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“The Shifting Sands of Time: A Walk through the History of Clearwater Beach and Nearby Island Communities”

Remarks by

Mr. Jim Schnur

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Special Collections Librarian, University of South Florida St. Petersburg
Monday, January 28, 7:30 p.m., Chapel-by-the-Sea, Clearwater Beach

OPENING SLIDE Good evening. Thank you for inviting me to the Chapel-by-the-Sea. This evening’s talk focuses on a beautiful shoreline, one that just won *USA Today*’s contest as the “best beach town” in Florida. And, through the advent of social media, a winner that carried a hefty number of votes, I might add. Of course, competition is tough, with St. Pete Beach having won high regards by the TripAdvisor website last year, and Dr. Stephen Leatherman of Florida International University in Miami, a.k.a. “Dr. Beach,” also giving high regards to other nearby shorelines, including Caladesi Island State Park in 2008 and Fort DeSoto Park’s North Beach in 2005.

BAHIA MAP As we look at the history of Clearwater Beach, Sand Key, and this area, we must remember that the history of human settlement spans more than one thousand years. Although high tides have washed away traces of footprints before the twentieth century, we will bring some of them back to life this evening. **INDIAN MOUND**

[Overview of shaping of Florida peninsula since last ice age and Pre-Columbian settlements]

JUNGLE PRADA In April 2013, we commemorate the 500th anniversary of Juan Ponce de Leon’s arrival as the first documented European in *La Florida*, we should remember that while so many view Florida as a place with little or no history before a ‘mouse’ arrived in the Orlando area a little more than forty years ago, our history is one that spans centuries. The first notable expedition to come to the Tampa Bay area and the Pinellas peninsula was the ***Pánfilo de Narváez*** expedition that reached a site they called *Rio de las Palmas* (River of the Palms) at or near Jungle Prada in present-day St. Petersburg in April 1528. Hearing about rumors of gold northward in the interior of *La Florida* at a place known as *Ocali*, Narváez remembered the success of the Hernán Cortés expedition into the Aztec Empire in February 1519 that led to the discovery of gold and the downfall of Montezuma. By some accounts, Narváez and his expedition did sail up Boca Ciega Bay and stop somewhere along the area of Clearwater or our beaches in north county. The expedition fell apart by mid-1528, and gold was never found.

MOHR ON JOHNS PASS But the golden sands of Clearwater Beach beckoned again, as during the first Spanish period, a chapter of Florida’s colonial history that spanned 250 years between 1513 and 1763, itinerant fishing “rancheros” appeared along the coastline. These rancheros, some of which continued to reappear even after Florida became a territory of the United States in 1821, were places where Cubans,

Spaniards, occasionally runaway slaves, and others sustained themselves by enjoying the bountiful harvests of fish and seafood available to them.

1839 MAP Between 1817 and 1858, Florida experienced three wars in which American authorities attempted to remove the Seminole Indians and their allies, including runaway slaves, from Florida. The longest of the three, the Second Seminole War, began in 1835 and continued until 1842. During this time, much of Florida's west coast, including the Tampa Bay area, was unsettled. **FORT BROOKE** Only a few forts, such as Fort Brooke, an outpost near Channelside that the city of Tampa grew around, were in existence.

On April 2, 1841, **Fort Harrison** began operations along **Clearwater Harbor** in the present-day **Harbor Oaks** area as a place for troops wounded or suffering illness during the Second Seminole War to recuperate. It was named in honor of President **William Henry Harrison**. Similar to Harrison's short tenure as President before his death from a cold (4 March-4 April 1841), Fort Harrison served as an outpost for only a brief period. Troops abandoned this outpost by late October 1841.

1842 MAP As the war came to an end in 1842, Congress wanted to find a way to encourage whites to settle in central and lower Florida and act as a buffer between the remaining Seminoles to the south and the growing plantation culture to the north. Thus, they passed the Armed Occupation Act, a measure that provided up to 160 acres (four high school campuses) of land to certain applicants who agreed to live on site for five years, cultivate a minimum of five acres, and bear arms to "handle" any Indians or runaway slaves. This act was so successful that it became the model for the Homestead Act of 1862 that opened the Upper Midwest to settlement. **1856 MAP**

On December 28, 1842, **James Stevens**, an 1805 native of Georgia who arrived in Florida in 1839, and the man known as "**The Father of Clearwater**" received permit #28 for lands claimed at Clear Water Harbor on September 5 that included acreage between Drew Street and Jeffords Street west of Fort Harrison Avenue. He, like others who received permits, including the seven McMullen brothers, generally stayed away from the coastline because along with the gold sands and blue water were dark clouds of mosquitoes.

Sometime during or around December 1851, **David B. Turner** and **Mary Campbell Turner** settled at Indian Rocks before later moving to the site of present-day Clearwater. Their son, **Arthur Campbell Turner**, played an important role in the development of the Clearwater as a merchant. During that decade, more boats began to appear along the remote and isolated harbor, and regular mail service arrived at Clearwater by late 1850s, probably 1859, the year a post office was formally established.

CIVIL WAR MAP Although the Civil War affected Florida, largely through the Union blockade of this Confederate state, much of the action occurred away from the Tampa Bay region. Federal forces maintained a presence down at Egmont Key, near the mouth of Tampa Bay, and occasional missions

along the coast looked for those who tried to bring in supplies from Cuba, but the area around Clearwater and its beaches avoided much of the conflict.

LOWE CIVIL WAR One obvious reason has to do with the population. According to the 1860 federal census, the Pinellas peninsula from Tarpon Springs to Pass-a-Grille had a population of 381 in a total of 82 families. And, as the war began, many of these families such as the Lowe and Meares families of Anona, saw their adult males engage in distant battles, further reducing the population.

The footprint of settlement along Clearwater's mainland began to take shape after the Civil War. In 1870, **Charles Wharton Johnson** arrived along the bluffs south of Clearwater after getting shipwrecked. He decided to stay in the area and brought his family. Soon, they moved into the Largo and played an important role in establishing "Citrus City." The site where Johnson landed became the lands where the Belleview Biltmore was built in the 1890s. In 1880, the **Orange Bluff Hotel** opened and became **the first hotel in Clearwater**. **M. C. Dwight** operated the structure. A fire destroyed the structure a few years later. Out on the beach, in 1883, **Prudence Shafer** established a fish ranch on 6.5 acres at the south end of the island where Clearwater Beach is today. By most accounts, he was the **first formal landowner on the island**.

1886 MAP A year later, in 1884, **Harvey K. Hendrick**, filed a claim for land on the island side, Sand Key, and homesteaded on a mile-and-a-half parcel. He built a home by 1891 and two children, Ida and Edward, were the **first white children known to be born on Sand Key** between Indian Shores and Clearwater Pass. **HORSE AND BUGGY** By the 1890s, Hendrick had sold half of his homestead to **L. W. Hamlin**. Hendrick offered occasional ferry service to those wishing to visit the island, though the Hendrick and Hamlin families kept much of this section of Sand Key to themselves before 1900.

HOG ISLAND The year 1888 brought increased activity to what was then known as "Western Hillsborough": **Henry Scharrer**, a native of Switzerland, arrived on Caladesi (Hog) Island after setting sail from Tampa and encountering a storm while approaching Dunedin Pass. After exploring the island, he returned to Tampa and began the process of gaining title to the island. He began the process of gaining citizenship with plans to acquire the island under the Homestead Act. In 1894, he married **Catherine McNally**. They welcomed a daughter, **Myrtle Scharrer (Betz)** in 1895. Myrtle's memories capture life growing up on Caladesi.

ORANGE BELT In June 1888, the final leg of the Orange Belt Railway reached its destination in a settlement that became St. Petersburg. Although much of the local history focuses on the development of St. Petersburg after Peter Demens brought the railroad to what became the "Sunshine City," we must remember that the railroad also transformed Clearwater and other areas of Pinellas and opened the area for citrus cultivation. **CLEARWATER DEPOT**

EARLY POSTAL CARRIER By the early 1890s, the small settlement of **Clear Water Harbor (three words) was incorporated**. **James E. Crane** served as the **first mayor**. By the early 1890s, the two streets, both made from a layer of shells from nearby Indian mounds along the bluffs, were Cleveland Street, which

ran from the harbor area to the Orange Belt Railway depot, and Fort Harrison Avenue. The city's name changed two times. **CLEVELAND STREET 1895** On January 19, 1895, *Clear Water Harbor* became *Clearwater Harbor (two words)*, and on February 28, 1906, the city became *Clearwater*.

By the 1890s, more than 200 residents lived in Clearwater, nearly all of them on the mainland near the bluffs. The most notable development south of Clearwater during that decade happened in 1897 when **Bellevue Biltmore Hotel** *officially opened*. Construction began in 1895. This hotel became the site for *one of the earliest Tampa-St. Petersburg regional rivalries*.

With his opulent **Tampa Bay Hotel** (now the University of Tampa) adorning the western side of the Hillsborough River, **Henry Plant** wanted to build another hotel at the end of the *Orange Belt Railway*. Plant had taken control of the Orange Belt after Demens was unable to make payments on loans. After St. Petersburg residents scoffed at his plans, he acquired the Johnson lands once held by Charles Wharton Johnson and built the *Hotel Bellevue*. Plant died in June 1899, but his family remained a presence in the Clearwater area. You may have heard of Henry's son, Morton F. Plant. In 1914, Morton set aside an endowment of \$100,000 to establish *a hospital for Clearwater* when the community contributed at least \$20,000 to this endeavor. The *Morton Plant Hospital* opened in 1915 with twenty-one beds.

In 1900, **John N. McClung** erected the *first ice factory in Clearwater*. This later became the foundation of the municipal water system for the small community. Ice factories played an important role in shipping seafood, as well as in allowing local residents to preserve their foods. By this time, the **first public dock in Clearwater**, constructed by the Clearwater Pier Company, opened at the foot of Cleveland Street along the intracoastal waterway. A pavilion soon followed. The *Ladies Improvement Society*, founded a year earlier, counted among its early projects a plan to construct public dressing rooms along the dock. **SUTHERLAND and SOUTHERN COLLEGE (3 IMAGES)**

That same year, a school with primary, secondary, and college courses came to the Palm Harbor area that had an important chapter along Clearwater Beach. Started under the auspices of the Florida Methodist Conference in 1883 as the Wesleyan Institute, this school moved from a village named Orlando to Leesburg in 1886, before arriving in Palm Harbor, then known as *Sutherland* in 1902 as the *Florida Seminary*. The school's name changed to *Southern College* in 1906. More on Southern College in a moment. **AERIAL VIEW**

Around this time, a Clearwater resident named **Colonel Tate** bought the south half of the island of Clearwater Beach for \$200. After building a small cottage for his son and daughter-in-law, **Ernest and Leola Rogers Tate**, some people from the area called Clearwater Beach's south end *Tate Island*. The north end of Clearwater Beach was acquired by **L. H. Malone and C. B. Bouton**, residents of Dunedin, in 1904. Malone and Bouton paid \$175. They built a pier on the bay side and bath houses, allowing locals to use the beach for recreational purposes. Few others lived on the island at that time. **INDIAN ROCKS FERRY**

BEFORE FIRE On the mainland, in June 1910, a terrible *fire destroyed much of Clearwater's business district* along the north side of Cleveland Street between Fort Harrison and Osceola avenues. **AFTER THE FIRE** The fire started at about 4:00 a.m. The wooden buildings quickly burnt to the ground. After this disaster, merchants rebuilt using bricks and blocks to prevent a similar tragedy.

Another construction project began in the spring of 1912 after Pinellas County was established and we successfully gained independence from Tampa and Hillsborough County: The newly formed Board of County Commissioners, voting three to two, awarded a \$3,750 contract to *construct a wood frame, two-story COURTHOUSE on a lot given by the City of Clearwater*. Constructed with volunteer labor, the structure was guarded by day and by torchlight at night by armed guards since some rumors circulated that a contingent from St. Petersburg planned to come to the site and burn the structure before its completion. The old Pinellas versus Hillsborough rivalries, with Tampa Bay being the barrier, would soon be replaced by a struggle between Clearwater and St. Petersburg over the seat of government. Clearwater prevailed.

Back to the beach: In 1916, the Clearwater Island Bridge Company built the **FIRST BRIDGE** *between Clearwater and Clearwater Beach*. A wooden structure with a toll booth on the east end, this early causeway connected the mainland to the beach at Seminole Street, north of the causeway built in 1926 and opened in 1927. That same year, on October 23, Clearwater became *one of the first places to permit women to vote in elections* when residents approved the \$10,000 bond issue for the construction of this bridge across Clearwater Bay. *Sue Barco* became the *first woman to submit her ballot* in this election

With the bridge built, in 1917 the **Clearwater Beach Hotel** was constructed on the largely uninhabited island. As more visitors came to the island for leisure, another group came out of necessity. On January 29, 1921, a **fire at the Florida Seminary** in Sutherland destroyed buildings at the school. The fire rapidly spread from building to building. Although fire brigades from Clearwater and Tarpon Springs rushed to the area, they could do little to save the structures because of a lack of running water. With the campus in ruins, school leaders received a pledge from E. T. Roux that the seminary could use his hotel along Clearwater Beach, the **Clearwater Beach Hotel**, as a meeting place for awhile. **BEACH PAVILION** Classrooms and barracks for the students sat alongside the hotel. Classes resumed along the beachfront for students at this provisional campus on February 8, 1922. Later, the campus moved to Lakeland and became *Florida Southern College*. **ANOTHER VIEW OF HOTEL**

ROOSEVELT BLVD The land boom of the 1920s reshaped the Tampa Bay area. Davis Island was dredged along the shores west of downtown Tampa. **LAND BOOM ST PETE** Numerous developments in St. Petersburg, such as Snell Isle along Coffee Pot Bayou, took shape. Clearwater's profile was reshaped by the construction of the **Fort Harrison Hotel** and other structures. Compared with Pass-a-Grille, however, the land boom missed much of the Clearwater Beach area until the mid-1920s. The original bridge could not handle the traffic, and the endless swarms of mosquitoes inhibited development.

That changed in March 1925, when work began on dredge and fill operations for the construction of the **Clearwater Causeway** between the mainland and Clearwater Beach. The Tampa Sand and Shell Company won the contract for this project. Boosters from the Lloyd, White and Skinner Development Company expressed their enthusiasm as plans for the "million-dollar" free causeway came together. Some began to call the beach areas under development "the Newport of Florida."

By the late 1920s, the **Joyland Pavilion** on Clearwater Beach became a popular gathering place for social events. Known by 1931 as "The Coolest Dance Pavilion in Florida," Joyland included a gathering place known as **Silver Dome Hall**, with its waterslide atop the dome and a pool below that attracted tourists and locals alike. Despite the economic downturn of the 1930s, Joyland continued to attract gatherings of "Tin Can Tourists" during the 1930s. **JULY 4 CROWD** A "pajama parade" attracted large crowds on July 4, 1931. In January 1936, for example, more than 2,000 members of the American Tourists' Association came to Clearwater for their second annual convention, a seven-day gathering of homes on wheels at a "Trailer City" erected on the Joyland site. **WOMEN ON BEACH 1920s AND 1931 BEAUTY PARADE**

2 FRUIT IMAGES Although the Great Depression hit the local economy hard, at least there was citrus to eat in the winter! Further development came to Clearwater Beach in 1934, when a cabana club founded by **T. R. Palmer** and **G. A. Hobart** at Clearwater Beach became **Carlouel Yacht Club**. **Paul Randolph**, owner of Randolph Farms in the Anona area, and a developer who first settled in Clearwater in 1919, played an important role by assisting the club members by selecting the property along the northern part of the island. The club's name came from the first names of the wives of Palmer, Hobart, and Randolph: **Caroline Hobart**, **Louise Palmer**, and **Eleanor Randolph**. In 1947, Palmer sold the club to one-hundred original members/families, with each paying \$1,000 to gain interest in the newly created Carlouel Corporation. The Carlouel operated only seasonally until it began year-round activities in 1954. In later years, the club held an annual talent event to spoof Tampa's Gasparilla that they called "Sasparilla."

By the 1930s, the paved Clearwater Causeway brought more folks to the beach, and the opening of the **Ben T. Davis Causeway** (later renamed **Courtney Campbell Causeway**) in 1934 certainly helped. Captain Ben T. Davis and his company operating Davis Causeway charged a toll of fifty cents per round trip in the 1930s. Similar to the Gandy Bridge, also started as a private toll road, tolls were lifted on the causeway in 1944 under the War Powers Act of 1941 when the federal government acquired the bridges so that those in the military did not have to pay tolls to cross the bay. **1935 IMAGE**

Distant war clouds also brought more life to the beach. During the mid-1930s, **Donald Roebing** had experimented with a number of amphibious prototypes, but none of them proved sufficient for operation on land and water with the results he desired. In 1940, decided to try yet another time to craft an **Alligator** vehicle. He tested his newer model in the area around **St. Joseph Sound** and **Clearwater Bay**. Officials from the United States Navy visited with Roebing and during the Second World War, an important industry along the beaches of Clearwater and Dunedin involved the production and testing of these Alligators.

PRAM RACING Other fleet took command of the waters in 1948, when **Ernest Green** of the Clearwater Optimist Club thought about the possibility of starting “a soap box derby on water.” Green mentioned this to fellow Optimist member and Dunedinite **Clark Mills**, a boat builder who saw great potential in this idea. Three days later, Mills had constructed and launched **the Pram**, a boat that could be constructed for between \$40-70 at that time. Soon, the Clearwater Optimists and the **Dunedin Chamber of Commerce** both had Pram fleets. The first Pram Regatta sponsored by the Optimists took place in 1948.

BEACH 1949 (2 images) As Clearwater Beach attracted more residents, the beauty of the coastline remained off-limits for some locals. Under the laws of segregation then in effect, many public spaces had assigned places based upon race. We have all heard of the separate water fountains and accommodations, but even the fabled **“Green Beaches”** of St. Petersburg remained off-limited to African Americans. Nearly all of the beaches in Pinellas County, including Clearwater Beach and Sand Key, were for white bathers only.

A rare occurrence actually took place in the summer of 1947, after an especially nasty bout of **red tide** hit the coast from Pass-a-Grille to Clearwater Beach, frustrating residents, proprietors, and others along the beaches. As the piles of dead fish continued to grow, officials decided to summon so-called "Negro workers" to collect the dead marine life and haul it away. African Americans gathered along this stretch of beach to collect fish, but had they visited a month earlier to walk along the sands, they would have faced arrest.

BELLEAIR BEACH 1920s On the other side of Sand Key, new communities took shape during the 1950s. On March 16, 1950, **the municipality of Belleair Beach was incorporated**. A couple of months later, on May 25, 1950, the original **Belleair Causeway opened to traffic**, connecting the mainland with the early settlements along Belleair Beach. Bridge construction had started in the early spring of 1949. This bridge was replaced with the current span in the spring of 2009.

BEACH 1954 In September 1954, the same month that the original **Sunshine Skyway** opened for traffic, Barnett and Lucille Harris opened **Sea-Orama** on Clearwater Beach with its "waterless" aquarium that displayed replicas of sea life. The attraction brought more tourists in the area before it closed in 1968. The Clearwater Marine Aquarium has taken the tourist experience to the next level since then.

BEACH 1958 In 1955, the municipality of **Belleair Shore** was established along a narrow strip of Sand Key, north of the **Belleair Causeway** and west of Gulf Boulevard. Senator **J. Frank Houghton** sponsored the measure, introducing the bill in the legislature. The original name of this settlement, **Gulf Belleair**, was changed to Belleair Shore a few months after its establishment. With sixty-seven lots and no roads, the residential municipality relied on neighboring communities and the county for all services. **CABANAS**

ON CLWR BEACH, DRIVING TO THE BEACH, COMING BACK FROM THE BEACH

An important chapter in the history of Clearwater Beach and Sand Key happened just over fifty years ago. On December 16, 1962, the **Clearwater Pass Bridge** opened, connecting Clearwater Beach with the

northern tip of Sand Key. The opening of the toll drawbridge promoted the development of areas between Belleair Beach and Clearwater Beach as homes, hotels, and later condominiums appeared along an area that was formerly used as a bombing range during World War II. The bridge became a popular route to the northern Gulf Beaches, with the one-millionth vehicle crossing the span on November 10, 1964, less than two years after it opened.

2 BY POOL As the beach population grew, communities took shape. **BEACH 1965** As part of the incorporated limits of Clearwater, Clearwater Beach assumed an identity as a signature community of the city. Other beach municipalities sometimes looked to the mainland with a sense of consternation, however. For example, on January 30, 1964, Mayor **R. Samuel Rileigh** of Belleair Shore, the smallest municipality in the county, told members of the Clearwater League of Women Voters at a luncheon that he believed the Gulf Beaches communities should be permitted to secede from mainland Pinellas and create a separate county. By the 1970s, as more residents moved to beach communities and real estate values continued to increase, an ongoing debate over beach access continued. **COLOR IMAGE OF THE CSWY**

Developments reached new heights during the 1970s and 1980s, as condominiums became more prevalent along both sides of Sand Key. **2 IMAGES WITH AERIALS** The beach continued to grow in popularity, as show in this **1981 IMAGE of Pier 60**.

While there is certainly much more that we could cover, let's stop here so that I have time for questions. **PELICAN ON BEACH** Clearwater Beach and Sand Key have a rich history, one worth investigating. Of course, we could talk a little more about St. Petersburg and the beaches it claims as its own, places such as Madeira Beach, Treasure Island, Pass-a-Grille, and the rest of St. Pete Beach. Some of you may remember that the place we call "St. Pete Beach" was once officially known as **St. Petersburg Beach**. In 1994, to clarify that St. Petersburg Beach was not part that larger neighbor on the mainland, the name of that community on the southern Gulf Beaches was officially renamed **St. Pete Beach**. Regardless of the name of the beach or the historical period visited, the islands of Sand Key are here to be enjoyed as a true asset of the Pinellas Suncoast. Thank you for allowing me to share this history. I do have time for questions. **CLOSING SLIDE**

Research for this presentation came from sources compiled by the presenter as part of an ongoing chronology of Pinellas County history. Please contact the author if you have specific questions.

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A native and lifelong resident of Pinellas County, Schnur discusses the settlement of Clearwater Beach, Sand Key, and nearby areas of the Clearwater mainland since the mid-1800s. Through vivid images and a rich narrative, he retraces the early years of a coastal community once known as Clear Water Harbor, illustrates how the arrival of the railroad and automobile brought dreamers and developers, and describes how the central Pinellas beaches transformed from unoccupied sandbars swarming with mosquitoes into dredged dreamscapes crowned with condos.

Schnur served as the Pinellas County Historical Society’s official historian of the Pinellas centennial of independence from Hillsborough County (1912-2012). Archivist and librarian at USF St. Petersburg, Schnur has taught college courses in Florida history since 1996. All author royalties from his newest book, *Historical Pinellas: A Centennial History*, benefit the Pinellas County Historical Society’s efforts at Heritage Village.