



WILTON MANORS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

HISTORICAL NOTES

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BETTY AND GEX WILLIAMS, INTERVIEW AS TOLD TO MARY AND RON ULM, AUGUST 28, 2013

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Wilton Manors Historical Society

Betty Morrison and (Edwin) Gex Williams, Jr. first visited Wilton Manors in 1949 and moved here in 1951. Gex (pronounced "Jay") was the son of E. Gex Williams and Helen King Williams. E. Gex was the son of William and Anna Williams, the cofounders of Williams-McWilliams Ice Cream. Gex, Jr., founded Williams, Hatfield, and Stoner, a civil engineering firm. As city engineer for many cities Gex helped develop South Florida's building codes. He designed much of the South Florida infrastructure residents take for granted today, including the replacement of septic tanks with modern sewer systems.

Gex, Jr.'s sister Helen, married George Richardson, Jr.

Betty and Gex Williams' first visit together to Wilton Manors occurred in 1949 when the engaged couple went to "hit some balls" at the golf range run by Al Hagen. The range was located on Wilton Drive where the current City Hall property is now.

The couple married in 1950 and came back to Wilton Manors to live after University of Florida graduation in 1951. The Chabot Apartments where they lived overlooked the No. 9 Fairway of the Richardson Golf Course (today's Richardson Historic Park and Nature Preserve). One evening Betty looked out the window and noticed that the Fairway looked a greyish-brown, as if it had been paved. But wait! It also looked as if it was moving and it was headed toward Wilton Drive. The couple ran outside to see thousands of land crabs moving in mass from the golf course across Wilton Drive, a distance of about 100 yards. The old joke around the golf course was that if you didn't watch the ball carefully, it would disappear down a crab hole!

In 1958 the couple moved with their three children: Gex, Steve, and Sandra to their newly purchased house at 625 NE 21st Court. This house was built in 1947 by Mabel Barwick, who ran a local insurance agency and real estate business on Wilton Drive. The home sat on almost an acre and was constructed of Florida cypress. The living room ceiling was 18 feet high at its peak and paneled with tongue and groove cypress boards long enough to reach the ceiling without any joints. The wooden paneling for the house is said to have taken up an entire box car when it was shipped by train.

At that time NE 21st Court ended at the Williams Driveway and there were no homes along today's NE 20th Street or NE 20th Drive. The backyard of the home looked out upon an undeveloped "Hagen's Island", which is today's Town House Isle. The location was ideal for raising a family. The boys fished upon the banks of the river, just a few steps from their yard. All the children visited Hagen Park and were involved in an active recreation program.

One special treat for the Williams children was watching the City's volunteer fire fighters practice and test equipment along the stretch of land at the river before Townhouse Isle was developed. (Wilton Manors had an all-volunteer fire department from 1952 – 1999.)

Another treat was getting a glimpse of the “Bird Lady” who lived in the “Castles” at Five Points, as locals referred to the entryway towers built in 1925 by Wilton Manors developer, E.J. Willingham. The towers were torn down in the 1960s, but live on in the official city logo. The “Bird Lady” moved into one of the towers rent-free and kept several parakeets, mynahs, and even an owl there until she was evicted in 1956.

Betty Williams was an avid gardener and often won awards for having the most beautiful yard. Quail, fox, and opossums were regular visitors, along with a variety of birds that nested there every year. “Hagen’s Island” was populated by ancient Cypress trees where parrots roosted, as they still do today.

Betty Williams led the Wilton Manors Cub Scout Troup for four years. She took the Troup for nature study at the woods at Richardson Golf Course. There, they identified cypress, oak, air plants, and wild orchids.

Betty also served on the Recreation Advisory Board at the time when the land for Colohatchee Park was purchased. She was the only woman serving on the Board at that time.

Gex Williams was one of the founding members of Williams, Hatfield, Stoner, a prominent engineering, land surveying, and planning firm. The business was located on Wilton Drive at NE 7th Avenue where the Executive Suites office building is located today. Gex served as the consulting engineer to the City for several years.

Answers to specific questions

Q. Who lived in the upstairs apartment of the Carriage House?

A. For several years two elderly ladies from the Northeast wintered in the apartment. Their names were Louise and Lizzie. They joined the family for Thanksgiving and Christmas Dinners and can be seen in one of the video recordings provided to the Society by the Williams.

In addition, Kamie Richardson lived in the apartment during the summer while she attended college.

Q. Did Buddy Hicks ever live in the apartment?

A. No, Buddy had his own home a few miles away.

Q. What can you tell us about Buddy Hicks?

A. Buddy served as the caretaker at the golf course and as driver and helper to Rachael Richardson¹. He was quite the philosopher. Everyone loved him. He was a real help to Rachael. He prepared dinner for her and took it to her. He kept an eye on George and Gex Richardson when they were young. Even after the golf course closed in the late 1950s, he came and sat on the tractor and mowed the property.

Q. What else can you tell us about the golf course?

A. It was the only public nine-hole golf course in Broward County and received a lot of business from the same golfers day after day. George, Jr. would get up early to change the flag pole and cups to give the course a different play each day. This was when he was going to law school in Miami.

Also, Gex and George would play golf in the afternoons after work. Betty would watch to see when they were starting down the 9th green and go over from the apartment to sit on the bench and visit with George, Sr. as they finished playing.

Q. Who lived in the old Willingham House after Rachael died?

A. Gex’s parents, Edwin Gex Williams, Sr. and Helen King Williams lived there until their deaths. The house was quite old. It had exposed wiring, the kind with the little insulators. The house fell into disrepair and George Richardson had it torn down. The volunteer fire department burned it as a practice drill before it was torn down.

¹ Wife of George Richardson, Sr.

Q. Who else lived near you on 21st Ct?

A. There were four houses built along 21st Ct down from Wilton Drive to the point where the street ended at the start of the Williams' lot. All of the houses are on the north side of the street. The first house belonged to Mrs. Turner, Sr. It was later purchased by one of the McJunkins. The next house was built by Carl Hiassen and later purchased by the Price family. Continuing east, the next house belonged to Roy and Martha Fairfield, and then the Barwick/Williams house was the last house on the street.

Q. The house that was at 625 NE 21st Court is no longer on the property. What happened?

A. After 32 years the Williams sold the house in 1991 to Stephen and Nancy Simmons who raised two boys and a girl there, just as the Williams had in the prior generation. Just before Hurricane Wilma struck in 2005 the Simmons sold the house and property to a developer who planned on building three homes of the large ¾ acre lot. The Simmons retained salvage rights to the house. Hurricane Wilma destroyed the trees and landscaping, but the well-built house survived without damage allowing the Simmons to later salvage the cypress paneling, the oak flooring, the attractive cypress front door and the 5 foot diameter chandelier, all of which found its way into the Simmons' new home in Harbor Beach.

Q. What can you tell us about how the Williams-McWilliams Ice Cream Store began?

A. Gex Williams's grandparents came to Fort Lauderdale in 1926 after their dry goods store in Missouri burned down. McWilliams was the husband of Gex's father's first cousin. In 1940 Gex's father decided that he would like to bring pasteurized milk to Broward County and he started a milk plant to pasteurize, bottle, and distribute milk. The milk plant also began distributing homogenized milk for the first time in Broward County. After school Gex worked at the plant running the bottling machine and homogenizer. His partner, McWilliams, was not interested in this side of the business and moved to Hollywood, where he continued running an ice cream store.

Q. In doing research on Willingham when he lived in Idlewyld, we came across some Williams. Do you know if they were related to you?

A. Gex's grandparents rented a home in Idlewyld in 1925, so it may have been them. Also, Betty's son-in-law was related to a Williams that also lived in Idlewyld. It could have been them.

Edwin Gex Williams - Obituary

Edwin Gex Williams Jr, 89, a Ft Lauderdale native, passed away at the Woodlands of John Knox Village Monday, May 8th. ... In lieu of flowers donations may be made to Gilda's Club South Florida. ...

Gex was born June 10th, 1927 in the Ft Lauderdale home of E Gex and Helen King Williams because there was no hospital in Broward County. He grew up in the historic Rose Drive home built by his grandparents, which is now Gilda's Club House.

As a youth Gex (pronounced Jay) worked the family business Williams McWilliams, then Ft Lauderdale's only ice cream shop, and South Florida's first dairy to pasteurize milk. A proud Flying L, he played trumpet in Ft Lauderdale High's first band, and weekend USO dances for the troops during WWII. Gex graduated high school in January 1945, at 17 and enlisted in the US Navy. Gex's grandparents William and Anna Williams moved to Ft Lauderdale in 1923 and his parents, Gex and Helen Williams, followed in 1926. In 1928 they became members of First Presbyterian Church. His father was fifth Commodore of Lauderdale Yacht Club.

Joining his father's Pi Kappa Alpha fraternity at the University of Florida Gex met the love of his life, Pike Dream Girl Betty Morrison of Gainesville. In 1951, after earning a BS in Engineering, Gex returned to Ft Lauderdale with his wife Betty. Gex and Betty raised their 3 children Gex, Steve and Sandra in Wilton Manors where he founded the civil engineering firm of Williams, Hatfield and Stoner (WH&S). Gex's sister, Helen, married George Richardson and they became best friends and brothers, living and serving together in Wilton Manors as city attorney and city engineer for decades.

In the 60's, 70's and 80's WH&S designed and oversaw expansions at Port Everglades, and Ft Lauderdale-Hollywood Airport, as well as Borden's South Florida Dairy. As city engineer for many cities Gex helped develop South Florida's building codes. He designed much of the infrastructure that South Florida residents take for granted today, including the replacement of septic tanks with modern sewer systems. Gex served as President of the Florida Engineering Society and the Rotary Club, as well as other professional and civic groups. He served on First Federal of Broward (later Glendale Federal) Board of Directors as a champion of affordable home loans.

To Gex, Ft Lauderdale was not just a good place to work, it was the best place to live and play. His passion for sailing and boating led him to become Lauderdale Yacht Club's first second-generation Commodore. As Commodore of the Gulf Stream Sailing Club he promoted family sailboat racing and cruising. Gex was Deacon and Elder at First Presbyterian Church and guided his life by the Golden Rule: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you". True religion for Gex was helping widows and orphans without fanfare or recognition. Many children in Wilton Manors were unknowingly helped by his kindness in sponsoring them in school and sport activities, senior trips and even weddings. People and relationships were always more important than money. His definition of success is leaving the world better than you found it. Gex's first words in the morning were generally, "another beautiful day in paradise". He has gone on to an even better paradise, and his beloved Ft Lauderdale is a little better for the time he spent here.

Gex is predeceased by his parents E Gex and Helen King Williams, and Judge George and (sister) Helen Williams Richardson. Gex is survived by his wife of 66 years, Betty Morrison Williams and their 3 children, 15 grandchildren and 20 great grandchildren. The Edwin Gex III and Judy Bixler Williams family: David and Melissa, Sandra, Anna, Katie; Mark and Jessica, Leah, Michael, Brianna, Brayden, Alyssa; Daniel and Jordan; Sarah and Seth Holman, Zeke; E Gex IV and Rachel, son; and Betsy. The Stephen Donald and Holly Anderson Williams family: Stephen and Kristi Del Sol Williams, Danielle; Matthew; Caroline; and Christopher. The Wayne and Sandra Williams Marlowe family: Rachael and Aaron Bullock, Jacquelyn, Rebecca, Micah, Malachi; Daniel and Florence Lambert Marlowe, Adelyn; Byron and Britney Roberts Marlowe, Peyton, Caleb; Susannah and Josue Galan, Elise, Lydia; and Caton. - See more at: <http://www.legacy.com/obituaries/sunsentinel/obituary.aspx?n=edwin-gex-williams&pid=185370632#sthash.KiKnTVYG.dpuf>

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