



WILTON MANORS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

HISTORICAL NOTES

JUNE 2008

LIFE IN EARLY PROGRESSO/ WILTON MANORS

RECOLLECTIONS OF EILEEN DURHAM MACKEY

As told to Mary Ulm
Wilton Manors Historical Society

During her lifetime, Eileen Durham Mackey has gone from living in a tent with her family in sparsely-populated Fort Lauderdale to being a resident in a high-rise apartment in urban Wilton Manors. She has been a unique witness to the development of South Florida and generously shares her story with the Wilton Manors Historical Society.

In 1924, Eileen's father, Lew Durham, was drawn to Ft. Lauderdale by the promise of abundant work for his craft as a carpenter. Land purchased during the South Florida real estate boom needed houses built on it.

The following year, 6-year old Eileen, her mother Edna, and two younger sisters rejoined Eileen's father at a city-operated tent city at South Andrews Avenue. Tent cities were a common form of housing in that era due to the lack of other accommodations.

Soon the Durhams relocated their tent to their newly purchased Progresso lot at 702 NW 2nd Avenue where they planned to build a permanent home. Their canvas topped tent was on a wooden platform with a box frame around the bottom. Mosquito netting formed the structure's sides. Furnishings were primitive--nail kegs served as chairs. Mrs. Durham cooked on a two burner kerosene stove and even baked biscuits using galvanized cans to form an oven.

Before the family's permanent house could be built, a devastating hurricane struck Ft. Lauderdale in September 1926. The Durhams huddled under quilts in an open field next to their property with others who were without shelter until a neighbor found them during the storm's lull and offered refuge.

To insure his new home survived future hurricanes, Mr. Durham found some unique ways to anchor his house to the ground. He used a living pine tree as one of the support columns--cutting it to the height he wanted and leaving it rooted in the ground. He also buried heavy logs several feet underground. To these he attached a heavy cable that ran across the attic.

Like many 1920's homes, the house had no electricity. Water was provided by a hand pump. Ice was delivered by truck. The family's meals were cooked on a wood burning pot-belly or

"monkey" stove.

Except for downtown Ft. Lauderdale, the surrounding area was sparsely populated and comprised largely of farmland or swamp. Seminole Indians had a camp near the fork of the New River. Indian men, including "Shirt-tail Charley" would come by the Durham house to sell fresh-caught meat. Eileen's father would often buy a rabbit, squirrel, or fish for the family dinner.

Eileen recalls seeing Indians near the South Fork of the Middle River in the early 1930's on Sunday drives with her family up Dixie Highway, the single asphalt road that headed north from Ft. Lauderdale. The family reckoned the Colohatchee area (in what today is southeast Wilton Manors) was where the Seminole Indians were catching the fish and game they sold.

Sunday drives up Dixie Highway also took the family past Wilton Drive's most memorable feature: "The Castles", referring to the towers erected in 1925 as the grand entrance to the Wilton Manors sub-division.

Wilton Manors was the dream of developer and owner E.J. Willingham who envisioned it as an exclusive residential community. "Improvements not promises" was the motto of the E.J. Willingham Development Company. Wide side-walks and ornamental street lamps had been installed along Wilton Boulevard, as Wilton Drive was originally named. All that was needed to complete his vision were buyers to build stately homes along the Boulevard, but this was not to be. The South Florida land bust in 1926 ushered in the Great Depression years for the area and Willingham, like so many other developers of the era, was forced to abandon his plans.

When the depression hit "Dad was left with three pennies", Eileen recalls. Eileen's older brothers had joined the family in Ft. Lauderdale by the late 1920s. Mr. Durham and the boys provided farm labor on the West coast and brought fresh produce home to the family on weekends. Her father also fished. In season, oysters were plentiful and turtle eggs could be found. The Durhams were used to hard work and able to take the hard years of the Depression in stride.

For entertainment the Durhams and their neighbors organized square dances in the neighborhood or they would get together and hold a pot-luck dinner or perhaps roast hotdogs over a bon fire at the beach.

Eileen and her sisters attended Northside Elementary School through fifth grade, then Central Elementary for sixth and seventh grades. All children in Broward County during that era attended Central High located at Broward Blvd & NE 3rd Avenue. It is at school where Eileen and her sisters met other children and youth from the area called Colohatchee. the heart of which included that portion of present day Wilton Manors that includes Dixie Highway and N.E. 24th Street.

Eileen provided the locations of the home sites of some of her school friends from the early 1930s. Lorraine Windham from her sixth grade class lived to the east of where Reflections Beauty Shop is located at 2212 Dixie Hwy. Lois Blackwell lived just north of the Windhams at about where 2201 N. Dixie Hwy is today. Jimmy and Margaret Brown lived where the big tree is at 2040 N. Dixie Hwy, where the Parker Electronics Bldg., now Pride Center at Equality Park, stands. George Smith, the owner of a furniture store in Fort Lauderdale, and

his family lived in the Administration Building behind the west tower at the entrance to the Wilton Manors sub-division. Eileen recalled the names of all the children: Mary, Dorothy, Edward, George, Flora, Ruth, and Estella.

In the 30's her brother and sister-in-law, Bob Durham Sr. and wife Freda, rented a chicken farm somewhere near the location of K Mart (NE 6th Avenue & Oakland Park Blvd). The only way you could get to it was by a dirt road through sandburs, palmettos, and Huckleberries off of Dixie Hwy. There were no other north and south roads that Eileen recalls. They had no electricity and the water had to come from a pump and its taste was terrible. The outside plumbing was built over the river, meaning that when they used the outhouse, the river took the deposits away. Alligators had been seen swimming in the river. The Durham's came home one evening to find that most of their chickens had been killed by a wild animal. Soon after this happened they moved back to the city.

Eileen married Joe Mackey in 1943. Joe, a Fort Lauderdale police officer, quickly rose to the rank of Detective by locating a stolen safe in a Davie canal. The couple raised a son, Brian.

Eileen worked at the Navel Air Station in the commissary. Later she worked at the court house registering people for voting. She worked with Easter Lily Gates. She never really had a career, but worked "at about anything", mostly jobs interacting with people. For several years she volunteered at the thrift store run by St. Andrew's United Methodist Church located a block north of Sunrise Blvd. on North Andrews Avenue in Ft. Lauderdale.

In the 1950's, Eileen became familiar with a popular social center of Wilton Manors-Ole Bill's Bar on Wilton Drive located where New Moon Bar is today. "Ole Bill's was a favorite spot to shoot pool and throw darts. There was a sailfish on the wall and someone had put false teeth in its mouth, which drew attention. People would go in just to take a look at the fish."

Just to the west of Ole Bill's was another favorite tavern that was an interesting place to stop in for a bit of gossip. Today it is the home of Tani's Hair Design at 2390 Wilton Drive.

Eileen recalls that Wilton Manors has always had a doctor and a dentist, a furniture store (where Out of the Closet is now), and several food stores.

Eileen and Joe made a home just east of Ft. Lauderdale High school for 40 years. When Joe's health failed in the 1980's, the couple moved to the recently built high-rise Wilton Towers apartments where Eileen still resides.

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