Annexation, Expansion, and Regional Challenges [1972-1981]

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Welcome to the eighth program of “Pinellas by the Decades,” a series of lectures and conversations sponsored by the Pinellas County Historical Society at Heritage Village to commemorate the centennial of our independence from Hillsborough County on January 1, 1912. Last month, we examined the sixties, a time of great change. Growth and expansion continued to accelerate between 1972 and 1981, the decade we will cover today.

The 1970s marked a time when great tourist attractions came to the area or grew. We all know about the “mouse” near Orlando, but others had existed in Pinellas for years. Some of them were mentioned in our lecture on the 1960s, but we will briefly mention a few of them again:

- **Aquatarium (St. Pete Beach, 2 slides)**, later known as Shark World before becoming condos.
- **Tiki Gardens (Indian Shores, 2 slides)**, now a public beach access site owned by the County.
- **Sunken Gardens**, then still in private ownership, now an attraction operated by the City of St. Petersburg.

Those of betting age could enjoy afternoon races at **Derby Lane** during its seasonal operations.

- **The Bounty (4 slides)**, a replica ship used in a movie that was moored from many years near the Pier and the St. Petersburg Museum of History.

- **The Haas Museum**, a site near Central Plaza managed by the St. Petersburg Museum of History that also served as a temporary home for the Lowe House now at Heritage Village. **(2 images)**

By the 1970s, another attraction of sorts appeared on the Redington Shores/Indian Shores town line when the **Suncoast Seabird Sanctuary** opened.

Of course, one of the most important attractions that took shape happened during the excitement before our **Bicentennial**. During this time, there was an increased awareness of the importance of our history at the same time that overdevelopment had threatened important historical landmarks in Pinellas. The Bicentennial Committee of the Board of County
Commissioners, the Pinellas County Historical Commission, and the Junior League of Clearwater spearheaded an effort to preserve structures and resources facing possible destruction.

Soon **PCHS** was established to assist in these efforts. Clearwater architect Don Williams designed a site plan for the original ten-acre site that was named “Heritage Park.” Williams, owner of the **House of Seven Gables**, also oversaw the elaborate plan to transport that structure from its perch in downtown Clearwater, along the intracoastal, and onto Walsingham Road in one piece. It was placed next to the Plant-Sumner House, the first structure to arrive. By 1977, Heritage Park--later renamed Heritage Village--**was dedicated** and our beautiful village opened to the public.

Visitors and residents alike started to notice subtle and not so subtle changes in the area. Ever since Sidney Colon opened **On Top of the World** in the late 1960s, widespread development and “condomania” become the norm in the area for the next forty years.

After U.S. Home Corporation announced plans for the Countryside development in the early 1970s, they initially approached **Dunedin** since the unincorporated lands near State Route 580 and U.S. 19 fell within that city's planning area. Dunedin had already experienced rapid growth and put it up for a city referendum in February 1972 to determine if the voters were willing to fund improvements and public safety services in this area. When voters turned down the measure, U.S. Home approached Clearwater. On May 22, Clearwater and U.S. Home entered into an agreement of understanding. Soon thereafter, Clearwater annexed the Countryside area and there were more homes in Countryside than cows.

“Condomania” hit the beaches first. Developments along Sand Key and Clearwater Beach exploded during the 1970s, and continued at a rapid pace into the new millennium. Some towns tried to regulate growth. Here's **Madeira Beach** at the intersection of Gulf Boulevard and 150th Avenue, or Tom Stuart Causeway, before 1970. While you can see some evidence of dredging where the Rec Center would later be built, most of the structures are one or two stories. Hotels, such as **this one** on the Gulf side near 140th along Gulf Boulevard, also were short in stature and simple in their accommodations. I call this period B.C.--before condo. By the mid 1970s, towns such as Madeira, Treasure Island, St. Pete Beach, North Redington Beach, Redington Shores, and Indian Shores would have developers visit their municipal meetings to request plans to demolish smaller structures and erect condos. Even Redington Beach, a town that had enacted strong building codes to discourage commercial establishments, had to relent on the issue of condos.

Soon, drivers from the mainland coming into **Madeira Beach** noticed the condos on the horizon. The **view at Sand Key** was even more profound.

Many cities went through cycles of blight and renewal during the 1970s. Tarpon's sponge fleet looked a little tired by the 1970s, and while the harvesting of sponges continued, many of the
Life seemed splendid along Clearwater Beach (4 images). Downtown, however, controversy ensued after a landmark downtown hotel, the Fort Harrison shown here in 1974, changed hands a couple of years later. When L. Ron Hubbard and the Church of Scientology acquired the Fort Harrison, a series of accusations and battles erupted between leaders in Scientology and city officials. Clearwater Mayor Gabe Cazares, an outspoken critic, was also the target of a variety of campaigns directed against him. Although the relationship between Scientologists and the City of Clearwater is not as contentious today, public opinions still remain strong more than thirty-five years later. (4 Views of downtown Clearwater circa 1982 and today).

Largo's downtown also seemed a little tired and worn for wear by the 1970s. The feed store at the intersection of the old Orange Belt right-of-way, Missouri Avenue and Bay Drive seemed out of place. The old Largo school at the present-day location of the current school board headquarters was demolished. Even John Taylor's impressive packing plant that opened in 1932 after its predecessor burned to the ground was reused as a place to buy second-hand restaurant equipment. "Citrus City" was losing its citrus and its packing plants were all but extinct.

St. Petersburg's waterfront remained active, with the Bayfront Center built in the mid-1960s attracting a variety of events, including indoor soccer games for the new Tampa Bay Rowdies, an occasional hockey exhibition game, and the annual St. Petersburg International Folk Fair. This multicultural event was popular at a time when new immigrant communities from Southeast Asia began to arrive. Most notably Vietnamese, the transition from Mekong to Meadowlawn was difficult for the first generations, though vibrant Asian markets and establishments have developed throughout Pinellas since the 1970s. The business community remained strong in St. Petersburg during the 1970s (SP Federal), and the business of baseball during spring training continued to attract crowds in St. Petersburg (2 images), Clearwater, and also Dunedin with the expansion Toronto Blue Jays in 1977.

One thing that many municipalities did pursue was annexation. (Discussion, include cities encroaching into unincorporated areas, like Clearwater's annexation of countryside, Largo's boundary moving east towards Tampa Bay, growth of Pinellas Park.)

Both incorporated and unincorporated areas also experienced expansion of residential neighborhoods and new subdivisions. Palm Harbor is an excellent example. Once centered around Alt. 19 between the Dunedin/Ozona area and Tarpon Springs, new communities under the umbrella of unincorporated "Palm Harbor" pushed eastward to US 19 during the early and
mid 1970s, and by the 1980s continued their path towards Lake St. George and Oldsmar. Closer to Heritage Village, new subdivisions between Seminole and Largo followed the path of Duhme Road as this roadway was built between Seminole Mall and Ulmerton Road.

Other types of expansion included better coordination of countywide social services, putting into place one of the earliest and most comprehensive "911" emergency operations and call dispatching centers in the United States, and plans to develop a strong network of roads.

Expansion also occurred in schools. New elementary schools appeared throughout Pinellas, though they lost their sixth grade to the middle schools that were no longer junior highs. In the fall of 1976, Pinellas Park High opened to handle the influx of students between St. Petersburg and Clearwater. Countryside High opened in 1979 to help with overcrowding at Clearwater and Dunedin. By the late 1970s, Seminole High School, a school that opened in 1962 on top of a hill on a remote stretch of Vonn Road, had double sessions and nearly 3,900 students, with freshman and sophomores luckily getting to sleep in late since their classes did not begin until noon. The opening of Osceola High School on the east side of Lake Seminole in August 1981 helped to alleviate overcrowding and brought double sessions to an end.

During the 1970s, busing for desegregation went into force under the Bradley decision. (Explain-30% limit, tensions were especially at Boca Ciega and Dixie Hollins, though things generally improved by the late 1970s and the Pinellas desegregation experience, in sum, was not as bad as many northern cities, such as Boston.) Two unusual weather phenomena occurred in the 1970s that affected schools, one rare, one tragic. In January 1977, an unusually cold spell brought snow to the area, closing schools (2 slides) and even segments of the interstate highways because of ice on the roads. On May 4, 1978, a tornado ripped through the High Point area near 150th Avenue, killing 2 students and injuring 94 teachers and students at High Point Elementary School. Nine classrooms were destroyed as the roof collapsed. Just a month after that tragedy, a happy and sad moment occurred at the Bayboro Campus of USF St. Petersburg. After many years of seeking an expanded campus, including talks of moving USF's Pinellas operations to Clearwater, a groundbreaking to celebrate Phase 1 expansion of USF St. Petersburg took place on June 15, 1978. Later that same day, Nelson Poynter, a champion of higher education in Pinellas County for decades and member of the groundbreaking party, passed away. (2 images, one of Poynter) Florida Presbyterian College also grew during the 1970s, and in July 1972 changed its name to Eckerd College.

Since today is Mother's Day, one of the busiest days of the year for restaurants, let's indulge ourselves and a taste of sample of the delicious local fare found in Pinellas County restaurants. Yes, national chains and fast food establishments had already entrenched themselves by the early 1970s, but there were some interesting and eclectic options available to locals, everything from popular early bird venues to truly one-of-a-kind dining experiences.

Let's start in southern Pinellas. Located at U.S. 19 and 24th Avenue South, next to the Lakeview Shopping Center, the Sand Dollar was a popular venue. The 2 large garden style dining rooms
could seat more than 400. Despite remodeling in the early 1980s, the restaurant closed and was demolished many years ago. We will next visit **Central Plaza**, with this view showing it as it looked on the southern side of First Avenue South just east of U.S. 19 in the mid-1950s. Where Goose Pond once allowed residents to enjoy an afternoon of quiet fishing, the Central Plaza development had approximately 2,000 parking spaces on its many asphalt lots during its heyday in the 1950s through the 1970s. Two of its most notable tenants were restaurants. Excitement filled the air when newspapers announced that the popular Miami Beach restaurant, Wolfie's, would open at Central Plaza. Here are two images of the store along Central Avenue. In addition, seniors could enjoy a nice meal at the Driftwood Cafeteria in Central Plaza, or, at their downtown location. If French cuisine was more to their liking, there was always the Wedgewood Inn just across 18th Avenue South from Bartlett Park, an elegant location with Salt Creek, the waterway that connects Lake Maggiore to Bayboro Harbor, running through the property. (3 images) The Wedgewood may have disappeared long ago, but this aerial shows where the creek cuts through the currently undeveloped property.

Since we are close to Bayboro Harbor and Albert Whitted, we could always grab a bite at that dynamic duo that fed the college crowds at the USF Bayboro Campus: **Aunt Hatties and Uncle Eds**. While there are other places downtown, let's continue our drive along 34th Street, US 19. A little north of 13th Street, near many of the new shopping centers and hotels along this busy stretch of highway, we would have found the Sunshine City's popular smorgasbord, the **Sweden House**. In its later years, as the perfect way to serve hungry diners, the restaurant even had a carousel that spun around so you did not have to move an inch if you wanted some three-bean salad with your mashed potatoes.

For those who craved steaks, a place a little west of US 19 on Gulf-to-Bay had a solution: **Chief Charley's**. The dark wood paneling on the Clearwater restaurant had many sayings of wisdom by the chief that would be considered somewhat politically incorrect today, but for those craving a porterhouse, this was a carnivore paradise. Another one opened in Seminole on 70th Avenue North just west of Seminole Boulevard. Both disappeared long ago. Although Pinellas is much more crowded today than in the 1970s when Chief Charley was at its prime--rib--you could say there's a bit of irony and that it's now safe for the cows to come home. Ever see those ads by a national chain imploring us to "eat more chicken"? Guess what sits right now at the old Chief Charley's site in Clearwater?

Of course, we've saved the sweetest restaurant tidbit for last. So, let's have our just desserts. While we could do an entire lecture on food culture in Pinellas, no tale of our county would be complete without a drive up along McMullen-Booth Road until we get to the area a little south of Alligator Creek.

Jim McMullen may have forded that creek as he walked inland from upper Tampa Bay in search of a place to build his log cabin in the mid-1800s. McMullen, Richard Booth, and members of the Hoyt family later developed the Seven Oaks settlement at that site. According to one version of the story, one of Jim McMullen's sons had received some kaypok tree seeds from a
church missionary and gave them to Robert Hoyt. The Hoyts built a nursery at Seven Oaks and established a mail order business that sold exotic plants by the late 1880s, about the time the first railroad made it to St. Petersburg. About that time, a couple of kaypok seeds were planted and they survived the bitter freezes of 1894 and 1895 because Hoyt kept them in his greenhouse. Although one of the saplings was planted elsewhere and perished in the bitter 1962 freeze, the other took shape on Hoyt's property along McMullen-Booth Road.

Here’s [a view in the 1950s](#), and a more contemporary [view](#). Of course, next to this impressive tree sprouted an equally impressive and unique feature on the landscape, the Kapok Tree Inn. Eating at the Kaypok Tree was a memorable experience, and these [3 images](#) of the exterior and a couple of the dining rooms whet your appetite with the tasteful and elegant decor of the restaurant. While McMullen-Booth is a busy roadway today, we must remember that the kapok tree and the adjacent restaurant were surrounded by farmland, citrus, and just a few homes on a narrow, two-lane road, back in [the early 1970s](#). Although the restaurant closed many years ago, its footprint remains. This waitress may be [setting the last table](#), but part of the site remains a place where morsels—those of a musical and theatrical nature, still are served in heaping helpings. The Ruth Eckerd Hall, just east of the old Kapok Tree, is an important cultural venue in upper Pinellas. Hard to believe that when discussions began to create a cultural center at this site, it was considered too far out in the country.

In December 1977, the Kaypok Tree Inns Corporation offered 40 wooded acres to the city to create the Richard B. Baumgardner Center for the Performing Arts. Clearwater architect Don Williams, donor of Seven Gables and designer of the original concept for Heritage Village, drew up the preliminary sketches and designed the site in a way so that the planned 900 parking spaces would preserve as much of the adjoining groves as possible.

Many of us have [old Kapok Tree glasses](#) hiding in our cupboards, I'm sure. Did you know that they're selling for more than $20 apiece on some web sites? The exotic drinks may no longer be available, but there's always another round. Speaking of another round, the Kapok opened another elegant facility on [Duhme Road just north of Madeira Beach](#). This is the one that my family went to when we wanted to give out-of-town family or guests a unique experience. Similar to the McMullen-Booth Road location, the dining rooms and bar at the Duhme Road location were “over the top.” Here is the [Rousseau room](#), inspired by Henry Rousseau, a French Impressionist and the eye-popping [Rahjah Lounge](#) around the early 1970s.

Some of you may remember that when [Walt Disney World](#) opened in 1971, you purchased ticket booklets. Some rides, like [Eastern Air Lines' If You Had Wings](#), were free. Riding the street car down Main Street USA was an ‘A’ coupon, the equivalent of 10 cents. But if you wanted to go on [Space Mountain](#), you better have an ‘E’ coupon, 90 cents back in the mid-1970s. Well, following in Disney’s footsteps, the Duhme Road Kapok Tree actually had a ticket window where you ordered your meal before you were even seated. You can see it [here](#) next to the little pond. After "ordering," a series of interconnected dining rooms with waitresses using the latest in technology, telephones, shuttled you to the appropriate table. While regular...
menus later replaced the ticket window, one thing I'll never forget were the marble restrooms in the first waiting area. They were quite elegant, but had a strange feature: on the north wall, they had huge glass windows so people using the facilities could watch peacocks roaming around. I'm not making this up!

As you can see, the Kapok is no longer at this site. Before its demolition, it did serve as a Jewish community center and early site of the Florida Holocaust Museum before that institution moved to downtown St. Petersburg. Although there is little evidence of the old Madeira Kapok Tree remaining, I bet some of you have passed by its most notable features a few times without even noticing them. The next time you drive along Park Boulevard just across from the entrance of the Wagon Wheel Flea Market, look on the south side of the road.

If you required entertainment with your dinner, a great place to visit during the 1970s would have been the Showboat Dinner Theatre along Ulmerton Road's crowded mile where it merges with Roosevelt. Opened in the late 1960s, the Showboat had its heyday in the 1970s [2 images]. Mickey Rooney and many other notable entertainers visited Pinellas to perform there. Jamie Farr, best known as Corporal Max Klinger on the 1970s series M*A*S*H, regularly appeared at the Showboat. By the mid-1980s, the theater fell on some hard times, as people chose to stay home and watch their expanded cable TV lineups, movie channels, and videotapes. It closed in the mid-1990s, and the theater was demolished a few years before the sign.

If country music is your thing, you could always drive along that remote, still somewhat vacant stretch of land between Pinellas Park and Ulmerton Road until you reached Joyland. Originally opened as a small theme park with rides, Joyland Park closed in late 1962. In August 1964, it reopened as a place to enjoy a dinner and country and western music, with the owner keeping the Joyland name since the sign from the original park had cost $8,000 and he didn't want to replace it. Across the street from US 19, a place with less joy opened, Horizon Hospital, a psychiatric facility that--much like the old Anclote Manor--had its share of controversy. During the 1980s, while I was working as a Pinellas County schools employee in a dropout prevention program located at Horizon, I remember hearing of a few instances where some of the patients at Horizon had escaped and actually went over to mingle at Joyland. Strange things do happen here.

Speaking of strange, another site that kept its name as its purpose changed was Toytown. Originally, a subdivision that never took off, by 1956 the county was willing to give the state 400 acres of this undeveloped site to become the home of a new state university they wanted to name "Sunshine University." Well, we all know that while the sun sets in the west, a new university rose in the east in Temple Terrace when the state put USF over there. By the 1960s, this site along Interstate 275 on the east side between Gandy and Roosevelt had become a public landfill for the city of St. Petersburg in March 1961, replacing a smaller location near 801 62nd Avenue Northeast, now part of the Mangrove Bay and Cypress Lakes golf courses. The landfill at Toytown remained in operation until the early 1980s, when the county's garbage
burning plant opened. Toytown posed a number of environmental challenges, and redevelopment is difficult. Dumping at the site remained relatively inexpensive into the early 1980s. For example, haulers could dump a ton of material for less than $7 in July 1982.

For awhile, there was even talk of constructing a baseball stadium at or near Toytown as part of the region's early quest for Major League Baseball in the 1970s. Some of these stadium conversations pre-date the use of much of this area as a landfill. Even in 1959, before the expansion era of baseball took shape, there was some discussion by the ad hoc Pinellas County Stadium Authority to build a 40,000 seat stadium that could possibly be expanded to up to 100,000 seats for football and auto racing, among other things. What were they thinking? While baseball wasn't the primary target, I'm sure, this ambitious idea speaks to the optimism of that time.

During the 1970s, Jack Lake held a prominent position at the St. Petersburg Times. He had worked there from 1960 until 1984. During the late 1960s and more so by the 1970s, Jack was starting to discuss the need for the region to get a new Major League Baseball franchise through expansion. Despite a few failed attempts along the way in the 1980s, Lake was a persistent force who helped to bring the expansion Tampa Bay Devil Rays to this side of the bay when MLB awarded the franchise in 1995. He threw out the first pitch at opening day in March 1998 during the Rays inaugural season. Also involved in the St. Petersburg and Suncoast chambers of commerce, he was involved in negotiations that encourage Eleanor and Reynolds Morse to move their eclectic art collection from Cleveland to a converted warehouse along Bayboro Harbor in 1982 when the Salvador Dali Museum opened.

Much happened during the period from 1972 through 1981, and unfortunately we need to end on a few sad notes. Although we can celebrate that the Florida Cabinet voted to approve the purchase of much of Honeymoon Island as a state park in December 1974, by 1980 Boca Ciega Bay suffered a loss of more than 80% of its sea grasses when compared to 1940. Much of the bay was a "dead zone." Two tragedies on the water grabbed international attention. On January 28, 1980, the US Coast Guard cutter Blackthorn was hit by the tanker Capricorn in lower Tampa Bay, near the Sunshine Skyway.

During the early months of 1980, there had been a few near misses along the Sunshine Skyway as well, with at least three close calls as large ships navigated the channel. Then, on an early May morning when rain hit the area with blinding force, one of the worst bridge disasters in American history occurred.

On a rainy morning of May 9, sometime around 7:30a.m., the Summit Venture, a tanker entering the mouth of Tampa Bay during a blinding storm, hit the newer of the twin spans and brought much of the center portion of the bridge thundering into Tampa Bay. Thirty-five people, including passengers on a southbound Greyhound bus, perished in this tragedy. One
man, Wesley MacIntire, somehow miraculously survived when his pickup truck drove off of the bridge, hit the freighter, and landed in Tampa Bay.

The destruction caused to the southbound span led to much speculation. Ultimately, traffic was rerouted to the older span as construction began on the current Skyway bridge.

Once again, we have covered a lot of material in our time together. I hope you have enjoyed our visit back to the seventies. I do have time for questions.