

Joe Crankshaw: Building Port St. Lucie from scratch was quite a process

By Joe Crankshaw

Monday, April 11, 2011

In 1958, U.S. 1 between Stuart and Fort Pierce was a two-lane highway running through woods and wetlands (we called them swamps), with a blinking light at Midway Road in White City.

North of Stuart, the long vacant stretch was broken by the Shell Bazaar shop, which had a giant, imitation conch shell outside to draw tourists, and at what is now Prima Vista Boulevard, there was a small, quiet, retirement community known as "River Park." That community was developed by the Cowles family, whose media holdings included Look Magazine and the Fort Pierce News-Tribune.

To the west of U.S. 1 was ranchland and the North Fork of the St. Lucie River, where Bert Pruitt's Fish Camp was the largest activity. The camp was accessible by boat and a narrow road running north from Stuart.

Then in 1958, three brothers, Elliott, Robert and Frank Mackle, Miami developers who had a company known as General Development Corporation, bought River Park from the Cowles Family for \$5 million.

The Mackles had developed Port Charlotte on Florida's west coast, and that fact loomed large in the newsroom of the then-weekly Stuart News because the editors expected a similar success story.

The staff's close attention enabled the News, a weekly publication, to "scoop" the Tribune on plans for a new town, even though Cowles served on the GDC board.

What was not known immediately when the story broke about the coming development was that the brothers had a budget of \$50 million, and were negotiating with ranchers for 40,000 more acres.

On Oct. 6, 1958, the purchase was announced and GDC officials said they would rapidly build 5,000 homes.

No one knew where they were going to get the home buyers, but the Mackles had proved adept at selling lots for \$10 down and \$10 a month for 10 years. They had salesmen in phone rooms in the North drumming up purchasers.

The first noticeable activity came with the construction of the Port St. Lucie Country Club, with two golf courses labeled "Saints" and "Sinners," and a small marina. They also built a large number of small houses they called "villas," for the club's vacationing guests along the roads from U.S. 1 to the river.

The process would horrify environmentalists today.

Bulldozers were lined up, track-to-track, and sent in from the highway, carving out an ugly gash that soon became a road. Water pipes were laid and the road paved. Immediately construction crews appeared and began building houses like automobiles on an assembly line.

There was a crew to do every operation from digging and laying foundations, to terrazzo floors and plumbing. Walls went up. Roofs went on.

You could stand at one end of the road by an almost-complete home and see in the distance crews digging foundations with buildings at all stages in between.

The labor force was international. I interviewed one man who proudly described how he had fought for Fidel Castro in the revolution that overthrew General Fulgencio Batista as leader of Cuba.

"My brigade commander was the great Che Guevara," he said of the Latin American revolutionary leader.

Other workers were Haitians, Mexicans and Guatemalan, with American whites and blacks in the majority.

When the country club was completed, the Mackles brought in Florida's new Gov. Farris Bryant to preside at its opening. A Democrat, Bryant was popular in Martin County. There was a big reception for his plane at Witham Field.

The first big event at the club was the installation banquet for the Martin County Historical Society. Martin County business and government interests were careful to cultivate General Development Corporation and the Mackles. That attention probably explains why it took Port St. Lucie so long to develop a town center.

Originally, the town was envisioned as a retirement center with no need for major commercial and business centers.

One day, I heard Dick Campbell, then advertising manager for The Stuart News, talking with some GDC officials. They were discussing where to put a commercial center. Campbell may have had some impact when he said: "Why do you need that? Stuart is just across the river."

Port St. Lucie still does not have a downtown, although they are trying to create one at City Center on U.S. 1.

Port St. Lucie developed a bit slower than some might have hoped for, especially the early city officials who were also employees of GDC. When I left The News in late 1961 to go to the Florida Times-Union in Jacksonville, they were just starting to lay out the massive tangle of roads that became the city's skeleton. When I returned eight years later with The Miami Herald, most of those roads were still devoid of homes.

The large network of roads out in the back country were still used by student pilots from Witham Field learning to make emergency landings, and by drug smugglers who found long stretches of vacant road

the perfect place to land and off-load their illegal cargo. There were so few law enforcement officers in the county that most of the smugglers got away. The evidence they had been there were the aircraft tire skid marks on the pristine roads.

Now, a student pilot or a drug smuggler would be hard pressed to find a landing area. In fact, an early city council adopted an ordinance prohibiting such extracurricular use of their roads. I don't know if it was ever enforced.

The roads were interesting in themselves.

GDC built them out of a mix of cement and local dirt in a mixture called "soil cement." There were questions about how long they would last. Eventually, some roads had grass growing through them before being resurfaced when development finally arrived.



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