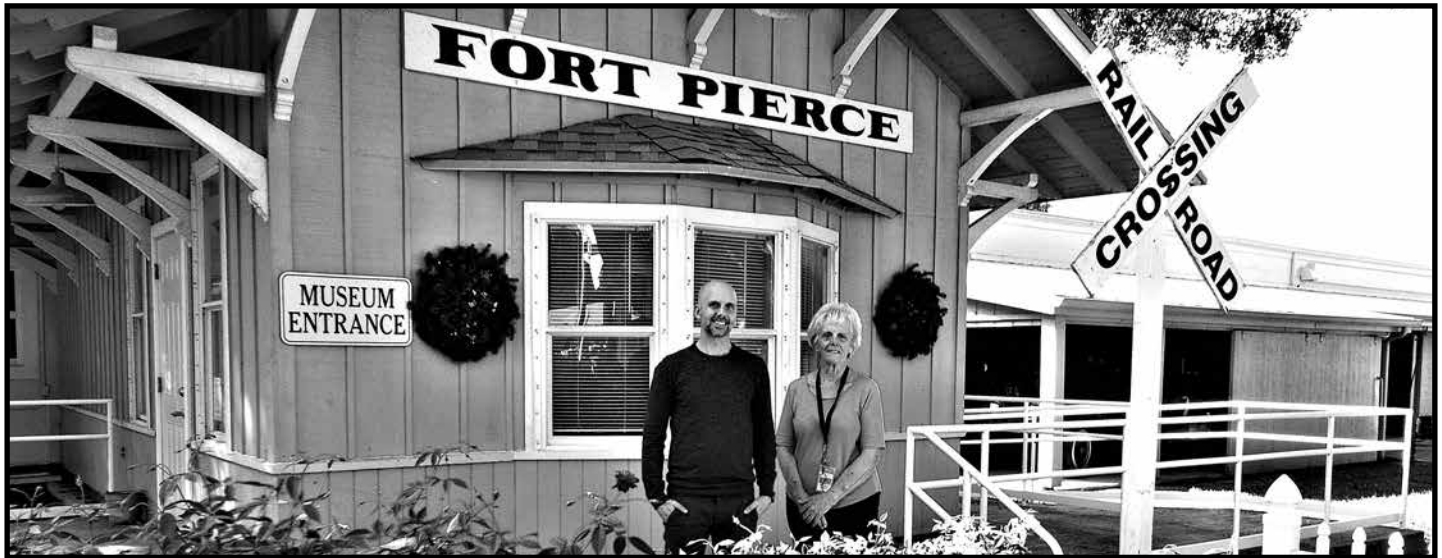
As always, we'll have a variety of interesting guest speakers at our monthly dinner meetings for the rest of our season. We hope to see you there. Δ

Bulletin Boosters

Help support a lively and useful SLHS Historical Quarterly. A \$10 donation will add your name to the Bulletin Boosters roster for a full year of Quarterly editions. Please give your \$10 donation to Treasurer Bob Burdge. Many thanks. Names of current bulletin Boosters are listed below (with expiration month and year).

Beate Hunton	10/22	Harold & Mae Holtsberg	10/22	Nels & Suzanne Hallstrom	10/22	Kenneth Roberts	1/22
Michael & Erlene Hucks	10/22	Cynthia Putnam	10/22	Larry Hardie	10/22	John Honea	1/22
Janis R. Brown	10/22	Michelle Franklin	7/22	Carl & Kathryn Hensley	10/22	Peggy Monahan	1/23
Herb & Judith Bopp	1/23	Deborah & Stephen Billis	4/23	Jeanie & Dick Lattner	10/22	Adrian Strickland	1/22
Jeannie McCorkle	1/22	Ernie & Judy Merrill	1/22	Norma McGuire	10/22	Charlene & R. N. "Koby"	
Margi Lloyd & Pete McLeod	10/22	Bob Burdge	1/22	Laura & Hoyt C. Murphy	10/22	Koblegard	1/22
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Elizabeth Lambertson	10/22	Noah & Bonnie Ludlum	4/22	Pam & Larry Blandford	10/22	Jarret & Jessica Romanello	7/22
John & Sallie Ventresco	10/22	Beth Stafford	7/22	J. Michael & Elaine Brennan	10/23	William & Fran Slat	1/23
Maureen & Gaylon Ware	10/22	Roger Miller	10/22	Tom & Kathy Gladwin	10/22	Buck Bryan	1/23
Ann Cali	4/23	Adele Lowe	10/22	Rhonda Hilson Realty	10/22	Mary Ann Bryan	1/23
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Jean Ellen Wilson	4/22	Thomas Bailey	10/22	Jean Dunn Spivey	1/22	Terri Sisson	1/23
		Richard & Priscilla Goff	10/22				

Danish historian visits Fort Pierce for research



Prof. Anders Rasmussen with SLHS President Nancy Bennett

A Danish university professor recently visited our historical society to conduct local research about **Louis Pio**, who was instrumental in founding the White City settlement in the mid-1890s. **Anders Bo Rasmussen, PhD.** is an associate professor of history at the University of Southern Denmark, an institution of about 20,000 students in the city of Odense.

Rasmussen's interests include Danish immigration to the United States and he has visited this country several times. His latest project centers on the career of Pio, a Danish socialist labor reformer of the late 1800s. Pio was jailed by his government and then came to America as an exile, helping to organize Danish immigrant colonies in the upper Midwest.

During the Columbian Exposition of 1893-94 in

Chicago, Pio persuaded several hundred Danish farmers to move to Florida, on land along **Henry Flagler's** new railroad. Pio's efforts had only modest success and the White City settlement struggled in its early years. In poor health, Pio returned to Chicago and died in June 1894. His name appears in some local property records of those days.

While here during early December, Rasmussen toured our exhibits at the Cobb building and in our museum, and examined documents in the SLHS archives. He also explored the White City and Jensen Beach areas before heading for Orlando to view documents at Rollins College. He stated, "My research here has been very productive. Thank you for a wonderful visit to St. Lucie County." Δ

Human skull fragments delivered to SLHS museum

One day in November a middle-aged local woman arrived at the museum bearing a metal case containing a fragmented human skull. The museum has been offered a wide variety of items through the years, but this may be the most unusual.

The woman earlier had phoned to offer the skull, saying she had found it in the attic of an old house she was clearing out after the death of a relative. She believed her father or grandfather had found the skull decades ago but she didn't know where or in what circumstances. Evidently the skull had been stored away and forgotten.

SLHS President **Nancy Bennett** first urged her to take the skull to the Sheriff's Office, but the woman seemed reluctant to talk with a law enforcement agency. Nancy explained the museum is not allowed to possess human

remains, but agreed to take the skull temporarily on condition that it would be turned over to authorities. The woman filled out the standard museum donation form with her contact information and a description of the artifact.

The skull fragments appeared to include most of the crown of the head, plus a partial jaw bone and some teeth. It was nested in paper inside a scuffed metal case. No one on the museum staff touched the fragments.

On Nov. 30 a Fort Pierce police officer and a detective came to get the skull. It is uncertain what will be done with it. We were hoping some university anthropologist could examine it and perhaps determine its age, ethnicity or other data. Perhaps that can still be done. Δ

Adventurous boys ... continued from page 1

James Paine had settled. Johnny said, "The Indian River was one of the first things we learned" and he was lucky to grow up in such a wonderful place. Johnny's grandfather made canvas shoes for all of the kids for wading to protect their feet from sting rays and oysters. He learned to make, mend and use nets. He once caught so many mullet in a cast net off a dock that he had to tie it off and run to get his grandfather to help him pull the net in.

Johnny used to harvest diamondback terrapins with his grandfather and put them in a pen at their dock until they had enough to ship north for terrapin soup. He would catch and crush blue crabs to feed the turtles. They'd catch loggerhead turtles for food. "Back then nobody had motors, not the normal people in Fort Pierce." They rowed or sailed their skiffs.

For turtles they used large mesh gill nets. They'd row up the river with an incoming tide and watch for turtles to sound. They would time it so they could ride the outgoing tide back home. Once they saw a turtle come up for air and were sure of its direction, they'd row fast around the front of it and circle the net. "They'll be in that circle but do not always get caught in the net right away... you see the corks bumpin' as they go along it, but eventually their flippers would get caught in the net." If his grandfather said they were going to get three turtles that day that was it. His grandfather always said, "We'll leave that turtle for next time." Johnny called this "conservationism."

There used to be a lot more manatees because "there were no motor boats to hit them" and the sea grass, their main food, was abundant. They would only kill one manatee at a time. It would provide meat for their family and neighbors. This was during the depression. They used a harpoon to kill sea cows. Nothing was wasted.

They wasted nothing including water for the garden. They would cut the top and bottom out of a 55 gallon drum and dig it into the ground. The water would come up into the drum, because the water level is only a few feet below the surface near the river. They would then dip buckets of water for the garden.

Johnny said they used to catch lots of sea trout in the Indian River. "Way back we used to just troll on our sailing boats. Later we put in Briggs and Stratton motors. As the time went on, we trolled trout here in the river using five cane polls rigged in a fan shape. First they used line with a feather. When a fish hit you'd fold the pole over and grab the line and pull it in. Sometimes you'd have five on at one time." He said as time went on, there was a lot more traffic and speedboats on the river and it was harder to catch a trout.

Johnny also had a little canvas skiff that he rowed everywhere in the river. Johnny and his grandfather

hunted and fished from this skiff in the Indian River and in the Savannas. They would hunt and fish in the fresh water estuaries all the way to Jensen Beach. They would bring home fresh fish and ducks.

Johnny said growing up on the Indian River was "just wonderful". After serving in the Merchant Marine and making many trips across the U-boat infested North Atlantic during World War Two, Johnny Jones carpentered and commercial king fished out of Fort Pierce for the rest of his days.

Tommy Taylor, born July 1, 1927, was a marine mechanic. He lived on 12th Street in Fort Pierce, but hung out at Peterson's dock with his best friend **Gene Hayes**, son of early Fort Pierce commercial fishing legend **Terrell "Pappy" Hayes**. He said that **G.T. Backus** of Backus Boat works built bantam sailboats for the local boys. They kept them at Peterson's dock. They were about 10 feet long and had flat bottoms and a centerboard. Like J.C. Monroe a decade earlier they raced them on the River on Sundays.

This was during wartime and the U.S. Navy had taken over the beaches and did not allow civilians east of the channel. Taylor said for mischief they would sail their little boats into the shallow grass flats on the east side of the river with their centerboards up. The sailors would chase them and run aground. The boys would sail by the grounded sailors and laugh. One day the sailors had an air boat and caught the boys. They said the reason they weren't allowed there was because the Navy was setting off explosions in the area. Tommy said they felt bad and never pulled that prank again.

Once, Tommy and his friend **Freddy Ray** were sailing in the Indian River several miles south of Fort Pierce. They headed into the shallow grass flats and failed to pull up the centerboard which hit bottom and tore out the hull. It sank and they swam and waded to the shore where the Navy was practicing mock invasions. A fellow manning a machine gun nest said, "Where the hell did you boys come from?" Then an officer sent a Jeep to take the boys to the Navy entrance gate at the south bridge and turned them loose. They walked to the Arcade Building in downtown Fort Pierce where Tommy's older brother had a soda shop. Their families were all there crying. They had found their sunken boat and believed the boys had drowned.

Tommy Taylor served in the Air National Guard and later won the Florida Distinguished Service Medal for heroic rescues during the 1949 hurricane.

All of these early river denizens appreciated the bountiful Indian River. Sadly, the crystal clear sandy bottom of Taylor Creek is long gone. Today the manatees and sea grasses in the lagoon are dying at alarming rates. But for these early young men, the river was a glorious paradise. Δ

Remembrances

Norman W. Platts

Descended from a pioneer local family, **Norman William Platts** died Nov. 15 at age 87. Born and raised in Fort Pierce and a graduate of local schools, he was the grandson of **Clyde Phillips Platts**, St. Lucie County's first physician.

Platts, a University of Florida graduate, managed his family's citrus groves and was active in community organizations. He was predeceased by his wife of 64 years, **Barbara Baker Platts**. Six children and eight grandchildren survive him.

Eleanor Rowe Taylor

Born in Kentucky, **Eleanor Rowe Taylor** came to Fort Pierce in 1953 and remained a local resident until she died Oct. 8 at age 88. She was a longtime teacher at Dan McCarty Middle School and Sun Grove Montessori School. She was a member of local arts organizations and volunteered at the Smithsonian Marine Ecosystems Exhibit.

She was predeceased by her husband, **Thomas O. Taylor**, with whom she operated a charter sailing business. She is survived by a sister, a daughter and a son.

Mary Wroblewski

Historical Society member and volunteer **Mary Taylor Wroblewski** died November 11 at age 90. She was born in Fort Pierce in 1931 and her parents were among St. Lucie County's early residents.

She was graduated from local schools and remained active in community projects, including volunteer work at the St. Lucie Regional History Center until shortly before her death. She was predeceased by her husband **Stan Wroblewski**, and one son. She is survived by two daughters.

Bonnie Kathleen Ludlum

Historical society member **Bonnie Kathleen Ludlum** died Nov. 8 at age 77. She grew up in Fort Pierce and was graduated from local schools. Her father, **David M. Fee Sr.** was a founding member of the St. Lucie historical Society.

She was a vice-president at First National Bank of Stuart and was active in civic groups here and in North Carolina. She is survived by her husband of 58 years, **Noah Ludlum**, plus two sisters, a son and a stepson. She was predeceased by a daughter **Kelly Jean Bowers** and a brother, **David M. Fee Jr.**

Kurt L. Wallach

Historical society member **Kurt L. Wallach** died Sept. 14 in Vero Beach at age 95. He was born in Germany in

1926. In 1933 following the Nazi takeover, his family fled Germany, going first to Holland and then to the United States.

He was graduated from Western Reserve University. As a Navy man during World War Two, Wallach trained in Fort Pierce for the underwater demolition teams and then served in the Pacific. He prospered in various businesses and has donated generously to the United States Holocaust museum and to Florida Atlantic University.

He frequently attended our society's dinner meetings and several years ago spoke to members about his wartime training at the Fort Pierce base. He was predeceased by one daughter, and is survived by his wife **Marilyn Wallach**, one son and two daughters. Δ

Shortage of volunteers is a persistent concern

The SLHS board of directors recently discussed the persistent shortage of volunteers staffing the museum and in other activities. Board member **Roger Miller**, who tallies a monthly volunteer report, said that in November the society had just 20 active volunteers – compared with 30 in the same month of 2020.

Understandably, volunteers come and go for varied reasons. Some move away or cut back on activities due to age or illness. There must be a continuous effort to replace those lost.

Longtime volunteer **Simone D'Addario** believes it's vital to have people with maturity and keen historical interest on the museum staff. "We're the ones who should be doing this to show our young people the history of their community," she said. "Without volunteers the museum would not be open," she added.

Under our agreement with the county, SLHS volunteers serve as greeters, cashiers, tour guides and special-events helpers. Board members are concerned that a volunteer shortage could harm the society's ability to staff the museum and participate in local activities.

Any member willing to devote a few hours each week should contact President **Nancy Bennett** or any board member. Δ

Memorial Contribution

The historical society has received a generous contribution from **Ms. Letitia Chapman**, in memory of our deceased member **Mary Wroblewski**. We greatly appreciate this memorial tribute. Δ

St. Lucie Historical Society, Inc.
P O Box 578
Fort Pierce, Florida 34954

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Membership Application

St. Lucie Historical Society, Inc.

Please join us in preserving our local heritage for future generations.

Name _____

Spouse's Name _____

Names and ages of minor children:

Address _____

City/State/Zip _____

Home Telephone _____

Business Telephone _____

Cell _____

Email _____

I/We wish to join the Society at the level indicated below.
Membership is from September through August.

New Renewal Individual (\$20.00)

Family (\$25.00) Business (\$50.00)

Please make checks payable to:

St. Lucie Historical Society, Inc
P O Box 578

Fort Pierce, Florida 34954-0578

For Information telephone: (772) 461-8020

General Meeting are held at:

The Elks Lodge

635 South 5th Street

Fort Pierce, Florida 34950

Society General Meetings are held on the 3rd Thursday of the month, from September through May. A meal is provided before the meeting at the price of \$13.00 per person. Reservations must be made for these meals no later than two days in advance of the meeting. To make reservations telephone (772) 461-8020 and leave a message. Reservations and your RSVP information by e-mail to: dinner@stluciehistoricalsociety.net. Dinner begins at 5:30 P.M. and the General Meeting Starts at 6:00 P.M.

Volunteers are Needed

If you have 3 1/2 hours that you can give once a week either in the morning or afternoon, please consider volunteering at the Museum.

Admission, to the museum, for St. Lucie Historical Society members is FREE. So come and take a tour.

The latest exhibit is St Lucie Families-Crafters of Local History.

The Pineapple Patch Gift Shop has a large selection of books of Florida historical value, cards, handmade Seminole Indian dolls, and baubles made by volunteers.

Museum Hours:

Tuesday through Saturday, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.