2015

Distant War Clouds, with Clearing Paths for Development Ahead [1942-1951]

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“Distant War Clouds, with Clearing Paths for Development Ahead”
Remarks Delivered at the Fifth “Pinellas by the Decades” Program
Pinellas Room, Heritage Village
12 February 2012, 2:00 p.m.
by
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Welcome to the fifth 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. From now through the summer, we will cover the historic landscape of the Pinellas Peninsula by remembering important events and discussing how these events shaped our history and present-day reality.

The focus of today’s lecture is to examine the period from 1942 through 1951. In our January program, we examined how our agricultural resources nourished us during the lean years of the Great Depression. We also learned that the State of Florida began to mobilize for the possibility of America's entry into the Second World War long before the attack on Pearl Harbor brought us into the conflict. Although World War II began with the German invasion of Poland in September 1939, one could argue that parts of the world were preparing for a larger conflict even earlier, with the Japanese invasion of Manchuria in September 1931 and Hitler's expansion plans for "Lebensraum," or "living space," as German troops entered other European nations--often with little or any resistance--before the invasion of Poland.

During World War II, all corners of the Sunshine State transformed to support the war effort. More than 170 military installations, airfields, and training fields blanketed the state. Civilian lookout posts and blackouts along the coastline prepared for the threat of "Unterseeboots" (literally, "Under Sea" boats) or U-boats. Although wartime tourism languished, frenzied activity covered Pinellas County during World War II. With the Maritime Service Training Station at Bayboro Harbor, Pinellas Army Airfield, and the test site for the Roebling Alligator in and around Dunedin, Pinellas contributed to the fight against foreign fascism. Many young recruits of the U.S. Army Air Corps trained in the area. With the war's
end in 1945, Pinellas County's population expanded into new areas once occupied by groves.

By the fall of 1939, with Europe fully engaged in the war, the Coast Guard reopened a naval base at Bayboro Harbor, just south of downtown St. Petersburg. Planes from the Coast Guard Air Station conducted anti-submarine patrols in the Gulf of Mexico. On November 6, 1939, the United States Maritime Commission selected the city's bid for a Maritime Service Training Station at Bayboro Harbor. This came after another Tampa-St. Petersburg rivalry for one of the coveted training facilities along the eastern coast of the United States: In August 1939, St. Petersburg and Tampa had submitted separate bids to host a maritime training center along the Gulf coast. One unsuccessful proposal called for a facility at Fort DeSoto on Mullet Key; Tampa submitted sites along the current location of MacDill Air Force Base. On October 28, St. Petersburg's city council met to approve a plan to donate land at Bayboro Harbor for this purpose. Two days later, the city submitted this proposal to the Maritime Commission. City leaders received early word that their bid was selected on November 2, with official word coming on the sixth.

By mid-November, two training ships moored at the Coast Guard station while awaiting construction for the United States Maritime Training Service Station to begin. The city transferred the land to the federal government in January 1940 and construction began in April 1940. Dedication of the base took place in July 1941.

By December 1942, Cooks and Bakers School was established at the US Maritime Service Training Station. New barracks and classroom facilities at the base opened in January 1943. Before the end of World War II, the base had to lease four large hotels formerly used by the US Army Air Corps in 1942 to meet the demand of maritime trainees during the latter part of the war. A couple of months earlier, on October 27, the United States Navy had commissioned an anti-submarine base at the south end of Bayboro Harbor.

This site on the peninsula at Bayboro Harbor continued to serve as the Maritime Training station through the end of March 1950, when federal authorities
decommissioned the facility. Nearly 25,000 recruits passed through the installation. After a variety of short-term uses, the former base become the first and temporary campus of Florida Presbyterian College, now Eckerd College, while its present campus near the Pinellas Bayway was under construction, and, in 1965, the Bayboro Campus of the University of South Florida. Now more than seventy years old, the former administration and main building of the Maritime Base is currently used by USF's College of Marine Science.

Other areas of Pinellas also prepared for the war. In March 1941, construction began on an airport in the High Point area after President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's administration approved a site of over 900 acres for an airport between St. Petersburg and Clearwater. Although originally envisioned for civilian purposes due to the limited possibilities for expansion at Albert Whitted and landing strips in north county, the site was acquired by the US Army Air Force (precursor to the US Air Force) in April 1942 and became Pinellas Army Airfield. Used primarily as a training site for P-40 Warhawks and P-51 Mustangs, the field also served as a strategic location to launch reconnaissance flights in search of German submarines along the Gulf. The military returned the facility to the county in December 1947, and it became Pinellas International Airport, now St. Petersburg/Clearwater International Airport.

Other nearby airports sent a steady stream of planes over Pinellas. In 1941, a man named Clarence Ludwig had purchased Grand Central Airport along Weedon Island and it was renamed Sky Harbor. Some training flights came from that facility, though many more took off and landed from three notable sites in Hillsborough: 1. MacDill Army Airfield, now MacDill Air Force Base; 2. Drew Field, later converted into Tampa International Airport; and 3. Henderson Field, a site that later became part of the USF Tampa campus and lands north of Busch Gardens. During World War II, many remote beach areas, including much of the area of Belleair Beach, Belleair Shore, and parts of Mullet Key, where Fort DeSoto is located, served as sites where young pilots practiced their skills in dropping bombs on deserted coastal venues.

The Army Air Corps had a substantial presence in St. Petersburg during World War II. In early 1942, nearly every hotel in the city was commandeered by the United States Department of War, predecessor to the Department of Defense. Among the larger hotels, only the Suwannee was available for tourists. Of course,
wartime rationing and restrictions decimated tourism and even led to the cancellation of Spring Training baseball and the city's popular Festival of States parade, but the city did become crowded with those who marched to a different drumbeat: More than 120,000 recruits passed through the city during the war years. Some stayed at the Vinoy and Soreno hotels, while others camped in temporary tent cities in the Tyrone area and near the Jungle area of western St. Petersburg.

A few people did leave the city, though not of their free will. Although some attempts by German spies had successfully reached Florida's east coast during the war, most German-American immigrants had melded into the war effort against foreign fascism and gladly started to call their sauerkraut "liberty cabbage" like they did during World War I. Others, however, were more obvious by their presence. Though small in number, they were quickly targeted. Very few Asian Americans lived in Pinellas at the time. However, on December 8, 1941, the Sone Gift Shop and the Nikko Inn, two St. Petersburg businesses with Japanese-American owners, were closed and police seized their assets. The proprietors, along with some other Japanese immigrants in the area, were sent to internment camps.

Other parts of the county mobilized for the war. As was mentioned in our last program, Donald Roebling had experimented with amphibious vehicles that might have military value during the mid-1930s, and finally designed the Alligator vehicle prototype in 1940 that he tested around St. Joseph Sound and Clearwater Bay. After visits by officials from the US Navy in that year, Roebling won a contract to produce the Alligators. Many were built in Pinellas and in a larger plant in Lakeland, with more than 18,000 put into service before the end of the war.

The testing and construction of the Roebling Alligators had a ripple effect on the Dunedin area. By May 1941, more than seven months before Pearl Harbor, the first group of United States Marines, forty in number, arrived in Dunedin to train. Two-hundred fifty soon followed. They stayed at the Hotel Dunedin while barracks were constructed. They had the responsibility of learning how to
maneuver the *Roebling Alligators* coming from the factories in Dunedin and Lakeland. Between 1941 and 1943, the *Dunedin Servicemen’s Lounge* occupied a spot in the old post office building as a place where local residents supplied food and hostesses provided a friendly face for the Marines assigned to the barracks north of town. Marines once stationed at the old *Dunedin Hotel* moved into new barracks at the site of the former *Skyport by late summer 1942*. Construction of the barracks and storage depot took place at a rapid pace, with completion of the facility taking only six weeks. This location became a training site for *Donald Roebling’s "Alligators."*

By July 1943, Grant Field in Dunedin became the site of a tent city for the 722nd *Army Signal Corps AW Company*. The *United States Marine Corps* base at Dunedin remained in operation until August 1944. The location, now part of the *Harbor View Villas* subdivision, shows no evidence of the former outpost except for a small sign along Palm Boulevard just west of US Alt. Route 19 (Bayshore Boulevard). By this time, the military authorities had acquired the boom-era Don CeSar Hotel on St. Pete Beach and transformed it into a place for injured servicemen to convalesce. Visits by the Sunshine City's "Bomb-a-Dears" lifted spirits of the war wounded, while others in distant battlefields liberated areas once under the control of Hitler and other Axis forces.

Another liberation movement happened much closer to home. In June 1943, Governor Spessard Holland signed the "Women's Emancipation Bill" into law. This measure was sponsored by Mary Lou Baker, a Pinellas resident who was the only female serving in the Florida legislature at the time, and only the second woman in the history of Florida to serve in Florida's House of Representatives. The eldest of five children, Baker possessed a strong interest in law, politics, education, and social justice. A 1933 graduate of Clearwater High School, she attended Florida Southern College and—over the course of several summers—enrolled in special law courses offered through the University of Florida while completing her law degree at Stetson University. During her studies, Baker won a prize for her essay on the granting of civil rights to women in Florida. She earned her Bachelor of Laws degree from Stetson University in 1938. Mary Lou Baker entered professional practice in September 1938. For the next eight years, she served as a
lawyer in St. Petersburg. From 1946 through her death in 1965, she formed a law partnership with her father.

In 1942, she ran against incumbent Stanley C. Minshall for a seat representing Pinellas County in the Florida house. In an April statement to voters published in the St. Petersburg Times, Baker made her case as a candidate worthy of consideration in the Democratic primary: "Pinellas County is my home. As a child, as a student, as a housewife, I have become acquainted with its agriculture . . . I know its great seafood industry, its sports fishing, its vacation areas, . . . its churches, schools, and colleges. . . . I know what a day’s work and a dollar are. . . . My platform, briefly stated, is to support that legislation which will secure sincere patriotism, honorable peace, free thought, free speech, pure morals, unfettered religious sentiments, and the blessings of democracy for all." She won the election.

Her bill, passed in 1943, gave married women the right to manage their separate property, to enter into contracts, to sue and be sued, to convey property, and to execute documents. It also enabled women in Florida to enter into contracts or partnerships with their husbands. These are things taken for granted today, but were not provided for under Florida law at the time. At the time, her own colleagues in the Pinellas delegation even avoided offering support, including Rep. Archie Clement, who condemned this as a “dangerous bill.”

Baker did not win passage of other important bills, however. One bill she filed would have permitted women to serve on juries. During debates on this proposal, Rep. Warren Sanchez of Suwannee County argued that the average mother should be “more concerned about her children at dinner time than about listening to testimony in a trial.” Others insisted the bill would open the way for African American women to serve on juries. Baker made a final stand, pleading, “Women on trial for crime might be brought to trial before a woman judge, prosecuted by a woman district attorney, defended by a woman lawyer, brought to court by a woman bailiff, and yet be forced to trial before a jury of men.” At the end of World War II, Florida remained one of only eight states that barred women from juries. Women would not win the right to serve on Florida juries until 1949, four years after Baker had left office.
In wrapping up our conversation of the war years, it's worthwhile to note two other barriers that fell as the result of the needs of wartime workers. Both the Davis Causeway (later renamed the Courtney Campbell Causeway) and Gandy Bridge were built as privately-owned initiatives. The only two spans across Tampa Bay were toll roads. By 1944, the federal government had taken control of these roadways as a wartime measure, thereby allowing war workers—and the rest of us—to cross the spans without paying tolls.

On May 8, 1945, a crowd of nearly 5,000 crowded Williams Park for V-E celebrations, as American and allied troops claimed victory over the Nazis in Europe. Later that month, on May 22, *a cenotaph was dedicated on National Maritime Day at the tip of the Bayboro peninsula* as the first maritime memorial for those who had trained there and perished in service during the war. The cenotaph remains on the site today, in front of the original Maritime Service building now used by USF's College of Marine Science.

As we close the chapter on our discussion of World War II, let me add that many of the residents of Pinellas who did not fight in distant battlefields still aided the war effort through scrap drives and other activities. For example, in Dunedin, more than 290,000 pounds of materials were salvaged in 1942 alone. One other contribution had to do with nutrition: After off-and-on attempts to develop an orange juice concentrate with taste that would attract broad market appeal, events during the Second World War actually moved this initiative forward. Most early attempts to remove water left a concentrate that, when reconstituted, tasted like dish water. Members of Dunedin's Skinner family and other investors in *Citrus Concentrates, Inc.* (CCI) were contracted by the War Food Administration about having supplies of their concentrate available for shipment overseas. They could ship as much Vitamin C in one shipment of concentrate as it would take thirty ships full of fresh oranges. These shipments provided Vitamin C to citizens in Great Britain during a time of food shortages, especially after the federal government provided over $1 million in financing for a concentrate plant in Dunedin. By the end of the 1943-1944 growing season, CCI had made and shipped more twenty-eight million cans of orange juice concentrate and, in doing
so, had employed approximately 450 at the Dunedin plant. Though the plant suffered a devastating fire in August 1945, Bronson Skinner did rebuild the plant.

During the 1940s, agricultural activities predominated along the peninsula. James Thurston, owner of Thurston Groves in the Seminole/Oakhurst area, called on other citrus growers to stand united in an effort to have the county do a comprehensive survey of the county's subterranean water resources to assure that sufficient amounts of freshwater would sustain their important industry. To Thurston, "excessive drainage" along roadways and to discourage mosquitoes had started to curtail resources. Thurston's plea in the summer of 1940 was heard by many, including those who maintained more than 1/3 of the lands within Dunedin's city limits in 1943 as sites of active groves. Charley and Winona Nigel Jones, newlyweds of 1944, natives of the Palm Harbor area, and longtime supporters of Heritage Village, even opened a popular roadside fruit stand in Palm Harbor in 1945 that they operated until 1960.

Some veterans of the war even came back with groves of citrus on their minds. The best example was Al Repetto, who grew up in the Largo area. After returning from service in the United States Navy during World War II, he started Orange Blossom Groves with his brother-in-law. Repetto’s holdings grew substantially during the 1950s. Over the next few years, subdivisions began to sprout in areas near his groves.

Others thought of cows. Milton Whitfield Bryan and his wife, Pansy, came to Pinellas from Tampa in 1940 to establish a dairy on a 1,040 acre site between Largo and Pinellas Park. They established their business to the east of Jay B. Starkey's extensive holdings between Park Boulevard and Ulmerton Road. Of course, the original pathway through Starkey's lands became Starkey Road, and the connecting path to the Bryan property became Bryan Dairy Road. In the summer of 1949, workers finished construction of a dam along Long Bayou at the present site of Park Boulevard. That stretch of the road between Lake Seminole Park and Seminole Boulevard sits atop a dam that was built at a cost of
approximately $160,000 that transformed the waters north of Park Boulevard from a saltwater marsh into the freshwater estuary of Lake Seminole. The creation of Lake Seminole was hailed as an important development for farmers and cattle ranchers in the area, such as Jay B. Starkey. However, by the 1950s, groves began to replace pastures on both sides of this human engineered lake.

Postwar projects reshaped other areas of Pinellas. In April 1946, as one of the earliest notable postwar expansion plans for the Gulf Beaches, D. L. McDevitt sold tracts of land along the northern portion of Sand Key. Some of these areas along this desolate beach known as Long Point had served as an Army Air Corps gunnery range during World War II. The only notable settlement in this area before World War II was a small cabana colony that belonged to the Belleview Biltmore Hotel across the intracoastal waterway in Belleair. During World War II, the cabana colony closed and lands between this area and Indian Rocks (some of which were submerged) served as a gunnery range for pilots. The first construction along what is now Belleair Beach began in 1946. Also during this year, much of this area became known as the Belleair Beach Improvement District.

On the southern end of the county, at Cabbage Key, a real estate deal in January 1949 set the stage for major developments by the 1960s. Cabbage Key exchanged hands in a valuable land deal that offered a glimpse of real estate speculation along the Gulf Beaches during the postwar years. Ray E. Dugan, owner of Cabbage Key since 1930, sold the island to a syndicate (that gave him 1/7th interest) for approximately $200,000. The transfer, including riparian lands, surpassed 1,000 acres. Cabbage Key once had large live oaks and a thirty-two acre fresh water lake, as well as a famous resident, Silas Dent, the "hermit" of Cabbage Key. Dugan offered his reassurances that Dent would not be evicted from the island as a result of this deal. A March 1949 article in a Milwaukee newspaper profiled Dent, then 68 years old and a resident of Cabbage Key for nearly forty years. By early 1949, a few others lived in huts on the island, and Dent spent some of his time weaving grass skirts and making mosquito swatters out of palm leaves. By the
1960s, this remote island was merged with Pine Key to form Tierra Verde. Little evidence of Cabbage Key's early years remains.

Beach settlements developed and incorporated. Charles E. Redington's development, Redington Beach, incorporated in November 1944 just north of the Lone Palm subdivision. On the north side of John's Pass, Izzy Schuster celebrated the opening of a $50,000 building that included a market and apartments. It also contained the first beach post office between Pass-a-Grille and Indian Rocks Beach when it opened on January 2, 1947.

By May 5, 1947, sixty-nine of the 101 eligible voters living between 140th and 155th avenues along Madeira visited the Bay Palms Trailer Park's recreation hall on 150th Avenue and voted in favor of incorporating Madeira Beach as a town. Harold J. Regan served as the first mayor. By September, residents between Johns Pass and 140th Avenue—part of the former Mitchell Beach development—also expressed their interest in becoming part of Madeira Beach. Voters in the town of Madeira Beach and unincorporated Mitchell Beach approved the annexation measure after a period of time when the Mitchell Beach areas had briefly became known as South Madiera Beach. A full merger of incorporated and unincorporated areas took place in August 1951.

South Madeira may have faded into the history books, but long before what is now known as South Pasadena came into existence, the area where this community is perched between Gulfport, St. Petersburg, and St. Pete Beach briefly became a wild and crazy party town. We often think of South Pasadena as the Pinellas County municipality with a median age that has hovered around 70 for many decades, but for a brief period, it a wild settlement known as "Coreytown" when paperwork was filed in the courthouse on March 23, 1948 that took advantage of the simple nature of incorporating under older Florida laws that were relics from the time the state was a rural frontier. The boundaries of Coreytown included "four bars, three fruit stands, a novelty shop, a floral shop, a tourist park and fewer than half a dozen residences." At the time, the law in
effect permitted areas with at least twenty-five male inhabitants to incorporate if they held an organizational meeting with at least thirty day's notification and if twenty-five residents attended the meeting. Mayor Walter Caldwell Henry of Coreytown--and one of the men operating the community's Rhapsody Bar--even admitted that the area had only fifteen permanent residents at that time. They sought incorporation as a way of getting water more cheaply from St. Petersburg's municipal system. Also, incorporated communities could keep half of the beverage license fees paid by proprietors. Others believed that Coreytown was established so the settlement could extend bar hours beyond the midnight curfew mandated in unincorporated areas. The bars in Coreyville operated until 3:00 a.m. A judge dissolved Coreytown in 1951 because the community could not attract twenty-five eligible voters for an election. The "town" started by bar operators became South Pasadena a few years later.

Developers transformed the mainland, as well. In 1947, Sidney Colen, a native of Erie, Pennsylvania, began building homes in St. Petersburg. Colen named his early developments after their children: Merna Park, Leslee Heights, and Kenneth City, a separate municipality established in 1957. We will talk about his developments in greater detail when we discuss Kenneth City next month and his signature development in the Countryside area, On Top of the World, later this spring.

James Rosati Sr., known by associates as "The Duke," built St. Petersburg's first post-Depression subdivision, Tyrone Gardens. A native of New York City, Rosati came to Florida in 1948 and that year developed Tampa's Bel Mar Gardens, along the Interbay Peninsula between the Gandy Bridge and the Howard Frankland Bridge. He came to Pinellas in 1950, the year that his 400-home Tyrone Gardens development won the first place award from the National Association of Home Builders for street improvement and road sizes. The Tyrone Gardens Shopping Center became the first postwar shopping center and offered competition for Webb's City for those who started to move to the western end of St. Petersburg.
Postwar developments required better infrastructure. In September 1947, the Gulf Beaches Sanitary District filed an injunction against the Haven Beach Hotel along Indian Rocks Beach to prevent the dumping of raw sewage into Boca Ciega Bay. The district claimed that untreated effluent went directly into the bay near the Narrows, and petitioners asked for the hotel to connect to a septic system. Some viewed this as the "opening gun of a campaign throughout the Gulf Beaches area to eliminate the dumping of raw sewerage into narrow bays and inlets between the islands." By the summer of 1948, the district filed additional injunctions against hotels with septic systems including the Tides Hotel and the Tides Apartments in present-day North Redington Beach and the Somo Apartments in Madeira. By the end of the decade, there were also calls to end the burning of waste and trash in large heaps along the Gulf Beaches, as well. By June 1951, major infrastructure improvements began at Madeira Beach, including the construction of a complete water treatment and sewer system, moving of underground pipelines along Gulf Boulevard, improvements to Gulf Boulevard (including widening of the roadbed), and the addition of curbs and sidewalks.

A year earlier, the Belleair Causeway opened to traffic, connecting the mainland with the early settlements along Belleair Beach. Bridge construction had started in the early spring of 1949. Other connections between land, water, and weather had short and long term impacts. In August 1947, an especially nasty bout of red tide hit the coast from Pass-a-Grille to Clearwater Beach, frustrating residents, proprietors, and others along the beaches. Devastating sponge blights also diminished the harvests of spongers in Tarpon Springs by the late 1940s. Other devastation hit during Labor Day of 1950, when a hurricane caused extensive damage along parts of the Gulf Beaches, including a stretch of the shoreline near the Narrows. Before the storm, a segment of Gulf Boulevard near the old 1916 bridge at Indian Rocks sat along the gulf side. Water damage from the waves destroyed the roadbed. The State Road Department planned to move Gulf Boulevard to the bayside, but there were delays in rebuilding the roadways.
Difficult times called for an optimistic outlook. In the late 1940s, after helping with a soapbox derby sponsored by the Clearwater Optimist Club, member Ernest Green thought about the possibility of starting “a soap box derby on water.” Green mentioned this to fellow Optimist member and Dunedinite Clark Mills, a boat builder who saw great potential in this idea. In rapid fashion, Mills had constructed and launched the Pram, a boat that could be constructed for between $40-70 at that time. Soon, the Clearwater Optimists and the Dunedin Chamber of Commerce both had Pram fleets. The first Pram Regatta sponsored by the Optimists took place in 1948.

As prams filled the waters of the Gulf Coast, the street car line between St. Petersburg and Gulfport came to an end. In 1947, members of the St. Petersburg city council approved a measure that led to the end of the street railway. Service on the last remaining routes ended at midnight on May 7, 1949. As they ripped up the rails, the 1949 Florida legislature approved a bill that changed the name of Lake Butler to Lake Tarpon. Originally named in honor of the first surveyor general of Florida, Colonel Robert Butler, the name caused difficulties for a local citrus grower who used "Lake Butler" as a return address and soon discovered that his return mail was sent to Union County by mistake, thinking they meant the community of Lake Butler in that county.

As we wrap up our enlightening lecture, we should mention that the need for more kilowatts to keep lights burning led to the dedication of the Higgins Plant at Booth Point along Old Tampa Bay in late 1951. The first phase of the $20 million plant helped to meet the growing electrical service demands of northern Pinellas. Named for A. W. Higgins, former president of Florida Power, the $7 million plant dedicated was part of a complex that sat on over 100 acres. To the north and on the other side of the shore sat Pinellas County's first county park, established a couple of years earlier on Odet Philippe's former estate.

Well, the period from 1942 through 1951 was a busy time in our county's history. From wartime restrictions to unrestricted development, the landscape was
starting to change. As we will learn in our next lecture, in 1952 the various communities along the Gulf Beaches developed a new marketing strategy as they marketed themselves as the "Holiday Isles." Also, that same year, a young entrepreneur named Jack Eckerd arrived in Clearwater and purchased a small storefront just west of the McCrory's on Cleveland Street in the downtown. His family had operated a drugstore company in Pennsylvania and other states before he moved to Florida. I know we will talk about some of his activities as we continue our lectures.

Thanks for coming today. I do have time for questions.