

The True History of Sanibel – Part One

By Art Stevens

There have been conflicting reports over the years on the precise history of Sanibel. There is controversy over how Sanibel got its name, who the early settlers were and exact dates of important historical events.

Being the consummate reporter, I embarked on a lonely but important mission – to research Sanibel’s history and set the actual facts down once and for all.

To accomplish this monumental task, I scoured every document and book I could get my hands on. I interviewed countless historians and studied family trees of Sanibel families whose ancestors were among the early settlers.

What follows is a chronology of the most important dates in Sanibel history. Tear up all your present Sanibel history books. They are inaccurate. Now the full story of Sanibel can be told.

One million B.C. – Neanderthal man comes to Sanibel from Miami to avoid the crowds. Led by their fearless leader Spam, this hardy group of prehistoric men settled in caves on the present day site of Sundial. Their hunting tools were rudimentary, but were adaptable to the new gulf environment.

Dinosaurs roamed freely in the heavily vegetated inner regions and the Neanderthals avoided these massive predatory beasts at all costs by camouflaging themselves as pepper trees.

500,000 B.C. – The Neanderthals were followed by the next species of man, the Rosenthals.

250 B.C. – Wandering nomadic tribes crossed the Continental Divide to settle in the estuary fault basin region of Southwest Sanibel. Unaccustomed to the vast climatic changes confronting them, their dietary habits became radically altered. They learned to eat shells from Sanibel’s shores.

The “shell people”, as they have since been referred to by historians, learned to cook such rudimentary dishes as shell steaks – with real shells; shellac, a fine porridge; and shello, a delicate dessert.

They maintained their quaint custom of slurping liquids from shells, then eating the shells. Present day descendants of these early tribesmen have carried on the customs of their ancestors. They can be seen in Sanibel restaurants eating their plates.

1225 A.D. – The shell people stayed in Sanibel for many centuries and their civilization flourished until the great shell famine of 1225. With fewer shells to feast upon, severe malnutrition and outright starvation took place. The number of shell people dwindled as a result and the tribe was forced to migrate to Palm Beach where they went into the suntan lotion business.

1250-1350 – During this period, there were no inhabitants in Sanibel. The island flourished as a garden primeval where wildlife in its natural form abounded. Flying

creatures known as birds built nests in tall growths henceforth referred to as trees. This was a period of calm transition for Sanibel. The return of man was not far off.

1350 – At last, the return of man. The Vikings discovered Sanibel and found they couldn't adjust to any temperature that is above 20' Fahrenheit. They decide to use Sanibel as a penal colony for captured Byzantine tribes. Thus the first modern day settlers of Sanibel, sent by the Vikings, were hunting tribes from Mesopotamia called Sanibelites. Now it can be told that Sanibel got its name from the Sanibelites who were outcasts in Scandinavia but learned to work the land in Sanibel. The Sanibelites lived in Sanibel for three centuries.

1618 – A turning point in Sanibel's history. Ponce de Leon, forever in pursuit of the fountain of youth, made his way to Sanibel thinking he was in Paris. Compasses weren't very accurate in those days. His small band of followers tricked the native Sanibelites into selling their beloved unspoiled island to de Leon for \$24 and the next year's first round draft choice. De Leon named the island Fountainbleau and established a beachhead there.

1750 – Fountainbleau, which had been governed for over a century by de Leon's followers, had relegated the Sanibelites to servant status. An elitist class system evolved consequently causing stirrings of unrest on the part of the Sanibelites who initially accepted their situation with stoic resignation. As the years passed and the distinction between the ruling Fountainbleaus and the subservient Sanibelites became more marked, civil strife became more frequent.

In 1750, Baillius, the warrior leader of the Sanibelites, led a rebellion against the now fat and lazy Fountainbleaus and forced them to flee.

Baillius, for whom present day Bailey's supermarket is named, became the patron saint of this island. He quickly changed the name of the island to Baileyville which it was so named until more radical sects of the Sanibelites overthrew the existing government in 1823 and renamed the island Sanibel. However, Baillius' birthday, February 30, is still celebrated as an annual holiday in Sanibel.

In Part two of this series on the true history of Sanibel we will take you through the next exalting two hundred years. This final installment of Sanibel's history will include such historic names as Benjamin Franklin, Sidney Sturdley, Paul Bunyan, Irving the Hun and Rumpelstilskin. Stay tuned.
