

Our Coquina Key
By Edmund Gallizzi

Coquina Key, as we know it, began its evolution after World War II. The development and growth had its ups and downs. But even before the war and then after, a series of developers had big plans for the island. These developers included Edson Lewis, William Goldman, Elliott Mackle, Irving Green, Frank Stumm and Thomas Mahaffey.

The evolution began in 1955 with the Mackle Company. Until 1955 the only access to the Key was via a rickety wooden bridge which was built in 1923 after a channel was dredged between Big and Little Bayou making the original peninsula into an island. It connected 45th Avenue South to Lewis Boulevard on the south end of the island. In 1955 Mackle built the north bridge that connected 39th Avenue South to Elkcarn Boulevard (Mackle spelled backwards).

Mackle initiated a real estate sales program with an April 1955 Grand Opening event at which more than 10,000 people attended. Mackle began building along Elkcarn and north on Neptune Drive. But according to the Tampa Bay Times, because Mackle's own sales teams scoured the country, local agents assailed the project because Mackle's first houses were inexpensive starter homes. Mackle intended to build more expensive waterfront homes later. He built one waterfront home in 1956 near the corner of Lewis Boulevard and Pompano Dr SE. By 1957 after building 200 homes, Mackle sold his property to Irving Green. With low down payments and gifts for purchasing, business was good. But by 1960 the bubble burst and owners with little equity went into foreclosure. An aerial photograph of the island dated 1957 shows two clusters of houses, one along Elkcarn Boulevard and northward on Neptune Dr. and the other along Lewis Boulevard with lots of vacant land between.

By the mid-1960's the pace of development picked up and Coquina Key became a growing neighborhood. Frank Stumm promoted the island and Thomas Mahaffey initiated the construction of the Coquina Key Arms apartments (north and south) which are now Waterside.

Other developments that aided the island community's growth included the new Coquina Key Shopping Center, the Coquina Key Property Owners (Neighborhood) Club House, the Coquina Key Park and Recreation Center, and Grandview Park.

The Shopping Center was built in 1960 with Publix supermarket as the center's anchor. Other business included SS Kresge, a doctor's office, a hardware store, an Eckerd Drug (now CVS) store, a cafeteria, a S&H Green Stamp Store, a jewelry store, and Joseph's Beauty Shop.

Recently we have been reminded of the beauty shop when the Joseph's sign appeared under some of the shopping center building's siding that was removed for the new Ace Hardware renovation.

In the early 1970's the city resolved to acquire "additional waterfront property for the purpose of expanding its parks and recreation programs" and "additional lands ... in the Coquina Key area to accommodate its citizens' desire for parks and recreation areas." As a result in 1973, the city purchased the Florida Power (now Duke) Employees Club and developed the Coquina Key Park. The property included a recreation building and a pool that was located at the northwest end of the park between the basin and Big Bayou. The building had a large multi-purpose room (main hall 75'x36') with a stage at the end. Among other things the main hall allowed ½ court basketball. Two wings were located at each end of the central building. The north end wing had a kitchen and snack bar. A game room and dressing rooms were located in the south wing which was adjacent to the 75'x35' pool. A small cottage was located by the pool. The Employees Club had owned the property since 1951, so by 1973 there had been a lot of deferred maintenance.

Soon after purchasing the Club the city invested more than \$100,000 for renovations, repairs and equipment including tennis courts, soccer fields and sailing prams. Programs at the recreation center included boating instruction by the Red Cross, scouting programs, summer playground, tennis lessons, South Side Soccer League, free lunch, swim team program, and canoe and sailing clubs.

By the 1970's the starter homes of the 1950's and the resident starter families now had teen aged kids. The Coquina Key Park recreation facilities (gym and pool) were a focus of island teen activities. The group became known at their high school, Lakewood HS, as the Island Kids.

Over the years as it became apparent that maintaining the building had become costly, Islanders worried that the city would demolish the building and sell the land to developers.

An editorial titled *Keep the Clubhouse* in the June 4, 1980 Evening Independent newspaper said "Before 1973, Coquina Key youngsters loitered at a convenience store because there was no other place to go. Must that undesirable situation be reawakened?"

But that was the end of the building and pool.

Information in this article came from the Tampa Bay Times, St. Petersburg Parks and Recreation, long time local residents, and the Urban Planning and Historic Preservation Division of the City of St Petersburg.