

Lower Matecumbe's Hidden Jewel

By Mary Ann Sturken, LMKA member

My husband, Craig, and I had the pleasure of meeting Suzy and Alan Sankpill who own the Parmelee estate, or palm tree plantation as it is referred to by locals. Suzy is the daughter of the late Alfred and Dorothy Parmelee who bought the property in the latter part of the 1950s.

Mr. Parmelee bought the land in five separate parcels and did all of the necessary work, including dredging and sitework, for the development and ultimate sale of a community such as Port Antigua. Clearly, he had a vision for this property. The property was drawn up with lots which were to be sold for homesites.

The Parmelees bought fill from the government to cover the property and in 1962, the land was pure white from the sand fill that covered the property. All of this was done before Port Antigua was begun. Ultimately, the Parmelees did not pursue the plan of selling homesites because they loved the nature and beauty of the land and decided to leave it as it was. A friend of the Parmelees, Mary Ikert, who ran the drawbridge at Indian Key Fill back then, planted the first palm trees on the estate; they were Jamaican Tall coconut palms.

Mr. Parmelee originally came down to this area of the Keys from Kansas City in the late 1930s to fish, but he fell in love with the area and bought the property here. He and his wife also built a home near Bud and Mary, bought property in the area that is today known as The Moorings, and also owned the Cinemorada Theater, which is today the Island Christian Church.

Suzy and Alan Sankpill inherited the land in 1977 and are the sole owners. After they inherited the property, they considered having a palm tree business. They estimate that the property contains over 4000 palm trees and they have personally planted most of them. They applied to the zoning board years ago to have their property zoned agricultural but were denied the request and were told there was no agricultural zoning here, so they dropped the idea of developing a palm tree business.



In addition to the palm trees, Suzy's mother, Deo, also planted Melaleuca, Oleanders, and Green and Silver Buttonwood. With such a large property and so many palm trees, the Sankpills hired a good friend to be caretaker of the property. He spends at least three days every week working there and carries a gun for safety. They said he has never missed a day of work.

Unless you have flown over the property in an airplane, you would never know that there is a canal within the property that opens up to the bay at the dead-end of Sapodilla. The Sankpills said there is extensive manatee life in this canal due to its very private and protected environment.

There is a small home on the property at the water's edge, which offers a fabulous view of Florida Bay. It was built in approximately 1959. Mr. Parmelee had a company in England and the lawyer for the company came for a visit and asked if he could buy some of the land and build a house on the property. The Parmelees agreed but said if he ever decided to sell it, he must sell it back to them, which he did. The Parmelees eventually lived in the home after they sold their home near Bud and Mary.

The Sankpills live in this bright and cheerful home with their dog, Kilo, and their cat, Aristotle. They also spend a good part of their time in Kansas City. Their grown children and grandchildren also like to spend time here and come often for visits.

We walked part of the property, which encompasses 40 acres, with Suzy and Alan and were able to see some very special animals that currently live on the property—the only pair of nesting American Bald Eagles in the Keys. They have been nesting there for over four years and have had two eaglets each year. The nest is huge and Alan said that someone from the Audubon Society who visited them said the nests can weigh anywhere from 400 to 500 pounds, or more. The Sankpills treasure these guests and do everything necessary to protect their habitat. (How lucky we are to be residents of Lower Matecumbe Key and have America's symbol of freedom living amongst us!)

The Sankpills are very dedicated to the wildlife on and around their property. As I mentioned earlier, there are manatees in their area.

This winter, due to the cold spell, 431 manatees in Florida died. That's over fifteen percent of the total population in Florida—and several that died were right here. The Village has placed buoys with orange print that say "NO WAKE - Idle speed 300 feet from shore—to protect the manatee population and the Turtle grass right off the Sankpills' property. These buoys are found all along the Keys and there is one on either side of the Port Antigua Canal. Quite often boaters can be seen going too fast between the shore and buoys, endangering the manatees. The Sankpills' request was to bring these buoys to people's attention, in an effort to protect the manatees.

The Islamorada Fire Department uses the Sankpill property to train their search and rescue dogs, which are all German Shepherds. The dogs are given commands in German, rather than English, because they are trained in Germany.

Our visit with the Sankpills was very special. They were incredibly hospitable and invited us into their home where we were able to have a great visit. Their beautiful piece of Lower Matecumbe is indeed outstanding!

