

Shaping the Dream: A Survey of Post-World War II St. Petersburg, 1946-1963

by

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## Table of Contents

Abstract	ii
Introduction	1
Chapter One: The Old-Time Magic	10
Shadows in the Sunshine	16
A Successful Formula	25
Chapter Two: A Bridge, a Road, a Plaza	28
Spans Across the Bay	30
The Missing Link	38
From Marsh to Merchandise	42
Chapter Three: Palmetto, Pastures, People	55
Acres of Houses	56
Segregated subdivisions	61
Land from water	65
New Industrial Might	72
Chapter Four: Downtown Dead or Alive	78
The Man with the Plan	85
Integration on the Horizon	88
Urban Renewal – or Not	95
Chapter Five: Changes in Attitudes	101
Out with the Old	103
From the Ames Brothers to Elvis	108
It’s Cool to Watch the Tube	118
Jim Crow Begins to Fade	122
Conclusions	130
Bibliography	139

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ABSTRACT

St. Petersburg stood on the cusp of great change in 1946. Returning veterans sought jobs and housing, and St. Petersburg experienced its first major growth era since the real estate boom of the 1920s. The decade of the 1950s saw the city's population leap from 96,738 to 181,298, an 87 percent increase driven by boosters and national publicity about the city's leisurely ambience. Tract houses replaced remaining pockets of pasture and pine trees as subdivisions sprawled toward the city limits and beyond. On fertile truck-farming acreage called Goose Pond, developers built Central Plaza, a shopping center positioned to drain business energy from an aging downtown. Space-age industry brought light manufacturing to supplement traditional economic bases. The Sunshine Skyway opened in 1954 and less than a year later, road builders completed U.S. 19 through St. Petersburg, providing more economic advantages. Civil Rights advances shook Jim Crow, as African Americans sued to integrate swimming venues and challenged "red lines" defining where people of color could live and open businesses. Television began opening new horizons and changing leisure habits as air conditioning brought residents a new dimension of indoor comfort. City leaders reaching for a dynamic civic image worried about the city's reputation as a haven for the elderly, but education leaders ordered three new high schools built to serve the burgeoning white student population. The mid-century boom revived an optimistic spirit while raising

issues such as land use, the downtown's future, and race relations against a backdrop of cultural change and the search for civic identity. As reflected in articles, interviews, reports, and manuscripts, St. Petersburg began redefining itself for the twentieth century's second half. This study surveys, describes, and analyzes the transformative events.

## Introduction

Charles Eloshway, a World War II serviceman bound for the Maritime Training Station at Bayboro Harbor, rolled into St. Petersburg's Seaboard depot on a balmy February day in 1942. Fresh from Pennsylvania coal country, Eloshway had left behind a winter storm and temperatures reeling below freezing.<sup>1</sup>

"When I arrived here, it was freezing up there," Eloshway said. "When the train pulled up, there were all these young women prancing around . . . I was impressed. They were all dressed in white. That was summer wear for Pennsylvania. That was my very first impression of St. Pete and I fell in love with it."<sup>2</sup>

War or no war, Eloshway could see better times ahead. So, too, could others in St. Petersburg. As early as 1943, as the nation operated on full war footing and hopeful patriots made "Comin' In on a Wing and a Prayer" a top musical hit, far-sighted residents suspected their pleasant, little city stood on the cusp of dramatic growth. The influential *St. Petersburg Times* already was urging "a bold overall plan" to prepare for a population surge some thought might soar as high as 500,000.<sup>3</sup>

The visions of prescient leaders began coming true soon after World War II ended. "St. Petersburg has grown too fast. Or at least too fast for intelligent planning to keep pace with development," warned a 1950 *Times* editorial recognizing the first surges

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<sup>1</sup> *St. Petersburg Times*, "Weather," February 15, 1942, 30.

<sup>2</sup> Charles Eloshway, interview by Jon Wilson about post-World War II St. Petersburg, St. Petersburg, January 13, 2009.

<sup>3</sup> *St. Petersburg Times*, "Can St. Petersburg Agree On A Bold Over-All Plan? We Offer Some Suggestions On Our Future Destiny," November 28, 1943, 6.

of expansion. This thesis explores the themes the editorial suggests: St. Petersburg's dramatic postwar growth; the issues attendant to rapid change; and the transformation transformation in civic philosophy that came with new technologies, a strengthening civil rights movement, a fledgling suburban subculture, rapid demographic change, and concern about the city's image. The thesis surveys the time period 1946-1963, with emphasis on the 1950s.<sup>4</sup>

It argues that the most important events during this period were the Sunshine Skyway's bridging of lower Tampa Bay, the completion of U.S. Highway 19, and the building of Central Plaza, the first regional shopping center in the area and the first major threat to the commercial hegemony of St. Petersburg's old downtown. Coming within a three-year span, 1952-1955, these developments were critical to St. Petersburg's overall expansion and prosperity. All were staunchly supported by business leaders and the informal power structure that included elected city officials, the St. Petersburg Chamber of Commerce, and the highly influential *St. Petersburg Times*. Their purpose was to make St. Petersburg a prosperous, dynamic city, and few, if any serious opponents emerged to challenge that vision.

Resources utilized include books both popular and academic, periodicals, newspapers, films, government documents, theses and dissertations, maps, city directories, memoranda, photographs, personal interviews, and period ephemera. *The St. Petersburg Times* weighed heavily in the research because the newspaper and its leaders played an influential role in virtually every aspect of the postwar dynamic; the newspaper was also the most consistently reliable primary source. The years under study are nearly identical to those of the so-called Baby Boom Era, but reflect this construct only

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<sup>4</sup> "Tale of Two Cities," *St. Petersburg Times*, December 28, 1950, 6.

coincidentally. They were selected as bookend representatives of postwar St. Petersburg because 1946 saw the first wave of new residents looking for a fresh start after the traumas of war and economic depression; 1963 saw the end of the Atlantic Coast Railroad service downtown, a departure of great symbolic magnitude in addition to being a practical step that city fathers believed necessary to improve the original city center and keep it relevant to the rest of St. Petersburg. “City fathers” or “city leaders” is taken in this work to mean a structure that included elected policy makers and their administrators, business leaders, and the *St. Petersburg Times*, which taken together represented a power elite. While recognizing that personifying a city treads on dangerous ground, the author sometimes uses the term “St. Petersburg” to connote a consensus among this power elite – as in such usage, for example, as “St. Petersburg wanted to change its civic image.”

St. Petersburg entered 1946 in an enviable position. An advantageous wartime economic boost emerged when the United States government sent 100,000 servicemen to train in the St. Petersburg sunshine. Even more visited from military bases in Tampa, Lakeland, and other nearby locations. They filled tourist hotels that otherwise would have remained virtually empty. They spent money, and as Charles Eloshway did, formed an attachment to Florida that eventually helped lift St. Petersburg to its first wholly sanguine era since the real estate boom of the 1920s.<sup>5</sup>

Newly discharged GIs chased their St. Petersburg dream, as newcomers had done since the Orange Belt Railroad’s 1888 arrival tacked a remote village on the map.

Veterans in need of housing had several paths. Newspaper advertisements lured

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<sup>5</sup> Walter Fuller, *St. Petersburg and Its People* (St. Petersburg: Great Outdoors Publishing Co., 1972), 198.

“qualified GIs,” offering homes by Florida Builders in Pasadena Estates for \$85 down and monthly payments of \$35. City government helped by making available 595 free lots in several sections of the city – all were tax-delinquent and available for white veterans. Many of the lots were in Rio Vista, a north St. Petersburg subdivision that had languished since the 1920s. A few more were available for African-American veterans in segregated, black neighborhoods. White veteran Lawrence H. Durant, a city bus driver, became one of the first newcomers, buying in 1946 a two-bedroom Rio Vista concrete block dwelling for \$7,000. The purchase symbolized the beginning of a new chapter in St. Petersburg history.<sup>6</sup>

The narrative would play out until 1963, when the last Atlantic Coast Line passenger train left downtown at funereal speed, ending 75 years of service that introduced St. Petersburg to hundreds of thousands of eager tourists, anxious new residents, and finally, wide-eyed GIs. The departure marked the end of St. Petersburg’s immediate post-World War II era, a period that saw the city’s population balloon to nearly 200,000. During the 1950s alone, 46,679 houses went up, marking the city’s busiest homebuilding decade before or since. Retiree affluence, the affordable housing in new subdivisions, Americans’ postwar desire to make a new start, the spread of home air conditioning, and incessant promotion that ballyhooed the city’s good-life reputation drove the new wave.<sup>7</sup>

Substantial growth was nothing new. Barely a half-century old when the United States entered World War II, St. Petersburg already had breezed through a series of

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<sup>6</sup> “Tangerine Queen Presides At Veterans’ Lot Drawing,” *St. Petersburg Times*, March 6, 1946, 11; “Vet Buys Rio Vista Lot,” *Times*, March 10, 1946, 14.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Henderson, “Last Train Departs – Loaded For Progress,” *St. Petersburg Times*, June 2, 1963, 1; Raymond O. Arsenault, *St. Petersburg and the Florida Dream, 1888-1950* (Norfolk/Virginia Beach, Va: The Donning Co., 1988), 308.



population increases. Incorporation in 1892 followed arrival of the railroad four years earlier. Effective promotion soon began to lure visitors and permanent residents, and as the twentieth century dawned, the waterfront village was beginning to earn a reputation as a resort. A few economic surges brought the permanent population to 14,000 by 1920, and then, riding the decade's roaring real estate boom, St. Petersburg grew nearly 300 percent to 40,425 by 1930. The subsequent bust and Depression slowed the city's growth rate to a "mere" 50 percent during the decade of the '30s, and as world war loomed in 1940, 60,812 residents—including 11,982 segregated African Americans—made St. Petersburg Florida's fourth-largest city behind Jacksonville, Miami, and Tampa.<sup>8</sup>

Given its history of steady population increases, its available room to expand (in 1943, 78.59 percent of its 52.3 square miles were vacant), and its leaders' desire to attract prosperity through promotion and continued urban improvement, St. Petersburg's continued growth appeared certain, despite several obvious environmental drawbacks. . Boosters didn't say much about summer heat and the lack of home air conditioning to hold it back; nor did they often take note of yet-unconquered swarms of mosquitoes.<sup>9</sup>

The city's press agents also did their best to ignore the conditions affecting most of the black population. A 1945 report by sociologist Warren M. Banner declared that St. Petersburg fell far short of providing African Americans equal facilities and opportunities. As the national civil rights movement gained momentum, traditional segregation ruled St. Petersburg, even as black people and white people remained interdependent on one another. New residents spilling into the city's palmetto and pine

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<sup>8</sup> Numerous authors have told the early St. Petersburg story, among them Arsenault, Fuller, and Karl H. Grismer, the latter in *The Story of St. Petersburg* (St. Petersburg: P.K. Smith and Co. ,1948).

<sup>9</sup> Harland Bartholomew and Associates, "A Proposed Master Plan For the City of St. Petersburg, Florida," 1943, 9.

precincts meant that roads, water, and sanitation services would have to keep up. A growing population that included both retirees and younger families required diverse needs. Newly muscular suburban vitality would challenge the aging downtown's relevance and economic viability. Leaders struggled to put forth a dynamic city image as national media painted contradictory pictures of St. Petersburg: Was it a sun-splashed Eden or a decrepit haven for the elderly?<sup>10</sup>

Another riddle, this one unspoken and unanswered, was: Given its inherent contradictions, did St. Petersburg have, or could it develop, a sense of place as a source of civic strength? Barely a half-century removed from its frontier days, the city yearned to be a metropolis. ("Where are the skyscrapers?" asked a newspaper editorial). Pavement and concrete-block houses shouldered natural, half-wild settings. New arrivals from the north, who still referred to the places they had left as "back home," overshadowed the much smaller percentage of longtime residents. A Southern city in some ways, St. Petersburg nonetheless lacked the characteristics that regionalist scholar Robert L. Dorman called the "tradition of traditionalism" – the ties of kinship, religion, and aristocracy.<sup>11</sup>

If such abstractions proved elusive, leaders had no problem in articulating ambitious, tangible goals to improve the city. City manager Ross Windom wasted no opportunity to get postwar civic objectives in print or talk about them in public forums. Most important were building the bridge across lower Tampa Bay from St. Petersburg to Manatee County and bringing the Gulf Coast Highway – U.S. 19 – through the city.

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<sup>10</sup> "3 Years After The Banner Report," *St. Petersburg Times*, June 6, 1929, 6.

<sup>11</sup>, "Where Are The Skyscrapers," *St. Petersburg Times*, July 2, 1956, 6; Robert L. Dorman, *Revolt of the Provinces: The Regionalist Movement in America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 48.

Other projects deemed imperative included railroad track removal, an auditorium, a new hospital, library, and police station, street and sewer improvements, conversion of public transportation from streetcars to buses, and better schools. Some leaders, particularly the *editors of the Times and Evening Independent*, pushed for slum clearance and improved conditions for African Americans.<sup>12</sup>

Chapter I introduces St. Petersburg's guiding postwar civic philosophy, a come-hither attitude suggesting that restless Americans could find the good life in the Sunshine City – the sobriquet itself a succinct, tried-and-true promotional motif. An ironic, even amusing duality teased image-makers. New houses went up at the rate of twelve per day and space-age industry moved in, but horses continued to run loose on major roads. In wooded pockets inside city limits, lawmen broke up moonshine stills. Business leaders and the media took the colorful inconsistencies in stride. They saw St. Petersburg as a product, selling the Sunshine City image as a way to attract new industry, new residents, and waves of tourists eager to escape the frigid North.

Chapter II looks at three elements that played the dominant role in St. Petersburg's postwar makeover: the arrival of Central Plaza, the completion of U.S. 19, and the opening of the Sunshine Skyway. Central Plaza became the linchpin and symbol of new St. Petersburg. It provided a prototype study in land use, environmental considerations, competing business interests, and urban planning. Within three years of the regional retail Mecca's opening, road builders pushed U.S. Highway 19 through St. Petersburg, bringing the city a new main thoroughfare, and the Sunshine Skyway spanned lower Tampa Bay for a direct link to South Florida.

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<sup>12</sup> Many newspaper articles address St. Petersburg goals for the decade of the 1950s. Typical is "May The Next Half-Century Be As Good As The Last," *St. Petersburg Times*, January 1, 1950, 18.

While these elements were extremely important, subdivision proliferation became postwar St. Petersburg's signature element. The coming of new industry with transplanted employees helped drive the housing boom. Chapter III examines those phenomena, along with emergent issues such as dredge-and-fill – turning water into land for development. This chapter identifies major residential developers, discusses the preponderant architectural style and typical price structures of new tract housing, and addresses the subtropical comfort measures of air conditioning and mosquito eradication. The chapter also discusses a proposed, new subdivision for African Americans, which never materialized, and uses the episode as perspective on St. Petersburg's debilitating, but durable, tradition of segregation.

As the growing population sprawled in all directions and encouraged establishment of new commerce centers in far-flung neighborhoods, the city's aging downtown entered a period of uncertainty. Except for a department store and the addition of another motion picture theater, virtually no downtown development emerged to add a modern dimension or provide new consumer attractions. Still, the old city core remained far from dead, as proven by frequent traffic jams, competition for scarce parking spaces, and seasonal events that drew hundreds of thousands. A few visionaries urged an updating – but would their voices be persuasive? Chapter IV looks at a downtown past its prime in a changing world; and it discusses the nearby African-American neighborhoods, further exploring the phenomenon of segregation.

Chapter V looks at St. Petersburg's seismic social shifts. For example, while its demise remained distant, Jim Crow fell into decline as civil rights activists sued to open previously segregated public spaces and picketers called attention to the whites-only

policies of movie theaters and lunch counters. Image-makers, stung when media and television personalities joked about the city's large elderly population, decided to portray St. Petersburg as younger and more energetic. Television changed leisure habits, at least those of residents affluent enough to afford the new medium. Despite its reputation as a retirement community, a surprisingly active youth culture emerged from the era of the Ames Brothers into the edgier realms of Rock and Roll and Rhythm and Blues.

The conclusion will discuss St. Petersburg's physical changes and determine how well leaders met goals for the city after 1945. It will examine the progress of the civil rights eighteen years after the end of World War II and consider the degree to which city leaders were successful in changing the city's image from that of a retirement center to a more youthful locale. It will look at challenges still unfolding at the end of the immediate postwar period, such as racial integration and the future of the old city center, and it will consider the city's developing sense of place: Was it Eden or just another Sunbelt city?

## Chapter One: The Old-Time Magic

Nestled among a stack of silver dollars, 18-year-old Pat Seavers showed off her smile, her legs, and her bare shoulders. She was posing for a three-column, eight-inch-deep photograph that appeared atop the main local page of the *St. Petersburg Times* on November 17, 1955. The image represented more than a stunt photo published for a laugh. It was another link in St. Petersburg's endless chain of publicity gimmicks.

The people who devised the photo had called police to escort \$30,000 in coins, which three local manufacturers said they would use to meet their payrolls for the week. Photographer Bob Moreland framed Pat Seavers as the flesh-and-blood cash conveyor. Chamber of Commerce officials, county commissioners, and a United States congressman took part in the ploy. Publicists, the newspaper reported, wanted to demonstrate "in cold money the buying power of industry." Business leaders wanted the public to accept the idea of new manufacturing as reinforcement to what always had been a tourist-and-agricultural economy; a serving of cheesecake seemed to them an appropriate way to draw attention. Particularly clear was the promotion's high-profile subtext: St. Petersburg had charm, youth, and vitality. It offered a good life that all were invited to enjoy.<sup>13</sup>

The publicity splash represented classic St. Petersburg strategy: Use infinite promotion to shout the city's charms to every corner of the country and to reachable realms abroad. "St. Petersburg was built on printer's ink," declared William Davenport

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<sup>13</sup> "Trucks Tote In \$30,000 in Silver," *St. Petersburg Times*, November 17, 1955, 21.

Sr., the diligent Chamber of Commerce manager. The reliable, old magic was conjuring a new era. St. Petersburg was booming again.<sup>14</sup>

By November 1955, St. Petersburg already was several years into its dramatic post-World War II growth, an era that produced the city's first great real estate boom since the speculator-driven land-sales orgy of the 1920s. The city's estimated population was 139,000 – a forty percent increase over the federal census figure of 96,738, recorded just five years earlier. Developers such as James Rosati, Sidney Colen, and the Florida Builders partnership were changing the look of the city's northern and western sectors. Every day, hammers echoed and concrete blocks clinked into place as work crews raised new tract housing in what had been pasture and pine stands. Construction in all of Pinellas County was at an all-time high. To sell the new homes, want ads cried for real estate sales people – no experience needed.<sup>15</sup>

Selling real estate was the quintessential St. Petersburg activity, and the campaigns of the 1940s and 1950s had a vintage goal: boost the Sunshine City's image and ensure prosperity. To be sure, business leaders hoping to add economic muscle were wooing industry to augment the traditional underpinning of tourism. But the pitch sang the same song to manufacturers, retirees, or families: Come enjoy fun in the sun, and never mind St. Petersburg's troubles, which the newspapers sometimes reflected in articles about segregated slums, haphazard planning, and growing discomfort with the city's large population of elderly people.

Accenting the positive, after all, was the advertising theme that always had brought people and their money to St. Petersburg. In the nineteenth century, railroad

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<sup>14</sup> "William Davenport, Area Leader, Dies," *St. Petersburg Times*, January 13, 1964, 1B.

<sup>15</sup> Arsenault, 195-196; Fuller, 200-202; *Polk's St. Petersburg City Directory*, (Richmond, Va.: R.L. Polk and Co. Publishers, 1955), 14.

pioneer Peter Demens and land baron Hamilton Disston extolled sun and sea to attract affluent tourists and fulltime residents. Dr. Washington Chew Van Bibber, a Baltimore physician who counted Abraham Lincoln among his patients, spoke to the American Medical Association in 1885, declaring the climate and general geography of what would become St. Petersburg to be life-giving, a blessing, a cure-all. The doctor, historians revealed decades later, had a hidden item on his agenda: He owned property on what he widely labeled the healthiest spot in the world.<sup>16</sup>

Regardless, Van Bibber's prescription provided the first boost to the idea of good life in the sun. Newspapers quickly took up the cry in the twentieth century. Early *St. Petersburg Independent* editor Lew B. Brown decided to provide a free edition whenever the sun failed to shine; from 1910 on, the "Sunshine Offer" carried St. Petersburg's name around the world. "In the past 34 ½ years, a total of 154 papers have been given away – an average of less than (five) sunless days per year," reported a 1947 tourist brochure. W.L. Straub, leader of the rival *Times*, ordered a standing head to be placed on the newspaper's editorial page: "Be sure it's right -- then boost it." During his tenure as president of the Board of Trade, Straub oversaw in 1913 a mass advertising campaign to distribute and mail 50,000 copies of a 16-page, illustrated booklet touting the city's charm.<sup>17</sup>

Flashy John Lodwick became the city's publicity director in 1918, first as an employee of the Board of Trade -- a Chamber of Commerce forerunner -- and later of the city government. The former Ohio sportswriter held the jobs for a combined 24 years and is credited with garnering millions of dollars of free publicity for St. Petersburg in

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<sup>16</sup> Arsenault, 52-53.

<sup>17</sup> "Tourist Guide of St. Petersburg, Fla.," Curt Teich and Co., Chicago, Ill., 1947, from author's private collection.



magazines, newspapers, and films. Early in his career, Lodwick worked closely with Mayor Frank Fortune Pulver, another avid booster. With his own money, Pulver bought full-page advertisements in northern newspapers to boast about St. Petersburg.<sup>18</sup>

After he became *Times* editor in 1939, Nelson Poynter liked to say that one of the paper's missions was to help make St. Petersburg the best city in the best state in the best nation in the world. Typical were a half-dozen editorials published during November 1955 that bragged about the city, called attention to its amenities, or boosted the goals of attracting more residents and luring new businesses.

On the same day it granted eye-catching coverage of the bathing beauty and the silver dollars, the *Times* published a lead editorial making it clear that commerce leaders were not seeking old-fashioned smokestack-and-freight industry, but the new kind that produced “costly and magical items” such as “electronic computing machines” made by Remington Rand, IBM, or Minneapolis-Honeywell. The editorial argued that Florida – and by extension, St. Petersburg – “is splendidly endowed to create fine settings for enterprises born in this dynamic hour of American technology.” New industry meant more people, more payrolls, and, so it was presumed, more and better business. A look at the newspaper's advertising columns suggested, of course, that business produced ad revenue. More subtle than the young woman surrounded by silver dollars, the editorial carried the same tune: Industry is good; we like it; so should you, the reader.<sup>19</sup>

To read the *Times*, one might get the idea that the entire city was awash with cheery optimism. Even the daily weather reports featured a cartoon pelican and homespun chitchat, aimed mostly at calling attention to the climate while taking every

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<sup>18</sup> Arsenault, 186; Grismer, 260, 320.

<sup>19</sup> “The Broad Meaning Of Industry,” *St. Petersburg Times*, November 17, 1955, 6.

opportunity to point out seasonal snow storms in northern states. On a day of expected rain and relatively cool temperatures, it was routine to run headlines such as “Dismal Type Weather,” with a “kicker” head in smaller type above the main headline, reading “Rarity of Rarities.” The little weather features amounted to a kind of journalistic boosterism, as editors expected visitors to mail copies to friends and relatives up North.<sup>20</sup>

Readers also found editorial-page paeans to suntans, very much in vogue before medical authorities began citing the dangers of too much exposure to unblocked sunshine. Under the headline, “A Good Tan Lifts The Spirits,” the newspaper cited a doctor’s claim that a tan “is not only curative and relaxing, a suntan gives us a psychological lift.” The editorial went on to say, “The Floridian is happy that so many sun-worshippers flock hither to get psychologically lifted via tan.”<sup>21</sup>

Sometimes the promotional gambits went south as well as north. Paul Davis reported in his daily column “Good Morning” that about one hundred tourists got off a cruise ship in Guatemala in early November 1955 and were amazed to find copies of the *St. Petersburg Times* at their hotel doors. The surprise delivery was the work of industrial promoter Jack Bryan, who arranged swift shipping via a South American airline. “Lots of talk among tourists that day about (St. Petersburg),” Davis wrote.<sup>22</sup>

In yet another arena, the Chamber of Commerce under manager Davenport successfully prompted the United States Weather Bureau establish a more promising forecast zone for St. Petersburg by trimming 83 miles off the zone’s cooler northern end. The change brought the city “deserved recognition of our superior quality of weather,” thus making St. Petersburg “look better to thousands of potential customers who judge us

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<sup>20</sup> “Dismal Type Weather,” *St. Petersburg Times*, November 10, 1955, 21.

<sup>21</sup> “A Good Tan Lifts The Spirits,” *St. Petersburg Times*, November 14, 1955, 6.

<sup>22</sup> Paul Davis, “Good Morning,” *St. Petersburg Times*, November 10, 1955, 1B.

by our temperatures,” the *Times* said. The chamber also began pushing for a separate St. Petersburg weather station, possibly to be located atop the First Federal Savings and Loan building at Fourth Street and Central Avenue downtown.<sup>23</sup>

Bragging about the “Sunshine City” was not limited to paid professionals, of course. Routinely, gloating visitors and new residents sent “back home” photos of beach outings or swimming pool parties conducted during the winter holiday period when much of the rest of the nation froze. But nothing could beat the aggressive, systematic drum-beating undertaken by the chamber.

Chamber manager Davenport, in much lower key fashion, was to postwar St. Petersburg what arch-promoter John Lodwick was to the city during the 1920s. During his tenure as manager from 1942 to 1962, Davenport promoted the coming of the Sunshine Skyway, the elimination of Gandy Bridge tolls, and the course of U.S. Highway 19 through the city. During his watch, the city government gave the chamber hundreds of thousands of dollars to use for advertising in printed media and on what Davenport called “this wonderful medium of television.” St. Petersburg, according to Davenport, became the first resort city in the world to use TV as a promotional tool. Crews produced 21 shows in color and with sound; some 160 stations in the U.S., Canada, Cuba, and London aired them, and untold numbers of PTA groups and social clubs saw the films in 16mm projection.<sup>24</sup>

Produced in the late 1940s and early 1950s, breezily narrated by “television traveler” Burrell Smith, the films carried such titles as “The Tale of One City” and “Sunny Days.” A 1947 video called “Batter Up” touted spring training and featured

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<sup>23</sup> “Our Famous Weather,” *St. Petersburg Times*, March 20, 1956, 4.

<sup>24</sup> William Davenport Sr., “Video Clips,” from private collection of William Davenport Jr.

Major League Hall of Fame player Honus Wagner greeting Al Lang, a former mayor who brought St. Petersburg its first preseason baseball. Another production called “Green Benches” was released less than a decade before the iconic seats became anathema to boosters tired of the city’s old-folks image. The 1951 film suggested only in passing that the benches were a particular favorite among the elderly; it showed servicemen sitting in the sun, children playing cops and robbers, and, as the narrator put it, “attractive young ladies tak(ing) time out to rest on a shopping excursion.” The films also featured the Silver Meteor and Orange Blossom Special, vaunted streamliners packed with southbound passengers; the Million-Dollar Pier; fishing, picnicking, and dancing in the sunshine; and, of course, shopping for the perfect retirement home. All the travelogues showed St. Petersburg at its best. Their purpose: to make people see for themselves.<sup>25</sup>

Davenport’s films were one among many elements of the manager’s public relations job. In what amounted to effort in perpetual persuasion, Davenport coaxed conventions to come to town, lobbied clean-industry executives, agitated for more and better schools, and pushed for summer tourism to complement the winter season. “No single individual was more closely associated with the many progressive developments which made . . . sound growth possible,” said the *Evening Independent*.<sup>26</sup>

## Shadows in the Sunshine

Official drumbeating and popular portrayals began to create a nascent sense of place for the postwar city. The concept did not so much involve appreciating history,

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<sup>25</sup> Videos, Joe Frohlock Productions, “The Tale of One City,” 1948; “Batter Up,” 1947; “Green Benches,” 1950.

<sup>26</sup> “Davenport Funeral Services Wednesday,” *St. Petersburg Evening Independents*, January 13, 1964, 9A; January 14, 1964, 6A.

tradition, and kinship as it did valuing leisure, recreation, and climate. Because of the weather, one could enjoy life year-around. One did not have to shovel snow or worry about tire chains. One could relax, get a suntan, look healthy, buy a boat, go fishing, or try water skiing. Such activity represented powerful ideas in a new age of leisure and consumer vitality – ideas that veiled a harsher reality.<sup>27</sup>

On a personal level, that might mean spending summer nights splayed against a bedroom wall or terrazzo floor in search of a cool surface to alleviate heat and humidity, or cranking jalousie windows wide open in hope of catching a breeze or a welcome hint of a cooling, dawn thunderstorm. A fishing expedition into the bayous might result in a swarm of mosquitoes covering one's arm like a fur sleeve. Mosquito control and air conditioning were not automatically endowed to new residents, and until each became widely available, more than one neophyte Floridian contemplated a return north after experiencing his or her first summer in the sunshine.

On a wider scale, mid-twentieth century St. Petersburg was not without its civic problems. The influx of transplanted Michiganders and New Yorkers meant building more sewers and roads. And the young families, moving into suburbs often cut from forests, needed new schools; county public school enrollment jumped every year, for example, the eleven percent from 1954 to 1955. Mound Park Hospital, the city's primary medical care center, reported a bed shortage almost every year. Developers were dredging huge swaths of Boca Ciega Bay, using the material to create more land for more houses, and in the process, ruining a precious natural resource.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup>Among authors addressing leisure and consumerism is David Halberstam, *The Fifties* (New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1993), 506.

<sup>28</sup>Evelyn Rogers, "Pinellas County Schools Enroll Nearly 2,000 More Students Than Last Year," *St. Petersburg Times*, September 2, 1955, 15; "Mound Park Faces Approaching Crisis in Finding Adequate

Bobby Barnes, who spent early 1950s summers in the beach communities just west of St. Petersburg, recalled the dredging in Boca Ciega Bay to create the Isle of Capri in Treasure Island. He remembered water clear as glass and mullet schools so thick they resembled a carpet on the water. “We lived in what we called paradise,” Barnes said. The big pumping machines brought noise and muddied the bay. “You couldn’t even wrap your head around it. Dredging an island!” Barnes marveled years later.<sup>29</sup>

Less turbulent and tumultuous than in many southern cities, but ever present, were St. Petersburg’s uneasy race relations. For the most part, white and black people got along, at least on the surface, and people of good will of both races reached out in many ways. For example, Rosalie Peck, a black woman, recalled that as a child growing up during the 1930s in a segregated city, she sometimes visited the white-owned Haslam’s Book Store, which was in a white business district where African Americans were not allowed unless they were employees. “I would sit on the floor and read. They were fine with me,” Peck said.<sup>30</sup>

The annual Festival of States Parade, always considered one of the year’s high points, showcased marching bands from all-black Gibbs High School and Sixteenth Street Junior High. The energetic musicians were popular with white spectators and a source of pride to the black community. Otherwise, the parade was mostly segregated. In 1954, organizers permitted for the first time a float with African-American participants. It was sponsored by the Ambassadors, a club comprising professional black men influential in their community. On the float were young African-American women, including 16-

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Beds For Patients,” *Times*, November 25, 1955, 40; Bruce Stephenson, *Visions of Eden: Environmentalism, Urban Planning, and City Building in St. Petersburg, Florida, 1900-1995* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1997), 126.

<sup>29</sup> Bobby Barnes, interview by Jon Wilson about 1950s St. Petersburg, Tampa, February 24, 2009.

<sup>30</sup> Rosalie Peck, interview by Jon Wilson about African-American history, St. Petersburg, March 13, 2003.

year-old queen Rosa Holmes, crowned at an Ambassador-sponsored coronation ball held during the festival. “We, as a group of African Americans, thought we’d like to show off some of our pretty girls just like the white clubs showed off their pretty girls,” said longtime educator Emanuel Stewart, who coined the Ambassador Club name. Festival organizers readily accepted the float’s entry. “They had no trouble at all when they found out it was first class and not something thrown together,” Stewart said.

“It was the most wonderful thing that has happened to me and my children,” said the woman who was queen. Years later, Rosa Holmes Hopkins recalled that the float was warmly received along the route by both black and white spectators. “All along I had just a wonderful time,” she said.<sup>31</sup>

Such pleasant episodes were not the norm, nor were occasions such as Louis “Satchmo” Armstrong’s performances at the Manhattan Casino, a renowned venue on Twenty-second Street South, considered the African-American community’s most important thoroughfare during the segregation era. Armstrong’s shows drew integrated crowds, whose members, awash in mutual appreciation of the star’s talent, forgot at least for a while the barriers that kept blacks and whites apart.<sup>32</sup>

Nonetheless, the city’s history of tense, sometimes violent race relations always lay coiled in the shadows; for in a sense, it was not truly just history. African Americans lived with a clear and present knowledge of events that had happened in St. Petersburg, and the fear that they might occur again. “Strict segregation was a way of life, spiritually hurtful and unacceptable, but steeped in reality,” said Rosalie Peck. Men of color had

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<sup>31</sup>Emanuel Stewart, interview by Jon Wilson about the Festival of States Parade, St. Petersburg, March 11, 2002; Rosa Holmes Hopkins, interview by Jon Wilson about the Festival of States Parade, St. Petersburg, March 12, 2002.

<sup>32</sup> John Breen, interview by Jon Wilson about the Manhattan Casino, June 14, 2002.

been lynched. The Ku Klux Klan tramped through black neighborhoods, attempting to assert white dominance through intimidation. In 1938, white police officers flew out of control and knocked down a respected black educator, Noah Griffin, because of a misunderstanding about a venue for an African-American teachers' picnic. Even whites were not immune from racist mayhem; in 1935, white nightriders kidnapped, pummeled, and castrated a white lawyer for seeing a black woman. In 1921, someone blew up an early blacks-only movie theater because it opened too close to a white neighborhood. Twenty-seven years later, as St. Petersburg stood poised to enjoy new prosperity and opportunity; more than 200 white residents stormed City Hall to protest expanded housing for blacks into previously all-white neighborhoods. Seventy-five people also signed a petition to the county School Board, saying that a proposed new school on Sixteenth Street South would "create an encroachment on many white families and badly undermine the value of homes owned exclusively by white people . . . ," the petition asserted. A proposed African-American subdivision in far south St. Petersburg was scuttled in 1955.<sup>33</sup>

In 1950, most of St. Petersburg's 14,000 African Americans – about fourteen percent of the population – lived in several segregated neighborhoods, parts of which could be characterized as slums. Their existence troubled downtown boosters. Substandard housing for a segment of the population seemed wrong to some of them, but the black neighborhoods also happened to be on the edge of downtown. They would not

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<sup>33</sup> "Slain As He Slept By Unknown Negro," *St. Petersburg Evening Independent*, November 11, 1914, 1; "Tobin Will Be Hanged By Sheriff," *Evening Independent*, October 9, 1915, 3; Arsenault, 268; "Mutilation Case," *Evening Independent*, March 22, 1935, 1; "Explosion Wrecks Theater On Edge Of Negro District," *Evening Independent*, November 26, 1921, 1; Al Barker, "Irate Residents Protest Negro Area Expansion," *Evening Independent*, February 17, 1948, 17; "Residents Protest New Negro School," *St. Petersburg Times*, November 2, 1947, 45; Peck interview.



be attractive to the new businesses that leaders hoped to attract to a modernized business district. St. Petersburg would soon have to confront the necessity of slum clearance – or “urban renewal,” as public officials and business leaders called such programs.

Besides the nagging problem of eyesore housing, the first suggestion of the black civil rights movement began to stir the city. In 1955, one year after the United States Supreme Court ruled segregated schools unconstitutional, six African Americans sued to end segregation in St. Petersburg’s downtown swimming pools. Blacks could, and did vote. By 1946, there were no white primaries. There was no poll tax. The city was not a voter-registration priority for civil rights groups, unlike other parts of the South. But the beaches, lunch counters, hotel accommodations, housing, schools, and motion picture theaters remained separate and unequal – and all, within a few years, would become the object of civil rights activists. Picketing and protests did not create national headlines, as did rights crusades in other Southern cities, but they did create tension in a city where the notion of tranquility was sold as part of its appeal.<sup>34</sup>

As the city struggled with a racial divide, its leaders also had to recognize an economic gap. While business seemed to be booming, at least for some merchants and trades, few would have considered St. Petersburg a wealthy city, even though the *Times* made a point of publishing articles about the city’s elite. One such piece, which included photographs, featured several prominent families with a page of coverage discussing their Thanksgiving plans. But a few days earlier, civic activist Thomas Dreier claimed that more than half the city’s residents earned annual incomes of \$2,000 or less, while seventeen percent earned less than \$1,000. The national average was \$1,770, according to

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<sup>34</sup> Numerous accounts cite the case, among them “Court Orders Spa Use For Negroes,” *St. Petersburg Times*, December 20, 1956, 25.

United States Commerce Department figures.<sup>35</sup>

Some of the relatively low personal income could be linked to fixed-income retirees and African Americans who worked as domestics, laborers, or other minimum-wage. But age and race wasn't the whole story. City and state officials cut off electricity and gas to more than fifty low-income white families at a Thirteenth Avenue North trailer park, saying the owner had failed to meet city code requirements. One mother of three young children, whose husband was out of work, protested that she could not heat her baby's bottle. Clearly, living the ideal sunny, good life was not an automatic condition for all St. Petersburg residents; even the 1955 Community Chest drive failed to meet its campaign standard, falling \$23,186 short of the \$270,893 goal. The disappointing result emerged even after union workers had canvassed the city, with plasterers, press men, electricians, carpenters, telegraphers, and plumbers among the all-male labor unions taking part.<sup>36</sup>

If inadequate infrastructure, Jim Crow attitudes, and a significant low-income population weren't challenges enough, a hint of juvenile delinquency and at least eleven deaths in 1955 due to malfunctioning or careless use of boarding house gas appliances made St. Petersburg seem even less the utopia chamber leaders liked to tout. Justice of the Peace Edward Silk vowed to campaign for stricter safety codes, and the *Times* joined the fray. "Each death," said an editorial, "is a black eye for a city whose aim is to be the most attractive and livable, the safest and healthiest in the world." Many of the gas victims were elderly. Other older citizens were targeted – perhaps not entirely tongue in

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<sup>35</sup> Allen Morris, *Florida Handbook* (Tallahassee, Fla.: Peninsular Publishing, 1955), 289; *St. Petersburg Times*, "Lack Of City Planning Flayed By Tom Dreier," November 12, 1955, 17.

<sup>36</sup> "Organized Labor Takes Part In Chest Campaigns," *St. Petersburg Times*, November 7, 1955, 16; "Blackout Blamed On Trailer Park Owner," *Times*, November 18, 1955, 23; "Community Chest Drive Ends \$123,186 Short Of It Goal," *Times*, November 30, 1955, 23.

cheek – by a group of youngsters who shot out windows with pellet guns, dubbing themselves “The Scarlett Torch Gang” and leaving notes promising to eliminate old people. The communications were elegant in their simplicity: “We are an organization which will stop at nothing to rid the town of St. Petersburg, Florida, of the elderly persons which have tried to inhabit it. We have no respect for age and will strive to reach our goals.”<sup>37</sup>

## **A Successful Formula**

The high-octane, virtually nonstop promotion worked. To most newcomers, St. Petersburg’s good points outweighed its bad ones, which in any case, were rarely mentioned. The population surge between 1950 and 1960 provided compelling evidence: St. Petersburg recorded an 87 percent increase, growing from 96,738 to 181,298. The newcomers did not blunder in by accident. They were guided, cajoled, and persuaded by calculated promotion, positive media coverage, and word-of-mouth advertisement. In the optimistic postwar years, people were ready to embrace good news, to believe there was reason that their popular president, Dwight D. Eisenhower, smiled so broadly. After a generation of Depression and war, why not accept the vision that there was such a thing as a really, good life? St. Petersburg seemed to offer it in large quantity.

Inflation, industrial strife, and warnings of a looming recession shadowed the nation in 1946. But by 1955, anyone who liked to make a buck in St. Petersburg had reason to be optimistic as the city approached the midway point of a booming decade. Thanksgiving brought significant indicators of good economic health. Nationally,

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<sup>37</sup> “Youthful Armed Gang Jailed After Shooting,” *St. Petersburg Times*, November 17, 1955, 23; “Prevention Is Better Than A Cure,” *Times*, November 26, 1955, 4.

Sinclair Weeks, the secretary of commerce, predicted record Christmas sales, as did merchants in St. Petersburg, who anticipated the “greatest Yule spree of all.” Weeks’s department said that St. Petersburg’s retail sales had increased by 73.7 percent during the period 1948-54. Employment in the city was up 10 percent over the previous year, the state employment office reported. The county clerk’s office recorded the biggest hunk of real estate transaction fees since Pinellas County’s creation from Hillsborough in 1912. Central Plaza, the city’s first and largest postwar shopping center, was celebrating its third anniversary and appeared to be on track to success. A newer shopping center, Five Points, was opening at Ninth Street North and Thirty-fourth Avenue, while downtown merchants centered around Ninth Street and Central began an aggressive campaign to counter their outlying competitors. Toffenetti’s, a chain that also had restaurants in New York and Chicago, opened downtown on First Avenue North and Second Street.<sup>38</sup>

Seasonal celebration offered more opportunity to cheer for St. Petersburg. For example, the yearly Santa Claus parade drew front-page advance newspaper coverage that included a banner headline in half-inch-high bold type and a sub-headline proclaiming the event to be the biggest parade in city history. Temperature graphs continued to occupy a spot on the main local page, accompanied by headlines with such words as “Mr. Sun is Bright Here, While Nation Shivers.” A newspaper staff member writing under the pseudonym Peter K. Pinellas was billed as the paper’s Yule correspondent, filing stories from the North Pole. A Thanksgiving Day editorial touted

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<sup>38</sup> “Central And Ninth ‘Shopping Center’ Set To Launch Flurry Of Bargains,” *St. Petersburg Times*, November 6, 1955, 7F; “Clerk Reports Boom In Fees,” *Times*, November 17, 1955, 21; *Times*, “Winter ‘Season Off To Flying Start With Employment Up 10 Percent,” November 18, 1955, 24; “Surging Retail Sales,” *Times*, November 22, 1955, 30; “Merchants See Greatest Yule Spree Of All,” *Times*, November 24, 1955, 5C; “Five Points Shopping Center Expected To Open Thursday,” *Times*, November 29, 1955, 18; *Times*, “Toffenetti Plans Gala Opening Today at 11 a.m.,” November 30, 1955, 17.

beaches, sunshine, and “a playground and a way of life to thousands.” The same day’s news columns highlighted a record kingfish catch; celebrated the publicity forthcoming through an NBC-TV home show originating in St. Petersburg; suggested in a sixty-four-page special Christmas section that shoppers mail Florida gifts to friends and relatives; noted the city’s official holiday lighting display would be turned on Thanksgiving night; and, perhaps for transplanted football devotees, touted the St. Petersburg High-Boca Ciega football game as a budding classic despite the contest having managed only its second renewal. Perhaps overly presuming the importance and appeal of its region, the newspaper published a long editorial suggesting that Adlai Stevenson, a likely Democratic presidential nominee, make his spring primary campaign headquarters in or near St. Petersburg.<sup>39</sup>

Despite its support for growth and the presumed prosperity it would bring, despite its constant drumbeating, the *Times* did not adopt a cynical, anything-goes development mentality. The plans of Florida Power Corporation, the regional electricity supplier, provided an interesting case in point. It brought the *Times*, an increasingly influential media outlet, face to face with another establishment powerhouse that planned to build a new power plant on Tampa Bay on an undeveloped section of Shore Acres known as Mermaid Point.<sup>40</sup>

In a remarkable and unusually displayed editorial headlined, “A City Dedicated to Beauty and Graciousness,” and accompanied by an artist’s drawing of a languid, bayside

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<sup>39</sup> “Good Reason For Giving Of Thanks,” *St. Petersburg Times*, November 24, 1955, 6; “Santa, Peter K. Pinellas Winging To Florida In Spirit Of Christmas,” *Times*, November 24, 1955, 19; “Sunshine Souvenirs Go North,” *Times*, November 24, 1955, 10C; *Times*, “Christmas Tree Lights On Pier Go On Tonight,” November 24, 1955, 34; “Welcome Stevenson – Florida’s Best Proving Ground For 1956 Campaign,” *Times*, November 29, 1955, 6.

<sup>40</sup> “A City Dedicated To Beauty And Graciousness,” *St. Petersburg Times*, November 9, 1955, 6.

scene, the newspaper politely but emphatically declared the new plant to be unsuited to an attractive city's destiny. The piece urged the city's planning board to vote "no" to a proposal that would have paved the plant's way -- a zoning change from "outlying residential" to "heavy industry."<sup>41</sup>

Editorial writers often ignore planning boards' agendas, but not this time. Designed to be eye-catching, stepping away from the usual tombstone column of weighty paragraphs unrolling down the opinion page's left side, the power plant piece was meant to be widely read, contemplated, and embraced as guiding philosophy. It claimed, in fact, to speak not only for the *St. Petersburg Times* editorial board but "for citizens here today and citizens of tomorrow . . ." In that single work, the newspaper expressed its vision for St. Petersburg and defined what it saw as the city's role in post-World War II America.

The editorial asked:

Can heavy industry – smokestacks, barge harborage, unnaturally shaped waterfront fills, and all – fit handsomely and harmoniously into the waterfront development picture of a city with St. Petersburg's destiny? Unless you low-rate that destiny, and remain insensitive to the role for which St. Petersburg is uniquely suited in America's future, your answer has to be "No."

The editorial said Florida Power's plans were based on "the unimaginative axioms of yesterday's engineering" and went on to describe St. Petersburg as a chosen city with a special future:

The utility firm's plans would not have been good enough in 1925 – they are far too short-sighted in 1955. The plans are technically neat and obviously rooted in the historical equations of electricity production – good enough, perhaps, for other places in the nation as they stand today. But these plans do not sing in St. Petersburg's key – perhaps not even on the pitch which America will take tomorrow. . . . Residing at it does beside its own resolution – in an hour when the proper fuel for power production in 1965 is still a mystery – electrical engineering ought to have the discernment to picture St. Petersburg's

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid, November 9.

special part in the nation's socio-economic revolution, its embodiment of 'a favorite place to be' in an age when people have the leisure and wherewithal to go where they wish.

In a way, the piece represented one more example of civic promotion. But in one blow, it invoked history, looked to the future, implied all that people yearned for in Florida, and chiseled St. Petersburg's niche in a changing nation. Essentially, it expressed what the city was about in 1955.

## Chapter Two: A Bridge, a Road, a Plaza

Charles Eloshway, the serviceman who fell in love with St. Petersburg the first time he saw it from a train window, returned after V-J Day, as so many other veterans did. This time Eloshway got off in Tampa and caught a cab for the ride across the Gandy Bridge. Sharing the car was a young man who looked Asian. It was jarring for Eloshway after his country had spent four years at war with Japan. But this young man wore a United States uniform. Eloshway shook hands with Herbert Kimura.<sup>42</sup>

Eloshway learned that Kimura's family had been one among a handful of Japanese Americans who for more than a generation had farmed a rich plot of muck land in the center of St. Petersburg. It was called Goose Pond. Flanking Central Avenue between 30<sup>th</sup> and 35<sup>th</sup> Streets, the marsh produced legendary vegetables, but it had a tendency to put Central under water during the rainy season and catch fire during dry spells. People who did not pull produce from its nutrient-rich soil – and even some who did – looked at it as a wasteland ripe for development. Indeed, development was on the way – and the Goose Pond was about to become the epicenter of seismic change that would reshape St. Petersburg.

The change came in the form of three events from 1952 to 1955:

The Sunshine Skyway opened in September 1954 and would take motorists on U.S. 19 over lower Tampa Bay. Providing a new transportation amenity at what had been a dead-end stop offering only ferry service, the Skyway linked St. Petersburg to South

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<sup>42</sup> Eloshway interview.



Florida via Bradenton, Sarasota, and the Tamiami Trail. It was the most important event in the development of St. Petersburg and its immediate vicinity since the coming of the railroad 66 years earlier.

U. S. Highway 19 – also called the Gulf Coast Highway – was completed through St. Petersburg, creating an uninterrupted road to the Sunshine Skyway. The road’s last section opened on July 19, 1955, giving the city a major north-south highway that extended all the way to the northeastern United States. “It’s going to put St. Petersburg on the map,” said Paul Segars, a sound-truck operator at the highway dedication festivities.<sup>43</sup>

Bold developers, anticipating economic growth with the coming of new residents and the highway and bridge links, built a sprawling retail center called Central Plaza over the southern part of Goose Pond, the wetlands in the middle of town. The shopping center opened in November 1952. Offering convenience for new residents moving into western St. Petersburg subdivisions, Central Plaza drew attention to what was called “the magic crossroads of tomorrow’s St. Petersburg – Central Avenue and 34<sup>th</sup> Street (U.S. 19),” where the new retail hub was situated.<sup>44</sup>

Although they were separate projects, the bridge, the highway, and the shopping center were interrelated components of a larger vision. Because its route was designated in 1947, developers knew U.S. 19 would slice through Goose Pond. They believed the highway, in combination with newly built subdivisions nearby, would turn an agricultural commodity into a business hot spot in what would become the city’s center. St.

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<sup>43</sup>Dick Bothwell, “Spectators Perspire, Attempt National Anthem, Feel Proud,” *St. Petersburg Times*, July 20, 1955, 36

<sup>44</sup> “Thousands Jam Central Plaza Stores At Opening,” *St. Petersburg Times*, November 19, 1952, 17; Bothwell, “US. 19 Opens Here At 3 p.m.,” *Times*, July 19, 1955, 1..

Petersburg leaders and their allies at the state, county, and federal levels had agitated since the 1920s to open the city by extending U.S. 19 and tying it into a lower bay-spanning bridge. The fact that St. Petersburg leaders persuaded state officials to build the road through Pinellas County and not rival Tampa made the victory even sweeter. All three phenomena converged during a span of a little less than three years. Taken together, they provided the most significant turning point in St. Petersburg from 1946 to 1963.

### **Spans Across the Bay**

The opening of the Sunshine Skyway, a 15-mile-long, \$21-million bridge across lower Tampa Bay, realized a generation-old dream and raised expectations for St. Petersburg's future. Before the Skyway's completion, motorists from St. Petersburg had two choices to reach Florida's lower Gulf coast. They could circle through Tampa to connect with southbound roads or they could cross the bay on the *Manatee*, a ferry in service since 1891. The Skyway reduced the trip to 20 minutes, offering not only convenience but a striking view from atop the 150.5-foot-high middle span, a towering web of steel girders overlooking a series of causeways built in a shallow semicircle. It was billed as the longest continuous bridge in the United States, and according to officials, would boost St. Petersburg's tourism, retail sales, banks, and real estate, while encouraging light industry to set up shop, enhancing the city's reputation as a modern, exciting place to live.<sup>45</sup>

The bridge opened on September 6, 1954. Its name was chosen from among more than 20,000 suggestions submitted in a public "Name the Bridge" contest. Not

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<sup>45</sup> Dick Bothwell, "15,086 Cars Cross Over Skyway," *St. Petersburg Times*, September 7, 1954, 1; "Tampa Bay Bridge Opens To Traffic," *New York Times*, September 7, 1954, 49.

surprisingly, given St. Petersburg's history of ballyhoo, the event became a promotional happening made to appear nearly as important as its impact on transportation. The *St. Petersburg Times* printed extra copies of its 278-page souvenir Skyway edition. The largest issue since the 1920s boom, the edition contained special sections about the cities and the ten counties the bridge was expected to affect, from Citrus County on the north to Collier on the south. Intended to be distributed nationwide, the issue contained – besides the usual daily news and commentary – articles and advertisements that provided an introduction to life on what the local boosters called the Suncoast. The *New York Times* and *Chicago Tribune*, among other large papers, published stories about the opening, and a local crew made a newsreel for CBS television. Officials somehow persuaded Miss Greece, in America for the Miss Universe contest, to fly in; Rica Diallina and Acting Governor Charley E. Johns exchanged kisses. Delighted reporters hurried to turn the smooches into headlines. To cover all the hoopla, technicians set up a 14-station radio network.<sup>46</sup>

The excitement produced a holiday atmosphere. Some kind of lower-bay link – developer Walter Fuller had proposed a tunnel at one point – had been discussed since the 1920s. In 1949 and 1950, St. Petersburg played host to “Hands and Spans Across the Bay” celebrations to stir up support. Now opening day had arrived, and the city turned out. Hundreds of cars, their drivers eager to be among the first to cross, crowded bumper to bumper on side streets leading to the Skyway approach. Those who were not driving stood or sat on campstools and chairs along Eighteenth Avenue South and Twenty-second Avenue South, the only roads available connecting to the short stretch of 34<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Bothwell, *ibid*; Richard F. Warner, “Bridge Over Tampa Bay to Be Dedicated Labor Day,” *Chicago Tribune*, August 15, 1954, E1; *Times*, “20 Bay Bridge Names Picked: One Will Be The Winner,” May 22, 1954, 17.

Street South leading to the Skyway entrance on Maximo Point. Said 84-year-old W.C. Greening: “I’ve lived in Florida since 1924. Yes sir, went to the Gandy Bridge opening, too, but that wasn’t advertised like this.” Two women identified as Mrs. Carl Happle and Miss Betty Lee Junium walked several miles to the bridge from their home on Union Street North. Downtown, more people jammed streets around the Suwannee Hotel, celebration headquarters.<sup>47</sup>

Pushing the bridge to its opening-day festival required “three long decades of hopes, plans, frustrations, controversies, and failures,” a newspaper reporter wrote on the morning of the Skyway’s debut. Failed plans, cost estimates that doubled and tripled, construction delays, and arguments about the bridge’s route were among the challenges the planners faced.<sup>48</sup>

The first bridge plan emerged in 1927, proposed by Dr. Herman Simmonds, a transplanted northerner who envisioned a high-level suspension bridge. Dismissed by some as a crackpot, an undiscouraged Simmonds diligently promoted his idea. Eventually, Congress authorized the bridge, and federal authorities issued construction permits. But the Depression crushed Simmonds’ dream. He went back North and plans for the bridge died.<sup>49</sup>

About the same time, the idea for a tunnel emerged. The first to bring it up was Louis E. Saupe, who led a firm called the West Coast Bridge and Tunnel Co. Saupe wanted a combination bay crossing – a causeway from Maximo Point to near Mullet Key, then a tunnel a bit less than a mile long under the main shipping channel, then another

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<sup>47</sup> Jerry Blizin, “Hopes, Controversies, Frustrations Dot Skyway History,” *St. Petersburg Times*, September 6, 1954, B7.

<sup>48</sup> Blizin, *ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> Blizin, *ibid.*

causeway to Terra Ceia on the Manatee County side. Developer Walter Fuller embraced the tunnel idea wholeheartedly and eventually became its primary booster, saying a tunnel would be cheaper, safer, and easier to maintain. Fuller, whose ally Wayne Palmer had engineered a tunnel under Mobile Bay, said a Tampa Bay tunnel would be hurricane-proof and at forty feet deep in the shipping channel, would provide sufficient room for the ocean liner *Queen Mary* to pass above.<sup>50</sup>

Pinellas County commissioners ran with the idea. In 1939, they pushed state lawmakers to approve it, and the Legislature agreed to back a combination bridge-tunnel. But the enabling legislation was declared unconstitutional because part of the project's route crossed a section of Hillsborough County, where the legislative bill had not been legally advertised, as required.<sup>51</sup>

The setback only seemed to spur more action during the next two years. In what would prove a fortuitous decision, the Legislature in 1939 created the St. Petersburg Port Authority, which was not directly related to the bridge project but whose existence helped keep alive interest in maritime activities and transportation across the bay. During the legislative wrangling, influential private backers had revived Herman Simmonds's high bridge idea; among them were former City Council member George Hopkins, First National Bank executive Harry Playford, *St. Petersburg Times* publisher Paul Poynter, and *St. Petersburg Independent* publisher L. Chauncey Brown. As frustrated County commissioners continued their unsuccessful lobbying to start the bridge-tunnel via legislative action, a Pinellas and Manatee County bridge authority began pursuing federal dollars and an engineering firm drew plans for a crossing that jumped off the foot of

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<sup>50</sup> Blizin, *ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> Blizin *ibid.*

Ninth Street South near the Bee Line Ferry terminus. But December 7, 1941 halted all activity. Immediate thoughts of crossing the lower bay vanished amid the early World War II effort. The Navy even took over the Bee Line Ferry service.<sup>52</sup>

Boosters soon renewed the fight. Nelson Poynter, son of the *Times* publisher and now a powerful editor at the newspaper, suggested the Port Authority build a deep-water port in which Navy ships could refuel. The idea never took off, though it was discussed month after month in endless deliberation that served to sustain the idea of crossing the bay. Finally the Port Authority quit gabbing and got busy: It decided it would buy back the Bee Line from the government after the war, thus acquiring an asset to aid in financing a bridge while showing a need for it by keeping close track of ferry traffic. Designers and engineers got on board, including the New York City firm of Parsons, Brinckerhoff, Hogan and MacDonald, the company that eventually designed the Skyway. Another engineering firm, Bail, Horton and Associates of Bradenton and Fort Myers, put an \$8.6-million price tag on the bridge and suggested a \$1.25 per car toll.<sup>53</sup>

Seeing serious steps undertaken, opponents began howling. Hillsborough County officials declared that a lower bay crossing would stifle Tampa business and threaten the city's shipping lifeline by making bay navigation more difficult. The Tampa Chamber of Commerce added its objections. The Pinellas County Commission, which did not wish to oppose a bay crossing but hoped to upstage St. Petersburg, threw in a complication when it asked the Legislature to let the county condemn the Bee Line and use county, state, and

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<sup>52</sup> Blizin, *ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> Blizin, *ibid.*

federal money for a toll-free bridge and/or tunnel. But the lawmakers let other business bury the bill, and it died without definitive action.<sup>54</sup>

By 1946, the state boards had blessed the bay crossing and the federal government approved. The official green lights were encouraging, but new difficulties loomed. Citing increased labor and building costs, the Port Authority pressed the Legislature to raise the debt limit on the bridge from \$10-million to \$15-million. Despite cries that the price was growing too high, lawmakers raised the limit. But the enabling legislation required that no member of the St. Petersburg City Council could hold a paid position involving the project – and so Port Authority chair E. Leslie Cole, a council member who had shepherded the project’s early stages, had to resign. E. R. Baldinger, a former Pittsburgh Steel auditor, replaced him. This resolved the conflict-of-interest problem, but the cost issue remained. It became the talk of the town. Argument ensued over business lunches and across fences. People went to mass public meetings in Williams Park. Finally, officials called for a referendum – and the public voted to approve the higher cost. That same year, 1947, Circuit Judge John U. Bird validated \$15-million in bonds. At last, the project seemed ready to begin. Yet not one bid was offered for any of the bonds. St. Petersburg defaulted on its bonds during the Depression years, and perhaps investors recalled the history.<sup>55</sup>

Bridging the lower bay might have remained unrealized for a long time, but smart politicking resurrected the moribund dream. Bridge boosters had an ally in Fuller Warren. Elected governor in 1948, the Blountstown-born lawyer agreed to let the state Improvement Commission take over bridge financing and to let the state road department

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<sup>54</sup> Blizin, *ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> Blizin, *ibid.*; “Tax Talk,” *St. Petersburg Evening Independent*, February 9, 1931, 7; “Financial Problems to Be Aired During Meeting of Florida League Of Cities,” *Evening Independent*, March 21, 1930, 14.

build it. Helping the cause was St. Petersburg lawyer Frank Harris, who was a major Warren supporter during the gubernatorial campaign. Acting quickly after the inauguration, Harris and Nelson Poynter hosted a dinner at the Vinoy Hotel on March 10, 1949. They invited Hernando County banker Alfred McKethan, a Warren appointee who as road board chairman and head of the Improvement Commission was one the state's most powerful politicians. A bevy of other state officials and lawmakers attended, as did the Port Authority members: Leon D. Lewis, William H. Mills, John P. Welch, Roy C. Bishop, and Henry Sorenson. Undoubtedly, negotiations took place before and after the sit-down. But soon afterward, the state took over the Port Authority's assets, assumed \$520,000 in bonded indebtedness, and retained a New York consultant to do a new traffic survey. Pinellas State Senator Henry Baynard and State Representatives Charles Schuh, James A. McClure, and Archie Clement pushed through the necessary legislation. Just like that, the project had its legs again – prompting the first of numerous celebrations.<sup>56</sup>

On July 4, 1949, the first Spans Across the Bay event drew more than 100 powerful figures, among them Warren and McKethan. A fleet of small boats ferried the luminaries down Tampa Bay. Guides showed them Egmont and Mullet keys, taking the greatest care to point out the bridge's proposed site and expounding on its importance. A few weeks later, Circuit Judge John Dickinson validated a \$21,250,000 bond issue, backed by Improvement Commission resources. In July 1950, another star-spangled holiday brought more than 5,000 people to Al Lang Field, where officials opened bids for the first phase of construction. Low bidders were the Hendry Corporation of Rattlesnake, a community just across Gandy Bridge on the way to Tampa, and Atlantic Dredging

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<sup>56</sup> Blizin, *ibid.*; Jeffrey S. Solocheck and Craig Basse, "Hernando Leader Alfred A. McKethan Dies," *St. Petersburg Times*, April 2, 2002, 1B.



Company of Satsuma. Each firm won pieces of the job. By 1952, the bridge – with no tunnel – was well on its way.<sup>57</sup>

Two months before the bridge's 1954 opening, two newsmen – *St. Petersburg Times* outdoors editor Rube Allyn and photographer Bob Moreland – became the first people other than workers to negotiate the new Skyway. Their trip, undertaken for front-page articles and photographs, included a dizzying scoot across the high span's girders, far above Tampa Bay.<sup>58</sup>

Allyn started his journey from the community of Rubonia – named for Rube Allyn Sr. – on the Manatee County side. He and Moreland took 59 minutes, counting stops to make photographs, to cross narrow girders as high above the water as the top of an eleven-story building. "It took my breath away," wrote Allyn, who noted that he counted five ocean-going freighters at least 500 feet long pass under the span.<sup>59</sup>

But to residents, the newsmen's scary expedition did not count. The real thing would be crossing by car, and motorists lined up by the thousands to do it. From 11:45 a.m. on September 6 to 11 p.m. that night – when the \$1.75 toll charge kicked in – 15,086 cars crossed, said Skyway manager L.E. Radcliffe. That figure did not include the official motorcade, led by opera singer James Melton and Miss Greece in Melton's 1900 Rockwell hansom cab. Following closely in a Chrysler Imperial were Acting Governor Johns, General James A. Van Fleet, and U.S. Senator Spessard Holland. It was estimated more than 50,000 people crossed in cars, buses, and trucks, on bikes, and on foot. Among the throng was Dazzy Vance, a Brooklyn Dodgers pitching star of the 1920s, who drove

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<sup>57</sup> Blizin, *ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> Allyn, "First Man Over Tells What It's Like – What You See From Skyway," *St. Petersburg Times*, July 8, 1954, 1; Witwer. "Times Reporter Makes Historic Trip Over Bridge," *Times*, July 8, 1954, 1.

<sup>59</sup> Allyn, *ibid.*

his 1925 Dodge from Homosassa Springs. David Carpenter, a Tampa resident, was reported to have experienced the bridge's first flat tire.<sup>60</sup>

For those less interested in risking car trouble in crowded traffic, there were plenty of off-road attractions, too: dances, a beauty contest, and by special arrangement with Paramount Studios, the first showing in the South of Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window*, starring James Stewart, in the air-conditioned Florida Theater.<sup>61</sup>

The relatively steep charge of \$1.75 to cross the bridge did not necessarily represent everyone's bargain. It represented more than an hour's wage for many workers local workers in 1954; truck driver trainees were being offered \$1.12, for example, and \$1.75 could purchase a seven-pound chuck roast on sale at Webb's City.<sup>62</sup>

## **The Missing Link**

That so many thousands turned out for the Skyway opening testified to the powerful mystique of the new bridge – but not to the convenience of reaching it. Motorists could not go straight down U.S. 19 because the highway remained incomplete between Twenty-second Avenue North and Eighteenth Avenue South, a distance of about three miles. African-American residents called the section south of Central Avenue and west of Twenty-eighth Street South “Bear County,” a reference to the sparsely settled neighborhood's relative isolation, where there were few roads. Many drivers had to detour on side streets to reach the bridge's entrance, and while residents might put up with the awkward approach on a special day, southbound tourists would not be

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<sup>60</sup> Bothwell, *ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> *St. Petersburg Times*, Florida Theater advertisement, September 7, 1954, 21.

<sup>62</sup> Help wanted advertisements for truck driver trainees appeared regularly in the *St. Petersburg Time* and Webb's City grocery advertisements appeared almost daily.

impressed. Clearly, the highway's final link had to be completed before St. Petersburg legitimately could boast of shedding its dead-end geography.<sup>63</sup>

A little more than ten months later, St. Petersburg had its full connection to the rest of the nation. The finished U.S. 19, stretching all the way to Erie, Pa., was dedicated on July 19, 1955. At the ceremony, U.S. Senator George C. Smathers, predicting the highway would bring progress and prosperity, called the road's completion "the American story of a dream come true." He praised Walter Fuller for his role and he bragged about Florida's growth, attributing it to the state's "exploding road system," and pointed to the \$3.3-million in federal subsidies that helped drive the highway through St. Petersburg.<sup>64</sup>

In 91-degree heat – "The usual pleasant St. Petersburg day," said Mayor Samuel Johnson, wiping away sweat – crowds gathered at Central Plaza, the city's new shopping center, to hear speeches and that night watch a \$1,500 fireworks display. An overloaded, one-ton air conditioner at a new appliance store went on the blink. Outside, spectators pulled their camp stools into rare patches of shade. A man dressed as Davy Crockett, the year's iconic frontier hero, appeared. Youngsters singing the popular Crockett ballad hushed when the combined bands of St. Petersburg, Boca Ciega, and Northeast high schools crashed into the *Star-Spangled Banner*. Gibbs, the city's segregated high school for African-American youngsters, did not participate. The absence amounted to irony even in a Jim Crow era, as the new highway passed closer to Gibbs than it did to the

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<sup>63</sup> "What Do You Want To Know About Sunshine Skyway," *St. Petersburg Times*, September 5, 1954, 2; Bear County is a familiar term among long-time African-American residents. The author first heard it from Joseph Battle in an August, 1996 conversation. In African-American historian Minson Rubin and the late City Council member Ernest Fillyau also used the term to describe the area.

<sup>64</sup> George Bartlett, "Official Opening Of U.S. 19 Joins Suncoast, North," *St. Petersburg Times*, July 20, 1955, 1; "Smathers Praises Fuller at Dedication," *Times*, July 20, 1955, 17

city's three public white schools. Publix market held a 19-cent sale honoring the highway's numeric designation. Charles Egulf, head baker at Wolfie's delicatessen, created a cake ten feet long and four feet wide, covered it with 250 pounds of butter cream icing, and decorated it with a map of Pinellas County showing the highway's route – in addition to the municipal pier, Al Lang Field, and Derby Lane greyhound track.<sup>65</sup>

As the Skyway celebration did the year before, the U.S. 19 festivities culminated years of planning. In a sense, the project began during the 1920s when the DuPont industrial interests bought millions of acres of land near the Gulf of Mexico in the Florida Panhandle. The DuPonts then began agitating for a highway between Pensacola and Tallahassee to serve their vast holdings, and as a clever political ploy, proposed an extension down Florida's West Coast all the way to St. Petersburg. When the Panhandle road soon was built, the link to St. Petersburg was pushed aside.<sup>66</sup>

But Walter Fuller later retrieved the plan. Always deeply involved in anything concerning St. Petersburg and its development, Fuller was elected to the Legislature in 1936 after campaigning for renewed attention to the highway. At first, not everyone shared Fuller's enthusiasm. When he invited 100 Pinellas businessmen to a planning session about the road, only eight showed up. And seven of them shrugged off Fuller's plan as unrealistic. Only *Times* publisher Paul Poynter liked the idea; he plunked down \$100 to underscore his support, which initiated the Gulf Coast Highway Association. .

Oscar W. Gilbert, a descendant of city pioneers who arrived from England in the 1880s

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<sup>65</sup> Bothwell, "Spectators Sang, Attempt National Anthem, Feel Proud," *St. Petersburg Times*, July 20, 1955, 36; *Times*, Publix advertisement, *Times*, July 20, 1955, 15; "Hint To Housewives," *Times*, July 20, 1955, 1.

<sup>66</sup> Stan Witwer, "Skyway, Gulf Coast Highway Join Hands," *St. Petersburg Times*, Sept. 6, 1954, 10B.

before St. Petersburg had its railroad, or even its name, became the association's treasurer.<sup>67</sup>

The group started promoting the highway and Fuller pushed it during the Legislature's 1937 session. He was able to secure a route for the highway and many promises to help build it. Mile-by-mile progress by road boards took place under five governors – Spessard Holland, Millard Caldwell, Fuller Warren, Dan McCarty, and Charley Johns. Work progressed even during World War II, and in 1944, the highway was completed from Crystal River to just north of New Port Richey.<sup>68</sup>

Between 1947 and 1954, the state worked hard to finish the road, pumping about \$6-million into the project. Work began in 1947 on an extension to Tarpon Springs, in 1949 to Clearwater's Gulf to Bay Boulevard, and in 1950 to Pinellas Park. In 1954, crews finished sections from Pinellas Park to Twenty-Second Avenue North in St. Petersburg, and from Eighteenth Avenue South to Maximo Point, where the highway joined the Sunshine Skyway.<sup>69</sup>

When the last link opened in 1955, St. Petersburg had a highway link not only to Erie, Pa., but also to Cincinnati through to U.S. 27 via Tallahassee. The city had traffic arteries to both the Northeastern and Midwestern United States, regions whose residents looked to Florida for vacations and perhaps new homes.<sup>70</sup> With gasoline available somewhere around twenty-five to twenty-nine cents per gallon, and more than seven-million cars sold nationwide in 1955, the new roads leading to St. Petersburg beckoned.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Witwer, *ibid*; Fuller, 301; Grismer, 277, 288.

<sup>68</sup> Witwer, *ibid*.

<sup>69</sup> Witwer, *ibid*.

<sup>70</sup> Witwer, *ibid*.

<sup>71</sup> "Gas Prices May Echo At Polls," *St. Petersburg Times*, October 27, 1955, 6.

## **From Marsh to Merchandise**

The Goose Pond story of development and merchandising symbolized St. Petersburg's emergence as a booming city. When the Central Plaza shopping center opened on part of a former marsh on November 18, 1952, a newspaper headline proclaimed that the city had enjoyed fleeting status as the nation's retail capital. Nearly six hundred feet of new commercial frontage, opening near the heart-of-town intersection of U.S. Highway 19 and Central Avenue, drew up to 50,000 visitors who strained merchants' inventories. One store reported selling one hundred radios in seven hours. Gushing news reports called the new center "business magic" and "brilliant in point of central location. But it cast ominous foreshadowing of difficult challenges ahead for the old downtown business interests."<sup>72</sup>

In microcosm, the saga represented the Florida's postwar evolution from isolated backwater to Sun Belt destination. The 98-acre tract, as were other parts of Florida, was filled and paved and covered with buildings. Its use as a food production site and natural drainage area was lost. So was its potential as a public park or nature preserve. All those past uses and future possibilities were traded for economic gain, shopping opportunities, offices, and other urban amenities for a growing city.

Filled with rich soil but smaller than a quarter-section farm on the Great Plains, Goose Pond first supported such bucolic activities as hunting and truck farming. Situated between Fifth Avenues North and South, bounded by Thirty-First and Thirty-Fourth Streets, the anomalous site in the center of town was developed later than other city areas

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<sup>72</sup> Douglas Doubleday, "City Has Brief Fling As Retailing Capital of United States," *St. Petersburg Times*, Nov. 19, 1952, 1; Doubleday, "Central Plaza Like A Stroke Of Business Magic," *Times*, November 18, 1952, 2B.

because of its low-lying nature. When development did come, it helped link far-flung subdivisions, provided a new economic sparkplug, and became St. Petersburg's most significant land-use event of the 1950s – on existing real estate. Dredge-and-fill operations, which created land from water, constituted the most dramatic (and damaging) development phenomenon, and will be discussed in a later chapter.<sup>73</sup>

The Goose Pond's character was not so unusual in early St. Petersburg. A patchwork of swampy land that composed much of the city's landscape, the Goose Pond area was part of a sinkhole system that stretched from Mirror Lake downtown to the city's west-central area. In his May 1848 survey, George Watson Jr. recorded a "prairie lake" sprawling over sections 14, 15, 22, and 23 of Township 31, Range 16. It was one of several such features in the lower Pinellas peninsula. The remnants of the lake Watson described would give way in the twentieth century to Central Plaza. Far from being the wasteland some developers described, the marsh's rich soil provided the nutrients growers needed to produce bountiful vegetable harvests.<sup>74</sup>

City boosters sometimes touted such sites as economic engines – if they were not denigrating them as barrens. The description depended on whether investments were being sought. Early in the twentieth century, the city's "muck lands" received considerable attention. On one occasion, the *St. Petersburg Times* said in a front-page article:

What were ponds and 'marshes' up to a short time ago,  
absolutely worthless territory that was only a blot on the

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<sup>73</sup> "46-Acre Potato Field Planted At Goose Pond," *St. Petersburg Evening Independent*, April 16, 1917, 1; John Bethell, *Pinellas, A Brief History of the Lower Point* (St. Petersburg: Independent Job Press, 1912), 56.

<sup>74</sup> Stephenson, 56; Kelly V. Wilson, "Modification of Karst Depressions by Urbanization in Pinellas County, Florida," Masters Thesis, University of South Florida, 2004: 35; George Watson Jr., survey, Land District East, State of Florida, May 1848.

landscape . . . are now in all stages of change, from the grubbing out of jungle, ditching, plowing, planting, to producing and harvesting. Small armies of workmen – which means (payrolls) – are engaged in these works, and the muck lands of St. Petersburg are among the busiest places to be seen on the Peninsula – either our own splendid little Pinnellas Peninsula or the big one of Florida.<sup>75</sup>

One of the earliest entrepreneurs at the Goose Pond was landscape businessman Charles Townsend Wedding, who established between 1905 and 1910 a nursery at what would become the southeast corner of Central Avenue and Thirty-Fourth Street. During World War II, his son, Charles Wedding, and grandson, C. Randolph Wedding, planted a victory garden on about one and one-half acres in the marsh. “We grew enough radishes and onions to feed the city,” C. Randolph Wedding recalled. Wedding remembered the Goose Pond tract as resembling a plain “with a dish” -- an indentation that allowed collection of water and helped create marshy conditions. Trees and shrubs grew intermittently among the garden plots. Miniature ponds developed within the site. There were no paths as such; people simply walked around, skirting gardens and bogs as best they could. Animals helping to work the land had a harder time, sometimes sinking into the muck. Mules wore burlap on their feet to keep from bogging down; farmers attached to the beasts’ hooves special wooden “mud shoes,” eight inches square by two inches thick.<sup>76</sup>

With its bumper crops, the soil’s fertility produced hyperbole and local legend. Robert L. Miller’s grandfather owned property at the Goose Pond. “You could hardly carry the watermelon(s) from there they were so big,” Miller said. Residents took

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<sup>75</sup> “Muck Lands Are Now Showing Their Worth,” *St. Petersburg Times*, March 22, 1910, 1.

<sup>76</sup> C. Randolph Wedding, interview by Jon Wilson about Goose Pond, St. Petersburg, April 13, 2006; Scott Hartzell, “Rich Paradise Retreated as the Future Took Hold,” *St. Petersburg Times*, Neighborhood Times Section, January 3, 2001, 9..



buckets and drove trucks to buy and carry away Goose Pond muck. “You could throw a stone in there and it would grow,” said longtime resident Sam Hicks Jr. In 1937, Paul McCutcheon, a Goose Pond property owner, cited an unidentified analysis that revealed every necessary nutrient for plant growth, saying that authorities had pronounced the soil “extremely rare.”<sup>77</sup>

Whatever the muck contained, its productivity consistently drew farmers willing to work the marsh for a living. Among those who did were a group of Japanese farmers, some of whom appeared in St. Petersburg about the time of World War I. They grew American vegetables, selling them to local grocers. Their names included Kimura, Terrasaka, Watanabe, and Yamanaka. Herbert Kimura said his father Harry Kimura also ran a butcher shop in a grocery store on the south side of Central Avenue near the Goose Pond.<sup>78</sup>

The soil’s rich content was not always beneficent. Something in it caused it to catch fire from time to time during dry spells. Smoldering muck fires spread a putrid odor across central St. Petersburg and sometimes caused a traffic hazard. One such inferno developed in January 1944 when property owners Al Furen and Bucky Enos got permission from the fire department to burn off a lot near Central Avenue and Thirty-first Street so they could install a golf driving range. The piled up mulch and grass, set it alight and, after leaving the scene learned that a workman had plowed under the burning bundles. The result was what the *St. Petersburg Times* called “a dense smoke screen” that tied up traffic and made vision all but impossible. The smog drifted, tying up motorists

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<sup>77</sup> Hartzell, “Furen To Spend \$50,000 On Goose Pond Making It A Show Place On West Central,” *St. Petersburg Times*, Nov. 26, 1937, 13.

<sup>78</sup> Bette Smith, “Vegetable Gardens of Goose Pond became concrete of Central Plaza,” *St. Petersburg Times*, August 8, 1983, 3D.

on streets and avenues from Fifth Avenue North to Fifth Avenue South in the marsh area.<sup>79</sup>

If fire was a problem, so was water. Heavy rains could send floods rolling out of the marsh to cover Central Avenue, which by 1914 stretched from downtown to Boca Ciega Bay. It stopped cars, trucks, and the trolley, which by 1913 reached the Jungle area on the bay. One tale of woe came from Walter Fuller, who had real estate projects in the far west St. Petersburg neighborhood. The summer of 1916 brought particularly wet weeks, putting Central under water near the Goose Pond and blocking transportation for Fuller's prospective customers. The determined developer commandeered a fleet of rowboats to ferry passengers across the flood so they could connect with street cars stalled on each side of the swamp.<sup>80</sup>

Goose Pond offered a slice of rich land, but its prominence on a growing city's main east-west roadway – which linked downtown to the property of influential real estate men promoting the city's western precincts – made the marsh more an annoyance than a blessing. It was only a matter of time before someone came up with ideas to develop it.

In the late 1930s, Al Furen was a young Goose Pond property owner with visions of more than truck farming. He wanted to turn the swamp into a showcase containing a shopping center -- a wisp of an idea whose timing proved not quite right, but which would have its day in a little more than a decade. Born during the Depression, the plan must have been viewed as bold. Furen wanted to start immediately on a five-year timeline whose implementation he predicted would cost \$50,000. The shopping center

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<sup>79</sup> "Muck Fire and Fog Bring Blackout to Goose Pond," *St. Petersburg Times*, January 14, 1944, 1.

<sup>80</sup> Grismer, 120; James Buckley, *Street Railroads of St. Petersburg*, (Forty Fort, Pa.: Harold E. Cox, 1983), 9; Fuller, 114.

was just one of the idea's aspects. Furen wanted to establish what he envisioned as "one of the beauty spots of the Florida west coast," featuring gardens, miniature lakes, and a wildlife sanctuary.<sup>81</sup>

Furen's dream did not materialize. During the 1930s, cash was scarce and lending was seldom available on request. Goose Pond truck-farming continued at least through World War II, but the site's Japanese farmers, long a fixture at the site, were no longer allowed to own weapons of any kind, including ax heads used in work. Legislators feared that these long-time St. Petersburg residents would use the weapons to aid Japan's war effort. At least one resident of Japanese descent still maintained a business as war drew closer; Kichi Yamanaka's Evergreen Garden Nursery remained at 3426 Central Avenue. The other store at the site was McCutcheon's Goose Pond vegetable market at 3260 Central Avenue. A full-fledged shopping center would have to wait.<sup>82</sup>

An early sign that Goose Pond would change with the rest of St. Petersburg arrived in August 1945 – just days after V-J Day – when the Pinellas County School Board purchased acreage on the site. The board revealed no immediate plans, but it was reported that members hoped to build new school facilities there. The purchase presaged a bitter fight less than a decade later between the school district and St. Petersburg city government about policy regarding the sale of publicly owned land. Meanwhile, it was inevitable that Goose Pond, by now a virtual relic of St. Petersburg's bucolic past, would be developed in some way that would reflect a more urban landscape.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> "Highway Plans Spur Building At Goose Pond," *St. Petersburg Times*, August 12, 1950, 37.

<sup>82</sup> Hartzell, "Rich Paradise Retreated As Progress Took Hold," *St. Petersburg Times*, January 3, 2001, Neighborhood Times section, 10.

<sup>83</sup> "Board Makes First Payment On New Junior High Site," *St. Petersburg Evening Independent*, August 23, 1945, 4.

The first impetus emerged in 1949 and 1950 when it became clear that highway planners were drawing the new U.S. Highway 19 route along the line of Thirty-Fourth Street – essentially Goose Pond’s western edge. Suddenly, the swamp was a hot item. Developers had avoided it for years because of the site preparation and fill work necessary to bring the tract up to grade. “It remained a rural gap in the center of St. Petersburg while urban improvements leaped over it,” wrote the *St. Petersburg Times*. But the coming of a major road made investment more attractive. Early in 1950, Builders Mortgage Corporation was one of the first large commercial enterprises to stake out territory west of Thirty-First Street near the marsh when it sunk pilings, installed a patch of fill, and built an office. Clearly, something was about to happen on the development front.<sup>84</sup>

And happen it did in 1951. The G&F Realty Corporation, headquartered in Jersey City, New Jersey and Miami Beach, bought four blocks between Central Avenue and Second Avenue South, bounded by Thirty-Fourth and Thirty-Second Streets. The sellers were Al Furen and C.E. Lebeck. The reported price was \$156,000.<sup>85</sup>

The second shoe dropped in September 1951 when newspapers “learned” – a term usually employed when sources are not ready to announce something officially – that a major “store center” would be coming to the Goose Pond area. In a special, apparently unannounced meeting, the city’s planning board agreed to a zoning change that accommodated the development. A month later, Lowell Fyvolent, a realty brokerage agent for G&F Realty, announced the new center would house “retail and service stores of complete diversification” and parking space for 750 vehicles. The project, which

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<sup>84</sup> “Highway Plans Spur Building At Goose Pond,” *St. Petersburg Times*, August 13, 1950, 37.

<sup>85</sup> “Corporation Buys Key Intersection,” *St. Petersburg Times*, August 12, 1951, 1.

reportedly was a \$700,000 investment, was bound to be benefit for residents of new subdivisions in the city's western and northwestern areas, but it also presented the first major threat to downtown business supremacy. Among those who saw it that way was James E. "Doc" Webb, the owner of the sprawling Webb's City on Ninth Street South. Webb tried to block the new Central Plaza development by persuading planners to chop the Goose Pond tract into small, conventional pieces rather than zone a commercial tract large enough for the shopping center. Webb failed, but his enterprise outlasted many another downtown business challenged and hurt by the upsurge in commercial growth brought by the new shopping center and others that followed.<sup>86</sup>

Few, if any, opposed the development on the grounds that a rich, productive tract of land should be in some way preserved. Al Furen's idea for a garden attraction had long since dissolved in the swirl of the city's postwar expansion frenzy. As a piece of old St. Petersburg disappeared under tons of concrete and asphalt, its seemed as though people, even those who had farmed the marsh, were eager to have their city embrace a symbol of a new and prosperous urban era. "We were glad to see Central Plaza," said Mary Kimura, the wife of Herbert Kimura, who was among the last of the Japanese Goose Pond farmers.<sup>87</sup>

Central Plaza opened in November 1952 with parking space for 2,500 vehicles, more than three times the original estimate. The center attracted between 30,000 and 50,000 shoppers on the first day and police had to direct traffic to keep it from jamming Central Avenue. The plaza's anchor stores included a Publix market, McCrory's variety store, Liggett's Drug Store, and Belk-Lindsey department store. Strong supporting stores

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<sup>86</sup> "Goose Pond Area To Be Site Of \$500,000 Store Center," *St. Petersburg Times*, September 23, 1951; "\$700,000 Investment Will Bridge Undeveloped Gap," *Times*, October 21, 1951, 1; Fuller, 230.

<sup>87</sup> Hartzell, January 3, 2001.

included Butler Shoes, Kinney Shoes, a Singer Sewing Center, a cleaners, a women's apparel shop, and an appliance store. A second grocery store, an A&P, further bolstered the line-up. Eventually, one of the major attractions became Wolfie's, a delicatessen-style restaurant with an extensive menu featuring reuben sandwiches, huge cheeseburgers, chocolate éclairs, cheese cake, and fish served with the head intact. It all made quite a ripple in the old Goose Pond and beyond.<sup>88</sup>

Central Plaza's arrival still left a question about the section of the Goose Pond north of Central Avenue. The School Board owned fifty-five acres, which it had purchased several years earlier for \$55,000. As early as 1953, industrialists had begun to sniff around, looking for likely development sites. In October, school board chairman Franklin Green consulted the city's planning board, bringing with him Al Lino, director of the Pinellas County Light Industry Council; J.V. Zimmerman of Futuronic, a toy industry; and George Dunn, director of the Chamber of Commerce's Industrial Bureau. City planners gave them a mixed reception. Among the critics was the ubiquitous Walter Fuller, a city planning board member, who declared the property should not be used for anything but public purposes. The School Board had a "public trust," he said, adding: "I doubt their moral right to sell it for private use."<sup>89</sup>

Fuller's remark was an early shot across the bow in what would become an acrimonious debate that dragged on for several years. The issue: how should the School Board dispose of its property? The land, worth much more in the 1950s real estate climate than the board had paid for it, promised a lucrative sales price. Speculation suggested the property was worth anywhere from \$750,000 to \$1-million, and the school

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<sup>88</sup> "Thousands Jam Central Plaza Stores At Opening," *St. Petersburg Times*, November 19, 1952, 17.

<sup>89</sup> "A Guide To St. Petersburg," *St. Petersburg Times*, October 23, 1953, 17E.

district needed revenue to pay for growing needs: in St. Petersburg alone, two new high schools and a junior high school were being built or were in planning stages. The question: To whom would the board sell, private developers or the City of St. Petersburg? The issue had even broader meaning, according to the *St. Petersburg Times*: “Shall any trustees of public realty holdings liquidate them today, in face of sure future needs for every inch of public land?”<sup>90</sup>

The *Times* was a staunch supporter of keeping the remaining Goose Pond acreage in the public domain. It also favored carefully planned development and it saw the Goose Pond controversy as a battle that would either uphold planning principles or push them away. The newspaper suggested that the lure of quick profits from real estate would damage the city’s future. In an editorial, the *Times* likened the Goose Pond to “a bright new coin burning a hole in the (S)chool (B)oard’s pocket.” What the newspaper did like was City Manager Ross Windom’s idea to put a stadium for high school and college football, a central library, and other “civic center” amenities on the site, which was the biggest piece of publicly owned land in the center city.<sup>91</sup>

In August 1954, the city planning board voted down the School Board’s request to allow stores on the Goose Pond acreage, something the board had wanted so that the land would become more attractive to developers. The planning board also recommended that the city acquire for public purposes. The *Times* hailed the decision as a “victory for the public.” But it was a short-lived triumph.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> “Land For Public, Windom Urges,” *St. Petersburg Times*, February 19, 1954, 25; “Appraisal Due On Goose Pond School Land,” *Times*, February 21, 1954.

<sup>91</sup> “St. Petersburg Needs A Stadium And On The Goose Pond Tract,” *St. Petersburg Times*, June 28, 1954, 6.

<sup>92</sup> Douglas Doubleday, “School Board’s Goose Pond Plan Given 1-2 Punch By Plan Board,” *St. Petersburg Times*, August 13, 1954, 17.

Less than a year later, the School Board sold its acreage for \$802,000 -- a 1,400 percent return on its \$55,000 investment a decade earlier. The board sold about fifty acres of the property to a five-person private development group, which paid \$682,000; the U.S. postal service picked up the other five acres on option for \$120,000. It was, said the *Times*, a “black day for St. Petersburg.” An editorial castigated both the School Board and the City Council for not working out an agreement to keep the Goose Pond public. . . . “The old \$ sign blinded civic imagination,” the editorial fumed, emphasizing the profit angle by using the dollar symbol. Meanwhile, School Board member Abe Pheil, a former St. Petersburg mayor, lashed back, accusing the *Times* of “making the board look like a bunch of money grubbers.” Almost immediately after the sale, the board ordered its architect to begin preliminary plans for twenty new classrooms, signifying that developers were beginning to win the commercial zoning they wanted.<sup>93</sup>

The School Board sale paved the way for development on the Goose Pond property north of Central Avenue. As in the Central Plaza development a few years earlier, no one raised a voice in defense of the marsh land itself. The public attitude of the time seemed to be that the Goose Pond, after years as a barely tolerated wasteland, finally was coming into its own. The *Times* summed up the mood in a blurb published after Central Plaza opened, headlined, “The Ugly Duckling.” The Goose Pond, the writer insisted, “was a forbidding and useless looking stretch. Citizens, when they thought about it, regarded it as a bother – something to hurdle over, especially after a Summer rain.” The feature concluded by mimicking the city’s land speculation fever of the 1920s:

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<sup>93</sup>Evelyn Rogers, “School Board Sells Goose Pond To Investors,” 23; *St. Petersburg Times*, July 28, 1955.



“Weeds are only topsoil deep, and real estate long rebuffed will take on jeweled luster when enough humans buff it.”<sup>94</sup>

A United States Post Office opened in late 1957 at First Avenue North and Thirty-First Street on part of the property the School Board sold. More development followed, including a retail center called North Plaza between Central Avenue and First Avenue North. A 36,000-square-foot W.T. Grant discount department store became its anchor tenant. A block east of Central Plaza, the William Henry department store went in. Restaurants such as Howard Johnson’s opened. A Montgomery Ward opened at U.S. 19 and First Avenue N in March 1959, a 181,000-square-foot behemoth set on ten acres, said to be the department store chain’s fifth-largest retail center nationally. The mega-store It included a fourteen-vehicle service center and an outdoor lawn and garden shop. On the site of the victory garden planted by C. Randolph Wedding and his father rose an apartment-and-office complex.<sup>95</sup>

Development overwhelmed the Goose Pond tract, although issues regarding rights-of-way simmered for several more years. Vestiges of the old agricultural economic base – mostly citrus and pasture lands – disappeared during the 1950s throughout St. Petersburg, covered in favor of tract housing and commercial development. St. Petersburg boiled with development fever. Nobody tried to rescue Goose Pond as a natural resource, and only the *Times* and a few allies agitated for a publicly owned facility of some kind. Business clearly was ascendant over public use. Entrepreneurs were succeeding in profitable “commodification” of land, a common phenomenon

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<sup>94</sup> Christopher Meindl, “Water, Water Everywhere,” *Paradise Lost*, Raymond O. Arsenault and Jack Davis, eds., (Gainesville, Fla.: University Press of Florida, 2005), 114; Douglas Doubleday, “Round Realty Row,” *St. Petersburg Times*, May 17, 1953, 1F.

<sup>95</sup> “Goose Pond Burgeons Commercially,” *St. Petersburg Times*, May 27, 1957, 25; “Montgomery Ward Special Opening Section Today,” *Times*, March 12, 1959, 1.

environmental historian Donald Worster has described. The Goose Pond had virtually no chance to remain as it had been and perhaps there was no compelling reason for it to do so. A new era in the city's history had arrived.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Donald Worster, "The Vulnerable Earth: Toward A Planetary History," in Worster, ed. *The Ends of the Earth*, 48.

### Chapter Three: Palmetto, Pastures, People

During the late 1950s and early 1960s, a talented, young designer worked into the wee hours and through weekends, crafting an exotic sports car at the edge of what was then St. Petersburg's suburban frontier. Henry Covington called his creation El Tiburon, meaning The Shark, or sometimes simply the Covington Special. The sleek, low-slung vehicle drew favorable reviews from such national automotive magazines as *Road and Track*.<sup>97</sup>

Glistening in Covington's driveway on Fifty-eighth Street North, El Tiburon seemed out of place. It was a fantasy car in a tract-house subdivision built next to pastures and pine. Fancifully named Westgate Manor was so undeveloped that cattle sometimes escaped from an adjacent ranch, soiling fresh St. Augustine grass and knocking down new clotheslines belonging to recently arrived middle-class residents from Long Island, or Springfield, Mass., or Port Huron, Mich.<sup>98</sup>

In truth, the anomalous space-age car in the cookie-cutter, concrete block neighborhood symbolized perfectly St. Petersburg's postwar reality. Between 1950 and 1959, developers built 46,679 new houses in St. Petersburg, the most in any decade before or since. Two-, three-, and occasionally four-bedroom houses – most in the suburban ranch style – were priced moderately to attract both retirees and young families. The new residents moving into these homes were always white; black residents drawn to

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<sup>97</sup> Olga Covington, interview by Jon Wilson about El Tiburon, St. Petersburg, February 28, 2000; "Henry B. Covington, 38, Designer Of Watches," *New York Times*, May 8, 1962, 39.

<sup>98</sup> The author lived in Westgate Manor as a youngster and watched roaming cattle. His first friends were from the locations cited.

St. Petersburg by work available in the decade's construction boom moved into the traditionally segregated African-American communities closer to the city center. Meanwhile, clean industry arrived. Cutting-edge electronics firms such as General Electric added another element to the area's traditional tourism, agricultural, and more recently, homebuilding economic bases. The new companies were directly related to the Cold War defense industry and the space race brought on by the Soviet Union's launching of Sputnik I in 1957. Covington's car represented St. Petersburg's aspirations to become a modern, exciting city even as the proliferation of look-alike subdivisions created a bland ambience. As a local writer expressed it in retrospect, the city's reality was one of stultifying conformity containing "(b)lock after block of concrete houses painted coral pink and aquamarine, with plaster marlins and palm trees glued near their front doors, shuffleboard courts and even a few real coconuts."<sup>99</sup>

## **Acres of Houses**

Memories of the Great Depression remained fresh enough that an economic slowdown in the late 1950s worried national leaders who feared something worse could be around the corner. In early 1958, President Dwight Eisenhower urged Congress to hurry its anti-recession projects and he asked for a 13-week jobless pay extension as unemployment hit a sixteen-year high. About 6.7 percent of the workforce had no job.<sup>100</sup>

On Long Island, some people were moving out of the city to new suburbs like

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<sup>99</sup> "St. Petersburg, Florida," <http://www.city-data.com/zips/33713.html>, accessed February 24, 2008; Richard Hill, "Jack Kerouac's Last Days," *St. Petersburg Times*, October 21, 1987, 1D; Hendrix Chandler, "Missiles-Sputnik Age Prove Boon to State's Industrial Development," *Bradenton Herald*, October 28, 1957, 3.

<sup>100</sup> Richard Mooney, "Benefits Sought For More Jobless," *New York Times*, March 16, 1958, 1; "Ike Sending To Congress Plans To Combat Recession," *St. Petersburg Evening Independent*, March 12, 1958, 1.

Levittown, where William Levitt put up 17,000 small family homes in New York potato fields, thus launching one of the first mass-production home developments.<sup>101</sup> St.

Petersburg had its own, smaller versions. Most often, the new residents were not people who had lived in older parts of St. Petersburg; they were newcomers drawn from the Midwest and Northeast to what they believed would be a new Eden in Florida.

The influx had ballooned St. Petersburg's population from 96,738 in 1950 to an estimated 165,000 in 1958.<sup>102</sup> The growing population evidently had money to spend, as Pinellas County for the first time passed Hillsborough County in annual retail sales.<sup>103</sup>

Pinellas also led the state in job increases for the previous year and less than three percent were unemployed. Among Florida counties, Pinellas pushed Dade County for leadership in the collection of sales taxes.<sup>104</sup>

While a statewide committee warned that growth endangered Florida's natural beauty, and as a burgeoning population strained Pinellas County's sewer, drainage, and public transportation infrastructure, new residential and business development boomed in outlying St. Petersburg neighborhoods and in neighboring towns – Kenneth City, South Pasadena, Pinellas Park, and unincorporated Seminole. Meanwhile, remaining agricultural land began to disappear. "Citrus land is losing out to subdivisions. And you in Pinellas have subdivisionitis more than any area in the state," said Walter Page, spokesman for the Florida Citrus Commission. Replacing the groves, said Edgar L. Beeland, manager of the Clearwater Growers Association, was "a sea of cement tile roofs

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<sup>101</sup> Halberstam, 134-137.

<sup>102</sup> St. Petersburg city planning board, *Polk's St. Petersburg City Directory*, 1958, x.

<sup>103</sup> Douglas Doubleday, "Pinellas Passes Hillsborough in Total Sales," *St. Petersburg Times*, March 27, 1958, 1B.

<sup>104</sup> Doubleday, "Pinellas Tops State In '57 Job Increases," *St. Petersburg Times*, March 27, 1958, 1B; "Pinellas, Dade Lead in February Sales Tax," *Times*, March 27, 1958, 10A.

from border to border, Gulf to bay.” Certainly, subdivision fever began early in the postwar period. Beginning in 1946, St. Petersburg set construction records in terms of total value every year through 1950; before dropping back slightly in 1951, construction renewal set records for the next six years.<sup>105</sup>

Big shopping centers finished, under construction, or planned amounted to \$20-million in investment in 1958, posing formidable competition for the old downtown. Chief among the St. Petersburg additions were North Plaza, just across from the popular Central Plaza; and Crossroads Shopping Center on Tyrone Boulevard. North Plaza boasted two full blocks of stores, including clothing and shoe shops, a mid-range department store, a drug store, gift and jewelry shops, and an appliance store. Parking was available for 300 vehicles – another advantage the new centers had over downtown, which for years had struggled to solve parking issues.

A supermarket, three department stores, and a drug store provided major tenants for the 42-store Tyrone Gardens Shopping Center expansion, and northwest on the boulevard, Crossroads planned parking for 3,000 shoppers bound for such stores as Food Fair, J.C. Penney, Woolworth’s, W.T. Grant, Thom McCann, and Liggett Drugs.

Kenneth City developer Sidney Colen planned a 26-store center to serve his new incorporated subdivision and plazas were proposed on a former dairy site between far Fourth and Ninth Streets North and on Alt. U.S. Highway 19. Publix, meanwhile, opened a supermarket in Madeira Beach and planned others in South Pasadena and south St.

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<sup>105</sup> Dick Bothwell, “Forest Of Citrus Trees Bowing to See Of Roofs,” *St. Petersburg Times*, February 3, 1958, 1B; *Times*, “Homes Dominate Building Boom,” July 16, 1950, 4-37; Jerry Blizin, “City Building Sets A Record,” *Times*, January 1, 1958, 3B.

Petersburg.<sup>106</sup>

Central Plaza, situated as it was in St. Petersburg's heart at the crossroads of Central Avenue and U.S. Highway 19, provided downtown its toughest competition – especially after adding an 86,000-square-foot Wm. Henry store to rival Maas Brothers. Plaza owners also tried to soften the center's parking lot ambience by adding a shaded walkway with a fountain, palm trees, and benches. Early in the year, a Montgomery Ward agent filed plans for an 80,000-square-foot store on First Avenue North and U.S. Highway 19. It would complement Central Plaza and render obsolete the downtown Ward store.<sup>107</sup>

Developers busied themselves putting up large-scale shopping enterprises because of new subdivisions sprawling north, west, and south. Virtually every day, St. Petersburg's newspapers published advertisements for newly built, affordable houses in every part of the city. For example, Meadowlawn premiered as a booming north city subdivision, offering two-bedroom houses of about 1,000 square feet for \$10,950, a price within reach of and living space suitable for most retirees or young families. In January 1958, the subdivision on Ninth Street North, north of Sixty-second Avenue had opened its second phase; 75 houses had already been completed and the constant beat and buzz of construction equipment promised 80 more soon to be completed. In the western sections, newcomers were buying tract houses in Brentwood Heights, Disston Gardens, Westgate Manor, and Harshaw Lake; prices ranged from \$8,250 to \$22,500 for two- and

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<sup>106</sup> “The Record: Two Centers Finished; Six Are Being Built; Three Proposed,” *Tampa Tribune*, October 13, 1957, business page.

<sup>107</sup> “Plot Plan Filed For 34<sup>th</sup> Street Store,” *St. Petersburg Times*, April 6, 1958, 1B; *Times*, “Central Plaza Family Grows To 33 Stores,” November 10, 1957, 1B.

three-bedroom houses.<sup>108</sup>

Typical of the style were terrazzo floors, carports instead of an enclosed garage, pebbled roofs instead of shingles or tile, and jalousie operated with a crank.

Nor was development confined to the city's northern reaches. South of Central Avenue, Irving Green had opened Coquina Key. His five two-bedroom, two-bath model homes were the first of a projected 1,200 new homes on the spit of land formerly known as Lewis Island. The models' debut was billed as the first attempt in St. Petersburg to conduct a "mass sale" opening patterned after successful subdivisions in Arizona and California. Maximo Moorings west of U.S. 19 was rising on 380 acres between Forty-sixth and Fifty-fourth Avenues South. The Greater Pinellas Point neighborhood was spreading across the tip of the Pinellas peninsula (new homes featured in-the-wall radio and communications systems), and Allstate Insurance Company had purchased a substantial chunk of property on U.S. 19 near the Maximo development.

The Allstate purchase raised *Times* editors' eyebrows, almost as if they were surprised by south side development. Allstate's coming, said an editorial, "serves as a reminder of an interesting fact -- St. Petersburg is bigger than you think, and has more resources than you know about." For years, many of St. Petersburg's white residents had attached a stigma to the city's south section. Even though many white people had homes there, the area also contained most of the city's African-American population. In its editorial, the *Times* ignored the traditional meme, blaming slower south side development

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<sup>108</sup> "For Your Life in the Sun," *St. Petersburg Times*, July 20, 1958, 8F; "Southern Comfort Homes To Open New Section," July 20, 1958, 12F. Virtually any daily and Sunday edition of the *St. Petersburg Times* and the *St. Petersburg Evening Independent* featured advertisements promoting new subdivisions.



on city ownership of large pieces of property there.<sup>109</sup>

Not all the tract-style houses were built in new subdivisions. St. Petersburg contained many areas that had been platted, sometimes paved, and finally abandoned during the 1920s real estate boom and its subsequent bust. Rio Vista, for example, a neighborhood in north St. Petersburg, provided property and houses for many returning war veterans. At the same time, neighborhoods such as Crescent Heights, Crescent Lake, Shore Acres, Lakewood, and Greater Pinellas Point had been only partly developed during the 1920s; vacant lots in these neighborhoods remained to be filled with houses built in the 1950s' style. So in these (and other neighborhoods) older frame vernacular, Craftsman, Colonial Revival, Art Deco, Tudor, and Mediterranean Revival houses often stand next to modest, '50s-style suburban ranch-style dwellings. Historian Jack Davis has called the phenomenon a "boom-bust" cycle, in which economic ups and downs have resulted in building during different decades and have helped create eclectic neighborhoods that have become a part of the city's identity.<sup>110</sup>

## **Segregated Subdivisions**

Ironically, a new waterfront subdivision for African Americans had been proposed for the area that became Maximo Moorings. Developer Richard Deeb filed his plan for it in March, 1955 after Mayor Samuel Johnson had asked the city's Interracial Advisory Committee to study the problem of congested living in African neighborhoods. Representing about fourteen percent of the city's population, black people lived in areas

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<sup>109</sup> "Coquina Island Homes Opening Today," *Tampa Tribune*, November 17, 1957, 47; "House Models Started," *St. Petersburg Times*, Waterview Homes advertisement, December 7, 1958, 11B; "Opportunity – On The South Side," *Times*, April 5, 1958, 4A.

<sup>110</sup> Jack Davis, "Booms, Busts and Bungalows: Development Patterns and Homestyles in St. Petersburg, Florida, 1888-1926," undated manuscript, 2, 20-21.

amounting to less than one percent of the city's total land area. The perceived crowded conditions in and of themselves did not necessarily represent a negative. The problem was that much of the housing in the black neighborhoods was substandard, as we will see in Chapter IV; moreover, few African Americans had any hope for better housing. Deeb's plan included 1,000 lots for new, single-family homes and four blocks of apartments spread over 360 acres. It also included a motel, a school, a health clinic, two churches, and a shopping center. "I look on this as the greatest opportunity a developer could have to improve Negro living standards and racial relations," said Deeb, a St. Petersburg resident. At first, the project seemed likely to win approval. Mayor Johnson liked it, the City Council passed the zoning application on its first reading, and both the city's newspapers offered upbeat coverage, circulating petitions and igniting a toxic word-of-mouth campaign. "White people started to protest," said Emanuel Stewart, an African-American member of the advisory committee. "They said things like, 'What will tourists coming off the (Skyway) bridge think if they see that?'" Others said Martin Shores would lower property values, cause diminished tax returns and result in a flood of unattractive, low-cost housing. In fact, Deeb's proposal called for an upscale development, but that did not matter to opponents, willing to capitalize on the institutional racism that still reigned in the Sunshine City. The plan died within a year of its birth.<sup>111</sup>

Its demise, which took place even as city leaders were discussing slum clearance plans – also known as urban renewal – meant no changes in housing opportunity would be forthcoming for African-American residents. Most people of color lived in Pepper

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<sup>111</sup> Scott Hartzell, "Martin Shores Subdivision Went No Farther Than Paper," *St. Petersburg Times*, September 17, 2003, Neighborhood Times section, 6.

Town, Methodist Town, Gas Plant, or near Twenty-second Street South.<sup>112</sup>

Pepper Town, first settled by black laborers who helped build the Orange Belt Railroad, was situated just east of Ninth Street along Third and Fourth Avenues South. Most whites assumed the neighborhood's name derived from the color of the spicy table seasoning; James King, who grew up in the neighborhood, suggests another possibility: that the name was coined because most people there grew all kinds of peppers in tubs, pots, or sparse yard gardens. Pepper Town residents also had established St. Petersburg's first Masonic lodge in 1893; the Prince Hall Lodge 109 predated by about a year the first white lodge.<sup>113</sup>

In 1894, Methodist Town began growing in a corner of what were then the western reaches of St. Petersburg. Named for the Bethel AME Church, it was situated west of Ninth Street North between Arlington and Fifth Avenues and was anomalous as a black neighborhood on the city's north side, generally off limits to African Americans. A few other African Americans lived in an unnamed community on Seventh Avenue North around Thirty-seventh Street. It, too, apparently grew up around a church, St. John Baptist, beginning in the 1920s when the area was far out in the country. Remnants survived into the 1950s. "We knew it was there. It always kind of puzzled us," said Horace Nero, who grew up in the Twenty-second Street community.<sup>114</sup>

Along Railroad Avenue between Ninth and Sixteenth Streets South, so called because tracks ran down the middle of the avenue, another black community arose. First

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<sup>112</sup> Peck interview.

<sup>113</sup> James King, interview by Jon Wilson about African-American police officers, St. Petersburg, January 15, 2007; Ernest Fillyau, interview by Jon Wilson about Masonic lodges, St. Petersburg, November 23, 2003.

<sup>114</sup> Horace Nero, interview by Jon Wilson about African-American police officers, St. Petersburg, December 11, 2006.

composed of railroad workers, draymen, laborers, and fishermen. Originally called Cooper's Quarters, it soon became home to tailors, barbers, teachers, preachers, grocers, carpenters, masons, and people employed in many other early twentieth century occupations. By the 1920s, it had become known as the Gas Plant neighborhood, named for the two massive cylinders of natural gas that towered over the community.<sup>115</sup>

But the largest and most energetic African-American business community bustled along a strip of Twenty-second Street South between Fifth and Fifteenth Avenues. At the height of its influence, nearly 100 black-owned or operated businesses, many of them mom-and-pop operations, were open. In addition, Twenty-second Street had the Jim Crow-era Mercy Hospital, a quonset-hut movie theater, and the iconic Manhattan Casino, a dance hall on the so-called chitlin circuit that featured virtually all of the era's big-name bands, entertainers, and gospel artists. Twenty-second Street had its beginnings in the 1920s, when African Americans began moving to the then-rural area both because they were attracted to jobs in the nearby white-owned industries and because white leaders encouraged black settlement away from the downtown area. Jordan Park, the city's first public housing project, was built adjacent to the thoroughfare during the years 1939-1941, and its residents contributed to the vitality of the Twenty-second Street's business and leisure establishments and its professional cadre of doctors, lawyers, and dentists. While never financially prosperous relative to the wider, white-dominated world, the Twenty-second Street neighborhood, like the other black precincts, provided its residents with a sense of self, of independence, and of community.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> Peck interview.

<sup>116</sup> Paul Barco, interview by Jon Wilson about Twenty-second Street South, St. Petersburg, August 14, 2001; Lou Brown, interview by Jon Wilson about Twenty-second Street South, February 18, 2002; Askia

What it did not provide was consistent access to good housing for the growing black population, which in 1950 had reached 13,977, or about 14 percent of the city's total 96,738; by 1960, it had grown about 72 percent to 24,080, or about 13 percent of St. Petersburg's 180,298 total. As new residential opportunities for whites exploded, those for blacks generally fizzled. A rare exception was Wildwood Heights, situated south of Ninth Avenue South between Twenty-Second and Twenty-Eighth Streets, where a few new houses were built during the late 1940s and into the 1950s.<sup>117</sup>

Maximo Moorings, which eventually was built where Martin Shores had been planned, was to be a whites-only community. New York-based developers Morty and Babe Wolosoff, built the subdivision after buying the land for it in 1956, with Walter Fuller as broker. The Wolosoff brothers decided to make a marina the centerpiece of their development after learning that every docking venue in St. Petersburg was full and had a waiting list. Finished by the late 1950s, Maximo Moorings promoters billed the docking facility as the world's largest covered marina. Dredge crews pulled up muck from the bottom of a Boca Ciega Bay inlet, using it to fill low spots in the subdivision.<sup>118</sup>

## **Land From Water**

The practice of creating land from water – dredging up bay bottom and using it to

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Aquil, interview by Jon Wilson about Twenty-second Street South, St. Petersburg, February 21, 2002; Peck interview; Arsenault, *St. Petersburg and the Florida Dream*, 270, 272.

<sup>117</sup> U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Census of Population and Housing, 1950*. 8, online at [www.census.gov/prod/www/abs/decennial/1950.htm](http://www.census.gov/prod/www/abs/decennial/1950.htm), accessed February 6, 2009, and *General Characteristics of the Population, 1960, 11-29*, online at [www2.census.gov/prod2/decennial/documents/11085788v1p11ch3.pdf](http://www2.census.gov/prod2/decennial/documents/11085788v1p11ch3.pdf), accessed February 6, 2009 ; "Wildwood Heights," City of St. Petersburg website, <http://www.stpete.org/neighborhoods/nnwil.asp>, accessed September 7, 2009.

<sup>118</sup> "Maximo Moorings," City of St. Petersburg website, <http://www.stpete.org/neighborhoods/nmaximo.asp>, accessed May 10, 2009.

build new acreage to be developed – ignited one of St. Petersburg’s more high-profile resource-use controversies of the 1950s. The clash pitted the forces of development and consumption against those of a nascent ecological movement. The developers proceeded unchecked, moving on the idea that if there weren’t enough land for waterfront homes, then it would have to be created. Dredges characterized “as routine as seagulls” attacked the bay, damaging a prolific fishery and destroying valuable sea grass as they turned Boca Ciega Bay into a muddied mess of fingerlike keys. Houses sprouted on newly dredged banks that jutted from the mainland or rose from the middle of the bay off St. Petersburg, St. Petersburg Beach, Treasure Island, Madeira Beach, and Redington Beach. Bay quality deteriorated until environmental watchdogs around the state and nation pointed to it as a disgraceful example of poor planning and the consequences of unbridled growth.<sup>119</sup>

Eventually, people who worried about the environment got fed up. Debate, legal challenges, and hearings echoed from city halls to federal chambers, as all levels of government became involved. Gov. LeRoy Collins favored regulating development operations in waters such as Boca Ciega Bay; *St. Petersburg Times* owner Nelson Poynter became a staunch Collins ally, launching a news and editorial crusade critical of dredge-and-fill practices. A major focus became the so-called “Furen Fill,” or “Ratner Fill,” the name changing according to who owned the rights to more than 500 acres of bay bottom between St. Petersburg and St. Petersburg Beach. Despite expert testimony that development on the fill would devastate marine life, Pinellas County commissioners approved Lee Ratner’s project and a series of legal challenges mounted by the Collins

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<sup>119</sup> John Rothchild, *Up For Grabs: A Trip Through Time and Space in the Sunshine State* (New York: Viking Penguin Inc., 1985), 33-34; Stephenson, 126-132.

administrative action did not stop Ratner from proceeding. His dredging work ended in 1961, helping to turn the bay into a “channelized cess pool.” More filling in 1961 provided land for the Pinellas Bayway, which linked Pass-a-Grille and St. Petersburg to Mullet Key Fort DeSoto State Park.<sup>120</sup>

Another dredge-and-fill battle took place on Tampa Bay in northeastern St. Petersburg, where developers planned an upscale, 600-home waterfront community called Venetian Isles, situated at the north end of Shore Acres, an existing subdivision. Many Shore Acres residents opposed the development and the *Times* backed them up. “There are grave questions as to whether Venetian Isles should be built,” said the newspaper. “Are we going to permit the same thing to happen in Tampa Bay that has ruined Boca Ciega Bay?” James B. Lackey, a University of Florida marine biology professor who also testified in favor of the Ratner development, said only raccoons and birds would suffer from the fill and that it would clear out a mosquito breeding ground; consulting engineer Herbert Gee vowed that the development would bring \$24-million in taxable home value to city and county rolls. In a concentrated show of opposition to a city project during the 1950s, residents protested the fill vigorously, standing up for natural beauty rather than development. Said a *Times* guest columnist: “While the professional proponent, and those who have an indirect interest, call the area a swampland – any who have seen it from the water, or looking out at Mermaid Point and across Papyrus Bayou, know it to be a scene of rare natural beauty.” The protests were of no avail. The project received approval but actual building did not begin until 1968.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> Stephenson, 136-139; *Times*, “Bayway Adds New Fill To Bay,” *Times*, January 1, 1961, 1B.

<sup>121</sup> “Stop Invasion Of Tampa Bay,” *St. Petersburg Times*, July 8, 1958, 6A; Paul Mitchell, “Coons Only Losers From Proposed Fill,” *Times*, July 11, 1958, 11B; , <http://www.stpete.org/neighborhoods/nvnen.asp>.

Among the larger 1950s “dry land” subdivisions was Meadowlawn, north of Sixty-second Avenue North, roughly between Ninth Street and Twentieth Street. Originally pasture land for dairy cattle, a chunk of it was purchased by Johnny Haynesworth. Haynesworth, who started as a plumber, became president of Florida Builders. With Jack Y. Williams as the firm’s executive vice president and contractor, the firm built Meadowlawn’s first 2,100 homes, in addition to the Grandview Shopping Center at Ninth Street North and Sixty-second Avenue. Financing much of the development was First Federal Savings and Loan. The partnership between First Federal and Florida Builders was responsible for a lion’s share of the single-family homes built during the 1950s, and at one point, Florida Builders was the nation’s third-largest building firm in terms of the number of dwellings finished.<sup>122</sup>

Even more impressive was the empire built by James Rosati. Born in 1898 in New York City, Rosati began his Florida career at age 50 in Tampa, where he built 196 houses in the Belmar subdivision. He transferred his operation to St. Petersburg in 1950 and developed 400-home Tyrone Gardens in western St. Petersburg, the city’s first new residential subdivision in at least twenty years. The former Long Island road contractor then took his operation a few miles north, developing nearly 200 homes in the Orange Hill subdivision near Fifty-Fourth Avenue North and Forty-Ninth Street, an unincorporated area between St. Petersburg and Pinellas Park. He went on to build Orange Estates, with 253 homes, and he was the first Florida west coast developer to create an orange grove subdivision, marketing the idea that any homeowner could have orange trees in his or her front yard. But his crowning achievement came in 1955, when

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accessed September 7, 2009; Joseph Rodriguez, “Halt Boca Ciega Look In Tampa Bay,” *St. Petersburg Times*, November 13, 1958, 6A.

<sup>122</sup> Jack Y. Williams, interview by Jon Wilson about 1950s St. Petersburg, St. Petersburg, April 15, 2009.



he opened Orange Lake Village, a 1,090-home community on 240 acres in Seminole. The development caused an upsurge in home values in the immediate vicinity, and in 1957, NBC did a major documentary on the subdivision. The show portrayed Orange Lake Village as the ideal retirement community, and was shown all over the world, providing yet another promotional vehicle for St. Petersburg and its immediate environs.<sup>123</sup>

Rosati even developed a “subdivision” for fish. He built “Grouper Village,” an artificial reef off the Pinellas shoreline, using thirty tons of broken concrete, pipes, and junk automobiles.<sup>124</sup>

The new subdivisions changed St. Petersburg’s residential character. Palm trees and subtropical shrubs, planted in newly placed St. Augustine turf, provided the “Florida” feel for new residents, but did not offer the languid shade produced by massive oaks and magnolias in the older sections of town. Most new homes came with jalousied “Florida rooms,” symbol of a new St. Petersburg. Family life had shifted from the 1920s bungalow with a front porch to television and the Florida room. Many homes came with backyard patios (or residents soon installed them), but there were virtually no porches suitable for sitting and watching the world – or at least one’s neighborhood – go by. Even if neighbors happened to be walking, they would do so in the street; few sidewalks were being built partly because of difficulty in getting the city to give up right of way, said Williams, the Florida Builders executive; but primarily because it was quicker and less costly for developers to proceed without installing the walkways. City policy seemed to fall on the builders’ side. At the height of the subdivision boom, City Manager Ross Windom affirmed that residents would have to pay for their own sidewalks if they

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<sup>123</sup> Lynn B. Clarke, undated typescript in *St. Petersburg Times* research library.

<sup>124</sup> Memo, Lynn B. Clarke to Douglas Doubleday, May 31, 1961, *Times* research library.

wanted them; according to Windom, such a policy was typical nationwide.<sup>125</sup>

Windom's position exemplified a truth of St. Petersburg city government of the 1950s. It was no surprise that the city's elected policy-makers offered no dissent in regard to sidewalks. In St. Petersburg's council-manager governing system, an able city manager such as Windom could run the municipality nearly as he saw fit. Of course, almost all City Council members had strong ties to the business community anyway; from 1945 until 1963, hoteliers, realtors or their friends, and lawyers tied to business interests held sway on the council. Even so, Windom's dominance was thorough. A *Times* editorial that analyzed a city election scolded council members: "There is no question but that city council has abdicated its leadership to Manager Windom. Since the manager is a strong and able man, it has been easy for the councilmen simply to let him do the leading."<sup>126</sup>

With sidewalks and porches scarce, new Floridians found the ambience conducive to staying inside and watching *I Love Lucy* or the *Ed Sullivan Show*. By 1958, St. Petersburg had four stations, counting the new educational channel, from which to choose. But if St. Petersburg's character was changing, so was the rest of Pinellas County's. A small news item, buried at the bottom of a *Times* page, told the story. The last wild deer in the county, a 160-pound buck, had been shot dead near Lake Tarpon. The item ran with a small cartoon showing a deer with wings and a halo, and carrying this caption: "I should have gone back to the (North) Pole with Santa." The prevailing attitude during this time of galloping growth apparently relegated rapidly vanishing wildlife to snickering humor.<sup>127</sup>

No such levity accompanied the invasion of a tinier form of wildlife: the

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<sup>125</sup> "City Street Problems Told By Windom," *St. Petersburg Times*, March 23, 1957, 17.

<sup>126</sup> *St. Petersburg Times*, "A Magnificent Opportunity," May 22, 1957, 29.

<sup>127</sup> *St. Petersburg Times*, "Pinellas' Only Known Deer Shot, Killed," December 27, 1958, 1B.

mosquito. Palmetto bugs, more commonly called cockroaches, merely startled and disgusted new homebuyers; mosquitoes could make them miserable. By 1950, the Pinellas County Anti-Mosquito Board boasted four large fogging machines, which at night traveled streets on the beaches and in cities, killing mosquitoes on the wing. The machines sprayed a toxic mix of DDT powder and No. 2 fuel oil. The so-called 'skeeter war cost county taxpayers \$119 per day.<sup>128</sup>

But the effort was not enough to beat back the pesky and prolific anopheles. In 1955, the insect legions actually were threatening St. Petersburg's continued growth and development. Asked the *Times*: "Is there a St. Petersburg resident who hasn't lost blood in the mosquito war this summer?" Mosquitoes were so thick that in some parts of the city, people could not stand outside long enough to catch a bus. A Snell Isle neighborhood group offered to finance and operate its own spray truck. Residents sold new homes because they found the blood-sucking pests unbearable, and others advised their friends and families up north not to move to St. Petersburg or even visit. The *Times* called the invasion "a community health and economic disaster." Clearly, something had to be done, but the question was, who? St. Petersburg city government declared it was the job of the county, which by 1955 was spending just nine cents per person on mosquito control, the lowest amount in the state. Meanwhile, budget woes and mosquito board political battles hampered the eradication effort.<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> Ralph Reed, "Pinellas Pays \$119 A Day To Keep Mosquitoes On Lam," *Times*, August 12, 1950, 13.

<sup>129</sup> John Perry, "Pinellas Putting Up A Puny War Against Mosquitoes," *St. Petersburg Times*, September 2, 1955, 19; Frank Trippett, "Pinellas Legislators Refused Pay Raise For Mosquito Board," *Times*, August 4, 1955, 23; Perry, "Mosquito Board Paid Out Extra \$2,000 On New Bid," *Times*, August 4, 1955, 23; "Residents Ask Aid In War On Mosquitoes," *Times*, August 22, 1955, 18; Trippett, "Collins Suspends Two From Mosquito Unit," Sept 10, 1955, 1; *Times*, "Licking Our Mosquito Problem Is A Job For All Of Us," 6.

Drainage ditches to get rid of standing water and aerial spraying with airplanes loaded with parathion and malathion were among other measures used to combat the bugs, but late in the postwar period, mosquitoes still posed a major problem. In 1956, the mosquito legions retreated to some degree. Even so, during the summer months giant retailer Webb's City racked up enormous repellent sales: 1,900 gallons of it, in addition to 1,656 aerosol bombs, 7,632 bottles of the trademarked 6-12 repellent, and 3,745 repellent sticks. If there were a respite, it didn't last. In the summer of 1962, the City Council and the Chamber of Commerce called for help. In response – and in the wake of ten encephalitis deaths – the Pinellas County Health Department announced another massive control program. Dr. W.C. Ballard, health department director, said the “epidemic” could be “catastrophic as far as the economy of the community is concerned.” Mayor Herman Goldner vowed that city government would, if necessary, in cooperation with neighborhood associations go house to house to inspect backyards and look for other possible breeding places. Early the next year, City Manager Lynn Andrews announced a \$40.6-million capital improvements program that included intensive control measures, giving residents some hope that substantial relief was forthcoming, late but nonetheless welcome in a city edging nearer 200,000 population.<sup>130</sup>

## **New Industrial Might**

*St. Petersburg Times* business writer Douglas Doubleday vowed that May 21, 1956, would be “the historian’s obvious choice for the moment when the modern

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<sup>130</sup> “Chamber, City Told Mosquito War Declared,” *St. Petersburg Times*, September 1, 1962, 1B; “A Breathtaking Clean Sweep,” *Times*, January 31, 1963, 14A; John Gardner, “Anti-Mosquito Warriors On The Edge Of Victory,” *Times*, August 5, 1956, 29; Tom Twitty, “Health Service Dusting Plane Hits Baby Skeeters In Their Cribs,” *Times*, July 8, 1956, 8B.

economy was born.” Perhaps Doubleday was being presumptuous, but the veteran journalist had a point. On that date, General Electric Co. announced its intention to build a plant just north of the city west of U.S. Highway 19 at the intersection of Brian Dairy and Belcher Roads. Even though another technical industry – the Hamilton Standard Division of United Aircraft – had begun a design and engineering operation earlier in the year, it was the giant, influential company from Schenectady, N.Y. that stamped St. Petersburg and its environs as a place for new, modern industry – sans smokestacks, steel, shipping, or coal. “The new industry was shining and smokeless,” wrote Walter Fuller, a developer in addition to being a real estate man and, during the 1950s, a city planning official. “It employed well-paid engineers and technicians with white collars, slide rules, and test tubes instead of horny-handed men in overalls with greasy tools in their hands, attending a production line.”<sup>131</sup>

Before the advent of the new technology, St. Petersburg’s economy depended on its traditional appeal as a resort, its mid-twentieth century homebuilding surge, its services to retirees, and to a much smaller extent, what was left of its agricultural enterprises. GE paved the way for an influx of new enterprise that solidified the 1950s boom, validated the residential housing swell, and bolstered the local economy’s foundation. On July 26, 1956, Minneapolis-Honeywell announced it would join GE and Hamilton-Standard. Sperry Rand and Electronics Communications Inc. soon would be on their way. The big five eventually would be supported by perhaps twenty subcontractors, which in turn required their own supportive service industries. “Florida’s industrial revolution is finding no greater success than in mid-Pinellas County,” conceded the

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<sup>131</sup> Douglas Doubleday, “New Economic Era Soars into 2d Year,” *St. Petersburg Times*, May 25, 1957, 27; Fuller, 216.

*Tampa Tribune*, the primary media outlet for Hillsborough County, which often found itself competing with St. Petersburg and Pinellas. St. Petersburg's widely promoted "good life" proved attractive not only individuals but also to companies seeking a pleasant ambience, in part because several business groups worked hard to persuade companies based in the north to relocate. St. Petersburg groups providing steady and efficient boosterism included the St. Petersburg Chamber of Commerce under William Davenport Sr., the Pinellas Industry Council, Florida Power Corp.'s industrial department, and the Pinellas County Committee of 100. All specialized in selling St. Petersburg as a desirable place to live and work<sup>132</sup>

That four of the five bellwether enterprises were outside St. Petersburg city limits did not seem to matter. The economic boost they brought flowed throughout the area. For example, St. Petersburg in 1956-57 set records in housing starts, bank account totals, power, water, and telephone customers, and postal receipts. Meanwhile, the new industries boosted Pinellas to Florida's top spot in job increases for 1957, the same year Pinellas passed Hillsborough County for the first time in total retail sales, according to *Sales Management* magazine's annual survey of buying power. "Employment and payrolls spiraled upward on an economic ramp," declared a laudatory newspaper article. Business leaders hailed the success as important first steps that they hoped would lead to more companies bringing their commercial and industrial enterprise.<sup>133</sup>

But objective income figures tended to suggest that, despite increasing payrolls and jobs, St. Petersburg was not that well off compared to the rest of the urban United

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<sup>132</sup> Leland Hawes, "Lure Of Wholesome Living Beats Stiff Competition For Atomic Age Factories," *Tampa Tribune*, October 6, 1957, 1B.

<sup>133</sup> Doubleday, *ibid*; Doubleday, "Pinellas Passes Hillsborough In Total Sales," *St. Petersburg Times*, March 27, 1958, 1B; Don Warne, "Pinellas Industrial Growth Spirals Upward During 1958," *Times*, 1B.

States, or even the rest of urban Florida. From 1949 through 1959, St. Petersburg's median family income per year rose from \$3,017 in 1949 to 4,232 in 1959 (40 percent), compared to urban Florida's more impressive \$3,335 to \$4,956 (48 percent). Nationally, the urban United States figure rose from \$4,210 to \$6,166 (46 percent). The city planning department report that cited the dollar figures asserted that St. Petersburg's lower numbers were a result of many residents depending on pensions for their only source of income, arguing that the numbers did not necessarily mean St. Petersburg was less affluent. "Although the median incomes for St. Petersburg in the 1960 census were low, according to national levels, these figures cannot be construed as an absolute measure of wealth," the report asserted. It went on to cite \$800-million-plus in estimated bank deposits in St. Petersburg, and pointed out that Pinellas as a whole ranked second only to Dade County, which had a much larger population. In addition, it was noted that one in three St. Petersburg residents owned corporate stock, citing a New York Stock Exchange survey that ranked St. Petersburg among the nation's highest in that category.<sup>134</sup>

Space-age competition that brought new industry also affected curricula in Pinellas County schools. Accelerated courses were offered as early as junior high school, with Latin, Spanish, algebra, geometry, and biology offered to selected students in grades seven through nine. The approach sometimes strained faculty; for example, at Lealman Junior High School, the boys' shop teacher was assigned to the eighth-grade "advanced science" course, which in reality consisted of a series of humdrum textbook readings. Meanwhile, the school district was feeling the strain of accommodating an expanding student population – a record \$18-million budget included no pay increases for teachers, in part because 222 new instructors were needed to keep pace with an anticipated

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<sup>134</sup> *St. Petersburg Times*, "City Population Jumps 4 percent In 4 Years," October 2, 1964, 4B.

enrollment increase of 6,000 students. Meanwhile, the State Board of Education approved \$1.1-million in bonds to build a new high school, as yet unnamed, in northwest St. Petersburg. When completed, the school was named for Dixie M. Hollins, Pinellas County's first school superintendent.<sup>135</sup>

The somewhat exotic, science-based enterprises raised St. Petersburg's opinion of itself as "a growing center for 'brains industry' and education as well as retirement," according to a newspaper article. But ironically, the decade that brought new industry, new curricula, and a new Florida Presbyterian College did not raise St. Petersburg's educational levels. In 1950, males over 25 had completed an average of 11.1 years of education; by 1960, the figure had dropped to 10.6. For the same period, females over 25 had dropped from 11.9 years to 11.3. The city planning department report referenced above again credited – or blamed – retirees for the drop, saying it was "apparently the result of in-migration of a different retiree than had been experienced in the past." City leaders heralded the coming of Florida Presbyterian in 1958 as an educational boon for the city. Business executives who brought in new industry also worked to lure the college, and trustees cited the willingness of industry to work with the college as a reason for its coming. Good transportation, plans for a civic auditorium, and a growing pool of potential college applicants in local schools also helped woo the college trustees.<sup>136</sup>

The industrial surge continued in 1958. Among new enterprises that created approximately 5,000 new jobs in St. Petersburg or just outside the city limits were a new General Cable Corp. plant and the City Bank and Trust Co. in downtown St. Petersburg.

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<sup>135</sup> John Gardner, "Gifted May Get 'Hard' Courses," *St. Petersburg Times*, March 11, 1958, 1B; Gardner, "School Budget Sets Record," *Times*, June 3, 1958, 1B. In addition, this paper's author was a pupil in Lealman Junior High School's eighth-grade "advanced science" class in 1958.

<sup>136</sup> "City Population Jumps 11.4 Per Cent In 4 Year," *St. Petersburg Times*, October 4, 1964; *Times*, "St. Petersburg 'Portrait' Won It A College," September 16, 1958, 2A.



Kane Furniture and the Times Publishing Co. opened new operations on U.S. 19, First Federal Savings and Loan doubled its space on Central Avenue, General Telephone opened a huge new building on Arlington Avenue and Ninth Street North, and Florida Power inaugurated its Paul L. Bartow Plant on Weedon Island, part of a \$96-million expansion the company had announced in 1950. Meanwhile, Pinellas International Airport expanded in 1956 to meet growing transportation needs. U.S. Rep. William C. Cramer joined county commissioners in turning over the first shovels of dirt for a \$343,500 modern terminal building. The airfield, originally built by the county and used as a World War II training base, had the only commercial runway on Florida's west coast, other than Tampa International Airport. The Pinellas airport was used by both passenger and freight aviation.<sup>137</sup>

The sea of new houses, a flood of new residents, and a wave of new industry changed St. Petersburg's physical appearance and its demographics. But a lingering question, sometimes overshadowed as St. Petersburg grew outward, was what would become of the old downtown.

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<sup>137</sup> Don Warne, "Pinellas Industrial Growth Spirals Upward During 1958," *St. Petersburg Times*, December 27, 1958, 1B; *Times*, "Florida Power Invests \$96-million In Nine-Year Program Of Expansion," July 21, 1950, 11.

## Chapter Four: Downtown, Dead or Alive?

James Earl “Doc” Webb, the hustling entrepreneur who created Webb’s City, “the World’s Largest Drug Store,” did his best to fight the land-use rules necessary to create Central Plaza. He knew the shopping center would change the habits of St. Petersburg consumers, leading them away from downtown and undermining the commercial hegemony of the old city center, a product of the 1920s boom. But several years after Central Plaza’s 1952 opening, the downtown appeared – on its surface, at least – to be holding its own even as it began to show its age.

A case in point was the 1958 Festival of States celebration. An estimated 300,000 people packed the mile-square district to see the annual festival’s showcase event, a three-hour parade that featured Col. Paul Tibbetts, the B-29 pilot who dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima. In a burst of hyperbole, the morning newspaper had forecast a parade-route audience of one million. The crowd did not swell to such a figure. But even one-third the predicted turnout put spectators ten deep along a strip of Central Avenue, the next day’s photo coverage showed. The number of spectators demonstrated that the downtown, at least on special occasions, retained appeal, and a reporter who had experienced every parade since 1935 declared it the most vibrant he had seen.<sup>138</sup>

City leaders used the sunshine festival like a hammer to pound the idea of St. Petersburg as a place to find the good life. Even the 1958 *Polk City Directory* contributed

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<sup>138</sup> George Bartlett, “1958 Sunshine Festival Biggest, Best, Most Colorful Of Them All,” *St. Petersburg Times*, March 29, 1958, 1B.

paean, publishing introductory articles that might have been written by pitchmen paid to praise the city. One offered this prescription for frostbitten northerners:

St. Petersburg is just what the doctor ordered  
for these hectic times -- health-giving sunshine  
and warm breezes in the sub-tropics at the time  
of year when the rest of America within the  
temperate zone is fighting off Arctic snows and winds.<sup>139</sup>

Newspapers also helped with glowing stories, many destined to be read up north as visitors took editions home or mailed them to relatives.

The old business district generally lay between the Fifth Avenues North and South, bounded by Tampa Bay on the east and Ninth Street on the west. The boundaries, of course, were not fixed in any sense; businesses considered part of the downtown dynamic often operated a few blocks beyond the informal lines.

News of record, advertising, and detailed guides such as city directories suggested the city's historic core contained energy, retail appeal, financial muscle, and entertainment value. By the 1950s, the downtown had developed serious flaws, but it was far from dead. Indeed, it still had a chance to reinvent itself as an attractive counterpoint to the city's new suburban shopping areas. For example, Maas Brothers Department Store, ten years old in 1958, was proving that customers would come to the old city center to shop. Other attributes were also present that, if properly utilized, might have helped the downtown lure new residents who were moving in miles away from the city's original business and retail hub.

Maas Brothers, the flagship retail outlet, occupied most of a city block and sold clothing, shoes, and household goods of all kinds. It offered a music department, a lunch

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<sup>139</sup> *Polk's St. Petersburg City Directory*, 1958, ix.

counter, and a second-floor restaurant that offered customers free birthday meals. Bargain basement sales drew throngs. During one such mercantile event dubbed “St. Petersburg Days,” Maas Brothers purchased ten full-page advertisements in a single edition of the *St. Petersburg Times*. Nor was the popular store alone in its field; at least seven other department stores, some of which were part of national chains, maintained outlets downtown. Several had survived the Great Depression, a distinction that suggested adaptability and consumer appeal but also tended to underscore their venerability, and perhaps the somewhat mossback nature of some downtown institutions. The time-tested 1950s stalwarts included Sears-Roebuck, Montgomery Ward, Rutland’s, Kresge’s, Willson-Chase, Sierkese, McCrory, Kress, and the granddaddy of them all, Webb’s City. More than any of the others (excluding Maas Brothers), Webb’s tried to maintain a cutting edge. It had enlarged and restocked its music store, and to mark the expansion, Doc Webb scheduled appearances by a bevy of popular, national recording artists including Connie Francis, The Champs, Dicky Doo and the Don’ts, Danny and the Juniors, and Jody Reynolds.<sup>140</sup>

Besides the range of department stores, five banks and four savings and loan institutions operated in or near downtown. Virtually every major American automobile manufacturer was represented in the seven dealerships along Ninth Street. Seven downtown theaters (including one for African Americans) showed a variety of movies: first-run to B flicks, second-time-arounders to art films. The 750-seat State Theater opened in 1950, one of thirteen new movie houses built that year in Florida. The cavernous Florida Theater was the largest in town. When it opened in 1926, it became St. Petersburg’s first air-conditioned building. It could seat more than 3,000 and boasted a

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<sup>140</sup> “Webb’s City Enlarges, Restocks Music Store,” *St. Petersburg Times*, June 7, 1958, 6C.

stage, a movable orchestra pit, and in its earlier years, a three-story Mighty Wurlitzer organ. Whatever movie happened to be playing was only part of the theater experience, which included lobbies filled with armor, tapestries, oil paintings of Spanish galleons, and huge, lighted mirrors that made the rooms seem even larger.<sup>141</sup>

A half-dozen cafeterias fed shoppers and winter visitors who stayed in a handful of large hotels and dozens of smaller hostelries and rooming houses. Professional offices, mom-and-pop businesses, and a score of restaurants and small cafes added to the activity. Virtually all of the city's music stores were situated downtown and virtually all offered instruments, sheet music, and lessons. Williams Park and green benches provided – if you were white – informal public gathering spots. There was an architecturally graceful public library with a garden reading area, a recreation pier on a gorgeous public waterfront, a baseball park, and several Protestant and Catholic churches that drew large congregations.<sup>142</sup>

As population, housing starts, and dollar building totals remained impressive, much of the city's old-fashioned, tourist-oriented persona persevered. Weekly open-air forums took place at Williams Park, the Municipal Pier offered free public programs including sing-alongs, and clubs centered around states and sometimes cities such as Akron, Ohio and Ferndale, Mich. conducted regular luncheons and entertainment programs. A shuffleboard column was published at least weekly on *Times* sports pages, a

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<sup>141</sup> Scott Taylor Hartzell, "Venerable venue had awesome beginnings," *St. Petersburg Times*, June 19, 2002; "Cinema Treasures," available online at <http://cinematreasures.org/theater/13464/>, accessed Jan. 27, 2009; Edwin Moore, "Theater Building Holds Pace; 327 Since First Of Year," *Box Office*, July 22, 1950, 8 ([http://issuu.com/boxoffice/docs/boxoffice\\_072250-1/70](http://issuu.com/boxoffice/docs/boxoffice_072250-1/70)), accessed January 27, 2009.

<sup>142</sup> *Polk's St. Petersburg City Directory*, 1958, 214-309.

nod to the St. Petersburg Shuffleboard Club and its typically older membership numbering in the thousands.<sup>143</sup>

Many activities were geared for the enjoyment of the elderly, whose dominating presence downtown had begun to worry city leaders interested in building a more youthful image. Referring to the city's reputation as a haven for senior citizens, a *Times* writer opined: "This lopsided view of the Sunshine City had been growing over the years. The business community writhed each time a national publication added to the warped image."<sup>144</sup>

National publications included a 1958 edition of *Holiday*, whose writer declared, "The old people pass the time listlessly, passengers in a motionless streetcar without destination"; and *Life*, which published a caption under a photo of bench-sitting elderly people that read, "Lonely and bored old people pass the time listlessly on a St. Petersburg, Florida sidewalk. *Time* magazine piled on, too. In an article that professed to be about the careful newspaper reading habits of the elderly, *Time* nonetheless managed to raise in the first two paragraphs old stereotypes and new indignities. The article referenced newspaper obituary space increasing in autumn because of elderly winter visitors; the words "mecca for retired oldsters"; blood pressure shops (50 cents a reading); and senior citizens' softball teams."<sup>145</sup>

The large elderly population, twenty-eight percent age sixty-five or older, according to the federal census, was one among several big questions the downtown

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<sup>143</sup> *St. Petersburg Times*, March 1, 1958-April 5, 1958, various pages; Douglas Doubleday, *St. Petersburg Times*, "Dwelling Unit Total Impressive in 1958," January 18, 1959, 2B; Dick Bothwell, *Sunrise 200*, (St. Petersburg: Times Publishing Co., 1975), 74.

<sup>144</sup> Bothwell, 74.

<sup>145</sup> Maria Vesperi, *City of Green Benches: Growing Old in a New Downtown* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1986), 40; *Time*, "The Old Subscribers," October, 1959, 80.

faced. For one thing, it had experienced just one major piece of development since the 1920s boom: Maas Brothers. Many of its hotels, theaters, and business buildings dated from that era and were beginning to show wear. The Carnegie Library, with its garden reading area providing a pleasant venue on Mirror Lake, nonetheless was of 1915 vintage and was beginning to show signs of age.

Meanwhile, traffic and parking remained a problem, and streets were deteriorating. Traffic jams were not uncommon. On an early spring day in 1957, for example, what was called “record traffic” swamped downtown to such a degree that police had to call out a special detail to direct vehicles at seven intersections on Central Avenue and First Avenues North and South. The extra manpower did no good; police were unable to cope with the massive jam. Lieutenant Harold Smith attributed the tie-up to “more cars here now than ever before,” bad weather that kept tourists from driving to the beaches, and several minor accidents in the congested area. Motorists were spending several minutes negotiating a single block, Smith said.<sup>146</sup>

The huge traffic snarl’s upside was that on the same day, Webb’s City collected a record number of gross receipts -- \$175,000. But overall, the situation was symptomatic of a greater problem, said an urban renewal proponent, and could hinder downtown redevelopment. “Look around you,” developer Joe Bonsey told civic club audiences. “I believe you’ll agree St. Petersburg has the poorest streets of any in the state, and probably the biggest traffic problem of any city its size. Maybe that’s why there has been no major construction downtown within my memory.” The city, declared a prescient Bonsey, chair of the city’s urban renewal committee, must give its central core the same consideration it

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<sup>146</sup> “All Roads Led Downtown To Record Traffic Jam and Corp of Cops,” *St. Petersburg Times*, March 6, 1957, 25.

was giving to outlying areas if it expected to attract new enterprise downtown and be fair to enterprise already there. At the same time, Bonsey was interested in the new dynamic further west. He had proposed a \$1-million hotel-restaurant-bowling alley development on 34<sup>th</sup> Street South a few blocks from the new Central Plaza.<sup>147</sup>

In fact, city leaders wrestled with the notion of redevelopment downtown, but it was not clear what direction they wanted to take. Among proposals under consideration were a one-way street grid and a Central Avenue pedestrian mall. City Manager Ross Windom, Mayor John D. Burroughs, and city council members were negotiating to get the Atlantic Coast Line and Seaboard Railroad systems out of the downtown area, tying those actions to the purchase from the ACL of the “South Mole,” a spit of land near the city yacht basin that also served as a Jim Crow beach for African Americans. Windom also had proposed selling the city gas plant, marked by ugly twin cylinders towering over an African-American neighborhood marred by substandard housing. Also under discussion was a waterfront civic auditorium.<sup>148</sup>

The reality was that the downtown veiled a creeping decay beneath a surface vitality. Aging structures, parking and traffic difficulties, a growing discontent with the elderly population, and a dearth of new or updated commercial attractors all suggested a need for new direction – or at the very least, an array of possible options. Leaders called for a professional study. It came by way of a visionary named Victor Gruen.

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<sup>147</sup> Ibid; “Need For Downtown Redevelopment Cited,” *St. Petersburg Times*, April 5, 1958, 4B; “All Roads Led Downtown To Record Traffic Jam And Corps of Cops,” *Times*, June 7, 1958, 1B; .

<sup>148</sup> “One Way Streets Downtown Studied,” *St. Petersburg Times*, March 9, 1958, B section; “Rail Relocation Will Give City Double Benefit,” *Times*, April 3, 1958, 1B.



## **The Man with the Plan**

Victor David Gruen was born in 1903 in Vienna, Austria. He studied architecture at the Vienna Academy of Fine Arts. He liked to perform satirical theater in Vienna's pre-war cabarets, but as a Jew and a socialist, had to flee the Nazis in 1938. One of Gruen's friends spirited him and his wife to an airport, where they caught a plane to Zurich, Switzerland. The couple reached England and then sailed for America. They landed in New York, as Gruen liked to recall in later years, "with an architect's degree, eight dollars, and no English."<sup>149</sup>

It did not take long for the ambitious emigrant to succeed. With other expatriates, he formed the Refugee Artists Group, which received financial support from such entertainment luminaries as Richard Rodgers and Al Jolson. Irving Berlin guided their musical efforts. Gruen himself wangled a letter of recommendation from no less a personage than Albert Einstein. By 1939, the group had hit Broadway, playing eleven weeks at the Music Box. Gruen soon made a leap back into architecture after running into an old Vienna friend who wanted to open a Fifth Avenue leather boutique. Gruen designed a revolutionary storefront with an arcade entrance that stood out among traditional storefronts flush with the street. He went on to design other stores in Manhattan and the Bronx, before designing Northland, an outdoor shopping center on 163 acres outside of Detroit. But Gruen's most famous project, and the one that earned him the label "Father of the Mall," was Southland, outside Minneapolis. It was the nation's first shopping area under one roof, air conditioned in the summer, heated in

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<sup>149</sup> Malcolm Gladwell, "The Terrazzo Jungle," *The New Yorker*, March 15, 2004, [http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2004/03/15/040315fa\\_fact1](http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2004/03/15/040315fa_fact1), accessed August 17, 2009.

winter: in other words, the archetypal mall that changed the direction of American retailing.<sup>150</sup>

The downtown “establishment,” including city government and a contingent of property owners called Downtown Progress Inc., commissioned Gruen’s study. What the futuristic planner came up with was more than the city fathers had bargained for, and when officials began to examine Gruen’s plan, news reports suggested that they released a collective “gulp.” Mayor John Burroughs did a discrete job of suggesting the new plan might be a bit much to swallow: “It has been three days since I was briefed on this plan, and ideas in connection with it are still popping into my head. It was impressive and stimulating,” the mayor said. “But anyone would be hasty to express a flat opinion now.”<sup>151</sup>

The relationship did seem a mismatch: Relatively provincial St. Petersburg casting its lot with a worldly architect who opened his firm’s headquarters in Beverly Hills, Calif. A magazine writer described Gruen as a “torrential talker with eyes as bright as mica and a mind as fast as mercury”; an entrepreneur who could cajole a letter of entrée from Einstein might have been equally persuasive in acquiring a contract from ambitious small-city officials.<sup>152</sup>

It turned out that St. Petersburg was not ready for Gruen. The creative Austrian’s plan called for a complete revamping of downtown, spread over twenty years. Its most startling suggestion was to eliminate completely auto traffic from downtown, relying instead on a loop road around the central business district with electric cars employed to

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<sup>150</sup> Ibid.

<sup>151</sup> Douglas Doubleday, “St. Petersburg Joins Other Alert Cities In Downtown Redesign,” *St. Petersburg Times*, June 2, 1957, 1B.

<sup>152</sup> Gladwell, *ibid.*

shuttle people from five major parking areas. The plan included a civic, cultural, and governmental center around Mirror Lake, enhanced recreation on the Tampa Bay waterfront, a large central freight terminal in African American residential areas near downtown, a civic center – and a heliport. Ironically, the plan’s suggestion for removing railroad tracks and doing something about the congested traffic should have had special appeal to leaders who had been complaining for years about exactly those elements. But the overall redesign seemed too exotic. As a city planning department report a year later put it: “The plan was considered by many to be too advanced in basic theory.” Additionally, said the city report, the plan had failed to capture the public imagination – and besides, was going to prove too expensive, requiring “more abundant economic resources than St. Petersburg would have for years.”<sup>153</sup>

In a further irony, the planning department report contained a new downtown redesign that incorporated such Gruen concepts as a civic auditorium, waterfront recreation, and a pedestrian mall that, while not eliminating traffic, would make the downtown friendlier to shoppers and sight-seers. City planners’ suggestions also included a network of one-way streets, underground placement of utilities, and two multistory parking garages. They also proposed a timeline, with many changes to be completed within seven years, and in what presaged the eventual arrival of the interstate highway system, a “loop expressway” by 1975. The Gruen plan was effectively shelved. “Most people at City Hall have never seen it,” wrote *Times* publisher Nelson Poynter in a retrospective column years later.<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>153</sup> Victor Gruen and Associates, *St. Petersburg CBD Study*, June, 1957, 36, 43, 46; St. Petersburg Department of City Planning, *Central Core Plan*, August, 1958, 2.

<sup>154</sup> St. Petersburg Department of City Planning, 14, 19, 21, 25, 30-31.

## Integration on the Horizon

The 1950s brought the first assaults on the city's longstanding segregation policy. As noted in this work's first chapter, an African American organization sponsored a float in the annual Festival of States Parade for the first time in 1954. The same year, Dr. Robert J. Swain Jr., a black dentist, successfully challenged the city's unofficial "red line," which defined where African Americans could live and open businesses. Swain crossed the line by opening an office twenty-five feet over the designated boundary, Fifteenth Avenue South. The city at first refused to issue a building permit for the office, but relented when Swain threatened to sue. The first black dentist to open an office anywhere in the city, and the first African American to open a pharmacy, Swain also built a six-unit apartment next to the office at 1501 Twenty-Second Street South. The apartments served as temporary homes for baseball players with the Major League's New York Yankees and St. Louis Cardinals, who were forbidden during spring training to stay with their white teammates in downtown's segregated hotels. (That policy would come back to haunt the city in 1962, when the Yankees moved their spring training headquarters to Fort Lauderdale; the Jim Crow hotel situation has been cited as among the reasons.)<sup>155</sup>

The most dramatic step in the civil rights arena came in 1955, when six African Americans sued the city government to end segregation at downtown bathing sites. Both Spa Beach and the indoor pool at the Spa, situated on the approach to the Municipal Pier, were reserved for whites only. A beach for people of color was situated a few blocks

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<sup>155</sup> Adam Smith, "Landmarks Honor Civil Rights Pioneer," *St. Petersburg Times*, Sept. 14, 1997, Neighborhood Times section, 6; Associated Press, *New York Times*, "Spring Camp Segregation: Baseball's Festering Sore," February 19, 1961, 179; David K. Rogers, "The Spring Home of Segregation," *St. Petersburg Times*, May 12, 1996, 1A.

south on Tampa Bay. Referred to as the “South Mole,” marked with signs proclaiming “colored only,” the spit of sand was near the terminus of the Atlantic Coast Line railroad tracks and was also used as a storage site by the city. Rubble cluttered the beach and bathhouse facilities were too small. On April 1, 1957, the Supreme Court ruled in favor of Fred Alsup, Ralph Wimbish, Willet Williams, Naomi Williams, Chester James Jr., and Harold Davis. In theory, the swimming spots now were open; in practice, they remained closed to African Americans.

This development was important because if successfully integrated, it would represent a major crack in the city business district’s longstanding wall of segregation. The city government wanted no part of any change. When eight young African Americans decided to test the court ruling by visiting Spa Beach on June 5, 1958, City Manager Ross Windom closed it after the youths used locker facilities and spent about forty minutes on the beach. Two police officers patrolled the site to enforce the ban. Said Mayor John D. Burroughs: “In my opinion, this was an unfortunate incident. I know a lot of our local Negro leaders, and their thinking does not go along with anything like this.” The beach visit, Burroughs said, was conducted by “some colored people who are not representative of our own true Negro citizens.” The comments often were typical of governmental leaders throughout towns and cities where African Americans challenged integration; white officials tended to blame outsiders or deviant thinkers for instigating civil rights campaigns. Windom’s thinking echoed that of the mayor’s: “I think the small group who went to the Spa were ill-advised,” he said. “I think the majority of Negro citizens don’t wish to exercise any right the Supreme Court may have given them. .” In

fact, the suit's plaintiffs were all St. Petersburg residents, and were community leaders.<sup>156</sup>

The *St. Petersburg Times* was among the first newspapers in the south to support integration. It declared in 1951 that "legal segregation will become as extinct as the slavery from which it stemmed, and in 1954 the newspaper endorsed the 1954 Supreme Court ruling that paved the way for school integration. But the newspaper took a rather mild stand in regard to the Spa suit. The newspaper encouraged the establishment of more bathing sites for black people, but stopped short of supporting integration at the Spa facilities, and indeed, seemed to imply segregated swimming ought to be the norm. Said the newspaper's editorial on the subject: "Immediate action is necessary to provide 'swimming holes' for all. While segregation cannot be legally maintained, we're sure that personal preference and neighborhood considerations will lead Negro citizens to use certain of the beaches and whites others. Both races will feel more at home among their own people and will have more fun together."<sup>157</sup>

The eight African Americans who went to the beach had St. Petersburg addresses, and were college students or graduates: Morgan Eugene Richards, 22, a registered pharmacist; Otto Karl Woodbury, 24, a Florida A&M student; Nathan Holmes, 19, a waiter; Allen Williams Jr., 23, a Morehouse College graduate; Betty Harden, 18, a student at Talladega College; Bettye Fluker, 22, a Florida A&M student; Victoria Monroe, 22, who had attended Florida A&M; and Bertha Dancil, 18, 5 Ozark Court, a Gibbs Junior College student.

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<sup>156</sup> Jerry Blizin, "Spa Beach Closed By City After Its Use By 8 Negroes," *St. Petersburg Times*, June 6, 1958, 1B.

<sup>157</sup> Robert Hooker, "The Times and its times," *St. Petersburg Times*, July 25, 1984, special section, 66; "A Time For Moderate Leadership," *Times* June 7, 1958, 4A.

Ralph Wimbish, a physician and one of the original plaintiffs in the suit to open the beach, called the closure “a rather drastic response to the situation. I hope it is only temporary. I am proud of those young people and their courage in exercising a privilege granted them by the U.S. Supreme Court. The city has had more than a year since the Spa suit was decided in which to provide the Negroes with a decent bathing beach. None has been forthcoming. In fact, since I was a child here, I have heard nothing but procrastination on this subject from City Hall. If they had given us a decent beach, no incident would have occurred to force the closing of the Spa.”<sup>158</sup>

Segregation also ruled at public beaches on the Gulf of Mexico. Other than the South Mole, the only other bathing facility for African Americans was a swimming pool at Wildwood Park. The pool opened in the 1950s after Jennie Hall, a white woman, donated \$25,000 to make it possible.<sup>159</sup>

On June 8, 19-year-old David Isom, a recent graduate of Gibbs High School, swam at the Spa pool, adjacent the beach. “I feel that it’s not a privilege, just a right,” Isom said. The cashier who sold Isom a 35-cent admission ticket said she had orders to treat Isom “like any other citizen.” About forty-five white people already were in the pool when Isom entered. They paid little attention to Isom, and Isom said he was treated politely by everyone present. Tommy Chinnis, the head lifeguard on duty, said the youth “was like everyone else.” Nonetheless, when Isom left after about twenty minutes in the pool area, pool manager John Gough tacked up a “closed” sign on the entrance. Gough said he was acting on orders from Windom “because a Negro has used the facilities.”<sup>160</sup>

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<sup>158</sup> Blizin, June 6, 1958.

<sup>159</sup> “Negroes Denied Good Beach Of Their Own,” *St. Petersburg Times*, June 6, 1958, 1.

<sup>160</sup> “Council to Caucus Before Reaching Any Decision on Spa Beach Policy,” *St. Petersburg Times*, June 7, 1958, 1B; Blizin, “Negroes May Seek New Court Action To Reopen Spa,” June 10, 1958, 1B.

During an era when the Little Rock, Ark., Central High School integration crisis remained fresh in mind – along with the sight of troops on Little Rock streets – St. Petersburg’s public reaction was mixed but generally reserved in regard to the African Americans’ pool and beach visits. No jeering crowds greeted the youths, whom city workers described as courteous and polite. A white man tried to ignore the no-swimming edict at Spa Beach and was arrested. Homemade, crude crosses were found marked with the letters KKK to imply the Ku Klux Klan had left them, and one 4 ½-foot cross was burned on the Vinoy Fill across the Vinoy Basin from the Spa facilities. A caption underneath a newspaper photo of the cross suggested youngsters conducting a high school graduation prank may have set the cross alight.<sup>161</sup>

On June 10, acting in a specially called caucus, the City Council voted unanimously to keep the beach closed. Said Councilman Ed Brantley: “At this time, until we’ve had a chance to study this situation, the less said the better . . . and since the city has an established policy of segregation, I move the Spa pool and beach remain closed.” Dr. Fred W. Alsup, one of the plaintiffs in the original suit, said the swimming site closures would likely result in another court suit. Meanwhile, the Committee of 100, a group whose mission was to attract new businesses to the area, urged quick action to establish a segregated beach for African Americans near the Gandy Bridge.<sup>162</sup>

Windom decided to reopen the beach and pool on Sept. 3. The next day, Bertha Dancil, one of the young black women who had tested the waters with seven others on June 5, used Spa Beach again. The city took no action and Windom described Dancil merely as seeking publicity. But the next day, four African Americans used the locker

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<sup>161</sup> Blizin, *Times*, June 7; Blizin, *Times*, June 10.

<sup>162</sup> Blizin, June 10; John Gardner “Speed Urged on Gandy Negro Beach,” *St. Petersburg Times*, June 10, 1958, 1B.



room and used the beach to swim for about twenty minutes. Once again, Windom closed the beach, but left the pool open. This time, the beach remained closed until Jan. 7, 1959, when the Council voted 4-3 to reopen it. It was a halfway measure taken without regard to the Supreme Court's decision; instead, said officials, the step was taken to appease hotel interests who pointed out that guests wanted to swim, and without Spa Beach, there would be no downtown beach available to them. The Council also made it clear that beach had been reopened on a "status quo" basis – meaning that segregation, in theory, was to stay in effect. In fact, a few blacks used the beach occasionally but generated virtually no attention. Closure came when four African-American youths visited the beach in the spring of 1959. George K. Armes, the new city manager, recommended the beach stay open unless there was trouble – and there was none. Mayor John D. Burroughs said the episode was "closed."<sup>163</sup>

The hotel interests by no means implied that they encouraged integration. Indeed, while the Spa controversy played out, the St. Petersburg Hotel Association brazenly asked the city to sign over its multi-million-dollar, twenty-acre North Shore Beach for use as a segregated facility – rent-free for the first seven years. At Thirteenth Avenue Northeast on Tampa Bay, North Shore was just a few blocks north of downtown, reachable by a short shuttle ride or, for energetic hotel guests, by a pleasant walk. The proposal emerged after secret meetings between city officials and hotel men, prompting piqued citizens to wonder whether the hotel industry truly represented the interests of the entire city. "The question is raised because City Council seems to be working in the hotels' special interest," wrote the *Times*. The question never was answered fully,

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<sup>163</sup> "Substitute Beach Plan Being Eyed," *St. Petersburg Evening Independent*, September 12, 1958, 14; "Council Ignores Integration Step," *Evening Independent*, April 29, 1959, 1B.

although one attempt included an analysis of United Fund contributions, which claimed the hotel interests donated less than one percent of the total \$596,026 quota set for the city. The council took no action on hotel industry's proposal.<sup>164</sup>

In a tumultuous year that saw Windom resign, yet another controversy swirled around the Spa site. For years, a civic auditorium had been on the planning table as a downtown amenity, and some city officials proposed to situate it on Spa Beach. It was not a popular solution among residents, who bombarded City Hall with petitions against the idea. The Council of Neighborhood Associations led the opposition. At the urging of Mayor John Burroughs, the City Council rescinded its Spa site choice, offering instead a stunning proposal to put the auditorium on North Shore Beach – another idea that went nowhere. Windom, meanwhile, offered no reason for his surprise resignation other than a desire to pursue “opportunities that may be available in private enterprise.” To generally good reviews, Windom had served for ten years, longer than any other St. Petersburg city manager. “That sure caught everyone with their trousers down,” Burroughs said. But Doc Webb, the “World’s Largest Drugstore” boss, suggested the dilatory Mayor and City Council may have been the cause. “I know if my board canceled every plan I had and let one disgruntled person . . . or any pressure group change everything, I would tell them what they could do with their job,” Webb said. The entrepreneur had it partly right. Windom left because of a dilatory council, it also because he could see desegregation

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<sup>164</sup> “Hotelmen Seek North Shore Beach Lease,” *St. Petersburg Times*, December 6, 1958, 1B; “Hotelmen Want Lease of North Shore Beach – First 7 Years Free,” *Times*, December 12, 1958, 1B; “What Percentage Of City Do Downtown Hotels Represent,” *Times*, December 12, 1958, 1B; “Council Lining Up Against Beach Plan,” *Times*, December 13, 1958, 1B; “North Shore Beach Action Delayed,” *Times*, September 18, 1961, 3B.

coming and wanted no part of it. “I do not want to be the person that integrates St. Petersburg,” he said.<sup>165</sup>

## **Urban Renewal – Or Not?**

As the officials and residents tried to adjust their thinking to the gradual dawning of integration, another racially charged issue divided the city: urban renewal, a governmental euphemism for slum clearance. In St. Petersburg, slums usually were associated with African-American residential areas, particularly in Methodist Town and the Gas Plant neighborhood – both on the edge of a downtown struggling to assert itself. Urban renewal projects to improve housing for poor, black people often came wrapped in altruistic prose, which, to be sure, sometimes was sincere. But at the same time, powerful leadership elements, including the morning newspaper, were not comfortable with black communities in close proximity. They wanted those communities’ residents to live elsewhere, and clearance – or “renewal” – of the neighborhoods was seen as “removal.” Such thought had prompted the *St. Petersburg Times* a generation earlier to wish for a “(N)egro reservation” away from the downtown.<sup>166</sup>

For several decades of its existence, St. Petersburg leaders did not admit that it harbored slums. For example, in 1924 xenophobic and anti-Semitic Chamber of Commerce manager Jim Coad infamously declared: “There are no slums in St. Petersburg . . . if we allow foreigners to make this their home, there inevitably will be

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<sup>165</sup> “City Manager Ross Windom Resigns,” *St. Petersburg Times*, November 7, 1958, 1B; “Business, Civic Leaders Deplore Loss to City,” *Times*, November 7, 1958, 1B; “Ross E. Windom, A Biography,” *Times*, November 7, 1958, 1B; “Racial Tension Over Troubled Spa One Of City’s Heated 1958 Issues,” *Times*, Dec. 28, 1958; Geoffrey Drummond, “Church Group Calls For City To Open Spa,” *Times*, September 23, 1958, 3B.

<sup>166</sup> “Keep This A Gentile City, Coad Urges On Kiwanians,” *St. Petersburg Evening Independent*, July 29, 1924, 1; *St. Petersburg Times*, “Lesson of Two Maps,” December 22, 1935, 4.

(slums). . . we must prevent it.” But by the middle years of the Great Depression, city leaders recognized a problem, admitting that areas of ramshackle housing had been festering for years. In the same 1935 editorial in which it suggested a “reservation” for African Americans, the *St. Petersburg Times* pointed to the city’s slum areas and lamented: “A very sorry showing it is for a city of St. Petersburg’s character and class.” A city council proposal to move African Americans west of Sixteenth Street did not address Methodist Town and the Gas Plant but left the “two large ‘downtown’ slum areas. . . entirely untouched and by the same token it leaves St. Petersburg’s whole grave Negro problem equally untouched,” the newspaper lamented.

A 1940 Works Progress Administration low-income housing survey began noting specific substandard elements in the city’s housing pattern. Citing particularly Methodist Town, the Gas Plant and an area between Sixteenth and Twenty-second Streets South, the survey revealed that 4,445 “dwelling units” had no toilet or bath facilities. Six years later, working for the Urban League under a Rockefeller Foundation grant, Dr. Warren M. Banner found that fewer than one in six African American rental properties had baths or toilets, and that twenty percent of those dwellings had no running water. Banner further found that one in three African-American homes needed major repairs.<sup>167</sup>

A possible, partial solution emerged in 1949. The federal government offered grants to finance 475 units of public housing, including 225 for white people. But first, residents had to vote on whether they wanted to accept the money. Owners of African-American rental property, people in the real estate business, and representatives of the building industry mounted a strong campaign against acceptance, including driving

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<sup>167</sup> “Don’t Throw Away The Oars Until The Boat Is Docked,” *St. Petersburg Times*, June 14, 1944, 6; Stan Cawthon, “Banner Report Will Be Guide For Negro Work,” *Times*, March 27, 1946, 13; “3 Years After The Banner Report,” *Times*, June 29, 1949, 6.

voters to the polls. A weak campaign by proponents and a small voter turnout doomed the federal grants; the naysayers won with fifty-four percent of the vote.<sup>168</sup>

More than a decade of hand-wringing followed. Studies were issued and debate about minimum housing standards laws rose and fell. Two separate urban renewal committees appointed by two different mayors, Samuel G. Johnson and John D. Burroughs, produced reports analyzing the slum situation but generating no remedial action. No black people served on the committees, and on the 13-member group Burroughs appointed, only three were without some connection to African-American rental property. When a minimum standards law was drafted, the city's legal department gutted it, saying it exceeded police powers.<sup>169</sup>

Meanwhile, the slums continued to fester, prompting fears of disaster. "I pray every time there's a wind," said fire chief S.O. Griffith. "Only the good Lord has prevented a fire in any of the Negro areas. "The men can't work in the close quarters. Some of these shacks don't even have city water . . . we've had to wet down a whole row of buildings to keep flames from spreading many a time . . . and what do we do the day we get simultaneous big fires in Methodist Town and near Twenty-second Street?" Griffith said about fifty percent of the department's calls came from African-American neighborhoods, and a 1958 blaze killed two small girls. The 1960 federal census said four percent of all dwellings in St. Petersburg had no flush toilets, and another ten percent had incomplete plumbing facilities. Almost all of the shortcomings existed in black neighborhoods. But the dithering continued, causing Rexford Stead, director of the

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<sup>168</sup> "Our Public Housing Issue," *St. Petersburg Evening Independent*, November 18, 1949, 1; Ogden Sharpnack, "Public Housing Loses, Copeland Pension Plan Okehed In Light Vote," *Times*, November 19, 1949, 13.

<sup>169</sup> Jerry Blizin, "Is St. Petersburg Going To Let Slum Problem Continue?" *Times*, January 30, 1958, 2B.)

Community Welfare Council's housing projects committee, to resign in anger. Citing St. Petersburg's "selfish indifference" in letting slums continue, Stead wrote that "It is particularly ironic that our Negro citizens are unable to contract for modern homes in attractive neighborhoods in a city where residence construction is the major local industry."<sup>170</sup>

Finally, pressed by urban renewal proponents and lobbied by the city government, the state legislature passed a slum clearance bill for St. Petersburg in 1961. State Senator C.W. Bill Young and State Representatives James Russell and Douglas Loeffler helped push the bill through. But a problem remained: ultimate approval of slum clearance was again up to voters. In November 1961 they were asked to let the city buy or condemn slum land and buildings, clear slum land by demolition if necessary, and sell cleared property to private persons or companies for redevelopment.<sup>171</sup>

Despite a campaign by the *Times* to push the measure through, including publication of an article that blamed fifty-six percent of the city's tuberculosis cases and thirty-five percent of the crime on the slums, voters again turned thumbs down. One-third of the city's voters turned out; the tally was 14,139 against the urban renewal enabling legislation, 10,756 in favor. An anti-government sentiment appeared to be at work. Two days before the referendum, an organization called the Civic Improvement Association bought an advertisement in the afternoon newspaper, urging a "no" vote and warning that urban renewal was a step on the way to socialism. In addition, the referendum came just a few days after voters had received their new tax bills. An \$8-million bond issue for

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<sup>170</sup> Blizin, *ibid*; "Stead Quits, Hits Slum Area Apathy," *St. Petersburg Times*, January 26, 1960, 1B.

<sup>171</sup> Cortland Anderson, "Urban Renewal Bills Approved In Senate," *St. Petersburg Times*, May 27, 1961, 1B.

citywide storm drainage also failed; and as if the fates wanted to twit voters, city streets flooded two weeks later after a torrential rain.<sup>172</sup>

Beaten down in their attempts at slum clearance, downtown boosters did salvage an important victory when the last Atlantic Coast Line train left the First Avenue South depot on June 2, 1963. It was 75 years, nearly to the day, after the first Orange Belt Railroad engine puffed in, signaling St. Petersburg's start as a place on a map. Leaders hailed the departure as equally significant. Now, they believed, a modern downtown could be pursued minus the traffic-snarling, aesthetically displeasing railroad – said, on top of everything else, to be a small-town anachronism. The Seaboard railroad depot had been gone since 1959, and the streetcar system made its last run in 1949.<sup>173</sup>

The railroad's farewell event produced a mob scene. Pushing, shoving, and shouting, a crowd estimated at 1,500 stampeded the last train out, clamoring for a ride to the new station near U.S. Highway 19. The ACL had offered the shuttle – free of charge, of course – as a nod to good civic relations. But railroad brass expected only 300 mild-mannered citizens. Instead, an agitated battalion surged to board, causing women to scream and children to be pinned against train-car sides. Mayor Herman Goldner clambered into the engine's cab and blasted the whistle as worried railroad officials tried to discourage the crowd, warning that there were not enough seats for all. Earlier, Goldner had completed the ceremonial removal of one rail spike. But the mayor's crew

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<sup>172</sup> *St. Petersburg Evening Independent*, advertisement, November 5, 1961, 8A; Charles Patrick, "Urban Renewal Loses, Drainage Vote In Danger," *Times*, November 8, 1961, 1B; Margaret Carroll, "Squalls Drench Suncoast After Tornadoes Hit Tampa," *Times*, November 24, 1961, 1B; Carroll, "Citizens Can Clean Up Slums With Nov. 7 Vote," *Times*, October 13, 1961, 1B.

<sup>173</sup> "First Avenue Track Removal," *St. Petersburg Times*, Municipal Report section, 4; Robert Henderson, "Last Train Departs – Loaded For Progress," *Times*, June 2, 1963, 1B; "So Long, Choo-Choo," *Times*, September 15, 1962, 6B; Geoffrey Drummond, "Dream Of Rail Relocation Comes True," *Times*, January 21, 1959, 1B; James Buckley, *Street Railroads of St. Petersburg, Florida* (Forty Fort, Pa.: Harold E. Cox, 1983), 32.

of dignitaries, which included Miss St. Petersburg, pulled up two more without instructions to do so, prompting the railroad people to protest that such enthusiastic yanking could strand the train before it could move one block. Eventually, it was able to pull out, heaving with about 900 people aboard.<sup>174</sup>

Hundreds of waving spectators lined the 3 ½-mile route to the new station at Thirty-Eighth Avenue North and Thirty-Second Street. Vice Mayor Nortney Cox, a possible candidate for mayor in the next election, leaned out a door and waved the entire way.<sup>175</sup>

Besides ending an era downtown, the railroad's departure tacitly recognized the city's new population in outlying regions, which the new depot proposed to serve. It also suggested less enthusiasm for the older tourists who traditionally had come to downtown by train since the late nineteenth century. St. Petersburg's oddly rambunctious farewell showed either a late-blooming affection for the Iron Horse or a lack of respect for what it had meant to the city's evolution. Perhaps a desire for a free train ride, however brief, sparked the rowdiness. Miraculously, the *Times* newspaper declared, the spectacle resulted in no reported injuries.

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<sup>174</sup> Henderson, *ibid.*

<sup>175</sup> Henderson, *ibid.*



## Chapter Five: Changes in Attitudes

Clare Carter and Donna Bemis would take no chances. The two Elvis Presley fans were first in line at the Florida Theater to see their idol – and they showed up at 4:15 a.m., nearly seventeen hours before Presley’s scheduled shows at the vintage movie palace. Between dawn and dark on August 7, 1956, 6,500 people, shrieking, awe-struck, or merely curious, crowded Fifth Street South between Central and First Avenue to see the new entertainment sensation with the sultry style and the grinding hips. The crowd was young – and predominantly female. Bobby Barnes was thirteen years old, a budding drummer who came to see the spectacle. “My mom drove me downtown, but, man, I was intimidated. I was the only guy,” Barnes said. “I got out of the car, and all I saw was girls waiting in line, everywhere, all around the block. It was too much perfume, everything was too sweet, it was something hormonal, y’know what I’m saying? I got right back in the car. It scared me to death, but I knew something different was going on.” Not entirely tongue-in-cheek, a newspaper columnist asked the next day: “What hit us?” It was a good question, and it applied to more than the advent of rock and roll.<sup>176</sup>

By the mid-1950s, dramatic change was reshaping staid St. Petersburg. A ballooning population, burgeoning subdivisions, a new through highway, a bridge link to south Florida, and modern retail and commercial centers cast a new look to what essentially had been a city of the 1920s. But physical, measurably objective change was just one element. New ideas were altering the subjective landscape. As publicists

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<sup>176</sup> Anne Rowe and Arlene Fillinger, “Elvis Came, He Sang, And He Conquered,” *St. Petersburg Times*, August 8, 1956, 1B; Paul Davis, “Good Morning,” *Times*, August 8, 1956; Bobby Barnes, interview by Jon Wilson about rock and roll bands, St. Petersburg, March 10, 1993.

advertised St. Petersburg as a retirement center, civic leaders – in an irony they did not seem to recognize – squirmed about the city’s image as an old folks’ home.

In further irony, especially in light of all the stewing about the elderly, young people in fact were having a definitive impact in numbers, attitude, and achievement. Just one example was the basketball team of Dixie M. Hollins High School, a new learning center opened in 1959 to accommodate growing neighborhoods in northwest St. Petersburg, Pinellas Park, and the nearby Gulf of Mexico beach communities. In the school’s second and third year of existence, its team won state championships in Florida’s largest high school classification – the first such basketball trophies a St. Petersburg school had won since 1933. Segregated Gibbs High School in 1956 won a state football championship for African-American schools.

Meanwhile, African Americans continued a measured pace toward equal opportunity. After the litigation about Spa Beach, the dithering about its future, its closures, and its ultimate reopening, St. Petersburg’s future as an integrated city slowly began to emerge. Amid the tangible results of growth and the intangible changes in attitude and psychology, St. Petersburg would have to come to grips with a new identity. The city’s postwar makeover had manufactured something of a national profile. Articles about the city in such major northern newspapers as the *Chicago Tribune* and *New York Times*, in addition to those which appeared in major magazines, were commonplace during the 1950s and 1960s. Some, such as those caricaturing the city’s elderly, were not eagerly embraced, but others suggested St. Petersburg was becoming a modern and interesting – maybe even exciting – place to live. The wide attention and growing population suggested a challenge would face residents old and new as they created,

consciously or not, a sense of place in a locale born of ballyhoo, frenetically built on booms, populated by people from somewhere else, and injected with a strong shot of mid-century cultural change.<sup>177</sup>

## **Out With the Old**

The notion of placing benches in downtown St. Petersburg began as an early twentieth century promotional gimmick. Their color was standardized as green in 1916 and soon the open-air lounges took on a powerful symbolism, cultivated by publicists as a mark of St. Petersburg's hospitality and year-round comfort in the sunshine. "Green benches are to St. Petersburg what the café tables on the sidewalks are to the grand boulevards of Paris," declared a newspaper advertisement at the height of the 1920s boom. During that bustling decade, the Chamber of Commerce campaigned to install more, and between 1921 and 1926, their number grew from about 500 to 2,353. "St. Petersburg is the only city counting its green benches in thousands," a chamber ad boasted.<sup>178</sup>

But by the 1950s, a new generation of leaders was shaping St. Petersburg. Weary of the articles and photographs depicting their city as a rest home, they set about a rejuvenation project. Among their goals: Get rid of the green benches. "It was an icon that needed to be changed," said C. Randolph Wedding, a St. Petersburg native who in the 1950s was beginning his career as an architect. In 1961, the city council passed an

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<sup>177</sup> George Sherbon, "The Dixie Darlins Did It For 2d Consecutive Year," *St. Petersburg Evening Independent*, March 12, 1962, 6; John Durant, "A Brighter, Younger Look For St. Petersburg," *New York Times*, November 19, 1961, 7..

<sup>178</sup> *St. Petersburg Times*, advertisement, "Green Benches," September 10, 1924, 8; *St. Petersburg Evening Independent*, advertisement, "Green Benches Are Symbolic of St. Petersburg," June 30, 1926, 2; . Arsenault, 136-37; Wedding interview.

ordinance requiring benches to be painted in rainbow hues: gulf blue, sandrift brown, sunshine yellow, ocean coral, or green. The Junior Chamber of Commerce, supported by the local chapter of the American Business Women's Association, began the repainting job in the spring. They hoped to be finished by July 4, when holiday festivities might draw attention downtown and attract photographers. Bench users greeted the change with mixed, sometimes skeptical reviews. Complained one unidentified elderly woman: "I can't tell whether a pigeon has been there or not."<sup>179</sup>

The benches were targeted because they seemed inextricably linked with the elderly and because the ancient pairing was seen to be stifling St. Petersburg's sense of itself as a vibrant city. Certainly, the city's association with the elderly went back decades. A *Chicago Tribune* article in 1936 cited Florida's West Coast as a haven for the old and weary, specifically mentioning St. Petersburg. Opined a student essay published in a 1929 edition of the *St. Petersburg Times*: "Our famous green benches lined along Central Avenue and in the parks are to blame for many a widow or old maid made supremely happy by finding some innocent male (unwedded) and proving to him that he will make an ideal mate." In 1913, the afternoon newspaper cited a *Saturday Evening Post* article in which St. Petersburg was cast as a place where "Elderly resorters pitch quoits and play croquet in their shirtsleeves." As early as 1910, newspaper classified ads were offering rentals for elderly persons only.<sup>180</sup>

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<sup>179</sup> "20 Jaycees On Free Bench Painting Spree," *St. Petersburg Times*, May 25, 1961, 1B; Paul Davis, "Bench Poll From The Park," *Times*, April 2, 1961, 1B; "Nancy, Too Goes For Pastel," *St. Petersburg Evening Independent*, May 31, 1961, 1B.

<sup>180</sup> Hal Foust, "West Coast of Florida Is Haven For The Weary," *Chicago Tribune*, January 19, 1936, E8; Dorothea Cunningham, cited in *St. Petersburg Times*, "Health, Wealth, Happiness Make St. Petersburg Good, Girl Essay Writer Avers," March 16, 1929, Section 2, 14; *Evening Independent*, advertisement, November 29, 1910, 3; *Evening Independent*, March 21, 1913, 2.

Although St. Petersburg did have an active population of youthful people, article after national article discussing old people waiting on the benches to die colored the Sunshine City gray in the popular culture of the time. An infamous *Life* magazine article in 1959 characterizing lonely and listless old folks on the sidewalks was just one such gibe. Comedians cracked jokes; local chatter sometimes seemed to encourage the anti-bench attitude. Asked a headline: “Are green benches traffic hazards?” A reader wrote a letter to one newspaper suggesting the benches be collected, piled on the waterfront, and burned. A section of the northern downtown area heavily populated by the aged was known by the grim nickname, “Gerontoville.” Further contributing to the sentiment was talk that portrayed old people on benches as not spending money and probably shifting the tax burden to younger people. “Young people were being eclipsed by an overwhelming blanket of seniors,” Wedding said. There was hard data to suggest so. From 1950 to 1960, St. Petersburg’s median age jumped from 44.6 years to 47.3; Florida’s change was 30.9 to 31.2, while the national median dropped from 30.2 to 29.5. During the decade of the ’50s, the city’s population of people 65 and over increased by 137 percent, compared to 132.9 percent in urban Florida overall and just 34.7 percent in the rest of the urbanized United States. Meanwhile, younger leaders pointed to the popular state societies, senior-gearred activities on the 1920s-era Million Dollar Pier, and even the Festival of States parade as institutions designed to appeal to a constituency that suddenly appeared to have worn out its welcome. It was, after all, just a few years earlier that promotional films designed to attract retirees were produced and circulated throughout the nation and in some foreign countries.<sup>181</sup>

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<sup>181</sup> Dick Bothwell, “Are Our Oldsters Lonely, Bored?” *St. Petersburg Times*, July 28, 1959, 1B; “Are Green Benches A Traffic Hazard?” *St. Petersburg Evening Independent*, December 29, 1958, 4B; Wedding. .

Another of the organized initiatives designed to bring about a more youthful image was Project 61, a blandly labeled campaign designed to generate world-wide publicity and break what the group's founders were calling "the dead grip of the past." Project 61, which generated strong civic support, was the brainchild of the Suncoast Advertising Club, whose president was Hal Canning, the *St. Petersburg Times* national advertising manager. At sales meetings around the nation, executives from other regions teased Canning about his city's reputation. "It indicated to me that our image left something to be desired. (Advertising) space buyers, agency men made joking remarks. City of the living dead, that sort of thing," Canning fumed. He related an incident in which he was preparing to show a color film of St. Petersburg to a group of ad executives; a young woman piped up: "Isn't St. Petersburg an upper denture market?"<sup>182</sup>

To Canning, the last straw came when a 1960 research report said that a sample group of industrial leaders believed fifty percent of St. Petersburg residents were 65 or over – far more than the twenty-eight percent the 1960 census revealed, or the twenty-two percent that census takers counted in 1950. Canning and a few others decided that the city needed a unified effort to wash away the old idea and usher in a new age. Thus was born Project 61. A brain trust consisting of what were called "twenty-four top-notch men and women of proven ability" took the reins. Phone banks contacted people nationwide to ask them what they thought of St. Petersburg. (Typical answer: "Old folks town.") A speakers bureau began sending its toastmasters wherever they might be welcome to spread the word about a younger city. A beautification committee aimed to plant 10,000 flowering trees. The *New York Times* declared with a perfectly straight face that "It is believed that, within a few years, St. Petersburg will be one of the

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<sup>182</sup> Bothwell, "How A City Is Moving To Build A New Image," *St. Petersburg Times*, May 1, 1961, 1B.

‘bloomingest’ cities in the country.” The article also noted that the city government had adopted a resolution proclaiming St. Petersburg to be “The City of Flowering Trees.”<sup>183</sup>

Indeed, committee members believed they had achieved a large measure of success when the *New York Times* published a laudatory, full-page article late in 1961. The *St. Petersburg Times* followed two days later with an editorial declaring that the story in the nation’s flagship newspaper amounted to “million-dollar advertising” and proved that it was possible to change the city’s image. Of course, it remained to be seen whether the city boosters could sustain the promotional effort or whether a one-time feature in a major newspaper would turn the relentless tide of established reputation. For the time being, the great northern exposure seemed to validate Project 61, but the local paper’s editorial warned that much work remained to be done. It was imperative, for economic well-being and future growth, the editorial said, to continue to make retirees feel welcome while striving to create “a well-rounded community . . . for persons of every age level.”<sup>184</sup>

Perhaps inevitably, a few enthusiastic boosters trotted out a tried-and-true icon to suggest youthful vitality: the bathing beauty. The Chamber of Commerce’s advertising agency decided to stage the first Miss American Bikini Queen contest in St. Petersburg on Valentine’s Day, 1963. “We feel the . . . contest will attract a tremendous amount of publicity and will further our youthfulness image,” said Dudley Jewell, the Chamber’s executive secretary. “It will continue to bring senior citizens to St. Petersburg, but will broaden our market and bring in other age levels, too,” Jewell added, granting a rather forced nod to the city’s older population. Meanwhile, in a burst of eye-catching

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<sup>183</sup>Bothwell, *ibid*; John Durant, “A Brighter, Younger Look For St. Petersburg,” *New York Times*, Nov. 19, 1961.

<sup>184</sup>“Proof That The Job Can Be Done,” *St. Petersburg Times*, November 21, 1961, 10A.

misjudgment that had yet to be widely considered an example of sexist exploitation, the *Times* published a drawing of a woman wearing a bikini and sprawled across three columns of the local section's front page. The art played alongside the article announcing the contest, and it did attract attention. Among other protests, a letter from the St. Petersburg Ministerial Association asserted that such a competition would most certainly be in bad taste. Less than a week later, the bikini contest was scrubbed.<sup>185</sup>

### **From the Ames Brother to Elvis**

In mid-November 1955, St. Petersburg police arrested four youthful gang members – three of whom were underage juveniles – for shooting holes through the plate glass window of a home in the affluent Coffee Pot Bayou neighborhood. Among the items police seized were a BB air pistol, seven bags of BBs, material for making stink bombs, and two foot-long lead-filled pipes, one of which appeared to be matted with human hair. (It was, after all, just a little more than two weeks after Halloween.) Police said another sixty-two cases of assault, vandalism, and armed robbery might be connected to the culprits, who also were found with a note with its four corners burned away and decorated with a red drawing of a flaming torch. The note threatened to do away with St. Petersburg's elderly residents and was signed "The Scarlett Torch." It was a rare St. Petersburg news account of what might be considered "juvenile delinquency" – a resonant phrase during an era in which teen-age culture began to take on a new aspect. St. Petersburg was hardly a hotbed of youthful crime. But accounts from across the nation that seemed to reflect a new, harder-edged breed of youngsters made some in the city

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<sup>185</sup> "Bikini Queen To Be Crowned On Valentine's Day," *St. Petersburg Times*, November 3, 1962, 1B; "Sorry, Fellows That Bikini Contest Taboo," *Times*, November 10, 1963, 6B.



nervous, even as FBI director J. Edgar Hoover warned of a national problem in regard to juvenile criminality. A *Times* editorial, citing a “rock ’n roll riot” in San Jose, Calif., ruminated about finding solutions to the “youth problem.” The editorial appeared a month before Elvis Presley brought his high-energy performances to the Florida Theater.<sup>186</sup>

The torch gang notwithstanding, few reports of widespread juvenile crime reached the city’s print media during the 1950s. Gangs, such as those that hit popular culture through shows such as *West Side Story* or movies like *Blackboard Jungle*, rarely emerged. Youthful street lore included tales of such tough coterie as the “Crescent Gang,” based near Crescent Lake, and the “Rock ’n Roll Rumlbers,” in which dozens of people claimed membership but which may not have existed. Scant documentation exists for either group. What occasionally did surface were teenage theft rings: groups of youngsters who committed auto parts thefts, house burglaries, unarmed robberies, and purse snatches. One such group called itself the “Midnight Auto Supply,” bragging that it could take orders for parts and deliver them the next day. Agencies, meanwhile, debated just how serious the juvenile delinquency problem might be. Welfare workers said St. Petersburg (and Pinellas County) delinquency rates were lower than those nationally and had not increased in proportion to population gains; police, on the other hand, cited “boy gangs” roaming through the city and representing a threat to property and lives. In an incident at Sixteenth Street Junior High School, three boys 15 to 16 years old beat

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<sup>186</sup> Ellis Clifton, “Youthful Armed Gang Jailed After Shooting,” *St. Petersburg Times*, November 17, 1955, 23; “How Can Youth Problem Be Solved?” *Times*, July 9, 1956, 6; J. Edgar Hoover, “FBI Chief Cites Danger Of Juvenile Crime In U.S. Today,” *Times*, November 12, 1953, 23.

popular band director Samuel Robinson and threatened him with a butcher knife after they had been expelled on charges of incorrigibility.<sup>187</sup>

By the middle of the decade, young people in St. Petersburg – as they did around the nation – tended to define themselves not by gang membership but by a new kind of music. Just a few years before the Presley phenomenon hit, orchestras still played big-band style for St. Petersburg High School’s postgame dances. Crooners like Perry Como regularly made the local hit parade lists. Black youngsters listened to groups like the Orioles harmonize “Is It Too Soon To Know” on the jukebox – which they sometimes called the Pick-A-Low – at Henderson’s soda shop on Twenty-second Street South. But by 1956, the Rock and Roll beat had taken hold, although not completely. On November 4 of that year, Presley’s *Love Me Tender* was the No. 1 record on St. Petersburg radio station WTSP; his *Don’t Be Cruel* and *You Ain’t Nothin’ But A Hound Dog* showed up as Nos.2 and 9 respectively. It was not a clean sweep for rock; Perry Como’s *Chincherinchee* came in No. 5. Popular WTSP disc jockey Bob Hoffer, meanwhile, cited in his weekly newspaper column his pick for record of the week: *I Saw Esau*, by the sweet-singing Ames Brothers. But the new sound was definitely on the move. Bobby Barnes, the young drummer who fled the Elvis Presley show, described it like this: “Not only could you hear it, you could feel it. There was a different vibe to it. Not as starchy . . . It all went from tie-wearing polite to something with an edge, 4/4 time instead of 6/8 with a back beat.”<sup>188</sup>

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<sup>187</sup> Bob Boyle, interview by Jon Wilson about street gangs, St. Petersburg, January 9, 2009; Bill Williamson, “Police Arrest 7 In Teen-Age Theft Ring,” *St. Petersburg Times*, September 3, 1957, 2B; Bob Preston, “Agencies Disagree Violently Over Extent Locally,” *Times*, November, 12, 1953, 23; “3 Boys Face Charges In Beating Of Teacher,” *Times*, October 20, 1959, 1B.

<sup>188</sup> Dick Bothwell, “Ghastly News,” *St. Petersburg Times*, September 24, 1952, 17; “YWCA To Begin Teen Hop Series on Wednesday,” *Times*, July 1, 1957, 46. Moses Holmes, interview by Jon Wilson about Twenty-second Street South, St. Petersburg, March 14, 2002; Barnes interview, 1993.

St. Petersburg youth embraced the era's music culture whole-heartedly. Car radios blared the hits of the day at such drive-in eateries as Triplett's across from St. Petersburg High on Fifth Avenue North; Chick's, a Boca Ciega High haunt on Central Avenue and 49<sup>th</sup> Street; and Olson's, a Northeast High hangout on Fourth Street North. Dances switched from the orchestras to guitar-and-drum groups, and teen dances took place at venues around the city, or at least they did for white youths; influential black columnist Calvin Adams reported a dearth of places where African-American youngsters could have dances, or for that matter, any other indoor activity. Clean-cut singer Pat Boone made inroads among teen-agers (and their parents) who appreciated the Columbia University graduate's smooth performance style. When Boone visited St. Petersburg in 1959, fourteen-year-old Lealman Junior High student Peggy Davis presented Boone a Junior Chamber of Commerce award after she wrote an essay about why she wanted to meet him. Teen-agers had money, and St. Petersburg's were no exception. They could buy records at Lefter's Music Store downtown, one of the spots where listening booths were available to preview the sounds, or in the platter departments of Maas Brothers or William Henry department stores. WALT radio and later WLCY – the old WTSP – catered to the musical tastes of the young, meanwhile, and advertised the local rock 'n roll events. Some of the biggest ones took place at Joyland on U.S. 19 and in various Clearwater venues. The Clearwater shows, which drew people from throughout the Tampa Bay area, eventually were called "Star Spectaculars." They booked the better local bands to open for recording stars such as Johnny Tillotson, Del Shannon, and Brian Hyland, and later, Bobby Rydell and Roy Orbison.<sup>189</sup>

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<sup>189</sup> "Contest Night Set For Hoffer Platter Party," *St. Petersburg Times*, June 1, 1956, 15; "Rock 'n' Roll Dances Resume Thursday At Municipal Pier," *St. Petersburg Evening Independent*, July 30, 1960, 4B; Calvin Adams, "We've Got Them Out Of Pool Halls, But Where Do They Go Now?" *Times*, February 19, 1952, 22; Douglas Doubleday, "Belk And Lindsey To Build Department Store At Plaza," *Times*, February 26, 1957, 23; "Maas Opens Two More Floors Tuesday," *Times*, February 8, 1948, 37; "Peggy Was Ecstatic," *Times*, photo caption, May 17, 1959, 1B; "Rock And Roll Stars Coming To Clearwater," *Times*, October 13, 1961, 10D; Marie Rhodes, "Clearwater Dances Return With Reunion," *Times*, November 29, 1996, 9B.

It wasn't long before local musicians drew inspiration. Among the first rock and roll groups to form were the Chants, the Tru-Tones, and Terry and the Pirates, the latter composed of St. Petersburg Junior College students. When the folk-song era began to emerge, another crew of junior college students organized the Wanderers, cast in the mold of such nationally popular artists as the Kingston Trio and the Chad Mitchell Trio. If you did not want to dance, play, or sing, but wanted merely to tap the bongos, you could lean back in the Hungry Brain, a coffee house on west Central Avenue aimed at aspiring beatniks and their acolytes. The Beaux Arts Gallery in Pinellas Park was another coffee-house venue for folk singers and others who worked outside the mainstream of local art, or for those who appreciated edgier material. Among those who attended was Jim Morrison, eventual lead singer for "The Doors," an influential rock group that achieved international fame. A St. Petersburg Junior College student during 1961-1962, Morrison projected a reserved personality at odds with his wild, drug-evangelist persona of later years. He was "one of the few (who) had an original, native talent," said Beaux Arts manager Thomas Bruce Reese. "He was finding himself here for the first time. We loved him rather dearly because he was so quiet."<sup>190</sup>

The Impacs ranked among the most popular – and successful – bands from St. Petersburg. With Savannah native Barnes' driving drum beat backing a guitar, a bass guitar, and an energetic vocalist, the group soon built a following with its fusion of Charleston/Savannah beach music, rockabilly, and rhythm-and-blues. There was one more element that made the Impacs stand out: an electronic echo chamber that gave every performance a recording-studio quality. The instrument was one of the first to appear in St. Petersburg. Barnes said that in the early 1960s, only one other musician had such an asset – and he had covered the manufacturer's address with tape to camouflage the source. Undeterred, Barnes applied heat to the tape while the echo chamber's owner was taking a break during an appearance. The tape loosened enough for

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<sup>190</sup> "Sundance Dance Champ To Get Cup," *St. Petersburg Times*, June 28, 1959, 14E; "Wanderers Wander Back," *Times*, August 10, 1962; "Home Economics Translated To Jive Talk," *Times*, September 25, 1960, 10 to 20 Section, 4; *St. Petersburg Evening Independent*, "Rock Vocalist Morrison Dies," July 9, 1971, 1A.

Barnes to spy and memorize an address, and the Impacs soon were able to add an important feature to their performances. The group's tight, unusual sound and its determined commitment to excellence, encouraged by Barnes, took it a long way. They toured with Dick Clark, the host of the national television show *American Bandstand* and cut records on national labels Cameo/Parkway and King. The Impacs never had a top ten record, but it was Barnes's opinion that the group barely missed hitting big-time fame when it could not reach a satisfactory record agreement with Parkway on a promising song.<sup>191</sup>

Both higher- and lower-profile local bands found a ready audience. Federal census figures in 1950 and 1960 showed that St. Petersburg's youthful population had increased its numbers nearly as rapidly as the 65-and-over set. In 10 years, the 17-and-under population jumped from 18,879 to 42,424, a 124.7 percent increase that outpaced the city's overall growth rate and fell not remarkably far behind the 137 percent increase of 65-overs. The baby boomer generation thus fueled a Pinellas County school-building frenzy that provided educational facilities to every section, sometimes without the best of site planning, it seemed. From 1953 through 1959, three new high schools opened in Greater St. Petersburg: Boca Ciega, Northeast, and Dixie Hollins, the latter also serving as a county-wide comprehensive school that offered vocational training to students of high school age. From 1952 through 1963, four new junior high schools for grades 7 through 9 opened, including one for African-American students; and 13 new elementary schools, two for African Americans, welcomed students. Boca Ciega, the first new high school built in Greater St. Petersburg in twenty-six years, showed what happened when planners neglected flood plains. Heavy rains flooded the grounds during the school's early days, and at times students literally canoed between wings while fish swam on the

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<sup>191</sup> Barnes interviews, 1993, 2009.

football field. While alligators sunned uncomfortably close to Northeast, cows grazed on nearby pasture and adjacent Sixteenth Street North ended just north of the school.

Officials made an attempt to plan and build a new Gibbs High School, but the school district and the St. Petersburg City Council could not come to terms on a land-swap for a new site at Campbell Park.<sup>192</sup>

As if to underscore the flood of new, young blood, the city opened three youth recreation centers during the 1950s. The first, Bartlett Park, was heralded as much-needed haven for teenagers who, it was feared, might otherwise learn bad habits by hanging around what their elders called “joints.” Dedicated in 1951, Bartlett Park also was seen as a symbol of new recognition of the young, who may have felt overlooked in the city’s preoccupation with providing attractions for older tourists. Bartlett Park was successful enough that tenacious crusader Ethel Ruppenthal was able to persuade city officials to build another in a new part of town. Northwest Youth Center opened in September, 1957 in a new part of town where Fifty-eighth Street North, to be one of the new center’s access roads, had yet to be completed. Another woman, Mrs. Robert W. Roberts, donated land for a third center to be opened a few months later in the northeast section of the city. It would be called Roberts Youth Center. Wildwood Youth Center, another segregated facility, opened in August, 1961, seven years after Jennie Hall donated \$25,000 for the pool in the adjacent park.<sup>193</sup>

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<sup>192</sup> U.S. Bureau of the Census, *General Characteristics of the Population, 1960, 11-29*, online at [www2.census.gov/prod2/decennial/documents/11085788v1p11ch3.pdf](http://www2.census.gov/prod2/decennial/documents/11085788v1p11ch3.pdf), accessed February 6, 2009; *A Tradition of Excellence: Pinellas County Schools 1912-1987*, Patricia Perez Costrini, ed., (Clearwater: Pinellas County School Board, 1987), 58, 64-67, , 78-79, 81, 103-104, 112, 141, 143, 155, 184, 188, 235-237, 261-262, 265; John Gardner, “Finding Adequate Negro School Sites Is Tough Job,” *Times*, October 18 1959 1D

<sup>193</sup> “Young And Old Equally Important,” *St. Petersburg Times*, November 20, 1951, 6; Craig Basse, “Ethel Ruppenthal, Civic And Political Activist, Dies,” *Times*, May 22, 1999, 8B; “Trees For The Forest,” *Times*, October 29, 1961, 6E; “Hall Pool Dedicated: Plaque Honors Donor,” *Times*, June 15, 1954, 7B.

A particular point of pride in regard to young people was St. Petersburg's acceptance by leaders in higher education. With the Committee of 100, a businessman's group, spearheading a campaign of persuasion, governing bodies of the national Presbyterian Church agreed in 1958 to situate a private, four-year liberal arts college on 160 acres on Frenchman's Creek, close to Boca Ciega Bay. The proposal to bring what became Florida Presbyterian College – later Eckerd – to St. Petersburg enjoyed wide support and offered a large measure of consolation to civic leaders who two years earlier had tried unsuccessfully to win a four-year public university. The University of South Florida went to Tampa, but in an unusual show of support, Tampa Mayor Nick Nuccio endorsed St. Petersburg as a site for the liberal arts school. The Presbyterians chose St. Petersburg over Sarasota, Orlando, and Ocala. Among the sales points boosters emphasized to the college selection committee were St. Petersburg's amenities developed through years of catering to tourists; a "spiritual" ambience because of the city's large number of churches with active memberships; its industry; good regional transportation facilities; new science-related industries nearby; and other higher educational facilities in or near the city. St. Petersburg Junior College had been open for more than thirty years, while Stetson University had opened its College of Law on the old Florida Military Academy Campus in Gulfport in 1954. Gibbs Junior College, a segregated school for African Americans, was established in 1957 – ironically, three years after the Supreme Court had ruled against segregated schools. While builders put together Gibb's new campus, Florida Presbyterian College held its first classes in 1960 at the former U.S. Maritime Service training center next to Bayboro Harbor.<sup>194</sup>

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<sup>194</sup> Douglas Doubleday, "St. Petersburg Site Is Chosen For Presbyterian College," *St. Petersburg Times*, September 16, 1958, 1A; Nash Stublen, "Industry Backs City's Bid For Presbyterian College," *St.*

But what sent St. Petersburg into a genuine paroxysm of joy was its own youthful tennis starlet. In 1956, Shirley Fry, who had lived in the city for two years, won the Wimbledon women's singles tennis championship. St. Petersburg threw 29-year-old Fry a ticker-tape parade – the only such celebration the city ever had conducted, even after the end of World War II. Fry, born in Akron, Ohio, came to St. Petersburg in 1954 with thoughts of leaving the tennis circuit because of a sore elbow on her racket arm. She took a job as a copy clerk with the *St. Petersburg Times*, where a year before her Centre Court victory in England, she wistfully watched the wire machines spew the news about the Wimbledon winners. But Dan Sullivan, the professional at the St. Petersburg Tennis Center, believed Fry was too young to retire and began working out with the whipplet-slender woman he called the fastest player in tennis. Fry began a startling comeback, which a sportswriter suggested might be due to the Florida sunshine. Not only did she win at Wimbledon, Fry also captured the women's national singles title in three days before her confetti celebration in St. Petersburg. "I'm overwhelmed," said the woman whom newspaper co-workers described as shy. On the day of her Wimbledon parade, Mayor Samuel Johnson also presented her with a ceremonial deed to the Municipal Pier. "Nothing like this ever happened to me before," Fry said. "Imagine me, Shirley Fry, perched on up the back of a convertible, smiling and waving like Princess Margaret. How did it all start? Why did they do it?"<sup>195</sup>

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*Petersburg Evening Independent* , August 12, 1958, 2B; Doubleday, "Tampa Endorses Boca Ciega Site For New College," *Times*, August 24, 1958, 14B; "St. Petersburg Portrait Won It A College," *Times*, September 16, 1958, 2A; "School Board Approves Budget For Gibbs JC," *Times*, July 11, 1957, 2B; Evelyn Rogers, "Impressive Ceremonies Open Stetson College," *Times*, September 20, 1954, 21.

<sup>195</sup> Bill Beck, "Shirley Conquers City In Love Sets," *St. Petersburg Times*, July 28, 1956, 1B; Beck, "World Title Comeback Trail Began At Times," *Times*, July 8, 1956, 1A; "Shirley Fry Whips Pat In Exhibition," *Times*, December 6, 1954, 16; "Shirley Fry Engaged To Wed In February," *Times*, December 4, 1956, 22 .



Public comments about the occasion suggested the motivation was simply affection for an engaging, athletically talented young woman. At the same time, Fry generated mentions of St. Petersburg in newspapers around the nation the celebration each time she won a major tennis championship, and so served – probably unbeknownst to her – as a civic image-builder. Nor was “Miss Fry,” as many newspapers identified her, the only youthful achiever St. Petersburg could claim. Carroll Baker, who rose to fame after her title-role appearance in the controversial movie *Baby Doll*, and a secondary but substantial role in *Giant* alongside Elizabeth Taylor, Rock Hudson and James Dean, got her start in St. Petersburg. A Johnstown, Pa., native, Baker came to St. Petersburg in 1950, attended St. Petersburg Junior College, modeled, found success in local beauty contests, filmed a citrus juice promotional, and performed as a magician’s assistant. Articles about Baker sometimes credited her show-business start to her days at the Betty Boop School of Dancing, so-called because the school owner Ann Warner had supplied the title character’s voice in the 1930s Betty Boop cartoons that portrayed a girlish sex symbol. Young male athletes also helped put St. Petersburg on the map. Prep basketball stars Ian Morrison of St. Petersburg High and Gary Keller of Dixie Hollins both were named high school All-Americans in the early 1960s. Morrison appeared on television’s *Ed Sullivan Show*, and Keller went on to become Florida’s first collegiate All-America. At the two-year college level, St. Petersburg Junior College star Gregg Bloodworth led the nation in junior college basketball scoring in 1961-62.<sup>196</sup>

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<sup>196</sup> “Hoad To Wimbledon Final; Miss Fry Wins,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, July 6, 1956, B3; Fred Tupper, *New York Times*, “Miss Fry Ousts Miss Gibson, Gains Wimbledon Semifinals With Miss Brough,” July 3, 1956, sports section, 23; Jay Horning, “Carroll Baker Danced Her Way To Fame,” *St. Petersburg Times*, July 11, 1993, 8A; Lowell Brandle, “As ‘Karol Carroll,’ Magician, She Left To Find Her Destiny,” *Times*, January 23, 1957, 21; Brandle, “Carroll Baker Had First Role In Citrus Juice Movie Shot Here,” *Times*, January 22, 1957, 21; Bob Chick, “Ian Morrison,” *Evening Independent*, May 19, 1981, 1C; Bill Buchalter, “Jeff Had To Fill Big Shoes – And He Did,” *St. Petersburg Times*, February 6, 1963, 1C.

## **It's Cool To Watch The Tube**

In 1952 St. Petersburg, The Shadow knew. Lamont Cranston's radio character, who began each show with a sinister boast about his omniscience, gave his fans a taste of the West when he put on chaps and a cowboy hat to break up a cattle rustling gang. This particular WTSP episode rated special mention in a regular *St. Petersburg Times* column called "Down Radio Row." Evidence in itself that the sound box still ruled, the same article noted that disc jockey Bob Hoffer was cultivating pre-rock and roll talent by giving air time to one Bob Sands, a crooner in the Como mold. At the same time, new-fangled transistor radios were winning mention. But buried in the article, whose headline did not hint of the imminent arrival of a new visual medium, was news that President Truman's budget request for the Federal Communications Commission would mean, if approved, more money to process applications for television stations. It was thought that nationwide, as many as 400 new stations might go on the air.<sup>197</sup>

One year later, St. Petersburg's first television station began sending signals. WSUN-TV, Channel 38 – operating from the Municipal Pier with a transmitter on Gandy Boulevard – became the first TV station on Florida's west coast in May 1953. Tampa's WFLA-TV Channel 8 and WTVT-TV Channel 13 would follow in 1955. WEDU-TV, Channel 3, St. Petersburg public educational channel began in 1958.<sup>198</sup>

The arrival of television made businesses "writhe like a high-tension wire" in anticipation of sales and money to be made from installment finance plans, according to

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<sup>197</sup> "Funds For Radio Increased," *St. Petersburg Times*, January 27, 1952, Magazine section, 38;

<sup>198</sup> "Florida Television At A Glance," *St. Petersburg Times*, April 19, 1953, 4H; "WTVT History," [http://www.myfoxtampabay.com/dpp/about\\_us/wTVT\\_history/wTVT\\_history](http://www.myfoxtampabay.com/dpp/about_us/wTVT_history/wTVT_history), accessed May 14, 2009; "WFLA-TV To Show Gasparilla Events," *Times*, February 14, 1955, 25; "Milestone Passed – And Those That Lie Ahead," *Times*, December 28, 1958, 3D.

one observer. Savvy dealers had begun expanding the previous year; by January the number of TV sales outlet had increased by nearly 300 percent. In April, new sets were reported to be arriving by the carload. Apparently, nobody stopped to count exactly how many that represented, but an informal survey estimated 16,000 installations had taken place by the end of March 1953. Some optimistic merchants expected sales to double during the first few weeks of broadcasting, then redouble by the end of the year or by early 1954. A seventeen-inch black and white set might sell for \$249.95, likely with two years to pay and nothing down. Canasta, a fad of the '50s, was expected to take a beating as “the Marvel of the Ages” swept people from their kitchen-table card games toward the flickering cathode ray tube.<sup>199</sup>

Television changed more than leisure activity. Three months after St. Petersburg received its first signals, some residents reported changes in eating, sleeping, buying, and social habits. An anonymous homemaker commented: “It’s easy, if you get interested in something at mealtime, to keep right on watching and forget to fix dinner.” Then came the Swanson TV Dinner, invented in 1954 by Gerry Thomas, who devised both the product and its name. St. Petersburg sales are not recorded, but nationally, more than ten million customers paid 98 cents for Salisbury steak, fried chicken, turkey, or meat loaf served with potatoes and peas. But then: Where both to eat and view? A newspaper survey in St. Petersburg reported that 90 percent of its respondents said they had purchased special furniture to make set-side dining more convenient. Meanwhile, some among St. Petersburg’s elderly population complained; such 10:35 p.m. programs as *Your Home Theater* were keeping them up past bedtime. And Police Chief J.R. Reichert

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<sup>199</sup> Douglas Doubleday, “Sets Arrive By Carload, But Move Swiftly In Brisk Market,” *St. Petersburg Times*, April 19, 1953, 4H; Dick Bothwell, “Looking At TV Through Square Eyeballs,” *Times*, April 19, 1953, 2H; “Look What Station WSUN-TV Will Bring You!” *Times*, advertisement, April 19, 1953, 3H.

declared that night TV viewing by green bench-sitters, gazing through windows at turned-on storefront sets, had to stop. The crowds were becoming a nuisance, the chief said.<sup>200</sup>

Another innovation that helped shape St. Petersburg, as it did the rest of the South, was air conditioning. The coming of room units combated the sweltering summers that made life difficult for many residents. Advertising them, through such media as the *St. Petersburg Times*' annual special section about keeping cool, helped ease worries of northern residents contemplating a move to Florida but hesitating because of what they had heard about smothering heat. Sunshine City boosters were not aware of such trepidations and did their best to overcome them. Declared a newsman writing in 1955: "Sure, it gets too warm here occasionally . . . but Florida has 30,000 lakes plus unlimited ocean in which to cool off, something you don't find in most places." As Raymond O. Arsenault noted in a ground-breaking article, the advent of air conditioning during the 1950s most certainly contributed to the reduced net out-migration from Southern states and starting in the early 1960s, more in-migration, at last, than departures. By 1958, Florida ranked fourth among states in the percentage of homes fully or partly air conditioned, and third in the number of room units purchased in 1957. By 1960, eighteen percent of Florida homes had air conditioning; in St. Petersburg, the figure was even higher: nearly twenty-two percent, which was still low by standards set later in the twentieth century.<sup>201</sup>

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<sup>200</sup> Bette Orsini, "City TV Viewers Still Miss Meals, Skip Bedtime, Ignore Friends," *St. Petersburg Times*, September 6, 1953, 2B; "The History of TV Dinners," website, [http://inventors.about.com/od/inventionsalphabet/a/tv\\_dinner.htm](http://inventors.about.com/od/inventionsalphabet/a/tv_dinner.htm), accessed September 17, 2009; Clyde Shaffer, "Even St. Petersburg Oldsters Change Way Of Life During First Month Of Television," *Tampa Tribune*, June 27, 1953, 1B; "Is Green Bench TV On the Way Out?" *Times*, September 7, 1953, 2B.

<sup>201</sup> Arsenault, "The End of the Long, Hot Summer: The Air Conditioner and Southern Culture," *The Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 50, no. 4. (November, 1984), 618; Dick Bothwell, "Nature's Air

Businesses and residents began riding the air conditioning wave immediately after World War II. In 1946, Florida Power Corporation reported installing sixty-one commercial units totaling 225 tons. Five years later, the utility company's installation rate had increased to 318 totaling 1,250 tons. In St. Petersburg homes, 299 room units were installed in 1950, mostly in bedrooms and living rooms; in 1952, 222 installations were reported during the first four months alone. Room units were available at about the same price as television sets: \$200 to \$250. Most banks offered to finance them.<sup>202</sup>

Together, air conditioning and television began to change the leisure habits of residents in St. Petersburg, particularly those on the Florida-room frontier where few new houses had porches to lounge upon or adjacent sidewalks on which to stroll and chat with neighbors. It was pleasant to sit inside and watch *Maverick*, *The Ed Sullivan Show* or *The Real McCoys* in the cool comfort provided by technology. The stay-inside attitude began to be reflected in a decline in attendance at outdoor entertainment venues. A sports columnist bemoaned, for example, that baseball attendance had gone into decline. One of the minor league St. Petersburg Saints' best clubs struggled to attract 50,000 fans halfway through the 1958 season, while second- and fourth-place clubs in 1951 and 1952 had drawn more than 250,000 each year. The columnist blamed the deficit on TV and the expansion of home air conditioning, and cited the comments of Cleveland Indians general

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Conditioning Plant Helps Summer Temperatures Down On The Suncoast," *Times*, April 2, 1955, 17E; "State Ranks Fourth In Use Of Air Conditioned Homes," *St. Petersburg Evening Independent*, July 5, 1958, 2E.

<sup>202</sup> "Air Conditioning Becoming Thing For Masses, Not Classes," *St. Petersburg Times*, July 17, 1952, 17; numerous newspaper advertisements linked air conditioner sales with bank financing. Examples include s, "Loans For A More Pleasant Summer," *Times*, May 13, 1954, 14C, and "Webb's City TV and Appliance Center," *Times*, May 13, 1954, 13C.

manager Frank Lane: “Fans prefer artificially cooled living rooms and TV entertainment to the torrid ballparks of mid-summer.”<sup>203</sup>

## **Jim Crow Begins To Fade**

In 1946, African-American veteran J.E. George asked for a building permit to erect a house at 2167 Fifteenth Avenue South, one of the entrenched boundary lines beyond which people of color could not live or open a business. In applying, George was challenging one of St. Petersburg’s most sensitive racial matters – separate housing in strictly segregated neighborhoods for black peoples and whites. It was more than tradition and greater than a folkway; the segregation practice had been in operation for most of the twentieth century and had the backing of city council, which in 1936 required that all African Americans had to live west of Seventeenth Street and south of Sixth Avenue South. George was most certainly among the first African Americans to issue a challenge, his effort coming nearly a decade before the more heralded Dr. Robert J. Swain, who built an office and apartments on Twenty-second Street South, south of Fifteenth Avenue. The city at first refused to grant George a permit, but when he retained a lawyer, officials yielded. It was one of the first postwar cracks in St. Petersburg’s durable racial code.<sup>204</sup>

As we have seen in an earlier chapter, the city had a history of racial tension that sometimes flared into horrific violence, mixed at times with racial benevolence, perhaps paternalistic, on the part of whites. By the 1950s, the violence had come to a virtual close.

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<sup>203</sup> Jeff Moshier, “August A Perfect Example—Minor Leagues Decline,” *St. Petersburg Evening Independent*, August 6, 1958, 9A.,

<sup>204</sup> “Effort To Set Boundaries Of White, Negro Residential Areas Will Be Made,” *St. Petersburg Times*, December 16, 1946, 21.

But sometimes cultural differences among recently arrived youngsters and their longtime-resident classmates resulted in playground fistfights; children vigorously debating the Little Rock Central High School crisis of 1957 almost certainly amounted to adolescent reflection of parental views. Meanwhile, white people sometimes attended performances by such entertainment luminaries as Louis Armstrong at the usually all-black Manhattan Casino. Indeed, music often was the equalizing element. *Times* reporter Jerry Blizin performed jazz on an integrated stage at Boca Ciega High School in 1959; a year or two later, white musician Ron Lowe was playing with an integrated blues combo called the Dominoes. The group broke an unofficial color barrier when it became the first integrated group to play for an integrated audience when it became the house band at the Peppermint Lounge in Madeira Beach. In another indication that a new day might be on the horizon, Dixie Hollins High School's white state title teams sometimes conducted clandestine basketball practices with the team from all-black Gibbs High School. During this era the Klan was moribund in St. Petersburg, but during lunch-counter sit-ins, a Klansman named Bill Hendrix showed up to promote a counter-protest. Police chief E. Wilson Purdy ran Hendrix out of town. The cracks in St. Petersburg's racial code suggested progress in race relations, but the city did not quickly shed its strict and sometimes toxic segregationist past.<sup>205</sup>

In fact, St. Petersburg went about desegregation in a strained, desultory way in which white businessmen's pocketbooks often became the issue on which decisions

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<sup>205</sup> ““Classic Music Event Is Warmly Received,” *St. Petersburg Times*, May 5, 1959, 2D; Breen interview; Greg Williams, “Dominoes Band Leader Ron Lowe Dies at 59,” *Times*, January 2, 2002, Neighborhood Times section, 1; Minson Rubin, interview by Jon Wilson about integrated, informal high school basketball practices, St. Petersburg, October 1, 2009; “Negroes Picket, Hold Sit-Ins,” *Times*, December 4, 1960, 9B; in addition, the author recalls racially charged fistfights among white youngsters at segregated Lealman Junior High School during the Little Rock crisis.

turned. For example, as we saw in Chapter 4, the Spa Beach and pool were reopened because hoteliers feared loss of revenue if the facilities remained closed because of black youths' efforts to use them. Likewise, a boycott led by such activists as Ralph Wimbish, Emanuel Stewart, and David Isom helped desegregate lunch counters. In March 1960, sit-ins began downtown. Three months later, urged by Governor LeRoy Collins, the city appointed a biracial committee to explore solutions. Picketing continued during the Christmas buying season of 1960. Among stores targeted were Webb's City, Maas Brothers, Kress, Rutland's, McCrory's and Woolworth's. But in January 1961 – with the committee providing help – the lunch counters downtown were desegregated. They already had been previously, and quietly, integrated at other shopping areas in St. Petersburg, and African Americans organized car pools to use those counters instead of supporting the downtown businesses. Webb's officials estimated the picketing and boycott cost the store \$15,000 a day, but battling through the courts, the city's iconic department store was one of the last holdouts. It was not the first time a biracial committee had helped ease tension. In the early 1950s, such a group had worked to keep the peace when blacks began moving south of Fifteenth Avenue South into previously all-white neighborhoods. Revered Gibbs High School teacher Olive B. McLin had been a member of that committee, saying that it was important in "keeping everyone talking" instead of confronting one another on the streets. In mid-1959, a white residents' group organized to stop the movement of black people into segregated neighborhoods. There were no reported incidents and the effort folded, this time without the refereeing of a special committee.<sup>206</sup>

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<sup>206</sup> John Gardner, "Negroes' Victories Came Quietly," *St. Petersburg Times*, February 14, 1962, 1B; Gardner, "Desegregation Locally Advancing By Degrees," *Times*, February 15, 1962, 1B.



Other segregation barriers also fell relatively quietly, although others proved more difficult. For every advance, there seemed to be a qualifying “but”. For example, segregated seating on city buses ended quietly in 1959 – but African American drivers still had not been hired by 1962. The police department had a black sergeant, a detective, and eight patrolmen – but none had the power to arrest white people. The public library had been desegregated as early as 1952. The St. Petersburg Ministerial Association had joined with the Negro Interdenominational Ministers Alliance to become a biracial group. Black doctors had become members of the Pinellas County Medical Society by 1962, but African-American lawyers and dentists still could not join their professional associations in the county. Major League Baseball teams that conducted spring training in St. Petersburg asked for housing for all members of their integrated teams, but the downtown hotels would not desegregate. The teams found housing at the Outrigger Inn near the Sunshine Skyway and at the Colonial Inn on St. Petersburg Beach, but the stonewalling by downtown hoteliers was said by some to be a reason for the New York Yankees’ relocation to Fort Lauderdale.<sup>207</sup>

The prospect of the Civil Rights Movements’ Freedom Riders visiting St. Petersburg in 1961 caused some concern among city leaders. The police department’s new riot squad had been in training for more than a year and there were hints that it would be used as needed in racial situations. But Police Chief E. Wilson Purdy took a calm public stance. While promising to enforce the law, Purdy said any citizen was welcome. “The mere fact that a busload of people may come to town . . . does not in and of itself constitute an emergency situation,” he said. In fact, no emergency situation

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<sup>207</sup> Gardner, *ibid*; “Spring Camp Segregation: Baseball’s Festering Sore,” *New York Times*, February 19, 1961, 179; “For Whom The Bell,” *St. Petersburg Times*, June 13, 1963, 14A.

developed when seven Freedom Riders, part of a biracial traveling group measuring the extent of desegregation throughout the South, arrived in St. Petersburg aboard two buses on June 15. There were not even any major incidents. One white man was arrested and charged with disorderly conduct after he refused to stop arguing with H. MacDonald Nelson, a black St. Petersburg minister waiting at the Greyhound bus station to greet the riders. Francis Randall, a white rider, and Ralph Diamond, a black member of the group, were served without incident at the bus station's lunch counter. So were Joyce Lebowitz, a white woman who was the New York City editor for Harvard University Press, and Mrs. Marjorie Maxwell, identified as a black St. Petersburg housewife. While in St. Petersburg, the Freedom Riders attended a workshop during the day, and in the evening, a public meeting at the Second Bethel Baptist Church near the Gas Plant neighborhood. Rev. Enoch Davis, the church's pastor, was known for his quiet leadership throughout St. Petersburg's era of desegregation. On the fiftieth anniversary of his ministry there, a newspaper wrote of him: "He didn't just speak . . . he acted. If a nonviolent public protest was necessary to assert every resident's right to a municipal beach, then action was in order. If a private housing project for the poor was a natural expression of his Christian commitment, he laid the plans. This steady alignment of walk and talk earned him unpurchaseable respect, in St. Petersburg and around the nation."<sup>208</sup>

The desegregation of the city's public hospital, Mound Park, was another important milestone. Since the 1920s, black patients had been treated at the all-black Mercy Hospital on Twenty-second Street South. While it built a reputation for caring

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<sup>208</sup> "Freedom Rider Group Plans Florida Tour, St. Petersburg Stop," *St. Petersburg Times*, June 13, 1961, 1A; "Freedom Riders Visit Without Major Incident," *Times*, June 16, 1961, 1B; "Democracy, Segregation Won't Mix," *Times*, October 10, 1962, 5D; "On The Anniversary Of Rev. Enoch Davis," *St. Petersburg Evening Independent*, January 4, 1982, 16A.

physicians and nurses, the hospital was woefully inadequate. For one thing, it had almost no medical equipment. It was considered so poor it was not even given a rating by medical authorities who assigned grades of A, B, or C to hospitals meeting minimum standards. One of the grimmer truths was that a black surgeon, upon discovering what appeared to be a tumor during an operation, could not simply take it out, but had to leave the patient's incision open while a small piece of the tumor was removed and sent for tests to white-only Mound Park. Mercy doctors such as Fred Alsup, one of the leaders in desegregating downtown beaches, talked of long waits for lab reports, consultations, blood transfusions, and other life-saving services from Mound Park. Delays had caused at least one patient fatality. In 1960, approximately 500 African-American residents chose in a citizens' association straw vote to support black doctors who wished to boycott Mercy unless better facilities were built. One of the solutions proposed was to build a segregated wing at Mound Park; another was simply to build an integrated medical center. Otherwise, physicians would begin sending their black patients to Mound Park, said Dr. Eugene Rose. Other doctors supporting the boycott included Ralph Wimbish and Harry Talliaferro, along with dentists Robert Swain and Gilbert Leggett. All were civil rights activists. The facilities were never built. But in 1961, Mound Park was integrated in 1961 when Alsup admitted phlebitis patient Altamease Chapman. Alsup consulted City Manager George K. Armes and city's legal staff before proceeding. "They told me that once you get the first black over there and open it up, it won't be any problem," Alsup recalled years later.<sup>209</sup>

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<sup>209</sup> "500 Dissatisfied Persons Vote For Hospital Boycott," *St. Petersburg Times*, June 21, 1960, 7D; Patsy V. Pressley and Laurie Mayers, *St. Petersburg Evening Independent*, February 28, 1985, 16A.

St. Petersburg and Pinellas County liked to tout its new high-tech industry. General Electric, Minneapolis-Honeywell, ECI, and Sperry Rand all listed themselves as equal opportunity employers. Some had hired African Americans in technical and clerical positions usually held by white people in the South. An industry spokesman seemed to fall back on the oft-stated “lack” of qualified blacks when a newspaper reporter asked about hiring policies. The spokesman blamed both the lack of educational facilities and the technical industry itself for not turning out more black people ready to be engineers and scientists.<sup>210</sup>

For the most part, schools remained segregated. St. Petersburg Junior College, Tomlinson Vocational School, and two parochial schools had some black students by the early 1960s, but public schools had none in grades kindergarten through twelfth grade. In 1959, eleven black students were denied admission to Dixie Hollins, the new comprehensive high school. Principal H. Bentley Lawson said the eleven did not meet entrance requirements. By 1962, Pinellas remained the only large county in Florida in which blacks had not filed suit to desegregate public schools. School officials interpreted the legal inactivity as a sign of blacks’ “confidence” in the system.<sup>211</sup>

On the political front, no African Americans served in elected office. In 1960, Bette Wimbish, wife of the activist physician, sought the 1960 Democratic nomination for the Pinellas County School Board. She lost the primary by a wide margin, but managed to get about 10,000 countywide votes in a county with only 3,798 black voters. She received votes in all of 114 precincts and carried five, one of them all white. In 1963, Isaiah W. Williams ran for the St. Petersburg City Council, also losing by a wide margin,

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<sup>210</sup> Gardner, “Desegregation,” *Times*, February 11, 1962, 1B.

<sup>211</sup> Gardner, “Desegregation Locally Advancing By Degrees,” *St. Petersburg Times*, February 15, 1962, 1B; Gardner, “11 Negroes Denied Transfer To New Dixie Hollins High,” *Times*, September 10, 1959, 1B.

but getting 38.2 percent of the vote. Running citywide – there were no council single-member districts – he lost to Daisy Edwards, a veteran council member and a rare woman on that board. Williams’ respectable showing prompted the evening newspaper to remark that it “was a victory in itself and a sign our Negro citizens must be considered active partners in all city affairs.”<sup>212</sup>

Mayor Herman Goldner, meanwhile, in 1962 claimed the city was trying to remove, as rapidly as possible, all references to segregation in city ordinances, in addition to getting rid racially referenced signs over water fountains and rest rooms in public buildings. The legal and technical aspects of segregation were one thing, the mayor said, while what he called the “sociological” aspect was another. “In this second area, I think it is impossible for the city government to move any faster than the community as a whole.”<sup>213</sup>

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<sup>212</sup> Robert Henderson, “23 Candidates In City Races Turn Out For First Meeting,” *Times*, February 12, 1963, 3B; *St. Petersburg Evening Independent*, “Election’s Over, Now Let’s Get On,” March 20, 1963, 8A.

<sup>213</sup> Gardner, “St. Petersburg Negroes Plan To Continue Their Struggle,” *Times*, February 16, 1962, 1B.

## **Conclusions**

During the eighteen years immediately following World War II, St. Petersburg's dreams were bigger than what it was able to realize. Through publicity, the city grew in population; thousands of new tract houses filled undeveloped land to the city limits in all directions. New shopping areas emerged and new industry in the city or near it provided new economic bases. Completion of new transportation links opened St. Petersburg and helped it move beyond the shadow of Tampa, its larger neighbor. In many ways, the city could take pride in its development as a lively, post-World II city. But it still fell short in quality of life.

St. Petersburg's expanding population represented a microcosm of Florida's explosive, largely unplanned postwar growth. Tract housing and commercial centers replaced virtually all of the city's remaining woodlands, pastures, and ponds. The relative rapidity of the changes and the uses of the land testify to the power of business dynamics, including relentless marketing and subsequent growth-driven public demand. Perfunctory planning was the order of the day. The construction of Boca Ciega High School on poorly drained land, for example, resulted in flooded grounds when the school opened. But most symbolic is the building of the Central Plaza shopping district and the destruction of Goose Pond in what became the city's geographic center. It is likely that the commercial and leisure enterprises established there through the years pleased more people than a marsh would have done, especially one that sometimes flooded and sometimes caught fire. Nonetheless, development might have progressed with debate as to the possible

value of the muck land in its raw, productive state. Consideration could have been given, for example, to Goose Pond's worth as a drainage basin, its merit as an aquifer recharge element, or its potential to be developed as a "central" public park in the mold of New York City's acclaimed Manhattan green space. Perhaps vigorous discussion in the early 1950s could have produced worthwhile philosophy on building and its consequences for the rest of the century in a Sun Belt city. As it is, the Goose Pond and its farmers have left no legacy.

A series of transportation improvements opened a wider world for St. Petersburg and helped the city leap into the postwar mainstream. Tampa International and Pinellas International airports came to be considered travel hubs, but well before the aviation amenities were dramatically developed, the Sunshine Skyway linkage to south Florida was established and U.S. 19 (the Gulf Coast Highway) with its connections to the North was completed through St. Petersburg. Those events took place despite sporadic opposition from some business interests in Hillsborough County and Tampa, which feared competition from its neighbor across Tampa Bay. That St. Petersburg was able to persuade or overcome the opposition provided another measure of the city's growing maturity and influence, representing the most dramatic independent step away from its larger neighbor since Pinellas County broke off from Hillsborough in 1912. Further transportation enhancements included the 1960 opening of Howard Frankland Bridge, providing a third span between Tampa and St. Petersburg in anticipation of the coming of the interstate highway system, and the 1962 opening of the Pinellas Bayway, which offered another route to the Gulf of Mexico beach communities and one to Mullet Key and its historic Fort De Soto. The Mullet Key linkage opened a Gulf-front key to

recreation, created another tourist attraction, and literally paved the way for future real estate development. Meanwhile, the city began deemphasizing its railroad dependence by moving the Seaboard and Atlantic Coast Line depots and their tracks out of the downtown area, seen necessary as a step toward downtown improvement. The trolley also was discontinued.

Overall, the downtown, subject of much concern about its future, made little progress. The Maas Brothers Department Store and the State Theater were the only major, new elements added to a central business district that faced increasingly stiff competition from businesses in outlying neighborhoods, most particularly the successful Central Plaza shopping center. A series of plans to reshape downtown were discussed and shelved, including the Victor Gruen plan and several less visionary proposals produced by city planners. A long-planned auditorium had not materialized, but was still under discussion. So was the possible coming of a new federal building. Remaining to be built were a new police station and a library. One of the proposed sites for the auditorium, the Spa Pool, site of St. Petersburg's first desegregation confrontation, burned the same day the Atlantic Coast Railroad left downtown. Razing of the Spa had been planned anyway, and the facility was not rebuilt. If updated, downtown still had a chance to make a comeback, or at least forestall a decline. At the beginning of the decade it had six banks; by 1960 five still remained. There were six cafeterias compared to three in 1951; nine department stores compared to eight. It had nearly 100 clothing, shoe and hat shops of various sizes and more than 100 hotels, in each case roughly one-third more than existed downtown at the decade's start. About the same number of cafes and restaurants existed as in 1950, and there were a scant fewer bars, liquor stores, and dime/sundries stores. Its



number of car dealerships had declined from twelve to seven, but garages and service stations had increased from eleven to fourteen. Twelve appliance stores doubled the 1950 count, likely due to the advent of television. Enough patronage supported dozens of small beauty and barber shops, thirty-eight real estate offices, and seven music stores selling instruments and offering lessons. Clearly, downtown had a heartbeat – but nothing much fresh to hold the sustained interest of a growing, far-flung population, which in any case had more convenient shopping opportunities and diversions that included television. It needed new excitement, but while the rest of St. Petersburg changed greatly during the decade of the 1950s, the downtown did not.<sup>214</sup>

Development of infrastructure did not always keep pace with the city's 87 percent growth rate during the decade of the 1950s. City government undertook a massive sanitary sewer pipe-laying project in 1962. But in 1963 less than 75 per cent of the city's drainage needs had been met and many streets remained to be paved and lighted. Substandard housing remained to be addressed, particularly in African American neighborhoods near downtown.<sup>215</sup>

The *St. Petersburg Times* helped the city to market itself, and as evidenced by its numerous citations in this work, represented a formidable force during every stage of St. Petersburg's development. Once a strong presence, the *Evening Independent* had originated the world-recognized "Sunshine Offer" of giving away a free paper when the sun failed to shine in St. Petersburg. It helped lead the fight for the city's first public

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<sup>214</sup> William Brown, "Spa Area Hit By Fire," *St. Petersburg Times*, June 3, 1963, 1B "Spa Work Bids Sought," ; *Times*, June 4, 1963, 9B; Comparison of existing businesses was accomplished by making counts in Polk City Directories of 1951 and 1960.

<sup>215</sup> "Election's Over, Let's Get On," *St. Petersburg Evening Independent*, March 20, 1963, 8A; "St. Petersburg Water Resources," website, <http://www.stpete.org/water/pdf/allaboutwater5.pdf>, accessed October 14, 2009.

housing project, Jordan Park. Through the years, *Independent* Lew B. Brown battled the times on such issues as the building of the Million-Dollar Pier and the proposals put forward by city planner John Nolen. But the afternoon newspaper took less of an influential role during the 1950s. Its circulation declined and in 1962, *Times* owner Nelson Poynter purchased his afternoon competitor, a move that foreshadowed changes in the city's media culture that would not wholly develop for nearly a generation more. The absorption of the *Independent* ended the possibility of competing media voice offering differing visions for St. Petersburg, and in a sense, the consolidation reflected the mood of residents. The mild 1950s produced no extended, vitriolic debate, even over the volatile issue of desegregation. "Everyone was too busy trying to make a living" to argue, said C. Randolph Wedding. City elections, with some exceptions that seemed to be based as much on personality as on issues, generally were notable for their civility. Putting fluoride in city water generated one of the hottest controversies of the 1950s in St. Petersburg (as it did elsewhere). But it was not until the early 1960s the first strong sense emerged competing visions of the city's future did indeed exist. The issue: What should St. Petersburg become, assuming its image as a senior citizens center could be watered down, as boosters desired. Some civic leaders wanted to discourage retirees altogether in favor of tourists with money; some wanted a minimum housing size; others vowed to fight city "controls."<sup>216</sup>

Despite its success as a popular place in the sun, St. Petersburg did not grow comfortable with itself during the immediate postwar years. Some of its uncertainty

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<sup>216</sup> "The Policy Of The Independent," *St. Petersburg Evening Independent*, July 2, 1962, 6A; "St. Petersburg Times To Buy Independent," *Ocala Star-Banner*, June 29, 1961, 1; Geoffrey Drummond, "Fluoridation Voted," *St. Petersburg Times*, July 8, 1959, 1B; Tom Twitty, "Green Bench Image Is Dead; What Next?," *Evening Independent*, April 1, 1962, 1B; Wedding interview.

stemmed from seeing itself as inferior to Tampa, a city also growing with bustle, business, industry, a new state university, and an airport considered a major facility – all amenities St. Petersburg wanted. The rivalry went back years and drained St. Petersburg’s sense of itself as a growing young city worthy of respect on its own considerable merits. Like much of Florida, many St. Petersburg residents came from elsewhere. They had no emotional ties based on family roots in the city or participation in its trials, successes, and disappointments. They saw St. Petersburg as a warm and pleasant spot in which to retire or raise a family where there were no months of dreary winter to bring snow and ice storms. Symbolizing the city’s sense of place was the prideful 1958 newspaper coverage of the *Today* show’s broadcast nationwide from neighboring beach community Treasure Island. NBC’s Dave Garroway was host, and the tone of coverage suggested that reporters swooned whenever Garroway uttered a complimentary phrase. Said the *Times*: “He doffed his Ivy League cap to the city in a friendly plug worth millions, while gently working his way through a three-hour . . . program from the Isle of Capri off Treasure Island.” Even a fresh breeze seemed not to matter. “I’m being kissed by the Florida sun,” the newspaper quoted Garroway as saying. An unstated irony was that the sun-kissed Isle of Capri had been dredged from the bay a few years earlier.<sup>217</sup>

As much as seeing it as sunny and warm, the rest of the nation often tended to view St. Petersburg as old and gray, and that galled the city’s leaders. They wanted a more youthful reputation and in an effort second only to the perennial promotional campaigns to make St. Petersburg seem a modern Eden, they tried to make people believe

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<sup>217</sup> There are numerous media references to the civic rivalry between St. Petersburg and Tampa. For example, see “Mayor Welcomes Tampa Commuters to St. Petersburg,” *St. Petersburg Evening Independent*, April 28, 1944, 9; “Planning On A Larger Scope,” *Times*, September 14, 1961, 14A.

that paradise was a place for the young. St. Petersburg was a city born of ballyhoo and its leaders thought the city's image could be changed at will. They were wrong, of course. St. Petersburg's reputation as a place for the elderly persisted long after deliberate measures tried to change that image, and some of what was said was true. St. Petersburg indeed was a place where retirees sought a gentle, carefree, and secure life – but reality did not always meet their expectations.

One estimate claimed that some 64,000 residents drew Social Security in St. Petersburg in 1960. While that seems high, it was certainly true that many residents 65 and over lived month to month on the "OAB" checks – Old Age Benefits. Those with other retirement resources often managed a good life. Those without often struggled. They sometimes shared boarding house rooms with two or three others. The demand for health care was such that Bay Pines Veterans Hospital was said to have a waiting list of 700. Dr. Howard Carter was the Pinellas County health officer in the Division of Gerontology and Research, which conducted a five-year survey of the needs of senior citizens. "Where we are falling down is that older people with limited means have difficulty finding the proper housing, proper food, proper care here. They have virtually nothing except the boarding home where someone might try to care for them out of kindness," Carter said. In a twist of irony, state and local leaders who once expended effort and money to attract retirees now tried to discourage them from coming to St. Petersburg (and other parts of Florida) unless they had at least \$250 in monthly fixed income. They warned that just 1 percent of people 65 years old or over had a job to

relieve boredom or supplement income, and they also pointed out that the law required a five-year residency before public assistance could be made available.<sup>218</sup>

Instead of trying to prove a negative – that St. Petersburg was *not* just a place for old people – boosters might have spent more energy encouraging and publicizing the youth culture. They certainly had the bases on which to brag – new schools, a burgeoning population of 18 and under people, and a record of youthful achievement that included All-America athletes, title-winning teams, accomplished musicians, a Wimbledon queen, and a movie actress well on her way to star status. The city certainly seemed to offer a platform for success and it had the mentoring needed to give young white people a start on their dreams. There were other signs of active pursuits and youthful vigor. The Southern Ocean Racing Conference, whose local center was the St. Petersburg Yacht Club, visited St. Petersburg yearly for widely publicized sailboat races. For four years, St. Petersburg played host to the national small-college football championship. The Holiday Bowl took place from 1957 through 1960, played either at Al Lang baseball field, which was reconfigured to accommodate football, or on St. Petersburg High School’s football field. In 1960, officials of the small-college governing body, the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics, dumped St. Petersburg for two reasons: It had not built the promised new stadium and it still maintained segregated housing for players. The loss served as a reminder that St. Petersburg had a way to go in meeting all its infrastructural improvement goals, but even more importantly, that it was falling short in providing opportunity for all, regardless of race.<sup>219</sup>

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<sup>218</sup> Gertrude Samuels, “Inquiry Into the Sunset Years,” *New York Times*, magazine section, March 20, 1960, 30.

<sup>219</sup> “N.Y.Y.C Boat First On Handicap Basis; Solution Gains S.O.R.C. Title,” *New York Times*, March 9, 1960, 43; “City Loses Holiday Bowl,” *St. Petersburg Evening Independent*, March 16, 1961, 1A.

Though it moved slowly toward desegregation, St. Petersburg managed to progress without violence. Moderate leadership spread among individuals and organizations did not make strident demands or insist upon enforcement of old mores. The White Citizens Councils and Ku Klux Klan klaverns, so prevalent in other parts of the South, had no influence in St. Petersburg. The Chamber of Commerce at last began to encourage publicly the concept of equal opportunity, and biracial human rights organizations had formed. Nonetheless, St. Petersburg had far to go. By 1963, its schools, both public and private, had not been substantially integrated, although a small start had been made. Though African Americans were beginning to move into previously all-white neighborhoods, housing patterns remained largely segregated and realtors still “steered” customers toward segregated neighborhoods.<sup>220</sup>

Equality of opportunity for, and wide social acceptance of African Americans remained ideals yet to be given substance. The question of the city’s self-identity had not been solved nor had the riddle of the downtown’s future. At least the railroad and trolley tracks were gone from the old city center. Like Goose Pond to the west, they were relics amounting to little more than a quickly vanishing memory of the city’s bucolic past. St. Petersburg could look back on its old days with a qualified satisfaction even as it faced the rest of the twentieth century with work undone. While the city had expanded physically, opened to the wider world, and progressed in its race relations, its character had yet to be fully shaped. That process would continue during the decade, which would prove to be the most tumultuous in the city’s history.

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<sup>220</sup> Sue Landry and David K. Rogers, *St. Petersburg Times*, “A Long Road of Rage,” *St. Petersburg Times*, September 14, 1996, 1A; Bill Heltzel, “Steering: Has It Affected You?” *Evening Independent*, February 24, 1979, 1A.

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