



WILTON MANORS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Historical Notes

June 2008

John Pedersen, Wilton Manors Pioneer, and Princess Margaret

By Benjamin Little and Paul A. Kuta
Wilton Manors Historical Society

Ward and June and Ozzie and Harriet may have had it easy in the suburbs in the 1950's, but this was because of Pioneers like Wilton Manors' John Pedersen. Unlike most of our Pioneer's, Pedersen never was elected to office, but he had the same entrepreneurial spirit!

John P. Pedersen and his wife Lillian arrived in Wilton Manors from Racine, Wisconsin after John, a builder, fell from a roof and suffered a back injury in the late 1930's. Some years earlier, Lillian had hit on the novel, and patented, idea of making curtain tie-backs, and the idea caught fire. It turned into the Unique Novelty Company with more than 60 employees, and counted Montgomery Ward and Sears and Roebuck among its customers.

Upon arrival in Florida, Pedersen began to acquire land by purchasing tax-delinquent property, as did several other of our Pioneers. He had hoped to build homes on these properties, but during the WW II years, lumber and building materials for housing were not available. Lumber and supplies for building chicken coops were available, and



Pedersen took advantage. It is unclear how many he built, but the story is that after the war, he simply cleaned and refurbished the coops with the necessary interior modifications and accoutrements and sold them as starter homes to returning soldiers and their young families. He owned a lot more land than that, on both sides of Andrews Avenue. On the east side, the land was north of Lazy Lake and concentrated around NE 24th Street. The Historical Society is currently attempting to map the holdings of all the early Pioneers.

Pedersen made his home in a number of locations in Wilton Manors. Most spectacular and

visible is the home he built for himself at 2125 NE 5th Ave. It puts today's McMansions to shame.

In 1950, Pedersen was driving through southern Palm Beach County and hit on the sleepy town of fewer than 1,000 citizens – Mizner's 1926 "booming" Boca Raton. Pedersen liked the feel of the place and thought it would be the perfect locale for his longtime dream – a tourist attraction where exotic animals roamed free in lush surroundings. He bought 300 acres and immediately set about to acquire animals and vegetation. He and his son Jack went to eastern Africa to acquire the animals. On one trip, they returned with more animals than had ever been in a single boat shipment from Africa. Florida Senator George Smathers was instrumental at clearing their arrival with the Port Everglades authorities.



Pedersen's daughter Shirley and son-in-law George Schneider grew many of the 55,000 plants needed for the park at the Schneiders' nursery at 2524 N.E. 5th Avenue, where the Marvilla Condominium now stands.

The park became Africa U.S.A. It predated Walt Disney's Wild Kingdom by some 45 years, and Disney was an admirer. There were a number of celebrity animals, including Princess Margaret, a baby chimpanzee who made numerous appearances on the Jack Paar Show. Princess Margaret was treated like one of the Pedersen children, and a big celebrity. She would kiss on command! The park operated in Boca Raton between 1953-1961, when Boca, which had grown big and prosperous on the success of Africa U.S.A., crowded it out. The property is now the Camino Gardens subdivision. John Pedersen died in 1996 at the age of 98!

The Historical Society would be very grateful for any information residents have on more specifics of Pedersen's "chicken coops."

The pictures of Pederson and Princess Margaret are from the Africa USA website, www.Africa-USA.com. The picture of the Pedersen House is from the Wilton Manors Historical Society Collection.

For more information on Pedersen and the others who were instrumental in shaping Wilton Manors, look for the new history of Wilton Manors, due to be published in time for Christmas. Be sure to visit our website, www.WiltonManorsHistoricalSociety.org.

The **Wilton Manors Historical Society Historical Notes** Originally published in the Wilton Manors *Island City News* – June 2008

Unless otherwise indicated, all content and graphics are © 2008 Wilton Manors Historical Society, Wilton Manors, Florida – All Rights Reserved.