Nina Baranski writing book for Port St. Lucie's 50th Anniversary

By Jay Meisel, Home Town News

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PORT ST. LUCIE - When Nina Baranski moved to Port St. Lucie in 1968, there were "no schools, no nothing," she recalled last week.

Because of that, she moved to Broward County, but later returned.

Now a resident of Georgia, Ms. Baranski is working on a book about the history of Port St. Lucie that will be part of its 50th anniversary celebration in 2011.

An executive committee was formed in 2007 to begin planning the celebration and is now seeking memorabilia from residents relating to the city's history.

Richard McAfoos, a member of the committee, scoffs at the idea the city doesn't really have much of a history compared to the neighboring towns of Fort Pierce and Stuart.

When people say that, he said, he refers to a 1961 Mustang or a 1961 Corvette.

"Those are now considered vintage vehicles," he said. Part of the city's history has been the tremendous growth and change, he said.

Port St. Lucie was incorporated on April 27, 1961, and did not have a single resident at the time.

For a good part of its history, the city, which now has more than 120,000 residents, was truly a "company town," he said.

General Development Corp., which designed and developed the city, appointed the early mayors and city council members, he said.

It was only in the 1970s that William McChesney, who was originally appointed a council member, became the first elected mayor.

Although the early council members were all GDC employees, Ms. Baranski said, she felt based on her research, they "had their hearts in the right places" although they also looked out for GDC's interests.

The transition of Port St. Lucie from a company town to a city run by its residents and its tremendous growth in the succeeding years were two major phases in the city's history, Mc McAfoos said.

In the 1970s, Ms. Baranski said, the city government was very limited in what it did, handling such things as zoning.

The city would collect millions in tax revenue and never spend it, she said.

A law in effect at the time, she said, allowed only 10 percent of revenue carried over to be spent the following year.

When in later years, the city wanted to undertake major projects, the law was changed, she said.

Many of the early elected council members were retirees who were very conservative, she said.

Ms. Baranski, a former newspaper reporter who later became director of the city's Community Relations Department, said she attended one meeting where they discussed a request by one council member to be reimbursed $8 for traveling to Tallahassee.

He spent 45 minutes trying to justify it, with one councilwoman questioning every penny, she said.

For most of the early history of the city, she said, it contracted with the St. Lucie County Sheriff's Office for law enforcement.

Even when the Police Department was formed in the 1980s, Mayor McChesney felt the city was too young to have one, she said.

During those years, Ms. Baranski said, the terms of council members changed several times from two to four years and then back to two years. Now they serve four year terms.

While the celebration is only geared for the 50 years Port St. Lucie has been incorporated, Mr. McAfoos said, the area has prior history.

Ais Native Americans once occupied the area, according to the Port St. Lucie Historical Society.

And in the 1890s, a community called Spruce Bluff was formed. It at one point had a school, but by the early 1900s, most residents left because a severe winter freeze in 1894 discouraged citrus and pineapple growers, according to the society.

The celebration of the more modern Port St. Lucie will include Ms. Baranski's book, the development of a history docudrama and a week of events from April 23 to April 30, 2011.

Anyone who would like to donate photos or memorabilia for the city's celebration should call the society at (772) 337-5698.