

Siesta and Nokomis Beach Pavilions

Historic Context

Sarasota's barrier islands, or keys, have attracted human habitation for centuries. Current traffic congestion and full parking lots at any of the keys' beaches on a sunny day attests to their continuing popularity as places of habitation and recreation.

Archeological sites on Siesta and Casey Key reveal evidence of human long before white settlers arrived. During the late 1800s and early 1900s, these islands were sparsely inhabited, sometimes by fishermen who caught fish for sale in local markets and to passing vessels. Factors that contributed to sparse settlement on the barrier islands were the lack of arable farmland, lack of bridge access from the mainland, and mosquitoes.

From the 1800s to well into the 1900s, Siesta Key was known by a variety of names, including "Little Sarasota Key" and "Sarasota Key." The formation of the Siesta Land Company in 1907 by Harry Higel, Captain Louis Roberts (who had opened Roberts Hotel the previous year) and E.M. Arbogast marked the first attempt to develop the key. On the north end of the key, the Company platted "Siesta on the Gulf,"¹ dredged bayous, and built docks. Harry Higel operated the Siesta Post Office and built the Higelhurst Hotel. Few people moved to the key, however, (the 1910 US census listed thirty-one residents) and not until the first bridge opened in 1917² did the advertising effort result in increased use of the beaches by Sarasota residents and tourists. The name "Siesta" gradually came to be applied to the whole key and by 1952 it was officially Siesta Key.³

Farther south on the key, "Uncle Ben" Stickney's homestead gained a community-wide reputation for hospitality in the early 1900s. Stickney made his acreage available for picnic parties before there were any roads or established beaches on the key.⁴

Once the bridge opened and footpaths became primitive roads, the Gulf beaches became more popular. By the early 1920s, I. G. Archibald had built a bathing pavilion on Crescent Beach, the first such facility to provide dressing rooms.⁵ In a major road and bridge building effort by the new Sarasota County Government to connect the different parts of the county, a new Siesta Bridge opened in 1927 to replace the 1917 one, and a second bridge crossed at "Uncle Ben" Stickney's.⁶ By the end of the decade, Roger Flory advertised Roberts' Casino, the Mira Mar Casino, and the Gulf View Inn on the Gulf side of the island in his "Hotels and Apartments" brochures.⁷ Although several subdivisions were platted in the vicinity of Sarasota Beach (between Crescent Beach on the south and the Gulf View Inn and casinos on the north), little development took place until after World War II.

Casey Key, south of Siesta Key, was known in the 1800s as Chaise's Key and as Treasure Island because of treasure rumored to be buried there. It was named for Captain John Charles Casey, who helped map the area for the first U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey between 1848 and 1851, while he was in the region negotiating with the Seminoles for the US Army. A Florida map dated 1856 shows the name Casey's Pass, and later maps show the name Casey's Key.⁸

Early Venice pioneers and visitors hunted animals such as raccoon, bobcats and panthers on the key, as well as gathered turtle eggs and cut buttonwood, mangrove and cedar. As early as the 1870's, residents complained of too many turtle egg hunters on the beach. Isaac Shumard, a pioneer from Missouri, moved to the northern end of the

Key with his family in the early 1900s. They and neighbors developed a bee industry. Zachariah Dryman established a homestead on more than 100 acres south of Blackburn's, along the bay that later became known as Dryman Bay.⁹

The Blackburn Point Bridge linked the north end of Casey Key to the mainland in 1926.

Three years earlier, E.C. Warren had constructed a toll bridge linking the mainland with the Treasure Island section of the key at the south end. This bridge was located in the vicinity of the current bridge on Albee Rd.¹⁰ The Depression and world war resulted in stagnant growth throughout much of the county and the southern area of Casey Key remained essentially undeveloped before World War II.¹¹

After the war, Sarasota County experienced a major period of growth, during which its population increased by 80% between 1940 and 1950, and more than 2.5 times in the following decade.¹² With easy access and the use of DDT and other means to control mosquitoes, the keys became very desirable for development as residential areas. Siesta Key became a "Mecca" for local artists and writers. Authors MacKinlay Kantor and John D. MacDonald, artists such as landscape painter Helen Sawyer and her portrait artist husband, Jerry Farnsworth, are but a few Siesta Key notables.¹³ International recognition for the key came when, in 1950, National Geographic Magazine cited Siesta beach as one of the four most beautiful beaches in the world.¹⁴

Recognizing the pressure on beach property from the growing population, in 1950 several Siesta Key residents urged the Sarasota Board of County Commissioners (BCC) to "protect the public interest" in beaches. In 1952 the BCC held a special bond election to authorize the expenditure of \$250,000 to acquire public beach sites in the county. Support for the bonds carried the election with 77% of the votes. The BCC appointed a Beach Committee to identify beach properties for acquisition. One of these was a Siesta Key parcel, with 1100 feet of Gulf beach, which was purchased from Harry Gregg for \$80,000. With the later purchase of additional lots, Siesta Beach Park came to include 40 acres with 2400 feet of Gulf frontage.¹⁵

To enhance the park facility, the County Commissioners hired architect Tim Siebert to design a pavilion. The initial structure was dedicated in the spring of 1960.¹⁶

After World War II, residents of the Nokomis area continued to use the southern end of Casey Key for day picnics and recreation. Not anticipating that the beautiful beach areas might not be available for public use some day, in 1947 they reacted quickly upon seeing a sign advertising the beach area for sale. Alex Knight, a real estate agent from Bradenton, had purchased the land. Several neighbors formed a Committee and requested the Sarasota Board of County Commission to buy the land. The Commission refused, stating that the county did not have the money, but suggested a joint effort. If the citizens could raise \$5200 toward the purchase, the county could match the funds with a left-over war fund.¹⁷ The residents formed the Nokomis Community Beach Club and contacted Alex Knight, who agreed to sell the land to the county for cost, as long as it would remain a public beach. The beach was sold to subscribers who became members of the club for \$29.50 per foot. \$5200 was collected. Members of the club cleared the land, drilled a well, planted trees, and erected a small shelter. Commissioner Glen Leach, the head of the Beach Committee, facilitated the process whereby the beach was legally turned over to the County, thus insuring that it would remain a public beach.¹⁸

By July 1954, with additional beach frontage having been acquired, preliminary work had begun on a new pavilion, designed by architect Jack West.¹⁹ In May of the following year, the Maticka Construction Company was awarded a contract for approximately \$28,000 to provide a pavilion and bathhouse, with covered walkway between, benches and tables, and a parking area. The beach was dedicated on February 12, 1956.²⁰

Architectural Context: The Sarasota School of Architecture

The earliest designs of the Sarasota School of architecture were based upon a conscious design philosophy developed by Paul Rudolph in 1947 in association with Ralph Twitchell. This philosophy was built upon the tenants of clarity of design, maximum economy of means, simple overall volumes penetrating vertically and horizontally, clear geometry floating above the Florida landscape, honest in details and in structural connections. Ralph Twitchell, an early Sarasota architect is credited by most people as being the “grandfather” of the Sarasota school of architecture. Although his work in Sarasota dates from the 1920’s, it was in the late 1930’s that his designs grew more modern with a notable emphasis on clean fluid building lines and a lack of ornamentation.

It was after World War II that some of the most interesting examples of the Sarasota School of Architecture were completed. Many of these structures took advantage of building technologies and materials that were developed as part of the war effort. The regional concentration of the resources distinguishes the buildings of the Sarasota School of Architecture as Sarasota County’s own unique architectural legacy.

Both the Nokomis and Siesta Key Beach Pavilions are associated with Sarasota’s modern movement, the Sarasota School of Architecture, by virtue of their designs and their architects, Jack West and Edward (Tim) Seibert. The pavilions reflect this association by their simple geometric plans, strong horizontality, broad roof overhangs, and dynamic interplay between indoor and outdoor spaces. The building’s designs serve to bring the outdoors in, a central tenant of the movement’s design philosophy.

Nokomis Beach Pavilion

The Nokomis Beach Pavilion was built in 1954 to serve as Sarasota County’s first beach pavilion. Designed by architect, Jack West a prominent member of the Sarasota School of Architecture the pavilion and associated plaza provide a classic example of the minimalist forms associated with mid-century modern architecture. The complex consists of an open pavilion and a building which originally housed restrooms, changing rooms, and showers, both of which are connected by a covered walkway. In addition the site included an expansive paved plaza with a planting area and fountain. Elements of these structures typical of the Sarasota School of Architecture include flat thin roofs on multiple planes, ribbon windows, a design that creates a strong interplay between interior and exterior spaces, and bathhouse built of stacked Ocala block.

Over time, this facility has suffered from deferred maintenance as well as insensitive renovations. For example, in an effort to cut down on the need for frequent painting, the thin posts were boxed in with concrete block that was then stuccoed, significantly affecting the delicacy of the design. Additionally the continuous exposure of the pavilion

to salt air has resulted in the expansion of metal components and failure of a portion of the roof system which in turn resulted in the eventual collapse of a section of the pavilion ceiling recently.

Jack West

Born in Illinois in 1922, Jack West served in the Navy in the Pacific during World War II. Afterwards he attended Yale University School of Architecture, where he was awarded his Bachelor of Architecture degree in 1949. After graduation from Yale, Jack West traveled to Sarasota to find out more about the sleek, modern buildings that were being designed here by the architectural firm of Rudolph and Twitchell. West worked periodically with Ralph Twitchell and Paul Rudolph, first as draftsman and then later after passing the Florida Architectural Board exams in 1950 as an architect. In 1951 West resigned from the firm of Twitchell and Rudolph to open his own firm.

After a brief period of time working in southern California, Jack West returned to Sarasota and his own practice. From 1953 to 1954, after Paul Rudolph opened his own practice, Jack West formed a partnership with Ralph Twitchell. In 1956 West formed a partnership with architect Beth Waters, the firm of West and Water lasted until 1960. West designed the Englewood Elementary School Addition and the Fruitville Elementary School Addition with Bolton McBryde. In 1957 the firm of West and Waters in partnership with Bolton McBride, an experienced school architect practicing in Fort Myers, designed additions to Tuttle and Fruitville Elementary Schools. Working with Terry Rowe, a local interior designer, West designed the Courtyard House, on Bird Key, which won the Homes for Better Living Award. In 1965, West designed Sarasota City Hall and formed an association with Rolland W. Sellev to do U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development work. In 1966 West formed architecture and engineering partnership with Al Conyers. The firm of West and Conyers/Architects and Engineers lasted well into the 1990's.

Siesta Key Beach Pavilion

The Siesta Key Beach Pavilion was dedicated in 1960. Published in Architectural Record of August 1963 the building was recognized as notable for its use of low maintenance materials like reinforced concrete, and concrete block. According to this same article the pavilion was constructed using columns that were pre-cast on site then hoisted into position, and beams that were poured in place. Pre-cast, pre-stressed, double tee joists, were laid across the frame, to form the roof of the shade pavilion. An underground concrete bulkhead wall was put in place at the time of construction to protect the facility against storms.

According to Walt Rothenbach Jr., Recreation Supervisor for Sarasota County by July of 1963 the public restrooms was through the concession stand, requiring that the restrooms close when the concession stand was closed. Later, access to the restrooms was changed, with the entry to the men's room on the Beach Road side of the building and access to the women's room on the Gulf side. Late in the 1980's when the building was renovated, access to the restrooms was changed again, this time to its present configuration, with both doors on the Gulf side of the building.

Over time Siesta Key Public Beach has expanded. According to Walt Rothenbach Jr., in 1965 land was acquired to the north of the beach pavilion adding an additional 300' of beach frontage. A series of beach cottages were included as part of this acquisition, one of which was moved to Turtle Beach and still serves as restrooms and meeting rooms there. During the 1970's the land holding was expanded to the south with the purchase of approximately 30 acres of property owned by the Greg family. Mr. Hugh Greg was the former governor of New Hampshire who retired to Siesta Key and built the Summerhouse restaurant there in 1975.

Edward (Tim) Seibert

One of the architects associated with the Sarasota School of Architecture is Edward J. (Tim) Seibert. Seibert, the child of Edward C. and Elizabeth G. Seibert, was born in Seattle Washington on September 27, 1927. He and his mother moved to Sarasota Florida in 1942, while his father served in the U.S. Navy. In 1945 Tim Seibert joined the U.S. Navy flight program where he served until his honorable discharge in 1946. From 1947 until 1950, Seibert attended Stanford University, where he majored in art.

Tim Seibert was drawn back to Sarasota in 1950 by a Saturday Evening Post advertisement for the Revere Quality House, an award winning residence designed by Ralph Twitchell and Paul Rudolph. On his second day back, he was hired by Philip Hiss to draft the drawings for his home on New Pass. In September of that year he enrolled at the University of Florida School of Architecture where he graduated in 1953. Upon graduation, he worked for various local firms, as work became available including Paul Rudolph and Ralph and Bill Zimmerman. In addition, he worked for contractor, Jack Twitchell, the builder of many of the structures associated with the Sarasota School of Architecture. After his work with Jack Twitchell, Seibert was hired by Philip Hiss as the "staff architect" for the Lido Shores subdivision.

In 1955, Seibert received his architectural registration in Florida and opened his own office. Since then, Tim Seibert has developed a remarkable body of work, which has remained true to the concepts associated with the Sarasota School of Architecture. His beliefs in maintaining honesty in architecture through clarity of design and an articulation of details has never been lost in his buildings. As a tribute to the quality of his architecture, Tim Seibert has twice been the recipient of the prestigious Florida AIA Test of Time award, first for the John D. McDonald House and then recently for the Cooney House.

¹ Sarasota County Plat Book A, p.37.

² *Sarasota Times*, May 3, 1917.

³ Lillian Burns and John McCarthy, "Siesta Public Beach Marker Narrative," 1986, p.1, at Sarasota County History Center, Sarasota, FL.

⁴ Ann Shank, "Uncle Ben Stickney's," *Sarasota Herald-Tribune*, April 11, 1995.

⁵ Burns and McCarthy, p.1.

⁶ Karl H. Grismer, *The Story of Sarasota*, M. E. Russell, Sarasota, Florida, 1946, p.230.

⁷ Roger V. Flory, "Hotels and Apartments in Sarasota, Florida," 1928; Flory, "Hotels and Apartments," 1929.

⁸ Janet Snyder Matthews, *Edge of Wilderness*, Coastal Press, Sarasota, Florida, 1983, pp. 207-208.

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- ⁹ Janet Snyder Matthews, Venice: Journey From Horse and Chaise, Pine Level Press, Inc., Sarasota, Florida, 1989, pp. 151-153.
- ¹⁰ Grismer, p.230.
- ¹¹ Matthews, Venice, pp. 200, 313-314.
- ¹² Allen Morris, The Florida Handbook, Third Edition, Peninsular Publishing Co., Tallahassee, Florida, 1952, p.341; Allen Morris, The Florida Handbook 1961-1962, 1961, p. 378.
- ¹³ Polk's Sarasota and Venice City Directory 1955, R. L. Polk & Co. Publishers, Richmond, Virginia, 1954.
- ¹⁴ Del Marth, Yesterday's Sarasota Including Sarasota County, E. A. Seemann Publishing, Inc., Miami, Florida, 1973, p.148.
- ¹⁵ Burns and McCarthy, pp. 3-4.
- ¹⁶ *Sarasota Journal*, March 24, 1960; *Sarasota Herald-Tribune*, June 5, 1960.
- ¹⁷ "They Saved the Beach," at Venice Archives and Area Historical Collection, Venice, Florida.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, *Venice Gondolier*, March 29, 1951.
- ¹⁹ Sarasota County Deed Book 272, p. 590; *Venice Gondolier*, August 20, 1953 and December 12, 1954.
- ²⁰ *Sarasota Herald-Tribune*, February 13, 1956.