



WILTON MANORS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

HISTORICAL NOTES

AUGUST 2007

JAMES C. DEAN'S HISTORY OF WILTON MANORS

by James C. Dean

edited by Benjamin B. Little

Wilton Manors Historical Society

The following is a "History of Wilton Manors" written by James C. Dean. It seems to have been written sometime in the later 1980's for some sort of event honoring Marcia Stafford.

James C. Dean is a very interesting and complex player. He was, foremost, a salesman. He was certainly one of the important early "movers and shakers." He was probably more "shaker" than "mover," talking other people into spending their money. He had great stories about bringing a bank to Wilton Manors, but it seems someone else did. He is given credit for building the bridge at the east end of NE 26th Street, but this was probably mostly other people's money.

Dean titled this document as "History of Wilton Manors," but it is not. It is a history of James C. Dean in Wilton Manors. He gets some facts wrong. One of them may be a transcription error.

This document was kindly provided to the Wilton Manors Historical Society by Tracy and Nancy Stafford from their mother's papers.

Benjamin B. Little

History of Wilton Manors By James C. Dean

In June 1935 at the age of 23 I left Macon, GA for a two-week vacation in Miami Beach. I was lured here after seeing the beautiful and romantic movie "Moon Over Miami". I got sand in my shoes and decided to stay.

After my vacation money was depleted, I needed to find employment. Almost immediately I was hired as an insurance salesman for Gulf Life Insurance Company. On Thanksgiving Day 1935 I was transferred to the Broward County office to take over an existing debit. My assigned territory included the City of Fort Lauderdale and the area of Wilton Manors. At that time there were six two story homes in Wilton Manors built by the

developer E. J. Willingham of Macon, GA.¹ I had people insured in three of the homes one of which was a house of ill repute. Economically things were pretty tough. Instead of collecting monthly premiums it was necessary for me to collect the money weekly. So for the next five years I continued to work in this area.

In January 1941 I was promoted to Assistant Manager of the Miami district, which covered Broward, Dade and the Florida Keys. I served in this capacity until November 1942, when I enlisted in the Air Force and was sent to the South Pacific Theatre of Operations.

In 1945, I returned to Miami on Christmas Eve night. Three days later, December 27, I met my future wife LaWayne and shortly after we became engaged and were married on October 27, 1946.

After completion of my military service, I was rehired by Gulf Life and returned to Broward County as manager of the Fort Lauderdale Office.

The time had come to begin planning a home for my future family. I decided that Wilton Manors would be the ideal location to build our new home. So I purchased property in the 700 block on the North side of Wilton Drive and shortly thereafter I began construction of our dream home, which was completed just before Christmas in 1946, and we moved in immediately. Ten months later our first child was born on August 12, 1947, a beautiful, healthy daughter. Eight years later our fifth child was born on George Washington's birthday, February 22, 1955, a healthy robust little boy. "Enough is enough — no more," said my wife. I said, "Honey, can't we have just one more and make it an even half dozen?" Needless to say, we had only five children. They all attended Wilton Manors Elementary School, Sunrise Junior High, and Fort Lauderdale High School. By 1955 our family had grown from two people to eight people (my wife, me, my mother-in-law and five children) living in our first little dream home on Wilton Drive.

It was now time to build our real dream home, a much larger one. Several months before our fifth child was born Life Magazine had published a 20 page detailed description and pictures of a home called 'Life Magazine's Dream Home of 1954', built in California. I took a copy of Life Magazine to my architect to draw plans of a five bedroom, three and a half bath, three car garage to be built on 3 ½ riverfront lots located on the North fork of Middle River, 1825

¹ The Hiassin House on NE 21st Court is the only extant "Willingham" house that the Historical Society is aware of. There would also have been the Willingham Administration building at Five Points (now torn down). The third one, the house of ill-repute, was on NE 23rd Street and NE 3rd Avenue. Willingham's own house was still standing and was two stories. He did not build it, but did modify it. It did not conform to his stated structural requirements. The best indicator of what had been sold, if not built on by 1928 is Willingham, Junior's re-plat of Wilton Manors. There are a number of lots which seem to have been sold on NE 23rd Street between 5th and 6th Avenues. They are wood frame and would have been built after Willingham, Senior left in 1926.

Coral Gardens Drive. We lived there for 46 years.

In 1947 only 87 families lived in Wilton Manors and we decided to incorporate. We presented a petition to the Circuit Court Judge of Broward for a charter to create "The Village of Wilton Manors". The Boundaries of the Village of Wilton Manors at that time consisted of:

East Border was Old Dixie Highway

North Border was North Fork of Middle River ²

South Border was South Fork of Middle River ³

West Border was where the two rivers merged back together ⁴

In early 1951 I was getting a haircut at the Gateway Shopping Center when I overheard a conversation between two real estate agents. They were discussing a plat drawing of a piece of property that I recognized. I asked if I could look at the drawing. After seeing it I inquired if they would be willing to sell it to me. They said yes. The total price of the 75 acres located East of the Old Dixie Highway was \$75,000. They agreed on a \$25,000 down payment, with a \$10,000 deposit, the balance of \$15,000 due in 90 days.

I only had \$8,000 in my bank account but I wrote a check for \$10,000 and went straight to my banker, Chuck Pierce, President of the First National Bank of Fort Lauderdale. He tried to talk me out of investing all my money in this land deal. He said, "They're way overbuilding in Fort Lauderdale, you're going to lose your shirt. " The end result was, he loaned me the \$5,000 anyway.

I thought I knew at least 25 people who anyone of them could have easily invested the balance of the \$25,000 down payment. However, they were not willing to invest their money in a desolated area filled with dense palmettos and pine trees with no egress or outlet.

Finally, I went to my friend Dave Turner and talked him into investing \$10,000 towards the \$15,000 balance of the down payment. I convinced Dave Turner to put up the money by explaining that I had invested all of my money in this project and I had quit my job as a manager of the insurance office so I could devote all my time to this project. Dave told me he could invest the money but that he would not be able to spend any time on the project himself because of his business, turner Supply, and his role of the State Highway Board.

Dave suggested Bob Roberts⁵ as another person who might be able to complete the

² Prospect Road, now NE 26th Street

³ Except for the Richardson property, what is now Richardson Historic Park and Nature Preserve and Manor Grove, which was the rest of the Richardson Golf course.

⁴ Actually what is now NW 5th Avenue, from NW 26th Street south to the river.

down payment still needed. Bob agreed to invest the \$5,000 but he too would not be able to devote any time toward the development of the project. He was owner and manager of a furniture store on East Las Olas Boulevard. So it was up to me alone to develop the East side of Wilton Manors. For the next two years, 1951-52, I worked on the development of the entire project. It began with the planning of an extension of N. E. 26th St. from the Old Dixie Highway and a crossing of the Florida East Coast railroad tracks east to what is now known as N. E. 14th Ave. and the construction of N. E. 27th and 28th Streets from N. E. 14th Ave. to N. E. 16th Ave, 2 blocks long). I continued this method of developing a small section each time until the entire project was completed. I might add that I was not paid any additional money for the two years I spent developing this project, other than my pro-rata share of the profits made from the sale of the lots.⁶

With no funds available to begin construction it was necessary for me to find a civil engineer who would be willing to design the entire subdivision and wait for payment as I was able to sell lots. Also, I had to find a paving contractor who would build partial sections of the streets and wait 90 days after completion to receive his payment. He then would continue to complete sections, one at a time, in the subdivision until all sections were completed. Payment for each section after completion would be made as stated above.

I needed a sales office on the project so I had a builder build me a 10' X 10' shack on the corner of 14th Ave. and 27th Street. Sometimes it was necessary to stay after dark with a perspective client and my only means of light was a lantern. When it got dark the mosquitoes and sand gnats would eat you alive.

We gradually added streets and developed lots until the subdivision was completed. Next came the construction of 26th Street, East to Middle River.

I contacted the other property owners to see if they would donate their property along both sides of the N. E. 26th right-of-way. Every one agreed except the owners of the property where Barton & Miller Cleaners and Laundry is now located and the property owned by Jim Hunt and Steve Caulder (Coral Ridge property) located where 26th Street was to be built between Middle River and Federal Highway. We had to pay Jim Hunt \$7,000 to obtain this right-of-way. At this point, we now had all the right- of-way secured from Old Dixie Hwy. to Federal Hwy. (U. S. 1).

Now the time had come to finish the only outlet, east from Wilton Manors to Federal Hwy,

⁵ Roberts, Turner, and Dean went to the west coast in the mid-1950's to develop the \$10,000,000, 6,000 acre "Tampa Beach" project. One assumes the \$10,000,000 was heavily leveraged. The project failed. Interesting, also, is that it is omitted from this history.

⁶ Dean's name does not appear on the plats for these developments.

Coral Ridge and the Beaches by building a bridge across Middle River to connect these arteries. The estimated cost for building the bridge was estimated at approximately \$50,000. Again, I contacted the property owners bordering on N. E. 26th Street. Coral Ridge properties (Jim hunt and Stever [sic] Caulder) were the second largest property owners along N. E. 26th Street, other than Middle River Estates. I first called on Jim Hunt for a donation towards the cost of constructing the bridge. He offered to donate \$2,500. I said to him, I will not accept your offer of \$2,500. But I will toss a coin with you to see whether you pay \$5,000 or nothing". I won the toss. The rest of the property owners would not pay anything towards the construction of the bridge. Consequently, I along with Dave Turner and Bob Roberts and I) [sic] had to come up with the remaining \$45,000. In October 1952 we contracted with Powell Brothers Construction Company to build the bridge across Middle River on N. E. 26th Street.

Finally, on December 22, 1952 we celebrated the opening of the bridge with the giving away of prizes such as TV's, bikes, etc. Thousands of people gathered on both sides of the river to celebrate the opening. Some 4,000 cars passed over the bridge that afternoon and evening.

The next phase of the development included the commercialization of N. E. 26th St. and also plans drawn for a 15acre shopping center beginning at N. E. 13th Ave. East to N. E. 17th Ave. on both sides of 26th St., better known as Better Gates Shopping Center.⁷ In my plans for the shopping center I showed a ten-story building with the work BANK written on top of the building.

The Fort Lauderdale News ran a rendering of the 15 acres shopping center.

Shortly after the Fort Lauderdale news ran the ad showing the Shopping Center plan, I went to my attorney's office on other business matters. When I arrived at his office he told me he had seen the architectural rendering of my shopping center plans and he advised me to rerun the ad in the Fort Lauderdale News removing the word BANK from the ten-story building showing the ad. He said people would laugh at me for having the work Bank show in the rendering in that location. I replied, "You just wait and see. I will get a bank charter in my shopping center. "

I then said to my attorney, "Would you like to serve on the Board of Directors with me?" He replied, "Sure I would, but you and I will never live long enough to see a bank built in those palmettos and pine trees. " Shortly after that conversation with my attorney I invited the people that I wanted to serve on the Board of Directors with me, to plan our strategy to obtain a Bank in this location.

⁷ This may be a transcription error. It was clearly "Manor Gate."

Fourteen months later we opened Wilton Manors National Bank with \$3,457,000 opening day deposits. I deposited \$2,240,000 myself on opening day. A majority of this money came from a bond issued by North Broward Hospital District, of which I was a member. Wilton Manors National Bank was now the first completed building in the shopping center. ⁸

In 1953 while I was City Council President, I carried the Articles of Incorporation to Tallahassee that our attorney, Bill Miller, had drawn up. I presented the Charter before a session of the Florida Legislature. We were granted a charter creating, "The City of Wilton Manors" on June 4, 1953. ⁹

That was the beginning of the building of our beautiful and unique City of Wilton Manors and 50+ years later I'm still living here today. ¹⁰

At this time I would like to give special thanks to my dearest and devoted friend, Marsha [sic] Stafford, for her guidance, expertise, and dedication throughout the early years in the building of the City of Wilton Manors. Marsha [sic] was the rock, the one we would all turn to for advice and to help solve the many problems we were faced with daily. If I could give credit one person who was most instrumental in helping to bring our dream city to reality it would be Marsha [sic] Stafford.

The material on this site is made available solely for research, teaching, and private study. All images and written content should be considered © **Wilton Manors Historical Society** or another entity. **Any duplication, publication, or other re-use requires permission and appropriate attribution.** Please click on "CONTACT US" on the menu bar for further information. - Dean_History.docx

⁸ This is very problematic. Dean's "bank" was on the south side of NE 26th Street. The Wilton Manors National Bank was on the north side. The founder of the bank was Clay D. Dyal, Jr. His name has not surfaced anywhere else in the Historical Society's understanding of our history. He was the son of Clay D. Dyal, an Orlando banker. There were a LOT of local luminaries on the initial Board of Directors, including Dean, which would seem obvious.

⁹ Not included in Dean's history is his effort, with Dave Turner, to give the City land on which to build a City Hall in the Manor Gate complex. The City rejected it in favor of a location on NE 21st Court which had the advantage of not shifting the center of town off Wilton Drive. There were a lot of newspaper reports of "dirty dealing" with this project.

¹⁰ *The Island City Gazette* of September 17, 1989 "*Special Pioneer Days Issue*" contains reminiscences of long time residents. Dean's need to be read carefully so as not to get wrong impressions.