



WILTON MANORS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

HISTORICAL NOTES

JULY 2017

Vicki Dwight Reminiscences From before Wilton Manors was a Village

The following is correspondence between Vicki Dwight, a long time resident, and Paul A. Kuta, Treasurer of the Wilton Manors Historical Society. Ms Dwight wrote to Mr. Kuta in response to an article he had written for the Island City News in October 2010. She remembered that the Gateway Towers straddled NE 26th Street at Five Points. In fact, they straddled Wilton Drive. She was 10 years old when the big Tower was torn down to make room for the A&W Root Beer stand, so her memories of that are not exactly correct. Her memories of growing up here in the 1950's and 1960's are priceless. Ms Dwight's letters are written in a cursive script which had to have gotten her an "A" in penmanship class.

October 12, 2010

Dear Mr. Kuta,

I would like to question a claim you made regarding the old village gate towers in the October issue of the Island City News. You wrote that they were located on each side of Wilton Drive at Five Points, which I believe to be in error.

To the best of my memory, it was 26 Street which ran between those iconic cochina block structures rather than Wilton Drive. I retain very vivid mental images of the towers, so I don't think I'm wrong. To this day, I can't drive West on 26 Street without seeing them in my mind as I they were quite unique and a point of pride for all of us who were the earliest residents of the tiny village.

I'm not absolutely certain, but it seems that there was once a wrought iron arch connecting the towers. The smaller and North structure was first to fall into major disrepair, but the much larger south tower remained for years longer because it was occupied by an old lady we called "The Old Bird Woman, who kept parrots and other avians inside and out around tiny place she called the home. Once she passed away, it became easier for the less historically respectful new officials to arbitrarily decide to do away with those beloved Tower Gates and, I believe that they were bulldozed without any public input whatsoever!

I'm not sure when that happened but I think that it was then that the Hagens became more involved in the politics of the community, particularly Mrs. Virginia (Ginny) Hagen¹. They owned so much property here especially what we used to call "Hagen's Island," that small spit of land at the far end of Wilton Drive, where back then, only their large home stood. Their daughters Joyce and Diane were good friends of mine and we were made much use of their small "island" as our fantasy spaces especially because they weren't allowed to go further west into what's now known as Lazy Lake, where we used to also play, building reed rafts and kid's forts.

My brother and I grew up on 1st Avenue and for years our backyard butted up to the South East corner of a large mango grove, owned, I think, by Mr. Fields, who was kind enough to allow us kids to use that area for yet another playground, where we could also build our forts and out tree houses. And oh, what fun we had! Wimpy Yankee kids might have their snow balls for fights but we lobbed mangoes and sharp toothed pinecones at one another, so often appeared at our dinner tables bruised and bloodied much to the chagrin of our parents.

Wilton Manors was truly a great place to grow up in and my late brother even moved back, buying a home on 10th Terrace in the late 80s or early 90s and found it to be as warm as it was even when we were kids. Adding to his pleasure, one of his best friends and his young family moved close by just at the end of the street, so he was able to enjoy seeing those kids grow up in the same great place he had.

...

I really appreciate hearing from you about my memories about the old gate towers and the memories I outlined earlier. Even though I've lived in Tallahassee for about for 40+ years I'm once again becoming a SOFLA girl and since we still own my late brother's house I'm so connected to Wilton Manors, so I continue to care about the community and the ways it continues to change and evolve. As you might imagine I have many memories of our special little enclave, but almost as many questions regarding those memories I'd love to discuss with you, so I'll just have to hope that you'll be willing to carry on an old-fashioned written dialogue for a while.

Thanks for any consideration you might give to this request. I'll afford to hearing from you!

Yours truly

Vicki Dwight

¹ Alvar Hagen was, in fact, one of the principals in the incorporation of the Village of Wilton Manors in 1947.

October 22, 2010

Dear Vicki,

Thank you for your kind and interesting letter in response to an article I wrote in the October issue of The Island City News. That newsletter's publisher, Steve Kelly, phoned me as soon as he received it, and I picked it up.

To first respond to your question, the Gateway Towers to Wilton Manors actually flanked Wilton Drive at NE 26th St. I have enclosed a couple of old photos and a copy of the 2005 pictorial history book on Wilton Manors that was authored by Historical Society Vice President Cindy Thuma. As you know, the towers were privately owned and not well-maintained. One set of towers was torn down in the late 1950s and the second set in the 1960s. Today, everyone says that the city should have found some way to retain them; but of course, having the money to do so was one of the civic questions. As you can see from the letterhead on this stationary, the Wilton Manors Historical Society uses the Gateway Tower as its logo.

...

We who are active in the historic society very much enjoy hearing recollections of Wilton Manors in years gone by. You mention Mr. and Mrs. Hagen and their daughters. We have been in contact with Joyce Hagen, who I believe lives in Ohio. She is been generous in sending us photos et cetera of her parents who were true pioneers in our city. Our society awarded a historic plaque to the Hagen home on NE 19th St.(Off Wilton Drive) which still stands and has been beautifully refurbished.

There are still people living in Wilton Manors who grew up here and would likely be your contemporaries. These would include Rob French (of Ed French painting in Oakland Park), Rick Miller (of Barton and Miller Cleaners at Five Points), Alan Clark (who lives in his parents' house on NE 27th St.), the Archacki son on NE 10th Ave., and several others whose names I do not immediately recall. ... Feel free to call me and write me as your circumstances allow. ...

With best wishes,

Paul A. Kuta

Wilton Manors Historical Society

November 30, 2010

Dear Paul,

What an unexpectedly pleasant surprise to find your wonderful thoughtful package in my mail! I had anticipated little more than a terse paragraph or three politely informing me of my faulty memory of the old Gateway Towers location. Instead, I now have a wealth of old photos and information which has sparked even more memories, some of which may also be faulty, so I may continue to bother you for more than you had expected or wanted.

I belatedly realized that I was silly to challenge anyone who has access to so much of the history of the village, but now I'm happy that I did, because of your more than kind and considerate response. I am now, however, forced to admit that my mind's eye may be in need of Lasik surgery, or at least a new pair of glasses! I guess that tends to happen when one is dredging up memories of 50 or 60 years ago although, especially, when there are days I can't recall why I went from one room to another! Can you relate? As they say, aging is not for the faint of heart!.

Back to the subject of the towers. Does anyone remember the old bird lady who occupied the South tower until it was torn down? I can't recall if she died or was evicted² before its demolition, but I definitely remember her being there, because the owner of the service station directly behind the towers would constantly complain about the way she has let the place become so overgrown. That station/garage was owned by Mr. Bower(or Bauer I can't remember), whose daughter Joanie was a longtime friend and dance class partner and where mom always tried to buy gas and have repairs done.

Page 35 of Ms Thuma's was book reminded me of two names I've heard for years, yet only very rarely remember: Police Chief Beaney and Mayor Frank Starling. One of mom's favorite stories was when Chief Beaney made one of his officers tear up a ticket he gave her and sent him to apologize personally for upsetting her, saying that these widowed ladies were not to be bothered unless absolutely needed! That young, new hire, quickly thereafter became a favorite of almost everyone, including the kids, with whom he'd spend time at the school and especially at the new A&W, engaging with us as long as he could until called away. I think he was "Officer Harms," quite handsome young man who was a motorcycle officer so he was especially impressive, in his high boots and big Harley cycle, yet he always made us kids feel so comfortable that we would miss him when he did not manage to show up at the A&W any afternoon. I spent many afternoon hours at that old root beer stand and was quite sad as I watched the being demolished not long ago. Barton and Miller's and Reds Bar are now the only places left at the old Five Points, which that new company wanted to rename Five Corners. My brother, John Dwight, was one of those who challenged the new owners of the Publix complex about calling it Five Corners rather than its historic name of Five Points. Thank goodness they prevailed!

² Evicted

Other photos brought back further memories of early school and church times. I especially remember Mrs. Von Spee from Miss Jordan's School and Covenant Presbyterian (her daughter, Paulette, was one of my classmates all the way through high school.) But it was the photo of our beloved Mrs. Meredith, first grade mentor for both of us, that gave me the best goose-bumps. I am convinced to this day that her astute tutelage was the main reason I loved school so very much for the rest of my life! (Mom would practically have to tie me to the bed when I'd get sick and couldn't attend.) Oh, so many good people...neighbors, teachers, cops, et cetera. This was a tight knit community, so much so that we kids had to behave, because there were so many eyes on us! That's why it's so nice to see the same vigilance in my late brother's neighborhood (10th Terrace), where all the nearby neighbors continue to keep an eagle-eye on that still vacant house; one even volunteered to park one of his cars in the driveway so the place would appear to be occupied to outsiders. You don't always find such on-going concern these days, yet another reason I continue to hold Wilton Manors close to my heart!

But let me get back to more of my possibly erroneous memories. Long before Lazy Lake was a small, independent community³, I recall it being a private enclave of a wealthy old man who had what all of called a "mansion," situated on the NW corner of that area. Although we were never hassled about playing in the area, building our bamboo rafts and forts, we were none-the-less warned by our parents that the old man might "get" us one day and we could be in big trouble. Of course, the lure of the little water hole was too much to resist, and we continued to play there whenever we dared. I cannot recall now how or why I finally decided to approach the mansion, but one day I did just that. As I recall, I was met at the door by someone I would now call a nurse, caregiver, because when I met the old man, he was in a wheel chair and on oxygen. Rather than being an "ogre" we'd all been told to expect, he invited me in and served milk and cookies. I confessed to him that we were playing on his property, and he said that he didn't mind as long as our parents knew where we were and we never harmed anything, although we were free to cut down any of the bamboo for our rafts and forts. That "mean old man" of local lore turned out to be a sweet, generous host who would even throw ice cream parties once in a while. He seemed to be a relatively lonely fellow, so I hope that we offered some bright spots to his fading days! I regret that I cannot, for the life of me, bring his name to mind, so I would love to know if there is anyone who could. This was back when Andrews wasn't even paved much north of 26th Street and we were still riding the mini-horses and donkeys on a small farm off Oakland Park Blvd and Andrews, which were both, of course, simply two-lane black-tops back then.

Not long after that, one of the best entertainment venues for kids and families opened on Oakland Park Blvd – the roller skating rink, which is now the Goodwill Store. Except for Manor Lanes and the movie theaters downtown, at that time, there was little else except the old drive-in theater, the beach, and Birch State Park for our amusement, yet we were rarely ever bored, because we always had our buddies and bikes and almost had to be dragged in every evening. Each night at dinner time, you could hear all our Moms hollering for us, so we would reluctantly stop our play and head

³ Lazy Lake residents declined to join Wilton Manors when it incorporated as a Village in 1947. The day before Wilton Manors incorporated as a City in 1953, Lazy Lake incorporated to avoid annexation by Wilton Manors.

for home, where we would all sit down together nearly every night to share a meal and conversations – so very different than family life these days. Even so, however, I still feel that Wilton Manors remains an exceptional place to rear kids, because every one of them in my late brother's neighborhood has thus far grown up to be exceptional students and citizens.

Ah well Paul, I've gone on far longer than I should have here, but since I have little contact with anyone these days, so some times take advantage of someone like you, especially when you've been so generous with your own response! Thanks again, you have given me much more pleasure than anything I remember lately.

Thank you,

Vicky

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