



The Historical Quarterly

of The St. Lucie Historical Society, Inc.

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Summer 2023

We owe gratitude to Lucille Rights for her outstanding career as historian, author, educator

By Ted Burrows

St. Lucie Historical Society members can be grateful that our friend **Lucille Rights** lived such a long life. It gave us all more time to enjoy her stimulating company, and for our communities to benefit from her skills at historic preservation and education.

Lucille R. Rights died May 21 in Stuart at age 95, after several years of declining health. Even as she became frail and her energy waned, Lucille's enthusiasm never faltered. Until recently she was a familiar presence at SLHS dinner meetings and participated in many of the society's projects.

Last year St. Lucie County's Board of Commissioners approved a proclamation praising Lucille's "faithful and dedicated service" over more than half a century. The proclamation, presented at the April 19, 2022 commission meeting, saluted her as "one of the Treasure Coast's most prominent historians" and as "an educator, author, archaeologist and volunteer."

Her death in May followed a serious fall at her home. She was survived by daughters **Julia Rights** and **Roberta Rights Murray**, son-in-law **Brett Browning Sr.** and grandson **Brett Browning Jr.** She was predeceased by her daughter **Catherine Rights Browning** and husband **William Murtough**.

Lucille was born and raised in Washington, D.C. and earned a degree in sociology from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. She arrived in Fort Pierce in 1952 and was employed for several years as a social worker. She took education courses at Florida Atlantic University and began a 25-year career as



Lucille R. Rights

a teacher in St. Lucie County public schools.

As a social studies educator, Lucille won numerous outstanding-teacher awards. With special activities and field trips to local historic sites, Lucille communicated to young people her fascination with Florida's past. Hundreds of her former students remember her with affection and respect.

In addition to teaching, Lucille conducted archaeological research at local historic sites. She was a leader in obtaining National Historic Places listings for the **Zora Neale Hurston** home, the St. Lucie Village

Historic District and the Desert Inn at Yeehaw junction.

Any review of Lucille's life and career surely would miss some noteworthy accomplishments. There were almost too many to count. No one could overlook her leadership qualities. With a combination of determination and good humor, she served at various times as president of the St. Lucie Historical Society, Stuart Heritage, St. Lucie Village Heritage, and as a charter member of the Southeast Archaeological Society.

A highlight of her career was publication of her 1994 book *A Portrait of St. Lucie County* which soon became a popular and much-admired overview of local history. She also wrote informative booklets for the school district and research papers for guidance of museum volunteers.

After St. Lucie County budget problems caused

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Welcome - New or Returning Members

Sue Favorite, Membership Chairman

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Christopher & Suzanne Widing • Robert & Judith Widing

Lisa & James Young

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The Historical Quarterly

of The St. Lucie Historical Society, Inc.

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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

Many friends and admirers of **Lucille Rights** gathered recently at the Dolphin Bar and Shrimp House beside the Indian River in Jensen Beach. There they paid tribute to one of our area's most distinguished historians and educators. Lucille died May 21, but our St. Lucie Historical Society and several other organizations will benefit far into the future from her devotion.

This was an appropriate setting for the gathering because of the restaurant's own historical significance. It was founded more than a half-century ago as entertainer Frances Langford's Outrigger.

People who have known and worked with Lucille on historical and educational projects were generous in their praise. Those who offered remarks included **Anne Sinnott, Perry Lloyd, Margi Lloyd, Richard McAfoos, Barbara Bass** and **James Barksdale**, among others.

Lucille's enthusiasm and good humor continued even while her health and vitality declined. She kept smiling and pitching in. When the St. Lucie County Commission last year issued a proclamation saluting her, it was a much deserved recognition of her decades of service to us all. 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).

Pam & Cole Harned-----7/24	Peggy Allen ----- 10/25	Jon & Maura Stanko----- 10/23
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Larry Hardie ----- 10/23	Katy Purcell----- 10/23	
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Artist to create memorial bench honoring Lucille Rights and daughter

A memorial bench soon will be created and placed on the museum grounds to honor **Lucille Rights**, who died on May 21, and her daughter **Catherine Rights Browning**, who died March 5, 2017. Both were former presidents of the St. Lucie Historical Society and contributed in many ways to the society's work. The society's board of directors recently voted unanimously in favor of this project.

Prominent local artist **Anita Prentiss** would produce the bench, decorated with inlaid tiles in a distinctive design created in consultation with the family. The bench, with a different shape from earlier benches, would be placed outside the museum



This photo shows the style of bench, but not the design, proposed for a memorial. The artist will create a distinctive tile design in consultation with the family.

Expert care for antique clock

The century-old Seth Thomas clock that hangs above our museum's check-in desk has recently undergone its periodic check-up, cleaning and adjustment and is now back in its usual spot.

Master craftsman **Mel Liebman** of The Clock Shop, in Fort Pierce's historic Arcade Building, 101 N. U.S. 1, Suite #123, did the work at no cost to the Historical Society.

The antique timepiece dates from the early 20th century, Liebman said, although its exact date of manufacture is uncertain. The clock requires occasional servicing by an expert to keep it operating properly.

We appreciate Mel Liebman's expertise and generosity. Δ

for use by visitors.

A contract with the artist is expected to be drawn up soon. The project would cost about \$3,000 and be completed by November. Donations are expected to cover most, if not all, costs of the project. According to the board's vote, any additional expenses would be paid from SLHS funds.

Memorial donations honoring Lucille Rights total more than \$2,200 as of the end of June.

Donations honoring Catherine Rights Browning total at least \$900. SLHS members wishing to contribute should contact President **Nancy Bennett** at the museum (phone 772-462-1795). Δ

SLHS to host history festival next January at museum

The St. Lucie Historical Society's board of directors has voted to host next year's annual history festival at the St. Lucie County Regional History Center on Seaway Drive. The event is set for Saturday Jan. 13, 2024.

This popular festival was originated by Indian River Magazine and in recent years was held in and around the Sunrise Theatre in downtown Fort Pierce. This year the historical society co-sponsored the event.

Preliminary planning is under way. The festival is expected to include special exhibits and activities inside the museum and around its grounds, entertainment, speakers and discussions on local topics, historical re-enactors and more. A fish fry by the Summerlin family also is planned.

The SLHS board is seeking exhibitors and vendors for the event, plus volunteers to help with essential tasks. Δ

LUCILLE... continued from page 1

the closure of the Regional History Center for several years, Lucille was very influential in getting county commissioners to reopen the museum in 2010, staffed by volunteers. “We would never have been able to reopen this museum without Lucille,” declared **Nancy Bennett**, president of the St. Lucie Historical Society. She stated “Lucille was very instrumental in developing our pioneer family gallery and in organizing tours for visiting school groups. She certainly was a wonderful friend.”

The following are some additional comments from people who have known and worked closely with Lucille Rights over the years.

Deborah Roberts Billis: “It has been an honor to serve on the SLHS board and be friends with Lucille for many years. As a native, I’m especially thankful for Lucille’s interest and study of the history of St. Lucie County that led to writing *A Portrait of St. Lucie County* so that we can see back in time to our roots and what has brought us to ‘today’s chapter of tomorrow’s history.’ I will fondly remember Lucille for her fierce independence, ready smile, quick wit and deep love of life, family,



Lucille Rights at a high point of her career, publication of her book “A Portrait of St. Lucie County.”



Lucille Rights receives proclamation from St. Lucie County Commission Chairman Sean Mitchell in April 2022, honoring her work as a historian and educator.

history and nature.”

Carolyn Bilotta McNeil: “We were the new kids on the block to the historical society, 2001. Understandably, people stay with their friends to mingle, but Lucille was different, so welcoming and kind to us. She would take time to converse with us. My mother **Lorena** had much respect for her too. I LOVED her.”

Sue Favorite: “Lucille was so knowledgeable and was always willing to talk history to anyone at any time. She was a big hit as a docent at the museum and it was a joy to watch the people’s reaction when they found they were being guided by the author of *A Portrait of St. Lucie County*. Lucille is so missed by her fellow museum volunteers.”

Ernie Merrill: “What a wealth of knowledge Lucille had, and it was amazing how she could remember the names of historical figures and authors. When visiting other museums, everyone would always ask me about Lucille, how she was doing, and would often mention how they had worked with her on a dig or project.” Δ

Feedback

Here are some recent visitors’ comments about the St. Lucie County Regional History Center, compiled from the guest book:

Debbie McCoy, Tallahassee: “Great stuff!”

The Edgar Family, Fort Pierce: “We had a great time on our treasure hunt!”

Brian & Dottie Summerlin, Aurora, OH: “Great museum. I will recommend!”

Alex Martinez, Eustis: “Hidden gem of history.”

Lea & Keli Scrapchansky, Brunswick, ME: “Loved it! It was great! Loved the presentation at the beginning as well.”

Pat and Laura Casadonte, Vero Beach: “Beautiful experience with amazing exhibits.”

Jennifer DeAngelo, Palm Bay: “So much packed in. You put your heart into it!”

Clark Family, Pataskala, OH: “Glad we stopped. Such a cool place.”

Louis & Janet Diann, Stuart: “One of the best museums we’ve ever visited!”

Healy Family, Queensbury, Bradford, England: “Very interesting!”

Deborah Bachar, Miami: “Incredible museum. Keep it!” Δ

Navy training occupied our island in a hot summer 80 years ago

It may seem difficult to imagine now, but during the summer of 1943 – just 80 years ago and well within a normal lifetime, our local stretches of Hutchinson Island throbbled with activity as the U.S. Navy Amphibious Training Base took shape and began preparing thousands of young Americans for the war effort.

Early in the war American military leaders realized that to retake Europe from the Germans, and Pacific islands from the Japanese, would require a strong amphibious warfare capability. Our forces had to be transported to hostile shores, landed there, then supplied and reinforced.

In late January 1943 the Navy chose our coastline as the site for a large base because Hutchinson Island then had relatively few inhabitants and large empty expanses. Fort Pierce also had a functional seaport for handling large ships and cargoes. Work began almost immediately and by that summer intensive training was under way while the base continued to expand, both north and south of the inlet.

An excellent overview of that exciting time is a book titled *World War II in Fort Pierce* produced in 1999 by historian **Robert A. Taylor**, PhD. He grew up in Fort Pierce, earned a doctorate at Florida State University and taught at Indian River State College and Florida Atlantic University. He now is dean of the College of Psychology and Liberal Arts at Florida Institute of Technology in Melbourne.

This small book is packed with photos and text showing how drastically the island was changed in a very short time. Taylor explained, “The first soldiers and sailors to arrive had to hack out campsites ... with borrowed tools while setting up a training schedule.... In a few months, Ft. Pierce was a major military post with

a national reputation [where] thousands of young men prepared for combat.”

Though technically a Navy base, this facility also trained men from the Army, the Marine Corps, Coast Guard and others.



This aerial photo shows the main layout of the base including barracks, tents and training sites south of the inlet. Outlying facilities were along both north and south beaches where access was restricted. U.S. Navy photo.

By the war’s end in 1945, more than 110,000 men had gone through training at the base in such skills as landing craft handling, gunnery, underwater demolition, communication, rescue and treatment of wounded, plus other specialties. Groups of around 500 men would come for training cycles of about eight weeks. They eventually would storm ashore under fire at beaches in France, Italy and many Pacific islands.

The base had a profound impact on this area’s civilian population. Local hotels, apartments and other large buildings became military housing to supplement the barracks and tents on the island. Local businesses provided supplies, and residents pitched in to provide hospitality. It was a time of intense pride. Everyone knew they were doing something important.

Taylor’s book is still in print, available through Arcadia Publishing in its “Images of America” series. Δ

Florida Facts

On Oct. 25, 1921 a devastating hurricane struck the Tampa Bay area, just as real estate development was beginning to take off in the famed “land boom.” It was the first hurricane to hit that area since 1848 and caused three deaths and an estimated \$10 million in damage. Tampa authorities, fearful of a negative impact on the real estate boom, downplayed the event as an unusual occurrence.

On Oct. 15, 1964, **Robert Lee “Bullet Bob” Hayes**, raced to a 100-yard dash gold medal at the Tokyo Olympic Games and became known as “the fastest man in the world.” He was a football and track star at Florida A&M University and went on to a successful pro football career with the Dallas Cowboys. Hayes died in 2002. Δ

St. Lucie Historical Society, Inc.
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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 _____

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

New Renewal Individual (\$20.00)

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P O Box 578

Fort Pierce, Florida 34954-0578

For Information telephone: (772) 461-8020

General Meetings 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 \$14.00 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.