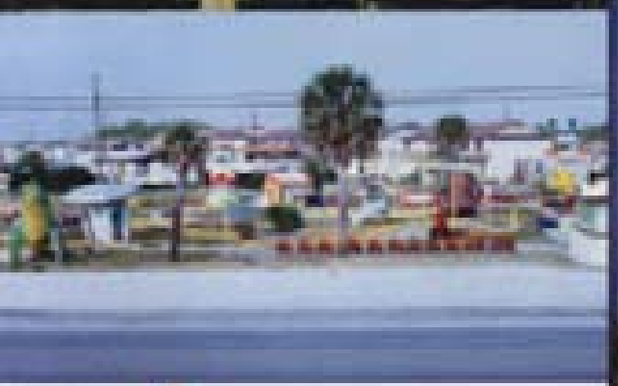

FROM REDNECK RIVIERA TO EMERALD COAST

FLORIDA'S MIRACLE STRIP

TIM HOLLIS

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From Redneck Riviera to Emerald Coast

TIM HOLLIS

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Designed by Todd Lape

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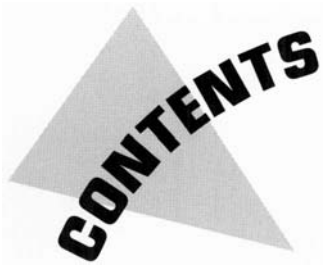

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INTRODUCTION

I have been a writer long enough to know the first question anyone is going to ask me: "Why on earth did you decide to write a book like *that*?" Okay, just so we can get that out of the way right at the beginning, here goes.

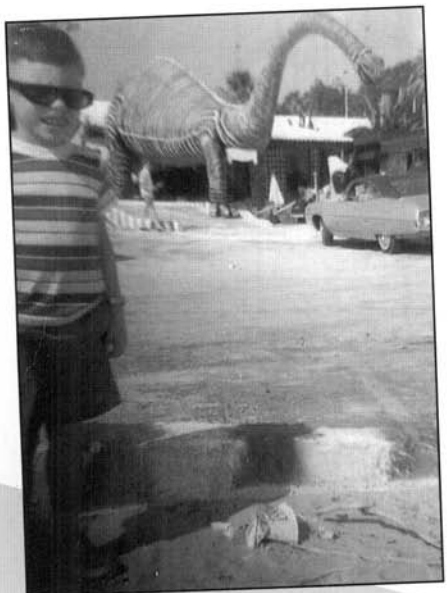
My father was a schoolteacher, and my mom was the stay-at-home variety, so when it came time for family vacations, we could not afford to jet to any exclusive and exotic spots; we basically confined our travels to the sights there were to see in the South. Of course, that still took in a lot of territory, and in those pre–interstate highway days, even a trip just a few miles outside town was something of an adventure.

Actually, my family's experience with Florida's Miracle Strip region extends even further back than my birth: my parents honeymooned at Panama City Beach. I assume my dad must have visited the area—whose tourism potential at the time basically consisted of Long Beach Resort—either while he was in college or in his early days of teaching junior high school, but *this* time there was only one little problem he failed to consider.

In those days, the seaside businesses that catered to visitors were seasonal in the extreme. Today one could visit Panama City Beach in the middle of the winter and still find numerous motel rooms, restaurants, and entertainment enough to cure the worst case of tourist cabin fever. However, my parents married on Christmas Day 1954, and when they arrived at the beach, they found a deserted wasteland with very little sign of human habitation. They finally managed to locate some tourist cabins that were open for business, not on the beach itself but

The author's parents stayed at the Pine Ridge Cottages during their honeymoon in 1954. The crumbling tourist court still stood forty years later but has since been demolished.

The author with his mother, grandmother, and aunt behind the Islander Motel in Fort Walton Beach, 1966.



The author visits Panama City Beach for the first time, 1968.

at least nearby, and it was there, at the Pine Ridge Cottages, that they stayed. It did not take long for them to learn that no restaurants were open to serve tourists at that time of year, especially on a holiday, and I often heard my mom and dad talk about the lady who ran the Pine Ridge Cottages taking pity on them and bringing food to help them fend off starvation. This trip obviously was not one of their proudest moments.

In fact, my parents never took another vacation, to the beach or anywhere else, until after I was born almost ten years later. It was in September 1966, when I was three years old, that we made our first trip to what had by then become known as the Miracle Strip. However, possibly because of their unpleasant experience of 1954, we did not visit Panama City Beach on that trip. Instead, our eventual destination—after stops at Mobile and Dauphin Island, Alabama—was Fort Walton Beach.

In photos from that visit, Fort Walton Beach is almost unrecognizable. Yes, the Gulfarium was there, and my dad must have used up half of a roll of film just on the porpoise show. We stayed at a motel called the Islander, which appropriately enough sat at the very end of commercial development on Okaloosa Island.

The Islander was certainly nothing fancy or luxurious, but at least it was better than the Pine Ridge Cottages, and there were even local restaurants where we could actually eat!

Two years passed before we finally made our belated arrival in Panama City Beach. I can only imagine what my parents must have thought about the changes in the place between 1954 and 1968. Now, all of a sudden, the highway along the beach

where they had seen nothing but sand dunes fourteen years earlier was crowded with motels and attractions, each one seemingly trying to outdo the rest in color and volume. The first things that attracted my five-year-old eyeballs were a couple of strange pieces of real estate that seemed to be littered with giant concrete statues. One of them was heavy on dinosaurs, with a huge green brontosaurus peering down at the parking lot, while another seemed to go after a wild animal theme.

"What are those?" I asked in total bewilderment, having never seen anything like them before.

"Oh, those are just places where people play golf," my parents replied, with no further elaboration. Maybe they assumed I would know what they meant, but the tone in which they said it made me think this "golf," whatever it was, was tantamount to shooting pool, playing slot machines, or betting on the horses. I did not pursue the subject any further but devoted my time to sampling the Miracle Strip Amusement Park, the observation tower, and the rows of refreshment stands shaped like giant Icee cups that lined U.S. 98. In case you are wondering, one thing we never did at the beach was go swimming: no one in my family ever learned to swim, including that lovable landlubber, yours truly.

The author learns to play miniature golf, 1970.

We returned to Panama City Beach in June 1970, and I finally got up the nerve to ask more questions about this "golf" business. I learned that the giant statues were actually obstacles in this kooky game, which my parents called "carpet golf" but which on the Miracle Strip went by more colorful names such

as Goofy Golf (the one with all the dinosaurs) and Zoo-Land Golf (the one with all the other animals). I never did get to be very good at the game, as my golf ball generally went in any direction except the one I intended. Miniature golf has been referred to as "the feeblest outdoor activity this side of waiting for a bus," but I never had any desire to be an athlete anyway, so it suited me just fine.

Since the game was secondary as far as I was concerned, I spent quite a bit of time photographing the courses and their amazingly creative ornamentation. How many times did I hear my mom say, "Why do you spend all that time taking pictures of *statues?* Why don't you at least have *people* in them?" Of course, if I had said that I was taking the photos for a book, it would have sounded like the proverbial silly answer to a silly question. To be honest, I had already started trying to be a writer at that age, so probably in the back of my mind was the thought that I might use them for just that purpose someday.

I was a weird kid (or is that already apparent?). In practically all areas of my childhood, it was not enough for me to simply enjoy things and have fun. I had to know the story *behind* whatever I was interested in. Using the miniature golf courses as an example, I knew that the giant figures that made them so appealing did not simply spring out of the earth, fully formed. Someone, I knew, had to be responsible for creating them, just as someone had to be responsible for the amusement park, Tombstone Territory, Petticoat Junction, the motels, the restaurants—the list could go on and on. Even as a child I realized

that *everything* has a history behind it, and I was determined to find out what it was.

I was in high school when I first began trying to dig the Miracle Strip's past out of the white sand where it had been buried for so long. Nothing much came of that first attempt, but some twenty years later I was finally able to put all those years of accumulating tourism memorabilia and snapshots from the South to good use when my book *Dixie before Disney: 100 Years of Roadside Fun* appeared in 1999. This led to a PBS documentary, *Greetings from Forgotten Florida,* the following year, but even after covering the Miracle Strip in those efforts much more deeply than it had ever been documented before, I still had boxes and boxes of unused material. Thus, the book you see before you today.

Is this a book about the colorful history of Northwest Florida? That depends upon your definition of *history.* From reading the pages that follow, one might be led to believe that nothing of any consequence happened in this part of the world until 1930 or thereabouts. This, of course, is laughably incorrect, as the area has a lengthy heritage stretching back to America's colonial days—and even further than that. No, this is not a history of Northwest Florida in that regard, but it is a history of the changes that were wrought when inhabitants of the area discovered that strange genus known as the tourist. From that standpoint, the late 1920s and early 1930s really are the beginning of the story. Those wishing to learn more about the pre-tourism history of the area should consult far more scholarly works by far more scholarly writers.

Wasn't that a long explanation for the question posed in the first paragraph? Maybe so, but now introductions are over, and it's time to get on with the fun stuff. Let's go have a ball at the beach. Get it? Beach! Ball! That's a joke, Son! And if you don't appreciate that type of humor, you had better close the book right now and go play a round of Goofy Golf.

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CHAPTER 1

THE SANDS OF TIME

Long ago, someone called these the world's most beautiful beaches. And here, in an atmosphere of soft breezes, sparkling water, and sugar white sand, a resort area was to flourish, its history lost in the passing of time.

Beaches are the first to forget their past.

Yesterday's tracks are quickly taken away and forgotten, erased by the rise and fall of the tide, offering up sands that await the creases of new footsteps where so many have walked before. And across these miles, you'll see the remarkable face change . . . age, perhaps, but never frown.

These observations were written by a now-anonymous copywriter for a Panama City Beach visitors' guide in the early 1980s, and one gets the creeping feeling that this person may have at one time made a thwarted attempt to write the very book you are now reading. It is true that trying to document the development of a tourist capital is made extremely difficult by the tendency of such areas to care only about the here and now.

Compounding the problem is that, quite often, there seems to be a certain amount of embarrassment among the locals when it comes to discussing the tackier elements of the region's reputation when, ironically, those are the elements that linger most fondly in visitors' memories, and they do so long after economic reality has made them obsolete.

So, in attempting to chronicle this area that during most of its now-nostalgic career was known as Florida's Miracle Strip, where should we begin? It might help to define just what areas constituted said Miracle Strip. Panama City and its seaside suburb, Panama City Beach, were always the centerpieces of activity along this commercial-crazy coastline. Some distance to the west was Destin, and a little further still was Fort Walton Beach, the only real would-be challenger to Panama City Beach's prominence. Tourism literature of the 1960s and later insisted on extending the Miracle Strip even further, taking in Pensacola Beach as well, although as we shall see, that area did not court the family tourist trade nearly as heavily as did the others.

This entire area was considerably behind the rest of Florida when it came to making itself enticing to the lucrative tourist trade. In fact, for many years it was practically the last place anyone would consider going for a fun trip. When travel writer John T. Faris wrote his comprehensive 1921 book *Seeing the Sunny South,* he thoroughly covered all the sights in Florida, but when it came to "West Florida," as he termed the region, tourist resorts were far from his mind. His emphasis, appropriately for the period, was on exploring the region by railway,

and after discussing the historic sites in Pensacola and the Florida National Forest, Faris dismissed the whole of what would eventually become the Miracle Strip in a single paragraph: "Let a day, at least, be taken for the ride from the railroad and for a study of the trees and the turpentine industry. Then let more time be devoted to a motorboat down Santa Rosa Sound to twenty-five-mile-long Choctawhatchee Bay, separated from the Gulf of Mexico by narrow spits of land, which bound the narrow entrance through East Pass." This, of course, was the region where Fort Walton Beach and Destin would later reel in the tourists; Panama City did not even rate a mention.

Although the resort areas of the Miracle Strip would eventually be linked together by the tourist industry and a shared desire to profit from the vacationing horde, the individual communities that made up the strip originally developed completely independently of each other. Perhaps this basic information should be our first concern.

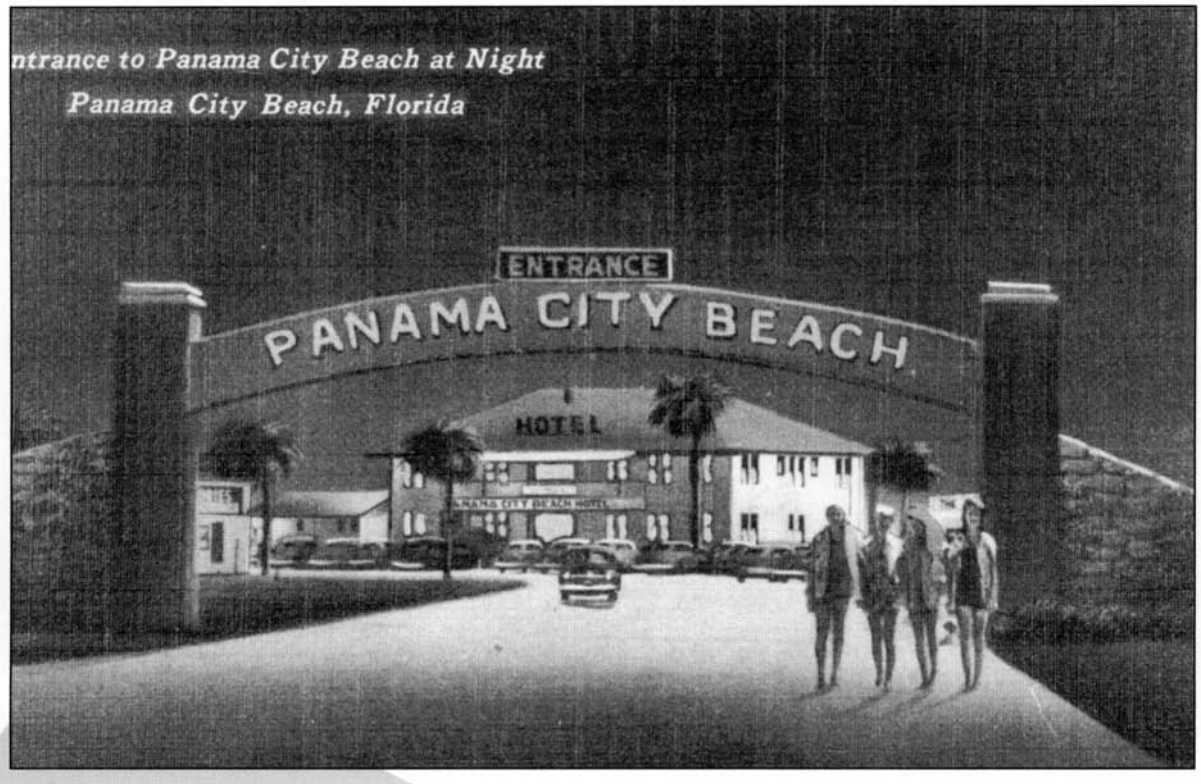
Panama City is said to have received its name because it was theoretically the nearest American port to the newly opened Panama Canal. As a town, Panama City was incorporated in 1909, although it had already existed as a community for several years. Instead of the nearby beach, early development centered on St. Andrews Bay, a body of water that remains a vital part of the city's nontourism side. However, something as large as the Gulf of Mexico was difficult to ignore, and as early as 1908 the incipient village's newspaper was reporting, "It is already very evident that about everyone who visits this bay

desires to go to the gulf beach and take a dip in the surf. There is scarcely a night but there are from one to five boatloads of people going there even now, and when the trains begin to bring in those who come here almost solely to enjoy the water and the bathing, this number will be greatly increased."

The newspaper's suggestion? Build a dock on the beach to facilitate the landing of the party boats that shuttled beach visitors from St. Andrews Bay to the bigger body of water and back again. It was further recommended that this dock could also contain a pavilion of sorts, "where parties could hold entertainments if desired, and which would be a shelter in case of rain. A cold drink stand, with ice cream when there were extra gatherings, would be profitable to the party who would furnish such refreshments and would be well patronized by the many going out there."

Someone obviously had the right idea, but a couple of decades would pass before the concept would develop into anything more than a curiosity to Panama City's more permanent residents. The early years of beach development were fraught with family feuds and land wars reminiscent of the Old West. Businessman W. T. Sharpless began trying to establish a resort at Long Beach in the late 1920s but was murdered in 1931 by some locals from whom he was trying to collect a fifty-cent fee for using his portion of the beach. The following year, Gideon (Gid) Thomas purchased 104 acres of sand and began his own project, which he called Panama City Beach.

Thomas constructed a two-story hotel (containing a total of twelve rooms) and some tourist cottages for those who wanted



The gateway to Gid Thomas's original Panama City Beach development, circa 1936. (Bay County Library Collection)

less "luxurious" surroundings. By May 1935, Thomas's new resort was well under way, but he still had one major problem to solve. The Gulf Coast Highway (aka U.S. 98) had been completed a few years earlier, but once the highway crossed the Hathaway Bridge heading west from Panama City, it veered away from the coast and carried automobiles far from the sandy white beaches. In fact, to this day the well-traveled highway that runs parallel to the beach is Alternate 98, and the main U.S. 98 cannot even be seen

An early view of J. E. Churchwell's Long Beach Resort.

from the sand. In 1935, however, no road at all—either official or alternate—led to the Gulf; even early investors who believed in Thomas and came to help him with his development were forced to physically push their cars through the sand until they reached the new resort in the making. Undaunted, Thomas laid out and graded a pattern of streets, then hauled in seashells from Apalachicola to make the road surfaces acceptable for automobile usage. The official opening of Panama City Beach to the public was held on May 2, 1936.

Unfortunately, Thomas lived to see only the first season of his dream resort. Overworking himself, he fell ill and passed away at his beach house on May 13, 1937. It is safe to assume that 99.9 percent of the four million tourists who now visit Panama City Beach annually have no concept of who Gid Thomas was, but they have most certainly seen his name. In 1953, state officials decided to commemorate his contribution to Florida tourism by designating one of Panama City Beach's main thoroughfares as Thomas Drive—and so it remains today.

While Thomas was busy getting Panama City Beach under way, others had come forward to pick up the Long Beach banner that had been dropped when Sharpless met his untimely demise. John McCall and J. E. Churchwell purchased the property that Sharpless had been trying to develop, and from that point forward, Long Beach Resort would primarily be a miniature fiefdom under the control of the Churchwell family.

Churchwell's first order of business was to build some tourist cottages and refurbish a large casino building that had been a part of Sharpless's original development. Local historian Marlene Womack reports that Churchwell, Thomas, and their compatriots encountered unexpected reverses during their first attempts to sell beachfront property: "Most people wanted only dirt for growing gardens," she says, "and saw no future in the 'ugly white sand.'" The story goes that someone told Thomas that he would never be able to grow anything edible on the spot into which he was putting so much effort. "I'm not growing vegetables out here," he said, "I'm growing *people*." As anyone who visits Farmer Thomas's garden on a

In the early days, the beach was the biggest attraction for tourists.

summer day can tell you, he indeed produced a bumper-to-bumper crop!

Churchwell had other competition to deal with as well. In addition to Thomas's people farm on Panama City Beach, the McCorquodale family was heavily involved in starting a resort called Sunnyside, further to the west, and the Holloway family was building cottages and other tourist amenities at the junction known as the Y, where State Highway 79 dead-ended into U.S. 98. Others came along and started developments with

In 1959, Long Beach Resort was still a relatively simple place.

By the late 1960s, motels and tourist attractions had bloated the original Long Beach Resort beyond recognition. (Bay County Library Collection)

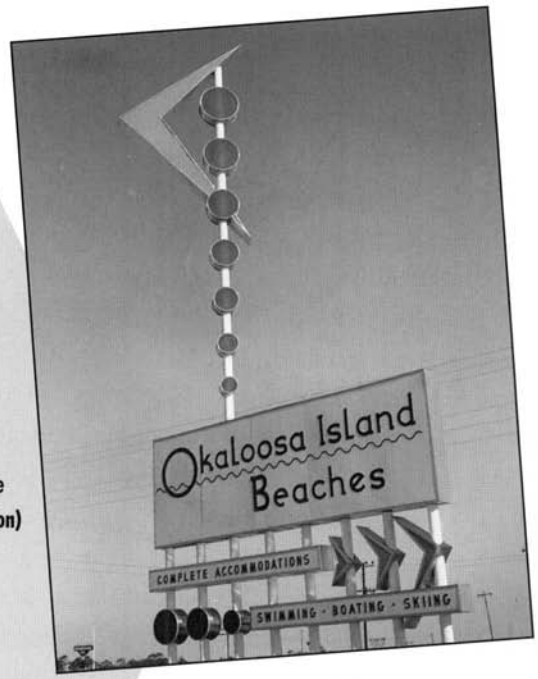
names such as Bahama Beach, Mara Vista Beach, Gulf Beach Resort, and El Centro Beach. It seemed that everyone wanted a piece of the action, but in the beginning there just wasn't enough action to go around.

Some of the partisanship that marred these early attempts to get a resort area started continued to boil in the subtropical sun for decades afterward. Until 1970, the area that most people thought of simply as Panama City Beach actually consisted of four separate communities, the boundaries between which existed only on plot maps and in the minds of the permanent residents. There was Panama City Beach proper, Gid Thomas's development, which was little more than a strip of a few hundred feet under the control of Thomas's daughter and her family, the Pledgers. Imperceptibly separated were Long Beach and Edgewater Gulf Beach, and at the very end of commercial development was West Panama City Beach, where most of the latter-day attractions such as the Miracle Strip Amusement Park were located. Everyone eventually realized that the whole could be at least as great as the sum of its parts, and the four communities officially merged into the single entity of Panama City Beach on August 12, 1970. (One should still be careful in the area, however, not to confuse Panama City Beach with its parent community, Panama City. The two do everything but deny kinship when it comes to the history of the region.)

The first runner-up for title of King of the Beach is Fort Walton, whose history as a community dates back even further than its flashy rival. During the Civil War, a contingent of Confederate soldiers established an outpost known as Camp Wal-

ton along Santa Rosa Sound, an inlet that was to this area what St. Andrews Bay was to Panama City. The accepted founder of present-day Fort Walton Beach was John Thomas Brooks, who arrived in 1868. He did little to boost a tourist-oriented image, but his former residence became one of the area's first hotels (the Brooks House) by the early 1900s. Other early hotels were the Gulfview and the Indianola, but a major difference separated them from the countless motels that would follow: all three of these early businesses were located on Santa Rosa Sound, not on the Gulf of Mexico.

In an effort to sound a bit more sophisticated, in 1931 the community of Camp Walton became known as Fort Walton, creating confusion for those who arrived expecting to find some sort of historical armory there. If those misled visitors wanted to visit the beach, they had to rely on a ferry that would take them across Santa Rosa Sound to Okaloosa Island. (Technically, Okaloosa Island is only a small portion of the much larger Santa Rosa Island, which stretches west all the way to Pensacola Beach.) That island proved to be the key to Fort Walton's eventual tourist industry. On July 1, 1953, the Florida State Legislature authorized Okaloosa County to lease a three-mile stretch of the island for commercial development, and in recognition of that accomplishment, the town again changed its name, this time to Fort Walton Beach. However, because Okaloosa Island was officially outside the corporate limits, some people ever since have sneered that Fort Walton Beach's name is still two-thirds inaccurate, as there was never a fort there and there are no beaches within the city's jurisdiction. The



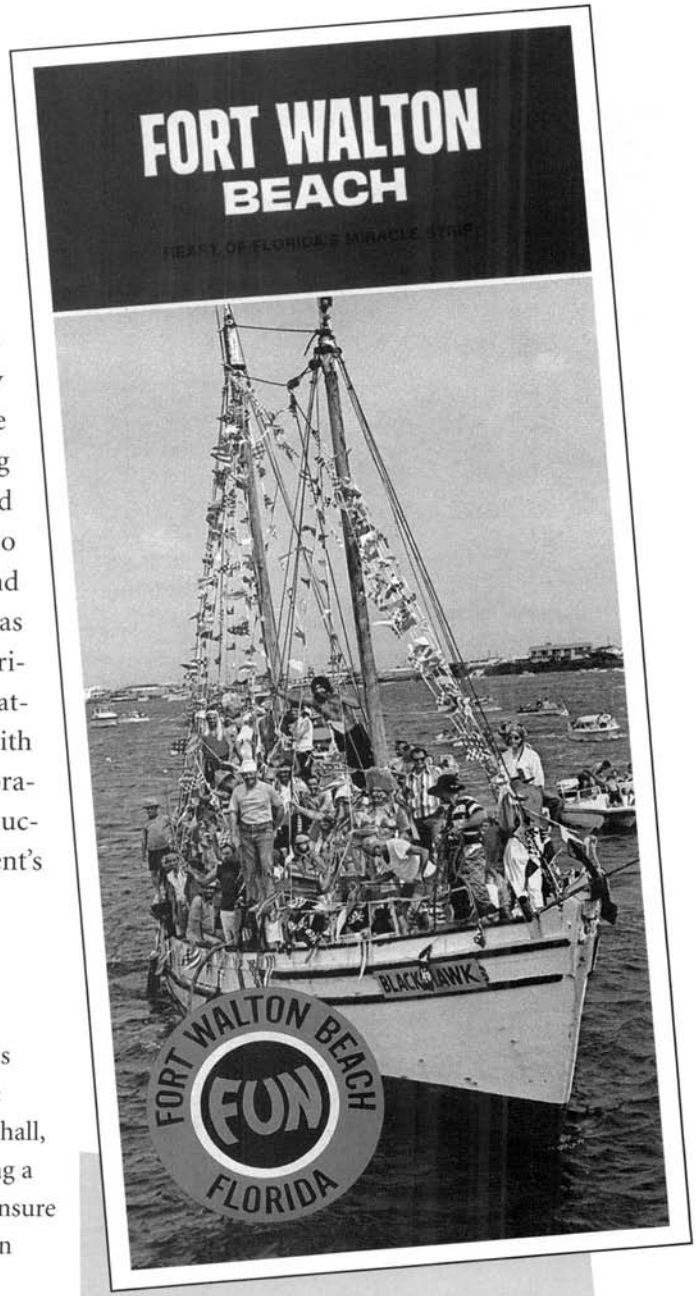
This very 1950s design sign directed Fort Walton Beach tourists to the newly opened commercial development on Okaloosa Island. (Florida State Archives Photographic Collection)

Tower Beach Casino and its accompanying amusements were Fort Walton Beach's equivalent to Long Beach Resort. (Fort Walton Beach Library Collection)

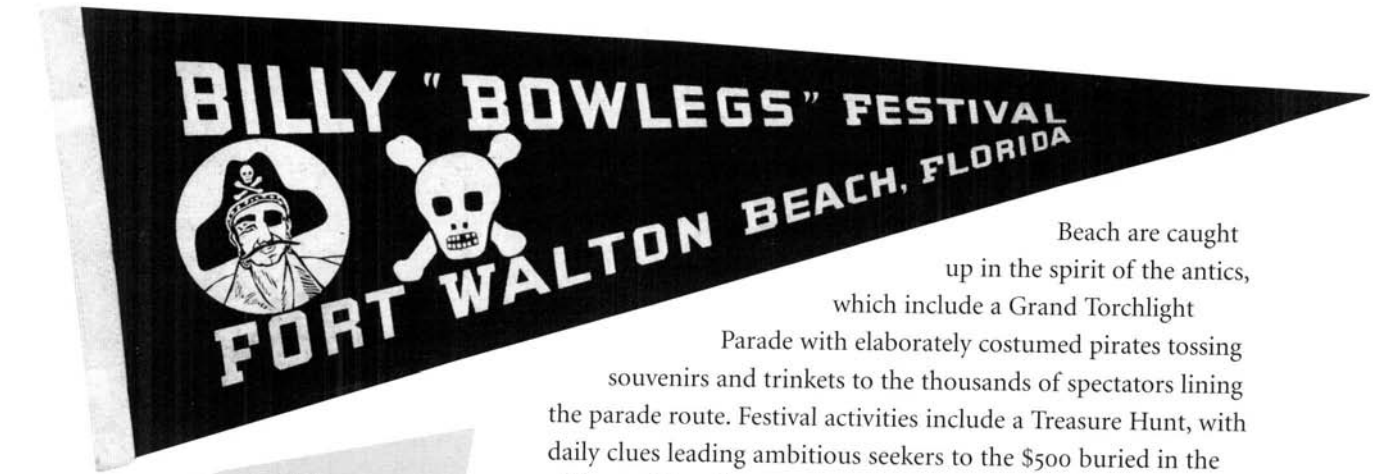
tourists refuse to get hung up on such technicalities, however.

The same year that Okaloosa Island was brought into modern-day tourism, Fort Walton Beach began an annual summertime celebration known as the Billy Bowlegs Festival. The festival's namesake has been the source of argument among local historians for years; popular legend identifies Billy Bowlegs as a pirate who preyed on ships along the Gulf Coast and then sought refuge in such inlets as Choctawhatchee Bay. Less romantic historians say that he was Jesse Rogers, a local cattleman who happened to be afflicted with rickets. Whoever he was, during the celebration Fort Walton Beach goes bonkers for buccaneers, as evidenced by one of the event's press releases:

> The Billy Bowlegs Festival begins when pirate rogues, members of the Krewe of Bowlegs, enter the city aboard the notorious ship *Blackhawk*. Laying siege to the city, the motley-attired band of pirates "attack" city hall, hoisting the skull and crossbones flag during a spirited skit, and locking up the mayor to ensure a week of pirate rule. Visitors to Fort Walton



Billy Bowlegs and his motley crew sail into Fort Walton Beach on the cover of this brochure.

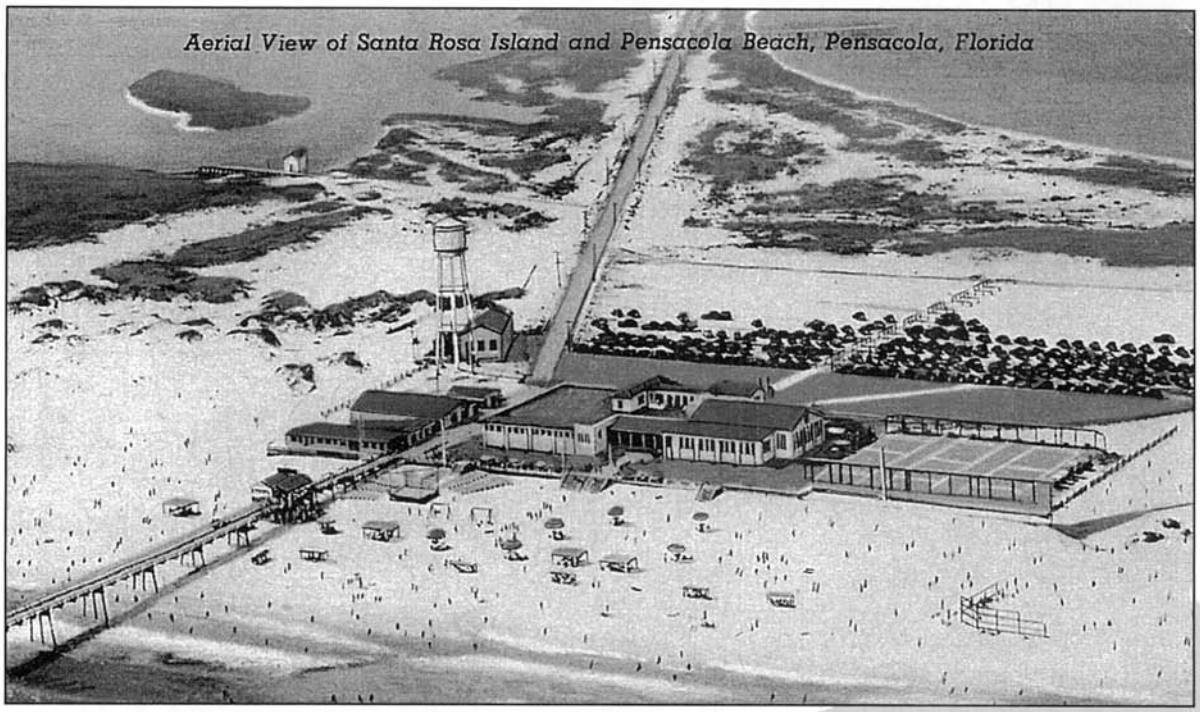


This souvenir felt pennant commemorates one of Fort Walton Beach's first Billy Bowlegs Festivals.

Beach are caught up in the spirit of the antics, which include a Grand Torchlight Parade with elaborately costumed pirates tossing souvenirs and trinkets to the thousands of spectators lining the parade route. Festival activities include a Treasure Hunt, with daily clues leading ambitious seekers to the $500 buried in the white sand beaches.

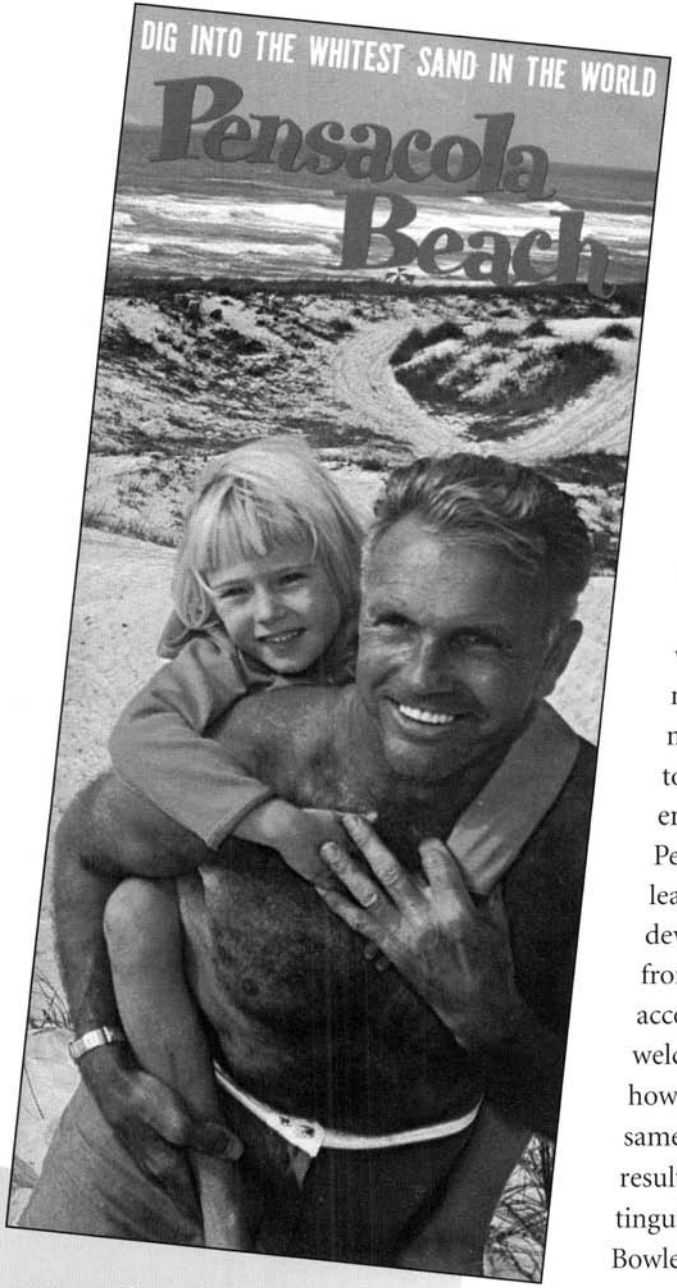
Whether Billy Bowlegs ever really existed and, if so, whether he was a pirate of the Captain Hook school matter not to this community, where the festival is still held each June to kick off the summer vacation season.

During the 1840s, a New England fisherman (who definitely was *not* a pirate) named Leonard Destin settled east of then-nonexistent Fort Walton, and after the close of the Civil War he and some other hardy pioneers set up a bustling fishing industry. This remained the primary business of the small community, which bore Destin's name, throughout the 1920s, when some of the boat captains found it profitable to help smuggle illegal liquor from offshore ships. That tourist lifeline, U.S. Highway 98, came through Destin in 1934, linking it with the developments of Fort Walton to the west and Panama City to the east, but the community preferred to remain small and



Still-barren Pensacola Beach as it appeared in 1941. (Brian Rucker Collection)

quaint rather than gaudy and garish. Destin was belatedly incorporated as a city in 1984, and around the same time it began to attract the water parks and miniature golf courses that already overflowed from Panama City Beach and Fort Walton Beach. Those who preferred the way Destin used to be established a more exclusive resort just east of the town in 1973. Built on two thousand acres that once belonged to Arkansas Governor Winthrop Rockefeller, the new seventy-million-dollar development was known as Sandestin.



With no real tourist attractions to promote, Pensacola Beach stuck with what it knew best: sand and surf.

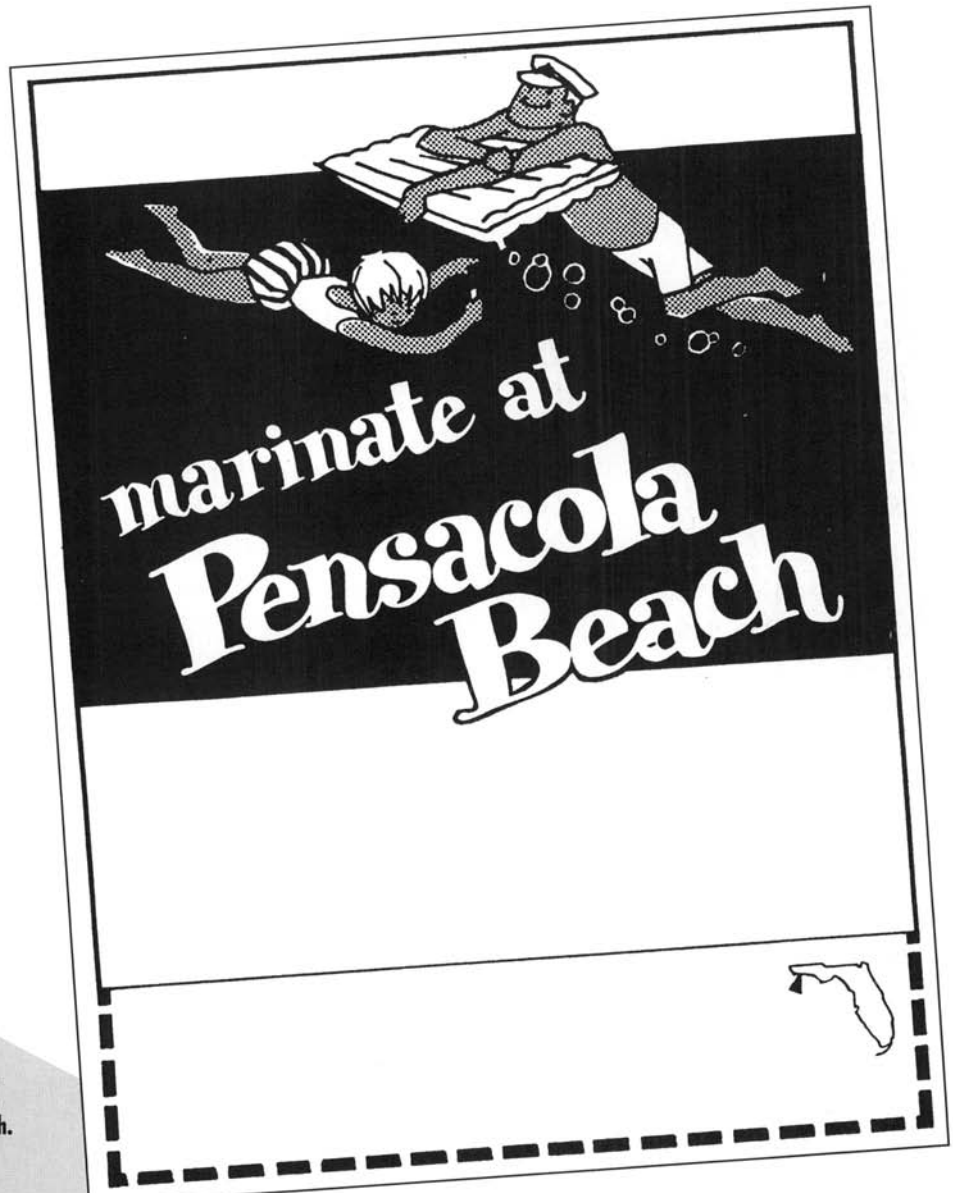
The commercial development that those residents were trying to escape continued to worsen, until by 2002 it had gotten so crowded that the city imposed a moratorium on any new businesses on U.S. 98 until something could be done to help ease the continual traffic jam. This was a fine problem to have as far as the businesses were concerned, but it did have a negative side for those who actually had to get out on the highway, either tourists or local residents.

The historic city of Pensacola had been so well established since the 1600s that it really did not need twentieth-century beachcombers to make its reputation. In fact, it shared Fort Walton's situation in that the beach actually sat several miles away from the city itself. In 1927, the Pensacola Bridge Corporation was formed to (1) lease two and a half miles of Santa Rosa Island for development as a resort, and (2) build a bridge from the mainland to the resort. This was all accomplished in June 1931, and Pensacola Beach welcomed its first visitors. As we will be seeing, however, this particular resort never developed the same oddball attractions as the others, probably as a result of some leftover dignity from Pensacola's distinguished past. Like Fort Walton Beach and its Billy Bowlegs festival, which celebrates someone or some-

Don Tristan de Luna relives his "discovery" of Pensacola every year during the Fiesta of Five Flags. (Brian Rucker Collection)

thing that may never have been real, Pensacola Beach developed its Fiesta of Five Flags, loosely commemorating the "discovery" of the area by Don Tristan de Luna in 1559. Serious-minded local historians report that as much fiction as fact has come to play a part in this pageant.

All of these resorts, so new by the standards of the rest of the state, took a number of years to attract much attention. In 1937, Florida's State Road Department published a slim booklet titled *Highways of Florida,* but it ignored the emerging Panhandle resorts nearly as completely as earlier efforts had.



A simple 1960s ad for Pensacola Beach.

There was some mention of Pensacola attracting tourists to its historic sites (but no reference to Pensacola Beach), and the entire section on Panama City read, "Though only a fishing village a short time ago, [Panama City] has now more than 12,000 people, due largely to the paper mill there. . . . It attracts tourists in all seasons." Yes, indeed, it was a mighty slow start, but by the early 1940s, the Gulf Coast was primed for its later fame.

World War II did not generally do much to promote tourism, but the conflict did create two large military outposts in the area, Tyndall Field in Panama City and Eglin Air Force Base at Fort Walton Beach. Eglin later had its chance in the spotlight when it was chosen for location filming for the 1949 movie classic *Twelve O'Clock High.* That drama, starring Gregory Peck, was supposedly set at an airstrip in England during World War II, and the producers somehow determined that Eglin most closely resembled what a base of that time would have looked like. The only problem was that it could not be used for airplane takeoffs and landings, because unless the shots were framed just so, they would pick up palm trees and other such subtropical foliage not usually found in England. (The runway scenes had to be filmed further north, in the more temperate zone of Dothan, Alabama.)

During the real-life war, each of J. E. Churchwell's tourist cottages at Long Beach Resort accommodated twenty-five servicemen rather than vacationers, and the Long Beach Casino was converted into a mess hall. (It had probably never before been such a mess.) In addition, Panama City was the location

of a large shipyard, and the combined war work of all these installations brought people to the region who would in peacetime either stay to become residents or return as tourists.

The U.S. 98 corridor along the Gulf really began to boom after the war. In 1946, the area around Fort Walton Beach and Destin became known as the Playground, a term that persisted locally for at least twenty-five years. In 1952, local newspaper writer Claude Jenkins is said to have been driving into Fort Walton Beach from the east when he spied the sparkling white sand of the beach and immediately coined the term *Miracle Strip*. Keeping in mind the historical difficulties discussed at the beginning of this chapter, it is hard to say just how or when the Miracle Strip name became applied to the areas both west and east of Fort Walton Beach, but by the early 1960s, tourism promoters, if not the towns themselves, considered the entire coastline from Panama City Beach to Pensacola Beach as a single entity.

While *Miracle Strip* was the name used in all tourism literature and on the signs of numerous businesses and tourist attractions, in private many people began using a more derogatory term for the same region. Just how the Gulf beaches became known as the "Redneck Riviera" is a little difficult, if not impossible, to explain, but it has much to do with the fact that for the most part the area's tourist base came from the other parts of the South, whereas the "classier" beaches of Florida's other coastlines generally attracted what was considered to be a more sophisticated, affluent clientele from the northern states. This difference largely resulted from the Mira-

cle Strip's geographical closeness to the rest of the South: the area became the natural vacation spot of choice for those who could not afford expensive jaunts to Miami Beach or Fort Lauderdale.

In fact, those who lived in the more traditional Florida resorts found it somewhat difficult to even conceive of the Miracle Strip communities as a part of their beloved state. In 1960, Jack Kofoed of the *Miami Herald* wrote a book, *The Florida Story,* which was intended to be a definitive guide to the Sunshine State's many wonders; however, even Kofoed's supposedly encyclopedic knowledge of his turf was challenged when writing about the Miracle Strip. He was most amazed at the fact that Panama City (he did not make a distinction between it and Panama City Beach) was a summer resort and operated on the opposite principle from the parts of the state with which he was familiar: "It and its neighbors along the ninety miles of sugar-white Gulf Coast sand boom during the warm months. . . . Miami Beach trims prices in the summer, but they rise in the Panhandle. . . . The Florida Panhandle is not visited by many of the millions who seek sun tan and diversion on the Gold Coast during the winter."

Contributing to the area's reputation as a hangout for less sophisticated southerners was the additional fact that many of the businesses that comprised the Miracle Strip were built, owned, or operated by entrepreneurs from Alabama, Georgia, and other neighboring states. Among these tourism moguls, the area was sometimes privately known as Lower Alabama. Even as early as 1936, when Gid Thomas's Panama City Beach

Broderick Lahan's Laguna Beach development was one of several early resort communities that lined U.S. 98 west of Panama City Beach.

was just being established, a group of investors from Birmingham began a development west of Long Beach Resort, calling their project Laguna Beach. According to a 1938 article, "Energetic, high-strung Broderick Lahan of Birmingham's Lahan & Co. Investments had noticed—as many another traveler along the Gulf Coast Scenic Highway has noticed—the natural beauty of the spot, its ideal advantages as a locale for vacation cottages. Wisdom of the move was seen right off when Lahan

salesmen sold 37 lots for cash the first week to Alabamians who longed for just such a spot to call their own."

The influence of Alabama and other southern states would continue to be felt in the region, but as the South became somewhat more affluent, people grew tired of the way things had always been done along the beach areas. Roadside history enthusiasts notwithstanding, many tourism promoters began to feel that the neon-garbed motels and souvenir shops, combined with the colorful, oversized statuary of the miniature golf courses and the general carnival atmosphere, were attracting the wrong type of crowd. In 1993, critic Tom Fiedler wrote, "Today the Panama City Beach strip could serve as a model of how not to develop a natural resource. It is a garish collection of T-shirt shops, goofy golf, water rides, arcades and fast food restaurants amid a sea of asphalt and, on most days, bumper-to-bumper traffic. The gorgeous beach has been mugged and gagged, left nearly invisible from the highway. Unfortunately, the Redneck Riviera remains the image that many people carry of the whole Bay County. That is misleading, like judging a house by the décor in the rumpus room."

For some reason, the Miracle Strip name became so associated with this "old style" of tourism that one by one during the 1980s and 1990s the various chambers of commerce began downplaying the term or eliminating it completely. Panama City Beach reverted to emphasizing its long-established slogan—"the World's Most Beautiful Beaches" (a phrase coined by J. E. Churchwell in the early days of his Long Beach Resort)—while the Fort Walton Beach/Destin area became known as the

Emerald Coast. Fiercely independent Pensacola Beach proudly stood on its own, with no other nickname. When it was absolutely necessary to lump the whole collection of communities together, as had been done in the past, it was usually now under the simple heading Florida's Great Northwest.

Mother Nature also weighed in with her opinion of the situation. While hurricanes have always been a fact of life along the Gulf Coast, two in particular scored direct hits on the Miracle Strip and helped clear out some of the older structures that many considered eyesores. Hurricane Eloise, in September 1975, and Hurricane Opal, in October 1995, eliminated some of the perceived clutter along the beaches, but they had help from local zoning boards (as we shall see when discussing the Miracle Strip motel industry).

Local government also began taking a previously unrevealed interest in the annual coastal mating season known as spring break. Originally confined to the resorts on Florida's Atlantic Coast, by the 1980s Panama City Beach had become the centerpiece for this ritual of sun, suds, and sex. The tradition had come to the Miracle Strip beginning in the 1950s under the dual names of "AEA Week" and "GEA Week." The initials stood for Alabama Education Association and Georgia Education Association, and each year the beaches braced themselves for the onslaught of junior high and high school students who were out of classes during the associations' yearly spring meetings. In stark contrast to the wet T-shirt and beer-drinking contests of today, for example, the plans for the 1964 spring break included contests in sack racing, "needle in the flour," balloon blowing,

egg throwing, potato rolling, and other such activities that today would probably be found at a kiddie birthday party.

As longtime motel owner John Holloway put it, "It used to be that kids on spring break came with their mothers and fathers." This much more innocent version of the event survived through the early 1970s but eventually merged with the college-dominated spring break tradition. Now, says Holloway, "They have their own cars and a pocketful of money to spend when they arrive."

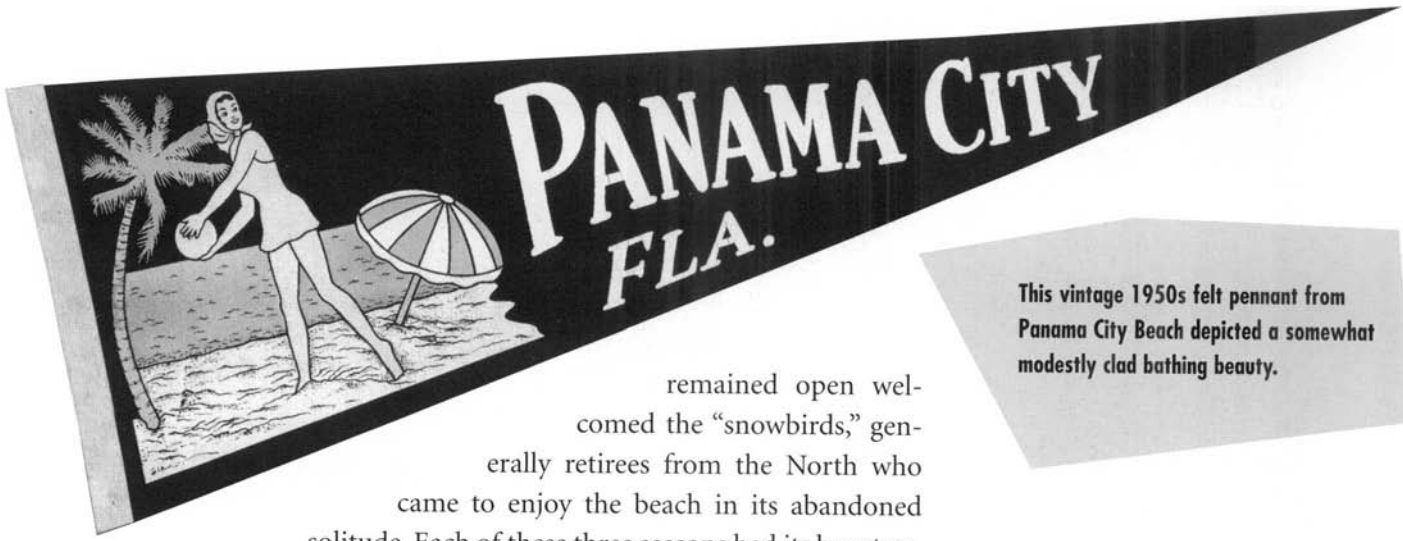
The city had (and still has) mixed feelings about how to react to this yearly invasion, being hesitant to stifle the commercial possibilities but also reluctant to condone the component activities. A separate tourist development committee was set up just to promote Panama City Beach as a spring break destination, using inserts in college newspapers and billboards at college campuses. This did not necessarily mean that the entire community backed the idea; when some locals objected to a poster depicting several scantily clad young women that was distributed to college newspapers nationwide, the cochairman of the Convention and Visitors Bureau went on record as saying, "There is no reason to advertise for spring break and make it some type of milk and cookies piece." The chairman of the Bay County Tourist Development Council shot back, "The long range success of this beach cannot be based on spring break," encouraging the city to work actively to discourage the annual insanity.

By the 2003 spring break season, even the American Medical Association (AMA) was getting into the lewd act. Alarmed by such promotions as coupons promising college students "all

the beer you can handle for $5," the AMA strongly recommended that Panama City Beach business owners cease and desist such outright appeals to the youths' baser instincts. And speaking of baser instincts, when the producers of the infamous *Girls Gone Wild* video series sent a brightly painted bus to Panama City Beach to promote their latest topless outing, city officials warned that any such displays would be rewarded with a scenic view of the city jail.

While the dollars brought into the area from these spring break orgies were always welcome, business owners had wildly varying personal opinions about how to handle the revelers. Even in 1979, the manager of the Chateau Motel was heard to complain, "Every fire extinguisher in these rooms is gone. . . . They break chairs, they break bottles and telephones." He had a simple solution for the problem: "I suggest they bring back the draft."

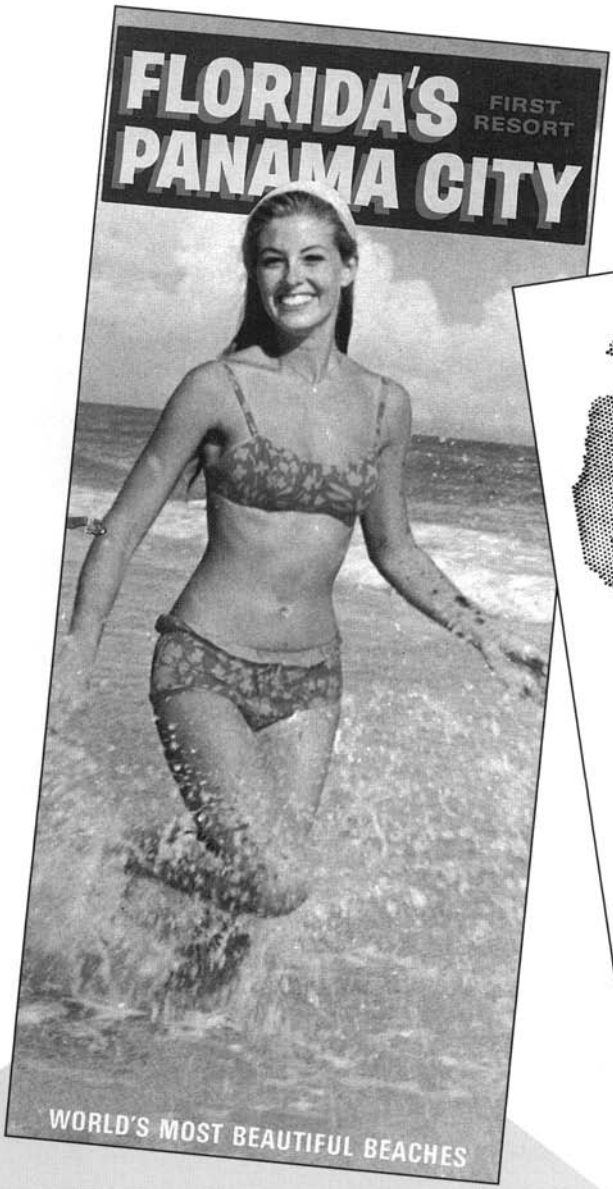
One outcome of all of this was that the Miracle Strip developed something of a three-way split personality, depending on the time of year. In the spring, the beaches became a nightmare for anyone over twenty-one years old, clogged with college and high school students whose primary interests were chugging until they barfed and collecting exemplary specimens of the opposite sex (two goals that frequently overlapped). During the summer months, things were just as crowded, but the emphasis shifted to families with children who were out of school. After Labor Day, the traditional end of the tourist season, many of the youth-oriented attractions (and even some smaller motels) locked their doors, while the ones that



This vintage 1950s felt pennant from Panama City Beach depicted a somewhat modestly clad bathing beauty.

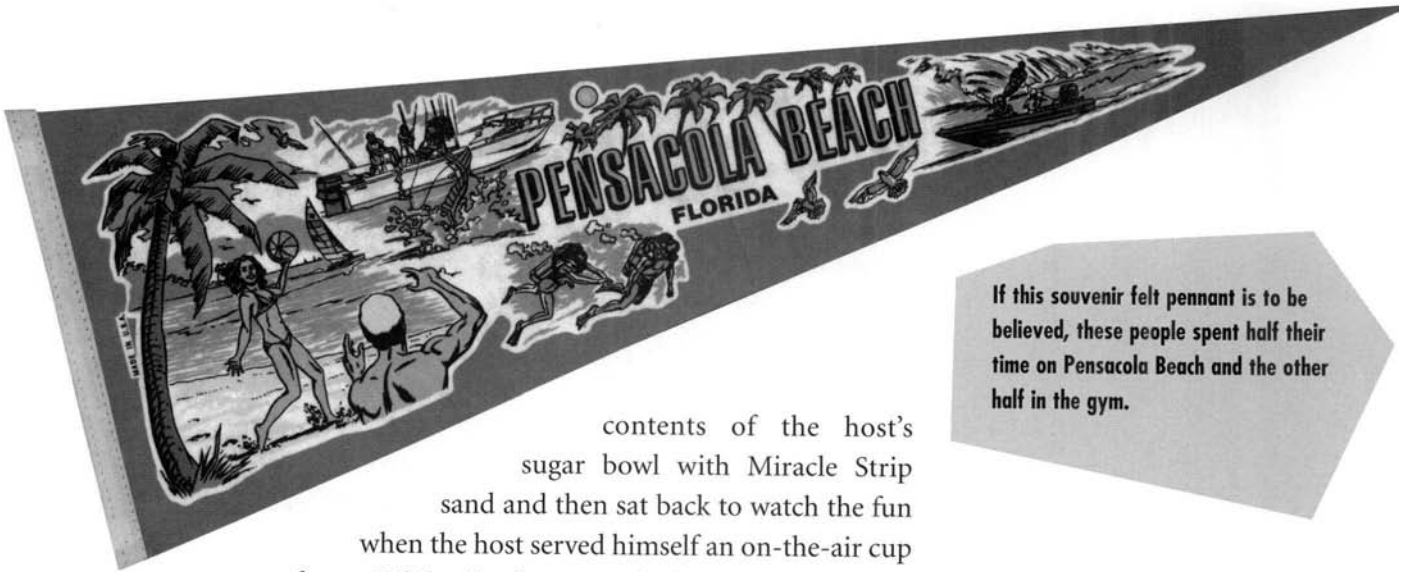
remained open welcomed the "snowbirds," generally retirees from the North who came to enjoy the beach in its abandoned solitude. Each of these three seasons had its boosters, who generally would not even think of visiting the area at either of the other two times.

During the 1960s and 1970s, much of the Miracle Strip's publicity originated with a company known as the Panama City Beach News Bureau. This was the brainchild of promoter extraordinaire Jim Sumter, who spent most of his waking hours figuring out ways to get photos and news items about Panama City Beach, its attractions, and its bikini-clad girls into newspapers and other media outlets nationwide. Insiders report that, not surprisingly, the businesses that got the most media attention were the ones that paid Sumter an under-the-table fee. In any case, Sumter certainly did his best to draw attention to his part of the state. The story is told of the time he journeyed north to Canada to promote the snowbird idea, taking along a jar of the famous white sand from the beach. On a Canadian television talk show, Sumter secretly replaced the



By the time of this 1960s brochure, Panama City Beach had figured out the best way to sell itself.

Proving that anything is grist for the advertising mill, white sand from the beach was packaged as a souvenir.



If this souvenir felt pennant is to be believed, these people spent half their time on Pensacola Beach and the other half in the gym.

contents of the host's sugar bowl with Miracle Strip sand and then sat back to watch the fun when the host served himself an on-the-air cup of tea. While the host coughed up sand, Sumter beamed at this proof of just how white and powdery the substance was. Many Canadians were persuaded to begin spending their winters on the Miracle Strip, but it is a safe guess that the strangulated TV host was not one of them.

The sand's resemblance to sugar—in appearance if not in taste—has always been one of the area's biggest selling points. Unfortunately, over the years several factors conspired to rob the strip of its most famous asset. After Hurricane Opal got through wrecking things in 1995, little sand remained between the commercial development and the Gulf. A massive refurbishing program involved dredging up sand from underwater, depositing it where the beach had been, and smoothing it out. This has been a success as far as getting the beach back, but even the most casual observer will notice that the sand is no longer as blindingly white as it once was. Time and the bleaching effect

of the constant sunshine presumably will eventually help restore the Miracle Strip to its former miraculous appearance.

By the 1990s, the original Miracle Strip resorts had been established for so long that no cosmetic changes could even hope to change their fundamental character. This resulted in the growth of several smaller communities located on the formerly desolate stretch between Panama City Beach and Destin. In the space of approximately one mile sprouted the triplet towns of Seagrove Beach, Seaside, and Watercolor. Unlike their older cousins, this new generation of resorts deliberately avoided wacky commercial development and promoted itself as offering residential neighborhoods for more discriminating, upscale consumers. However, proving that some things never change, at least some of these exclusive new communities were built by interests from Alabama and other southern states, just as had been the case going back to the mid-1930s.

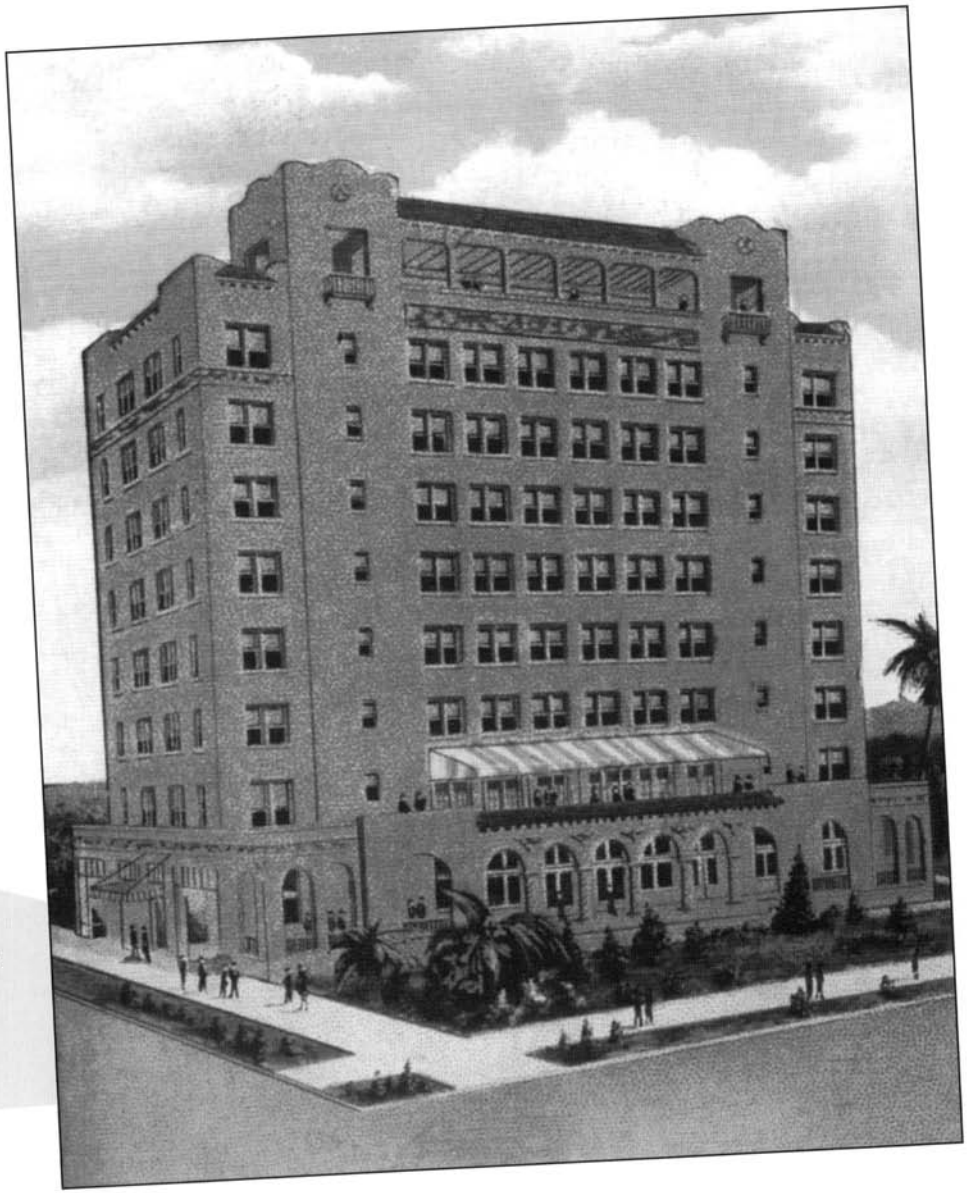
As much as the towns themselves might want to erase their sometimes tawdry and tacky past, as the anonymous writer compared it to footprints being washed away by the ocean waves, the less-than-dignified attractions of the Miracle Strip's heyday insist on lingering in the minds of those who visited the area. Step right this way, folks, and you will be transported to an era when colorful neon motel signs flashed in the night, giant concrete dinosaurs ate golf balls, and no curio cabinet at home was complete without a seashell sculpture (preferably with a light bulb built into it). The tour begins now!

SLEEP TO THE SONG OF THE SURF

CHAPTER 2

Unless one lived near enough to the beach to drive down for a day of enjoyment and then return home before bedtime, one of the primary concerns when planning a Miracle Strip vacation was to determine at which motel to stay. At one point in history, this would not have been a difficult decision, because the choices were extremely limited. As with the rest of the area's development, we must begin in downtown Panama City itself.

The hardship involved with getting from the main part of town out to what were then relatively remote beaches explains why the first lodging for tourists was not located on Gulfside property. Local historians say that by the early 1900s, Panama City had several two-story wooden hotels whose purpose was to serve those who came to enjoy the beaches but did not necessarily want to sleep on them. This line of thinking continued when local sawmill owner W. C. Sherman built the imposing ten-story Dixie-Sherman Hotel in the heart of downtown in



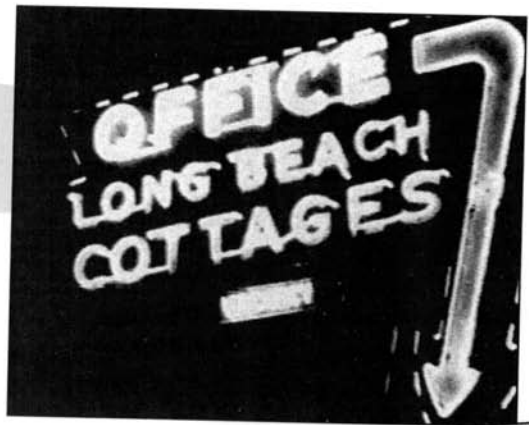
The Dixie-Sherman Hotel was the most luxurious place to stay in Panama City for those who did not wish to sleep on the beach.

1925. This structure remained the premier stopping place in Panama City for those who wished to avoid the beaches' carnival-like lifestyle; just so that would not seem too far away, though, the Gulf beach could be seen from the hotel's rooftop garden. Despite its importance to the history of the area, the obsolete old building was demolished in April 1970.

"Luxury" hotels, if that term can be applied to them, took another halting step toward the water when H. L. Sudduth opened the Cove Hotel on the shore of St. Andrews Bay around the same time the Dixie-Sherman was built. It might not have been on the ocean, but at least it had its own beach.

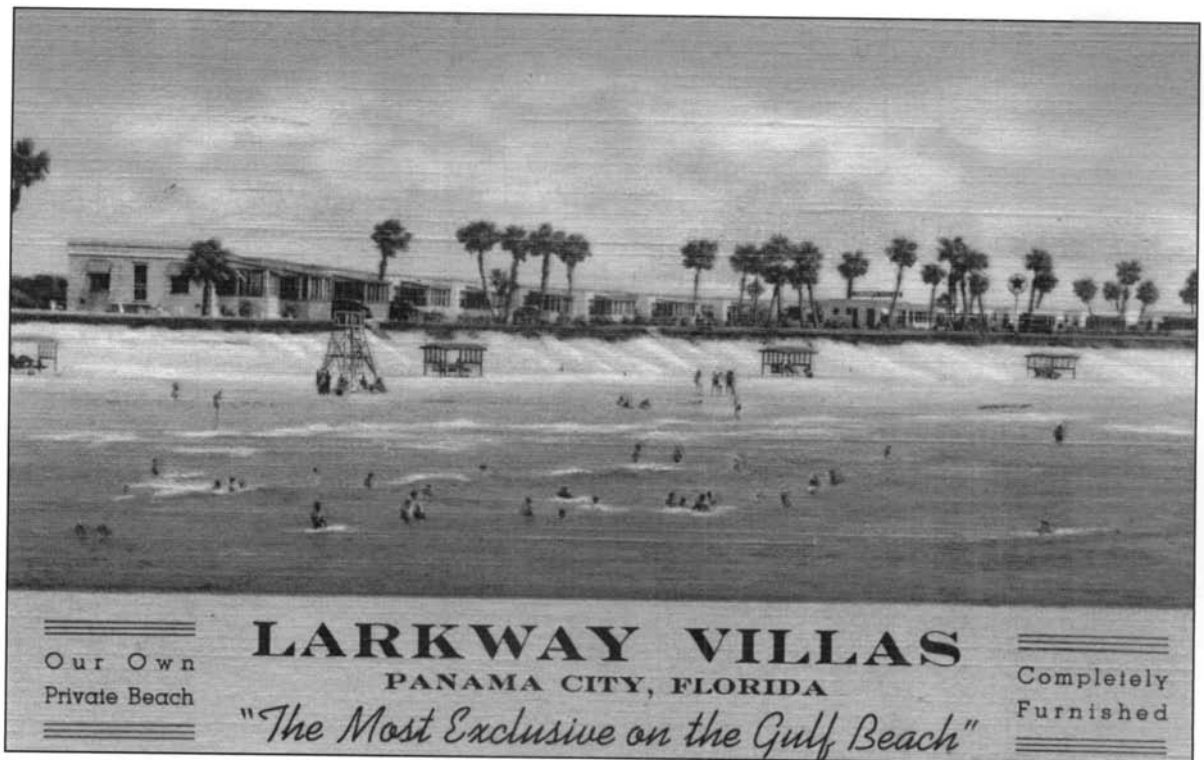
We have already seen how several families and businesspeople homesteaded the desolate beaches and began trying to make them suitable for human habitation. This is really where the story of the waterfront motels gets started, but even then the area took a long time to develop into anything resembling its present-day form. First, we should point out that the word *motel* was not invented until 1925, when a lodging facility in California decided to link its individual cabins together under one roof and create a new type of roadside environment for weary travelers. This radical concept did not become very widespread over the rest of the country until after World War II, so when rooms on the beach first came to the Miracle Strip, they were still in the form of small tourist cottages associated with one or the other of the developing resorts.

Some of the early ventures, such as Long Beach Resort and the original Panama City Beach, had cottages built as a part of the resort itself. At others, such as Laguna Beach, the owners



Most of the early resorts such as Long Beach featured tourist cottages.

The El Centro Motel was one of those built across the street from the beach. Notice that the "pool" arrow points to nothing but a patch of grass!



The Larkway Villas were some of the earliest tourist cottages on Panama City Beach.

were primarily concerned with selling lots to people who wished to construct vacation homes. An interesting aspect of this, which may still be seen in spots along the otherwise-unrecognizable Panama City Beach strip, is that most of these independents were not built on the Gulf side of the highway but across the street. The developers presumably wished to keep the sand and surf as unobstructed as possible. A prime example was the El Centro Motel, established at Sam Hearn's El Centro Beach development yet on the opposite side of the

road from the Gulf. The El Centro Motel operated successfully for decades in spite of the fact that the only water on its premises was the swimming pool.

A similar situation faced the collection of cottages known as the Larkway Villas, constructed in 1938 on the dry side of U.S. 98. These multicolored cabins were owned by Harry Edwards and his son, Jimmy Lark, and consisted of seventeen individual buildings arranged in a semicircle. As with so many of the others, guests of Larkway Villas had to cross the highway to reach the beach—and were they to try that today, it is rather doubtful that they would make it back to their room with all their appendages still attached. Things were different in Larkway's heyday, and the cabin court remained in business until sometime in the mid-1960s; it was demolished a few years later. Lark had bigger fries to fry, having long since established the Miracle Strip Amusement Park by the time the Larkway Villas flew the coop.

By the time the Larkway Villas were constructed, the sandy path the beach was going to follow was easy to see. In October 1936, the local newspapers reported on some new developments taking place near the intersection of U.S. 98 and State Highway 79, known locally as the Y:

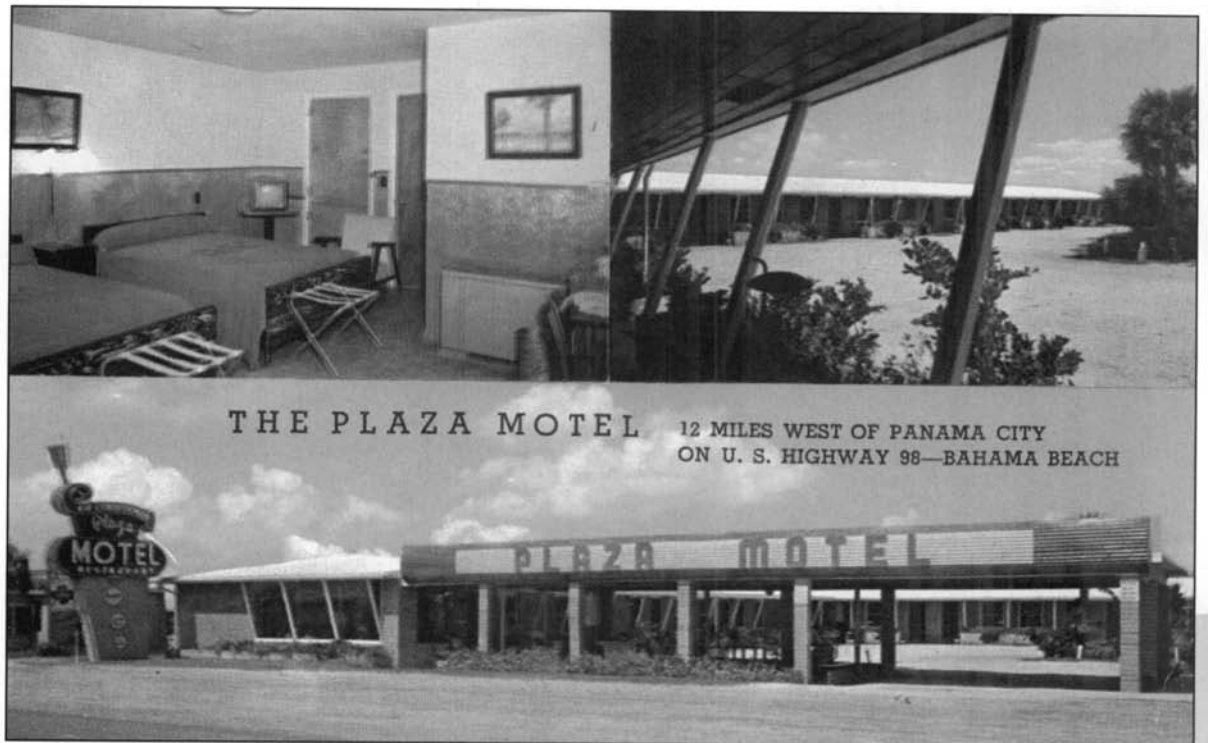
> Panama City's beach frontage is going to get another new development this winter. Four thousand feet of Gulf Highway frontage will be developed in cottage sites. One hundred forty-four large lots have been platted and six cottages will be erected immediately. Mr. J. B. Lahan and Mr. W. E. Hooper of Birmingham, now stopping at the Dixie-Sherman, are the developers.

These Gulf Resort Beach Cottages were part of the late 1930s flurry of development along the emerging strip. (Bay County Library Collection)

This is only one of many developments coming. . . . Another group of rental cottages is in prospect. . . . Besides this present beach resort, owners are planning extensive increases in present facilities, including McCorquodale's Sunnyside and Thomas and Pledger's Panama City Beach. Two hundred new cottages by spring along this beautiful highway and beach are already planned. Panama City is coming into its own as a vacation land.

There was no denying that final sentence, and had it not been for the war, the Miracle Strip beaches might have become

The Sea Breeze Hotel and the Hotel Patio were two more early arrivals on Panama City Beach. (Bay County Library Collection)



The Plaza Motel's twenty-seven rooms made it one of the largest motels on the beach in 1956.

a major tourist destination ten years earlier than they did. However, when the war ended and the tourists began coming back, they found the lodging situation basically unchanged. The old resort cottages opened their doors again, but there was a faint scent of change on the ocean breezes that blew into those newly reopened units.

The first half of the 1950s saw the arrival of the true motel concept, although many of the new businesses continued using the long-established terms *lodge* and *court*. Most of these estab-

Peek's Motel was the survivor of the Panama City Beach strip, remaining unchanged for fifty years.

lishments were microscopic in size compared with the motels of today. A typical example of the prevailing format was the Driftwood Lodge, a two-story motel with a total of twelve rooms that was constructed in 1955. Others were even smaller: the Beacon Motel (1951) had eight rooms, and the neighboring Sandpiper Motel (1955) had nine. The Bell-Mar Court was large, with fifteen units. A true pioneer of the beach motel business was Barney Gray, who named his original motel after

himself and then a few years later started the much larger Miracle Strip Motel. The Plaza Motel overpowered its brethren with twenty-seven units and in 1956 bragged that it was "as modern as tomorrow," with its air-conditioning, steam heat, radio, television, and intercom telephones in most of its rooms. (Living up to the slogan even fifteen years later, the main feature of the Plaza's sign during the 1970s was a giant yellow smiley face. Modern indeed!)

By the turn of the twenty-first century, most of these early 1950s motels either no longer existed or had been transformed into enlarged and renovated properties that bore no resemblance to their original form. An exception to that rule was Peek's Motel, which opened in the early 1950s and retained its original look, with a distinctive pink-and-blue color scheme, five decades later.

The Seaview Cottages and the Florida Girl Motel were examples of early lodging in Destin.

The Silver Beach Cottages are generally acknowledged as the first motel in Fort Walton Beach.

While Panama City Beach was a constant hurricane of activity during the 1950s when it came to putting up motel rooms, its nearest competitor, Fort Walton Beach, was doing considerably less to give drowsy tourists a place to stay. If you will kindly recall from the previous chapter, it was 1953 before Okaloosa Island was opened to any sort of commercial development, so until that time the hotels of that area had been either on the shores of Choctawhatchee Bay or in nearby Destin. Oh yes, people had considered the possibility of attracting tourists to the island in the past, as local historian Leonard Hutchinson pointed out: "Thomas E. Brooks, grandson of the area's pioneer John Thomas Brooks, kept glancing across at Santa Rosa Island and had visions of a thriving summer resort amidst the barrier dunes and along the unequaled white sand beach. Tom secured a lease from Escambia County, which then

claimed jurisdiction, and built a cottage colony at surf's edge. The cottages were completed in 1927 or 1928, but during the first season's operation, not a single renter could be induced to remain on the island overnight."

Although it was probably sheer coincidence that the eventual opening of Okaloosa Island and the demise of Fort Walton Beach's long-established gambling industry took place at roughly the same time, one definite connection existed between the two events. One of the most elaborate and well known of the area's gambling palaces was the Shalimar Club, operated by Roger Clary. After the dealers packed up their eyeshades and left, Clary built what is acknowledged to be Fort Walton Beach's first motel, the Silver Beach Cottages. These cottages differed little from tourist cottages elsewhere, but the roadside sign—a giant neon palm tree—showed that more creative days were on their way.

Longtime chamber of commerce booster Jerry Melvin says that even after the beaches were opened, it took quite some time before the big building boom hit. He places the beaches' main era of motel development from roughly 1961 through the 1970s. During that time, so many different motels of various styles were constructed that one would be foolhardy to even try to guess at the order in which they appeared.

What is known is that for many years, the motel that marked the end of the row was the Islander, built and operated by the Bryant family. The Islander was a typical two-story building that would have been considered an L shape, except that instead of a sharp corner the building made a gentle curve. Like

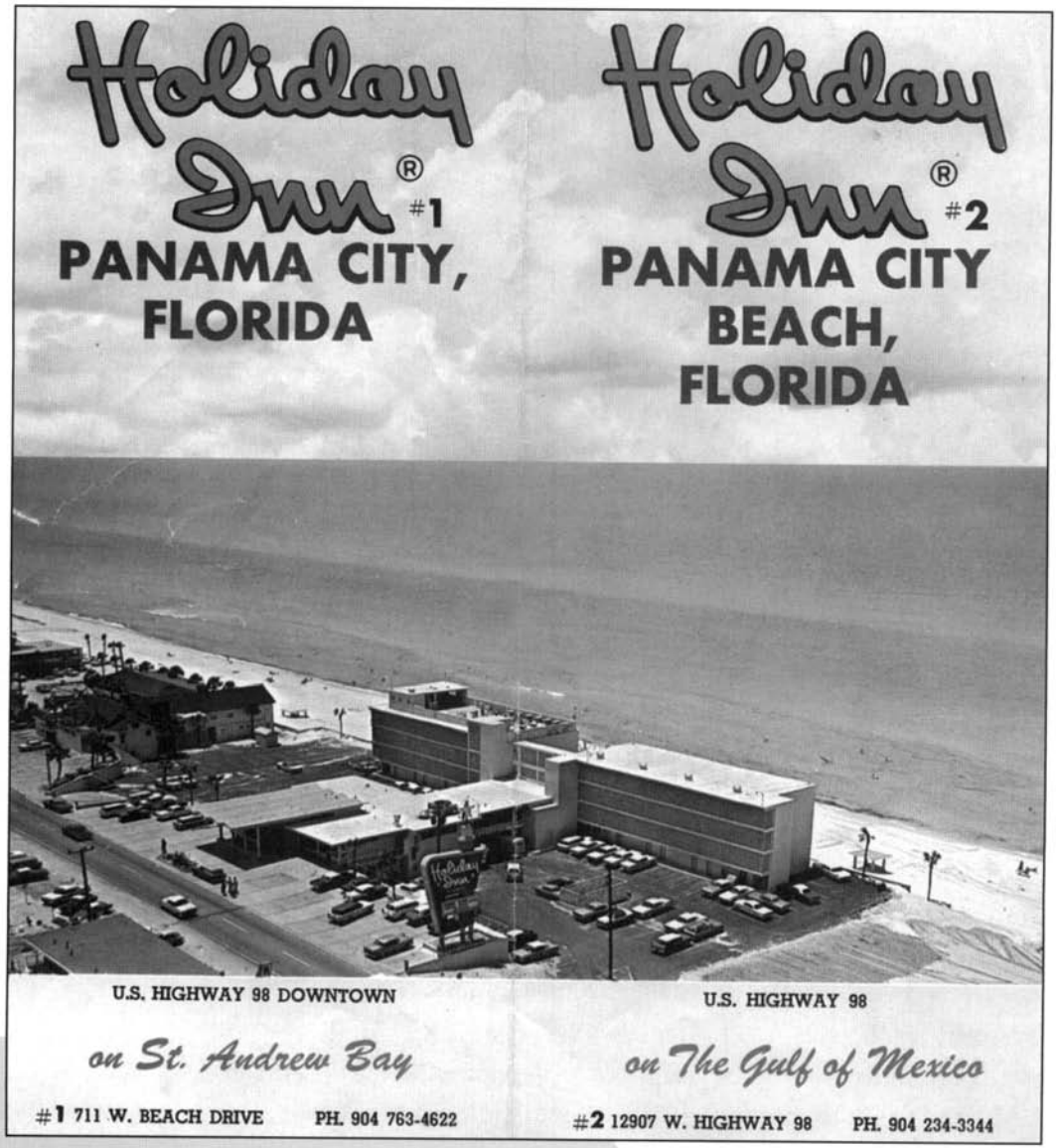
For years, the Islander Motel was located at the end of Okaloosa Island.

many other coastal businesses, the motel was painted a loud aquamarine color, and the letters of its neon sign were mounted vertically on the tall antenna that projected above the main office. Of course, no matter how nostalgic they look, motels are not in business to be museums, and over the course of its history the Islander kept modernizing, adding larger and larger annexes. In October 1995, the original building was demolished, not by the owners but by the even more destructive Hurricane Opal, and on its site today sits the present-day incarnation of the Islander, a row of multistory condominiums whose only connection to the original is the name.

Just as these newer-style motels had taken over the work formerly done by the original small tourist cottages, so did the coming of the 1960s bring changes that would affect these mom-and-pop operations. Back in Panama City Beach, one of the first of the large chain motels to arrive was Holiday Inn, with its flashing, pulsating roadside sign lighting up the night. Cliff Stiles was a hotel magnate who had picked up the Holiday Inn franchises for Birmingham and other southern cities, and in 1960 he expanded his influence into downtown Panama City with a Holiday Inn there. It was nowhere near the beach, of course, but at least it was a start.

In 1963, Stiles announced grandiose plans to build the first Gulfside Holiday Inn in the area that had been founded as Bahama Beach but was now part of sprawling West Panama City Beach. It was immediately apparent that this new kind of motel was going to be different from its tiny forerunners along the strip. Stiles's Holiday Inn was to boast one hundred rooms, and at four stories it was reported to be the tallest building on the Gulf of Mexico. (It is assumed this meant only the northwestern Florida portion of that body of water, as there were undoubtedly taller seaside buildings in Tampa and other points south.)

Stiles got his Holiday Inn on the beach open in time for the 1964 tourist season, but once it was established as a permanent part of the motel scene, he quickly sold it and the downtown location for two million dollars and let others worry about it. The two Holiday Inns went through various owners in the years that followed, and even a third location was added,

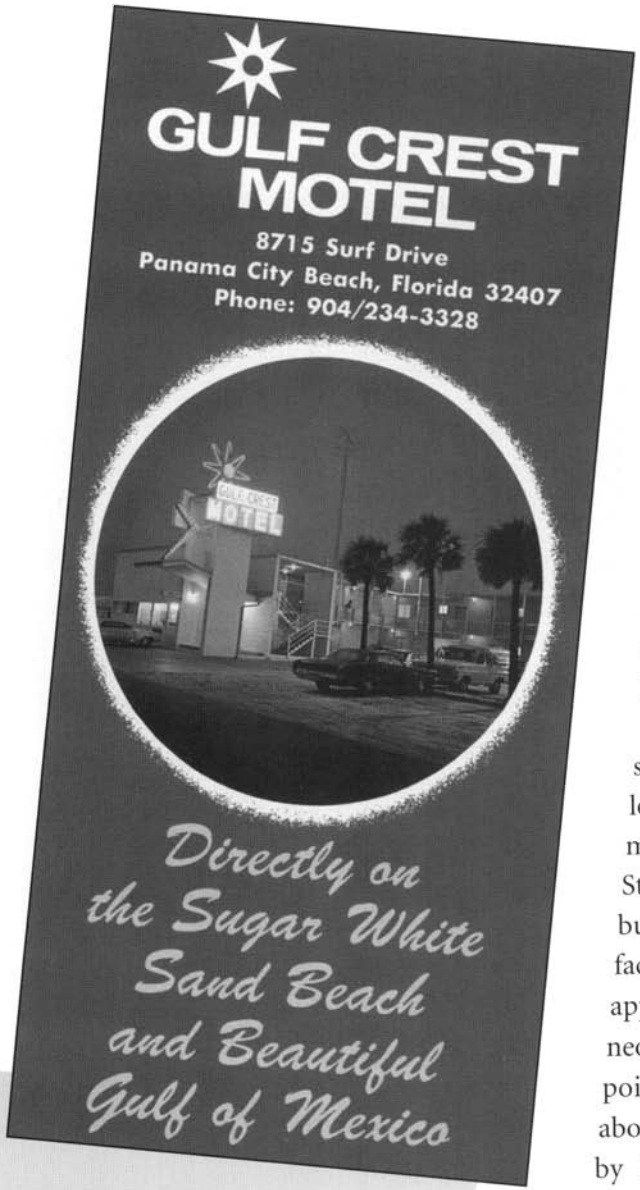


When the Holiday Inn on Panama City Beach opened in 1964, its four stories were said to make it the tallest building on the Gulf of Mexico.

The Tourway Inn and its little-boy-pirate logo followed Holiday Inn to Panama City Beach in the 1960s.

roughly halfway between the Miracle Strip Amusement Park and the Petticoat Junction park at Long Beach. Stiles's original 1964 location eventually became an outlet for other motel chains, and the third one grew up (not out) to be today's lavish Holiday Inn Sunspree Resort.

Another Holiday Inn location along the Miracle Strip, in Navarre Beach, had its own chance to take a bite out of the competition. In 1978, scenes for *Jaws II* were filmed on the beach adjoining that motel, and some local residents remember seeing the huge mechanical shark—actually the star of the



The Gulf Crest Motel apparently sought to copy the Holiday Inn sign as closely as possible without risking a lawsuit.

movie, if you look at it that way—anchored in the rolling waves. The lone shark was apparently removed after the filming, leaving only the real-life variety to worry careless swimmers.

Other chain motels soon tracked Holiday Inn in the sand. Howard Johnson's raised its trademark orange roof on Panama City Beach in the mid-1960s, with its traditional Simple Simon logo coming along for the trip. The smaller Tourway Inns chain staked out a spot directly across the highway from the Zoo-Land Golf course; even though every Tourway Inn in the nation used the logo of a smiling juvenile pirate, the signage looked especially appropriate in its Panama City Beach location.

Holiday Inn and its competitors really started something, because the tourist seasons that followed brought a steady stream of new multistory motels that attempted to imitate the general look of Stiles's original. There was the lavish Chateau Motel, built in the shape of the letter C, with the open end facing the Gulf. The Gulf Crest Motel did not lift the appearance of the Holiday Inn building itself, but the neon sign certainly betrayed that influence, with its pointing yellow arrow and starburst design high above. The Port of Call Motel outdid the Holiday Inn by having five stories. Then in 1966 came the

Fontainebleau Terrace is the first of the new high-risers to be erected on Panama City Beach. Seven stories high, affording a panoramic view of the Gulf and Bay County. Two elevators; 24-hour service. 152 rooms; tastefully furnished, each overlooking the Gulf of Mexico. All rooms have two double beds, TV and are air-conditioned. 600 feet of private beach, as well as a swimming pool, roof garden and recreation room.

Adjacent restaurant, nearby golf . . . all make the Fontainebleau foremost for enjoyment and entertainment for weekends, vacations, conventions and honeymoons!

Write:
FONTAINEBLEAU TERRACE
14401 West Highway 98
Panama City Beach, Florida 32401
Telephone: AC 904 234-3362

When the Fontainebleau Terrace came to town, it signaled a trend toward taller and taller motels.

Fontainebleau Terrace, touted as "one of the new high rises on the beach," reaching seven stories into the air. It may have been a cliché, but it really did look as if the sky was the limit.

As the 1970s got under way, it appeared that there would be no alterations in the way things were going. In 1973 the Stephens family opened the Sea Witch Motel in the area that had been known as Sunnyside during the initial resort development of the 1930s. Not to be confused with Popeye the Sailor's long-standing comic-strip nemesis, the Sea Hag (also a witch), the Sea Witch Motel was named "in honor of America's greatest clipper ship, the *Sea Witch.* This great vessel set many records for commercial sailing which are unsurpassed to this day," according to the original publicity. With such an unusual name, perhaps the Stephens family felt they needed to head off any suspicions that they personally dealt in the supernatural—it was better to leave that to some of the spookier attractions along the strip.

While new motels would continue to be built and old ones remodeled or refurbished, a new type of lodging was slowly beginning to muscle in, the latest in the long string of changes the industry had already witnessed. Between 1971 and 1973, condominiums began gaining popularity, and their size and luxury made even the most modern motels look like 1936 tourist cottages. When it was announced that a new project to be known as Pinnacle Port was to be built at the far western end of beach development, the statistics were staggering. Whereas people gaped in amazement when the four-story Holiday Inn opened in 1964, the buildings of Pinnacle Port were

more than three times that tall, with twenty-eight hundred rooms and a total cost of sixty million dollars. The complex was also to feature a gatehouse, landscaped boulevards, both indoor and outdoor swimming pools, a racquet club with four tennis courts, and a marina village containing a restaurant, lounge, docks, and convenience store. If Panama City Beach's early visionaries could have seen that proposal, they would have either puffed out their chests with pride or fled in abject terror at what their great plans had wrought.

Many more people were fleeing in horror when on September 23, 1975, Hurricane Eloise did her part to help clean out some of the clutter accumulating along the beach. In many ways this event was a turning point for all the businesses along the Miracle Strip. Yes, there had been hurricanes before, but they had all arrived in the years before there was much to damage other than sand dunes. With Eloise it was different, especially since so many motels built in the previous twenty years were sitting on the Gulf side of the highway. Businesses on the opposite side, such as the amusement parks and the miniature golf courses, took a hit, too, but nothing like the buildings that were directly in the line of fire—or water or wind, as the case may be. As a commemorative booklet preserving the hurricane's legacy explained,

> The eye of the storm passed between Panama City Beach and the Fort Walton Beach/Destin area, bringing the northeast corner of the inner strength of Eloise directly across Panama City Beach. Along with the full force winds that hit the resort city

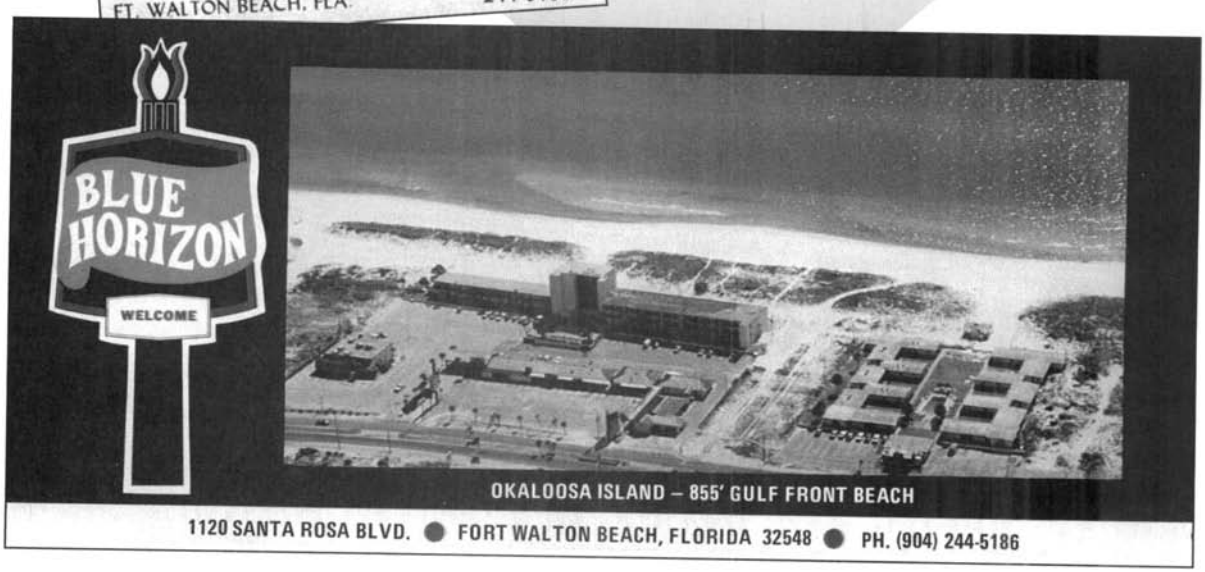
> came massive waves of sea water—tons upon tons of water—that struck up and over sea walls and into motels and beachside homes. The thick concrete walls were bashed inward by the repeated blows and then dragged outward again as the water receded for another surge, much as one would wiggle a baby tooth back and forth in its socket in preparation for removal. As the sea walls gave way, so too did the sand dunes behind them, and the supports upon which many buildings rested. Homes and motels simply had their foundations ripped from under them and fell into the onrushing seas.

Dramatic, isn't it? As more than one person pointed out, the Miracle Strip lived up to its name even during the worst storm it had ever seen, because no lives were lost. The same could not be said for the motel industry. The Escape Lodge did not escape, losing most of its sign and a large portion of the beach that supported its back side. At the Fun'N'Sun Motel, rooms and even the swimming pool collapsed through the floor, landing on the sand beneath.

Most demolished of all was the Roundtowner Motor Inn, of which news reports said, "The rush of wind and water tore through the first floor rooms, pushing contents out windows and doors. Debris was strewn for hundreds of yards inland, soaked with saltwater and coated with seaweed. The motel has at one time been mentioned in the controversy in the beach resort area about the distance buildings should be set back from the shore line."

That same controversy applied over in Fort Walton Beach as well, with the added difficulty that most of the resort buildings

The Blue Horizon Motel grew from a collection of cottages to a sprawling high-rise complex on Okaloosa Island.



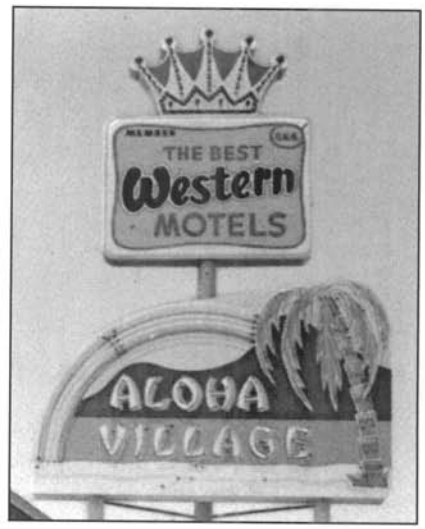
there were located on an island, with footings even less sure than those in Panama City Beach. However, in 1975 Fort Walton Beach and Destin received only a brush from the western edge of Hurricane Eloise; they would get a fuller dose of what an enraged Mother Nature could do twenty years later. In the meantime, even into the late 1970s several of the small, early motels could still be found on Okaloosa Island. We have already mentioned the aquamarine-colored Islander motel, but there were also the Blue Horizon, which had grown from a simple collection of cottages into a high-rise; the Conquistador Inn, with a Spanish theme, naturally; the Driftwood Motel-Apartments; the Marina Motel; the Mariner Inn; the Vista Del Mar Motel-Apartments; and the Gulf Beach Motel.

Like the early lodging in Panama City Beach, these squatters were joined by their slicker chain motel cousins during the first part of the 1970s. The Best Western chain put its pineapples into the Aloha Village, with a colorful neon sign that more closely resembled something from an earlier era. In fact, the Aloha Village's bright rainbow and palm tree motif was so striking that even after the facility had ceased to be a motel and became the Coquina Isle Condominiums, a portion of the sign was retained and rearranged to promote the new business. Ramada Inn sent its balding butler logo to Fort Walton Beach as well, although it was difficult to see the motel behind the enormous volcano-like structure that was the centerpiece of the swimming pool in front. For those who liked to drink and dive, inside the volcano was a "swim-in bar."

In October 1995, Hurricane Opal did to Destin and Fort Walton Beach what Eloise had done further east twenty years earlier. Many buildings on Okaloosa Island were either swept completely away or damaged beyond all repair; large chunks of U.S. 98 were removed in one whack. As we shall see in chapter 3, even Fort Walton Beach's tourism showplace, the Gulfarium, was closed for nearly six months while repairs were made. Today's Okaloosa Island is a vastly different place, with the highway rerouted and rebuilt and most motels towering many stories above the beach. The same applies to Pensacola Beach and Destin, either of which would be unrecognizable to a tourist who had stayed away for a couple of decades.

In fact, even Panama City Beach itself has become more unrecognizable during the past few years. There was a time when a visit to the spot was comfortably reassuring, as the same veteran businesses could be seen year after year after year. They might change names now and then or have a new color of paint applied to the outside walls, but they remained landmarks, and it was nice to see them hanging in there even as modernization crushed in from all sides. However, that is all changing rapidly.

After the 2000 tourist season ended, the Panama City Beach city council had to face reality. As the local newspaper put it, "With only minute amounts of undeveloped beachfront property left inside city limits, a new trend is afoot to demolish small, decades-old properties and build taller and much denser buildings in their place." The first to go, as planned at the time, was the old Gulf Crest Motel—with its Holiday Inn rip-off



Fort Walton Beach's Aloha Village said aloha years ago, but part of its neon sign was preserved by the Coquina Isle Condominiums.

These cozy cabins in Pensacola could be rented for five dollars per night in 1950.

neon sign—to make room for what would be the tallest building on the beach, dwarfing all previous contenders for that title.

By the spring of 2002, bulldozers were almost as common as seagulls on the beach. Within the first two weeks of May, six of the small, older motels were razed: the Majestic (formerly the veteran Barney Gray Motel), the Long Beach Inn, the Twin Palms Motel, the Skyway Motel, the Sugar Beach Motel, and the Port of Call Motel. The site of Gray's pride and joy was to become the Majestic Towers, two skyscrapers containing 550 rooms. The Port of Call would be replaced by two twenty-two-

story towers. Some people bemoaned the loss of the quirky little motels that made up so much of Panama City Beach's personality, but other more business-minded individuals thought that the new development was a good thing: "We'll see a change in the caliber of tourist," said city manager Richard Jackson. "I don't think you'll have quite the beachy atmosphere."

More than any other single element of Miracle Strip tourism, the motels have always seemed to symbolize whatever was happening at the time. From their primitive beginnings as cottages to their pink-and-green neon-draped days of the 1950s and 1960s to the literal growth spurt of high-rise condominiums, lodging facilities have always changed with the times more than have amusement parks, miniature golf courses, or the other more timeless types of entertainment. Only time will tell what comes along to replace today's ultramodern motel facilities, but one thing is for certain: someone will come up with a new idea someday, and then even the multimillion-dollar Majestic Towers will have to fall under the merciless wrecking ball.

CHAPTER 3

FUN IN THE SUN

While it was true that some families, either because of financial necessity or personal preference, would spend their entire Miracle Strip vacations hanging around the motel pool or swimming in the big pond known as the Gulf, many others found the need for alternate types of diversion. Fortunately for them, there was no shortage of enterprising citizens more than willing to fill that gap with an astounding variety of attractions to make tourists feel good about parting with their spare change.

Probably the first human-created attractions along Panama City Beach were a part of J. E. Churchwell's Long Beach Resort complex. (Gid Thomas's original resort development remained primarily a bathing beach, although vintage photographs show some single amusement rides clustered around the main hotel.) As mentioned earlier, Long Beach Resort was just getting started when World War II put a temporary kibosh on such development, but once the fighting was over, the Churchwells jumped back into the tourist business with a vengeance. By 1954, Long Beach Resort's promotional literature painted the place in glowing terms:

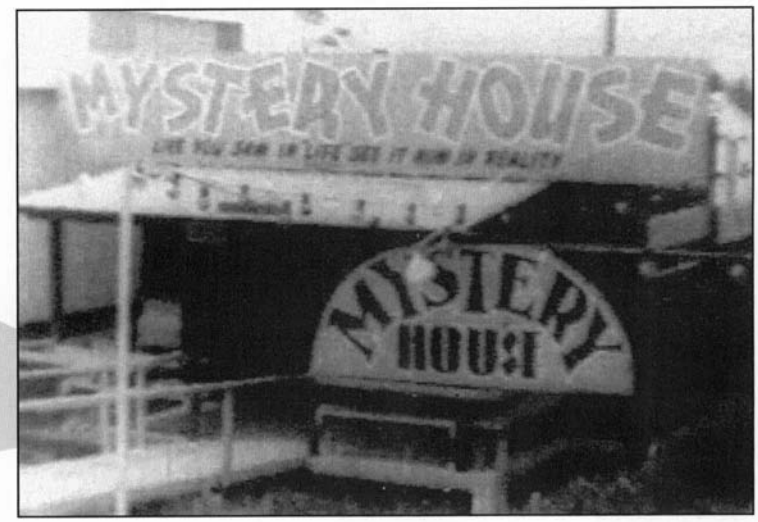
> Right on the snow-white sand at Long Beach Resort is a gala playground for young and old! Here is a place for wholesome,

out-of-doors fun, and there are facilities for clean indoors recreation and amusement. There's no better exercise for any age than a refreshing swim in the clear waters of the Gulf of Mexico.

There's real fishing for the sportsman, a modern yacht club and beautiful 18-hole golf course are nearby. One can visit famous restaurants, nightclubs and cocktail lounges in Panama City, just a few minutes' drive from Long Beach Resort.

There are completely modern cottages right on the water's edge, and these charming cottages were planned to house the entire family, bringing all the delights of seaside activity right to your doorstep. Efficiency and comfort are the key words: luxurious Beautyrest mattresses on the beds, tile baths with showers and all the comforts of home. Cottages are air-conditioned and steam and vented gas heated. A supermarket and modern restaurant are part of Long Beach Resort.

Most of the various attractions in and around Long Beach Resort leased property from the Churchwells rather than actually being owned by that founding family. Businesses would sometimes come and go rather quickly; at times, an attraction would last for only a single tourist season, whereas others would become mainstays of the beach. One of the more obscure ones was the Mystery House, whose exact location is as much a mystery as its name implies. It is known mainly from surviving film footage and listings in a few city directories. The oversized sign on the building read, "Like you saw in *Life,* now see it in reality," but no one seems to remember just what all the fuss was about. Nearly every tourist trap had some variation on the mystery house idea, with slanting floors that caused



The location of Panama City Beach's Mystery House is as much a mystery as what went on inside its walls.

water to seemingly run uphill, for example, so it is probably safe to assume that Panama City Beach's Mystery House was in there mixing it up with the most mixed-up of them.

For entertainment of a different sort, the Long Beach Deer Ranch boasted a collection of one hundred deer, sheep from the Far East, and a real, live buffalo. Does anyone want to take a guess at the buffalo's name? Yes, it was Bill. (More people could have said howdy to him if his name had been Bob Smith.) Another feature was "Billy Goat Hill," a low-tech concept that could be found in practically any attraction that exhibited farm animals.

These dinky attractions would eventually all be replaced by J. E. Churchwell's sprawling Petticoat Junction amusement park (discussed in chapter 5), but the mainstay of Long Beach Resort remained its tourist cottages, restaurants, and souvenir

shops. To that list we should add the Hangout, one of the most familiar places to the under-thirty crowd.

It is somewhat difficult to describe just what the Hangout actually *was,* but everyone who visited Long Beach Resort during that era agrees that it was a big deal. The Hangout is best defined as a loosely knit grouping of snack bars and other amusements around a pavilion that served as a dance floor, with a roller skating rink roped in there somewhere. The loud music and uninhibited dancing that went on at the Hangout undoubtedly worried some of the more straitlaced parents, but archival film footage of the place makes it look more like something innocuous enough to be straight out of an Annette Funicello movie.

Of course, even Annette's good clean beach party fun eventually went out of style, and according to the Churchwell family, a similar fate befell the Hangout. Whereas the local boys had always enjoyed hanging out at the Hangout and heckling the tourist boys—not to mention ogling the out-of-state girls—for most of the Hangout's career they had enough sense to let it go at that. But the times they were a-changin', and things began to get more worrisome when the boys (both local and otherwise) began packing knives and other weapons that could do more harm than calling someone a smart-aleck name. That was when the Hangout started roughing up its squeaky-clean image, and things might really have gotten down and dirty if Hurricane Eloise had not wiped out the Hangout.

Nostalgia is a powerful thing, whether or not it is 100 percent accurate, and twenty years after its demise, the Hangout

On a hot summer day in 1954, the tourists crowd the beach at Long Beach Resort's popular Hangout. (Florida State Archives Photographic Collection)

swung back to life on June 7, 1995, with a party at which participants were encouraged to dress in 1950s clothes and dance the night away with Willie Hightower of the Drifters. The "new" Hangout hung out behind the huge Howard Johnson hotel, part of the Boardwalk Beach Resort. By that time, old Long Beach Resort itself had just gradually faded away; family spokesman Paul Churchwell, when asked about the slow decline of the family's longtime business, was philosophical

about it: "That's the price you pay for being first. Something new always comes along, and people stop paying attention to the old." Today, the site of the old complex is still known as Long Beach Resort, but it is a row of high-rise condominium towers. Early in 2002, the final remnant of the last Long Beach Resort motel was bulldozed to make room for more condos. It was truly the end of that aspect of Panama City Beach's history, but few people seemed to notice.

While it is true that for a considerable length of time Long Beach Resort had something of a monopoly on Panama City Beach entertainment, it was not the only source of fun available to visitors. In fact, in the waning days of 1946, the first real attraction appeared that was not directly connected with any of the preexisting resort developments. The place gave some people the creeps, yet it would go on to have the longest life of any of its companions along U.S. 98.

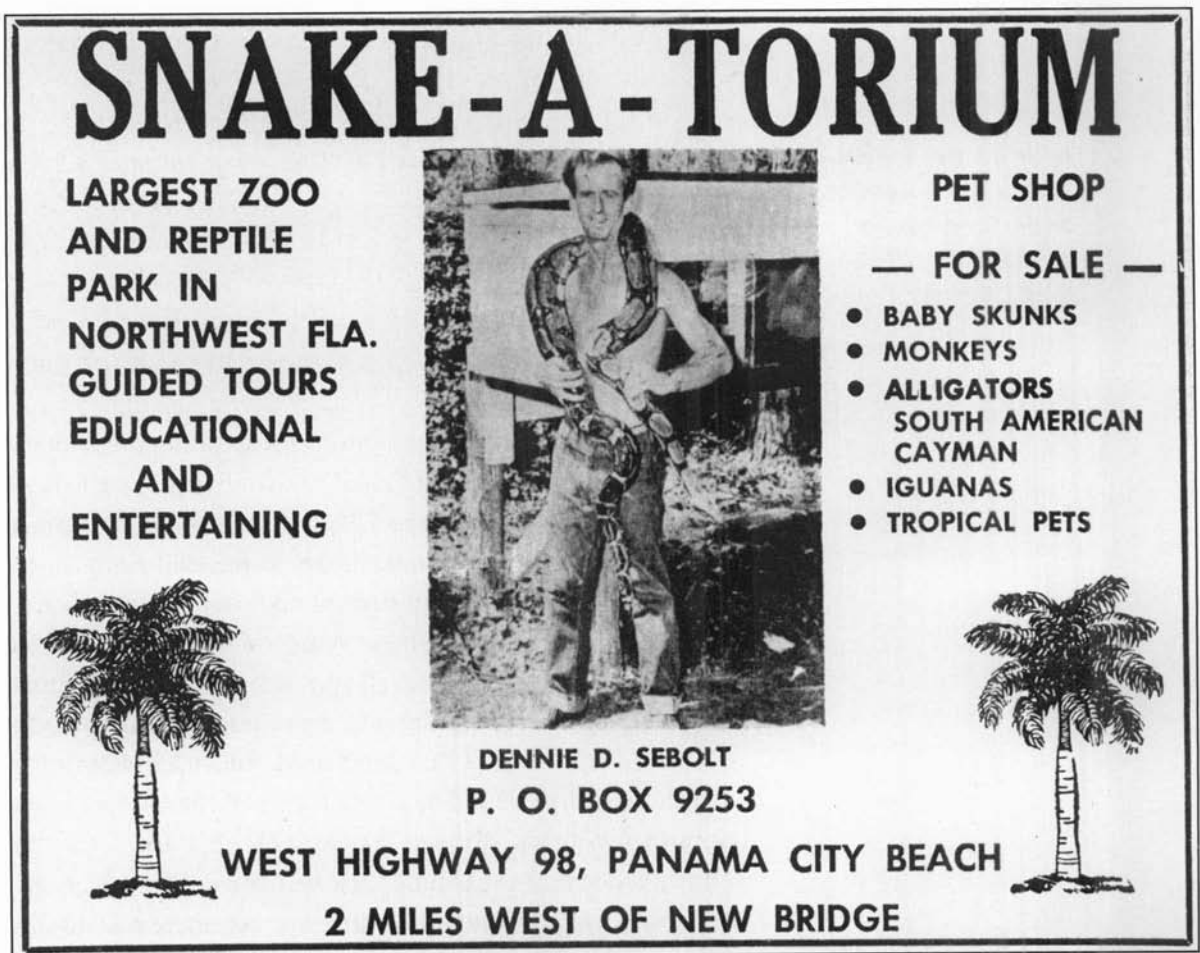
This slithery smasheroo had its genesis in a much older and more established attraction elsewhere in Florida. Since the 1930s, famed herpetologist Ross Allen had enlivened things at venerable Silver Springs in Ocala with his much-publicized Reptile Institute. Allen used his visibility to educate the public about snakes, including sensational demonstrations of milking the venom from the most poisonous varieties. Allen was featured in movie newsreels and practically all of Silver Springs' other publicity, and he became a household name among Florida tourists of his day.

So it was that Jack Tillman, a logger by trade and sideline snake supplier to the Ross Allen Reptile Institute, accumulated

An early view of the Snake-A-Torium, one of Panama City Beach's first independent tourist attractions. (Dennie Sebolt Collection)

enough experience and know-how to set up his own version in Panama City Beach, and the Snake-A-Torium (as it was called) opened its jaws and welcomed its first visitors in December 1946. This fact in itself marked the Snake-A-Torium as an attraction of a different skin than Long Beach, Laguna Beach, or any of the previous business ventures along the Gulf: the reptile display would be open all year, not just for the summer trade. The reasoning for this was not complicated. Since the snakes and other beasts that comprised the Snake-A-Torium's menagerie had to be fed and cared for regardless of whether sunburned tourists stopped by to gawk, it made sense for someone to stay at the counter and be prepared for any possible customers, be it January or June, because there was no difference in the operating cost.

Tillman had a young assistant named Dennie Sebolt who helped out with running the new attraction, and Sebolt proved to be a real pro at picking up on the way things were done. In fact, in the mid-1950s Tillman sold the Snake-A-Torium to



Sebolt, who would be its owner, star, and chief promoter for most of the next four decades. Sebolt did not forget the attraction's roots, however, and practically every ad for the place prominently featured a photo of Sebolt, either with a giant

Dennie Sebolt, owner of the Snake-A-Torium, says this is one of the advertisements in which he emulated Ross Allen of the Silver Springs Reptile Institute. (Bay County Library Collection)

python draped around his neck or performing some other stunt that was part of the regular tour. "I was still trying to make myself into another Ross Allen," he chuckles today.

Indeed, most of the Snake-A-Torium's repertoire was lifted directly from the Allen Institute. Sebolt continued the practice of milking venom, which he would then sell to pharmaceutical firms, which used the poisonous substance in manufacturing medications. Of course, the snakes did not have the crawl of the place all to themselves. Alligators, a scaly standby in hundreds of Florida attractions, unpacked their suitcases at the Snake-A-Torium, and in case visitors were looking for something warmer and fuzzier than cold-blooded reptiles, the critter collection grew to contain bears, bobcats, skunks, and monkeys, among other mammals. Sebolt points out with some pride that all of the featured creatures were natives of Florida, with the major exception of the monkeys. However, he says, so many Florida attractions with a jungle theme displayed the popular primates that many tourists went bananas and thought Florida did have monkeys in its wilderness days.

It should be obvious by now that Sebolt was a master of publicity, and this extended to the highways that led into Panama City Beach from all directions. Inspired by the advertising for those ubiquitous roadside candy shops, Stuckey's and Horne's, Sebolt set out to make sure the Snake-A-Torium name was on every traveler's lips (even if snakes didn't have lips) by the time each carload reached the city limits. He installed his billboards along all the major routes: U.S. 231, State Highways 77 and 79, U.S. 331, and U.S. 98 west of Panama City Beach. ("I

couldn't go too far east on 98 because I'd run into Tyndall Air Force Base," he says with a tinge of regret.) Constructed of wire mesh, with red cutout letters spelling out the various slogans Sebolt devised, the signs followed the honored tradition of specifying the remaining mileage to the Snake-A-Torium; Sebolt carefully spaced the signs five to six miles apart, so a car traveling at sixty miles an hour would encounter one approximately every five or six minutes.

The Snake-A-Torium was even caught in the bright lights of Hollywood for a brief time. In 1972, veteran actor Ray Milland lost more than a weekend in the Panama City Beach area while filming a thriller with the simple title *Frogs*. Instead of costarring with Kermit, Milland and his fellow actors had to put up with the real, live variety, supplied to the movie studio by Sebolt's attraction. Most of *Frogs* was filmed at nearby Eden State Park, but there are unconfirmed reports that in some scenes the Snake-A-Torium's pits and overgrown tropical foliage made an appropriately swampy environment. As with the proliferation of billboards, the Snake-A-Torium was out to get any possible sort of publicity, by hook or by croak.

Now, it may be that animal antics are timeless, but it was not so with the public's attitude toward them. Genuine concern for the humane care of such captive specimens led to greater and stricter regulations and license fees for the privilege of owning and displaying them, and Sebolt eventually found his business so hamstrung with red tape that even the joy of fondling a boa constrictor was no longer worth it. On October 1, 1991, Sebolt closed up shop for good. Actually, it was more of a changing of

the guard, as Panama City Beach veterinarian Gerrie Barr and some associates purchased the Snake-A-Torium property and retained most of the animals residing there. The only parts disposed of by Sebolt were the star slitherers themselves. Since the potential market for such a collection was understandably limited, Sebolt ended up hauling his creepy crawlers to the annual rattlesnake festival in San Antonio, Texas, where he found a counterpart who provided good homes for them all.

Meanwhile, new owner Barr came up with the name ZooWorld for his acquisition, and it opened in June 1992. Sebolt reports that nearly all of his original buildings and walkways are still in use by ZooWorld, but the number and variety of animals have increased to fit its more politically correct conservation theme. As for the veteran reptile rustler, Sebolt admits that when he goes fishing or enjoying some other woodland activity, he still occasionally catches snakes and then releases them, just for old times' sake. Some habits are hard to break.

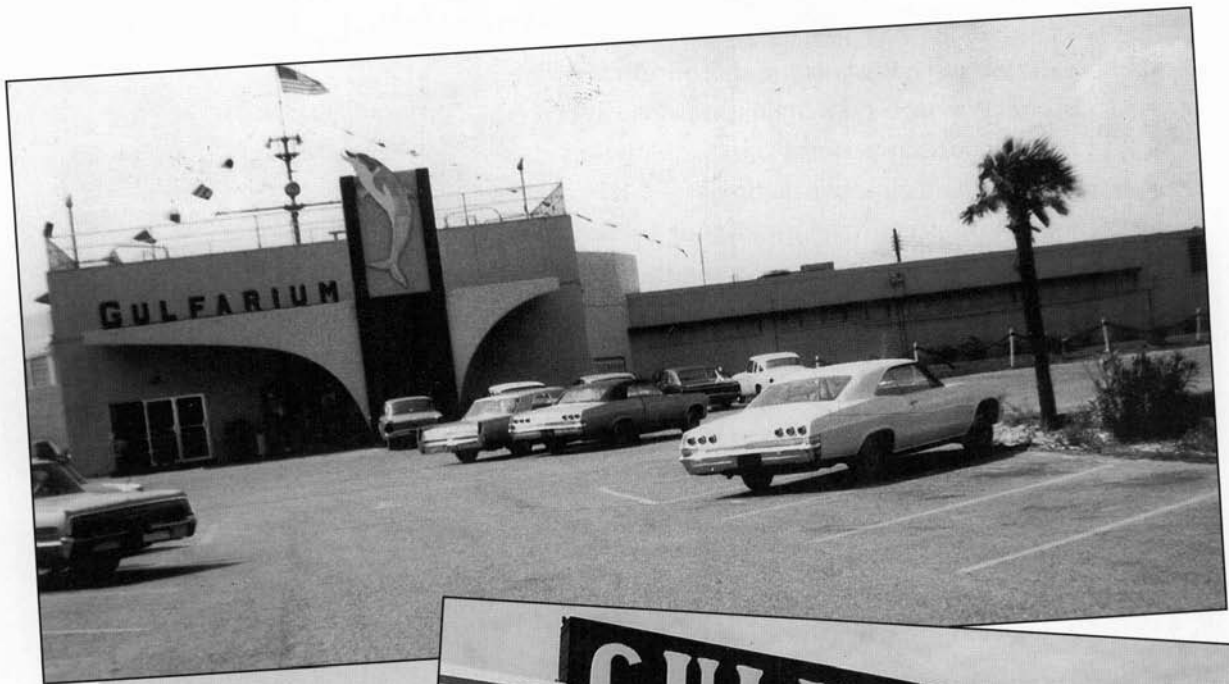
At one time, reptile farms were common sights along all the southern roadways. Sebolt's Snake-A-Torium was not even the only such attraction along the Miracle Strip. At some point, an imitator known as the Seminole Reptile Jungle slunk around the West Panama City Beach vicinity, and over in Fort Walton Beach, a family named Shannon ran its own collection of creepers in the early 1950s. In fact, the location of the Shannon snake farm became the site for that resort area's first big and lasting hit in the tourist wars.

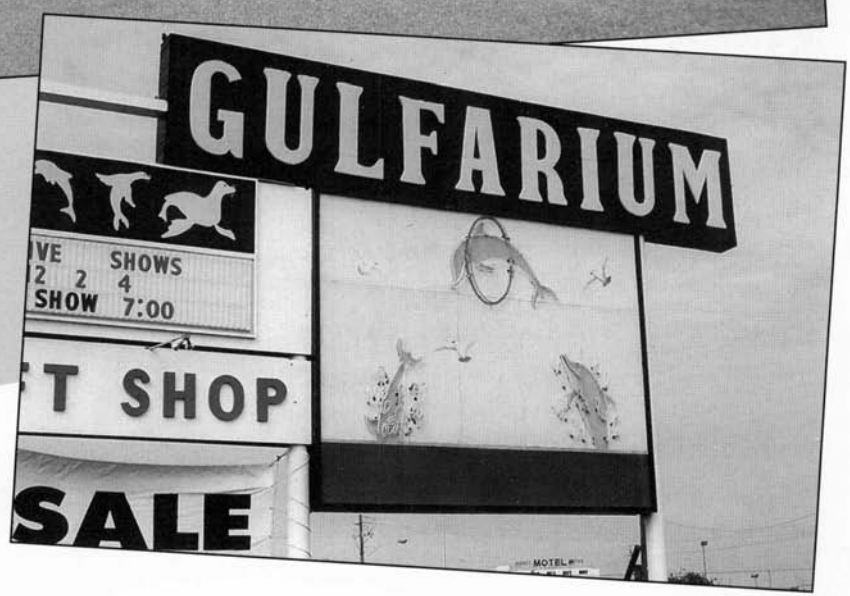
Back in the vastly different world of 1938, a group of biologists discovered that, contrary to popular scientific opinion, it

was not impossible to keep marine creatures in captivity—it only required a facility large enough to service their needs. This was the origin of Marineland, the world's first oceanarium, situated near St. Augustine on Florida's Atlantic Coast. For many years, Marineland clammed up about its methods of operation, but former employees (or traitors, as Marineland preferred to think of them) eventually went out on their own and began other, similar attractions, including the famed Miami Seaquarium.

Now, Fort Walton Beach comes into the piscatorial picture by virtue of a marine biologist named John "Brandy" Siebenaler. After earning degrees at the University of North Carolina and the University of Miami, Siebenaler worked in his underwater field for the benefit of several scientific facilities, but in 1952 he was on a research trip to Fort Walton Beach and decided there was a great potential there. You see, other oceanariums had been concerned with the marine life of the Atlantic, but the world of life beneath the surface of the Gulf of Mexico remained largely unstudied. Siebenaler set out to remedy the situation, and construction on his gigantic fish bowl he named the Gulfarium began in late 1954, reportedly on the property formerly home to the Shannon snake farm.

The Gulfarium opened with a splash on August 15, 1955. Like its predecessor, Marineland, it was not practical to expect such a facility to be a financial success if biological studies of the deep-sea denizens were to be its only activity. Something more entertaining had to be introduced to get large groupers of paying customers through the front door. Fortunately, in 1951 the



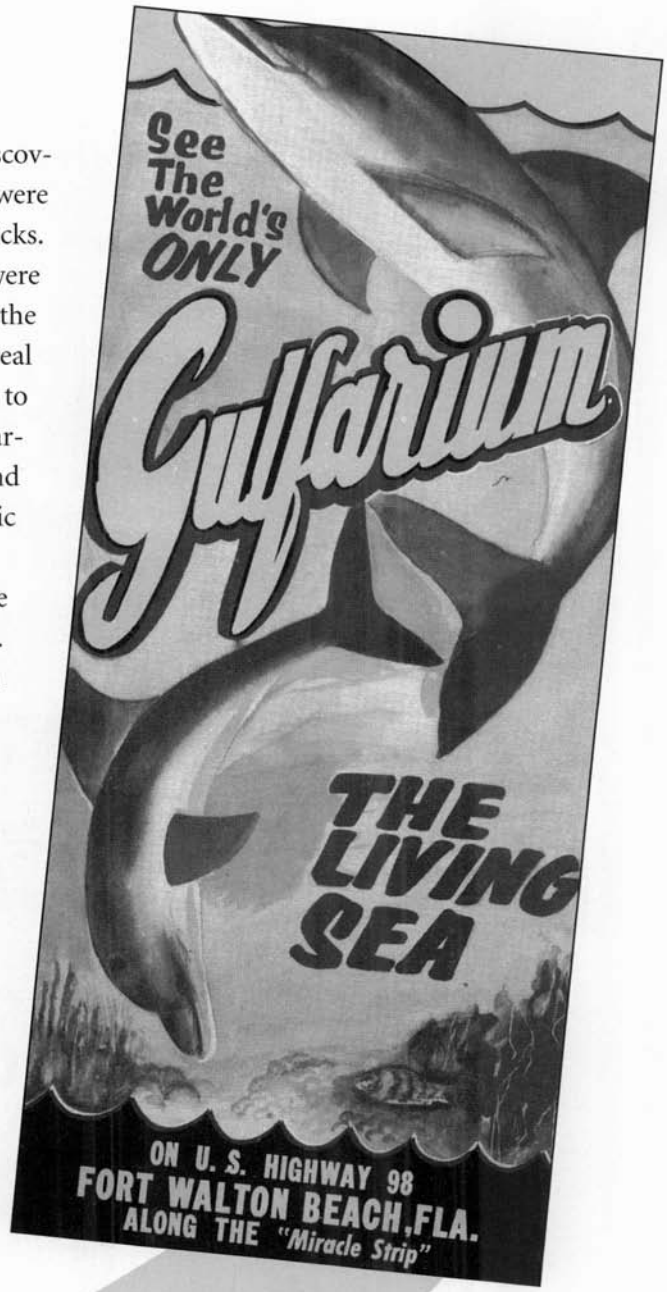


Porpoises were everywhere at Fort Walton Beach's Gulfarium, not just in the giant tank. One hung out on the building's pylon, while another repeatedly jumped through a hoop on the roadside neon sign.

scientists at Marineland had made the amazing discovery that porpoises were highly intelligent and were capable of being trained to perform stunts and tricks. Actually, most of what the fishlike mammals did were simple variations on their natural behavior in the wild, such as high leaps and somersaults, but the real trick for their human trainers was to teach them to do these tricks on cue. Like Marineland, the Gulfarium promoted popular porpoise performances, and that became its most visible face as far as the public was concerned.

In fact, the Gulfarium's original decor on the front of its building played up the porpoise theme. Painted in loud shades of aqua and yellow, with red lettering for contrast, the structure's central pylon sported a huge cutout figure of a smiling porpoise. (During the 1960s, children and adults often assumed this friendly face represented the star of the popular TV series *Flipper*.) This design and color scheme were suitable enough to last for more than twenty years, but since the 1980s the decor has been changed at least twice, although the basic shape has remained the same. The roadside sign also demonstrated the Gulfarium show, with a neon porpoise jumping over and over again through a hoop.

It looked like smooth sailing at the Gulfarium until Hurricane Opal gave it a major



An early Gulfarium brochure plays up the porpoise theme.

black eye in October 1995. Being situated on Okaloosa Island made the building even more vulnerable to the damaging winds and high surf than it would have been otherwise, and not surprisingly, the floodwaters returned some of the aquarium's residents to the wild. Another loss that affects our topic here is that the Gulfarium proudly displayed its archival photographs and newspaper coverage of the grand opening in its hallways, and the drenching it received killed that historical collection as soundly as if new management had taken over and done it on purpose (the usual scenario in the tourism industry). However, the porpoise show must go on, and after five months of nonstop work to repair damage, the Gulfarium reopened in March 1996.

Brandy Siebenaler continued to oversee his briny brainchild for the rest of his life. When he passed away at the age of seventy-four in February 2000, he was eulogized for his dedication to not only the study but also the well-being of his marine life and his dedication to teaching the public, especially schoolchildren, to respect them. His son, Gary, took over, and today the Gulfarium remains the first and foremost attraction in Fort Walton Beach's ever-growing list.

Another 1950s attraction to open in the general vicinity of the Gulfarium was the Museum of the Sea and Indian, nine miles east of Destin. This combination museum and gift shop continues to operate today and has become somewhat of a legend among roadside buffs for its low-budget approach. Nothing could hope to top its early advertisements, which screamed, "See the Drunken Fish! Oscar the Octopus! Dog Fish! Visit the

new INDIAN FUN HOUSE!" Place this copy alongside a cartoon drawing of an octopus wearing an Indian headdress, and you get the general idea. The Museum of the Sea and Indian most definitely belongs to an earlier era, but it is an era well worth preserving in today's all-too-familiar cookie-cutter roadside landscape.

Another attraction that purposely belonged to an earlier day grew out of the sand on Pensacola Beach in 1959 and managed to stand out primarily because it was one of the few true tourist attractions there. The city of Pensacola commemorated its four hundredth anniversary in 1959, and to celebrate, the West Florida Home Builders Association took it upon itself to re-create what was intended to be an authentic Spanish village of 1723. The press release at that time stated, "Much time and energy went into the planning and building of the many houses, the church, the stockade and fortifications, and the governor's mansion. Careful research was conducted to insure strict authenticity of the structures."

This probably is quite true, because photos of the Spanish village's exterior prove that it was not dressed up in the gaudy fashion one would expect from a roadside attraction. All the buildings looked quite plain and unadorned sitting out on the sand of the beach, but apparently the big show was on the insides of the various structures. Here could be seen local performers in period costumes, acting out day-to-day village activities. Since this would not have been a proper place to find bathing beauties in their bikinis, the Spanish village did the

It doesn't look much like a tourist attraction, but this was the reconstructed Spanish Village on Pensacola Beach, which lasted from 1959 to 1973. (Brian Rucker Collection)

next best thing, dressing girls as pretty senoritas to serve as greeters.

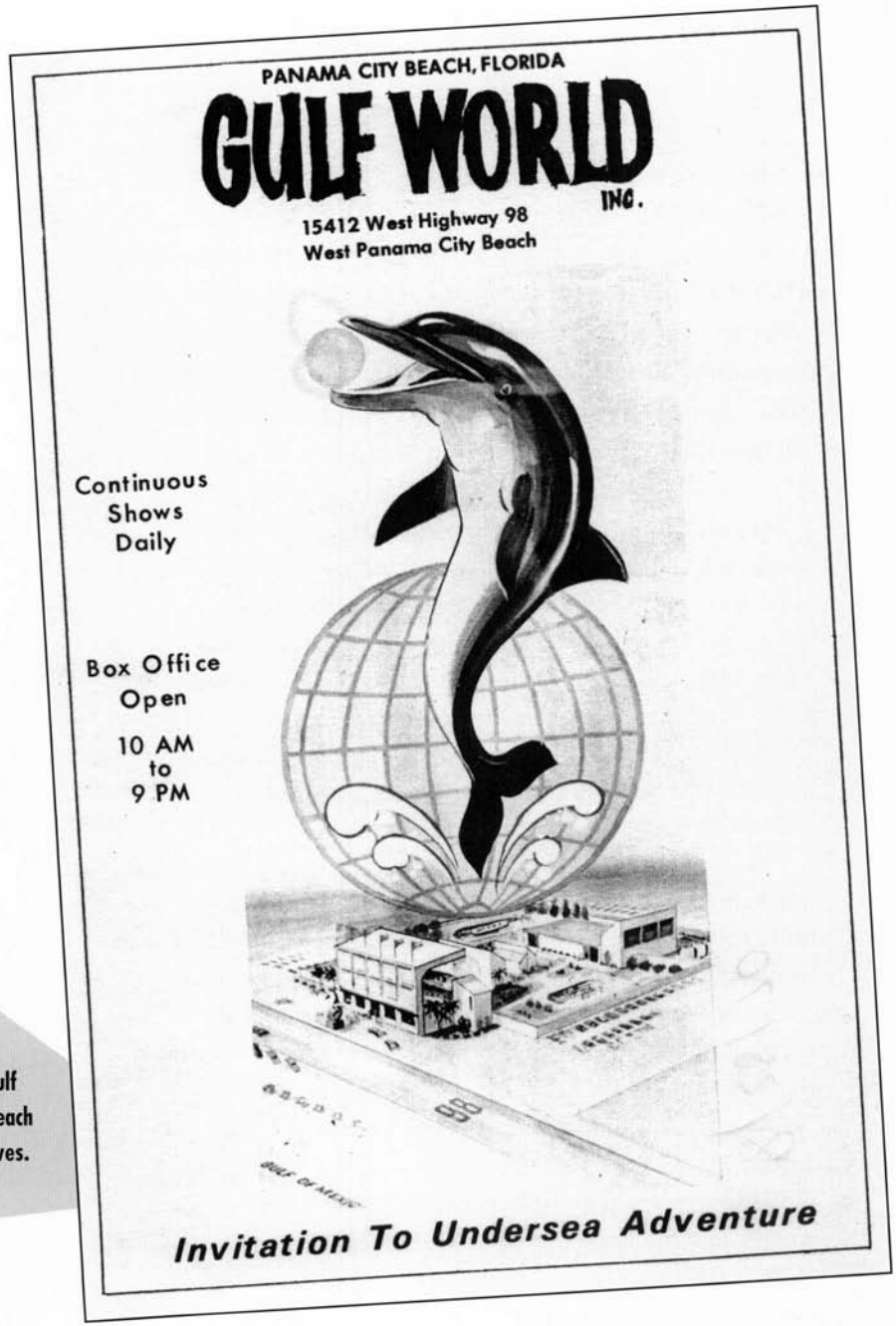
The Spanish village held down the fort on Pensacola Beach for more than a dozen years, but by the early 1970s the buildings were no longer in any condition to welcome tourists. The entire complex was razed in June 1973, and its property was given over to more typical beach development.

The next big event to take place in local attraction history was the arrival of Goofy Golf, which putted over from Biloxi to Pensacola and Fort Walton Beach and then ultimately to

Panama City Beach. That Panama City Beach location, in turn, produced the Wild West–themed Tombstone Territory, which then inspired its carbon cowboy copy, the Petticoat Junction/Ghost Town complex at Long Beach Resort. All of these super-duper-sized projects of the late 1950s and early 1960s have such complicated histories that they will be dealt with in chapters of their own.

While Panama City Beach was without question the loopy leader in offbeat attractions, the fact remained that the Gulfarium in Fort Walton Beach was still the kingfish of its type, and Panama City Beach really did not have anything comparable to it. For a while, celebrated local fisherman Roy Martin operated an aquarium-type attraction he called the Fish Bowl, but it was hardly in the same class as the Gulfarium, and, according to his colleagues, it was as much a display of the dead fish he had hooked in his long career as an exhibit of the living variety. It seemed there was a potential whirlpool that needed to be harnessed.

It fell to businessman Wes Burnham to do the job. In 1969 he opened Gulf World, which to all appearances was strictly a Panama City Beach reincarnation of the Gulfarium. Of course, the porpoise show remained front and center, but Gulf World did add other features that kept it from being merely a copycatfish. Unlike its Fort Walton Beach ancestor, Gulf World expanded its perimeters to include wildlife not necessarily native to the Gulf Coast region, including parrots and penguins. (Wow, were *they* a long way from home!) There were also tropical gardens complete with the South Seas tiki gods

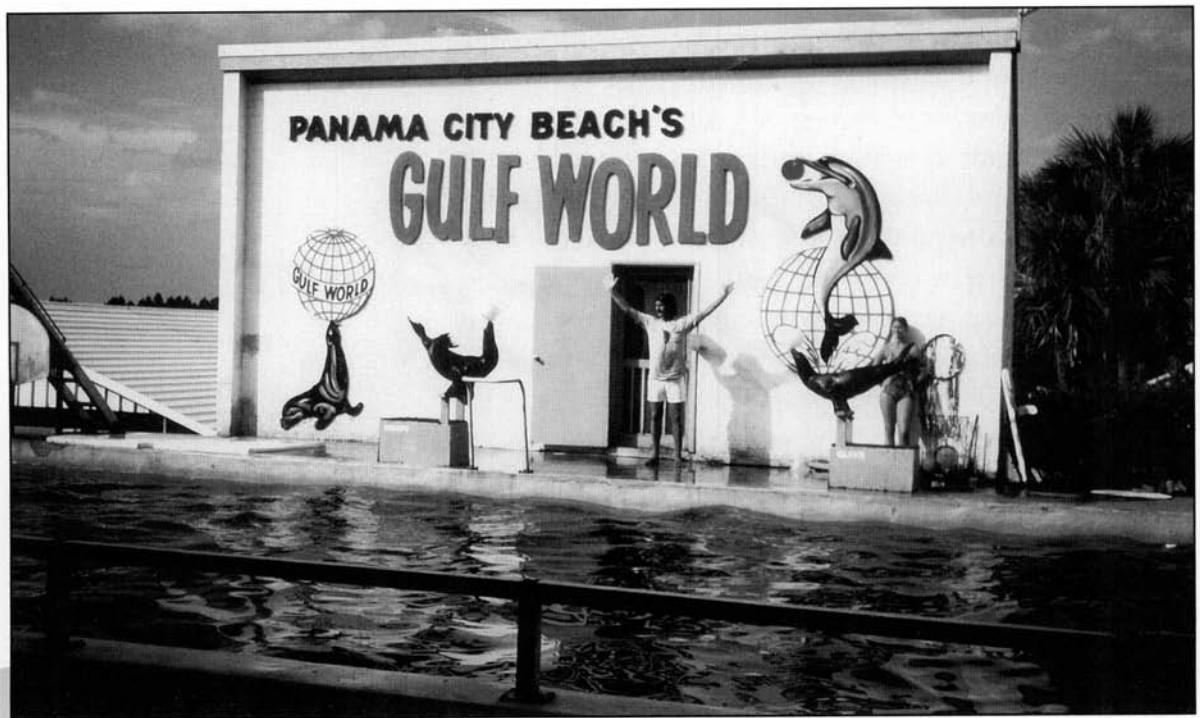


Wes Burnham opened Gulf World in Panama City Beach in 1969, and it still thrives.

that had already become common at restaurants and souvenir stores throughout Florida.

One of Gulf World's many part-time performers was Tracy Lewis, whose family was deeply involved in running the various businesses in Petticoat Junction's Ghost Town. She sometimes managed to get out of Dodge and sun herself in Gulf World's tropical atmosphere, and she has some fond memories about stunts both planned and unrehearsed:

> We'd do this dive show in the back and have to put on a scuba tank and weights to keep us down. We'd show how to remove the gear, except the weights and fins, then calmly put the tank and mask back on. That was fine, except you weren't supposed to look down at the latches as you unfastened them . . . even trying as hard as possible, all of us would once in a while grab the weight latch and there we'd go, floating around! We'd get it back together, but the little man on the prerecorded tape would keep on with the show!
>
> Also, we'd feed the fish at the end of the show, and one of the other employees would calmly throw the bag of food down. To get to the point where they were to throw it in, they had to walk on a narrow ledge by the wall above the aquarium. I'll never forget the day one of the guys fell in. Sometimes the fellow who did the scuba diving show with the speargun before my show would shoot the bag of food to me with the speargun.
>
> You could buy dead fish at the snack bar and feed them to the sea lions right across from the snack bar. (I always thought that was gross; you could buy your dead fish in the same place where you got your hot dog.) One day I went to the store next door and



It's showtime at Gulf World in this shot from the early 1970s. (Tracy Batohie Collection)

bought a can of sardines. I laid them on the napkins, and they looked just like the fish the tourists would buy. I walked over to the fence where the sea lions were, looked at the fish in my hand, and said out loud to all the folks around me, "The sea lions have had enough fish, and they look good," and I began to eat the sardines. The gasps! I ate all of them very calmly and then walked off. . . . I wonder if those poor souls ever came back to Gulf World.

Well, at least *some* tourists returned, because through expansion after expansion, Gulf World has continued to grow, and today's version of the park is a major player in the rescue

of the various whales and other sea creatures that occasionally beach themselves in the neighborhood.

One of the most eye-catching buildings along U.S. 98 in Panama City Beach was shaped like a ship—not just any ship, mind you, but that dinghy of the deluge, Noah's Ark. Thankfully, no one was using this appearance for a tacky souvenir shop or themed restaurant. This Noah's Ark was really and truly a church, a special outpost ministry of the United Methodist Church. The original pastor, Rev. Jim Rains, states, "A lot of people see it but don't know what it is. They think it's a restaurant or an arcade. There are other businesses on the beach that look like pirate ships." One of those was the Treasure Ship, a larger-than-life replica of a Spanish galleon that was parked in Grand Lagoon, near the Captain Anderson's restaurant. The Treasure Ship was a combination restaurant, bar, and gift shop and was probably the location Rev. Rains meant when he told the story of a wedding that was to take place at Noah's Ark: "The bride and groom went to the wrong boat and were waiting at a bar that was a pirate ship."

Around the same time that Noah's Ark washed ashore, the Panama City Beach strip became home to another attraction that we might say represented the opposite end of the supernatural realm. Castle Dracula was never a very major tourist spot—and certainly never an extremely popular one—but its very weirdness makes it stand out like a glowing specter in the minds of all who dared go near the place.

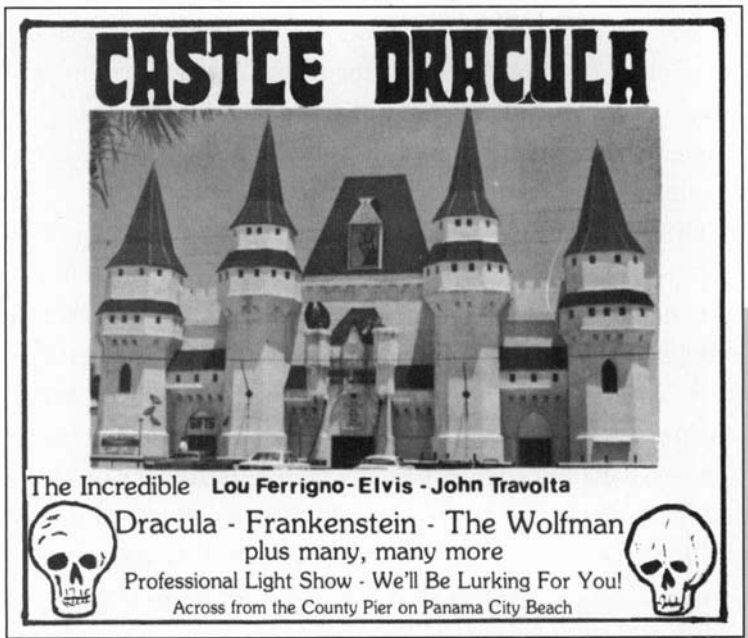
From the highway, Castle Dracula resembled the type of edifice one might find sitting in the middle of either Disneyland

or Walt Disney World, but closer inspection proved that its resemblance to those elaborate theme park palaces was merely a sham. Castle Dracula was a three-dimensional facade that fronted what turned out to be a rather plain-looking building visible only from certain vantage points.

There are basically two ways to describe this pseudo-spooky establishment. One perspective comes from Castle Dracula's own publicity material, which plumbed new depths when it came to being lurid and crass: "Inside the castle, with its dimly lit hallways, you can hear the mysterious organ music of the Phantom of the Opera. You may also hear the howl of a dog or a nerve-shattering scream. Could it be the Hunchback or Dracula has claimed another victim? Visit the Crypt, Séance Room, or the Torture Chambers . . . if you dare. If you happen to hear a creaking of the stairs or perhaps footsteps behind you, do not be frightened, that's only . . . FRANKENSTEIN. So come and . . . heh, heh . . . KILL A LITTLE TIME WITH US. We'll be lurking for you."

Okay, so now we know what Castle Dracula thought of itself. What did visitors actually experience when they paid their hard-earned money to see it? Two of those who were caught in Dracula's tourist trap were friends Rod Bennett and Jim Peavy, and between the pair we get the "real" picture of the castle:

> Castle Dracula was sort of a cross between a "Movieland"-type wax museum and a straight haunted house. In fact, the sidewalk out in front had Chinese Theater–style footprints in cement of all the famous monsters (Wolfman, Frankenstein,



This advertisement for Castle Dracula makes the building look like something from a Disney theme park but does not explain what Elvis and John Travolta have in common with Dracula, Frankenstein, and the Wolfman.

Dracula, etc.). You entered through a gift shop that specialized in Spencer Gifts–type novelties, with an emphasis on the spooky side, of course. Also, there was a magic counter with a live magician for a salesman.

Early on in the walk-through itself was the scene I remember best. Someone had re-created Vincent Price's art-deco pipe organ from *The Abominable Dr. Phibes* and used it as the basis for a wax scene with Phibes himself—a pretty good professional wax figure, if I'm not mistaken. Most of the other figures were done on the cheap, with mannequins wearing store-bought Don Post monster masks standing in for wax figures. Possibly they blew their entire wax-figure budget on that one character and had to fudge the rest.

Jim Peavy says that he believes the *Dr. Phibes* neon-deco pipe organ may have been the original prop used in the movie and that the owner's acquisition of it might have been the impetus for the whole project. (He's not sure where he remembers hearing this.) The "haunted house" elements were unusually gory for the mid-1970s, and none of it was done very well except Dr. Phibes.

Besides the classic monsters of filmland, Castle Dracula spotlighted other creeps, but since it was constantly walking a copyright tightrope with certain characters, its way of handling this truly scary situation was sometimes quite interesting. For those too young to remember it or too old to appreciate it, one of the hit TV shows of the late 1970s was based on the Marvel Comics character the Incredible Hulk, played by bodybuilder Lou Ferrigno. That was fine and dandy, and the green, glowering Hulk was somewhat of a natural fit for Castle Dracula's collection of freaks, even though he was supposed to be a good guy rather than a villain. However, the Incredible Hulk was a copyrighted character, so no matter how he was depicted, Castle Dracula could not legally use his name in its advertising. The solution? Simple! Castle Dracula's ads shouted, "See *The Incredible Lou Ferrigno!*" What Mr. Ferrigno and his lawyers thought of this is not documented.

Within just a few years of its opening, enough tourists must have gotten wise to these types of hulking shenanigans and discovered the same things that Bennett and Peavy described, because Castle Dracula went into a rapid decline. By 1981, not only were the monsters being advertised, but so were the cas-

From high above the Goofy Golf course, the turrets of Dracula's Facade can be seen in the distance.

tle's two newest residents, Elvis Presley and John *Saturday Night Fever* Travolta. Yes, that's right, although probably the scariest thing one could say about Elvis was that he was dead. We can't say what sort of horror the sight of Travolta in his leisure suit would produce.

The last days of Castle Dracula are shrouded in a fog of mystery. Owners of nearby attractions assert that the castle's operator "died a horrible death," but they are talking about businesswise, not the literal demise he might have suffered at the hands of the castle's residents. Actually, reports are that Castle Dracula eventually burned to the ground, clearing the way for other types of businesses to take its place. However, true to its

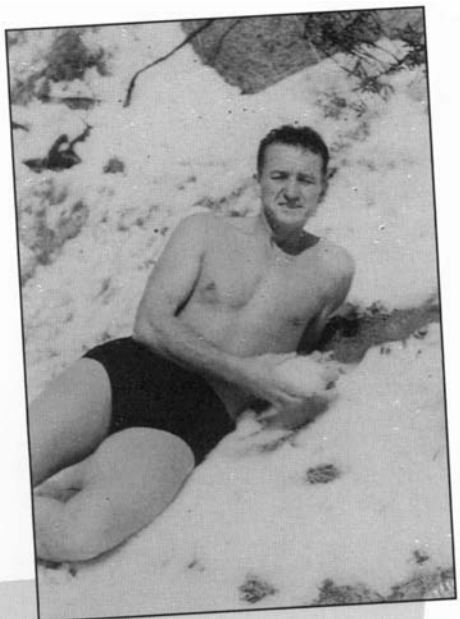
namesake, it refused to die completely. It is said that for years afterward, Hollywood-style footprints and autographs could still be seen in the sidewalk in front of the gift shop that eventually rose on the castle's former spot. The whole story of Castle Dracula simply proves that, for a tourist attraction, luring customers with cheesy special effects and exaggerated claims can turn out to be more deadly than a stake through the heart.

GOOFY GOLFING

CHAPTER 4

Of all the many different types of attractions found along the Miracle Strip, no single type made as large an impression as the area's eye-catching miniature golf courses. Actually, it seems a little ridiculous to even refer to them by such a name, because the primary features that made them stand out from the surrounding landscape were anything but miniature: giant concrete statues, brightly painted and impossible to ignore. The game itself was almost an afterthought.

Before looking at the influence the Miracle Strip had on this cherished pastime, we should first look at how the diversion began. Although several people in the first two decades of the 1900s had devised personal putting greens to help improve their golf games, credit is usually given to Garnet Carter of Lookout Mountain, near Chattanooga, Tennessee, for developing miniature golf into the form we know today. He theoretically did so originally to entertain the children of the guests who were staying at his hotel, the Fairyland Inn, and he patented his invention as "Tom Thumb Golf" in 1929. By franchising the concept, Carter turned Tom Thumb Golf into a national fad during the early days of the Great Depression. By 1930, some three thousand Tom Thumb Golf courses had people of all ages and socioeconomic statuses puttering around



Future Goofy Golf impresario Lee Koplin, 1954. (Koplin Family Collection)

with the craze. Scores of unauthorized rip-offs emerged as well, glutting the market so badly that in just a couple of years, people had grown weary of the idea of miniature golf, and Carter moved on to other interests. (In 1932 he opened Rock City, a roadside attraction on Lookout Mountain, and his life—not to mention southern tourism—would never be the same again.)

In Carter's original concept of miniature golf, the emphasis was on the "miniature" part of the name. Small statues of elves and other minuscule obstacles were manufactured to both add to the difficulty of the game and give it some visual interest. This was where the courses along the Miracle Strip widely diverged from their long-ago roots.

After being nearly forgotten for almost twenty years, miniature golf made a comeback after World War II, when family entertainment in general became even more popular than ever before, thanks to the burgeoning baby boom. In 1948, the owner of a small course in Guerneville, California, enlisted the help of Lee Koplin, a welder who had originally come to the West to work on the Hoover Dam. An extremely creative individual, Koplin used his skills to construct some small concrete statues for his friend's course. According to family lore, the addition of the eye-catching statuary more than doubled the course's income almost overnight, and Koplin realized he might be on to something big—but he didn't realize *how* big.

Koplin spent the next ten years wandering around the country, building miniature golf course obstacles and perfecting his ideas. In either 1957 or 1958 he opened a course on the beach at

Biloxi, Mississippi, and called it Goofy Golf. The name seemed absolutely perfect, but like most such things, it was not the first time that particular combination of words had appeared. Back during the original miniature golf mania of 1930, a song had been published under the title "I've Gone Goofy over Miniature Golf," but it is unlikely that Koplin was remembering that obscure tune when he came up with his moniker.

Little documentation survives on these early Koplin courses, but what does seem certain is that with every one of them, the concrete figures grew larger and larger. Again according to his family, Koplin was at one time troubled with nightmares in which he would be pursued by a wild assortment of terrifying monsters; he supposedly conquered this problem by turning the creatures into the most enjoyable part of his game.

Shortly after Koplin's Biloxi course was completed, work began on Goofy Golf franchises in two other communities, but while the name and logo would remain the same, Koplin was not directly involved in designing them. Goofy Golf of Fort Walton Beach was, for some reason, not constructed on the beach but instead on Eglin Parkway, the main drag through the heart of town. This course was designed and built by J. W. Hayes, who went after a style that seems to have resembled Koplin's early efforts. Dinosaurs, which were to become a Goofy Golf trademark, were absent except for a solitary tyrannosaurus that served as a roadside lure. Figures were thrown together in purposely incongruous combinations, such as a long-billed toucan sitting on a multiarmed saguaro cactus. Because the actual acreage occupied by the course was quite

Some of the concrete wildlife that inhabited Fort Walton Beach's 1958 Goofy Golf.

small, its periphery contained a large number of oddball characters—a totem pole, a gorilla, a shark, and some other misfits of society—to help draw the attention of those passing by. Standing on the corner of the property, frightening children of all ages, was a huge headhunter, or perhaps some sort of alien being, who quite graphically clutched a woman's disembodied head in his outstretched hand. This bogeyman's reign of terror ended on senior prom night in 1984, when he was destroyed by pranksters who obviously were not miniature golf historians.

Other inhabitants of the course were friendlier looking, even if they served no real purpose in the game. A few exotic animals—an elephant, a kangaroo, and a giraffe—existed independently of any of the golf fairways, serving only to provide atmosphere. One true obstacle, a blue sailfish, fit right in with the prevailing theme of Fort Walton Beach souvenirs. (If Goofy Golf had featured a flamingo, the picture would have been complete.) Unlike Koplin's courses, most of the Fort Walton Beach Goofy's obstacles were not mechanized, but there was a classic animated neon sign depicting two colorful golfers putting around.

The history of the Goofy Golf built on Navy Boulevard in Pensacola (again, not on the beach) is wrapped in even more mystery than that of other courses. A local newspaper article reported that longtime residents of the area recall that Pensacola's Goofy Golf was developed by "a pair of carnival veterans, a redhead and a bald man." That is as specific as the article gets, but the fact remains that, like the Fort Walton Beach course, Goofy Golf of Pensacola did apparently have some

The sea monster and octopus from Pensacola's Goofy Golf would be replicated at other courses over the years.

Construction begins on Panama City Beach's Goofy Golf, January 1959. (Koplin Family Collection)

agreement with Lee Koplin, because its scorecards sported the same logo as the other Koplin courses.

Pensacola's Goofy Golf had a large-mouthed sea monster fronting the clubhouse and a green octopus through whose tentacles players had to route their golf balls, but its most unusual obstacle was the Frogman (possibly inspired by a character created by *Wizard of Oz* author L. Frank Baum). Even this hybrid's amphibious aura was not particularly attention-grabbing from the roadside, so the primary resemblance to the

The Koplin family poses at the recently opened Goofy Golf, 1959. (Koplin Family Collection)

Fort Walton Beach course was Pensacola's use of huge nonobstacle figures situated around the edge of the property.

These small Goofy Golfs were successful enough, but when Koplin turned his attention to Miracle Strip mecca Panama City Beach, he did not hold himself back. He appears always to have intended this Goofy Golf course to be his flagship operation, and late in 1958 he picked out a location along the largely undeveloped beachfront stretch of U.S. 98. The spot he chose was directly across the highway from the county pier. He later

These two photos amply illustrate why Lee Koplin called Goofy Golf "the Magic World." (Florida State Archives Photographic Collection)

Believe it or not, the building behind the brontosaurus is the Koplin family home.

said that the reason he wanted this particular location was that he knew that because of the pier, no one would ever build a motel or other structure across the street that would block his course's beautiful view of the Gulf of Mexico.

Construction began in January 1959, and by that summer the Goofy Golf course was open. Photos show that even though Koplin's statues were larger than they had ever been before, the course still had a somewhat "flat" look to it until the landscaping and plant growth could get started. Also, during the first two or three years after opening, Koplin continued

One of the earliest advertisements for the flagship Goofy Golf course. (Bay County Library Collection)

This octopus and his captive mermaid were fixtures of future Goofy Golf courses.

adding figures of larger and larger size, until Goofy Golf was dominated by a life-sized brontosaurus and a replica of an Easter Island bust that was so tall that it housed a stairway leading to an observation deck atop the figure's flat head. The theme of the whole place was summarized by the sign that was displayed near the clubhouse: "This is the Magic World, where the ages of time abide in a garden of serenity, with perpetual

Goofy Golf never explained who or what this king was supposed to be, but some questions are probably best left unanswered.

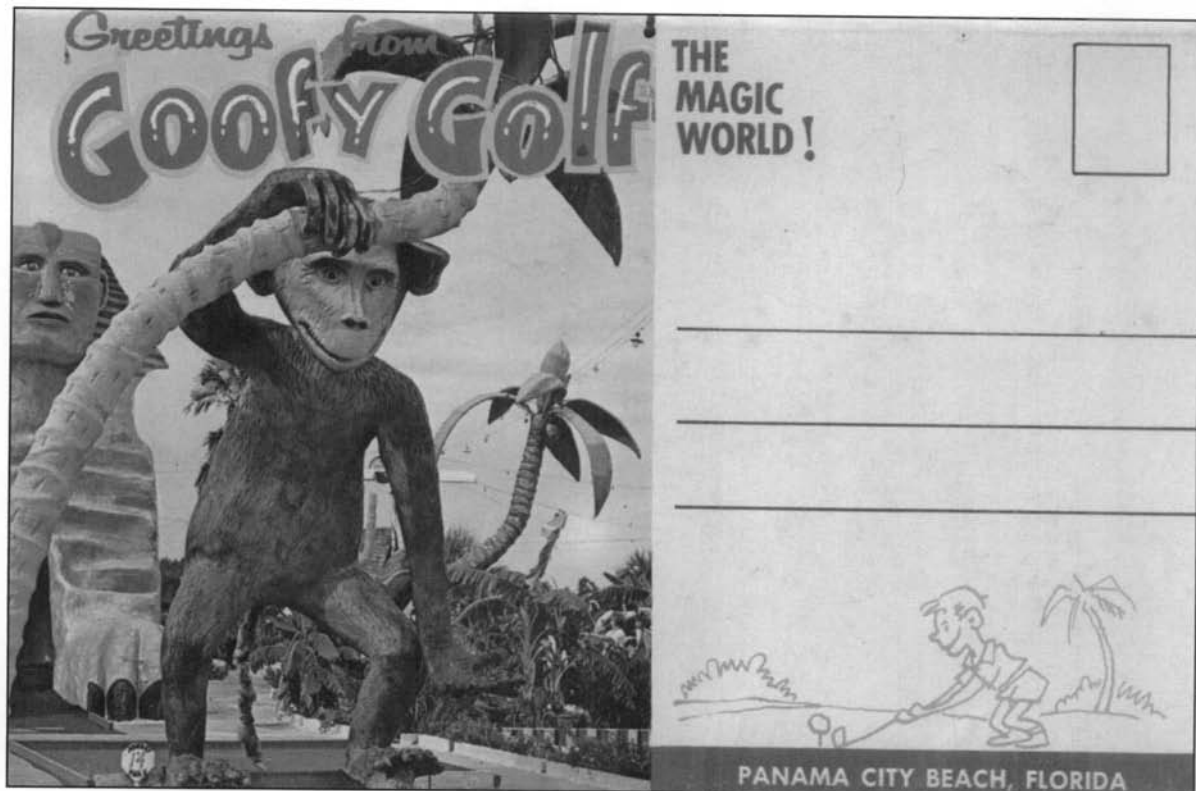
peace and harmony." Koplin was so pleased with his "garden of serenity" that he built a house for his family in the middle of the course: visitors had to walk around the brontosaurus's tree-sized legs to get to the front door.

Apart from the sheer size and detail of his concrete figures, Koplin made good use of mechanisms that would give his statues some manner of animation. A large alligator opened and closed its mouth, challenging players to knock the golf ball into its gaping maw. A pixilated pixie grasping a golf club rotated back and forth on a pivot, doing his best to knock balls away as

The official Goofy Golf logo featured these two Casper the Friendly Ghost look-alikes.

they rolled toward him. A huge monkey was equipped with a long, ropelike tail that switched constantly in the path of the golf balls. (His left hand was lowered into such a position that four generations of youngsters have had their photos taken while sitting in it.) An ostrich raised and lowered its long neck and head, seemingly pecking at the fairway.

Even the nonanimated figures were appealing in their own surreal way. An octopus with writhing tentacles held aloft a panicky mermaid for purposes best left unexplored; when one of the area's periodic hurricanes sliced off the sea maiden's upper half, the remaining tail portion was smoothed over and turned into a fish. A replica of the Sphinx loomed behind the mammoth monkey, serving not so much as an obstacle but as a building of its own. A castle was equipped with a moving drawbridge, but glaring down from the battlements was a leering ogre dressed as a king; since the monstrous monarch was constructed of painted plywood, he had to have his fearsome visage replaced frequently, until it got to be too much trouble and he was discarded, leaving his fortress unguarded. Of course, mixed among these bizarre visions were also



Goofy Golf may have been the only miniature golf course in history to market its own postcard folder.

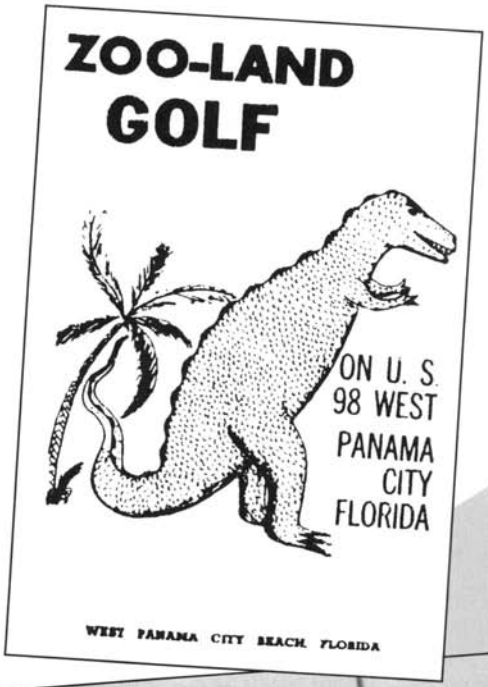
more traditional miniature golf structures—a pirate ship, a windmill, a church, a haunted house, a rocket ship, and a chicken coop (where a properly placed golf ball would drop out of the back end of a concrete chicken).

Some figures, mostly dinosaurs and oversized flowers, were not obstacles in the game but simply existed to make the place look even weirder than it already was. There was even a long, concrete cave that had to be traversed when getting from one

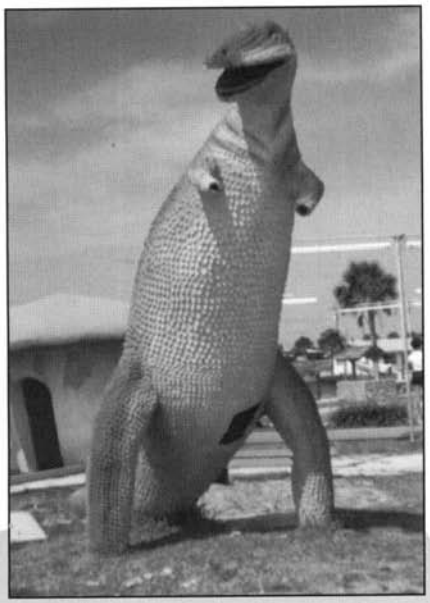
hole to the next. With the interior painted in fluorescent colors and illuminated by ultraviolet light, even on the sunniest of days it could give small children the heebie-jeebies. Nighttime at Goofy Golf was something else again: the course was illuminated for night play by numerous multicolored lightbulbs that bathed the whole property in a rainbow of hues. The monkey, the Sphinx, the Easter Island bust, and most of the dinosaurs had colored lightbulbs installed in their eye sockets, which thus glowed eerily after dark. And as if all of this were not enough to help Goofy Golf live up to its name, there was the official logo on the roadside signage and scorecards. It featured two solid white Casper the Friendly Ghost look-alike figures, one preparing to knock a golf ball off the other's head.

Living in the middle of the course, Lee Koplin's children—Randy, Lisa, and Michelle—felt something like Alice in Wonderland, growing up in an undeniably unique environment. Randy Koplin has reminisced warmly about the summer nights when he would be getting ready for bed and his dad would take him around the course, under all the multicolored lights, and Randy would say good night to all the permanent residents: "Good night, fish. . . . Good night, octopus. . . . Good night, brontosaurus." Then, he says, "I'd go to bed and listen to the frogs singing outside the window." Yes, whether you lived on the course or just visited it while on vacation, there was, and still is, nothing quite like Goofy Golf of Panama City Beach.

That is not to say, however, that imitations did not exist. Within a couple of years of Goofy Golf's introduction, clones began springing up like unwanted weeds on the fairways, much



L. L. Sowell's Zoo-Land Golf opened in Panama City Beach in 1960.



Zoo-Land Golf's emblem was this roadside tyrannosaurus that breathed fire from its mouth via a concealed gas pipe.

as Garnet Carter had to deal with those who aped his Tom Thumb Golf in the late 1920s. The most blatant copycats had enough sense to stay away from the Miracle Strip, where direct comparisons would be obvious, but one of them did eventually make a somewhat bold move. Sir Goony Golf, a franchised chain based in Chattanooga, unashamedly lifted most of its figure designs from the Panama City Beach Goofy Golf but ended up distributing them over a much wider area of the country than Lee Koplin ever envisioned. Sir Goony even embarked on one crusade to invade Goofy's own realm: around 1978, the Pensacola Goofy Golf was remodeled, keeping the original small collection of statues but bringing in Sir Goony Golf's trademark figures as well! Today, there are many people who believe Sir Goony's invaders in Pensacola were part of the original course design, but those who subscribe to this idea are just goony, Sir.

Most entrepreneurs who decided to imitate Goofy Golf did not do so as closely as did Sir Goony. In most cases, it was more a duplication of the general style than of any specific Koplin concepts. Goofy Golf's first competition in Panama City Beach arrived just a year after the course's debut. A fifty-year-old retired sign painter, L. L. Sowell, sat in the Goofy Golf parking lot one busy summer day and counted the people lining up to pay for a round or two. Deciding that running a miniature golf course would be a good way to spend his retirement, Sowell drove off down U.S. 98 and leased a piece of property that was rather in the middle of nowhere—he later claimed the only nearby businesses were a single motel and a doughnut shop.

On New Year's Day 1960, forms began taking shape on Sowell's new property. Using the same type of steel-and-chicken-wire skeletons as Koplin, Sowell crafted a collection of beasts for a course he would call Zoo-Land Golf. He later claimed that for inspiration he used children's books that were illustrated with animal art, but obviously what he did to bring those drawings to larger-than-life went far beyond the printed page. Zoo-Land Golf opened in time for the 1960 spring break, and its small size and out-of-the-way location seemingly did nothing to discourage business. Befitting its name, animals comprised most of the course's obstacles and decoration, a biologically impossible combination of prehistoric beasts and more familiar modern-day fauna. There was a kangaroo, complete with boxing gloves, into whose pouch the golf balls would be knocked, exiting the marsupial's body through an opening in the tip of its tail. Fish of various species were cast about, including a tarpon and what appeared to be a pink salmon. Sowell's pride and joy was his tyrannosaurus, easily the largest figure on the lot, which stood by the roadside and breathed fire from its mouth via a concealed gas pipe. Despite the Zoo-Land name, some figures had nothing to do with the animal world: there was a giant Mother Goose shoe, a candy house not unlike the one where Hansel and Gretel got into hot water, and a pair of mushroom houses that predated the American importation of *The Smurfs* by a couple of decades.

Perhaps because his background was in art rather than engineering, most of Sowell's figures did not possess even the rudimentary animation of their Goofy Golf cousins. An alligator

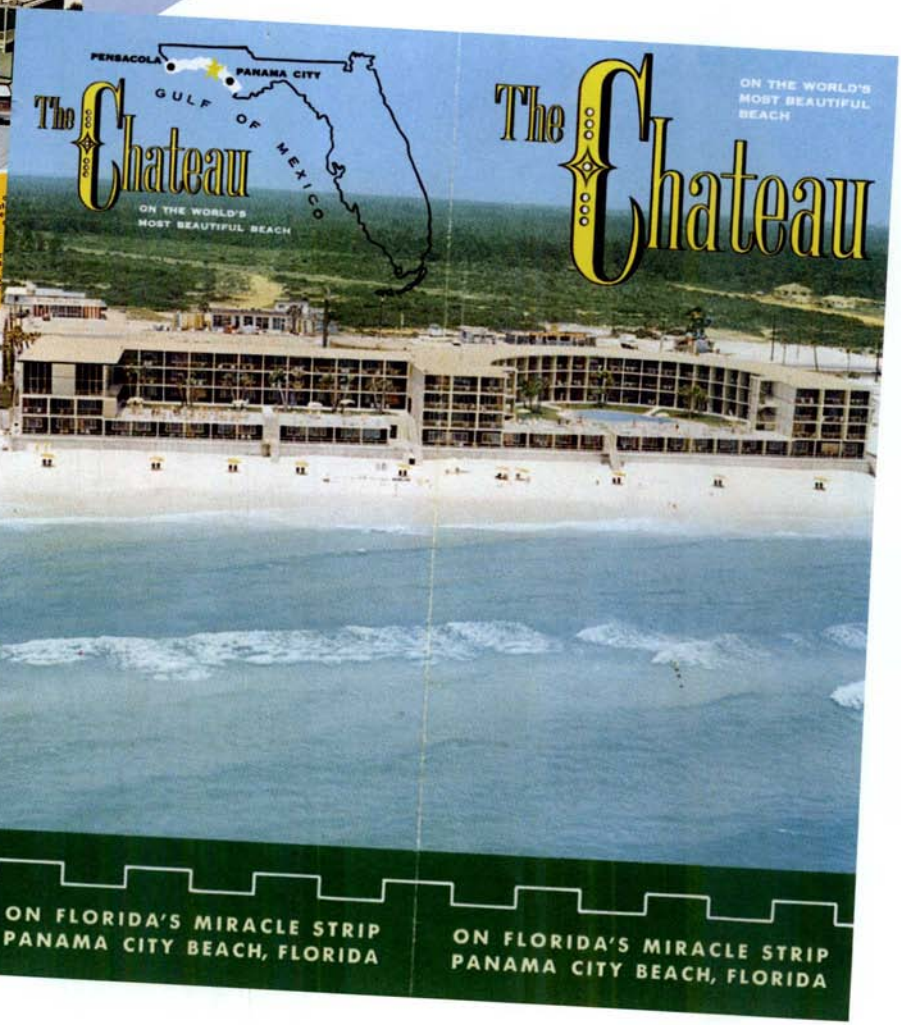
Long Beach Resort marketed this colorful postcard folder in 1955.

Gateway to Pensacola Beach, Florida

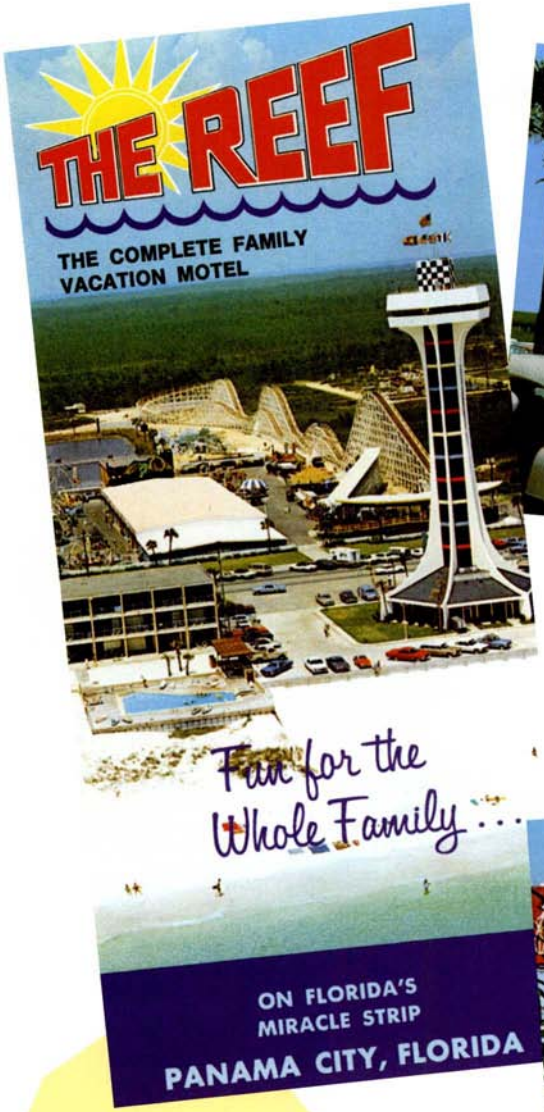
No one could miss this neon sign directing tourists across the bridge to Pensacola Beach. (Brian Rucker Collection)

Long Beach Resort was a crowded neon wonderland by the 1960s.

The Islander Motel in Fort Walton Beach was an aquamarine paradise.

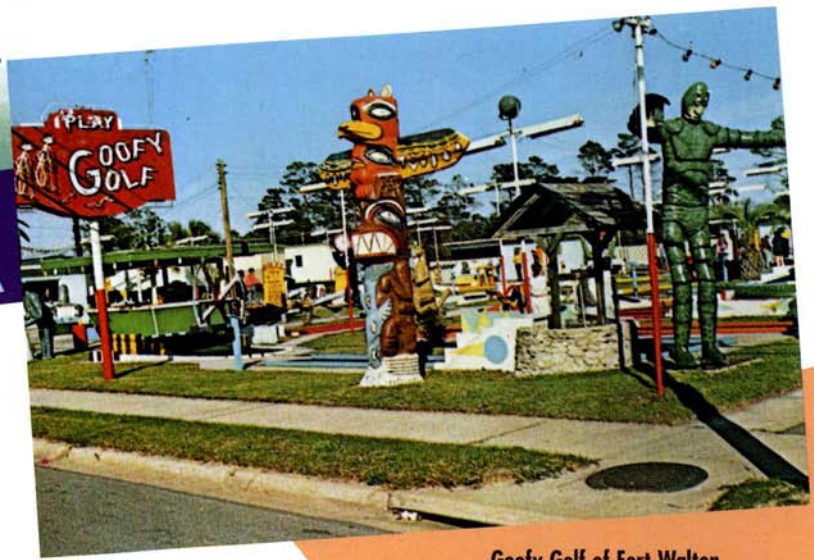


The area across the street from the Chateau Motel is as interesting as the motel itself in this mid-1960s brochure. Notice the tiny Kentucky Fried Chicken and surfboard shop as well as the giant pirate that was eventually moved to the Petticoat Junction amusement park.



This brochure is supposed to be advertising the Reef Motel, but the Miracle Strip Amusement Park and observation tower occupy most of the space.

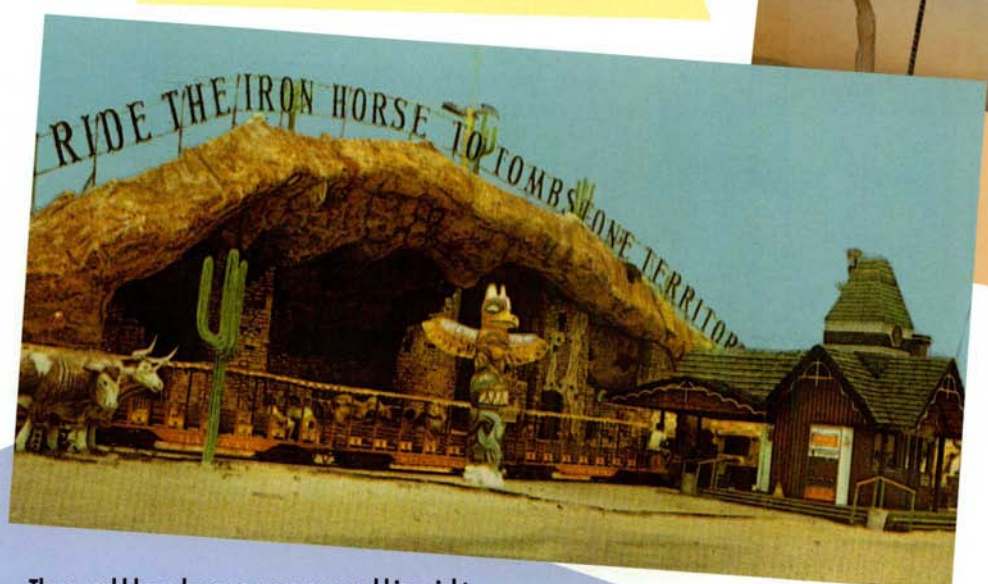
Fort Walton Beach's Gulfarium as it appeared shortly after its opening in 1955.



Goofy Golf of Fort Walton Beach was small but crowded with oddball characters.

L. L. Sowell's Zoo-Land Golf has now been bulldozed to make room for an RV park.

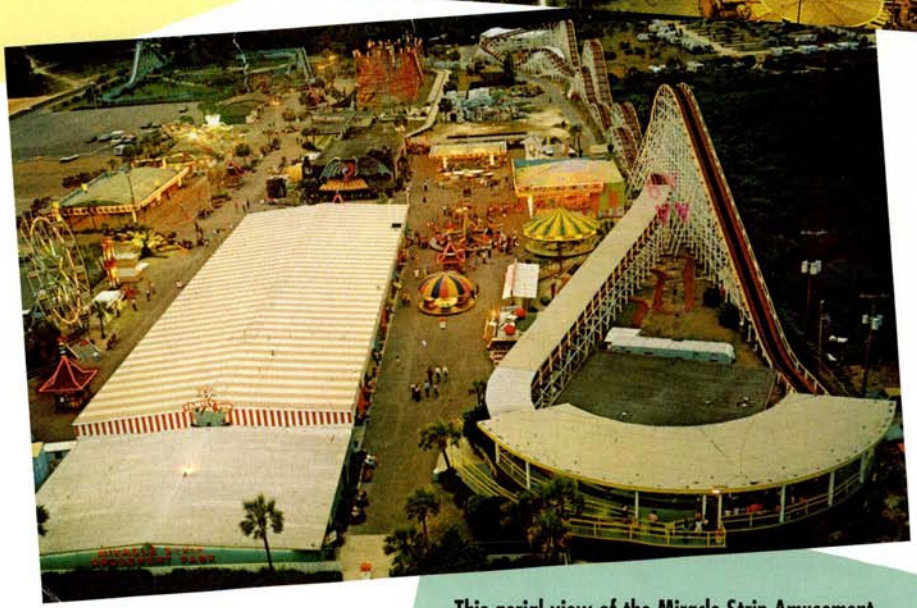
The sun sets on the Magic Carpet Golf course in Fort Walton Beach.



There could have been no more eye-grabbing sight along the Panama City Beach strip than the entrance to Tombstone Territory. (Koplin Family Collection)

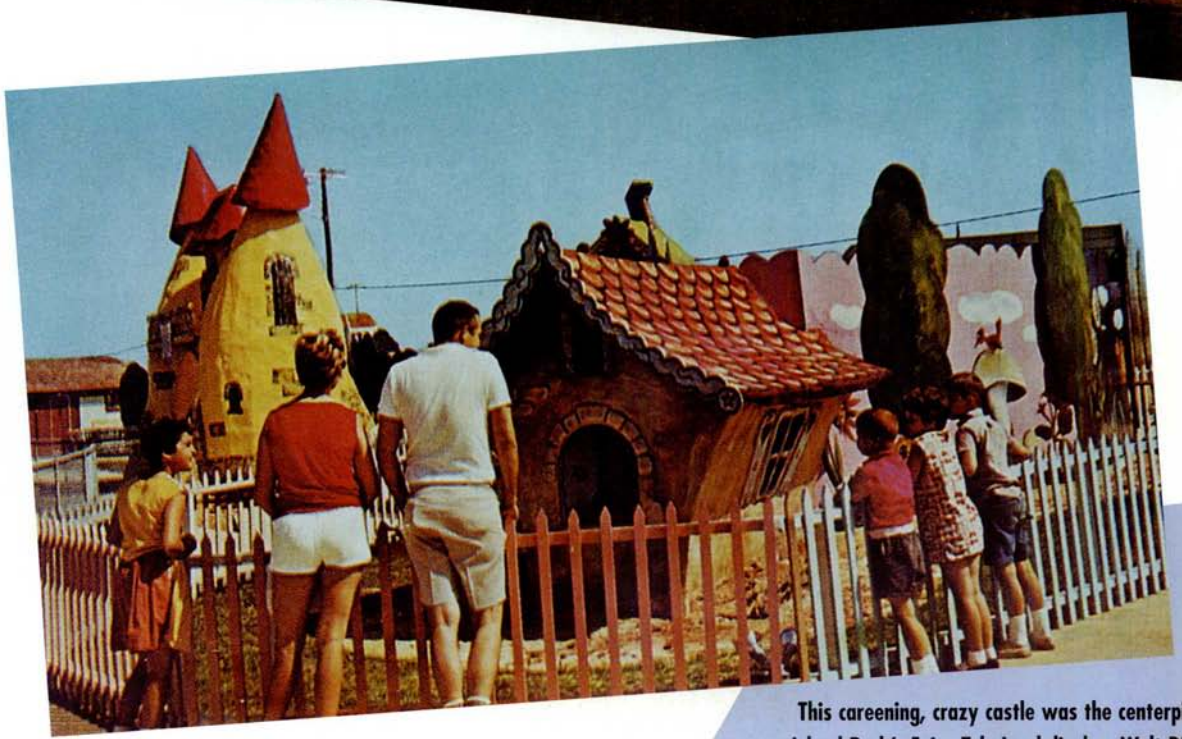
After beginning life as Santa Claus, this bucktoothed buccaneer took up residence at Panama City Beach's Petticoat Junction amusement park.

The amusement park at Long Beach Resort existed only during the main tourist season; after Labor Day, the rides returned to their home base in Tennessee.



This aerial view of the Miracle Strip Amusement Park gives some idea of its scope and color.

Val Valentine's Jungle Land volcano took on an appropriately mysterious aura after dark.



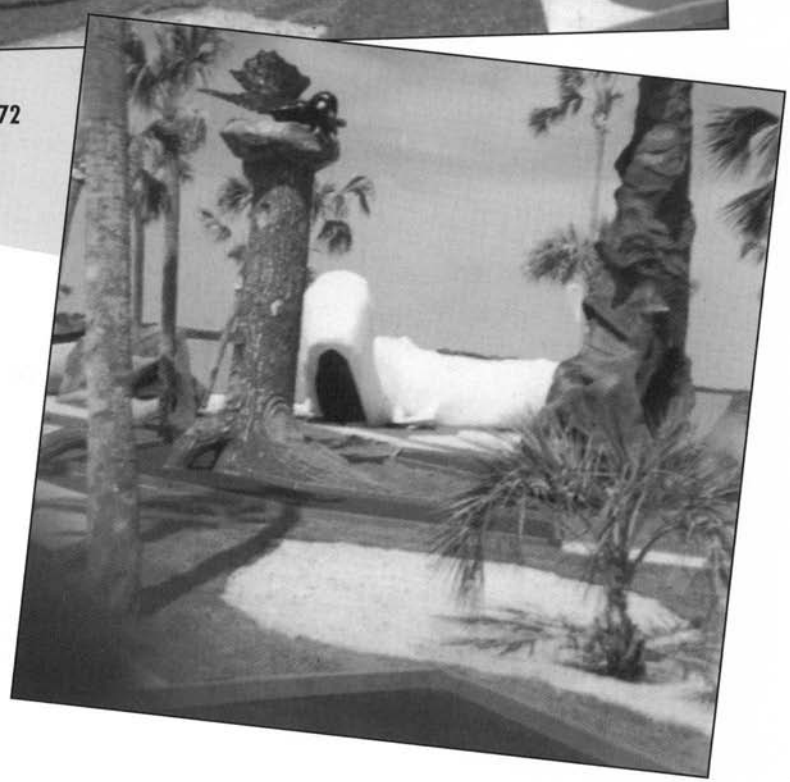
This careening, crazy castle was the centerpiece of Okaloosa Island Park's Fairy Tale Land display. Walt Disney would no doubt have been horrified. (Fort Walton Beach Library Collection)

You will not often find buildings painted this shade of green outside a major tourist area; Staff's Restaurant in Fort Walton Beach flaunted it proudly. (Fort Walton Beach Library Collection)

These seashell sculptures with plastic accoutrements were first manufactured in the 1940s and can still be purchased today.

By the time this T-shirt design was created in the late 1960s, the amusement park, tower, and Jungle Land were considered a single entity.

This typical T-shirt design from the 1960s featured those evergreen (and pink) Florida symbols, palm trees and flamingos.



Pirate's Cove Golf opened in 1972 but lasted less than a decade.

opening and closing its mouth (so minutely as to be almost imperceptible) was the only moving figure on the course. Lighting was also more basic, with no glowing eyes or other special effects (except the fire-breathing roadside dinosaur); that traditional miniature golf sight, the windmill, had colored lights installed on its flaps, but that was the limit as far as ballyhoo was concerned.

During Zoo-Land's last decade, its animal population increased even more. A small course near Long Beach Resort went out of business, and Sowell got a good deal on its collection of prefabricated fiberglass animals. These new figures were slick and colorful, but mixed among his own older concrete work they somehow did not seem to fit in.

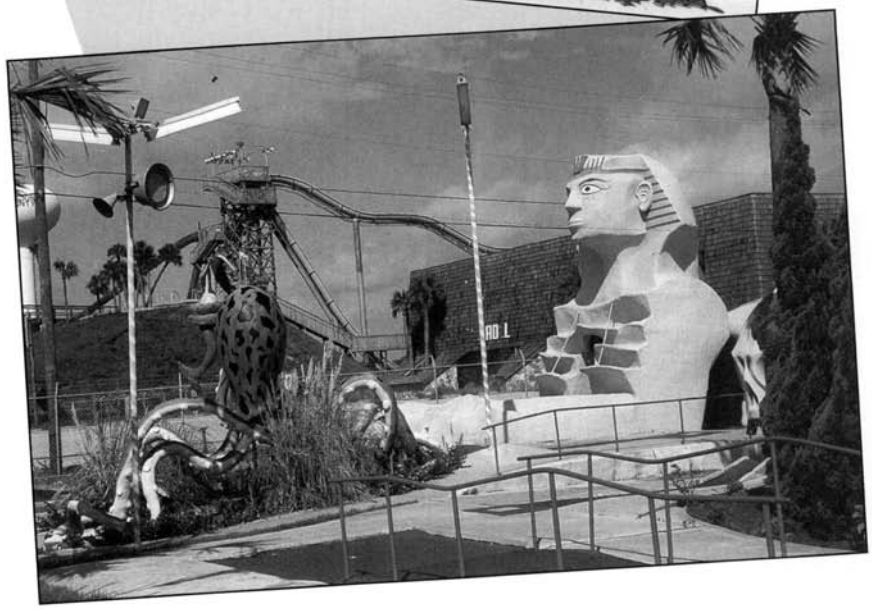
Zoo-Land Golf met a beastly fate. In the mid-1990s, Sowell closed his office for the last time, and the property reverted to its original owners. The golf course was unceremoniously bulldozed to make room for an addition to the landowners' existing Seagull RV park and campground, and none of Sowell's original statuary survived the process. A fiberglass giraffe from Sowell's 1980s-era remodeling and a couple of the other interpolated animals could still be seen in the campground, but there was no other indication that a miniature golf course had ever existed there.

A similar fate befell a small course constructed in 1972 next door to Panama City Beach's recently opened Gulf World. Pirate's Cove Golf was constructed in the same concrete-and-wire-mesh style as the older courses, but it followed a total nautical theme, with no dinosaurs or other out-of-place ele-

Children of all ages were no doubt frightened by this fearsome obstacle at Pirate's Cove Golf.

Magic Carpet Golf was the new chain of courses built by the Koplin family, but other than the name they were identical to Goofy Golf.

Magic Carpet Golf in Fort Walton Beach continued the Koplins' "Magic World" slogan and contained many of the same figures as Goofy Golf.



Lee Koplin in his magic world shortly before his 1988 death. (Koplin Family Collection)

ments. Players putted through the yellowed teeth of a huge skull and crossbones and were able to walk inside a replica of Moby Dick, but the land on which Pirate's Cove Golf sat was more valuable than pieces of eight in a dead man's chest. The property is currently the parking lot behind a restaurant, with only a few of the course's palm trees still in place.

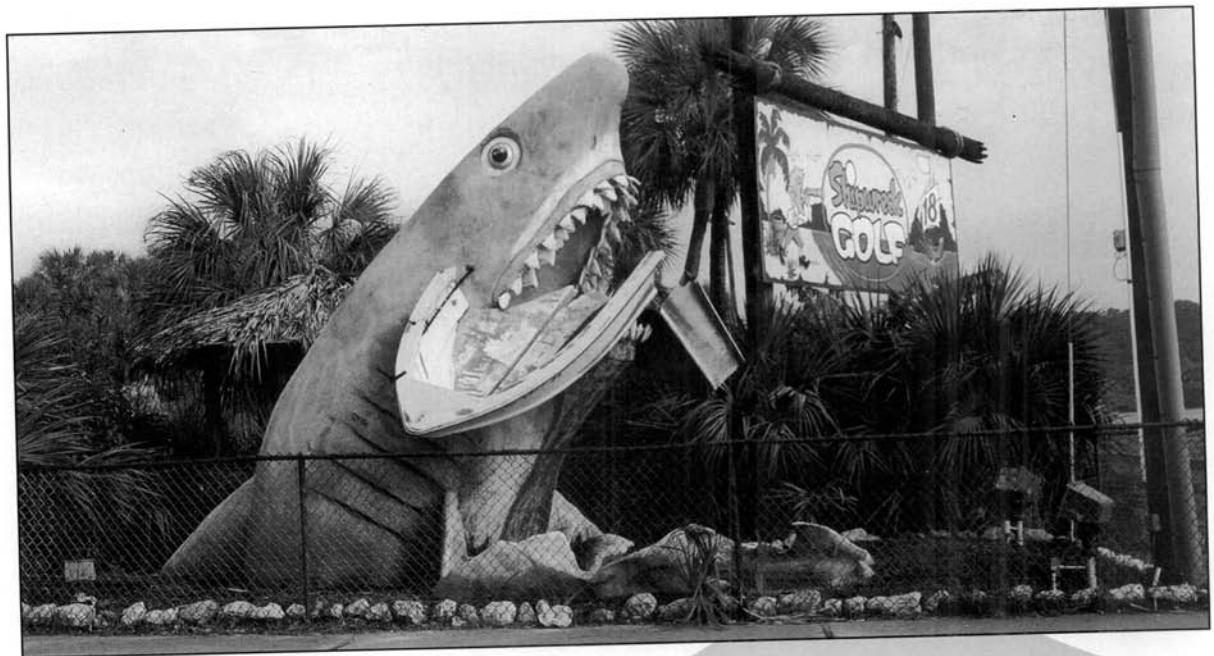
Meanwhile, in the late 1970s, Fort Walton Beach finally got a miniature golf course on a par with the Panama City Beach Goofy Golf. Many of the figures were duplicated—the giant monkey clutching a palm tree, the Sphinx, the octopus with a captive mermaid—and since this course was known as Magic Carpet Golf, the casual observer might surmise that it was yet another unauthorized clone of Goofy Golf. However, there is more to the story than that.

Accounts hold that Lee Koplin was not as enamored with the business side of things as he was at creating and imple-

Beacon Golf's concrete statues were for decorative purposes only.

menting new ideas, so he had somehow neglected to trademark the *Goofy Golf* name. This meant that tacky courses had sprung up everywhere using the name simply because the alliteration was so appealing. The Koplins had continued building courses across the country, but with the proliferation of knockoff Goofy Golfs they decided it was time to begin using a new name. Magic Carpet Golf was the winner, and that was how the new Fort Walton Beach course would be known, as would most of the other Koplin courses that still existed.

Magic Carpet Golf was built under the supervision of Randy Koplin, who apparently inherited Pop's skill at concrete sculpture. (Lee Koplin passed away in 1988 after a long illness.) However, times were different than when Goofy Golf made its debut, and Magic Carpet Golf of Fort Walton Beach had a life span of fewer than twenty years. By the time the twenty-first



The tradition continues: Who could possibly ignore this roadside lure for Shipwreck Golf?

century dawned over the rolling waves off Okaloosa Island, Magic Carpet Golf had been demolished and a large building constructed on the site.

All of the Miracle Strip communities had other miniature golf courses that lacked the sticking power of the ones mentioned so far. One course built in the traditional old style was Beacon Golf, located on Thomas Drive in Panama City Beach. This course featured colorful concrete statuary, but the figures were purely for decoration, as none of them actually served as obstacles in the game. Beacon Golf made way for other business development years ago, but for some time afterward, sharp-eyed visitors could still spot the replica lighthouse that

served as both its roadside lure and the source of its name. Vintage film footage from the Long Beach Resort area shows still another course with dinosaur obstacles, but no one knows what it was named or just where it was located. Surviving city records indicate that it was probably one of two Johnson's Carpet Golf locations, the other of which stood with no ornamentation in downtown Panama City. Under "Places of Amusement," the 1959 city directory listed Freeman Miniature Gulf Course on Thomas Drive (either a misprint or an ingenious pun), Uncle Bud's Miniature Golf, Tracy's A&W Miniature Golf at Laguna Beach, and a couple of other unnamed courses. As mentioned previously, the "official" Goofy Golf of Pensacola did not stand on the beach, but at some point during the early 1970s, another course calling itself Goofy Golf did operate overlooking the ocean. No one who saw its run-down condition and lack of decoration could have possibly mistaken it for part of the Koplin chain.

In the 1980s and 1990s, the miniature golf industry experienced yet another of its periodic booms nationwide, and that included the Panama City Beach area. The new style of courses, while certainly elaborate, somehow lacks the flavor of those courses lovingly (if laboriously) created by hand. Great emphasis is placed on an overall theme, and as we have seen, the older courses—from the variations on Goofy Golf to Zoo-Land Golf and beyond—usually quite deliberately went in the opposite direction, with an "anything goes" attitude.

At such present-day Panama City Beach courses as Barnacle Bay Mini-Golf and Coconut Creek Mini-Golf, the landscaping

is second to none, and the animal statues are more realistic than Lee Koplin or L. L. Sowell could have ever conceived. Players are immersed in a total world unto itself, whether it carries the theme of a jungle or a pirate lair. Shipwreck Golf, at the foot of what was once the Jungle Land volcano, has a roadside lure every bit as eye-catching as Sowell's pyromaniac tyrannosaurus: living up to its name, the course features a gigantic shark emerging from a pool, clenching the shattered remnants of a fishing boat in its teeth. Yes, some things stay the same! Miniature golf has come a long way from its beginnings atop Lookout Mountain, and it is ironic that it was the influence of the beach, about as far removed from the mountains as one can get, that has done so much to give the game its present-day look.

CHAPTER 5

SMILE WHEN YOU SAY THAT, PARDNER

Now that we have seen how Goofy Golf and its concrete-creature-crammed companions made such an indelible mark on Miracle Strip history, we will travel back in time to visit the saddle-sore pals who shared space along U.S. 98 with the miniature golf courses. Although there would seem to be little connection between the two phenomena, Panama City Beach's Goofy Golf indirectly (and inadvertently) started this additional fad along the strip in the early 1960s.

When Lee Koplin, the originator of Goofy Golf, bought property to build his fantasyland, he acquired more than was required for the miniature golf course. Behind the course were acres of undeveloped and wooded property, and immediately west of the course was a blank expanse that ran several hundred feet along the main drag. Surely there was some way to utilize this empty space.

Yes, indeed there was, but in the beginning Koplin did not bother to try to come up with anything himself. While he was

Try a Thrilling, High Ride

on the World Famous

Skyride

and enjoy the scenic

"Frontier" Train Ride

PRESENTED AT

THE "MAGIC WORLD"

West Panama City Beach, by

SKYRIDES OF AMERICA, INC.

The Skyride gave tourists a lift in the days when there were no buildings on the beach taller than two stories.

busy trying to build a bigger brontosaurus, he leased the extraneous property to some enterprising concessionaires. One of these tenants was a company known as Skyrides of America.

Skyrides resemble ski lifts with both ends at ground level. Passengers board bucketlike cars attached to a long cable that moves in a continuous loop. The gondolas travel gently uphill until they reach a tall support tower, continue along high above ground until they reach another tower, and then descend back

to earth, where the cable makes a 180° turn before carrying its cars back into the air. The skyride on Koplin's property provided customers with a terrific view of the Gulf of Mexico and the roadside strip, which was still quite barren at that time. Unlike some skyrides, which transport customers between two points, passengers at Panama City Beach could not disembark midway through the ride but simply traveled back to the starting point.

This may seem like an awfully unexciting concept for a tourist attraction, but in the late 1950s skyrides were one of the newest hits in the amusement industry. The first skyride in America had appeared at the 1933 Century of Progress World's Fair in Chicago, but the concept had not gained popularity until that visionary extraordinaire Walt Disney had installed one at his theme park in California in 1956. Within a few years, everyone wanted one, and at least five different manufacturers were churning out variations on the basic concept. The one at Panama City Beach was one of the simplest and most basic, but it was a novelty in its day.

Besides the skyride to nowhere, as it could have been called, another concession that rented space in Koplin kountry was a "frontier train ride." Like almost everything else that did not come directly from the imagination of dreamers such as Koplin or Disney, this train ride was yet another example of the amusement business latching on to an existing fad and then beating it to death. As we shall learn in the next chapter, the companies that manufactured miniature trains for amusement parks nationwide had been forced to change styles from their

The miniature train pulls away from U.S. 98 on its way to the Magic Forest. (Florida State Archives Photographic Collection)

original diesel design to old-fashioned steam locomotives, mainly as a result of the popularity of television Westerns during that period. The train that departed from Koplin's property was one of these miniaturized coal burners. Obviously, unlike the skyride—which had the novelty of altitude going for it—a locomotive could not expect to survive by simply railroading its passengers through nothing. Fortunately, other concessionaires decided to set up shop in the forest behind Goofy Golf, so the "frontier train ride" hitched on to them.

Although barely remembered today, the main occupant of Goofy Golf's backyard was the Magic Forest. Now, if you ask tourists of that era to describe the Magic Forest, it is likely that you will get a glassy-eyed stare. Plenty of people know that the forest existed, and a goodly number of them will tell you that they saw it, but it exists in their memories only as a sort of half-forgotten dream that melts away as soon as your eyes clear. Maybe the Magic Forest was more authentic than anyone believed. At any rate, people hazily recall that the centerpiece was a huge castle that contained dioramas depicting scenes from various classic fairy tales. There also seem to have been other structures surrounding the castle, each with its own chapter in the ongoing three-dimensional story. Whatever the Magic Forest was, the train ride would drop folks off to visit it for a while, and then they could hop the next steamer back to the comparatively more believable starting point on the highway.

Perhaps because the Magic Forest was causing tourists to wander about in a dazed stupor, other attractions soon began moving into its neighborhood. Some of these were operated by

members of the extended Koplin family, while others belonged to independent operators, but they all had one thing in common: nothing tangible survives today to document their existence. In fact, outside of people's memories—not always a reliable source—the only concrete description of the developing amusement complex comes from one of its brochures—and as the surviving Koplins have pointed out, it may not be 100 percent truthful. With that thought in mind, let it go on record that the brochure describes the additional wonders as "Visit Enchanted Castle! Cross Swinging Bridge! Ride Jungle River Boat! See Animated Wild Animals! Enjoy Beautiful Scenery! Stay as Long as You Like!"

Even though it was beginning to look like the Koplins and their tenants were trying to re-create Disneyland in Panama City Beach, long before Walt himself thought of branching into Florida, the problem seemed to be that it made no sense for an old-fashioned Western-style train to be hauling little buckaroos to fairy tale forests, jungle cruises, and petting zoos. Why not take the next step and go full steam into the Western theme? Why not, indeed? Within a couple of years, all the concessions were ditched, Lee Koplin took control, and near the former site of the Magic Forest rose a complete Western town, with weathered buildings lining a dusty street (although the dust was more like white sand).

As a name for his new burg, Koplin turned to the source of the Western bonanza, television, selecting Tombstone Territory, the title of a fairly successful series that had aired on ABC from 1957 to 1959. The show had been canceled by the time the

The main street of Tombstone Territory looks peaceful for now—but the outlaws haven't made their hourly jailbreak. (Koplin Family Collection)

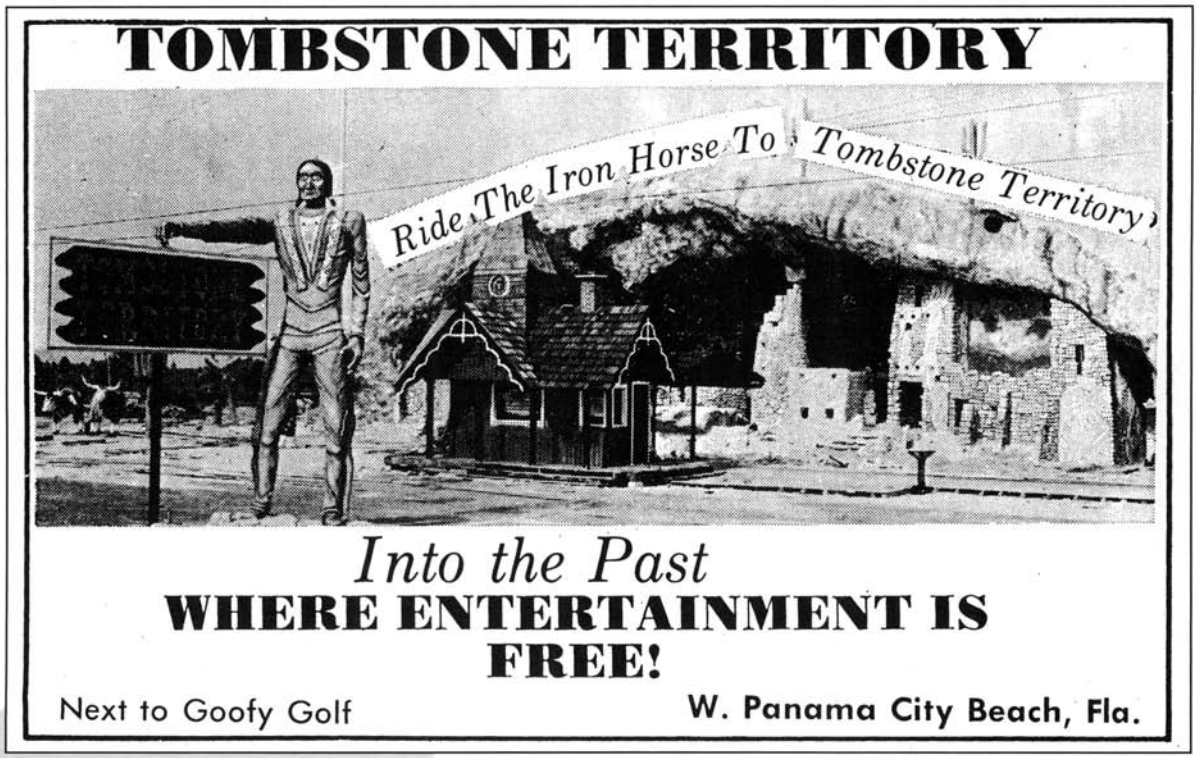
name was revived in Panama City Beach, but reruns were still being seen. Besides, Tombstone Territory was the name of an actual historic area in Arizona, so what happened to the TV show did not really affect Koplin's park one way or the other. (As we shall see later, Koplin's nearest and most ferocious competitor did not learn this lesson until it was too late.)

Arriving at the Tombstone Territory railroad station, visitors found themselves at one end of Main Street, facing north.

On the left side, the main building was the saloon, with a small stage where the traditional cancan girls performed. This would hardly seem to be the ideal location to launch a show business career, but at some point one of the saloon singers (who, it is reported, actually performed inside a cage) was a girl named Robin Swicord, who later packed her valise and caught an Iron Horse to the *real* West, becoming a successful Hollywood screenwriter and producer. Among her credits are the movies *Shag* (1989), *Little Women* (1994), *The Perez Family* (1995), *Matilda* (1996), and *Practical Magic* (1998). For some reason or other, her official biography does not mention her saloon days at Tombstone Territory. Merely an oversight, we are sure!

Across the street from the celebrity incubator saloon were the general store, the jail, and the trading post, where "authentic Indian souvenirs" imported from Cherokee, North Carolina, were sold. At the end of the street was the Spanish mission, complete with a bell tower that could be ascended to double as an observation deck. The interior of the chapel was decorated like a real church, with beautiful painted murals depicting the Ten Commandments, the Lord's Prayer, and other similar sacred subjects. Phalanxes of angels wended their way up the stairwell to the bell tower, a comforting sight for those afraid of heights.

Of course, Lee Koplin's talent for concrete sculptures could not be expected to lie dormant just because he was not building another Goofy Golf course, so the Tombstone Territory street was also adorned with an artificial saguaro cactus or two, along with a horse (for photo opportunities) and an old padre



When Lee Koplin built this giant Indian and replica of Colorado's Mesa Verde, passers-by could not avoid noticing. (Koplin Family Collection)

watching over the Spanish mission. Surviving photos also show that there were a few less durable painted plywood figures helping to populate the town.

Where Koplin's concrete talents really shone brightly, however, was out on U.S. 98, the departure point for the miniature train. His crowning achievement there was an enormous cave-like structure containing a replica of one of the famous Cliff Dweller communities, some buildings intact and some appearing broken and crumbling. Just to be sure that the average

Interesting scenery always abounded around Tombstone Territory. (Florida State Archives Photographic Collection)

tourist understood what this massive display was supposed to be, Koplin explained it with a hand-lettered sign: "CLIFF PALACE, Southwest American Indian Dwelling—Built during the 11th century in southwest Colorado—Today known as Mesa Verde National Park, the oldest known structure in the Western Hemisphere. A Monument to the True American, THE INDIAN." (Koplin apparently figured that no one would question the relationship between an Indian settlement in Colorado and faraway Tombstone, Arizona.)

This eye-catching display was topped by a giant sign that urged everyone to "Ride the Iron Horse to Tombstone Terri-

tory." The roadside lures also included a gigantic Native American holding the lighted sign, a pair of longhorn cattle, a totem pole, and still more saguaro cacti. One figure that did not quite seem to fit the prevailing theme was a replica of Aladdin's lamp, with an Oriental-looking genie emerging from the spout in a cloud of smoke. A small set of steps led to a platform in front of the genie's gesturing hands. No one bothered to explain what this had to do with the Old West, but as far as the rest of Panama City Beach was concerned, it did not look at all out of place.

Now, the next part of the story may or may not fall into the realm of coincidence, but it happened nevertheless. Around the same time that Koplin was cementing his place in Miracle Strip history, another entrepreneur approached J. E. Churchwell, who in 1964 was still running Long Beach Resort a few miles east of Koplin's bailiwick. According to nephew Paul Churchwell, "A fellow came into town—I can't even remember his name—and wanted to put in a train ride as a concession, and we agreed to do so. He operated it for part of a season and essentially went broke at it. The train was a piece of junk, and he couldn't keep it running. So we bought him out and took it over. We had a guy on staff who was a jack-of-all-trades, so he began to build parts for this old-timey train. That's how we were able to get it up and running."

So the Churchwells had a train ride of their own, but the biggest difference between it and Koplin's tiny toot-toot-tooter was that the Long Beach railroad was full size. In fact, the locomotives they used were authentic coal-burning antiques: one

was built in 1912, one in 1913, and the newest one in 1946. (Only one would be used at a time, with the other two in reserve in the event of a breakdown.) However, even with a life-sized railroad running in a circle, the fact remained that there was still nothing to see and nowhere to go on it. Observing how Koplin had solved this problem is probably what gave Churchwell the notion to construct his own Ghost Town on the back edge of his property.

Like the trains themselves, Ghost Town was noticeably larger than Tombstone Territory. There was a greater variety of buildings and businesses, including a newspaper office, ice cream parlor, hotel, and traditional saloon with dancing girls. How could such a thriving community fit the usual meaning of the term *ghost town?* Elementary, my dear Gabby. When it began, the only living people in Ghost Town were the tourists themselves. The weathered buildings were populated by fiberglass statues. These immobile denizens of Ghost Town were the work of Hardie Phipps, a little-known artist from Memphis whose primary claim to fame was creating the figures that decorated the lawn of Graceland each Christmas season.

After a season or two of sending tourists back into the true Ghost Town, the Churchwells were fortunate to encounter the Lewis family, whose several members got their heads together and started coming up with ways to give the tourists more to see—and not incidentally to raise more money for the Lewises and their landlords, the Churchwells. Daughter Cathy Lewis has explained how they breathed new life into the town:

Cathy Lewis and her mother, Dean Lewis, with the first issue of the *Epitaph*, the official newspaper of Petticoat Junction/Ghost Town. (Michael and Cathy Lewis Collection)

If it hadn't been for my mother, Ghost Town would have been just that. She approached Guy Churchwell with an idea about having real shops in the empty town buildings. Up to that time, people would just file by, peering in the windows at Mr. Phipps's fiberglass statues. Mother made a mock-up of an Old West newspaper and four "wanted" posters. The wanted posters included cartoon caricatures of three different men and one woman. There was a round-faced man, a long-faced man, and a man with a square jaw. I wish I had a nickel for every person I heard exclaim, "That looks just like . . ." Then they had to buy one for fifty cents. My mother would hand-letter the name and offense with a Speedball pen and India ink as the customers waited in line. The next year, she got a flatbed press and set my brother to work with it when she opened the ice cream parlor on the corner.

The Lewis family also began the official Ghost Town newspaper, the *Epitaph* (sounds more like the newspaper for Tombstone Territory!). The layout and articles would change from tourist season to tourist season, but the headline was left blank, so copies of the paper could be personalized to each tourist's specifications.

One spectacle that all Western-themed tourist attractions of that era shared was a periodic shootout in the street, whereby the marshal would have to settle the hash of various and sundry sidewinders and owlhoots. At Ghost Town, these skits began with the 1966 tourist season and featured a regular cast of characters that included straight shooter Marshal Sherm Walker and bad guy Jack Slade, described by Paul Churchwell as "a cowboy bum." (Does that mean he raised bum steers?) Occasionally, Lee Koplin reportedly would mosey over from his competing Tombstone Territory and make guest appearances as the Ghost Town undertaker. A highlight of every performance was when one of Slade's slimy sidekicks would be shot off the roof of one of the buildings and land on the street below with a thud, surely one of the toughest ways to make a living on the Panama City Beach strip.

The same villains who raised a fuss in town could also be found skulking along the railroad route, stopping the train for a good old-fashioned holdup. On one occasion, the actors playing the outlaws noticed that a passenger on the train was their cousin, visiting from Birmingham. They decided to use this lady as an example and held her at gunpoint while taking her earrings, jewelry, and purse as she screamed and hammed

At Petticoat Junction, Marshal Sherm Walker prepares to shoot it out with no-good sidewinder Jack Slade. (Florida State Archives Photographic Collection)

it up for all she was worth. The other passengers may not have been aware that the seeming victim's valuables would be waiting for her at the depot once the train finished its run.

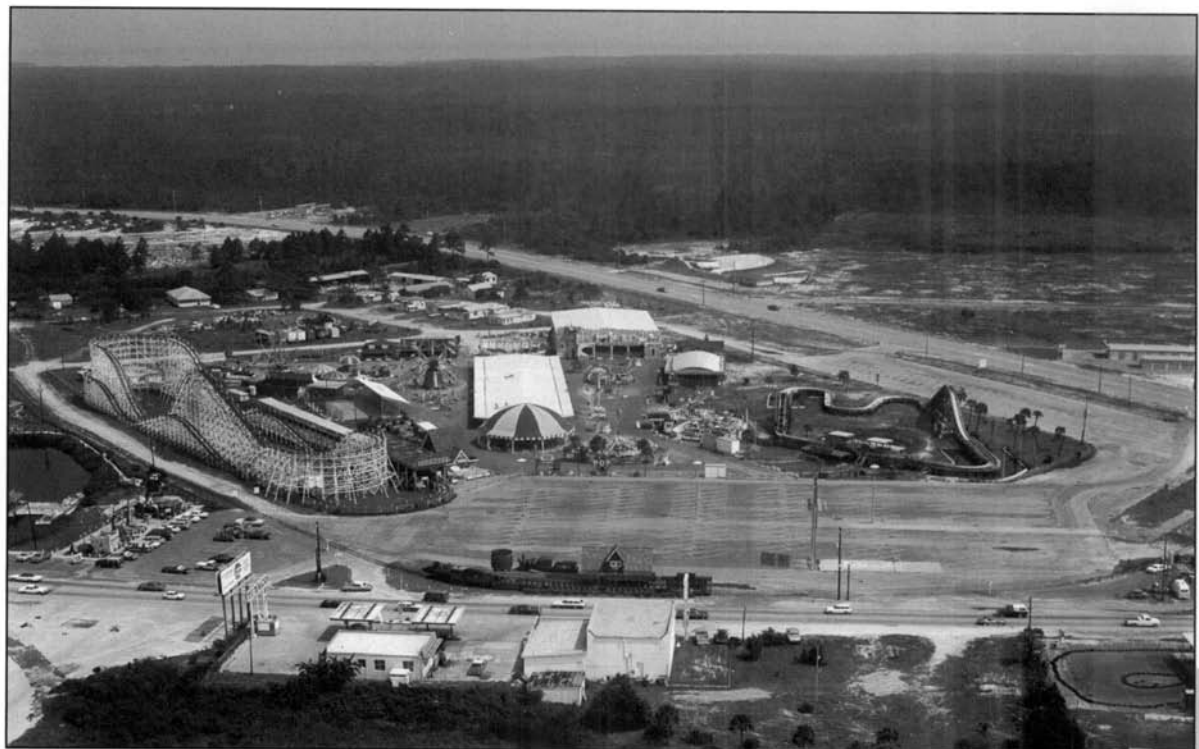
Sometimes just working in a park with a Western theme could be as dangerous as living in the Old West itself. Cathy Lewis recalls her hazardous behind-the-scenes role in the daily proceedings: "I loaded the blanks for the cowboys with a hand-packing lever kind of doodad that fell to pieces one day. For a week or so after that, I carefully tapped the primers in with a hammer and tamped the powder, with a wad of toilet paper, down with a hammer and the head of a ten-penny nail. It's a miracle I still have all of my fingers."

One day, someone decided it would be humorous to put a switch on the usual outcome of the gunfight. After the marshal had laid the bad guys among the daisies, as was his habit, teenager Cathy was to run out of one of the nearby buildings, brandishing a firearm and screaming, "You stinking marshal! You killed my pa!" Then, she was to fire on the hero and kill him in cold blood. The act went according to the script until the climactic moment, as related by Cathy herself: "The day I shot the marshal in the back, I was not the one who loaded the shells. One of the boys had loaded them 'special,' just for me. It was a double-barreled sawed-off shotgun. When I drew it up to shoot, it almost took my arm off. The marshal fell, and so did I. The 'dead' guys who had already been shot were all quivering on the ground with muffled laughter. Later it was explained to me that to fire a shotgun, one holds it loosely out by the side, so that it rocks *back*, not up in the bend of your arm."

There was obviously a lot of excitement in the back of the Churchwell property, but the part of it that faced U.S. 98 was basically empty. This is where Churchwell decided to combine his Ghost Town with a variation on another idea. The Miracle Strip Amusement Park had opened to great success with the 1963 tourist season (see chapter 6), and Churchwell's pioneer pride just couldn't let him stand for anyone getting ahead of him. Long Beach Resort had always featured carnival rides, but they were not there on a permanent basis. The roadside part of Ghost Town was going to change that dynamic.

Whereas Jimmy Lark and the founders of the Miracle Strip Park had constructed a roller coaster from the ground up, Churchwell didn't want to waste any unnecessary time, so he purchased an existing coaster known as the Tornado that had formerly operated at the Wedgewood Village amusement park in Oklahoma City. The Ghost Town gunslingers reportedly reassembled the roller coaster, and they were a bunch of confused hombres when the Tornado was finished but they still had many unused pieces left over. All of the other standard amusement rides were put into place as well, and then Churchwell had to come up with a name for his new complex.

In September 1963, a new situation comedy had premiered on CBS-TV. It was *Petticoat Junction,* created by comedy whiz Paul Henning as a spin-off of his phenomenally popular *Beverly Hillbillies* of the season before. *Petticoat Junction* was the dual story of the Shady Rest Hotel, run by Bea Benaderet and Edgar Buchanan, and the antiquated Cannonball Railroad, with longtime Western movie sidekick Smiley Burnette as the



This aerial view of Petticoat Junction gives a good idea of the amusement park's scope. (Florida State Archives Photographic Collection)

engineer. Somehow, J. E. Churchwell had become a good friend of Buchanan's, and the gravelly voiced old character actor helped his beach buddy obtain permission to call his amusement park Petticoat Junction. That was the only connection the complex had to the TV show, but the name would be immediately recognizable to anyone at all familiar with the era's programming.

A few years after its opening, Petticoat Junction got a new resident who had even less to do with the TV show. Up in

Montgomery, Alabama, a large discount department store had kicked off the Christmas shopping season with a five-story-tall Santa Claus that sat in the store's parking lot to draw in the toy-seeking crowd. The giant figure had a core of Styrofoam and foam rubber, with a fiberglass skin to contain his friendly features. Once the holiday season was over, the not-so-jolly St. Nick was purchased by Panama City Beach interests, cut apart into sections, and transported to a spot across U.S. 98 from the newly constructed Chateau Motel. Santa Claus obviously would have looked rather strange sitting on the beach, so he was renovated, emerging as a fierce pirate, with a hook where his mittened left hand once waved.

The original use for this behemoth buccaneer was as a museum of wax scenes depicting typical pirate life and loot. But as was proven time and again, tourists did not visit the beach to be cooped up inside dark and dingy museums, so that enterprise lasted for only a season or two at the most. The ponderous pirate was then purchased by the Churchwells, who moved him to the edge of Petticoat Junction and used him as the emblem and ticket office for a "pirate ship" ride on the adjacent Lake Flora (an artificial body of water named for J. E. Churchwell's wife). After that attempt and a later paddleboat ride went belly up, the pirate's base was locked up and he was left there "just as something to see," as Paul Churchwell puts it. Eventually a water slide known as the Sui-Slide was constructed behind the Captain Hook look-alike, and he became a roadside billboard for that attraction (which also failed—the ratio of failures to successes in the fickle tourism business is amazingly high).

The Cannonball pulls into Ghost Town with another load of paying customers, circa 1966. (Cathy Lewis Collection)

One reason for having so many different features in one spot was obviously to get tourists to spend as much moolah as possible while on the premises. Petticoat Junction/Ghost Town raised this to a new art form. Cathy Lewis is quite candid when describing just how the operators made sure that no money remained in anyone's pocket:

> Timing was everything. The family was told at the ticket depot that the train would drop them off at Ghost Town and be back around to pick them up in thirty minutes. During that time, they could enjoy the entertainment. Our job was to keep

them in Ghost Town for as long as possible so they would spend more money. After all, we made most of the money we were to live on the rest of the year within three months.

This is the way the dance went: The train would drop off tourists, they would hear the announcement on the speakers welcome them to Ghost Town and direct them to head to their right, into the saloon. Once in the saloon, they were ushered out the back door onto a walking trail. The trail had a swinging bridge, a cemetery ("Here lies Les Moore, shot by a .44; no Les, no Moore"), and a multitude of fiberglass figures that the Phipps family had fabricated. It took the group a while to get through the trail. It noodled around back to the saloon's rear entrance, by which time the Phipps boys would have the front double doors to the saloon closed. Once inside, the folks were asked to take a seat to watch the silent movie, but first perhaps they would like some popcorn or a cold drink. Most people would have paid *anything* for a drink after walking on that trail for almost thirty minutes on a hot, humid summer day.

The movie would start, and the player piano would play. While the group was inside, the train would come back around to drop off another load, hopefully leaving before the saloon doors opened. The new group would be welcomed and would be encouraged to check out the shops. When the saloon doors opened, the train was gone and those poor varmints who had been watching the movie were stuck for another thirty minutes. Then came the gunfight, and after that the second group was encouraged to head for the saloon, out the back, movie, closed doors, and bingo, we had their wallets for another half hour.

Earlier in the choreography, there was an adjustment made. The train would blow its whistle as it approached Ghost Town.

The tourists in the saloon could hear it over the blasting piano and would come running out of the saloon, dragging their kids through the sand. It got to be a real spectacle, and I think perhaps somewhat dangerous. So the engineer was told to stop tooting the train whistle until he had pulled out. As the town developed and we had other entertainment—Indian dancers, a rock band, and a small restaurant—we could keep folks back there all day and they would be happy.

I wish I had a video of those folks running after that train in the early days. Some of them would get absolutely livid, and some would cry. They hadn't planned on spending their whole day at Ghost Town, just thirty minutes!

All was not mercenary cynicism, of course. After all, tourists were there to see different sights and experience different things, so giving them their money's worth was part of the game too. Cathy Lewis's younger sister, Tracy, shared what may have been the most important lesson the family learned from its Ghost Town experience: "I remember something Mother told us. She said, 'Be sure and greet everyone happy, and with a smile.' She said that some of these families might have saved for years for this one vacation, and our bad day shouldn't affect their family fun! You know, I remembered that every day I worked at that beach. We children—Cathy, Michael, and I—worked hard and long hours at Ghost Town, but I know we tried our best never to let those tourists down."

The fact that both parks were so heavily tied to television eventually worked against Tombstone Territory and Petticoat Junction/Ghost Town. The once-blazing popularity of Westerns

In 1999, the rusting machinery of the Skyride still sat forlornly.

rapidly cooled off as the 1960s progressed, and this affected all the country's many tourist attractions playing off the theme. As far as the two Miracle Strip rivals were concerned, Tombstone Territory started to live up to its name first, probably because it was smaller and did not have the amusement park on which to rely. By the mid-1970s, Tombstone Territory was in serious trouble. The skyride that had started the whole complex no longer seemed novel or particularly unique. Hotels and condominiums had begun springing up that were every bit as tall as the

skyride's supports, and practically across the street a two-hundred-foot observation tower had opened in 1966. From the tower's deck, the skyride looked like a pair of toothpicks sticking up out of the ground far below. When Hurricane Eloise blew into town in September 1975, the skyride's passenger cars were scattered far and wide over the surrounding countryside, and no attempt was made to restart the rusting relic. More than twenty years later, a trip along the area's back roads still revealed skyride buckets sitting in the brush, overgrown by foliage.

Film footage from Tombstone's final days survives, and it shows a much depleted and discouraged attraction. By that time, the staff of performers apparently had dwindled to the point that the marshal doubled as the main entertainer in the saloon, and he and the dancing girls performed listlessly on floor level with the customers instead of on a stage. Most jarring was the lack of any attempt to maintain the Western illusion: in the footage that exists, the marshal sings into an unconcealed microphone, with a 1970s-era stereo system plainly displayed behind him.

The disillusionment that prevailed is also confirmed by Tallahassee newspaper writer Mark Hinson, who reminisced about his eleventh birthday party, held at Tombstone Territory: "It was late August, hot as a scorpion's underwear, and the Iron Horse wouldn't start. . . . The teen-age kids running the train sent for a pair of jumper cables and a pickup from the parking lot to administer shock treatment to the train. . . . When we finally got to Tombstone Territory, the staged gunfight had long since been over. Back at the station, in a hurry to exit the

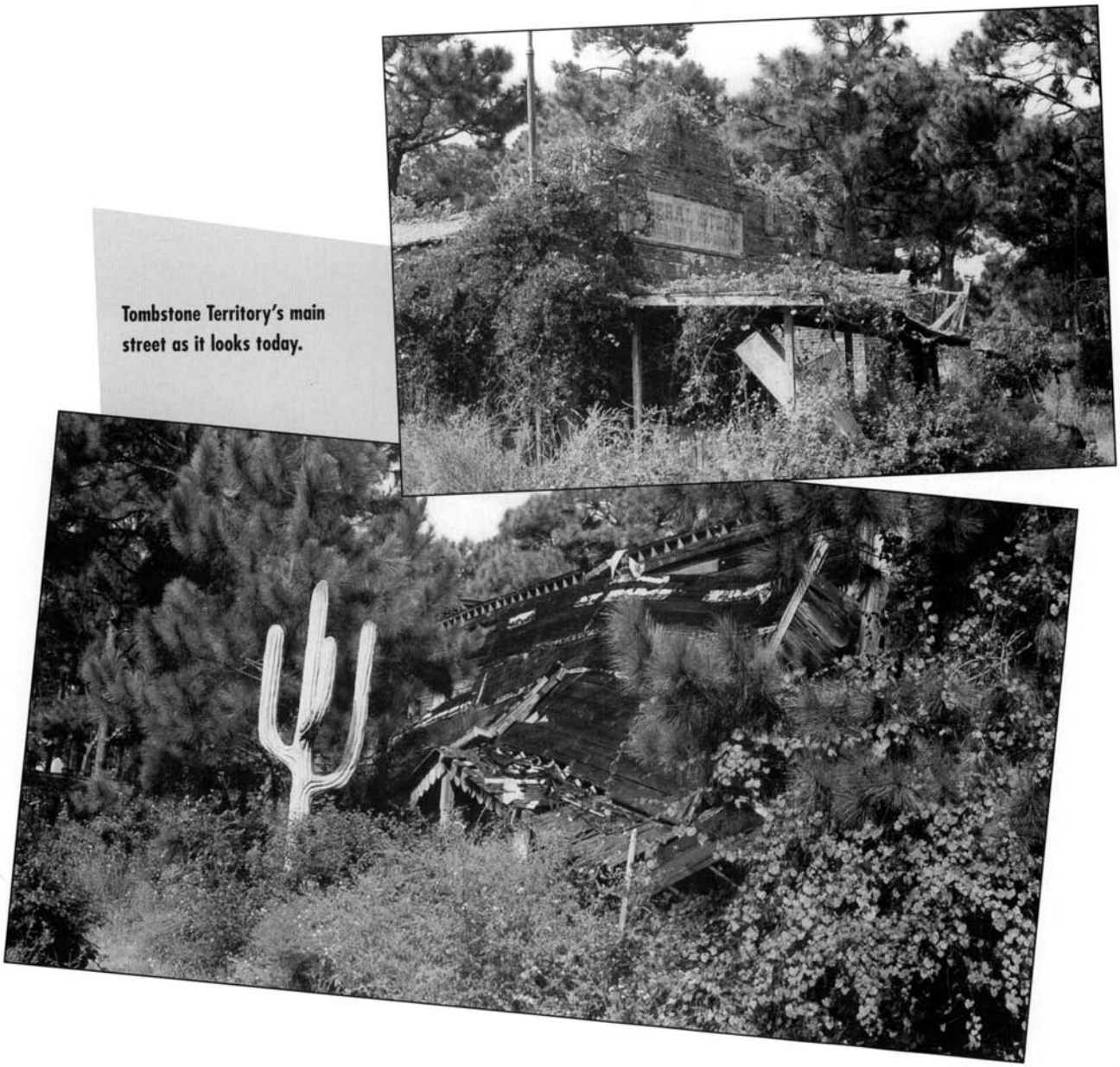
Iron Horse, I slipped on oil and fell on my big birthday butt. As I lay dazed on the train platform for a moment, I thought to myself, 'This is the end of something.'"

By 1979, nothing about Tombstone Territory was functional. The giant concrete Indian at the entrance still held a sign, but now it read "Magic World Amusement Park." There was nothing operating, though, and only a couple of pathetic snack bars looked like they had seen any activity in years. It was not long before the property was cleared and most of Koplin's lavish statues demolished. For some reason, the totem pole and longhorn cattle that stood in front of the Cliff Dwellers' cavern were spared, and they steadfastly remained in their original locations even as fast food restaurants and airbrushed T-shirt stands grew up around them. The totem pole disappeared first, but the cattle were still holding their own in 1999, when they too went to the slaughterhouse.

As for the town portion itself, at the turn of the century it still stood within a chain-link fence in the Raccoon River Campground, another complex owned by the Koplins. The saloon building's roof and front porch had collapsed years earlier, but the other buildings remained in their weed-infested lot, with the Spanish mission (now used as a tool shed) still displaying its beautiful painted murals on the interior walls. The only visible remnant of the skyride was the conglomeration of huge gears and other machinery at the end of its cable, and even those relics were rusting into oblivion.

Meanwhile, back at Petticoat Junction, the amusement park kept things going even after the namesake television series was

These concrete sculptures were truly Tombstone Territory's tombstone. They continued to stand in their original locations before being demolished during the 1990s.



Tombstone Territory's main street as it looks today.

canceled in 1970. As the years plodded by, however, fewer and fewer people visited the park, and at the end of the traditional tourist season on Labor Day 1984, the Churchwells decided it was time to hang up and quit. On February 4, 1985, an auction was held on the property, and everything that could be carted away was sold to the highest bidder. This included all the amusement rides, the merchandise and other contents of the Ghost Town buildings, and even the railroad track and the three locomotives. Those who bought the remains of the old park did so for a variety of reasons: some of the rides were purchased at rock-bottom prices by other amusement parks, while the 1922 carousel and its carved horses attracted collectors. The track and one of the trains were purchased by an eccentric millionaire from Alabama "for his grandkids to play with," said Paul Churchwell. Thereafter, the Petticoat Junction train and its three miles of track could be seen encircling the millionaire's mansion on I-65 just north of Birmingham.

Two things that were not sold at the auction were the Tornado roller coaster and the giant pirate, either of which would have been too expensive and troublesome to move. In March 1990, the Tornado was bulldozed to make room for a proposed new amusement park that never took its first ride. The patch-eyed pirate sat on his lonely vigil until a fire in 1993 made short work of his Styrofoam carcass. A couple of years later, the former Petticoat Junction property became the site of Panama City Beach's new Wal-Mart Superstore, and an Applebee's restaurant was constructed where the train once dropped folks

off at Ghost Town. Where the town buildings themselves sat was allowed to reforest itself, and today there is no visible remnant of any of them. Only Lake Flora, where the paddleboats and pirate ship once cruised, remained along the edge of the Wal-Mart parking lot to remind people of the past.

Happy trails, y'all.

A COTTON CANDY WORLD

CHAPTER 6

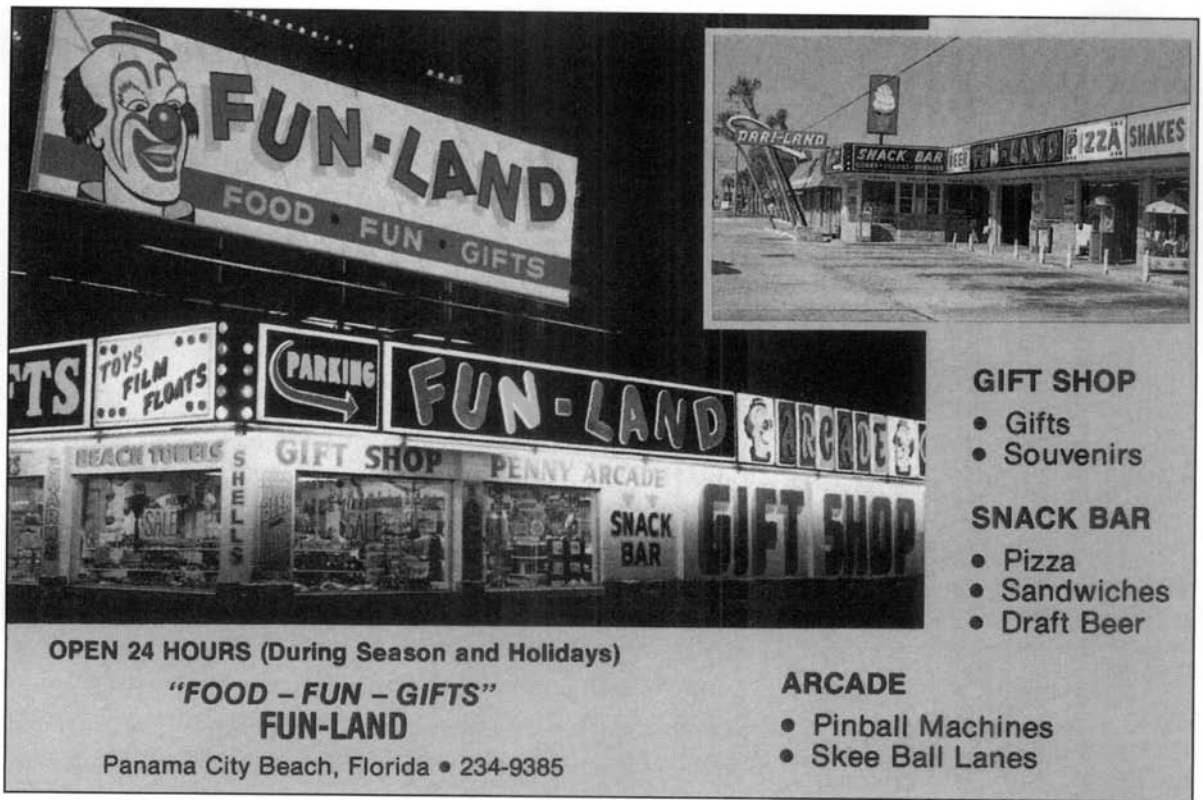
The tradition of having an amusement park as part of any seaside resort is one that dates back at least to the late 1800s, when the first such attractions were built at New York's Coney Island. From that point forward, almost any beach would be decorated by some form of amusement park, ranging from the simple to the incredibly complex. On the Miracle Strip, the faintest beginnings of the amusement park concept stirred to life at Long Beach Resort in the years immediately preceding World War II.

Postcards from the early 1940s show that mechanical amusement rides were a part of Long Beach Resort from its earliest days. This tradition continued after the war years and really blasted off during the 1950s, when Long Beach was the center of tourist activity on what would later become Panama City Beach's main drag. There was one big difference between the rides at Long Beach and the ones that would follow in its sandy footprints, however. The Ferris wheel, merry-go-round, kiddie cars, and other such diversions operated at full steam throughout the tourist season (approximately Memorial Day through Labor Day), but they were only there on a lease basis, and once

This Fun-Land matchbook cover, with its clown and merry-go-round, helped promote the false notion that the arcade was another amusement park.

summer was over, the rides would be trucked back to their home base in Tennessee. Anyone passing the site of Long Beach's amusement area during the off-season would have seen nothing but a bare expanse of white sand. Later, when a bumper car ride was added to the collection, the covered pavilion would remain on site year round, but the bumper cars themselves would vanish.

A big part of any amusement park was the penny arcade that usually lined the midway. In 1954, at the opposite end of the resort from Long Beach, entrepreneur Don Remsnider built an arcade, which he called Fun-Land. According to longtime manager Sonny Greenberg, Fun-Land had constantly to battle the



idea that it was another amusement park. "The name was misleading," he says, "and the fact that our logo was a clown face didn't help any." Indeed, from its publicity one would think that Fun-Land was some sort of hybrid of a circus and an amusement park, but in fact its sole source of fun was its arcade, which contained skee ball, pinball machines, voice recording machines, photo booths, "test your strength" punching bag gadgets, machines that flipped photos to give the

Because of its jolly clown face logo, Fun-Land constantly had to battle the idea that it was an amusement park. (Bay County Library Collection)

appearance of old-fashioned moving pictures, and almost anything else that could be operated by the insertion of a coin into the slot. An enormous gift shop was later added to the complex, as well as a companion refreshment stand called "Dari-Land." Fun-Land survives to dish out fun today, making it a viable contender for oldest continuously operating attraction on the Panama City Beach strip.

While Long Beach Resort continued to operate its seasonal, now-you-see-it, now-you-don't amusement park, in 1963 things began to get a bit more permanent in the thrills, chills, and spills department when the distant thunder of what would become the Miracle Strip Amusement Park was first heard. The idea that would eventually develop into the park came from Jimmy Lark, a local builder whose family went way back in the area's tourist business. As you may remember from chapter 2, that family's name was immortalized in the Larkway Villas, one of the early cabin courts on the beach. Lark had vacationed at some other seaside resort and had observed a roller coaster drawing hordes of customers willing to pay to have the cookies frightened out of them. Lark came back to Panama City Beach and set out to build his own roller coaster as a roadside attraction, not necessarily as part of an amusement complex. The land he secured was partially owned by the Bennett family, operators of the Reef Motel, with its western edge under the control of Angelo Butchikas (of Steak Pit fame). Lark took on a couple of partners, Alf Coleman and Bill Parker, and the three men set out to build a roller coaster—even though none of them had any prior experience in doing so.

Fortunately for those who were going to ride the thing, Lark's coaster, officially named the Starliner, was physically constructed by the Philadelphia Toboggan Company, a firm that had been manufacturing the rides since shortly after their debut at Coney Island in 1884 (when they were known by the archaic term switchback railways). Where Lark and his cronies came into the process was in designing the coaster and its track, intending to make it the longest and fastest of its kind. Under the direction of primary designer John Allen, the track stretched to an incredible 2,403 feet, and no one was totally certain that it would work until it was finished. Park manager Buddy Wilkes relates, "Roller coasters work by gravity, and when they were ready to test this one, they ran one car on it, knowing that it would go much faster later with two. Well, the single car couldn't make it up one of the inclines. Everyone thought it was a failure, but John Allen went to one particular spot, tapped it with a hammer, and the thing worked."

Jimmy Lark's roller coaster as it appeared before the rest of the amusement rides were put into place. (Miracle Strip Amusement Park Collection)

While construction got under way, Lark and his crew apparently decided that the large vacant area to the left of the coaster could be used for other things besides simply the parking lot. There is some discrepancy over just how the other rides that made up the park came to the property; one account says that the acquisition of the Ferris wheel, merry-go-round and other devices was directly linked to the civil rights movement that was fermenting up in Birmingham, Alabama. In the spring of 1963, conditions had gotten so volatile that the city had elected to close all of its municipal parks rather than integrate them. One of the parks was a small amusement facility, Kiddieland,

located at the Alabama State Fairgrounds. This version of the Panama City Beach park's origin says that when Birmingham closed its Kiddieland, Jimmy Lark either purchased or leased all the rides and transported them to his new location by the sea.

Others do not agree with this account, and indeed, if it is true, Birmingham wasted little time in replacing its rides that had gone to the beach. By a couple of years later, tensions had cooled off and Kiddieland operated successfully for many more years. The alternate story says that Lark merely contracted with a carnival owner from Birmingham, who brought his arcade games and a few "umbrella rides" down to supplement the roller coaster. As with many such hazy historical facts, the truth may encompass parts of both stories.

However the other rides got there, the fact is that Miracle Strip Amusement Park opened on June 1, 1963, with the Starliner roller coaster as the focal point. Riders seemed to agree that the ride was the "fastest in the world," as the publicity claimed. It is said that roller coasters in the southern states always travel faster than their northern counterparts because of looser packing grease, but it was still many years before anyone came forward to challenge the Starliner's claim.

Of course, roller coasters do not suit everyone's stomach, so the Miracle Strip Park had other rides to keep those nonenthusiasts entertained. One of these other attractions, which definitely was not imported but was created on the spot, was the Haunted Castle dark ride. Any amusement park worth its candied apples had one of these attractions, sometimes referred to as fun houses, even though fun was primarily the realm of

Crowds such as these could be found at the Miracle Strip Amusement Park on any summer day.

those old enough to appreciate the opportunity to do some amorous clinging and necking in the dark; for the younger set, fun and the Haunted Castle were two concepts that did not coexist within the same universe.

Even the exterior of the Haunted Castle was designed to look intimidating. Its main feature was an enormous dragon with glowing eyes, and hard by this apparition's side was a half-destroyed clock with the number thirteen where the number twelve usually appears. As the hands whirled about erratically,

Just the exterior of the Haunted Castle was enough to give nightmares to young and old. (Florida State Archives Photographic Collection)

a series of "sproings" and "boings" emanated from the timepiece, sounding more like something from a humorous animated cartoon than what would be expected in such an ominous setting. The sides of the building were decorated and sometimes animated as well. From one turret window protruded an arm attached to a bloody hand, which waved pathetically at the crowds below.

Those who made it past the threatening facade were in for an experience that certainly delivered enough horrors to produce nightmares in living color, although these phenomena were a product of the pre-Disney Imagineer era and the components were thus arranged in a hodgepodge of sights and sounds rather than following any coherent story line. Dark ride enthusiast and historian Rod Bennett has too-vivid memories of the Haunted Castle, which he relates as follows: "You bumped your way through the traditional wooden doors, and then you were inside. The first thing that jumped out at you was a big bloody rat about the size of a dog. Some of the other gags included a mad doctor's lab where they were sawing someone's head off and a great gag where a gorilla with an axe would come down and crash against a chain link fence." Coincidentally, a local legend holds that in the late 1800s a giant gorilla escaped from a ship and made its way ashore to the Panama City area. After a few reported sightings, the junior King Kong was never seen again. Perhaps this ape passed the rest of his days in the Haunted Castle!

Bennett continues with diabolical glee:

Then, at one point in the ride you would break outside onto a porch on the second level, so you could look down and see everyone standing in line, and then you would go back inside, which is a pretty traditional haunted house gag. But one of the great scenes, and the one that most people probably remember in this ride, is that you would start to go down this long, sloping hill with the old "barrel roll" effect, so that as you went down you would lose your sense of orientation because you were going through the middle of a rotating tube, and it had all these psychedelic pinwheel-type colors under black light. Down at the end of the tunnel you could see what looked like the back of the car ahead of you, with the people's heads and so forth, and it was turning upside down. Of course it turned out that it wasn't real at all, it was a fake car turning upside down to add to the illusion. The final gag, which was also somewhat traditional, was a Mack truck that would turn its lights on and honk at you, then BANG, you were back outside.

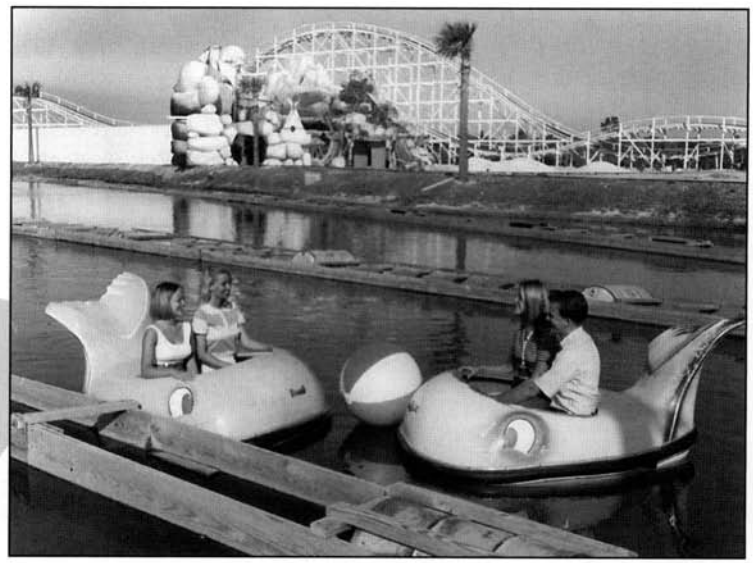
The Haunted Castle obviously did not try to carry out the theme of a true castle (or any other theme in particular, it would seem), but another attraction in the park had even less to do with its name. The Hurricane House was not a ride but a walk-through maze whose only connection to coastal storms was its painted front depicting furniture and other objects whirling through the air, à la *The Wizard of Oz.* Bennett also has detailed memories of this more benign experience:

The Hurricane House was best described as a "dark fun house." I remember that one of the best effects was a room with

a big open maze made out of prison bars painted stark black; you could see all the way to the other end of the room, but you had to go through the maze to get there. And what made it much more creative was that there was a strobe light going off the entire time, and the walls were painted stark white, so when the strobes went off the prison bars cast black shadows on the white walls. Now, the white walls also had black bars painted on them, so that made it all very disorienting and a strange experience! There was also a room where you would look up and see a lady's bedroom, and the furniture was all attached to the ceiling like an upside-down room. There was an upside-down bed with a lady asleep in it, and you could see her chest moving up and down as she was breathing.

While these spooky and silly abodes entertained patrons, the park's traditional amusement rides also impressed visitors. Whereas some of those long-ago children grew up to study dark rides and fun houses, others specialized in the miniature trains that were features of so many parks. One of those ex-youngsters is Tim Cavender, who offered the following memories of the Miracle Strip train:

After doing a little research, I found out that the first train at the Miracle Strip Park was an Alan Herschell S-16 locomotive with tender and four passenger cars. In 1958, the Alan Herschell company had bought out the Miniature Train Company, the premier park train manufacturer during the 1940s and 1950s. Their most popular train was a 16-gauge diesel locomotive that was modeled after the streamlined trains. Even though the public was



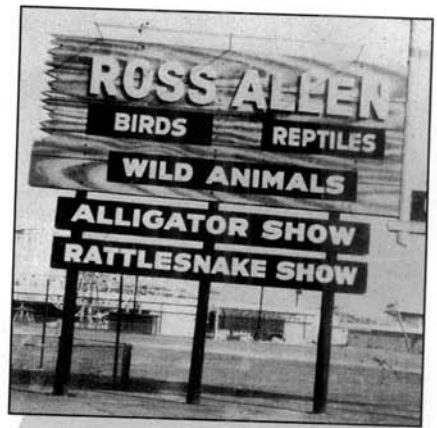
These bumper boats were an early feature of Miracle Strip Amusement Park; also notice the Western-themed railroad tunnel in the background. (Florida State Archives Photographic Collection)

fascinated with the new modern trains, the 1960s were the height of the popularity of TV Westerns, and almost all amusement parks wanted a train from that time period.

The train would leave the station and enter a tunnel. This tunnel was interesting because it had a fake front of painted stones, a teepee and a cactus. Once you passed through the tunnel you were located behind the most distant point of the roller coaster. It seemed that you traveled a good distance back into a wooded area of the park until you made the turn and headed back to the train station.

While the Miracle Strip Park was making its attempt to cash in on what the neighboring Tombstone Territory and Petticoat Junction were already doing, a different type of activity was going on at the far edge of the park property. Ross Allen, the

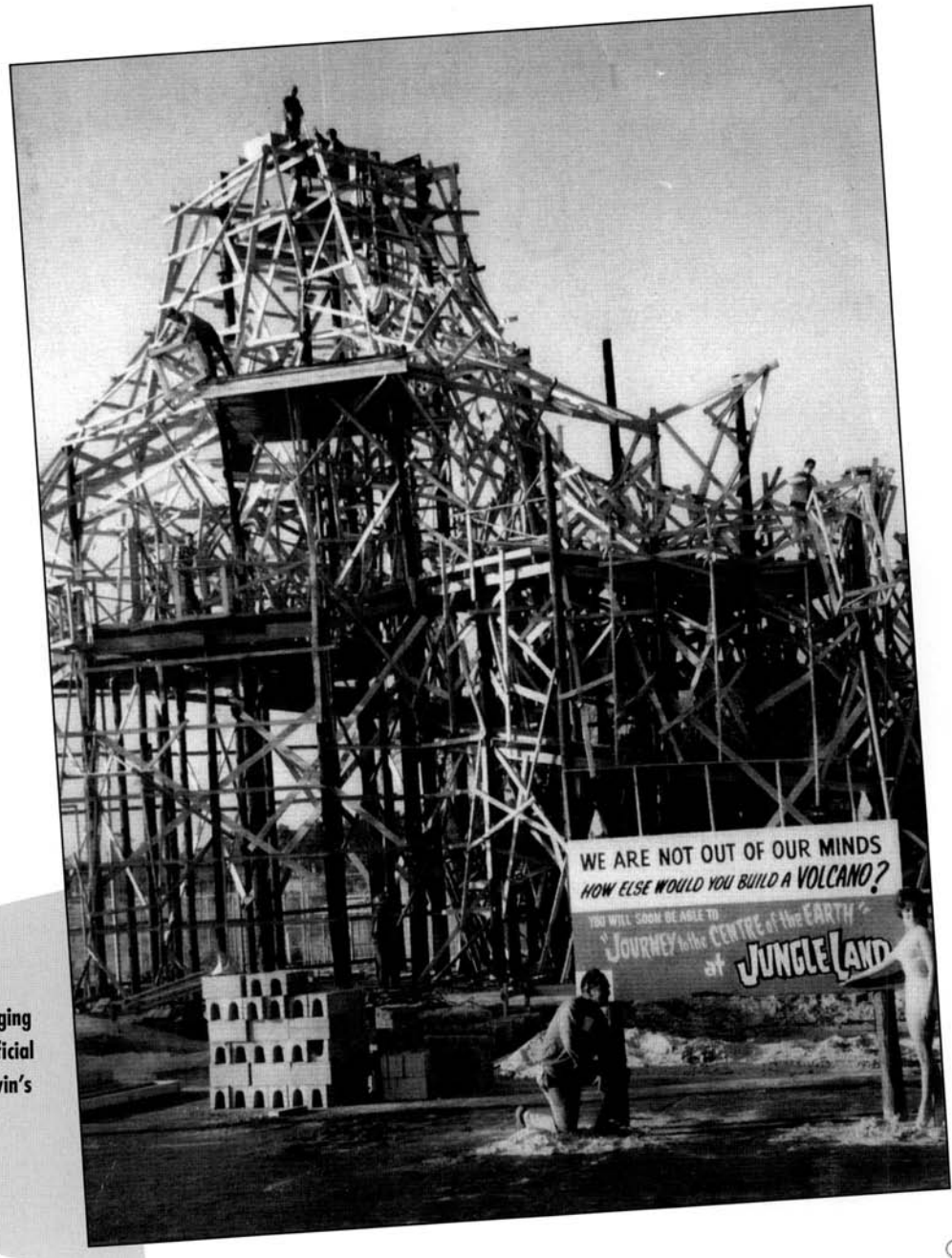
famed herpetologist whose reptile farm at Florida's venerable Silver Springs had inspired the creation of Panama City Beach's Snake-A-Torium, loaned his name to a collection of wildlife that was situated on the old Angelo Butchikas land, separated from the Miracle Strip parking lot only by a two-lane road. There was always an inherent problem with this type of tourist attraction, which exhibited living, breathing, and eating animals instead of the mechanical or concrete variety: while the tourist season was in full swing there might be sufficient business to keep these enterprises afloat, but once Labor Day was over, the customers stopped coming but the resident fauna still had to be fed and cared for during the long winter months.



The Ross Allen wildlife exhibit was losing money despite its proximity to the Miracle Strip Park. (Val Valentine Collection)

Ross Allen's Jungle Show had managed to survive its first season but lacked sufficient capital to make it to the second one. This is where we now introduce a player who would come to have far-reaching effects on the future of the Miracle Strip. His name was Vincent E. Valentine, known to all as Val. Originally from extreme southern Florida, Valentine was an artist who had worked at the legendary Max Fleischer animation studio in Miami, working on *Popeye* cartoons and the 1939 animated feature *Gulliver's Travels.* After the Fleischer studio moved back to its original home in New York City, Valentine had worked as an artist and graphic designer for most of the famous tourist attractions in central Florida.

By 1965 he had made Panama City Beach his home base, and the failing Ross Allen menagerie seemed to him to have unrealized potential. "It was taking in only four hundred to five hundred dollars a day," he says, "and I knew it should have been



Val Valentine's solution to bringing in tourists was to build an artificial volcano as a roadside lure. (Alvin's Island Collection)

Jungle Land's tour guides had no difficulty in getting crowds to follow them into the volcano's depths. (Val Valentine Collection)

making four or five thousand dollars a day. All it needed was something to let people know what was there and draw them in. . . . It had to have a package." Valentine knew Allen from their joint tenures at Silver Springs and managed the wildlife collection for him during the 1965 season before purchasing it.

Valentine's knack for packaging gave him the know-how needed to turn the two-bit roadside zoo into something that couldn't be missed. He changed the name to the more exotic-

No slouch when it came to promotion, Val Valentine knew how to draw people to his pseudo-Polynesian world.

The Jungle Land volcano contained many fascinating sights.

sounding Jungle Land, then set out to make his attraction's appearance match. Devising an elaborate network of wood and metal, bolstered by telephone poles and then covered with wire mesh and finally concrete, Valentine housed his new Jungle Land inside a towering artificial volcano. Just to ensure that the crater could be seen at night as well as during the day, Valentine installed smoke pots inside the pinnacle so that smoke and flame would belch from the interior.

The live animals continued to be housed in the volcano's base, but now they were only one part of the show. Visitors could take a seemingly peril-filled walk through the passageways that Valentine had carefully planned out for his volcano's interior. These "journeys to the center of the earth," as they were promoted, were usually guided by would-be Sheena of the Jungle look-alikes, wearing outfits as brief as standards of the day would permit. The publicity photos for Jungle Land emphasized this aspect of the attraction, although sometimes it became difficult to tell whether the tour guides were supposed to be rainforest denizens or cave girls from the prehistoric past.

Val Valentine had a personal philosophy of entertainment that was a part of most of the attractions he designed. Instead of such startling but cheap thrills as monsters jumping out at people, Valentine preferred to have his special effects activated by the visitors. Thus, the Jungle Land passageways had no charging gorillas or costumed headhunters but instead featured a wall with openings through which people could view the "molten lava" in the volcano's core, a room where the ceil-

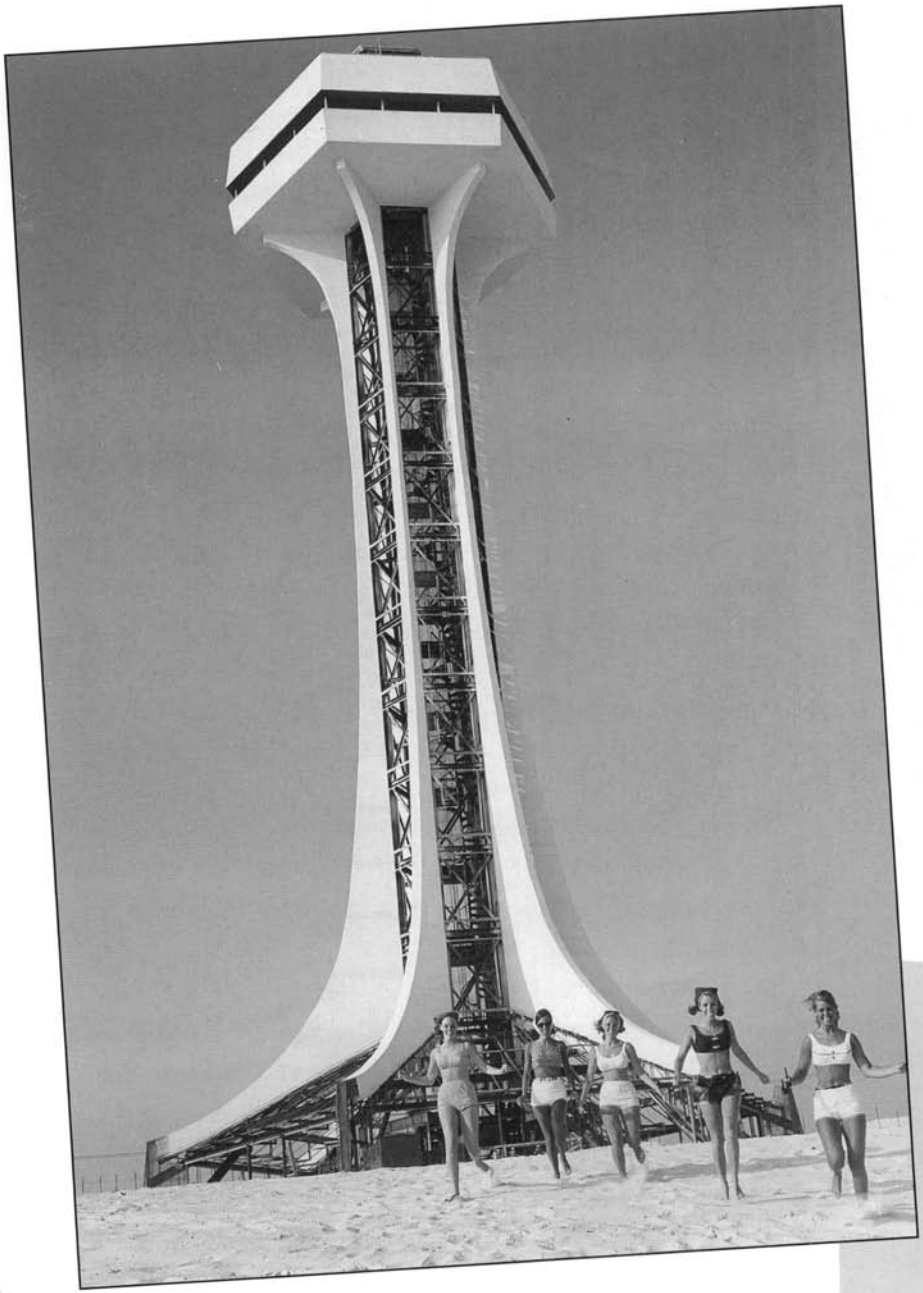
In the base of the Jungle Land volcano, one of the main attractions was performing wildlife. (Florida State Archives Photographic Collection)

An unusual view of the south end—of the Miracle Strip observation tower, that is.

ing was embedded with skulls, and a teetering "balanced rock" that seemed ready to crash at any time. However, the success of any tourist attraction has to be measured in terms of money, not creativity, and the volcano proved itself king of the jungle, as during its first season it brought in more than enough money to recoup its entire construction cost.

The year after Jungle Land opened under its new theme, Valentine became involved in another project for the Miracle Strip Park's periphery, this time a piece of property across the street. Observation towers had been something of a fad in the tourist industry for a few years, and someone decided that such a vantage point would give visitors an unparalleled view of the strip and the Gulf of Mexico, even making the skyride at Tombstone Territory look tiny by comparison. Valentine assisted with the design of the two-hundred-foot-tall tower, which opened in April 1966 and was officially known as Top o' the Strip, though most people called it simply the tower. Other than a snack bar and souvenir shop in the base, there was little to detract from the tower's main purpose—taking tourists to the apex via a leisurely elevator ride and then treating them to an unforgettable view.

Another event would take place in the airspace above the park, but it did not turn out exactly as planned. According to Buddy Wilkes, "Mr. Lark used to have fireworks for the Fourth of July, and people would come out and fill up the parking lot for free, but they wouldn't come inside the park at all! Then, to add insult to the injury of not having any business, some of the spectators filed claims against Lark for having hot ashes fall on

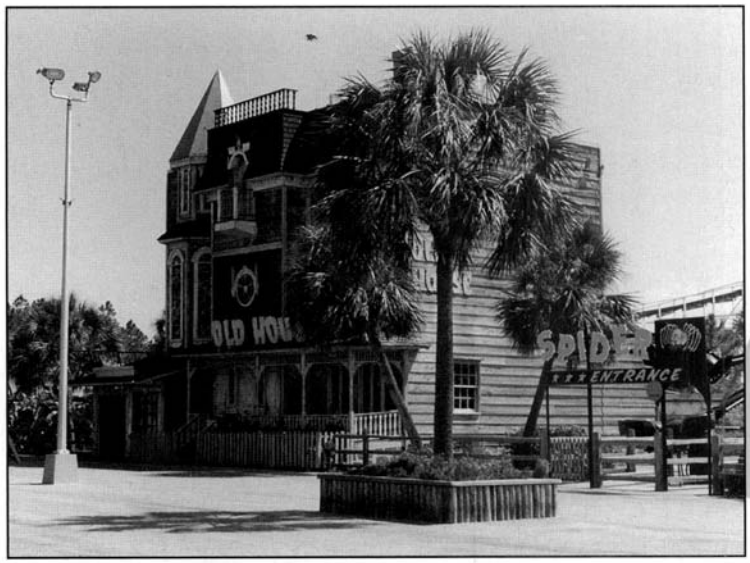


For this prepublicity photo, the bathing beauties could not even wait for the construction of the observation tower to be completed.

In 1967, the observation tower shared airspace with Barney Gray's Miracle Strip Motel. (Brian Rucker Collection)

their cars' paint jobs!" No one ever said that operating an amusement park was totally amusing.

When the 1967 tourist season made its appearance, the newest feature inside the Miracle Strip Park was an old one—in fact, it was called the Old House. Val Valentine, among his many other credentials, was something of an expert at designing and building haunted house attractions, but he had not been directly involved with the original aesthetics of the Haunted Castle or the Hurricane House. Someone finally decided that it was time to put Val's talent to use,



Volcano veteran Val Valentine designed and built the Old House in 1967, allowing tourists to scare themselves silly.

and the Old House was heavily patterned after a similar structure Valentine had supervised at the venerable Wisconsin Dells tourist trap.

When completed, the Old House followed Valentine's same "scare yourself" philosophy as his previous Jungle Land volcano tour. Mechanical figures were confined to the house's exterior, serving as lurid lures. Atop the widow's walk on the structure's roof, a ghostly revenant was seen to stalk slowly across, turning to gaze on the customers below just before disappearing. A window in the house opened and closed to display an old witch's ghastly green countenance as she leered at the waiting line. Although early publicity for the Old House depicted some of the same girls who normally donned swimsuits to promote Jungle Land, now costumed as glamorous

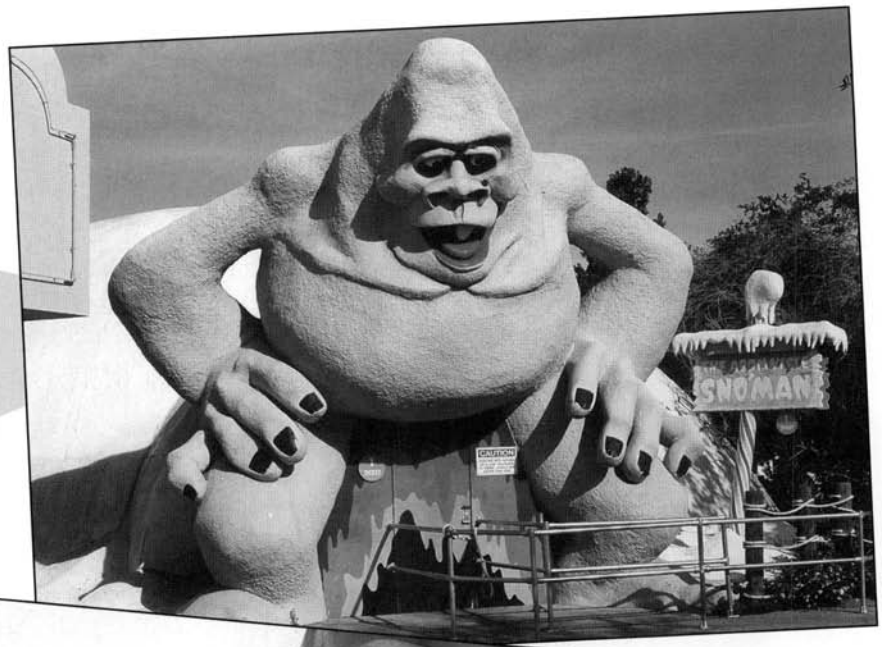
This classic early 1970s ad slick says it all.

ghouls, during its actual operation the Old House did not employ actors. Instead, as *Amusement Business* magazine reported, the whole idea was for visitors to create their own fright: "Secret passageways, sliding panels, tilting hallways, sinking corridors and falling balconies allow each visitor to discover exciting things for himself, making him a participant instead of just a spectator. Visitors scare themselves as they tiptoe through the house and activate balanced contrivances with their own weight."

Reflecting the slowly changing concerns of the amusement industry, the trade publication also noted the Old House's many hidden safety features: "There are more exits than the law requires, including three fall-away walls that form ramps leading directly outside. All paint is non-flammable, and the entire interior has been treated with fire-resistant material."

The Old House remained Val Valentine's pride and joy, and he used its popularity to branch out and design similar attractions for other high-volume tourist centers (the Mysterious Mansion of Gatlinburg, Tennessee, was another Valentine creation). Back at the Miracle Strip Park, however, most of Valentine's work involved sprucing up the rest of the rides and attractions as the park approached and then passed its tenth anniversary. In 1972, the park debuted its new Zoom Flume ride, an unoriginal concept that had been created for the Six Flags Over Texas amusement park in the early 1960s and had made its way east when Six Flags Over Georgia opened in 1967.

By the mid-1970s, the park's newest kick was to take some of the traditional rides that had always been located outdoors and place them in new indoor "themed" environments. One of the first to receive this treatment was when an old-fashioned spinning Scrambler ride was domed over, the interior made to look like the polar icecap (complete with snow and icicles), and the outside decorated with one of Valentine's enormous sculptures, the Abominable Sno'Man. Carrying the icy theme even further, the building was refrigerated to help sustain the illusion and to help attract those looking for a break from the sultry heat of a coastal night.



The Abominable Sno'Man was the first of the giant concrete figures to take up residence at Miracle Strip Park.

Val Valentine and Alan Lark pose under the work-in-progress on the Dante's Inferno devil head. (Val Valentine Collection)

In the 1980s, the Haunted Castle was remodeled, removing the original dreaded dragon facade.

Everyone was so pleased with the Abominable Sno'Man that Valentine next designed a setting for a ride on the site of the departed Casa Loco (formerly known as the Hurricane House). Whereas the first one had emphasized cold, the new setting went in quite the opposite direction. Dante's Inferno was set in a darkened building with artificial flames, with riders entering through the open mouth of an enormous devil's head with lighted eyeballs. Around the same time, the exterior of the Haunted Castle was updated (although the interior

remained unchanged). Gone were the two-dimensional dragon and crazy clock, replaced by fully rounded spooky trees (complete with faces), turrets, and towers. A sentimental holdover from the earlier design was the waving arm, which continued to dangle from its tower window.

By the beginning of the 1980s, the appearance of the whole area surrounding the park was beginning to change. Faced with a decline in the popularity of displaying live animals and increased regulations of such attractions, Jungle Land closed up its trading post for good. A structure such as a volcano could not stay vacant for long, of course, and in 1981 the chain of Alvin's Island department stores opened its Magic Mountain Mall in a new structure surrounding the volcano's base (see chapter 7). Fortunately, most of Valentine's original pathways through the volcano were preserved as part of the new business, although the openings that once looked down on "molten lava" now show nothing but Alvin's merchandise far below.

Val Valentine was sorry to see his tropical paradise become as deserted as an uncharted island—at least until Alvin's moved in—but fortunately he had other projects to keep him from becoming too depressed. Jimmy Lark's last big idea, completed just before his death in 1983, was the Shipwreck Island water park (known during its first season as What-a-Water-Wonderworld). Miracle Strip manager Wilkes says that the water park was a concept ahead of its time. Professionals wondered who could be expected to pay to flounder about in the water when the entire Gulf of Mexico was just across the street, but the same thinking that made motel swimming pools such

Still on the job after twenty years, Val Valentine created this striking advertisement for Miracle Strip Park's 1983 water park addition.

a splash apparently applied to Shipwreck Island. Val Valentine worked overtime at his drawing board, designing various objects that could be crawled over, under, and through, all keyed to the shipwreck theme and engineered to get visitors as wet as possible.

The biggest and most noticeable change occurred across the street from Miracle Strip Park in the closing days of 1995. The Top o' the Strip tower had been poorly maintained for several years, constant assaults by the salt air off the Gulf waters causing its metal components to rust and deteriorate even faster than normal for such structures. The elevator had long since stopped running, and the landfall of Hurricane Opal that October made everyone concerned about the tower's stability. Thus, the decision was made to bring the aging observation deck to its knees.

In the days before the strip became overbuilt, the lights of the Miracle Strip Park and the tower made them stand out from the surrounding countryside.

The sad event took place on December 8, 1995. Crowds of onlookers gathered on the beach to witness the historic sight; for some, the event represented the end of a fondly remembered era, while for others it was simply the eradication of an eyesore. Getting a two-hundred-foot tower to fall without damaging the buildings on either side (the Reef Motel and Barney Gray's Miracle Strip Motel) required some real expertise. Demolition experts determined that the best plan was to have the tower fall toward the beach, where it could not do any harm.

The destruction of such a structure is not child's play by any means, but the crew did allow gravity to do much of the work. Explosives were placed around the base of the tower, where the souvenir shop and snack bar had already been gutted, leaving only the supports visible. At a signal from the foreman, a charge was set off on the beach side of the supports, blowing them out and causing the whole tower to tilt southward like a modernistic Leaning Tower of Pisa (or pizza, which had once been sold in its base). Seconds later, charges blew out the supports on the northern side, and like a falling tree, the formerly upright tower crashed onto the sand below, its own weight shattering it into scrap metal on impact.

The crowd cheered at the successful completion of the project, but there were tears mixed among the hurrahs.

Such a valuable, if small, piece of beachfront property was not going to stay vacant any longer than a morsel of food would remain in the presence of the area's seagulls. Soon after the last remnants of the tower's foundation were cleared away, construction began on a new multistory motel on the site. It was known appropriately as the Beach Tower Resort Motel, and its sign featured an artist's rendition of the long-gone tower.

The tower was brought back to life, after a fashion, for the Miracle Strip Park's 2002 operating season. Noting that since the tower's demise the tallest nonaccommodation structures on the beach had been bungee jumps, the park built a new 185-foot-tall "free fall" tower named the O2. While its primary use was as a thrill ride, its similarity to the late, lamented Top o' the Strip did not go unnoticed. During daytime hours, when the rest of the park was closed, visitors could pay to be hoisted to the top of the O2, where their seat would remain for picture taking and observing the view, and then they would be gently lowered to the ground in a fashion more befitting the old tower's elevator system. The same visitors could then either get off or be lifted to the top once again and dropped to the ground at full force. It was a more modern spin on the observation tower concept, but at least it showed that old ideas are sometimes the best starting point.

Not long after the tower's planned collapse, Val Valentine's Old House also fell to the wrecking ball—not because it was decrepit and ramshackle (after all, it had been built that way)

but because it was a victim of changing attitudes. Since the Old House was a walk-through attraction and not a ride, visitors were packed into it as closely together as practical, and some of the female customers began complaining that in such tight quarters, they were being groped by the male customers. This, compounded by the fact that the public in general had lost its appetite for being cooped up with a crowd of total strangers, meant that the Old House had to go the way of most of the real-life old houses it represented. The haint on the roof had to find a new haunt.

While all of this excitement had been going on in Panama City Beach, what was the rest of the Miracle Strip doing for the betterment of the amusement park industry? Well, if we are talking about Pensacola Beach, the answer is, "Not much, brother." There was never a Pensacola Beach Amusement Park as such; the nearest relation was a giant slide, of the type that could be found in nearly any tourist center of the day, which existed independently of any accompanying park.

Northwest Florida historian Dr. Brian Rucker remembers another Pensacola area attraction that aspired to be an amusement park without attaining its goal: "Back in the mid-1960s," Rucker says, "there was a weird attraction on U.S. 98 between Gulf Breeze and Navarre called 'Squirrel's Tent City.' This guy named Squirrel had a large lot selling campers and early RVs, tents, etc., and across the road he had opened up this tiny amusement park. I think there was a small carousel, Ferris wheel, and stuff like that. It later fell into disrepair, and about ten years ago I went by there and saw concrete remains.

Fort Walton Beach hopped onto the amusement park bandwagon with the Okaloosa Island Park in the 1960s. (Fort Walton Beach Library Collection)

I think it has been developed since then, but they still sell campers there."

Fort Walton Beach made a bit more of a concerted attempt to get into the amusement business. First came the Tower Beach Casino, whose neighboring rides looked like a clone of Long Beach Resort. Then, just as Panama City Beach went from temporary to permanent, so did Fort Walton Beach, with its Okaloosa Island Park. This tiny collection of rides and other accoutrements remains to this day one of the greatest mysteries in Miracle Strip tourism. No one seems to know when the park began, who operated it, or even what year it finally closed. Therefore, the Okaloosa Island Park story has to be pieced together from several fragments, with key parts undoubtedly missing.

What little evidence remains of the Fort Walton Beach park indicates that it definitely belonged to an earlier style of amusement park design than the Miracle Strip Park, although which one came first is difficult to determine for certain. The

first real coverage of the park did not come about until around 1966, and even then it raised more questions than answers. At that time, Fort Walton Beach publicity reported that Okaloosa Island Park was "under new management" (although there is no record of the previous management) and that the park "has been expanded to offer complete well-rounded entertainment for the youngsters, teenagers, and adults. Five acres of free parking are provided, in addition to no admission charges at the gate or to the Fairy Tale Land. More than fifteen permanent rides are reasonably priced and a special area has been set aside within the park for transit rides, thus providing a changing variety of thrills for everyone. Miniature golf, special rates for group outings, an adjoining picnic area on the Intracoastal Waterway, a long range 22-rifle gallery, refreshment stand and dances for teenagers are other features of the amusement park."

And there, fun seekers, is the most detailed description available of Okaloosa Island Park. Of all its features, both permanent and "transit" (coming and going with the tourist season), the one that received the most attention photography wise was Fairy Tale Land. Even this is difficult to analyze from the scant evidence that has been preserved, but it appears to have been a walk-through area quite similar to storybook parks in other parts of the country. The fanciful buildings visible in surviving photographs appear to be of a style as yet unidentified by any architect: in fact, the garish and misshapen red-and-yellow castle that was quite prominent in the display looks as though the wizened gnomes who built it might have spent their lunch hours drinking a little too much dew out of the daisies.

By the time of this limited publicity, Okaloosa Island Park was under the "new management" of W. F. "Dub" Duggan and Andrew "Andy" Osak, jointly calling their company the Dubandy Corporation. How long they remained in charge of the park, and what became of them afterward, is yet another mystery. Amusement park historian Adam Sandy unearthed some evidence that by the early 1970s, the park had been renamed Funway Amusement Park, and had introduced its (literally) most lasting feature, the Comet junior roller coaster.

This wooden coaster was a sight to behold, with its myriad supports, cross-beams, and track painted in alternating red, white, and blue stripes. The reason the Comet was the park's most lasting feature is that it continued to stand on the property long after the park closed—although even what year that event took place is uncertain. Sandy's research shows that the Comet last coasted in 1989, whereas the final listing for the Okaloosa Island Park showed up in the 1977 Fort Walton Beach city directory (possibly at the time the name was changed to Funway). Whatever the final year may have been, the Comet sat alone on the vacant lot, overgrown with weeds and surrounded by broken remnants of the miniature golf obstacles and Fairy Tale Land scenes, for many years thereafter. The ruined roller coaster became both a landmark and a blemish on the landscape, seemingly impossible to eradicate; it reportedly was allowed to sit unwanted and unwashed for so long in the hope that it would eventually fall apart, saving the cost of demolition, but it refused to succumb. When Hurricane Opal bore down on Fort Walton Beach in 1995, there was a glimmer of

hope that the high winds and surf, which did substantial damage to veteran attractions such as the Gulfarium, would at last succeed in taking the Comet out of orbit. But when the clouds lifted, there was the stubborn little coaster who could, still standing over its weed-infested lot with its red, white, and blue stripes gleaming defiantly. What happened after that is not documented, but at least by 1999 the remnants of the "living dead" ride had been cleared away and the property was ready for other development. Fort Walton Beach's new civic center complex now beams brightly in the amusement park's place.

The tourism industry operates under the same "survival of the fittest" rule as the most savage jungle, and this is the best explanation for why some of the Miracle Strip amusements survived while others did not. It is a rare and fortunate attraction that knows how to update itself to cope with changing times without losing the qualities that helped to make it successful. With its brethren such as Long Beach Resort and Okaloosa Island Park falling victim to the bulldozers, the fact that the Miracle Strip Amusement Park has managed to survive in anything resembling its original form is, in fact, true to its name—nothing short of a miracle.

SEA SHELLS SEAFOOD AT THE SEASHORE

CHAPTER 7

Before we pack our suitcases and load up the car to head for home, there are two final types of businesses we need to visit. Of the two, there is no doubt that restaurants were the more necessary—unless vacationers were taking the economical route and packing their own picnic lunches. Less life-preserving but just as common and perhaps even more fun were the souvenir shops that tried to sell out-of-towners everything from T-shirts to seashell sculptures to anything that could be manufactured with an alligator, a flamingo, or a sailfish on it.

Since human beings crave sustenance to stay alive, we will begin by looking at that aspect of their Miracle Strip vacations. Each of the communities that made up the area had its own legendary eateries, but the one that became the most famous was far from the first to get started. Captain Anderson's in Panama City Beach may well be the best-known restaurant in northwestern Florida, but the most logical question for us to

The early days of restaurants on the Miracle Strip were typified by this one at Long Beach Resort. On the back, a tourist wrote in 1957, "It is five miles from our motel, and the nearest restaurant at that."

ask here is whether Captain Anderson was a real person or a fictitious sailor like Captain Kangaroo or Cap'n Crunch.

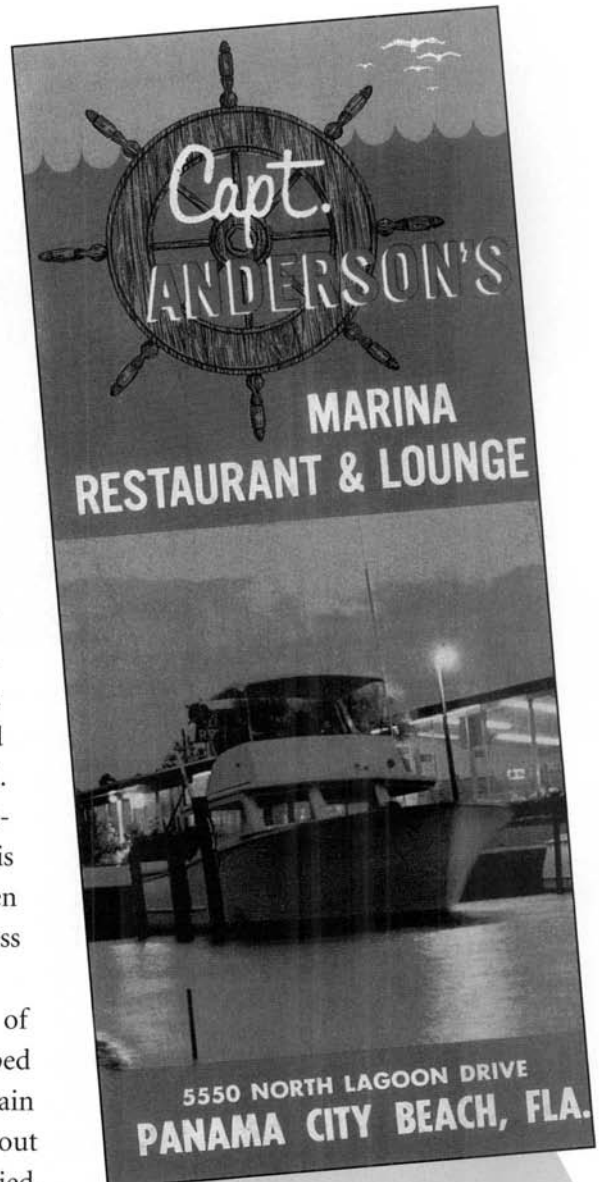
Yes, Virginia, there really was a Captain Anderson. In fact, like that jolly old gift giver in the red suit, there were *many* Captain Andersons. The original was Captain Charles S. Anderson, who was a descendant of a long-established Florida fishing family. Charles Anderson had four sons, Walter, Max, Lambert, and Virgil, and they too all carried the title of captain, so you can see that the number of real-life Captain Andersons might rival the number of Elvis impersonators in Las Vegas.

In 1956, Walter and Max Anderson moved the family's fishing business from the downtown docks of St. Andrews Bay to Panama City Beach's Grand Lagoon, which was then consid-

ered far from the center of any activity. Longtime local resident Jack Mashburn remembers, "I saw them driving all those pilings out here, and I said, 'People aren't going to drive out this far to go fishing.' The Andersons said, 'We think they will.'" Soon after making their somewhat bold move, the seafaring brothers started drawing even more customers to their quarters by opening the first version of the Captain Anderson's restaurant.

Now, like the restless ocean itself, our scene temporarily shifts to another Panama City restaurant with a legendary reputation. In the early 1930s, Greek immigrant Theo Patronis had opened a lunch counter in Tallahassee; his son Johnny eventually joined the business and learned the trade. In 1947, Johnny Patronis joined forces with George Gouras in a new Tallahassee eatery, the Seven Seas Restaurant, and in 1953 the Gouras-Patronis partnership joined A. I. Christo to open a second Seven Seas location in downtown Panama City. Two years later, Patronis and his brother, Jimmy, bought out Gouras's share of the Seven Seas, and the family was now in the restaurant business in a big way.

What does that have to do with the many faces of Captain Anderson? In 1967, the Patronis family stopped sailing the Seven Seas and sunk their anchor at Captain Anderson's Pier at Grand Lagoon, where they bought out the restaurant from the family whose name it carried.



Captain Anderson's Restaurant became the most well known seafood spot in Northwest Florida. (Bay County Library Collection)

The original interior design of Captain Anderson's Restaurant was meant to give the impression of being the hold of a ship. (Patronis Family Collection)

According to the official family history, "When Johnny and Jimmy bought Captain Anderson's in 1967, the property spanned two acres. The restaurant had 225 seats and included about 4,000 square feet. Max and Walter Anderson did $4,000 worth of business in December 1966. After Johnny and Jimmy took over, in December 1967 they did $16,000 worth of business." Besides this proof that the Patronises knew cooking like the Andersons knew fishing, the restaurant kept growing and growing until it reached its current size—800 seats and 28,000 square feet.

Going along with the seafood theme was the restaurant's decor, which in the early days was meant to suggest the hold of a ship. Captain Anderson's claims that its displayed deep-sea-

diving suit, mounted like a mannequin, is one of the most photographed sights in Florida. Even though, like the earliest Panama City Beach businesses, Captain Anderson's still closes during the winter months, at any other time of year hungry tourists can be found packed into it like so many sardines (which are not usually the main feature of the menu).

And what became of the Patronis family's original venture, the Seven Seas Restaurant? Christo continued operating it in downtown Panama City even after his partners sailed away for other climes, but faced with diminishing business, it sank beneath the waves in November 1978.

Captain Anderson's may be the most famous seafood restaurant on the Miracle Strip, but as stated earlier, it was a relative latecomer to the food industry. To find another spot that truthfully claims to be one of the oldest continuously operating seafood servers in the area, if not the whole state, we must now journey west to Fort Walton Beach and drop in on the staff at Staff's Restaurant.

Today, even cities far from the ocean have trendy seafood restaurants that strive to give the rugged appearance of old-time coastal eating, with rusting corrugated tin roofs that look like they have hosted one barnacle too many. However, Staff's Restaurant was different because it looked that way for real, not because it was the fashionable thing to do! The shade of green that the building was painted could be found only in a tourist capital, and just to break up the monotony the exterior walls were adorned with wooden cutouts of fish, crabs, shrimp, lobsters, and other such edible sea creatures.

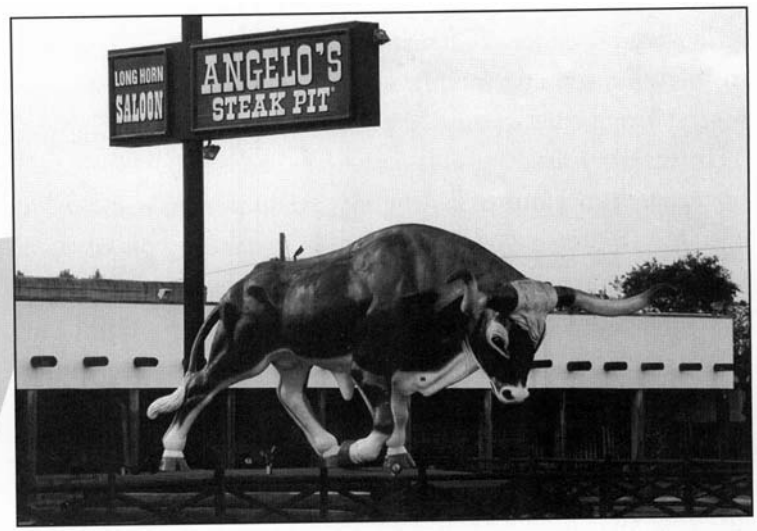
Staff's Restaurant in Fort Walton Beach has been a culinary tradition since 1913 or 1931. (Fort Walton Beach Library Collection)

Histories variously give Staff's birth year as either 1913 or 1931, but that is not due to a simple transposition of the numerals. In fact, the restaurant had two different beginnings, depending on which one is counted as official. The roots of the business sprouted when Theodore Staff left his home in Mexico to join his father-in-law, Adam Gerlach, manager of the Gulfview Hotel in what was then known as Camp Walton. (As we saw in chapter 1, the Gulfview was aptly named, as tourists could indeed see the water from its location, but it was not built on the beach.) This event occurred in 1913, as the family reports: "Food for guests at the hotel was supplemented by fresh grown vegetables from the Staff/Gerlach garden, and freshly caught fish of wide varieties from Santa Rosa Sound and the Gulf."

During the next eighteen years, the Staff family's food-service business centered on the Gulfview Hotel. Theodore Staff was a health nut before that term was invented, and he was determined to make his five daughters (out of a total of eight children) into champion swimmers. He succeeded in doing so, and by the early 1920s the Staff girls were winning so many swimming contests that they could have ended up as the main course in one of the Gulfview's famous seafood dinners.

When not competing for various aquatic athletic awards, one of the Staff daughters became smitten with family handyman Docie Bass. The young man ran a combination café and convenience store in a garage that had formerly housed one of the area's first automobile dealerships. This restaurant of sorts first opened in 1931, and after Bass married his waterlogged sweetheart in 1936, the name became the Staff Restaurant, as it has remained ever since. Even though certain degrees of remodeling have taken place, today's Staff's is still in the same building, although the outside walls are no longer decorated with giant cartoon creations. The family patriarch, Theodore Staff, passed away in 1973 at age ninety-seven, proving that his seafood diet and unconventionally healthy lifestyle must have done him some good.

Naturally, not all restaurants on the Gulf Coast were as tied to their fishing poles as Staff's and Captain Anderson's. For those who preferred food that walked about on four legs rather than swam, there were places such as Angelo's Steak Pit in Panama City Beach, opened in 1958 by Angelo Butchikas. Unfortunately, Angelo died in an automobile accident in 1963,



Angelo's Steak Pit would have been a lost dogie without the help of its roadside trademark, Big Gus.

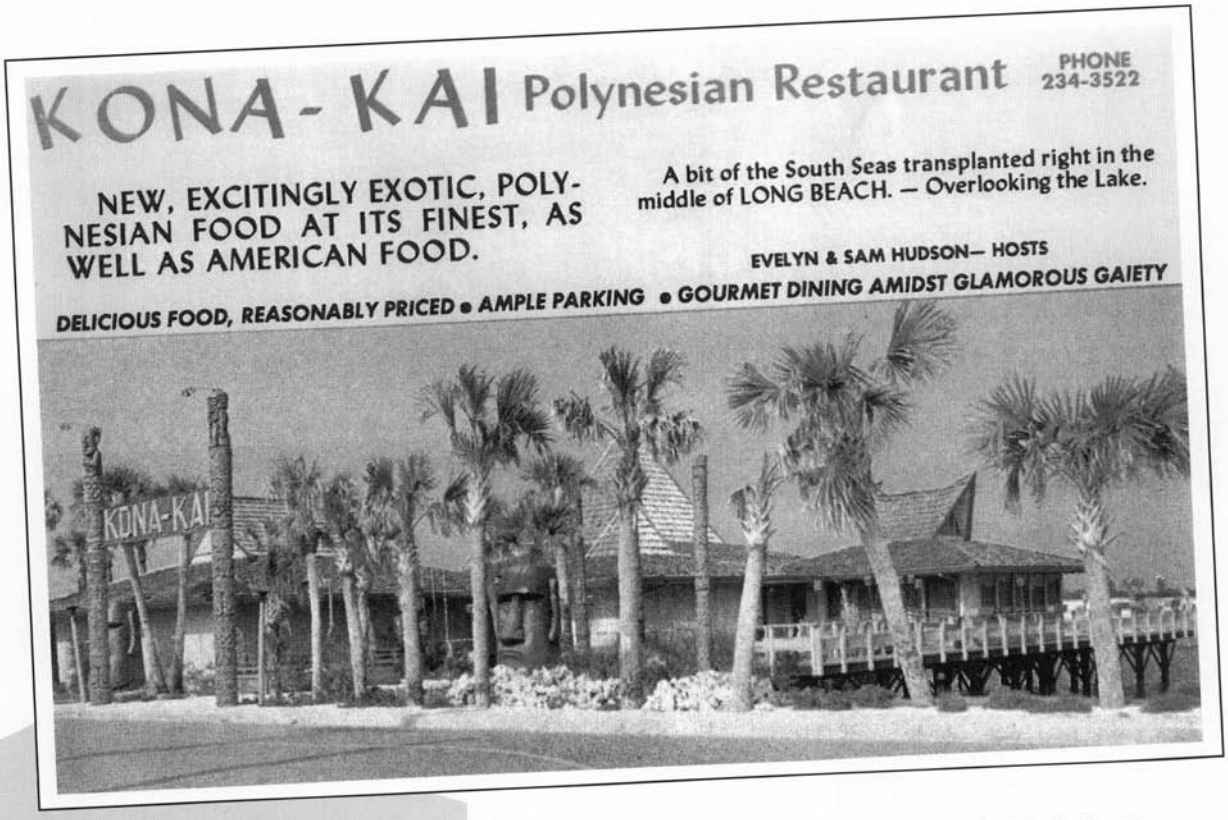
but his son, George, continued the operation and made it into the area's second best known grazing spot, ranking just behind Captain Anderson's.

Angelo's Steak Pit is probably as famous for its trademark, the gigantic fiberglass steer out front, as for its mouth-watering meals. George Butchikas explains that the original acquisition of the steer, nicknamed Big Gus, occurred out of necessity. Until 1969, U.S. 98 was a two-lane highway—as it still is through much of the Panama City Beach strip—and when the process of turning it into a four-lane road began, the Butchikas family feared that tourists would speed right past their location without giving it a second look. Big Gus was the answer, and since 1970 the steer has steered passing patrons right into the parking lot. Butchikas reveals that when he first laid eyes on his prime beef, Big Gus was not a longhorn steer but a Spanish-

style *toro* still under construction. A word and a dollar or two to the builder, some modifications, and olé, Big Gus was the biggest longhorn ever rustled east of the Pecos.

In recent years, Big Gus's size has caused the overgrown bovine to run afoul of newly enacted local sign ordinances. Thankfully, because of its age and long-standing position on U.S. 98, Big Gus has been grandfathered in and is thus protected from beautification fanatics who would like to put him out to pasture. However, George Butchikas encountered unexpected reverses when he considered opening Angelo's locations in other towns. He had Gus's original creator construct two replicas to be used at the additional locations, only to find that no other town would allow such a monstrosity to be placed in front of a business. "No Big Gus, No Angelo's" is Butchikas's motto, so the Panama City Beach restaurant thrives while Big Gus's brethren remain in storage until their day in the sun arrives—if ever.

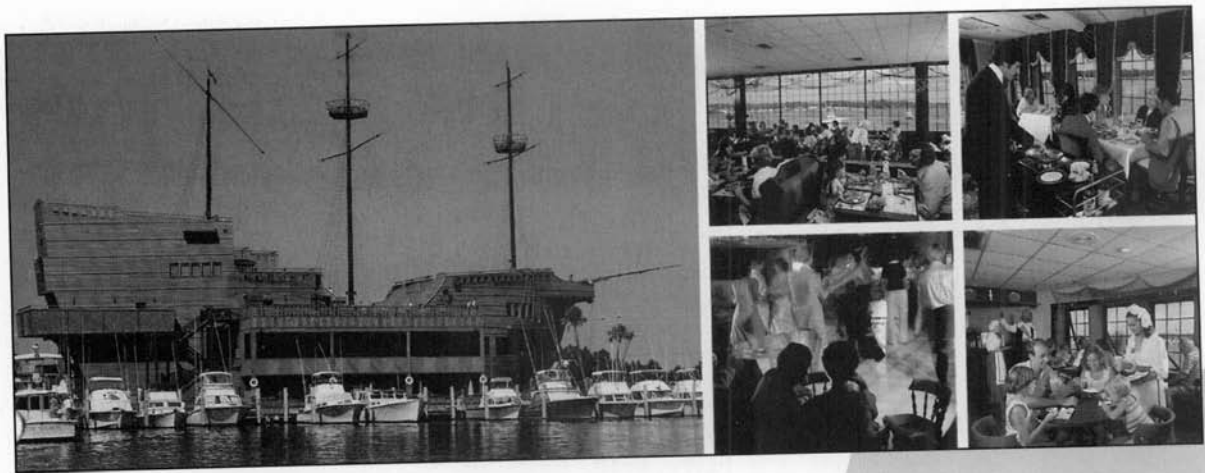
Some restaurants chose to make their fame from their themes rather than from specific menu items. The leader in that aspect would be Panama City Beach's Kona-Kai Polynesian Restaurant, which carried the South Seas idea even further than most of the other restaurants and souvenir shops that employed the exotic concept. The Kona-Kai advertised itself as "a bit of the South Seas transplanted right in the middle of Long Beach," and much of the building was situated on a pier that jutted into the artificially created Lake Flora. The distinctive Kona-Kai structure has endured many ownership and name changes, but its Polynesian appearance has been preserved.



Panama City Beach's Kona-Kai Polynesian Restaurant made people feel they were in the South Seas when they were actually in North Florida. (Bay County Library Collection)

Another type of theme was the idea behind the Treasure Ship, a building that gave all the appearances of a gigantic Spanish galleon floating in Grand Lagoon. The Treasure Ship was launched in the late 1970s and still has its gangplank down today. Partly a collection of restaurants and bars and partly a shopping mall, the Treasure Ship is such an active advertiser that it will never be accused of standing by to repel boarders.

Then there were the "gimmicky" restaurants, which were usually short-lived. Fish Tales, nestled against the Aloha Village



The Treasure Ship dropped anchor in Grand Lagoon in the late 1970s.

motel on Okaloosa Island, was decorated in a library motif, and the waiters and waitresses were costumed as storybook characters—Little Red Riding Hood, Peter Pan, the Cowardly Lion, and so on. The Nikko Inn in downtown Fort Walton Beach pushed its Japanese theme on honorable tourists before eventually saying "sayonara." The Hawaiki Inn was a revolving restaurant atop a high-rise hotel; as diners dined, they would be slowly rotated for a constantly changing view of the Gulf and the surrounding area (if motion sickness didn't make them lose their meal first).

In the late 1960s two different restaurants began their crusades to become known primarily for their kooky roadside signage. One of these was Destin's Green Knight, a fancy eatin' place opened in 1967 with a towering emerald-colored statue out front that would have given Sir Gawain the jitters. The Green Knight establishment went through many different per-

The Green Knight rode his steed into Destin in 1967, and, much to the upper crust's horror, became the main landmark in the community. (Norma Calhoun Collection)

sonalities; after its start as a restaurant, it became a lounge and then a liquor store. In longtime bartender Norma Calhoun's words, "Many a condo project was started and finished at the Green Knight bar." (Maybe the inebriation of the participants helps explain the congestion and out-of-control sprawl for which Destin is frequently criticized these days.) Regardless of the contents of the building, the faceless Green Knight statue kept his visor pointed toward the Gulf, seemingly unfazed by the many indignities heaped on him.

Some of these insults came from local youths, whose rowdier members delighted in such pranks as pinning a gigantic diaper on the appropriate area of the knight or making off with his spear. Abuse of a more destructive kind stemmed from local zoning boards and beautification committees, which saw the limey swain as a spot on their escutcheons. In 1998 the Green Knight was removed and a new shopping center constructed on the spot where his many namesake businesses had

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Meanwhile, over in Panama City Beach, Sir Loin stood guard in front of his namesake steakhouse (or should that be namesteak sakehouse?).

operated. The creaky old warrior himself was reportedly moved to Fort Walton Beach, where he stood shakily in front of yet another liquor store before going to pieces. After that the knight was demoted to a page—of history, that is.

About the same time the Green Knight strode into Destin, a possible jousting opponent made a quest into Panama City Beach but at first did so in name only. Woody Miner, who had a hand in several different Miracle Strip businesses over the years, opened a restaurant he called the Sir Loin Steakhouse. It featured appropriately Old English decoration, but diners may have wondered just who Sir Loin was. (The punny name, of course, was not original with Miner, having been used by the Walt Disney and Warner Brothers cartoon studios among countless others, but sometimes the oldest gags are the best.)

The restaurant changed hands a few times over the next dozen years, but in the early 1980s someone finally decided to put a face with the Sir Loin name. And what a face it was! The forty-six-foot-tall Sir Loin erected in front of the restaurant was promoted as the tallest statue in Florida, but that claim obviously depended on one's definition of a statue. (There were figures on Panama City Beach's own Goofy Golf course that were taller than Sir Loin, and directly across the street at the Petticoat Junction amusement park was a giant fiberglass pirate who made Sir Loin look like small steak and potatoes.)

At some point just a few years after the nobleman's arrival, the Sir Loin Steakhouse went out of business, and the building was converted into the Shell Island Gift Shop. The giant trademark could have been doomed, but he had plastic surgery (or

cement surgery, as the case may be) and got a new identity. Now he was King Neptune, with a metal crown, shocking pink robes, and trident. Somehow or other, while few people seem to have paid any attention to him while he was Sir Loin, once he was converted into the king of the sea, more local authorities who were concerned about beachfront kitsch began peering at him and yelling "Good knight!"

Many forces have been at work ever since to threaten King Neptune's continued reign. The last gift shop he represented wrapped up its business, and some time passed before another establishment opened in the same building. The period when the building was empty was considered sufficient to classify the moldy monarch as an abandoned sign, a prime candidate for removal. His more loyal subjects insisted that he could not be considered a sign at all and so was not subject to such treason. The battle rages on, but at last report King Neptune was still eyeing his domain with a steely—no, better make that stony—stare, horrifying some and delighting others.

Before finishing off our dinner, we should briefly discuss the rise and proliferation of fast-food restaurants competing with the more upscale eateries along the Miracle Strip. The trend toward less elegant surroundings in which to gobble grub began in the 1950s, of course, and Panama City Beach boasted the presence of Jenkins's

After Sir Loin had cement surgery, he became His Majesty King Neptune, and he has annoyed local beautification committees ever since.

The former Jack's Hamburgers restaurant at the Miracle Strip Amusement Park now serves as the Salty Dog T-shirt shop.

Drive-In as a popular spot for the "no shirt, no shoes, no big deal" crowd. It was not long before mom-and-pop establishments such as Jenkins's started feeling the heat—not from their kitchens but from the introduction of fast food chains.

One of the first to establish its presence in Panama City Beach was a Birmingham-based drive-in chain, Jack's Hamburgers. Jack's did not just pick any out-of-the-way location for its prime Panama City Beach store: it hugged the Miracle Strip Amusement Park property, with only a fence separating the Jack's parking lot from the Starliner roller coaster. Jack's had other locations along the beach as well, but while the others were later sold (in at least one case changing only two letters on the signage and becoming known as Rick's Hamburgers), the one at the amusement park survived. Falling in line with its larger national competitors, McDonald's and Burger King,

Jack's got away from its orange and yellow striped drive-in buildings during the 1970s and became a sit-down type of restaurant. In that form, the Miracle Strip Park location lasted into the 1980s. At last report, the building was serving as the Salty Dog Surf Shop, and Jack's officials back at the home office in Birmingham were kicking themselves for letting such a lucrative location slip through their fingers like sand on the beach.

About the time Jack's made its retreat, its big-time rivals started advancing into its former territory. Kentucky Fried Chicken and Pasquale's Pizza had arrived during the 1960s, but during the 1980s McDonald's and Wendy's starting dishing out dishes on the former Tombstone Territory and Castle Dracula sites. In fact, during one manic spring break in the late 1990s, that McDonald's became the site of a well-publicized riot when MTV personality Jenny McCarthy walked in and was mobbed by crowds of amorous males. Even the cancan girls at Tombstone Territory never had to deal with that.

Now, it does not take a biological genius to understand why people need to eat while they are on vacation. There has been no definitive scientific study, however, on why tourists feel the urge to cart home loads of souvenirs that will probably never see the light of day again once the car pulls into the garage. A nonprofessional guess at this might conclude that the custom began in the days when vacations were not common and those who did get away from the humdrum for a few days or weeks wished to bring something tangible back with them, enabling envious friends and enemies to see that the travelers really had visited some exotic place. This would also explain why sou-

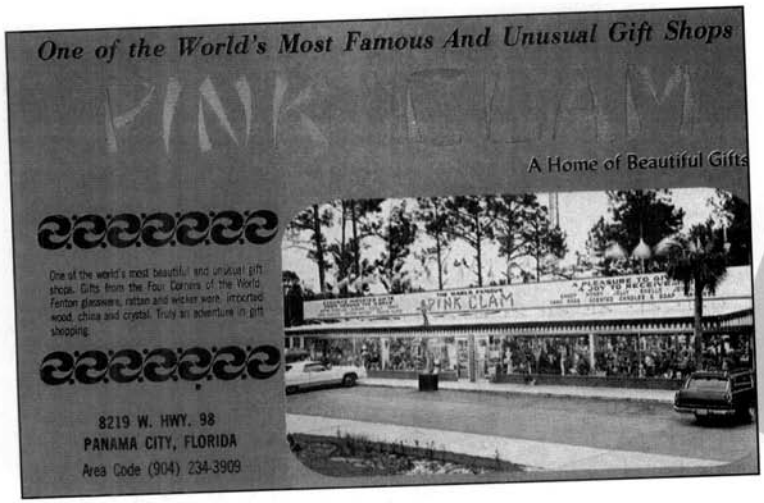
These seashell sculptures with plastic accoutrements were first manufactured in the 1940s and can still be purchased today.

venirs are generally manufactured in forms that would nauseate most interior decorators: they must stick out from their surroundings or their purpose for existing is voided.

Souvenirs existed on the Miracle Strip as far back as did tourists. Even during the lean World War II years, those who managed to get to the area despite gas rationing and rubber shortages could pick up miniature dioramas made of polished seashells and plastic flamingo or palm tree figurines. In fact, these sculptures are still being sold, frequently with socket for a small bulb for a nightlight built into them, using the same plastic figures as six decades ago.

There is no doubt that flamingos and palm trees were the major design elements of the entire Florida souvenir industry, but on the Gulf Coast, the eccentric-looking sailfish soon joined the fun. Once the Gulfarium arrived in Fort Walton Beach in 1955, porpoises became the fourth major souvenir motif. All of these emblems could be found in all possible forms or usages, but the place to see them all in a single location was on the boxes of saltwater taffy sold in many different souvenir shops. These fluorescent-colored works of tourism art combined all these icons, along with Florida's subsidiary trademarks: alligators (more common in some regions than others), parrots (no doubt because of Miami's famous Parrot Jungle), and monkeys (which, as Snake-A-Torium owner Dennie Sebolt pointed out, biologically challenged tourists often considered to be Florida natives).

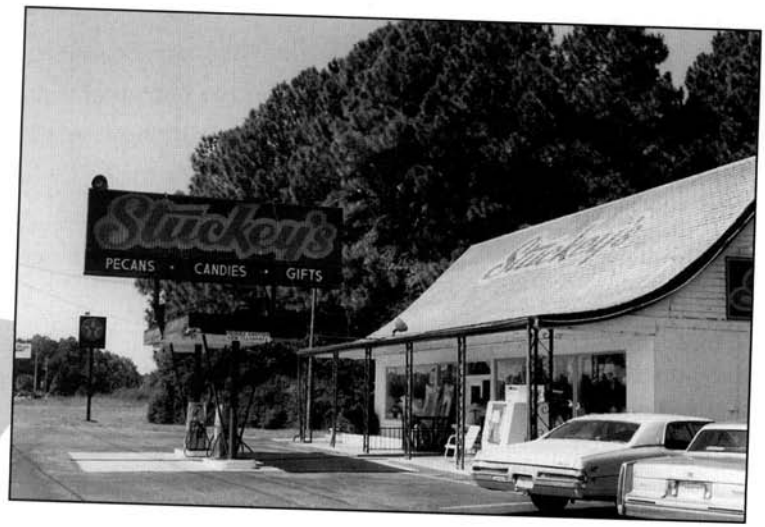
With all the souvenirs that incorporated seashells into their design, as well as all the individual shells that could be pur-



The Pink Clam souvenir shop typified the stores of its type that lined the Miracle Strip highways. (Bay County Library Collection)

chased in heaps at any souvenir store worth its seahorses, there might be some puzzle as to where they all came from. How could even a state surrounded by the ocean possibly come up with enough shells to supply the demand? For the answer, let us turn to Panama City Beach's Shell Port gift shop, which reveals the secret: "We would like to note that all of the shells we carry are simply by-products of another market: shell consumption. While we in the United States prefer a certain variety of shellfish, the overseas population cannot afford to be so particular. Many families find that fishing provides an ample supply of food, and once the meat that is found inside the shells is consumed, the by-products—the lovely shells—are sold for additional income. These beautiful shells are then cleaned thoroughly and made available for a shell lover's enjoyment."

While the rest of the world was working to supply Florida with slightly used seashells, one place that could be counted on



By the 1990s, the Stuckey's store in Panama City Beach was the national chain's oldest operating shop.

to have those, and any other sort of doohickey available, was Stuckey's, a chain of candy and souvenir stores founded in Eastman, Georgia, during the Great Depression. Stuckey's and its pecan candy really went nuts after the war, and in August 1954 the chain's Panama City Beach location opened under the management of Dennis and Martha Rich. According to the couple, at the time their store was established, the only businesses nearby were the Snake-A-Torium, about two miles west, and a store called the Indian Post. In fact, they recalled, the Snake-A-Torium staff used to visit the swamp that surrounded Stuckey's, trapping water moccasins to exhibit.

The store was a partnership between the Riches and company founder W. S. Stuckey until 1959, when the Riches bought out the whole store. "My daddy used to tell me, 'It's better to sell peanuts for yourself than work for somebody else,'" Dennis

Rich said. The couple continued operating their small corner of the Stuckey's chain, and by the 1990s it was the oldest location still in business. After Martha Rich passed away, Dennis kept the store open, taking more than a little pride in the fact that it was selling basically the same selection of merchandise as when it opened. By 1999, Stuckey's had adjusted its marketing to changing times and the tiny building no longer fit the company's needs. Dennis Rich negotiated a deal with the company and continued selling the Stuckey's brand of candy. The Panama City Beach Stuckey's—now known as Rich's Gift Shop—is a rare relic of an earlier, simpler time along the beach.

Stuckey's may have operated only one store in the area, but a very similar selection of merchandise could be found in a whole chain of shops known as Alvin's Island. Named not after a singing chipmunk but after company founder Alvin Walsingham, the chain has most definitely carved out its own place in the hardened and competitive souvenir business.

Whereas souvenir stores depend on tourists for their livelihood, Alvin's original customers were the more homegrown kind. When Walsingham opened his first shop in 1950, it was a five-and-ten-cent store of the Woolworth's or J. J. Newberry style. It also was far from the beach, in downtown St. Andrew. After eight years and several additional locations, the first Alvin's Five and Ten Cent Store on the beach side of town opened in 1958, and the first big steps in the evolution toward its eventual form took place.

As a neighborhood dime store, Alvin's trafficked in all the usual household necessities one would expect from such a

business. With its arrival on the beach, those more mundane items suddenly were replaced by bathing suits, beach balls and other such inflatable toys, beach towels, and souvenirs. Oh yes, the souvenirs. Gary Walsingham, Alvin's son, has some very definite views on the knickknacks that move across the Alvin's counters every day. "Everyone makes fun of the fact that we sell carved coconut heads. I have no idea why people buy them. We've sold thousands of carved coconut heads, but you never walk into someone's house and see them. So, I don't know where they all go!" Walsingham believes that people today primarily buy souvenirs to give to other people, not to keep and display for themselves. That may be true, but whatever reason for the purchases, the fact is that they occur—and have done so for a long, long time.

For many years, the Alvin's stores operated in a variety of formats: some sold only swimwear, others sported sportswear, some were grocery stores, and others specialized in those love-em-or-hate-em souvenirs. In 1972, Alvin Walsingham was persuaded to open a megastore, Alvin's Island Tropical Department Store, that combined under one roof the sorts of goods sold by all the other establishments. At the same time, the store subscribed to the faux-Polynesian theme that had been so successful in other realms of the tourist business, and palm fronds and bamboo soon were sharing space with the saltwater taffy and rubber alligators.

While numerous Alvin's locations still exist up and down the Miracle Strip—the chain expanded into Fort Walton Beach in 1976, Pensacola Beach in 1986, and even the Alabama

The Alvin's Island Tropical Department Stores went after a heavy South Seas theme in all their locations.

beaches during the 1990s—the flagship store is the one that opened in 1981 and carries the tropical theme to full night-blooming splendor. Alvin's fell into a lagoon of good luck when it came to that one. As we saw in chapter 6, in the late 1970s Val Valentine's beloved Jungle Land attraction, in the impressive concrete volcano, finally met with an enemy more deadly than headhunters: public apathy. When Jungle Land closed, Alvin's saw an opportunity to have the Tropical Department Store to end all others (if there had been any others, that is).

New buildings were constructed around the volcano's base and surfaced with rocklike cement to match the preexisting crater. Even the interior of the new building had passageways lined with stalactites and other glittery rock formations that helped continue the theme Jungle Land had begun. Most important from a tourism history standpoint, Alvin's preserved the original walkways inside the volcano, so shoppers

In 1981, Alvin's made its ultimate move when it opened a store in the former Jungle Land volcano structure.

could continue to take Valentine's "journey to the center of the earth" approximately as he first conceived it.

For many years, concerns about air pollution caused the shutdown of the smoke and flame that erupted from the volcano at regular intervals. ("There's a lot more pollution from all the cars on the strip than there ever was from my volcano," says Valentine defensively.) In the late 1990s, however, even that feature made a limited comeback. The wisps of smoke that emanate from the Alvin's volcano today do not begin to compare with Jungle Land's original unbridled brimstone, but they do at least keep it from looking like a cold crater.

Two other chains of stores climbed the corporate ladder to fill the slot vacated when Alvin's jumped into the seashell and

beach blanket bingo business with both bare feet. These were no-frills convenience stores, selling only the most basic of human needs, but there were so many of them up and down the Miracle Strip that they seemed to be as much a part of the neighborhood as the white sand on which they were built. The Junior Food Stores were begun in 1953 by L. D. Lewis, who had previously gained fame in the grocery business with his Jitney Jungle and Sunshine supermarkets. His Junior chain had a whittled-down selection of merchandise, but the locations were quickly identified by their signage, which featured a frizzle-topped, bow-tied character who very well could have been Dagwood Bumstead's long-lost half-brother. Another odd face adorned Junior's most prolific competitor, the Tom Thumb Food Stores based in Crestview (county seat of Fort Walton Beach's Okaloosa County). The merchandise was identical, but as the name would suggest, the Tom Thumb logo was an elfin figure remarkably resembling a mutation of Robin Hood and Peter Pan.

The chain of Junior Food Stores used this cousin of Dagwood Bumstead as its logo beginning in the early 1970s.

And so, with our stomachs and car trunks full, and with plenty of convenience store snacks to help break up the drive, we must now head north on U.S. 231, U.S. 331, State Highway 79, or any of the other routes that lead away from the beaches. This visit to the Miracle Strip has of course been tinged with nostalgia, as many of the sights we have visited in these pages no longer exist in reality. That reality is of a much more crowded, high-tech, and, some might say, less family friendly strip than the one we aging Baby Boomers remember. However, for some of us, we have only to close our eyes and we are

once again sitting on a private balcony at a loud aquamarine-colored two-story motel, eating saltwater taffy out of a colorful box decorated with Florida emblems, watching the waves roll in while across the street a giant volcano blasts fire into the night sky and a concrete tyrannosaurus does its best to keep a red golf ball from rolling between its legs.

Yes, in the real world, the tourist industry is ever changing, but in memory—and in the piles of photographs, postcards, brochures, and other such ephemera that have fortuitously survived—it will always remain as it was thirty, forty, or even fifty years ago.

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