



# WILTON MANORS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

## Historical Notes

January 2007

### JAMES C. DEAN

### Entrepreneur Extraordinaire

by Paul A. Kuta

Wilton Manors Historical Society

James C. Dean died on December 11, 2006, just 4 days shy of his 95th birthday. One of the true pioneers of the City of Wilton Manors, Mr. Dean's entrepreneurial activities over the course of a long professional career had considerable impact on Broward County and South Florida.

Mr. Dean was born in Ashland, Alabama. At a young age, he moved with his family to Georgia and later attended the University of Georgia. In a tradition followed by thousands of young people in later decades, Jim Dean visited Miami on a school break in 1936. He liked it so much that he stayed and got a job as an insurance agent. His territory covered all of South Florida.

During World War II, Dean joined the Army Air Corps (which later became the US Air Force). Returning to Miami from his military duty in 1946, he met his wife, LaWayne Chaplin --a WAVE in WWII. They were married on October 27th, honeymooned in Havana, Cuba, and relocated to Fort Lauderdale. Looking for a permanent place to live with his new bride, Jim Dean bought two adjoining lots at 701 Wilton Drive (where the Island City Lofts is now rising). In March 1947, Dean and his wife moved into their new home in then unincorporated Wilton Manors, with a population of just 300; and all five of their children were born there.



With a new family to support and largely undeveloped land nearby, Jim Dean began his many business and real estate ventures in the 1950's post-war boom in Florida. He founded the Sun Life Insurance Company, his initial major investment. In 1951, he bought large tracts of land east of the FEC railroad tracks on what today is Northeast 26th Street (which he, in essence, built). In 1952, with other developers, he began building 300 homes in the Middle River Estates subdivision in Wilton Manors. In 1953, he built the Manor Gate

Shopping Center on the south side of N.E. 26th Street and moved his insurance company to that site. In 1955, on the north side of the street, he founded the Wilton Manors National Bank (where Sun Trust Bank is today) and served on its Board of Directors.

### **James Dean Bridge**

In one of his lasting legacies, Jim Dean led a group of developers to privately build the Northeast 26th Street bridge to Federal Highway. This opened Wilton Manors to the east side of Fort Lauderdale. The bridge was dedicated in December 1952 and turned over to Broward County. Responding to a petition from the Wilton Manors Historical Society and forwarded by the Wilton Manors City Commission, the County approved the naming of this bridge for James Dean in 2004.

Aside from his business interests, James Dean contributed to his community. As the newly-elected President of the Wilton Manors Village Council, in 1953 Dean carried the articles of incorporation for a city to the State Legislature in Tallahassee. On June 4, 1953, Wilton Manors was renamed and became a separately incorporated city--the 11th in Broward County. Jim Dean was a founding member of the Wilton Manors Baptist Church in 1955 and served as a Deacon there for most of his adult life. He also donated the land for the Wilton Manors Kiwanis Club on Northeast 14th Avenue in 1958 and served as the club's President and long-time active member.

Dean's varied interests took him far beyond Wilton Manors. He helped form the Lauderdale Beach Bank and the First National Bank of Lantana. Real estate developments to his credit included Coral Estates of 150 homes; Boca Villas in Boca Raton with 600 homes; and the planning of a community near Tampa Bay on the west coast with 60,000 housing and commercial units. His extensive real estate interests and joy of travel took him to Southwest Africa in 1971-1972, where he was a member of an international consortium selected to build a new community for a population of 250,000--complete with a city's roads and utilities infrastructure.

In 1958, Dean became President of the Gold Coast Broadcasters, Inc. He was the builder and owner of Station WPOM in Fort Lauderdale--one of the first radio stations in Broward County. He also was one of the founders of Broward General Hospital and served on many State Boards and Committees.

In addition to his 3 sons and 2 daughters in Florida, Dean is survived by 6 grandchildren and one great grandchild.

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