

WHERE SOME OF THE PINELLAS PIONEERS LIVED: PASS-A-GRILLE

Presented with the permission of Author, Historian, James T. Hurley,

edited by Chas. Grandmaison

This story with its myriad of the histories of people was taken from a book that was written by historian and Realtor Frank T. Hurley. This article is from Chapter 11 of Mr. Hurley's excellent book, "Surf, Sand, & Post Card Sunsets". It has been slightly edited, but still retains the items that are of the most interest to Pinellas County historians and genealogists. The Vital Statistics of most of the persons listed in this article can be found in the Pinellas Pioneer microfilms at Largo Library. Researchers will also find that the names of spouses and children, as well as the spouses of many of those children, are also shown in the Pinellas Pioneer microfilms.

In the early 1900's, surveyors' stakes were piercing the thickets in which Iseka once hid. Tourists would drink from the Old Spanish well, and adventurous mainlanders pitched tents on beaches that Colonel Brooke and his soldiers had scoured for pirates.

Pass-a-Grille even had a handful of houses - seven by the autumn of 1901. George Lizotte and his wife Bessie opened a small hotel-restaurant about that time.



The Bonhomie Hotel opened the Gulf Beaches to tourism in 1901. As its sign modestly states, its shore dinners "made Pass-a-Grille famous." (courtesy Capt. Kenneth B. Merry)

Documented is Zephaniah Phillips' homestead cabin, two lots south of where it stands today. Also documented were George B. Haines' cottage in the 500 block of Pass-a-Grille Way, and Scepter Patrick's house on stilts that Lizotte had remodeled into the Bonhomie Hotel.

Capt. Ransom's cottage was at 702 Pass-a-Grille Way. Some old-timers say the sea captain's cottage was later moved to 102 Fifth Avenue and is still standing.

Early settlers picked the choicest lots. Later, when Pass-a-Grille land became coveted, they re-sold their lots to newcomers, but often kept their houses, using crude rollers and teams of oxen to move buildings to new locations. A temporary road of planks laid in advance of the straining ox teams kept the rollers from sinking into the sand.

M.H. Kinyon, a St. Petersburg real estate developer, closed his deal on a lot just north of the homestead house in March 1901. That summer Kinyon built a house and a "substantial dock" for his launch that had been brought south on a railroad flat car from St. Joseph, Michigan.

Kinyon's house was probably dismantled before World War I.

The Davis sisters, Ellen and Cinthiana, owned the first beachfront house. They were spinsters from Connersville, Indiana. (Miss Ellen was a charter member and twice president of St. Petersburg's Woman's Town Improvement Association.) Their two story frame home on the south corner of Ninth Avenue and Gulf Way was set with its back to the north and its front south toward the summer's prevailing breezes and winter's warmth; rather than facing west toward the Gulf view. It was said to be Pass-a-Grille's third house. The Davis sisters' house was moved twice. Once they had it hauled back to solid ground after a storm undercut its foundation and left it teetering 10 feet over the water's edge. In 1911, its new owner, Fred Leshner, formerly of Chautauqua, New York, moved the house about 50 feet south to 807 Gulf Way. There the old house stood until June 1968.

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In 1902, George S. Granger, a railroad man from Waldo, Florida, built a vacation house at 102 Seventh Avenue that was typically Early Pass-a-Grille- with wide overhangs, high ceilings, and a high pitched roof. Most early houses, including his, were set high off the ground, some as high as six feet, so the Gulf could flow underneath if it ever went rampaging. But, when Granger built another house at 106 Seventh Avenue three years later, he set it imprudently low on brick piers merely 18 inches high. His son, Mac Granger, once said "All the settlers around here predicted sooner or later there would be high tides or floods from a hurricane and away would go our house". But it never happened. Even the big hurricane of 1921, the worst since the Great Gale of '48, left George Granger's small cottage dry.

Most pretentious of all early dwellings was Sea Call, built in 1902 by Edwin H. Tomlinson, the tarpon-fishing philanthropist. It stood for about 45 years at 108 Pass-a-Grille Way. Tomlinson's friend, Guglielmo Marconi, inventor of the wireless telegraph, once expressed interest in conducting wireless experiments between the United States and Latin America. Tomlinson, who was financially well off, constructed three towers for Marconi's experiments. One tower, said to be 137 feet tall, was built in St. Petersburg, adjacent to Tomlinson's home at 308 Fourth Street South, where he lived in Victorian elegance. The second was on Pine Key (he purchased most of the island in order to get palm logs for his enormous dock in Pass-a-Grille), and the third tower was in Pass-a-Grille as an extension of his beach house. But alas - Marconi never showed up. Thereafter, villagers sometimes pointed out Tomlinson's Pass-a-Grille house to strangers as the "House Where Marconi Almost Stayed". Its tower was a landmark for some years until storms took their toll.

As a boy, Capt. Kenneth B. Merry often

climbed the rickety ladder to the top of Tomlinson's nearly 100 feet tall tower. There were stories, Merry said, that Tomlinson planned to experiment sending messages from there to his tower in St. Petersburg by using sun rays reflected from mirrors and an alphabet similar to the Morse code. George Lizotte used the tower more than Tomlinson. "It was very convenient for me, as I could watch for the coming of the steamship Oskinwa and prepare for the crowd," he once explained.

Joseph E. Merry's store, established in 1902 on the end of a dock that he, Hanna, and Lizotte had built at Eighth and Pass-a-Grille Way, was the first on the Gulf Beaches. Originally, he sold bait and tools and rented boats to excursionists, but in 1903 he added groceries.

Born in Nova Scotia, Merry came to Tampa in the early nineties to help decorate Henry B.



Joseph E. Merry's general store at the end of a dock at Eighth Avenue and Pass-a-Grille Way was the first retail business at the Gulf Beaches. (courtesy of Capt. Kenneth B. Merry)

Plant's Tampa Bay Hotel, a Moorish style palace (now the University of Tampa) that was then Florida's plushiest, most exotic hostelry. Merry next followed his trade in a small nearby town that looked promising - St. Petersburg! He settled down, married a Miss Coleman, and built a two-story home on Tampa Bay where the Soreno Hotel now stands. Their only child, Kenneth B. Merry was born there April 23, 1898.

After his young Wife died in 1900, Merry and his two-year-old son moved to Pass-a-Grille. Capt. Kenneth B. Merry remained a Pass-a-Grille resident ever since, and was the

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oldest person of the Gulf Beaches in years of residency. Looking back over his long life recently, Captain Merry recalled that the only time he was away from Pass-a-Grille, except for vacations, was during World War I, when he was an apprentice boatman in the Tampa Bay Pilots Association. "Even so, I was stationed at Egmont Key," he said.

As for Joseph E. Merry, he stayed in Pass-a-Grille, too. He later remarried and was a storekeeper at 107 Eighth Avenue and a ticket agent for the Favorite Line boats until his death in 1917.

E.G. Kittridge and his wife, Laura, were Bonhomie Hotel guests who had amassed a modest fortune in the granite business in Barre, Vermont, built two cottages in 1903 near 103 and 105 Eighth Avenue. George Lizotte said, "They were ardent fishermen, and one day I asked George Roberts to take them out. They came back with a load of fish and were so enthusiastic about the place that they bought two lots across the street from me, and by spring had two houses built." (According to Pioneer National Title, Kittridge paid Selwyn R. Morey \$450 for 12 contiguous lots on Eighth and Ninth Avenues. The transaction occurred April 8, 1903.) A house at 103 Tenth Avenue may be one of Kittridge's. Captain Merry said it was moved in the twenties or early thirties from Eighth Avenue to its present location. The other Kittridge house was moved to 1803 Pass-a-Grille Way.

Alphonso L. Thayer, self described in his St. Petersburg city directory ad as a "dealer in Florida shells and curios, had a two story home built in 1906 on the north corner of Tenth Avenue and Pass-a-Grille Way. Some of the house still stands; artist Ralph McKoy and his wife used it as a home and as a Studio.

In 1908, William R. Bell, a Cincinnati contractor, built the island's first brick house at 1005 Gulf Way. Bell and his wife, Eleanor, retired

to Pass-a-Grille that year after spending two winters in the community as tourists.

Tampa businessman Calvin Barnard's summerhouse at 605 Gulf Way was the island's first concrete block structure. During the winter of 1908-09, a hermit who had pitched his tent nearby, cast the blocks for the house right on the site. Barnard's heirs owned the house until 1968.

About 1908, Mrs. Phoebe Gough and Miss Abigail Michael, two sisters from the Cincinnati area, had a summer cottage built for themselves at 111 Fourth Avenue. The Michael family owned the cottage, which is said to be Pass-a-Grille's 16th building.

Another early beachfront home was "Darkinel," built sometime after November 1908, by Miss Jennie Darnell and Miss Elizabeth Kincaid, both of Tennessee. Their cottage was as architecturally unique as its name that combined the Darnell and Kincaid surnames. (Until the early thirties, Pass-a-Grille homes had names, not street numbers.) Darkinel faced the sunsets at 109 Sixth Avenue.

Of architectural interest because of its widow's walk overlooking the Gulf is the Paul Smith house at 1007 Gulf Way, built about 1910 or 1911. G.H. Fisher and his wife, were winter visitors from Chicago. They purchased the house in 1913 and occupied it until Fisher died in 1925. Fisher's father-in-law, Charles C. Germain, then acquired it. The house is still there, but the widow's walk has been converted into a room.

James S. Simmons, a former congressman from Niagara Falls, who came to Pass-a-Grille in 1911, had homes on the south corner of Fifth Avenue and Gulf Way and at 108 Fifth Avenue. He used the latter as his residence, maintaining the Gulf Way house

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for his partner in real estate ventures. Simmons was a prominent yachtsman and was once commodore of Pass-a-Grille's Yacht and Anglers' Club. In the twenties, his sleek, 60-foot yacht, "Niagara", was acclaimed as one of the Tampa Bay area's most beautiful boats.

On the islands north of Pass-a-Grille, the first settlers left little to posterity, only their names in title company records. The nondescript shacks that they raised were perishable things that clung precariously to the sands and soon they, like the men who had hammered them together, were gone. Probably the first beach land sale occurred in September 1883. The State Land Office sold John Flannery, a Cross Bayou farmer, a quarter acre at approximately 141st Avenue and Gulf Boulevard in Madeira Beach. Flannery, who paid \$1.25 for it, may have used his land as a fishing camp.

The first recorded beach landowner seems to have been Irving J. Adair, postmaster at John's Pass on the mainland. Adair's land patent was dated March 10, 1883. One corner of the section of land that he homesteaded in Seminole on Boca Ciega Bay touched Madeira Beach east of Gulf Boulevard at about 159th Avenue.

Dusty title company archives also disclose one Albert E. Willard acquired land on the Treasure Island side of John's Pass in 1883. He owned 12 acres. Sidney Lanier, who visited Cedar Key and Tampa in the winter of 1874-75, wrote that anyone desiring to stop at points between Cedar Key and Tampa would have to charter Capt. A. E. Willard's steam launch. "It is in contemplation to send a weekly steamer from Cedar Key, touching at all the points ... as far down as Sarasota Bay, at which latter location some northern gentlemen have projected a colony." If the Captain Willard that Lanier wrote about and Treasure Island's first recorded land owner are the same, which seems likely, then Willard may have intended John's Pass to be a scheduled stop on his steamship line, but the line never went into service.

In 1884, Rollin M. Witt obtained three parcels from the state; 16 acres on Treasure Island along Blind Pass, 13 acres on Cabbage Key, and 30 acres on Pine Key's south tip.

Some 287 acres, including most of Treasure Island, the Isle of Palms, and the Isle of Capri were homesteaded by long-forgotten Claude A. Saunders in 1886.

In December 1885, William J. Van Kirk had purchased the Isle of Palms from the State Land Office only to find six months later that his title had been canceled by Saunders' stronger United States government deed. Unruffled, Van Kirk found an island east of Madeira Beach (probably today's Crystal Island) equally handy for his obscure purposes and took title to 25 acres there in 1886.

While Zephaniah Phillips was whacking away the palmettos and clearing a patch of underbrush for his homestead, Dr. Jason L. Edgar, who practiced medicine and operated a drug store in Dunedin, Florida, was conjuring up visions of himself as King Copra. Dr. Edgar's coconut domain was the north end of Pine Key, which he had renamed Edgar's Island as a prerogative of owning most of the island.

In 1884, the 42-year-old physician started his plantation with 2,000 coconuts that Capt. J. White of Disston City had brought to Pine Key from Cuba. The plantation was mildly successful at first, but Dr. Edgar later abandoned it after his trees were damaged or killed by harsh freezes of the early nineties. An interesting character, Dr. Edgar, had been an Army surgeon during the Civil War and had practiced in St. Louis. In September, 1884, Dr. Edgar, M. Joel McMullen, and Dr. James Baggett "the beachcomber dentist", established the West Hillsborough Times, the ancestor of the St. Petersburg Times. Dr. Edgar is believed to have been the first medical doctor in what is now upper Pinellas County (until he arrived, the nearest doctor was in Tampa). Usually he was paid with eggs, vegetables and chickens.