

The History of Camp Flying Eagle

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Manatee County Historical Society
Luncheon Meeting at
"Renaissance on 9th" Street
Bradenton, Florida
October 21,2009

I am not from this area, like most of you people are. I arrived here in 1995 after I retired out of the Army and fulfilled a long time promise to my wife that after I retired we would move wherever she wanted to move, instead of wherever the Army wanted to move me.

So, we got in the car one day and started South, and she held her hand out the window and held out an ice scraper and the first guy that said "What's that?", that's where we stopped at. (Laughter and audience comment: "They didn't know what it was!")

When we got here, and I'd been involved in scouting since my two boys were involved with scouting, the first one back in 1971. So, naturally, when I got here, I wanted to keep up my involvement in scouting, so I contacted the local group of people, called the Manatee District, and got hooked up with them, and the first thing they did was take me out to Camp Flying Eagle. And I fell in love. And that's been my second home; I spent almost as much time out there at the camp as I do at my home in River Club. But it's because I love it.

So I'm very happy to be here to tell you a little bit about the history of the Camp. It would be nice if we all could go out into the camp and we all had on walking shoes and I could walk you around the camp. Show you all the historic places out there. But we're not there, so I don't know how long I've got to talk. I could talk for the whole afternoon just on the camp. So I'm not going to talk very long, I'm just going to give you some of the historical highlights of the camp.

I'd like to say that the Boy Scouts of America and Manatee County and Camp Flying Eagle grew up together. And this is how it happened. You heard the Judge talk about Lord Baden-Powell founding the Boy Scouts in England in 1907. In 1910 it migrated to the United States and in America became the Boy Scouts of America. That very same year, in 1910, the first Boy Scout Troop, south of Tampa, all the way down to Naples, was formed right here in Bradenton. In 1910, a few people lived here. In 1910, according to Census data, Manatee County had 4,874 people, and Sarasota had 840, and Fort Myers, down south of us, had 2,463.

Yet the first troop was formed right here and it was formed in September 1910 and they met in a church which was located right down here on the corner of 9th Avenue and 14th Street, not very far from here. They were serviced by the National Council, at that time. By 1913, the Boy Scouts decided that they were going to form local councils. But the local council that supported the Boy Scouts here in Manatee County and Sarasota County was in Lakeland. So this troop that formed here in 1910 grew, and a few more troops were formed, and few troops were dropped, all the way up until about 1926, or 1925 I should say, we had in Manatee and Sarasota County, we had 14 troops or about 295 Scouts.

In those days when the Scouts went camping, it was in the summer between the school years. They did not do weekend camping like they do now, like they've been doing since the 1950s. But they went to camp in the summers between the school years. And it was quite frequent they went out for the entire 6 weeks period between the school years, wherever they could find a place to camp. The Boy Scouts in those days did not own property. So, if a troop wanted to go camping, so in our area, they had to find some farmer or some rancher, who would agree to let them come out and camp on their ground.

And there was no organized program for them but a scoutmaster took his boys out for two weeks, three weeks, six weeks, whatever how long they were out there and they made up their program every day, what they were going to do. It was mostly just teaching the boys how to live in the outside, and to get them out of the streets and the cities, and so forth.

Sometimes two units would camp together, or three units would camp together, and the scoutmasters would start planning together what they were going to do the next day. And that eventually led to, when the National allowed local councils to become in charge that led to local councils setting up summer camps for these boys.

In 1925, we people in Manatee County and Sarasota County petitioned the National Council in Washington D.C. for permission to establish our own council. And, so, the National Council gave their permission and on the 25th of December, Christmas Day, 1925, about 100 people from Manatee and Sarasota Counties met in the old Carnegie Library over in Palmetto, and there they formed the Sunnyland Council that you heard the Judge [Gilbert Smith, Jr.] mention.

Let me give you some of the names that were involved with that decision: Harrison, Judge Harrison from Palmetto. If you know these guys, shake up and down your heads. George Blakely, Horton, Roth, Harllee family, the Blalock family, the Wyman family [sounds of audience members going "Yep!" or "Oh, yes, after these names], the Green family, the Shelton family, the Turner family, big names, right? Well, almost everybody back in those days was big because there wasn't very many of them here. [Laughter] Anyway, they met there and formed the Sunnyland Council.

At the same time, the group of them met down in Fort Myers and they formed the Royal Palm Council. We had up here in our Council 14 troops at that time and Royal Palm down in Fort Myers had four troops.

Now let's jump ahead to 1928. In 1928, Sarasota began to puff their buttons out a little bit, said "We want our own council." So they petitioned the National to withdraw out of the Sunnyland Council and National gave them permission and they withdrew and formed their own council down in Sarasota with a total of seven troops in 1928. Well, by 1932 they made a determination that they could not financially support it so they came back into Sunnyland Council and are still with us, by the way.

Let's now move to 1929, which was a landmark year. One big important thing happened in 1929. Camp Flying Eagle was born. On January the 15th, 1929. Now how did that come about? Well, you remember I was telling you that when the scoutmasters wanted to take their boys camping, they had to find some farmer, or some rancher, that would allow them to occupy the land? Well in those days, you know, they chopped trees down, and did a lot of stuff. Finally it became very difficult to find private owners who would give them land to camp on for up to six weeks. So the Sunnyland Council decided "Maybe we ought to buy our own property."

And so they looked around and 140 acres about 15 miles east of Bradenton, in what is now known as the Rye Park Tract, was for sale. 140 acres and the owner was a lady name of Miss Minnie Harris. I don't know if that name means anything to you or not, but she was the widow of one of the ranchers in the eastern part of the county. And she wanted \$2,000 for the property, for 140 acres.

So the Sunnyland Council probably had \$3 or \$4 dollars in their bank account. [Laughter] So they went to one of the local banks here to borrow the money and they said "Who are you?" Well they said "We're the Sunnyland Council" and they said "Don't mean anything. We only loan money to individuals or to corporations. You are not an individual and you are not a corporation, because you don't have a charter." So they couldn't borrow the money.

So there were a few people on the executive board, eleven of them, decided they were going to form a private organization and get a charter from the state, and once they got the charter, then they could go to the bank and borrow the money. And most of those guys, I betcha know the names of: the Blalocks, the Wymans, the Greens, the Harllees, those are the same people and they formed a corporation and they called it the Manatee County Boys Development Association. Have you heard of that? Manatee County Boys Development Association?

Well, if you move backwards a bit in time to 2006-2007, you probably read a lot about them in the paper, when the lawsuit was going on about the camp. Anyway, they formed this corporation, got a charter, went to the bank, borrowed \$2,000, got on in a

horse and buggy, went out east, gave Miss Minnie Harris the \$2,000 and she signed the deed over to them.

Well, they came back and they said: "We're going to give the property to the Boy Scouts." And the National Council said "Oh, no you're not. We don't own property." Now that the Manatee County Boys Development Association has 185 acres, 140 acres I mean, they can't even give it away! [Laughter] So they said: "O.K. we're going to run it ourselves. And every summer we will allow the Boy Scouts to use it.

Now you've go to remember that the people who ran the Boys Development Association were the same group of people that ran Sunnyland Council. They were one and the same people. So they were renting it out to themselves. They were able, they put the camp up for sale immediately, and they sold it for \$15 an acre to anyone who wanted to own part of Camp Flying Eagle. And that \$15 was the initiation into the Boys Development Association. But they said they would take anything, so eventually there was a board of about 37 people and businesses here in Manatee County, mainly Bradenton that bought individual acres out there. And they raised enough money that in 1931 they were able to pay the mortgage off.

So they would allow the boys to come out there. Now remember they still just went out there during the summer. And then they would rent it out to people like the Kiwanis Club or the J.C.s, stuff like that. [i.e. the Junior Chamber of Commerce] and that happened along until 1942. In 1942, they gave the Sunnyland Council a 100 year lease, at \$1 a year, they leased it. So in fact they became the owner through a lease.

But back to 1929. Now they got 140 acres in January and they want to run a summer camp in July. Ain't no roads out there! Well, you know Upper Manatee River Road out that way? It goes out past Crystal Creek, out to Rye Park. That was just a dirt trail, a wagon trail. So it was difficult to get materials and supplies out there. So they brought everything they needed to start the camp up the river by barge.

And that required them to go out there and build a dock at Camp Flying Eagle. So they built the dock out there, at Camp Flying Eagle, which later became the central part of their aquatics program. But that's where they unloaded the material. The very first structure they built out there what we think, what I think, is an old Cracker-style building. Some of you guys, you want to go out there and look at it. But they built the building and the Rotary Clubs of Palmetto and of Bradenton, provided the money and the labor, and they built this thing, and they named it Rotary Hall. That became the dining hall; it became the camp headquarters, and the camp store. And it's still out there. It'll be 81 years old next January.

The second thing they did was, they had to have water out there, so they found an artesian well and dug down 600 feet and they got water and that was the water that they used for the dining hall.

Must remember that there was no electricity out there. There was no way to pressurize the water. So they piped the water in freely from the artesian well, through the kitchen, and went back out into a cesspool. The water kept flowing. That cesspool became an interesting thing because that's where they put all the grease and stuff like that. That attracted flies and hogs and they ended up putting a screen over it.

But anyway, the next thing they built in was four cabins for the boys to sleep in because they didn't have any tents in those days. So they built four cabins and I think you may remember [speaker turns away to point to someone at head table, probably to David Bates] in those cabins, I think they grew to six, going north from the old dining hall.

And then the next thing they built was the camp director's quarters, overlooking the river, which is right next to where our current dining hall is. But they built it like a T, And on one side of the T was the camp director's quarters and on the other side of the T was the waterfront director's quarters. And in the stem of the T, was the camp physician's quarters. And I'll talk to you about that camp physician in a minute. And they built those six cabins for 8 boys to live in.

For summer camp, it was **open in July 1929**. It was run for two weeks; they had 48 campers out there, for two weeks. Let me tell you a little bit about that camp. Like I said, there was no organized programs so their fun things was in the river: swimming, canoeing, lifesaving. The rest of their fun activities was tracking, signaling and things of that nature. But most of the time they were out there, all during the 1930s, they were building the camp.

The boys actually built the rest of the camp, the boys and their leaders out there. That first summer camp in 1929, as I said was there for two weeks. Want to take a guess at who the physician was that week? [Guesses from audience: Dr. Sugg? Dr. Leffingwell?] Does Dr. Blake mean anything to you? [Much laughter from audience] I think he has a big building named after him [referring to L.W. Blake Memorial Hospital on 59th Street West]. But he was the camp physician out there for two weeks in 1929. Pretty busy man; he had to give those boys a physical twice a week. That was a requirement back in those days. And he had to weigh them daily.

Now you gotta remember, back in 1929 that was a long time before DDT, screenwire, things of that nature. Lot of malaria down here. A lot of mosquitoes, and that was one of the big problems out there. That's why Dr. Blake could give the boys a physical twice a week, and he weighed them every day because he was concerned about the food they were feeding them and all the work and things. But anyway, that was that.

How did they name it **Camp Flying Eagle**? How did they ever, people ask me, "How did they come up with the name Camp Flying Eagle? " I found an article in a scrapbook when I was doing the research on the camp. It may be legend, it may not, but in the 19-teens when they were going out camping, they spent a lot of time camping on the old Marine land out there on the Braden River, just southeast of Oneco.

I forget the name of the place, but apparently, the first year they camped out there they saw some eagles, Bald Eagles. And every year when they went out to the camp, the eagles were there. So when they got the new camp, they decided to call it Camp Flying Eagle. Probably there were eagles there when they started but there's no eagles there now.

Another big thing happened in 1932. They've got these cabins, you remember, David? And boys being boys, you've gotta have latrines. Up until 1932 they just used a hole in the ground. In 1932 they got this great idea, the boys got this great idea, they were going to build a pit latrine. There was some engineering firm down in Sarasota that designed a four-seater for them. They built it about 100 yards west of where those cabins are. It was very unique. It was a platform like this [speaker points to a long folding table] with two holes on this side and two holes on that side. There was a concrete slab underneath it about that wide [speaker demonstrates with his hands, ca. 10 inches] and about that deep [a. 8 inches] that ran out and empties into a cess pool. Down on the end of this thing, there was a 5-gallon bucket that was designed by the engineers and the boys built it, and it was on a pivot. They piped the water in from the artesian well, and it was designed that when it filled up, it would tip over and dump the water and that was your flush mechanism.

Can you imagine, you've never been to Camp Flying Eagle before, it's your first night, and you go down there to the bathroom, your sitting there and then you hear a "Splash!" [Laughter] Anyway, that old latrine is still there. The structure covering over it is gone, but when I was doing the research, people kept telling me about this old latrine. I kept saying we can't find it, and the ranger and I crawled all over that place, I kept giving him reference points and directions, and after about six weeks of crawling through the palmettos and wait-a-minute vines [?], the ranger and I finally found it.

During the 30s, they had a lot of problems out there when the camp was closed, especially the dining hall. People would break into it and steal all the dishes. Theft was a great problem out there at that time and of course the ranger wasn't there. [?] Of course, we did not have fences out there in those days and cattle wandered all over the place.

It in the 1933 summer camp that the National Guard wanted to store all their weapons out there for the boys to shoot. Springfield rifles, Browning automatic rifles, machine guns. The boys had a great time. Today we'd go to jail if we did that.

Here's an interesting thing. Anybody here besides David, and you, and the judge, ever been to Camp Flying Eagle? Any of you guys camped out there? Great! Maybe some of you ladies have children or grandchildren camped out there. Well, count yourself among the 850,000 who have camped out there. And I mentioned earlier, they would rent the camp out in the summertime or when they weren't using it in the summertime for the boys, and would use it.

In 1939, the Junior Chamber of Commerce of Sarasota rented the camp out for a picnic one weekend. And - it got a little bit out of hand. A lot of drinking going on,

which generally happened in those days. And, you probably don't know this but I found this out in the newspaper, but a fight started and one guy got cracked over the head with a wine bottle [?] and he's the only known person who's ever died at Camp Flying Eagle. You might be interested in who that person was. Well, he was the playboy son of some guy by the name of Potter Palmer, out of Chicago, who owned the Palmer Ranch in Sarasota County. Isn't that neat? [Laughter]

Let's jump up to World War II. World War II was an interesting time in Camp Flying Eagle as it was all over the United States. First the boy scout camp. You know, we had rationing. When the boys went to summer camp out there, it created a little problem. One thing, every boy had to report with his own ration book. And a quarter-pound of sugar. Every day the cook would have to collect, you know; so many red stamps, so many green stamps, depending on what she was feeding them the next day. She'd give it to some guy, and he'd get into his horse and buggy and go downtown to Bradenton and he'd go from store to store and if he could find the stuff, he'd buy it and the next day, they would put it on the barge and bring it up.

That old dining hall I was telling you about had a - you know, they didn't have refrigeration out there so they had to bring ice out. So one of the hotels here in town donated a big old ice box. And they put it, if you face the dining hall, from the River; it was on the right-hand front side. And that's where they had this ice box. They would bring the ice up on the barge, bring it up and put in the perishables. Well in 1939 they had a case of dysentery. The health officers claimed it was coming from the river, the river was polluted. So they closed the camp for three years. They had to go somewhere else to camp. But then they finally come back and said "O.K. You can come back." And that year the camp physician went down to inspect this old ice box and the floor, it was caved in. And he led the investigation that decided that the dysentery they got back in 1939 was not from the river, but from contamination with the soil. I found that very interesting.

In 1947, Florida Power finally extended electricity out there and the Council had a big picnic and celebrated and now they put pressure tanks on the water and pumped the water, instead of depending on gravity flow.

In 1942 they formed the Order of the Arrow Lodge out there. Any of you guys go to the OA Lodge? It was originally the Calusa Lodge then it became the Micanopy.

The 1950s was another interesting decade. By the 1950s, all boys 14 years of age and older had to be in what we call Exploring. Now that World War II was over and the country come back, scouting was mushrooming and they had a lot more people camping and they opened it up on weekend camping.

By this time we had another 45 acres donated to the camp. Five acres of it is across the river. That came from Mr. Jennings' family. This is where they put all the explorers over to camp. And the OA would go out there for their ceremonies. So they had to get people over so they built a bridge.

Jennings Bridge Now this was quite unique. It was a swinging bridge and they built it and they had trouble finding cables. The cable for the bridge was donated by the Otis Elevator Company. But the contractor went out there and he built the bridge from the center out to each end and he ran out of money. He went to Sunnyland Council to ask for more money to finish the bridge. They said "Uh, uh. You signed a contract. We're not going to give you any more money." And he said, "O.K., they I won't build any more bridge" and he left. Eight feet on this end wasn't finished and eight feet on that end wasn't finished. So volunteers went out there and built that thing. It was so poorly constructed and built without Corps of Engineer approval, that in 1959 it became so dangerous that they took it out of commission. They finally tore it down in 1966, I think it was. The old abutments on each end are still there.

Another big thing happened in the world of Camp Flying Eagle in 1955. Every year they'd been contracting somebody to come on out there and be the camp cook. Usually you ended up with the camp director's wife. They hired a lady by the name of Miss Bertie Harris. Anyone ever heard of Miss Bertie? Dave has, you guys have. She ran the cafeteria at [?] School. She put up her job and for the next 30 years she ran the summer camp. I saw that Miss Bertie died about 4-5 years ago, but when I was doing my research I contacted one of her daughters and her daughter let me go through Miss Bertie's scrapbook, which was about that thick [speaker holds his hands about 12 inches apart]. And on page 1 it said "July 1955, My First Day at Camp Flying Eagle." And on the last page it said "August 1980, my last year at Camp Flying Eagle." And in between was just precious letters and notes from kids that had camped out there. And some of them had already grown up and wrote her letters from Vietnam. Just little notes like "Miss Bertie, I sure wish I could get some of your Camp cooking," stuff like that.

1950s, the camp attendance had increased so much that the six patrol cabins was not enough. They decided they were going to build a model campsite and the first one they built was campsite Judd, and that was financed by a man by the name of Judd out of Fort Myers. He built that one and the Kiwanis Club decided that they would build two more. And then the Selby Foundation built two more campsites.

1960 we got a new Mess Hall, built by the Kiwanis Club. The Kitchen was furnished by the Selby Foundation. We got a new swimming pool in 1960. In 1960 the Order of the Arrow - you may have been out there when this happened - they ceremonially buried an old truck, a 1944 Chevrolet Truck that the Army had given them after World War II. It finally got to the point where they couldn't find repair parts. And the old garbage dump which was near the well field. That's where they buried all the garbage until the county started picking up in 1972. It's where they buried the truck. We found the indentation in the ground where it goes.

1967, the group from Fort Myers that had formed their own council in 1925, the year Sunnyland Council was formed. I think I mentioned to you that they came back in 1937. In 1967, they broke away and went back to Fort Myers.

1985, the camp was over 50 years old, it needed to be updated, so Sunnyland Council ran a big fund drive. Some of you guys participated in that. They built the ranger's quarters, the maintenance compound, a new admin building and training lodge, a new chapel,

In 1992 the Boys Development Association finally decided to deed the property to Sunnyland Council. In 1995, Sunnyland Council and the Fort Myers Council merged. It's sort of like, a family adopted a son, the son grew up and went away, and then when the family got old, the son adopted the family back.

I want to finish up by giving you a couple of other historical things that you might find out there. If you go out there, make sure you go into the current dining hall and look over the fireplace. There are two very old lanterns sitting there on the mantel of the fireplace. You guys remember? I know you do. [Speaker faces David Bates at head table] The history behind those old lanterns -- you know the old draw bridge down here between Bradenton and Palmetto? Well they built that thing in 1910, I understand, and they put one of those lanterns on one end and one on the other end and that's how they controlled the traffic on the drawbridge. It stayed there until 1922 when they took the lanterns down and took it out to Snead Island and put them on the Cut Bridge out there. They stayed there until 1947, and Judge Harrison placed them up and brought them out and presented them to Camp Flying Eagle. They've been out there ever since. They are now almost 100 years old. Very unique.

The dining hall is still plaques campers have left out there, especially the summer campers. They have pictures of the boys who went out to Filmont. If you are ever out there, go in and take a look at them. There's an old cow skull that we found out on Jennings Island. It's now located in the old Rotary Building. How'd that cow skull get there? Well, across on what is now the Regan Ranch, used to be a butcher shop out there. In the back end of the 1940s, the boys used to go over there to get bones to make neckerchief slides. One of the things they found unique was that they could bring the cow skulls back and put them in trees and put candles in their eye sockets. [Laughter] You know, for night lights. We found one of those, still hanging in the tree across the river on Jennings Island. You can find, walking along the river bank up on the main part of the camp, you can find sharks teeth. You can find manatee vertebrae, all kinds of stuff out there.

After the lawsuit was filed, to save the camp, and it was settled, in 2007-2008, the people in the county began to reward the Scouts of Manatee for saving it. In the past two years they have put in over \$300,000 worth of new improvements at the camp. A new 16,000 seat amphitheater, central bath house, new equipment throughout the kitchen, a portal entrance from the parking lot, a climbing wall, a place to teach cooking - they built a big shelter there and called it the Roadkill Cafe. They upgraded the range, put a new roof on the chapel, and on several other facilities out there. They put in a security system and put \$10,000 worth of communications equipment in and built 35 picnic tables. That's about all I want to say about Camp Flying Eagle.

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