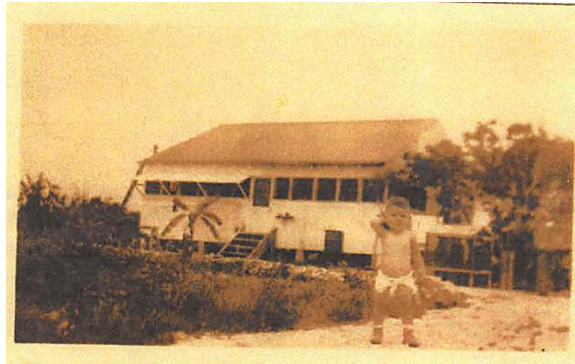


BOYHOOD DAYS ON CUDJOE KEY

By Robert Sawyer as told to John Viele

In 1938, when I was three years old, my father, Ross Sawyer Jr., purchased 72 acres of land on Cudjoe Key for \$414. He wanted a place where he could hunt and fish and be free from city life in Key West.



Sawyer family
lodge on Cudjoe

He was a carpenter, and, he built a lodge for our family: my mother Jennette, myself and my brother Ronald, who was one year younger than I. He used lumber from the abandoned railroad bridges for the floor and roof supports. Nearby, he built a small house for my grandparents. The buildings were located on the Gulf side of the Overseas Highway opposite what is Sawyer Drive today. We lived in Key West, but once the buildings were completed, my father would drive us up to Cudjoe in his truck on most weekends.

The first Overseas Highway was completed in 1928 with two forty-mile water gaps that were crossed by car ferries. At first, there were wooden bridges between the keys, sometimes described as rickety. At night, traffic on the highway was virtually non-existent. Only two vehicles disturbed the silence on Cudjoe in the night, a Greyhound

bus and an Overseas Transportation Company truck.

A sharp curve on Sugarloaf Key known as "Dead Man's Curve" frightened some motorists who would slow down or stop if they saw a truck coming the other way.

Gas stations were few and far between and there were none in the lower Keys. Buckets with ropes attached were placed on the wooden bridges to put out fires that usually resulted when motorists threw cigarettes out their windows. A blowout was a serious problem as hordes of mosquitoes would quickly descend on anyone attempting to change the tire.

Mosquitoes were a real problem. In the forties, a mosquito control agency for the Keys was established. Settlers could get large containers of DDT from the agency. By connecting a line from the container to a car's exhaust pipe they had a spray truck. It helped but not much because of the limited area they could spray with the truck.

Rural keys residents in those days subsisted largely on what they could catch or kill in the surrounding waters or woods. Major native food sources were fish, crawfish (Florida lobster), turtle, turtle eggs, raccoons, and White-crowned Pigeons. My father felt that the deer were so defenseless that he would not hunt them.

We also had vegetables that my parents planted and we raised chickens and ducks. My father also planted lime trees and raised bees.

As a boy, I thought White-crowned Pigeons tasted better

than steak. There were two ways we would hunt them. One was to walk quietly through the woods on the north side of Cudjoe. We would shoot them as they fed on the Poisonwood Tree berries. The other was to go by boat to Tarpon Belly Key or the small keys in the vicinity of Pye Key and shoot them as they flew overhead. With a 12-gauge Shotgun, it was hard to miss.

Raccoons would often come out of the woods and stay by the side of the highway at night. To get them, mother would drive the pick-up truck with father sitting in the back with his shotgun. After he had killed one or two, mother would drive back to let him pick them up.

We boys didn't have to dive to catch crawfish. They would gather under mangroves near the waters edge. With grains (spears), it was very easy to catch them.



Ross Sawyer, Jr.

My father had a turtle net that he would set in three feet of water near the end of what is today Colson Drive. This place was also our swimming hole. The net caught more sharks than turtles. To get turtle eggs, mother would drive Ronald and I up to Long Key where we would walk along the beach looking for signs of turtle nests, and then dig them out to get the eggs. Loggerhead Turtles laid their eggs about 25 to 50 feet from the waters edge; Green Turtles laid them about 75 feet or more from the shoreline.

There was a pond about 250 feet east of our Cudjoe lodge. Sometimes, an alligator would take up residence in it. My Dad was concerned that we small boys might arouse the gators appetite, so he would shoot any gator that appeared.

Rattlesnakes were another concern but mainly for the chickens. There was a chicken coop for them to nest in. Every once in a while we would find a rattler in the coop feasting on the eggs. My father would quickly take care of dispatching the snakes.

The only full-time resident of Cudjoe when I was a small boy was Burton Cash, a black man and charcoal burner, who lived in a small house next door. He also took care of the vegetable garden and the bees and acted as a protector for my mother when strange men came passing by on foot.

There were several part-time residents. Karl Thompson had a house and a coconut plantation on the northeast section of Cudjoe. The house is still there as well as the canal he had dredged for access to the coconut trees. He owned a Coca Cola bottling plant in Key West and only came up on weekends.

Another weekender was Jack Ederly who would stay in a small building made of railroad ties located in what today is a trailer park. He was involved with a development called Sarcarma located between the highway and the Cudjoe Bay shoreline.

Working with our father, my brother and I learned to be carpenters. There was no electricity on Cudjoe until 1953, so we learned using hand tools. My father developed the Sawyer and Colson Drive area. My brother and I worked on many of the houses.

John Viele is a resident of Cudjoe Gardens and author of three books on the history of the Florida Keys.