



WEST PASCO HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Newsletter

October 2015

We celebrate our building's 100th anniversary



The West Pasco Historical Society celebrated the 100th anniversary of our building on Aug. 29. Our building, know as the Old Frierson Place, had been the residence of Ed and Willie Maude Frierson for many years. It originally served as the Seven Springs schoolhouse, from 1915 to 1925. The building was originally located on what is now Little Road. It was donated to the historical society by Alex Acey in 1981. It was then moved—minus the back porch and outhouse—to Sims Park.

The building is older than any of the existing buildings in the downtown business district, although it is not quite as old

as a few of the homes around Orange Lake.

Pictured here with the birthday cake are Patrick “Eddie” Russ and his wife and Bob Langford. Mr. Russ is descended from the Frierson family and remembers playing in the home. He donated some textbooks that were used when the building was a schoolhouse.

The year 1915 also marks the 100th anniversary of the establishment of the New Port Richey post office, and thus the name of the town. New Port Richey was incorporated in 1924.

From our President, Bob Langford



We are now into fall and Halloween is just around the corner. We have so many exciting things coming up. For more details on any Historical Society event just call 727-847-0680 or check our web site at westpascohistoricalsociety.org.

Beginning with the Gulf High Homecoming Parade that will take place down Grand Boulevard on October 16th, 4 PM and a Gulf High celebration at the closed Railroad Square at 7 PM.

The Annual Art Walk Festival will begin at 10 AM on the 17th of October along with the Friends of the New Port Richey Library's book sale going on along Grand Boulevard.

Here at the West Pasco Historical Society we will be resurrecting Founders Day on October 24th. We will be celebrating our founding families and offering the opportunity for you to meet and talk with these folks and their families. There will be tours at the Hacienda Hotel in small guided groups for a small suggested donation of \$12 that will be split between the West Pasco Historical Society and the newly formed non-profit group, the Friends of the Hacienda and Historical New Port Richey. Several businesses in town will be giving discounts with your wristband when you donate money to the groups. There will also be a very interesting slide show at the Business Incubator along with the Historical Society and the Rao Musunuru M.D. Museum and Library open for your convenience. The Hacienda tours will be on Friday the 23rd, 4 PM - 7 PM and Saturday from 9 AM - 2 PM. There will be refreshments available, along with membership applications for both groups. Tee shirts representing The Friends of the Hacienda and Historical New Port Richey will be given out free with the purchase of memberships and will also be available to buy without a membership.

On November 7 beginning at 10 AM there will be a Historic Walking Tour with the New Port Richey Parks and Recreation Center.

November 13th and 14th the Pasco Fine Arts Council will be holding its Art Annual Friday at 7 PM – 8:30 PM and Art Celebration and Exhibition Saturday from 10 AM - 4 PM at the old Grove Park Center. Call 727-845-7322 for details.

On December 4th there will be a Wassail Bowl celebration at the Historical Society and Santa will be there on both the 4th and 5th in his sleigh in the front yard of the Historical Society.

The Boat Parade will be Dec. 5 at 6:30 p.m. The Holiday Parade will be Dec. 12 at 6 p.m.

I have appointed Ann Rusaw James as our new Treasurer after Dani Brooks unexpectedly resigned her duties. Ann will become a Director at the next Board Meeting on November 4th. We appreciate Dani's service to the Society after replacing Lisa Carey who did such a great job for so many years.

Bob Langford



WEST PASCO HISTORICAL SOCIETY NEWSLETTER MEMBER PROFILE: Dan Callaghan

At the age of 73, Dan Callaghan is glad that he belongs to the West Pasco Historical Society for the rest of his life, and that he is fortunate to serve as a member of the board.

He moved here to New Port Richey in 1997, and was slowly caught up into participating in the museum's events by former president and now Museum Director, Terry Kline.

A stranger in a strange land, Dan found Florida to be a beautiful state, with its natural beauty dwindling; and a backward state when it came to treating all of its citizens and visitors in a respectful manner. His service in the Marine Corps and later in the Special Forces, and growing up in a diverse neighborhood north of New York City led him to expect that people of color should be and are a part of one's everyday life, and that such diversity enriches us all as Americans and human beings.

His wife Anni, from Denmark, also expected her society to show tolerance, respect, and diversity, so they both have devoted much of their time to making this happen around them. They know that the problems of this world, this state, and this community are complex and overwhelming, but even though they appreciate they are not likely to change the world, they actively seek to keep the world and its ills from changing them.

Dan and his wife Anni take an active role in the African American Club of Pasco. They have helped organize programs to celebrate Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s life, and to celebrate Juneteenth, when not only blacks but whites were freed from the burden of slavery.

They also played an active role in ending what they believe to be more than 80 years of insults toward American Indian culture and spirituality by misguided people keeping alive the prejudices and lies from when the Chasco Fiesta was created, when American Indians were seen as savages, heathens and pagans. With the help of Lakota Indian activist Russell Means, and nature writer Peter Matthiessen, and a host of other good people, Dan challenged white civic and business leaders choosing to dress up like Injuns, misrepresenting their culture and spirituality in order to have a New-Orleans-inspired good time!

Dan tried to end that Krewe of Chasco through letters, and court challenges, and local protests, and after four years, chained himself to a roadway to stop the Krewe of Chasco float, leading to his conviction and imprisonment.

At the beginning of his trial, the judge informed Dan that he had turned down three plea bargains and suggested Dan consider accepting one of them rather than face a possible six years in state prison. Dan informed the judge that he believed the trial would be the best possible way to get Pasco citizens to end the Krewe of Chasco, and that he wanted to proceed. After the guilty verdict, Dan appealed his sentence to the Florida Appellate Court, the Florida Supreme Court, the U.S. District Court in Tampa, the Federal Appeals Court in Atlanta, and finally, all without an attorney's assistance, to the United States Supreme Court, which declined to add the case to their docket.

By his involvement in the Rao Musunuru M.D. Museum, Dan has worked to ensure that people of color are represented in our books and files, and is pleased that we now have an African American on our Board. Among our presentations are those dealing with the history of Blacks and American Indians here

in Florida. Dan is also deeply gratified with the friendships that he and Anni have made among our members. "I am, indeed, fortunate to have learned and to have helped preserve the history of West Pasco County."



"Al Capone's chair" donated to the museum

It's probably not really Al Capone's chair, but that's what Ed and Patti Nixon called it before they donated this item to the Rao Musunuru Museum and Library recently. The chair is certainly a relic from the old Moon Lake Lodge and Dude Ranch, which was a noted resort mainly in the years before World War II. Local lore has it that Al Capone stayed there, but he actually was in prison during most of this period.

The chair was among some old item stored in a shed that the Nixons were offered when a relative died about 13 years ago. It's not clear how the relative acquired the chair, but she was known to frequent flea markets.

The pictures show the donated chair, not yet put on display at the museum, and an old post card picture showing the chairs of the same design in the lodge.



New Port Richey's Hollywood Connection – Who Really Was Here?



Movie star Thomas Meighan (center) in New Port Richey. The photo may have been taken at the dedication of the Main Street bridge in 1927.

As most local residents know, in the 1920s a number of Hollywood celebrities were attracted to New Port Richey and there was hope that a movie colony might be established here. A theater was built in 1926 and named for Thomas Meighan, a leading movie star.

The tales about our notable visitors and residents have probably been enhanced over the years, and some of the local lore is undoubtedly untrue. In this article, we will attempt to name who did and who did not visit New Port Richey.

THOMAS MEIGHAN, a famous movie star mainly in the 1920s, built a home in New Port Richey. It no longer exists. He wintered here beginning in 1928, when his home was completed. The local weekly newspaper quoted Meighan as saying, "I love this city. I have registered here, I shall vote here and make New Port Richey my home." An elegant theater was completed in 1926 and named the Meighan Theatre. Meighan (pronounced MEE-an) was not present for the opening of the theater but sent a congratulatory telegram. In 1930 he made an appearance between the two showings of his movie *The Racket* and was greeted by "resounding cheers" from the local audience, according to a newspaper story at the time. Meighan intended to shoot the movie *We're All Gamblers* in New Port Richey, but the movie was instead filmed in Miami. His last visit here seems to have been in 1933.

GLORIA SWANSON, one of the most prominent stars of the silent movie era, would be New Port Richey's most famous resident if she did live here. She is said to have stayed at the Hacienda Hotel, her home is supposed to be on the Pithlachascotee River, and a parking lot here is named for her. However, we can

find no contemporary account describing a visit. On Jan. 11, 1930, the Associated Press reported that Swanson was expected to arrive in New Port Richey "within the next few days to be the guest of Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Meighan, at their Jasmine Point home." The *Tampa Morning Tribune* carried this news but no follow-up story confirming a visit. The *New Port Richey Press* surely carried a banner headline announcing her planned visit, but the newspapers of Jan. 3 and Jan. 10, are lost. On Jan. 17, 1930, the *New Port Richey Press* reported that Meighan and his wife and the Broadway star Madeline Cameron made an appearance at the Meighan Theatre, but there is no mention of Swanson. In 1929 Charles Herms compiled a list of notable visitors to New Port Richey and he included Swanson. In 1983, when Swanson died, a local newspaper reported that Pauline Stevenson Ash recalled that as a teenager she spotted Swanson at the Hacienda. But Mrs. Ash described Swanson, inaccurately, as blond and tall. Swanson was, however, part of a group of Hollywood investors who purchased property here. Our verdict: she probably never visited New Port Richey. But if you have evidence otherwise, let us know at westpascohistoricalsociety@gmail.com.

ED WYNN, a noted star of radio and movies, visited New Port Richey on at least several occasions. Reginald Sims, son of George Sims, recalled that Wynn "came down for several weeks visit with my parents each winter." Wynn wrote the play *The Perfect Fool* while fishing on the Pithlachascotee River. On Nov. 12, 1926, Wynn arrived in New Port Richey "to write an original story for his comedy to be made next month by Famous Players," according to the *Tampa Morning Tribune*. He was the guest of Mr. and Mrs. George R. Sims. On Saturday, Nov. 13, 1926, the new hotel under construction was formally christened "The Hacienda." The speaker of the afternoon was Ed Wynn, who expressed his great pleasure at being in "the most beautiful city imaginable." Wynn later owned property in the business district but did not live here.

IRVING BERLIN, while not a Hollywood figure, is the composer of *God Bless America*, *White Christmas*, and *Easter Parade*. On Jan. 1, 1926, the *New Port Richey Press* carried the banner headline

FAMOUS MILLIONAIRES OF BROADWAY BUY IN NEW PORT RICHEY

and named Meighan, Paul Whiteman, and Irving Berlin. The newspaper included a photo of a check for \$825 signed by Irving Berlin for "first payment for a homesite." It would probably take a records search to verify that Berlin actually bought property, if the purchase was done under his name. A biography of Whiteman says that Whiteman helped to match buyers and sellers in the 1926 Florida land boom but implies that he did not buy property himself. Our verdict: neither Whiteman nor Berlin ever visited.

AL CAPONE, although not a Hollywood figure, is said to have visited Moon Lake Gardens and Dude Ranch. The lodge formally opened in 1933 and the dude ranch in 1937, but Capone went to prison in 1932.

GENE SARAZEN was also not a Hollywood figure, but was one of the greatest golfers of all time. His home here was completed in 1928. It still exists, at 7151 Jasmin Drive. Sarazen invented what is considered to be the first true sand wedge, which he called the sand-iron, in New Port Richey in 1931.

Some other notable visitors to New Port Richey in the 1920s are as follows: William Jennings Bryan, Raymond Hitchcock, Gloria Zabelle Hitchcock, Ernest Truex, Earl Benham, Ring Lardner, Edna Wallace Hopper, Charlotte Greenwood, John Conrad, Rex Beach, Irving Batchelor, Grantland Rice, Frank Case, Oscar Shaw, Jack Hazzard, and Jesse L. Lasky.