

## **Shell Bazaar's giant conch shell good vantage point to see Port St. Lucie founded, grow**

By Christin Erazo

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PORT ST. LUCIE — Before streetlights, homes or even paved roads existed on the uninhabited tract of land that would later be known as Port St. Lucie, it was home to Christine Williams and her family's shell shop.

The Shell Bazaar came to town in 1953 after George and Jean Williams left Daytona Beach and decided to set up shop off of U.S. 1, right between Fort Pierce and Stuart.

Sometime between 1954 and 1955, the store's notable 5,000-pound concrete molded conch shell was created to lure motorists off the highway to see the family's inventory of shell-created lamps, knick-knacks and souvenirs.

A 6-year old Williams would spend afternoons sitting atop the pink-painted conch and watch as cars seldom passed through.

From that spot, she saw how the rural background of her childhood transformed into a developed city.

"There was nothing around, just a fruit stand down the street," said Williams, now 55. "We rode horses, had cows and pigs and it was a very quiet life. But, the area did develop quickly. We changed addresses six times without ever moving."

General Development Corporation's construction of Port St. Lucie beginning in 1958 brought an influx of families and retirees over a period of years, but the newfound population did little to affect the Shell Bazaar's quiet business.

For more than two decades, the Williams family relied on its lamp manufacturing and livestock to make ends meet — until 1988 when the New York Mets spring training camp came to town.

"Our business quadrupled or more," said Williams, who left her home and finance job in Stuart to return to the family business full time. "Back then it was mostly New Yorkers and they had never seen a store like this. I felt like we were a foreign country to them, we were country people."

A steady stream of tourists would come in to get key chains, T-shirts and about every single shell-made product possible. They would also stop to snap a picture inside the conch.

"Tourists would come in and ask what there was to do around here, and I'd tell them, 'You're here,'" Williams laughed. "The growth of the city was wonderful because we needed it. We couldn't live off seeing two to three people a day like my parents did."

As the city grew around the small shell shop, the hometown feel inside remained.

Williams said along with frequently updating the Shell Bazaar's inventory to appeal to both tourists and locals alike, the store's "touchy, feely attitude" is what has kept loyal customers coming back and the business afloat.

"The customers are the history of the store," Williams said. "They come in from all over the world and show us pictures of when they were kids and their parents took pictures of them in the shell. We're now seeing those customers' grandchildren."

Williams sighs in amazement as she looks through old pictures of her trucking and horseback riding and the rustic backdrop of what eventually became St. Lucie West and Tradition.

She never imagined the once-dusty roads she gazed out over atop of the conch would develop so rapidly and that her family's little shell shop would be there to witness it all.

"I always say I would've paid more attention had I known everything would grow," Williams said. "I feel fortunate to have the oldest business in the city and be part of a landmark."

