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## SMALL-TOWN FLORIDA: 107 SOULS, LITTLE MAIL

By DANIEL de VISE

DATELINE: BASCOM

It's closing time. Marsha Chandler empties 15 letters from the town mailbox. Up the road, the town clerk parks his pickup around the side of Town Hall for a late meeting so as not to take either of the two paved spaces.

Bascom, 107 citizens in 57 homes clinging to a county road and surrounded by peanut fields, may be the smallest real town in Florida.

"It's so small," joked Grady Cloud, the town wit, "we've got both city limit signs on the same pole."

The state lists Bascom as Florida's ninth-smallest incorporated place. But the eight others are odd. Consider Weeki Wachee, a "town" built around performing mermaids; Islandia, a town within Biscayne National Park populated mostly by park rangers; Lake Buena Vista, whose spiritual center is Downtown Disney; and Lazy Lake, a city block in Broward County that is carved from another town.

The search for Florida's quintessential small town leads deep into Cracker country, past Dellwood and Greenwood and Two Egg, to a place that lies within a day's walk of either Georgia or Alabama.

Bascom is the birthplace of actress Faye Dunaway - "a chubby little girl," in the words of Anne Grant, a descendant of the early settlers.

The former Dunaway home still sits beneath towering pecan trees on Hummingbird Road, off the main road. Several Dunaways are buried behind the Methodist church, and a young Dorothy Faye is pictured, with little fanfare, in an old Bascom Elementary School class photo at the Town Hall.

### COMMERCIAL CENTER

Settled before the War Between the States - still the preferred term among locals - and named for a Methodist bishop, Bascom thrived for a century as a commercial center for farmers before its citizens chose to incorporate in 1961.

Barely two blocks long, the downtown boasts Bryan's General Merchandise, Tidwell's Garage, a day-care center, a pair of well-drilling outfits and an arts and crafts store with a facade painted to resemble a cow.

The First Baptist Church sits across the road from the Methodist church, and each is flanked by a cemetery.

An old knee-slapper, handed down through the generations, tells of the Methodists singing the hymn Will There Be Any Stars in My Crown? on one side of Basswood Road, and the Baptists on the other side replying No, Not One.

NO CINEMA

Bascomians dine out in Marianna, 15 miles away, or trek 70 miles to Tallahassee for a big-city experience. There is no movie theater in Bascom. The three-room schoolhouse closed in 1963.

Panama City is a prime vacation spot. Some in Bascom have never seen Miami. There is a five-person Town Council. There hasn't been a municipal election in three decades.

There are two mail slots in the town post office, one for out-of-town mail, the other for local correspondence. On some days, no one in Bascom mails a letter.

#### NO ANONYMITY

"Everybody knows everybody," said Chandler, the postal employee, who has lived in Bascom for 10 years. "Everybody knows everybody's business."

The road to Bascom runs north from the strip malls of Interstate 10 and seems to travel back in time, past rusted neon signs and aging pickups. Here, everything is named after someone: Walden's Grocery; Blondie's Gas; Robert E. Long Cane Syrup; the Ham Peanut Co.

Bascom's first settlers came down from Georgia on paddle-wheel boats and wagon trains along the Chattahoochee River, turning west at Neal's Landing.

The first church was built of logs in 1880 and named for Methodist Bishop Henry Bidleman Bascom, once chaplain to the U.S. Congress. Settlers took his name for the town.

The town has a Civil War hero, Joshua Pinkney Bevis, captured twice by Union soldiers. Released from a Virginia prison at the close of the conflict, he is said to have walked home.

"He slept for a week," said Grant, a Bevis descendant.

Bascom somehow supported a band in its early days, and Bascom's proudest moment may have come in 1895, when the band played at the inauguration of Gov. William Bloxham.

Bascom achieved a measure of prosperity in 1910, when state highway workers paved State Road 165 straight through downtown. Legend has it that workers chose the route after picnicking with some Bascomians several miles away.

"We had two or three doctors, and a pharmacy, blacksmith shop, cotton gin," said George Hall, the town clerk since 1972.

#### ROAD DEMOTED

As if to mirror the town's gradual decline, State Road 165 has since been demoted. It is now a county road.

With agriculture as its economic base, Bascom never really took off. The population peaked in the low 100s, the citizenry aged, the shops closed.

Farmers still come from 15 miles around to visit Bryan's General Merchandise for hardware, Wolverine boots and cast-iron stoves. It's about as busy as Bascom gets.

"It's a store," said manager John Bryan, "where you can get sprayer parts and also buy a real nice steak."

The 2000 Census listed just 13 people in Bascom under the age of 10. Seven households earned more than \$50,000 a year. The median home value was \$53,000.

Bascom has three black residents, all living in a mobile home behind the general store, according to the town clerk. The remaining residents are white non-Hispanics.

#### COMMUTING ELSEWHERE

Most who live in Bascom work someplace else. Hall, the town clerk, used to commute to Tallahassee.

Cloud, the wit, works at a state prison in Malone, the next town over.

"Most people born in this town never leave," said Cloud, sitting with some friends outside Tidwell's Garage after work on a recent afternoon.

"And those that go, most of them move back before they die."

He summons one more joke: "It's God's country. Don't nobody else want it."

Herald database editor Tim Henderson contributed to this report.

#### FLORIDA TOWNS SMALLER THAN BASCOM

\* Islandia, population 6: Florida's smallest town is - or was - set on a string of coral islands within Biscayne National Park. Incorporated in 1960, Islandia never took off and has no bridge to the mainland. According to Town Clerk Will Murphy, who doesn't live there, Islandia has a four-person council but few or no permanent residents other than park rangers.

\* Weeki Wachee, population 9: Incorporated in 1966 as "a way to get Weeki Wachee on the map, literally speaking," said John Athanason, who speaks for both the city and the Weeki Wachee attraction, with its dancing mermaids. Weeki Wachee also has a mayor. She's a former mermaid.

\* Marineland, population 10: Incorporated in 1940 to protect the interests of the nation's oldest oceanarium. The town still centers on the struggling attraction, but Mayor Jim Netherton says plans are afoot to build it into a real town.

\* Lake Buena Vista, population 19 and Bay Lake, population 28: These Orange County towns are the home address of Walt Disney World. The four main theme parks sit in Bay Lake, while Downtown Disney and environs lie in Lake Buena Vista, according to the Bay Lake town manager, named (of course) Mickey Shiver. When all the visitors go home, a few current and former Disney employees remain.

\* Indian Creek Village, population 33: This ultra-affluent island in Biscayne Bay has a median home value of more than \$1 million, and its citizenry has included such names as Shula and Iglesias. Incorporated in 1939 as a way to get better services than the surrounding sprawl, according to Samuel Kissinger, village manager.

\* Lazy Lake, population 38: It's "a city block masquerading as a town," in the words of a Herald profiler. Lazy Lake is 13 homes and a lake surrounded by the middle-class Broward County city of Wilton Manors. Incorporated in 1953 by developer Hal Ratliff, Lazy Lake was another Florida concept town that never quite panned out.

\* Belleair Shore, population 72: Belleair Shore is another ultra-wealthy suburb that incorporated for the sake of services, zoning and such. It's probably the wealthiest community in the Tampa Bay region, says Mayor John Robertson, who believes that the actual population is closer to 120. The Clearwater-area beach suburb has a working city council. "The Town Hall," Robertson joked, "is on the west side of my kitchen."