

THE HISTORIAN

The Newsletter of THE BOYNTON BEACH HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Serving Boynton Beach, Ocean Ridge, Manalapan, Gulf Stream, Lantana, Hypoluxo, the Village of Golf, Briny Breezes and all areas of West Boynton to US Hwy 441
Post Office Box 12 Boynton Beach FL 33425-0012

Voncile Smith, President

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Voncile Smith, Editor

HISTORIC 1927 BUILDING AGAIN ENDANGERED

The Boynton Beach City Commission is once again considering demolishing the historic 1927 Boynton High School Building.

The Cultural Center, Inc. which operates the 1913 Schoolhouse Children's Museum has asked the Commission to assign them the responsibility for doing a feasibility study on the old building to determine how it might best be used; then possibly implementing plans to begin restoration. The City, however, is considering tearing it down and erecting a new building to house additional space for the Children's Museum and other functions now served by the 1960s Civic Center. The Board of Directors of the Historical Society has endorsed the request of the Cultural Center and is pledged to assist them secure grants and other financing.

Mayor Jerry Taylor has complained that no group has done anything about restoration yet. He overlooks the problem that until a group or organization is assigned responsibility for the building by the City that little can be done. The City in effect must give a group authorization to go ahead by virtue of a lease or other categorization. Bluntly put, someone has to be put in charge or applications for grants or requests for help in fundraising are meaningless. People simply are not going to designate funds directly to the City for restoration; not can any group hope to raise funds until some assignment is made. That assignment could be to the Cultural Center or to the Boynton Beach Historical Society.

The Historical Society would prefer a cooperative effort with the Cultural Center.

This historic building has been examined by two totally separate firms of restoration architects. One, **Rick Gonzalez** who restored "The Harriet" at City Place, was retained three years ago by the Boynton Beach Historical Society to inspect the building and make recommendations. In 2003 a special committee under the auspices of the Community Redevelopment Commission hired another architect from Key West. Both groups said essentially the same thing: the building is generally structurally sound, but in need of some rather extensive rehabilitation. They strongly recommended against demolition because of the good quality of the building and the established favorable economic impact that restoration and utilization of historic structures can have for a community. [Continued on page 2]

LIGHTHOUSE FAMILIES:

The Knights, The Pierces, and the Vosses PROGRAM FOR NOVEMBER 8

Sheldon Voss, a volunteer in the school system of Broward County for talks on Florida history, will discuss the history of the Lighthouses with which his families were involved.

The meeting will be held at 7:00 p.m. on Monday, November 8, 2004, at the Boynton Woman's Club, 1010 South Federal Highway.

Sheldon's mother was **Mary Knight** and her father was the keeper of the Hillsboro lighthouse for 10 years in the early part of the twentieth century. Her uncle, another Knight, was the founder and operator of "Cap's Place" a restaurant he established on an intracoastal island off Lighthouse Point in the 1920s. "Cap's Place" is still operating under different ownership, and guests continue to arrive in a boat shuttle from the west side of the Intracoastal at Lighthouse Point.

Sheldon's father, **Frederick Voss, Jr.**, operated a fishing boat out of the Boynton Inlet prior to World War II, and served in the Coast Guard during that war. **Frederick Voss, Sr.**'s father-in-law, **H.D. Pierce**, was assistant lighthouse keeper at Jupiter during the last years of the 1800s.

Sheldon is active in the Hillsboro Lighthouse Preservation Association.

One need not be a member of the Boynton Beach Historical Society to attend. **Admission is free and open to the public.**

[HISTORIC 1927 BUILDING, Continued from page 1]

Boynton has a paucity of historic and cultural buildings. Unfortunately, City Commissions in the past have often been rather callous about the history of the City. In 1967 the beautiful 1920s beachfront Casino was destroyed. (It was never designated for gambling, but was designed to be used for meetings.) What we now have for our oceanfront is a nondescript boardwalk, functional perhaps, but certainly nothing which represents any distinctiveness for the City. If we had had an imaginative City Commission and City Manager, we could now have both a boardwalk and an historic building.

Once a building is demolished it is gone forever. The Historical Society hopes the City will consider the proposal by the Cultural Center and give it the go ahead to begin fundraising.



Group in front of Boynton Oceanfront Casino c. 1951
[Can you name any of them?]

SIMON BROTHERS HONORED as Community Leaders By Delray Beach

The four **Simon brothers, Charles, Alexander, Roy, and Ernest**, whose family has long been active in the history of Boynton Beach, were honored last month as lifelong community leaders with the presentation by the Old School Square Cultural Arts Center of the 2004 Delray Beach Life Achievement Awards.

They have been participating members of the Boynton Beach Historical Society. Their father for many years operated a general store in our City, and all of them work in various professional fields both in Boynton Beach and in Delray Beach.

We congratulate them upon the receipt of this honor for their many years of service. Much of their lifetime service has benefited both communities.

THE ASHLEY GANG: Notorious Bank Robbers of the 1920s

Beginning about the second decade of the twentieth century, **John Ashley** and gang members **Clarence Middleton, Ray Lynn, and Hanford Mobely**, John's 19 year old nephew, terrorized Florida's southeastern coast. They looted banks in Polk, St. Lucie, Palm Beach and Okeechobee Counties; and according to legend one of the early banks in Boynton Beach was repeatedly victimized.

Their bloodthirsty reputation struck fear in the citizens of the area.

Around 1904 **Joe Ashley** had moved his wife and five sons from the Gulf Coast to Pompano Beach. As one son, John, grew into adolescence, he worked in a packing house and seemed to fit well into the community. In 1911 the family moved to West Palm Beach and during treks into the Everglades, John became an expert trapper and a crack shot. The family then settled in Gomez, just south of Stuart, and later the Stuart bank became another of their repeated victims. Both Stuart and Gomez were then part of Palm Beach County which had been divided from Dade County in 1909. (Martin County was not created until 1925.)

After 1919 John and his brothers and friends had profited under Prohibition from bootlegging, running rum from Bahamian warehouses to the Florida Coast and even highjacking other runners when they had the chance. But John Ashley's violent life of crime really began about 1911 when he apparently murdered **DeSoto Tiger**, the son of **Tom Tiger**, a leader of the Seminole nation. Although no one witnessed the murder, he and Tiger had been seen together in a canoe filled with otters skins worth about \$35.00 a pelt at the time. It was later proved that John had sold the hides in Miami for more than \$1,200.00. He was convinced no white jury would ever convict him of killing an Indian.

After learning of the discovery of Desoto Tiger's body in a canal near what is now Fort Lauderdale, Palm Beach County **Sheriff George B. Baker** sent two deputies to track down John Ashley. While they walked along Dixie Highway near Hobe Sound, John and **Bob Ashley** suddenly accosted them with drawn pistols. The Ashleys disarmed them and sent them back to Sheriff Baker with a derogatory, verbal warning.

John Ashley did not reappear until three years later when he turned himself in at Gomez for trial. His first trial ended in a mistrial. He had been a model prisoner, but he was distressed when he learned of attempts to move the second trial to Miami, away from those who knew the Ashleys, and he escaped from jailer **Robert Baker** (son of the sheriff) while being escorted to his cell.

A number of crimes were credited to the Ashleys during the next year. During one, a robbery of the Stuart Bank, a gang member, Kid Lowe, accidentally shot John Ashley in the eye. John lost his eye and had to wear either an eye-patch or a glass eye from then on. But at the time the injury slowed him down so that he was apprehended soon afterward by Sheriff George Baker and his posse.

Baker took him first to West Palm Beach, then to Miami for his second trial in Tiger's death. The name of the jailer in Miami provides a note of interest in reference to one of the current members of the Boynton Beach Historical Society.

That jailer was **Wilbur Hendrickson**, a great uncle of [Continued on page 3]

[THE ASHLEY GANG, Continued from Page 2]

Jean Ann Thurber, and a brother to Jean Ann's maternal grandfather. Hendrickson, originally from Palm Beach County, had gone to Miami to work. When he answered a knock at the jail door early in the afternoon on June 2, 1915, Bob Ashley immediately shot him through the heart, grabbed his keys and ran.

In the ensuing commotion, Bob Ashley and a policeman, Robert Riblett, were both mortally wounded; and Bob had never reached John to try to free him. The Tiger case continued for over a year. Finally in November, 1916, John pleaded guilty to manslaughter and was sentenced to 17 years.

John was first sent to Raiford, but in March, 1918, he was transferred to a road camp. Three months later he fled. During the next three years most of the Ashley activity centered on moonshining and rum-running. In June, 1921, John who was running contraband to other parts of the state, was captured and returned to Raiford. During that same year, two of his brothers, **Ed and Frank**, were lost in rough seas while carrying a full load of liquor.

The other gang members continued their activities including a return to bank robbing. They were eventually captured and sent to Raiford, but John Ashley escaped the prison, apparently with outside help; and Clarence Middleton and Ray Lynn fled from a road gang.

By 1924, Robert Baker had succeeded his father as Sheriff and his cousin **Fred Baker** was a deputy. In a botched attempt by Baker's posse to capture the gang in the woods near Gomez, Fred Baker was killed. By October, posses had discovered and destroyed all the gang's hideouts, and John Ashley decided the gang should move north to Jacksonville in November for a while. Somehow Baker learned of their plans and sent two deputies to alert the **St. Lucie County sheriff, Albert Merritt**. Merritt decided to stop the gang at the little wooden Sebastian bridge where all traffic to Jacksonville had to pass.

Merritt put a chain across the bridge and hung a red lantern from the chain. Several conflicting versions of what happened next were reported. When the members of the gang got out of their car to investigate, the deputies came up from the bank of the river. The deputies who were present testified to the coroner's jury that the gang members had been shot trying to escape, but according to other reports, the men were already handcuffed when they were shot. The coroner's jury unanimously ruled the deaths justifiable homicides.

The members of the Ashley gang were buried in a family cemetery at Gomez. Reports were that the surviving Ashley family members were embarrassed and suffered continuing harassment. Eventually they changed their names and left the area.

[Information for this story came from *Florida Lore Not Found in History Books*, **Vernon Lamme**, Star Publishing Co., Boynton Beach, FL 1993; Posted internet newspaper stories from www.sebastianlibrary.com; *Bud Garner's World* at www.flseentry.com/bgbank.htm; *Palm Beach Post*, "Neighborhood Post," **Eliot Kleinberg**, 12-06-2000.]

INFORMATION WANTED!

Do you have a recollection, anecdote, or little story or perhaps pictures about our area you are willing to share with us? If so send them to Voncile at the Society's P.O. Box 12, Boynton Beach, FL 33425-0012. We need your help!

LANTANA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

The Lantana Historical Society was organized in 2003. At present they are actively involved with restoration of the **Mary Lyman** School where they will soon have their headquarters. They have also made the preservation and recovery of the historic Everygreen Cemetery one of their major projects. They meet on the second Thursday of each month, at 7:30 p.m. in the conference room of the Lantana Police Department. **Jack Carpenter** is president and **Rosemary Mouring** is 1st vice-president and newsletter editor. For more information contact Rosemary at 561-588-9546 or their e-mail address LHSociety@bellsouth.net

BOYNTON BEACH HISTORICAL SOCIETY WILL MEET JANUARY 10, 2005

We do not print a newsletter for December and we schedule no programs for that month. Our next meeting will be January 10, 2005 and the program and location will be announced in the next issue of *The Historian* which will be mailed the end of December.

TIME FOR DUES!

The membership year for the Boynton Beach Historical Society is from January 1st to December 31st. Please consider saving us the postage and labor of sending out special dues notices by returning the form below with your check for the type of membership you desire to Post Office Box 12, Boynton Beach, FL 33425-0012. We are most grateful for your help

BOYNTON BEACH HISTORICAL SOCIETY MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION FORM CALENDAR YEAR 2005

Member's Name _____

2nd Member's Name _____

Street _____ City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Telephone _____ e-mail _____

TYPE OF MEMBERSHIP:

INDIVIDUAL (\$25.00) _____ FAMILY (\$35.00) _____

PATRON (\$50.00) _____ CORPORATE (\$100 or more) _____

Yes _____, I will be willing to serve on the following committees (Circle choices):

Archives/Preservation Program/Planning Mailings Telephone Hospitality

Membership Public Relations Minority History Seeking Sponsors Fundraising

Other (Specify): _____

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