

The True History of Sanibel – Part Two

By Art Stevens

Let us return to the days of yesteryear when Sanibel was in its infancy. The preceding chapter traced the history of Sanibel from the dawn of civilization to the revolt of the Sanibelite tribe led by its warrior leader, Bailius, in 1750.

The next two hundred years of Sanibel history would prove to be just as tumultuous, volcanic and asthmatic.

1791 – Benjamin Franklin chose Sanibel as his winter home and made his greatest contributions to mankind from these shores. It was while in residence in Sanibel that Franklin dabbled in such inventions as the kite, electricity, shoe laces, nail polish, hair spray and dentures.

He was inspired in Sanibel to develop the Franklin Mint, which, as you know, simply melts in your mouth.

1812 –England attempted to seize Sanibel from the United States as partial redemption for its staggering losses during the Revolutionary War. The new U.S. government refused to accede to the might of the famed British Navy and in one of the great sea battles of all time John Paul Stones, Admiral of the U.S. fleet, defeated the legendary Duke of Ellington, four games to two.

Sanibel's sovereignty was secured and the British were sent packing.

1840 – Charles Periwinkle became the first mayor of Sanibel and decided to have his way.

1851 – Egrets and herons make their first appearance in Sanibel. Apparently hypnotized by the historic Sanibel lighthouse during their annual migration from South America, these beautiful birds were offered the key to the city by Mayor Periwinkle.

1864 –Groundbreaking for the famed Sanibel subway system took place on May 1, 1864. The subway, which would connect Fort Myers, Tampa, Mexico City and Sanibel, was designed by the renowned American engineer Diamond Jim Brady. Legend has it that three hundred workers drowned in the bay while attempting to lay railroad tracks on the bay floor.

The subway, which was to be completed in 1872, lasted until 1910, when it was destroyed by a band of roving graffiti writers. Remnants of the old subway system are often found in present day Sanibel by deep sea divers.

1875 –The Sanibel secession, led by Sanibel's notorious mayor Ponce de Leon IV, took place on February 30, the national holiday of Sanibel commemorating the birthday of Bailius, the island's patron saint.

Sanibel had been annexed by the state of Florida some one hundred years earlier, but growing unrest over ever increasing shell taxes led to the insurrection. De Leon and his army banished all Floridians from Sanibel, set up their own government, renamed the island Fountainbleau, and defended the island from Fort Sundial.

1881 – The State of Florida recaptured Sanibel by sending in a crack platoon led by the young Teddy Roosevelt. De Leon IV is forced to flee to Mexico where he later joined forces with Pancho Villa to launch Mexico’s first silent movie company. Florida renames the island Sanibel and appoints William Jennings Bryan its new mayor. It is as mayor of Sanibel that Bryan established a national reputation. His famous “Cross of Gold” speech was given on the steps of McT’s Restaurant.

1910 – The island of Sanibel is rocked by a volcanic eruption from St. Timbers, the tallest mountain in Lee County. Molten ash flows through the cobblestone streets of Sanibel taking the lives of six herons, two egrets and one ragtime musician. Damage to the island was measured in the millions of dollars. Sanibel is a shell of its former self.

1915 – After years of rebuilding, Sanibel is restored. The former Rodeo Drive is renamed Periwinkle Way in honor of Sanibel’s first mayor. And Sunset Boulevard is renamed Middle Gulf Drive.

1920 – Sanibel Town Council votes to join the U.S. to fight the First World War. The Council, in its infinite wisdom, decides that it is vital to stabilize the island’s work force during these trying times and drafts young men for the war effort between the ages of six and ten. Sanibel embarks on a rigorous military training program for these young men when it learns that the First World War had been over for a year.

1928 – Sanibel rejects prohibition and becomes a “hot spot” for U.S. partygoers. Sanibel becomes the winter home of the film industry and it was not uncommon to see John Barrymore, Greta Garbo and Babe Ruth sipping Molotov cocktails from seashells.

1935 – The depression grips Sanibel as it does the rest of the nation. Businesses fold with morbid regularity. Breadlines are endless as rich and poor alike line up outside Timbers for morsels of blackened bread. Dowager matriarchs of heretofore wealthy families are seen selling apples on Sanibel street corners, and worse, their heirs sell sea shells by the seashore.

Thus ends a two-part series on the history of Sanibel up to the Great Depression. Now you know why Sanibel has such a rich tradition. Visitors are in awe of our famous landmarks and monuments, such as the statue of our patron saint Bailius in the swamps of Ding Darling.

As you peruse our island, you too will find yourself thinking about the many roads we have traveled to make it to modern times, such as how the early Sanibelites made the decision to switch to Direct TV from cable. Folklore abounds in Sanibel about our mythical heroes such as Lawrence of Sanibel, Charles Periwinkle, Sidney Sturdley (his name keeps coming up), Bailius, John Paul Stones, and Monty Muckyduck.

Let us take a moment of silence now to honor these Sanibel household names. Okay, that’s enough.
