



WILTON MANORS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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PERRY MICKEL A TRUE PIONEER

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Chef, realtor, farmer, builder, and civic volunteer, Perry Mickel played a key role rescuing Wilton Manors from the dual disasters of the housing crash and hurricane of 1926. He was one of the Wilton Manors Pioneers instrumental in creating the Village and then City of Wilton Manors and in its development during the first three decades.

Born in Missouri in 1893, Mickel served in the Army in World War I. While living near Indianapolis, Indiana, he met and married Dorothea Applegate, a trained nurse, in the early 1920s. The newly married couple moved to Muncie where Perry worked as a chef in a restaurant at a lakeside resort. When that enterprise failed, the Mickels decided to move to Fort Lauderdale in 1924 during the period of the land boom in South Florida.



In a 1976 interview with the Wilton Manors Historical Society, Dorothea Mickel said her first impressions of Fort Lauderdale were of an area with lots of scrub pines and palmettos, a small population center along the New River, and hordes of land speculators from the north living in tents. Perry first worked as a chef and restaurant manager, but soon got the real estate fever. The Mickels were living in a garage apartment on the beach when the 1926 hurricane struck. The land bust and economic depression soon followed.

One of the ambitious land developments that was put on hold was E. J. Willingham's Wilton Manors, a 345-acre residential subdivision north of the Middle River in Fort Lauderdale. With the land bust underway, Willingham returned first to his home state of Georgia in 1926 and then died in March 1928 at the age of 66 in Asheville, North Carolina. Management of the Willingham Development Company was left in the hands of his son, E.J., Jr., and attorney Tom Fleming.

To help them sell the vacant land and retire some of the debt, they recruited Perry Mickel. In 1928, the Mickels and their three children moved into the vacant Willingham house at 1937 Wilton Drive (where Richardson Historic Park is now located). They lived there for six years, and Perry Mickel ran a small dairy farm while selling real estate. During this time, Dorothea Mickel worked as a public health nurse in the county school system. In 1936, George Richardson, Sr. purchased the house and surrounding 40 acres for use as a golf course.



During the 1930s, Mickel bought the tax liens on 48 acres of property west of Andrews Avenue. In 1938, he built a house and outbuildings on the corner of what today is N.W. 3rd Avenue and N.W. 25th Street and operated a dairy and vegetable farm. He later became a general contractor. In a 1952 newspaper interview, Mickel said that he farmed in winter and built homes in the summer “to try to make enough to pay off what I lost in farming in the winter.”

During the 1940s, Perry Mickel was engaged in many civic activities in the burgeoning community. He was a founding member of the Wilton Manors Civic Association in 1946 and assisted with the incorporation of the Village of Wilton Manors in 1947. His good common sense and dry humor made him a popular figure.

Nancy Sawallis, who provided the old photo of the Mickel house reported to the Historical Society in a recent interview: “My husband, Bob and I (newly married and very "green") were fortunate to become neighbors of the Mickel family in 1947 when we purchased a small lot adjacent to their farm. Perry and his sons helped us pour the concrete slab for the tiny cottage we built there. [Called “Skunk Hollow”] They gave us vegetables from the farm, and we felt we were eating ‘high off the hog!’

“Dorothea was capable, feisty and fun. Perry had great common sense and a wry sense of humor. They became dear friends and mentors for us.”

In 1952, Mickel was elected as the second Mayor of Wilton Manors, and served in the unpaid job until 1955. During his term in office, he presided over the development of the first city charter and State Legislature approval for the incorporation of the independent City of Wilton Manors in June 1953. The Police Department was created during Mickel’s tenure. He also witnessed an extraordinary boom in land development in the Island City. In 1952 alone, the value of construction was said to have approached \$1 million--especially with the development on either side of N.E. 26th Street to the new bridge to Federal Highway which opened that December. Mickel also began planning for a new city hall.

After leaving elected office in 1955, Perry Mickel essentially retired while continuing to sell off much of his land. In that year, he first leased and then donated 2 and a half acres of land near Powerline Road for use as the ball field which still bears his name. Beginning in 1956, Mickel and his wife began spending an increasing amount of time in Asheville, North Carolina where their daughter lived and where they built a house in 1965. Perry died there in 1968; and Dorothea moved there permanently in 1972, passing away in 1981.

The N.E. 15th Avenue bridge across the South Fork of the Middle River is also named for Perry Mickel.

For more information on Mickel and the others who were instrumental in shaping Wilton Manors, look for the new history of Wilton Manors, due to be published in time for Christmas. Be sure to visit our website, www.WiltonManorsHistoricalSociety.org.