

BROKEN WATER PUMP AND COUNTRY HUNTING LODGE LEAD TO CUDJOE GARDENS

by John Viele

On an automobile trip from their home in Michigan to Florida in 1954, Vincent and Billie Drost were persuaded by a friend to take a quick trip to the Keys. In Marathon, a broken water pump forced them to make an unplanned visit of several days in Key West. Sightseeing along the way, a successful fishing trip, and warm welcomes from friendly locals, opened their eyes to the beauty and attractions of the Keys. Subsequent visits in following years convinced them to make the Keys their new home. In 1957, they purchased the property that is now the west portion of Cudjoe Gardens and made plans to develop it. Neither Vincent, a retired chemist and real estate dealer, nor Billie, a clinical psychologist, had any experience that

would have qualified them to carry out such a project, but they were undaunted.

Ross Sawyer (Sawyer Drive) was a native of Key West. In 1938 he paid \$414 for 72 acres of property on Cudjoe Key for hunting, fishing and farming. His property included the present sites of Colson and Sawyer Drives. Colson owned and operated a dragline and was Sawyer's partner.

With lumber from the abandoned railroad bridges, Sawyer built a lodge for his family and friends and a small house for his parents on the Gulf side of the first overseas highway. He planted banana trees and tomatoes and built coops for chickens and ducks. On weekends, the Sawyer family including their two young boys, Robert and Ronald, rode to Cudjoe in Ross's truck. The boys would spend much of their time helping their father. When time permitted they would catch crawfish (Florida lobsters), and

blue crabs. White-crowned pigeons flew into the Keys in April and stayed till September. Doves arrived in October. Accompanied by their father, the boys would hike up to the eastern shore of Cudjoe and shoot birds along the way. Robert recalls, “The pigeons tasted better than steak.” Riding with their father in the truck at night, they would shoot raccoons crossing the highway.

Electric power did not arrive in the lower Keys until 1953. After the canals were dredged and the ground level built up, home building began in the late 1950s. Vincent Drost and Ross Sawyer managed their developments separately. There was no legal connection between them. After streets and canals were laid out, trenching machines, dynamite charges, and draglines dug the canals and later dredged a basin with a launching ramp for use by homeowners with boats. Bulldozers spread the fill from the canals

to create higher land for home building. Both men were determined to make their developments garden spots in natural beauty. They carefully marked all the native trees that could be preserved to save them from the bulldozer. Drost planted palm trees at the boundaries of building lots and mangroves along the outer edge of the perimeter canal. Both men drafted deed restrictions for their lots. Most of Drost's mandated ground level homes of masonry with not more than one and one-half stories and included prohibitions against unsightly signs, overgrown yards, house trailers, and other things which would mar the beauty of the developments.

As each new addition was added to his development, Drost drew up another set of deed restrictions and there were some significant differences between them. A committee was formed to consolidate the restrictions. It was a big job, but it was finally finished in 1998 and presented to the affected property owners for

review. The consolidated deed restrictions were approved by a majority of the property owners. A couple who made one of the early purchases of a lot wrote, “We also remember our first contact with Vincent Drost. He was sitting in a little 4 x 4 shack alongside the road (US 1) with a small sign advertising lots for sale. One or two canals had been dug and there really wasn’t a whole lot to see. The date, May 2, 1959 was the day we made our down payment.”

The first two homes in Drost’s development were finished in 1960. One of them was the Drost’s house and office at the corner of Drost Drive and First Ave. E. Sales of lots and home construction continued with ups and downs. Hurricane Donna in September 1960 and the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962 slowed sales to a near standstill. In one particularly bad year, the Drosts sold only two lots. To encourage neighbors to get to know one another and work

together for the betterment of the Gardens, the Drosts built a club house which they named the Club 800. It was completed in 1974. All residents of the Gardens were afforded full memberships; residents of neighboring Keys could become associate members.

As the years rolled by, Colson and Sawyer Drives gradually and unofficially came to be considered part of Cudjoe Gardens. Today, residents of those Drives are included in all Gardens activities and can and have served on the Board of Directors.

Despite the best efforts of the Drosts, residents made only limited use of the club's facilities.

Around 1980, the Drosts sold the club and it became a public restaurant. They also sold the property around the basin and launching ramp, which became a commercial marina open to the public.

A group of homeowners formed a property owners association in 1976. One hundred owners became members, paying dues of \$10 per year. In 1986, the Drost's donated property on 4th Ave. W. to the Association to give it stronger legal standing in court cases. To foster community spirit, the Association sponsored social events such as picnics and an annual Christmas party and published a quarterly newsletter.

When Drost was ready to dredge the last canals, those north of 4th Ave. W., the Army Corps of Engineers limited the depth to 8 feet instead of 15 feet. As a result, there would not be enough fill to bring the adjacent properties up high enough for home building. To get enough fill, what would have been 3rd Ave. W. was eliminated, and the two canals to the north were made much wider. A large area between 4th Ave. W. and 2nd Ave. W. was left in its natural state as a sanctuary for birds and other native creatures.

Sometime after the property owners association was formed, Drost turned over the job of vacant lot maintenance to the association. The committee in charge of lot maintenance hired contractors and sent notices of their fees to all owners of vacant lots. Not all of the owners were cooperative and management of lot maintenance has been a constant headache for the association.

Over the years, the Property Owners Association has fought to maintain the deed restrictions. Court battles, although costing the Association heavily, have kept the restrictions valid and enforceable. Legal fees which could not be recovered forced the association to raise annual dues to \$100. This was reduced after we had enough in reserve to the current figure of \$75.

The Drosts also donated property at the entrance to the Gardens to the Monroe County Sheriff's

Department. Groundbreaking ceremonies for the \$250,000 sheriff's office building took place on August 19, 1988 with many notables present to express their appreciation to the Drosts.

Through the years, resident volunteers have pooled their efforts to accomplish significant maintenance and improvement projects. Led by "Skip" Speller, the chain-saw gang cleared fallen trees and limbs from the streets and property after hurricanes. Using a pontoon boat acquired by the Association they cut back overhanging limbs and bushes along the canal walls which were impeding navigation. In 1997, the chain-saw gang removed 200 palm trees with lethal yellowing. In the early 1980s, another group of volunteers installed channel markers to guide boats into the Gardens from Bow Channel. Some of them are still in place. In 1984, volunteer residents planted 60 blight-resistant coconut palm seedlings on lots whose owners requested them and had contributed to their cost.

Over the years, the quality and clarity of the water in the canals gradually deteriorated. To improve flushing of the canals, Drost underwrote the cost of a canal cut-through between 1st and 2nd Avenues. Then in 1991, a committee headed by Skip Speller, assisted by William Scheidell conceived a project to get additional canal cut-throughs. After eight years of difficult negotiations with regulatory agencies, governmental authorities, and property owners, the committee won approval to go ahead. Property owners gave their approval to the project in a special referendum. A contractor completed the four cut-throughs in October 1999. The work was paid for by homeowners on the affected canals. In conjunction with the work, bicycle-walking paths were paved on each side of Drost Drive. In 2001, several residents volunteered to take the necessary training and begin a program of canal water sampling.

To further enhance the beauty of the Gardens, the Association initiated and funded a project to plant trees along Drost Drive and install an entrance sign at the corner of 1st Ave. W. A resident volunteer, B.J. Deis, planted an attractive bromeliad garden in front of the sign. In its over fifty years of existence, Cudjoe Gardens has survived many hurricanes with only minor damage. During hurricane Donna in 1960, the water rose to street level, but did not flow into homes. Hurricane Georges in September 1998, a category three storm, destroyed 60-70% of the trees and landscaping and sent water into some of the older homes built at lower levels. One home in the first addition was flooded to a depth of 18 inches. Several boats sank and a few others were washed up high and dry on land. The wind destroyed some porch enclosures, blew tiles and shingles off roofs, and tore the roof off the Sheriff's sub-station, but there were no serious injuries. Hurricane Wilma in 2005 flooded many

homes and cars in Key West, but spared Cudjoe Gardens from the worst. Some boats were floated up off their lifts, partially sunk, or left hanging from their davits partly full of water. After the storms, residents together with the chain-saw gang went to work to cut up fallen trees and limbs and clean up the debris.

Starting with two houses in 1960, Cudjoe Gardens today, June 2015, has 316 houses plus several under construction. Vincent Drost passed away in 1997; Ross Sawyer in 1972 . We residents owe them both a debt of gratitude for the outstanding job they did in developing Cudjoe Gardens.

John Viele is the author of three books on the history of the Florida Keys:

The Florida Keys - A History of the Pioneers

The Florida Keys - True Stories of the Perilous Straits

The Florida Keys - The Wreckers