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Oldsmar Public Library

Kathleen de la Peña McCook

Paula Geist

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Florida Library History Project

Oldsmar Public Library

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Compiled by Paula Geist, Adult Services Librarian

With the Assistance of:

Hilary Wagner and Kathy Benz, Oldsmar Library Reference Staff, Nancy Mellican, Director Oldsmar Library

Ann Lieberman, Marsha Cornelius, Kim Copenhaver, Robert Geiszler, and Amy Shepper, under the Supervision of Kathleen de la Pena McCook, Director University of South Florida, School of Library and Information Science

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Ransom Eli Olds and the American Dream

Contributed by Ann Liebermann

The City of Oldsmar sits on the Eastern edge of Pinellas County at the Northern end of Tampa Bay. A charming town with lovely oaks and beautifully planted medians, it is like a breath of fresh air in the midst of Pinellas County, the most densely populated county in the State. Strip malls, fast food restaurants, and crowded highways dominate much of the area, but the little town of Oldsmar has the distinct flavor of a sleepy Florida town.

The raw essence of old Florida has been well preserved in Oldsmar. There is a small town feel augmented by a feeling of space. The city is thoughtfully planned with the streets fanning out from Shore Drive along Tampa Bay. Many houses

both new and old, grand and modest, sit on large treed lots. The main street in town is State Street, home to City Hall, the Library, and the fire station. Park Boulevard stretches from City Hall on State Street to R. E. Olds Park located on the edge of the sparkling waters of Old Tampa Bay. The view of the bay is spectacular from Shore Drive. Much of the shore line is undeveloped parkland and is a gentle reminder of the incredible natural beauty that remains in some parts of Florida.

There were only a handful of settlers in the area in 1913 when Ransom Eli Olds decided to purchase 37,541 acres on the northerntip of Tampa Bay from Richard Peters in what is the present day Oldsmar. At the age of 52, the inventor of the Oldsmobile and REO cars embarked on a grand undertaking, turning the untamed land in northern Tampa Bay into a bustling community. He paid \$400,000 for the land \$200,000 in cash, \$75,000 in bonds and a \$125,000 apartment house in Daytona Beach. The town was originally named R. E. Olds-On-The-Bay. The name was later changed to Oldsmar. In 1927 the name was changed again to Tampa Shores, and finally in 1937 it was changed back to Oldsmar.

The early settlers had to contend with water from cisterns and individual wells. Cheesecloth was used to sieve the mosquito larva out of the water. The city built a water tower in the twenties and water was pumped into it every morning and sulfur water flowed from the taps. Somehow a faucet with St. Petersburg water was installed by the railroad tracks and everyone brought jugs to fill for drinking water. The nearest stores were located in Tarpon Springs and Dunedin.

Strategically situated between Tampa and St. Petersburg, Oldsmar was ripe for development. The long bridges across the bay had not yet been built and the shortest way from Tampa to St. Petersburg was through Oldsmar. Olds designed a community for working people rather than for the wealthy. He used engineers and surveyors from Boston to design a well-platted community, modeled after Washington, D.C., with tree lined boulevards leading from the bay to downtown. A power plant that served parts of Safety Harbor, Dunedin, and Clearwater was constructed. The streets were paved with oyster shells obtained nearby. R. E. Olds named many streets himself. Woodward, Jefferson, and Congress reminded him of Detroit. Olds named Gim Gong Road after a Chinese American horticulturist from Deland Florida. Gim Gong was working on developing frost resistant citrus crops. The streets of Oldsmar were unusually wide and more than 20 miles of sidewalk were installed. Over the years much of the sidewalk was buried under a layer of

sand.

Advertisements glorifying the virtues of Oldsmar were placed in the Detroit papers. He used the slogan Oldsmar for Health, Wealth and Happiness. He tried to entice Northern companies to move their businesses to Oldsmar by offering cheap labor. Olds spent \$100,000 drilling the infamous oil well that yielded water not oil. It has been said that oil was poured into the well each morning to make it look like they had struck black gold. The oil well is now capped and sits on the grounds of the Tampa Bay Downs Racetrack. (There were three other oil wells in Florida, one in Sarasota and two in the panhandle but none of them possessed the technology to drill through the Florida aquifer).

Recreation of newspaper advertisement c.1921 OLDSMAR NOW HAS
ELECTRIC LIGHTS FACTORIES WATER WORKS RAILROAD STATION
GOOD RAILROAD WAREHOUSES EXCELLENT AUTO ROAD
PRODUCTIVE FARMS COMFORTABLE HOTEL PUBLIC HALL
BEAUTIFUL BAY SHORE BANK BUILDING MANY ARTISTIC
BUNGALOWS All of this has been accomplished in little more than one year.
What will this progressive be when it is five years old? NOW IS THE TIME TO
BUY LAND Free Booklet REOLDS FARM COMPANY OLDSMAR, FLORIDA

The first library in Oldsmar was started by the Woman's Club in 1919. In 1977 the Oldsmar Library was donated to the city and moved from the Woman's Club building to State Street in the City Hall Annex. At this time the Friends of the Library was established to help promote the library. The first school in town was located in a church at the intersection of Buckingham and Jefferson Avenues. Another early school had one room for first, second, third and fourth grades, a second room for sixth, seventh and eighth grades, and high school was in the hall. The Post Office was downtown in the middle of an animal display park featuring alligators. During the 1921 hurricane, all the alligators escaped.

Original plans for Oldsmar included a golf course and a luxurious hotel on the bay but neither ever materialized. A saw mill and foundry that made cast iron engines for tractors and grove heaters became established. The mill produced the Olds Chair (also called the Oldsmar Chair)--a sturdy chair made out of either yellow pine or cypress. The Olds Chair was similar to the Adirondack Chair and it was sold throughout the United States.

Olds provided financial backing for Kardell Tractor and Truck Company to move into town. Renamed Oldsmar Tractor Co., Olds was hoping they could devise a machine to cut through the palmetto roots. Building roads and clearing land was frustrating and expensive in Florida. The palmetto roots were impervious to bulldozers and other northern machines.

Oldsmar had dairy farms and farms of peppers, tomatoes, corn, gladioli and grapes. In the early days, it was not uncommon for cattle and hogs to run loose through town. A huge banana plantation was established on the bay but the winters were too harsh for it to flourish for long. The waters at the northern end of the bay were clean during the twenties and thirties. Fishing, oystering and crabbing were wonderful. Towns people could take their catch to the Rex Cafe to be cooked. Big fish fries and dances were a weekly event.

Oldsmar sits like a plateau where the land elevation never rises higher than 20 feet above sea level. In 1921, the town was hit by a devastating hurricane. Large pine trees were uprooted and most of the town flooded by water levels 14 feet above normal. Some of the oldest homes built in Oldsmar remain on Park Boulevard. Many homes still standing after the hurricane were moved by barge to St. Petersburg during the 1920s and 1930s.

Olds had over 4.5 million dollars invested in the community in 1923. When he realized Oldsmar was not growing as he had anticipated, he started liquidating his assets. He started selling the unplatted parcels of land. The racetrack was nearly completed when he traded it for the Fort Harrison Hotel in Clearwater. The rest of the land was traded for the Belerive Hotel in Kansas. Ransom E. Olds left the town of Oldsmar after suffering a financial loss of nearly \$3,000,000. Olds envisioned a city of 100,000. The population of Oldsmar was only about 200 when he left.

Harry A. Prettyman, a St. Louis promoter, and his associates continued to sell lots in town after Olds left. Prettyman staged promotional gimmicks like Gold Rushes where pieces of gold were buried on a vacant lot and everyone got to dig for it. In 1927 Prettyman was caught selling underwater lots. To avoid scandal, the town of Oldsmar was renamed Tampa Shores. It wasn't until 1935 that the last of the property owned by R. E. Olds was finally sold.