Tampa's Own Sea Wolf: Hudson 'Gene' Holloway

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The young Navy seaman lay snug in his tent among the Antarctic ice. He could hear his captain talk to a scientist in the next tent over. They talked about turning back after spending days reaching the base of the highest point in Antarctica, forbidding Mt. Erebus. The most active volcano in Antarctica, it was the men of the HMS *Nimrod* and Sir Ernest Shackleton’s Expedition of 1908 who first braved its snow, ice and sub-zero cold to conquer the 12,500 foot height. “I was a strong, young, dumb guy,” the man remembered over forty years later. “And I’m thinking to myself, I’ll be damned. I came here to climb this mountain, and I’m gonna climb this mountain, even if I’ve got to [secretly] slide out of this tent, take my pack and go up that mountain.”

Opposition from nature or authority figures rarely fazed Hudson ‘Gene’ Holloway’s determination. “That thought,” he said, “that reasoning, kind of went with me all of my life. Yes, there’s authority, but I’m my own person, and I was prepared to make my own moves.” Holloway must have convinced the captain, because he was allowed to continue the ascent with the one remaining climber. “We went on to climb the mountain . . .” Thus, in 1958, Holloway conquered the first of many challenges in his life when he looked into the sulfurous red glow at the summit of Mt. Erebus. Legendary explorers such as Scott, Shackleton, Byrd and Sir Edmund Hillary are inexplicably linked to the incredible beauty and unspeakable perils of Antarctic exploration. Only a select few men and women have known the breathtaking grandeur of Antarctica. An even smaller number have climbed Erebus.¹

Fifteen years later, at age 35, Hudson ‘Gene’ Holloway conquered another mountain—he retired a millionaire. It should have been the end of his glorious rags to riches story, but it was only the beginning of a far different tale.

Jarring events ushered the United States into the 1980s. Revolution in Nicaragua, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and a hostage crisis in Iran brought the 1970s to a close. In Florida, the Mariel boatlift of Cuban refugees brought a new sense of urgency to the state. The tourism industry ran hot—and so did the drug trade.

Each age gets the heroes it deserves, and the new Gilded Age of the 1980s required something and someone different. It was a wild time, characterized by heavy deficit spending, dubious trickle-down economics and rising tensions in the Cold War. The hippies of yesteryear gave way to yuppies in search of excess and luxuries.

Tampa did not need more culture—city fathers seemed intent on destroying that. Authentic Florida was beyond passé. Ybor City lay in the ruins of corporate greed and urban renewal. Sprawling agribusiness interests devastated the Everglades. Busch Gardens inexplicably modeled itself on an African theme. Like much of Florida, Tampa specialized in the contrived. What Tampa needed was more: More to look at, more to overwhelm the senses, more food for less money, more exotic animals, more mystery and controversy.

It took a man of the moment to supply exactly what Tampa needed. It took a man of vision to supply such a peculiar concept to Tampa’s restaurant market. It was called “The Sea Wolf,” one of Tampa’s most unusual and beautiful restaurants. Named after a Jack London novel set in the treacherous Pacific, it offered seafood dinners and
Hudson 'Gene' Holloway seated at his desk in the office of the Sea Wolf restaurant. (Photograph courtesy of Debbie Cazin.)

fixings of fancy, including antiques, art and animals. In his ambition, Holloway did not set out to just serve Busch Garden's tourists - he sought open competition with the entertainment giant.

The entertainment did not stop with the Sea Wolf itself. With his freewheeling lifestyle, intoxicated antics and faked death, Holloway went from creating an attraction to being an attraction. This is not just a story of a businessman and his decisions, good and bad. It is a story of modern mythmaking, a story that reveals more about Tampa than it does of any single individual. The cast of characters: a hardworking public thirsty for heroes and novelty; a press that required human lives and stories to keep the media machine buzzing; a business world that hosted criminals as comfortably as gentlemen; and a Tampa so bored with its elite that it welcomed a rowdy newcomer as its pied piper. Only the story of one person can reveal all this and more: Hudson 'Gene' Holloway, Tampa's own Sea Wolf.

Born into poverty in Tampa and partially raised in an oppressive foster home, Holloway grew up living in an old school bus. With his brothers, he helped his father fish for mullet and spent time living in a tarpaper shack on Tampa's former Henderson Field. He dreamed of greater things and joined the U.S. Navy at the age of seventeen. "At that point in my life," he said, "I didn't even know what roast beef was. I thought hamburger was made out of pork." He worked hard for ten solid years driving trucks after his navy discharge before becoming a successful seafood broker for a company called Standard Brands.

Holloway did not wait long before going into business for himself as a seafood broker. "I remember walking into Morrison's restaurant chain. I was real apprehensive. Here I am, an uneducated guy walking into a big chain like this, and I see all these guys, these dudes that come and go in their big cars, and I had a yellow Nash Rambler in those days. Am I going to compete against..."
these people?" His independent career started shortly thereafter with an order for five truckloads of cherries. He arranged a good deal for Morrison's, and the real challenges and opportunities began. He formed his own brokerage company called International Seafoods.³

Holloway proved himself to be a crafty businessman at the helm of his new venture. He played seafood suppliers against each other and traveled as far as Canada, Mexico and Iceland to find the best prices. Such competitive pricing and quality snagged Holloway some enviable clients, most of them massive chains: Red Lobster, Morrison's, McDonald's, Maas Brothers, and Kentucky Fried Chicken. On any given day, International Seafoods sent out invoices as big as $1.5 million. When General Mills bought Red Lobster in 1973, they also bought International Seafoods, for over two million dollars. General Mills wrote a special clause into the contract to prevent immediate competition from Holloway: he could not operate in the seafood business for five years.⁴

Holloway intended to retire to life's finer things, like fast boats, scuba diving, beautiful cars, skydiving, and gorgeous ladies. He established himself in Lakeland and bought a mansion there. He counted the area's most prestigious business and political leaders among his friends and partners. An avid skydiver, Holloway met the former Miss Tampa, Debbie Jean Ponton, in 1974, at the Zephyrhills Parachute Center. Although she wasn't his first love - Holloway had been married three times before - he claims it was "love at first sight." Holloway's personal jeweler lavished Ponton with whole racks of rings and bracelets. He picked her up in his private plane to beat Tampa's swelling traffic jams. Holloway's beautiful 10,000 square-foot Lakeland home had been featured in several national magazines, including Architectural Digest.⁵

To escape the hassles of local notoriety, new wife, Holloway dropped all pretense of retirement and embarked on a new journey, a new gamble.⁷

Gene Holloway seemed destined for great things, but he was not without a dark side. As a young man, Holloway read the Jack London novel The Sea-Wolf. The story concerned a privileged intellectual man shipwrecked in the Pacific. A brilliant and brutish sailor named Wolf Larsen - or the "Sea Wolf" - picks up the luckless protagonist. Once aboard Larsen's schooner, Ghost, the protagonist leaves behind his physically and morally pampered world for one ruled by the cold indifference of nature and the cruelty of man. It took someone like Gene Holloway to draw inspiration for a business from such a novel. In 1977, Holloway opened a unique restaurant in Lakeland, and he tellingly named it the Sea Wolf. Shunning a sunny Floridian or Caribbean theme, he chose a darker seafaring motif. With incredibly intricate aged woodworking, animals live and stuffed, tasteful art and valuable antiques, the restaurant dazzled. Holloway's carpenters employed woodworking techniques rarely seen commercially in

"Few other cities could have provided the multidimensional playground Holloway's lifestyle demanded. But then few other American cities . . . still retain the energy to spawn a Holloway in the first place, or tolerate the vision as long as Tampa bay did."

Hal Robinson, Tampa Bay Magazine
the U.S., using rare woods imported from all over the Americas. Using his knowledge and connections in the world of seafood, he obtained his ingredients at reasonable prices and passed them along to his customers. The Lakeland Sea Wolf met with instant success, but Holloway was just warming up to the idea. He confided to his wife that he was planning on “doing something grand that Tampa has never seen before.”

In 1977, Holloway acquired property just down the street from Busch Gardens. The Treasureland Amusement Park had previously occupied the site. It was about to be replaced with a much larger attraction – the Sea Wolf. It was an ideal location for a flashy, eccentric eatery with low prices catering to the tourist trade. The same seafaring theme applied, but this time with a vengeance. The copious art and antiques were all original. Stained glass – the nation’s largest collection of Tiffany windows, obtained from a church in New York – added soft colors to the ambience. Designer furniture added a further touch of dignity and grace. Manicured gardens and rare birds created a wonderful view from the Garden Room. The décor itself was worth millions, perfectly marrying the rustic and refined. Holloway’s Tampa office, too, reflected his personality. To the right of his heavy wooden desk was a five-foot statue of Satan, reaching out for a soul with clawed hands, wings and horns. Another likeness of Satan hovered above his desk, carved in wood on the wall. Depictions of Christ graced two of the walls. Stained glass windows filtered in a soft, magical aura. Among all the antiques and religious imagery hung a contemporary portrait of a nude woman. Several rocks displayed in a small glass case were keepsakes from the dangerous mountain climbing trip in Antarctica.

Holloway spared no effort or expense in assembling his dream. Unlike many old moneyed families, Holloway was no stranger to sweat and toil. He worked twelve-hour days supervising construction, manicuring the garden and cleaning. Debbie

Exterior of the the Sea Wolf restaurant on Busch Boulevard in Tampa. (Photograph courtesy of Debbie Cazin.)
unfailingly supported him, consulted on décor, and kept the books during construction. The Tampa location would take up four times the size of the original. It took over a year to build, all in an age when a pre-fab McDonald’s could be slapped together in two weeks.

On January 15, 1978, the Sea Wolf opened in Tampa and the crowds rushed in. In the first two months, the restaurant made a million dollars in sales. “Be prepared,” St. Petersburg Times restaurant critic Ruth Gray warned, “to wander around the restaurant along with the masses, because you’ll find loads of people.” The restaurant’s unusual visual attractions made a crowded visit seem worthwhile. Gray continued, “Your visit to the Sea Wolf will seem like an adventure because there is so much to look at. The entrance features a lion statue, plants, etched doors and so much more that it defies memory.”

Such heavy crowds pressed in that Holloway employed a number system. Each party would be assigned a number and wait for it to appear on a video screen, a more subdued way to seat people than calling out their names. The first of the waiting areas was a simple lobby, while the second featured large aquariums stocked with a variety of fish, eels and sharks. The Teddy Roosevelt Bar-Lounge processed customers for a third time before seating, where customers gawked at a variety of stuffed animals. A Kodiak bear greeted visitors while a white mountain goat appeared under bright lights in a glass case. A mountain lion caught in mid-leap reached out with his claws to mounted heads of deer. Even with its three lobbies, the Sea Wolf’s customers often spilled out onto the parking lot.

Of course, the fact that the food was good and relatively cheap drew repeated visits from locals. It also helped that Tampa had few good, high-profile restaurants at the time. One could start with Escargot Bourguignonne, Clams Casino and Key West conch chowder. The Sea Wolf’s still-novel salad bar featured marinated vegetables and other high-quality items. Customers found their seafood cooked to perfection. For an entree, patrons had many choices, among them frog legs, Oysters Rockefeller, Alaskan king crab, and lobsters from Maine and South Africa. The “Shrimp ala Sea Wolf” was a rich pasta offering, with linguini covered with Louisiana shrimp, celery, and mushrooms cooked in a garlic sauce—all topped with bacon and provolone cheese. Customers especially enjoyed strawberry Daiquiris to wash down their dinners. It spoke volumes that Helen and Robert Richards, who made a living as fishermen, and later owned the Seabreeze Restaurant, went to the Sea Wolf whenever they didn’t feel like cooking.

By April 1978, the crowds convinced Holloway to implement a $1 million expansion plan that would expand seating to 1,000 and space to 32,000 square feet. He boasted to the press, “I expect to have the largest restaurant in the south and ... one of the major tourist attractions in Florida by the end of next year.” Holloway hoped to rival Busch Gardens for the distinction of being Florida’s largest tourist attraction, second only to Disney World. Years later, Holloway claimed to have done just that. If his claim was true, the Sea Wolf would have had to attract over 2.4 million visitors that year.

Holloway had plenty to be proud of. His hard work had paid off. He had created an original restaurant concept that worked. Few restaurants in the country consistently drew so many people. The Sea Wolf garnered
Gene Holloway and his wife, Debbie, promoted the Sea Wolf Restaurant with $5 gas coupons as a promotion during the gas crisis of the 1970s. Notice their pet tiger and cub at the gas pumps as cars line up behind them for free gas. (Photograph courtesy of Debbie Cazin.)

glowing reviews and grossed $5 million in its first year. It became the 8th largest restaurant in the U.S. by sales volume, and the highest-selling seafood restaurant. But as he walked around the sprawling restaurant just three weeks after its opening, he kept thinking to himself, “I could have done so much better.”

Overwhelmed

Holloway tried to run the Sea Wolf like a family, but the business had a way of revealing his dark side, the side that identified with Wolf Larsen. The perceived ineptitude and disloyalty of his workers annoyed him. The restaurant became a massive operation that no one person could run, a trap. Holloway had no one he could trust enough to run it for him. He used cameras to watch his workers. When employees tried to form a union, he fired all of the workers who were involved. One claimed that Holloway violently twisted his arm. Holloway allegedly threatened another with a vicious attack dog. The disgruntled employees picketed the Sea Wolf in protest. For once, Holloway had nothing to say to the press.

Holloway could not afford to ignore the press altogether. Sales fell sharply after his first smashing year in Tampa. If he expected to maintain his high volume, Holloway needed plenty of repeat customers. In a clever promotional campaign, he distributed coupons that allowed patrons to get $2-$5 of gasoline with a restaurant purchase of $20 or more. At the time of a gas shortage and crisis caused by poor U.S. relations with the Middle East, free gas was a very attractive bonus for diners. Holloway concentrated his promotional efforts from

“The loneliness of the man is slowly being borne in upon me. He seems consuming with the tremendous power that is in him and that seems never to have found adequate expression in works. He is as Lucifer would be, were that proud spirit banished to a society of soulless . . . ghosts.”

The Sea-Wolf, p. 94
week to week on different counties. Somehow he managed to secure enough fuel to fill his three 10,000 gallon tanks. On one Sunday alone, he gave away 650 gallons of gasoline. He blamed the rising cost of gas on weakening sales, but was more than breaking even with the new promotion. Holloway's campaign paid dividends, and he still had hopes of bringing in $5 million as in the first year of operation. As 1979 wore on, however, the outlook did not look good. Sales continued to decline, and it had little to do with gasoline. With images of the Sea Wolf's crowded triple lobby, many patrons must have decided they wanted a simpler dining experience. The novelty wore off. Fast.16

Instead of cutting back operations or trying to save money, Holloway announced plans to expand into a larger shopping, dining and entertainment complex. He already had acquired 28 acres for the project that he dubbed "Condor Plaza" – once again modeled on a faraway theme, a bird that never flew over Florida. Holloway had his eye on additional property, because his latest sprawling dream would require considerable land. Besides offices and condominiums, the massive Plaza would include an entertainment complex called Wolf Larsen's Good Time Emporium; several restaurants; Jack London Square, a shopping village constructed in 16th century Tudor style; and a towering hotel that would stretch sixty stories into the sky. The estimated price tag on Condor Plaza: a whopping $75 million.17

Just as he grew impatient with retirement, Holloway tired of the effort the Sea Wolf required. He began using more and more valium, alcohol and recreational drugs to ease the stress. His marriage suffered from so much strain and the time they spent apart. A part of Holloway wanted to walk away from the entire endeavor, but it was too late for that. He had invested much more than his $2 million General Mills' fortune on the Sea Wolf. It may have been a monster, but it was his monster. He had obsessed over its construction and perfection for two years, and while his mind told him to let it go, his pride could not disentangle itself from the Sea Wolf.

Gone were the days of twelve-hour shifts and sleeping in his office before the next day's work. Holloway handed over the office duties to his unswervingly loyal secretary, Pat Patterson. "He was bored, tired with the restaurant," she remembered. Holloway relished the chase and resented all else. "He wanted to build, build, build," Patterson said. "I've seen him devise things, set up things. He'd be so enthusiastic about getting something operating until opening day, and then he was through with it." Mrs. Holloway remembered, "It was such a large restaurant to operate and be involved with. It became a situation where neither one of us were in control of our lives."18

With his enthusiasm and profits waning, Holloway took on a new, more public role as the Sea Wolf's promoter. Although he never found himself altogether comfortable as pitchman, he did his best. Inspired by the film Urban Cowboy and the fashions of an antique dealer friend, Holloway appropriated a wardrobe of cowboy hats, buckskin and fur coats. He'd arrive at the restaurant in full pimp regalia, walking Bamboo, his wife's pet cougar. He mingled and joked with customers and made novel drinks with crushed Oreos for baseball great Pete Rose and magnate George Steinbrenner. His new role as public relations guru gave him an opportunity to flaunt his fun-loving side. And, his outsized youthfullness. "He never wanted to be old," secretary Pat Patterson said. "He never wanted to be fat." He befriended his youngest and most impoverished employees. Holloway promoted eighteen year-old Ronnie Atherton from cook to manager shortly after they met, increasing his salary to over $20,000.

Yet, once again, a dark side lurked behind the friendly veneer. Holloway's attentions were not free. He asked for favors and staunch loyalty in return. A master manipulator, Holloway boasted of his instinct for immediately sizing people up, how much they would tolerate and how far they could be bent. Patterson remembered, "He would spot it [weakness] immediately. The only thing he respected was strength and he always displayed that himself." On the one hand, he recruited loyal young stooges. On the other, he kept company with older, disreputable friends, like drug traffickers. Either way, owing Holloway could lead friends and employees down a darker path than they might have bargained for.19

Far away from those dark paths, Holloway often appeared on the television news to promote the Sea Wolf, wrestling his pet cougars and tigers for the cameras.
Behind the playful charade, the Sea Wolf lost money. To rival Busch Gardens, Holloway bought six Clydesdales to tow a carriage around the parking lot. A female employee drove the team of horses while dressed as a New York policeman, gun and all. He bought a full façade of All Angel's Church in New York. Workers unloaded truckloads of sculpted stone for the Condor Plaza that were never unpacked.

Holloway's personal life dissolved into a raucous parade of wild nights, booze and drugs. He drank heavily and went to drag shows at Ybor City's El Goya Lounge, a club for homosexuals, with ladies on both arms. Mrs. Holloway found the situation increasingly intolerable, and left her free-wheeling husband several times. He tested the bounds of civilized behavior but found none. In fact, the people he surrounded himself with encouraged it. He stumbled and urinated in front of the restaurant. He engaged in fire extinguisher fights across the bar. One night, customers found themselves watching Holloway's pet tiger eat pigeons in the garden.

The public responded to his antics and excesses with amused interest, but Holloway felt embattled and paranoid. As he went on with his flashy charade, Holloway plotted to sell the Sea Wolf. He entered into negotiations with at least one interested party, while his bankers applied pressure for their loans to be repaid. Holloway's shady goings-on slowly crept up on him as well, and rumors flew of his involvement in the underworld of drugs and crime. Holloway began buying assault weapons and pistols to augment his antique gun collection. He carried a gun at all times, preferring a hard-hitting .357 revolver. His firearms did not stop a criminal at the Sea Wolf in May of 1980. Customers leaving the restaurant found a gunman in the parking lot breaking into cars and robbing patrons. When fearful customers brought it to an employee's attention, two male workers went outside to stop him. Instead of making a citizen's arrest, the two men were wounded in the gunfire that ensued before the gunman ran off. After so much commotion in the restaurant, Holloway ran outside with a pistol. The perpetrator had already escaped. When interviewed by a newspaper reporter, Holloway said of the employees who were shot, "These two men just prove that all Americans aren't still cowards."21

The distinction was an important one for Holloway. Like many Americans, he became disillusioned when U.S. prestige suffered setbacks during the 1960s and 70s. America had seen disappointment and disgrace at the hands of Communist movements in Vietnam and Nicaragua, the Arab oil embargo and the hostage crisis in Iran. Holloway wanted to see a figure more like Wolf Larsen in the White House: fearing nothing, manipulating all, and carrying a big stick. But he did not imagine Reagan or even Carter as the president with those qualities – he imagined himself.

One day, while participating in a parade in St. Petersburg, Holloway gave an impassioned impromptu speech to onlookers. He railed against U.S. weakness abroad and stagnation at home. The spectators cheered him and shouted, "Holloway for President!" Their cheers gave him the idea to run for the nation's highest office. While his wife agreed with some of his political views, she was not amused by his self-nomination. "I tried to talk him out of it," she said. "By then he had gotten on such a big ego trip." Publicity campaign or serious political act, Holloway decided to see where his campaign would lead. "I've never been politically motivated before," Holloway admitted, "but I'm tired of the jellyfish in Washington. I'm tired of this country going downhill because of spineless leaders. Someone has got to stand up and do something."22

Appropriately, Holloway chose to represent Teddy Roosevelt's defunct Bull Moose Party, but he only heeded half of his predecessor's advice. He proposed to carry a big stick, but did not intend to speak softly. He dreamed of a televised ad made in Madison Square Garden, where he would deliver a fiery speech to the empty auditorium, "a combination between Billy Graham and Adolph Hitler." When his speech ended, a lone applause would ring out, and the camera would zoom to the back of the stands, where Uncle Sam stood, pointing at Holloway and intoning, "America needs you, Holloway!" Many thought his bid for the presidency was a joke, but he didn't treat it like one. In April 1980, Holloway sold his Lakeland Sea Wolf and cancelled expansion plans in Tampa to finance his presidential campaign, or so he said. "America is headed for deep trouble," he predicted. "We are faced not only with serious economic and
energy problems at home, but with a decay­ing respect around the world as a power to be dealt with." Among his many proposals, Holloway intended to roll back all prices to 1975 levels. 23

He probably would have liked to turn his whole life back to "1975 levels." Since then, his marriage had fallen apart, debts had climbed, dreams had crumbled and his state of mind had spiraled downward. The Sea Wolf's financial situation deteriorated as quickly as his personal life, beginning when the restaurant's first comptroller embezzled $75,000 from the restaurant. Contrary to claims of making millions, the Sea Wolf actually lost over $60,000 since its opening in 1979. He was behind on mortgage payments. The November presidential election came and went without Holloway on the ballot. His wife filed for divorce at about the time of the election. Just being Gene Holloway must have seemed like quite a burden to him on one wild night when he ran from his office screaming, "I am Teddy Roosevelt!" 24

More than peeved bankers seemed out to get Holloway as his life careened into 1981. A Tampa Tribune article listed a litany of health code complaints against the Sea Wolf. Holloway's restaurant had been cited by the Hillsborough County Health Department eleven times in two years. A customer found a "tooth-like object" in a seafood casserole, and another found a band-aid in a salad. Others complained of terrible tastes and odors at the Sea Wolf. 25

A recurring stink of a different kind haunted Holloway's personal life. He and
Debbie had patched things up after she had filed for divorce the year before. But on April 24, 1981, Debbie filed again, complaining of threats and abuse to herself and others. A friend later testified that something else led to the breakup: Holloway insisted upon using her pet cougars in a televised skydiving exhibition. She had to flee with her leopard in her car to avoid a televised disaster.

When the sun rose on April 25, the day after Debbie filed for divorce, flames consumed the couple's car and mansion in Thonotosassa. Finding the burnt house reeking of gasoline, the police suspected arson and began an investigation. When questioned, Holloway claimed he knew nothing of the fire. The night that Debbie filed for divorce, Holloway threw a party for his employees. After getting a ride to the restaurant, he spent the night in his office.

Or at least that was his official story when questioned later by police. An associate told a different story, that Holloway had torched the house and called a friend for a ride. “Let's get out of here,” Holloway said as he climbed into the pickup truck. “Let that bitch have the farm now.” Holloway cancelled his life insurance policy and obtained a new $6 million policy that did not name his wife as a beneficiary. All the time, a Tampa bank was demanding payment on a $585,000 loan.

Other debts were being collected around town, with more violent consequences. On May 18, police found a strangled corpse in the bushes of a roadside ditch beside State Road 581. The dead man was identified as Robert Walker, leader of the “Walker Organization,” a notorious drug ring that
imported huge amounts of marijuana and cocaine from South America. Walker’s smugglers flew the drugs into North Tampa Airport in Land O’ Lakes. Investigators had long suspected some sort of business relationship between Holloway and Walker.29

The heat finally closed in on Walker in March, when Federal police raided the airport. The police arrested Walker and the courts indicted twenty-one accomplices. Walker’s arrest was the kiss of death. To keep him from blowing the lid off the lucrative smuggling ring, gangsters quietly disposed of the dethroned drug lord.30

Zephyrhills pilot Jeffery Lane Searles ran the airport in Walker’s absence, but not for long. Holloway and Searles were old skydiving friends, and Searles had been busted a decade before with 3,700 pounds of marijuana. Police arrested another man with Searles that day: James Thrasher, another Holloway associate who assisted in running the airport.31

That summer, Searles made a flight to Phoenix in a Cessna. He visited someone in Phoenix who owed the operation money. When the debtor sold his car to pay back the loan, Searles deposited the check in the Sea Wolf’s bank account. Police caught up with Searles in Phoenix and arrested him for running drugs from Tampa to Arizona. When arrested, he listed his occupation as purchasing agent for the Sea Wolf. Searles later skipped bail and resurfaced in the Cayman Islands, operating Apex Consulting Co., an import firm owned by Holloway.32

Because Searles could scarcely run North Tampa Airport from the Cayman Islands, a new owner had to be found. After obtaining the proper licenses, Holloway took over operations of the airport in July with an option to buy. Holloway designated none other than James Thrasher to run the airport, with Searles conveniently in the Cayman Islands running Apex Consulting. For drug trafficking, it was a match made in heaven.33

In June, just before he obtained ownership of the airport, Holloway advertised for armed, karate-trained bodyguards. Instead, he found twenty-year-old Sheree Patterson, who became his girlfriend. She looked just like Debbie. In August, he designated his two Cayman Islands corporations as the beneficiaries of his life insurance. Holloway also liquidated more than $600,000 in assets and took out another $500,000 in loans. Late in August, Holloway met with Jeffery Searles in the Cayman Islands. He brought along girlfriend/bodyguard Sheree Patterson and associate Marlene Padovan, an employee of the North Tampa airport.

While Holloway basked in the Caribbean sun, secretary Pat Patterson made final arrangements to sell the Sea Wolf.34

While in the Cayman Islands, there was much to discuss: Holloway had a new plan.

Overboard

On August 28, 1981, Holloway left on a trip with girlfriend Sheree Patterson and associates James Thrasher and Marlene Padovan aboard the 44-foot rental yacht Mamous. The foursome embarked from Clearwater Marina and stopped for two days at Dinner Key Marina in Miami. After a leisurely cruise to the keys, they stopped for dinner.35

The evening of September 4 was gentle, mild and moonless. Holloway had been drinking all afternoon. About three miles from the Keys, they enjoyed the dinner Padovan had made. At 9:39 p.m., Holloway went out for some air and tripped on a hatch cover. He pitched over the rail. For a moment, he clung to the rail with his hands, but finally fell into the dark waters. Padovan saw the fall and alerted the others. Thrasher activated a strong spotlight and caught a brief glimpse of Holloway. Just as Thrasher zeroed in on him, the spotlight went out, hampering the search. “He wasn’t swimming,” Thrasher later testified, “it was more like he was fighting the water.”36

With the spotlight erratically blinking on and off, Thrasher lost Holloway in the strong currents. The crew tossed out two life jackets to him, but Thrasher later found both floating empty in the water, along with Holloway’s cap. The area is known for strong currents emanating from the Gulf Stream, which flows nearby. The three witnesses later testified that Holloway’s swimming suffered from a dislocated shoulder and two cracked ribs incurred in a sandlot football game. Thrasher calmly called the Coast Guard to report the incident. Within two minutes, the Coast Guard dispatched a chopper and boat to the scene to seek out the body. Just as the search parties arrived, they saw a distant profile of another yacht pulling away.37

Patterson became hysterical and hugged a life preserver. Padovan said of Patterson, “She never talked about it. It was like she
was in a daze, like she was lost.” A Monroe County sheriff’s deputy said, “the sharks and turtles could take care of it [the body].” Holloway’s brother Gale spent thousands of dollars searching the waters around the Keys, but found no body. His family prepared for the worst. Holloway was officially “missing” and the press was abuzz with tales of intrigue.

Back at the Sea Wolf, speculation mounted. A hostess said, “You can ask anybody in this restaurant. Nobody believes he’s dead.”

In any case, the Sea Wolf did not suffer in Holloway’s absence, because he no longer ran it. Former Campbell’s Soup executive Bob Dourney leased the restaurant on September 2. Two days later, Dourney received a call in the middle of the night saying that Holloway drowned off the Keys. Although the change seemed very sudden, the lease had been in the making for a year. While Holloway ran for president in 1980, he quietly urged Pat Patterson to sell the Sea Wolf. Dourney approached as an interested party and signed the first contract – a lease with an option to buy – in August 1980, for the Sea Wolf and some adjoining property.

Dourney wanted a large restaurant in the Tampa Bay area because of the region’s impressive growth. He had never heard of Holloway until he found the Sea Wolf. He fell in love with the restaurant at first sight: the antiques, the art, the different moody rooms. Dourney did his best to make the Sea Wolf a worthwhile investment. He required employees to take training classes, reduced items on the menu, and started ordering produce locally. Dourney activated a security system and sent a form letter to 10,000 customers, introducing the new management. His improvements turned the restaurant around in one short month. By mid-October, he claimed the Sea Wolf took in 41% more money than it had under Holloway.

But, Dourney had much more trouble on his hands than a little tinkering at the Sea Wolf. Holloway’s departure ushered in a wave of violence and chaos that Dourney couldn’t have imagined when he signed the lease. A rash of burglaries began on September 21, when vandals burned papers in the Sea Wolf, stole change from the registers, and ran off with a talking parrot valued at $2000. The culprit of one of the break-ins was later discovered to be Gregory Lee Ponton, Debbie’s brother. In October, when a female employee tried to drive home, all the tires on her car fell off. The lug nuts had been removed during her shift.

Pranks of that sort were the least the female witnesses to Holloway’s disappearance had to worry about. While driving her car, a gunman shot at Marlene Padovan about a week after Holloway went missing. Nine days later, another shooting occurred near Sheree Patterson’s home, but the gunman had the wrong target. Patterson lived at 1741 West Powhatan Avenue. The gunman shot at a similar-looking woman in a similar-looking car in front of 1731 West Powhatan. Perhaps wisely so, Patterson was far away visiting acquaintances in Tennessee. Authorities would be unable to find her for many months. While the bullets flew, the Florida Department of Law Enforcement opened several investigations of Holloway’s associates for a variety of serious crimes. Instead of dodging bullets, Thrasher submitted to a polygraph test for investigators.

Holloway may have been absent, but his
financial and legal troubles had not fallen overboard with him. After the court declared Holloway an absentee, wife Debbie and secretary Pat Patterson both offered to handle his estate. The presiding judge appointed retired accountant Fred T. Rodgers to the job. Rodgers reportedly told the press, “I don’t think I’m going to find a tremendous amount of money.” Rodgers did find enough to provide for back pay, some minor debts, and a bill incurred from the purchase of a gold cap for Holloway’s pet tiger’s tooth. The massive Condor Complex was officially shelved.44

Gene Goneaway’s Escapade

Holloway never even got wet. He wasn’t even onboard the boat when he supposedly fell from it. While the Coast Guard searched off the Keys for a body on September 4, a very much alive Gene Holloway registered at the Hotel Wellington in New York City as James LaRue. He obtained a passport and driver’s license that bore that alias. Other than his assumed name, Holloway did very little to change his lifestyle. He seemed utterly unconcerned about being caught, acting as if he never did anything wrong. He made three phone calls to secretary Pat Patterson, after which she mailed payments to American Foundation Life Insurance and other insurance companies.45

The press later inferred that Holloway intended to collect a total of $16 million in insurance settlements, but it was not that simple. His “heavy duty” divorce played a major role. When it became clear that Debbie would file for divorce, Holloway moved to cancel the $10 million life insurance policy he bought for her. He assumed that cancellation of the policy would result when he stopped making payments. He now suspects that his broker did not want to lose the large policy, and advised Debbie to continue to make payments. In fact, Debbie’s attorney advised her to make the payments to protect herself. Her reckless ex-husband seemed intent on ruining himself through debts to financiers, both legitimate and obscure. If Holloway were to meet a fate similar to the last owner of the North Tampa Airport, Debbie would be ruined as a co-signer of Holloway's mounting debts.46

Holloway obtained a new policy for $6 million, but soon discovered that the old $10 million policy was still in force. He suspected that Debbie had continued to pay the premiums throughout that turbulent summer. “I saw this insurance isn’t cancelled out,” he remembered, “my life was in danger. If I had not have left, I’d be a dead man. Someone would have gotten to me.”47

Besides feeling unsafe, Holloway stood to lose a great deal of money in his upcoming divorce.
I knew there was too much of my assets on the table. I needed to shuffle some things around. I was ticked off with whoever let Debbie know that she needed to start making payments. Even then I knew that if I died, before someone were to pay off that much insurance, they'd probably want to see a body. I devised this plan that it would appear that I was dead, and that would stop the divorce proceedings, and if I got a chance to nail that goddamn insurance company along the way, that would be good too. That way [enemies] wouldn't be trying to nail my ass for $10 million.

The fugitive left the Big Apple with Sherry Patterson on September 30 for Niagara Falls. At one point, Patterson said of his escapade, "This is an impossible dream," to which Holloway replied, "I know, I know." He had already been on his "vacation" for four weeks. Frank Salceuski, Holloway's chauffeur for the trip to Niagara Falls, would say so. The chauffeur must have gotten to know his passenger well before he returned to New York two days later. Salceuski returned to Niagara Falls with the limo a week later with a female friend of his own. The couple stayed at the luxurious Fallway Hotel for two nights, and Holloway paid the bills. Shortly after, the limousine company fired the fun-loving chauffeur.49

While at the Fallway, Holloway sought a Canadian home to rent for the winter. On October 13, Stanley and Pat Fox welcomed a smiling American couple into their home. The Americans explained that they had just arrived from the Bahamas. James LaRue was a talker. Instead of a simple business discussion, the elderly Fox's sat down to a meal of escargot, squid, steak and broccoli, all made by their guests. The Foxes were delighted when Mr. LaRue paid six month's rent in cash. Although Mr. Fox made objections to conducting business on the Sabbath, he accepted the money. The payment covered their annual migration to Florida.50

The Foxes left their house to the LaRues and Holloway had his hideout. One day his lady friend locked the keys in his rental car. Holloway broke the windshield to get the keys. Then she was gone. In need of a new female companion, Holloway went to a posh bar on a Saturday night. He found young, attractive Susan Wall there. A couple of dates later, Holloway spilled the beans about his status as a fugitive. Although she had fought hard to get her male-dominated sanitation job, Wall quit to follow him just ten days after they met.51

"My God, what happened to you?" the hotel clerk asked the mysterious man with a bandaged face. The man replied with different stories on several occasions: a fall down a set of stairs, a plane crash, a car crash and a fist-fight. The truth was that on November 5, Holloway disappeared into the office of famous plastic surgeon Dr. Martin Unger. Beneath the bandages, Holloway got a nose job, hair transplant and wrinkles removed around his eyes. When he arrived at the Royal York Hotel in Toronto to recover, he requested a large safety deposit box for his vinyl satchel.52

Beginning on November 10, Toronto police staked out Holloway's room, hoping to collect evidence against drug traffickers. Instead they watched room service cart food to a hotel room for several days. "It was nothing but the best," Toronto police Sergeant Jim Kellock said, "steak and eggs and fish." The reclusive bandaged man would not leave his room as long as his face remained bruised.53

On November 12, one week after his surgery, the mystery man left the Royal York with his latest female friend, Susan
Wall. As he walked to his car with vinyl satchel in hand, Toronto Police approached him for questioning and searched his car. The man carried $260,000 in cash, a list of Tampa telephone numbers, a Florida driver's license and eleven foil-wrapped nuggets of hashish with a brochure listing illegal drug prices. Holloway was placed under arrest and Toronto police soon found out who their suspect really was. Only then did Holloway discover that his clever alias, James LaRue, was the name of a wanted man in Canada.54

Making Waves

"He turned out to be quite a swell guy," Toronto Police Sergeant Young beamed when asked about Holloway. "He was laughing and joking and communicating well. He's a nice guy, really." Assistant U.S. Attorney Terry Bostic of Tampa could not accept how even the police could like a criminal so much. Bostic said, "My God, I can't believe the guy. It's almost like he's a folk hero. The man has been charged with a serious crime. I see no humor in that." Bankers, insurance brokers, and lawyers didn't find it a laughing matter, either. Perhaps that was why everyone else liked Holloway's story so much.55

When Bostic said, "I don't want to see any kind of circus surrounding the trial," it was far too late. Holloway kept telling interrogators that he swam ashore after his fall from the Mamous and hitchhiked to Niagara Falls. He had also taken to shouting to onlookers, "I love Canada!" But, Canada had had enough of Holloway. The Canadian courts dropped their drug charge so he could be tried for insurance fraud and arson in the United States. After five nights in jail, U.S. authorities shipped him under guard to Tampa.56

Tampa greeted Holloway with a celebration that, while not a hero's welcome, was a celebration nonetheless. "It's been a ball," disc jockey Jack Harris said, "a real neat media thing." A thing it was: not a celebration or protest, but a strange ritual of celebrity. A novelty song called "The Ballad of Gene Goneaway," became overnight WRBQ radio's most requested single. Radio stations held look-alike contests. When the Tampa Bay Buccaneers' offense floundered against Denver at Tampa Stadium, angry fans shouted to Head Coach John McKay, "Send in Holloway."57

Journalists and television reporters found themselves puzzled by the Holloway story, all in an age when reporters seeking the limelight were never at a loss for words. In order to make sense of his allure, journalists resorted to interviews with Tampa area radio disc jockeys. Cleveland Wheeler told reporters, "I think people like outlaws," and he was right. Women found Holloway sexy. "The women at the courthouse are crazy about him," a downtown legal worker said. Another woman swore to the Tribune that she would have traded her house and husband for a chance to run off to Canada with him.59

Steve Otto, who then wrote for the Tampa Times, probed deepest when he observed: "Tampa's rich aren't exactly known for being colorful or especially lavish with their money, except at Gasparilla when the laws on public drunkenness are largely overlooked." Finally, as if in exasperation, Otto complained, "Are we so small time and desperate for heroes that we have to glorify this medium-sized showoff [Holloway] and create the illusion that here is a guy who has done a number on the system so hooray for him?"58

The answer was, of course, yes. The one thing Otto overlooked was the fact that he saw fit to devote a column to the man. Creepy, sleep-inducing bluebloods aside, stressed-out workers across the country wished they could disappear, even if just for a vacation. The wishes of the masses often reflected their grim reality: that the blue-collar middle class was disappearing in America, squeezed between the working poor and an ever-shrinking sliver of filthy rich. While workers could steal a laugh because one guy rocked the boat, disc
jockey Scott Shannon chided, “Talk to the Metropolitan Bank. They don’t think it’s funny.” The cycle of enthusiasm between the icon and the public seemed for a while to feed on itself. Former associate Charles Miranda mused, “Knowing Gene Holloway, it makes me wonder who’s chasing who, and did we capture him or did he capture us.”

One could say that Holloway had captured the public, but they would be ignoring the solemnities of the courtroom. Holloway’s estate still lay in the hands of court-appointed Fred Rodgers. Rodgers only had $15,000 to work with to pay Holloway’s debts. By November, a scant $6,000 remained.

“Everything can be salvaged,” Rodgers said, but what could be salvaged depended on the outcome of Holloway’s court cases.

The courts did not wait long before bringing Holloway’s cases forward. On November 23, Holloway was indicted on two counts of federal mail fraud charges and arson relating to the fiery destruction of his house in Thonotosassa. The indictment came before Holloway returned to Tampa to defend himself. He also faced possible charges of obstructing justice, bank fraud, insurance fraud and conspiracy to make false statements to the Coast Guard. There was even talk of the IRS seizing the Sea Wolf. Holloway pleaded not guilty on December 1. U.S. Attorney Gary Betz thought Holloway “disappeared” because he owed money to a drug smuggling business partner. Allegedly, Holloway planned on paying off his debts with his life insurance proceeds payable upon proof of his death.

Bob Dourney endured a bumpy ride after leasing the restaurant in September. Dourney could only sigh to himself, “Oh well. So much for the low profile. The last thing you want to do when you take over a restaurant is announce there’s a new owner,” he explained. “But one of the first things we found ourselves doing is putting up a billboard out front saying the Sea Wolf is under new management.” Dourney seemed more peeved at the press than at burglars or Holloway. “Especially the way the media played up the so-called fire,” he said. “TV news had us burnt to the ground.” The press also repeatedly said that Holloway still owned the Sea Wolf. “That’s not true,” Dourney snorted. “He owns the property but we [my family] ... signed a five-year lease with him with an option to buy. He may own the property but the restaurant belongs to us.” To emphasize the change in ownership, Mr. Dourney changed the name of the restaurant to Dourney’s Sea Wolf.

The presiding judge lowered Holloway’s bail, and the legend went free. Holloway left the courthouse and a swarm of journalists asked for interviews. “It’s Gene!” a woman squealed. A crowd grew, many holding drinks from a nearby Christmas party. When asked how it felt to be free, he replied with a grin, “I’ve always been free, my man.” He was not likely to be free for long.

When asked at the time if he would change anything about his escapade, Holloway replied, “I really didn’t get to see all of Canada that I wanted. And I want to go back and have my face finished – you know, the sanding.” He planned to write novels and to go to Moscow to take in the Russian ballet. He even thought about joining some mercenaries in a military takeover of Seychelles, a small island nation off the coast of Africa. Holloway should have been thankful he was unable to participate in the coup – it failed miserably.

Then Holloway answered more seriously, “I, perhaps, would have taken my vacation a little differently. [It is] a little dark shadow in my life. But it’s an adventure. And I’m an adventurous person.” As his sun began to set, that “little dark shadow” would lengthen. He went on a coke-snorting and pill-popping binge that lasted five...
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months. Debts mounted and the IRS auctioned off $1.2 million of Holloway's antiques.66

On January 18, 1982, Holloway's trial began for alleged insurance fraud and arson connected with his home on Lake Thonotosassa. A swirl of witnesses testified, but for every witness that testified against him, Holloway had someone to contradict their testimony. The evidence seemed to stack up against Holloway. He allegedly backed his Lincoln Continental into the garage, siphoned out the gas and spread it around the house. He removed the vanity plate off the car before the fire, and police found the gas cap in the back seat. Even Holloway's loyal secretary testified that he bragged about setting the fire.67

The jury announced the verdict on January 28, 1982. As a juror read, "Not guilty," Holloway stood up and clapped loudly four times. His attorneys restrained him from further celebration as the judge threatened to hold him in contempt. The judge then pronounced him not guilty and congratulated him. As he left the courtroom, Holloway let out an unrestrained "Yahoo!" and made his way to a local bar for a tall drink of Jack Daniels whiskey.68

**Lost Fortunes**

If Holloway thought he was free from further troubles in the courts, he was wrong. The first trial had tired him out, and he wanted to move on to life's more pleasurable diversions. At the end of March 1982, Holloway and his three accomplices from the *Mamous* excursion agreed to a plea bargain. In return, prosecutors struck two accusations, that could not be proven from the ten-count indictment: that Holloway faked his death to get money for drug smuggling, and that he threatened to put out death contracts on uncooperative accomplices.

The day after pleading guilty, the judge sentenced Holloway to the maximum of five years in Federal prison. The charge: wire fraud. After taking his death, he called his secretary, allegedly to tell her to resume payments on his old $6 million insurance policy. "That's what I went to prison for," he remembered, "the phone call. I never collected any money, a claim was never made. I plea bargained with them, and that was a mistake."69

Scheduled to leave for the Federal Correctional Institution in Lexington, Kentucky, Holloway remained unrepentant. "I'm going to end up making millions and millions of dollars off this," Holloway enthused. "I'm writing a book.... It's been said that four different companies want to do movies [on my story]. The people at Marlene's lawyer's firm said they would rather watch my story than *Dallas* on television every week." When asked what he planned on doing before his incarceration, he said he'd eat a steak dinner, get into his Jacuzzi and "smooch with my Canadian sweetheart." He couldn't help adding, "I'm going to get drunk probably on a daily basis and get fatter."70

Prison must have seemed like therapy when compared to what Bob Dourney...
faced. The Sea Wolf floundered into 1982 with none of the crowds the restaurant drew three years before. At the time, Steve Otto of the *Tampa Times* said that his poor dining experience at Dourney’s Sea Wolf was “not unlike going into the haunted mansion at Walt Disney World.” The place was dark, nearly empty and all the food was greasy. Dourney had unwisely stopped frying with peanut oil. Holloway admitted later, “I knew before I leased the thing that Dourney wouldn’t be able to handle the business. I really wasn’t close to anybody — my brothers, I didn’t want to get them involved. He made two [monthly] payments, that was it.”

After just one year at the helm, Dourney was forced out of the Sea Wolf in August 1982 by a friend of Holloway’s. New York antiques dealer Martin Ryan had assumed several of Holloway’s debts and bought his antiques. Ryan filed a lawsuit alleging that Dourney had fallen behind on payments and forcibly cut Dourney out of the lease. After more legal wrangling, Dourney gave up the lease and moved out of the restaurant in the beginning of 1983.

When Ryan moved into the Sea Wolf on January 8, he found the bar taps had been left running, leaving the floors covered in sour beer. Raw meat and food rotted on the floors. The freezers and facilities showed signs of willful destruction and vandalism. “Everything in here, I purchased for him,” Ryan boasted. “I stood here when the carpenter’s saw were working on the lobby. I’ve been here since day one. It’s a mystifying place. It sort of becomes a part of you.”

Ryan hired an Atlanta management company to run the Sea Wolf, but had not decided whether or not he wanted to sell it. Ryan knewingly added, “[T]he smartest thing for me to do would be to walk away from it.”

But Ryan did not walk away. *Tampa Tribune* food writer Mary Scourtes reviewed the Sea Wolf while Martin Ryan owned it. He made the menu simple and more organized. However, the food quality suffered in the absence of Holloway’s seafood connections. While chicken and beef dishes stood out, Scourtes found the seafood bad or tasteless.

Far away, Holloway rebounded from an awful first day in the “Federal Pen.” He remembered, “I’m laying in bed, it’s early in the morning shortly after I arrived. I said, ‘I’m going to wake up in just a minute with this all a dream.’ And I wake up in the morning and there’s a guy [inmate] laying here, and over there some more, and that was a pretty bad moment.” The prison’s administration put Holloway in charge of the gardens and he planted marigold, zinnias, cockscombs and chrysanthemums.

When a prison psychologist wrote his profile of Holloway, he could have been summing up the hopes and fears of an entire generation. “He projects the image of an attractive, egocentric, experimenting adventurer who is willing to try the untried. However, he can also be viewed as a lonely, middle-aged man, overwhelmed by the complexities of his own creations and desperate in his attempt to retain a youthfulness inconsistent with his age.”

In some respects, the psychologist’s profile could not have been more accurate. Holloway said that while in prison, “I decided I was going to spend all my time improving myself.” He ran, lifted weights and read books on personal fitness and nutrition. He lost 55 pounds and vowed to quit drinking and drugging for good. There would be no more chicken wings or French fries, either. He incessantly popped three dozen pills daily — mostly vitamins — and read his self-improvement bible, *Life Extension*. He planned on living to be 150 years old. Clearly, Holloway’s habits had changed, but the goal — youth — was the same.

Perhaps the most extreme change of all was his new view on relationships. “I thought, what is it with you Holloway,” he said, “can’t you be loyal to a woman? Without loyalty, you don’t have a relationship.” His “Canadian sweetheart,” Susan Wall, visited him about one thousand times during his stay of almost three years in the Lexington prison facility. Prison officials repeatedly refused to allow him to marry her while incarcerated. But on January 28, 1983, Holloway married his fifth wife in a quiet ceremony in the visiting room. He was 44 years old and she was 28. Back in Tampa, ex-wife Debbie Ponton struggled to pay off the debts she inherited from Holloway.

All this time, his fortune was ebbing away. “I thought I was going to be in prison for a year or two,” he remembered later.

It turned out that I was there for a maximum of five years. I saw everything disappearing. I see all my lifetime’s worth of
work going down the doggone drain. It probably would cause a lot of guys to jump off the bridge. I took it the way it was and it figured it was my fault for being there.79

After a brief transfer to the federal prison camp at Eglin Air Force Base, Holloway returned by bus to the Tampa Bay area in April 1985. He arrived to serve the last few months of his sentence in a work-release program at the Goodwill Industries halfway house in St. Petersburg. With no property and all of his money tied up in litigation, he seemed unperturbed when he visited his old haunt. Martin Ryan had sold the Sea Wolf and a restaurant named the Tobacco Company took its place.80

While visiting the restaurant, Holloway granted an interview to a reporter. He looked back at his disappearance as an ill-conceived idea spawned by an excess of whiskey and drugs. Although he had no regrets, he fumed when asked if the Sea Wolf was built with drug money. “If the feds had anything on me as far as where my money comes from, they’d still have me in prison,” Holloway explained. “When you’re successful, people want cop-outs for why they’re not successful, [like] ‘the reason he’s successful is he’s a crook.’” Holloway soon tired of dwelling on the past. “I’m not dead,” he said with evangelical zeal. “I plan to build other great things. I’m gonna be bigger and greater than I ever was.” He planned a new Sea Wolf and ten other restaurants in the Tampa Bay area, and he had yet to be released from custody.81

The Gambler

Holloway, the gambler, was far from finished. He told the Tribune that he would seek a presidential pardon from the White House to clear his name. He found himself free in time to watch his most valuable treasures auctioned off to pay debts. Ten days after his release, a Lakeland warehouse put 350 of Holloway’s various antiques on sale to the public. Over one hundred creditors waited in line for a share of the proceeds. “[W]e all lose possessions at one time or another,” Holloway mused. “I’m young. I have the opportunity to make them back.” Holloway must have felt like a lightweight as he watched the auction with just $100 in his pocket.82

Tampa saw the opening of two more Sea Wolves in quick succession, both failing because of lack of capital and friction with business partners. The new restaurants were mere shadows of the old Sea Wolf. Holloway scraped together a few plants and antiques for décor. Reporter Steve Otto could not stay away from the Holloway story for long. While visiting the new Sea Wolf in May, Otto saw Holloway refilling a large pot of chowder. “The chowder is wonderful,” he wrote. “If you want to go over and stare at Gene, be sure to get a bowl of that stuff to do it with, along with one of his blackened grouper steaks.”83

When Otto asked him is he still had a wild side, Holloway admitted, “Well, I’ve still got the fur coat and the feather hat hanging in the closet. But I think maybe I’ll let it stay there … maybe as a reminder that I did those things, but that was another lifetime.” When asked on another occasion if his past would hurt his new business, he replied, “I served a million people over at the old Sea Wolf. People will come back for a good meal. I owe no apologies to anyone.” Otto, who once criticized the attention Holloway received from the press, saw fit to devote yet another column to the man he called a “show-off.”84

Less than two weeks after Tampa’s final Sea Wolf closed, Holloway grasped at his final straw, and Joe Redner was his name. Redner ran several, popular, adult entertainment clubs in the Tampa Bay area featuring “exotic” female dancers. Moralizing Christians condemned Redner as a messenger of the devil. It was an unholy alliance made in a heathen’s heaven. Holloway, the notorious shadowy businessman modeled after a character in a Jack London novel; and Redner, the man who sold glimpses of flesh as a commodity. Both were legends of sorts. Holloway had been featured on television, radio and in newspapers for deeds good, bad and ugly. Redner fought countless legal battles to stay in business and claimed to have been arrested more than one hundred times. Redner’s supporters often sported “Leave Joe Alone!” bumper stickers on their cars. It seemed strangely appropriate that they became partners in a scheme to open a restaurant and a strip bar in Citrus County.85

In the end, Holloway and Citrus County just didn’t mix, and neither did he and
Redner. They did indeed open a $5 million Sea Wolf in Homosassa. Holloway then became embroiled in a series of legal squabbles that never seemed to abate. Finally, Redner sued Holloway for back rent, the restaurant folded, and Holloway filed for bankruptcy.

He had tried to make it happen again: he used all of his connections, know-how, tricks and cunning, but the magic was gone. The Sea Wolf had sailed its final turbulent voyage.

Conclusion

Holloway heard the news on the radio one day. In 1990, a year after Holloway's final restaurant failed, the old Tampa Sea Wolf building was destroyed by arson in a massive fire. All the aged wood and elaborate carvings went up in smoke, never to return. Holloway drove by the site, but did not stop that day. Instead, several nights later, he gathered some ashes as a souvenir. He would have felt sad, but he had put the restaurant business behind him for good.86

In 1995, the same ill-fated site on Busch Boulevard was home to the $3.2 million China Coast restaurant. The China Coast chain went out of business before construction was complete. Still, the building went up, never to host a meal for anyone. The site remained strangely "cursed," but Holloway never lingered far away.87

Separated from his Canadian sweetheart and abandoned by his business partners, Holloway stayed true to form and continued his journey alone, just as he had on Mt. Erebus so many years before. In 1992, some friends asked for his help to search an old Caribbean shipwreck for gold. His friends seemed more interested in drinking at the local bars than in finding bars of gold, so he became a lone treasure hunter. He secured sensitive equipment for his boat to scour the waters of the Gulf. Holloway discovered another lucrative treasure as his new career began – meteorites.88

On a hot afternoon in June 2002, Holloway took a cloth bag off of the floor of his SUV. He carefully unwrapped the contents from a series of cloth layers and handed me a heavy, blackened meteorite. He had already sawed off a small sliver, a sample for a California university, and the cut revealed a metal interior as bright and smooth as chrome.

Holloway appeared to share many of the same qualities. His exterior did not have the luster of earlier days, although he still appeared young for his age. It was only when I took a small sliver of the man in the form of an interview that I could see his smooth, shining interior. The beaming smile was unexpected from such a soft-spoken man. His skin slightly weathered by the sun and his arms still thick and strong, perhaps Gene Holloway has finally found his true calling – alas, a treasure-hunting Sea Wolf.

ENDNOTES

Andrew T. Huse earned his M.A. in History from the University of South Florida and is a program assistant and researcher at the USF Libraries Florida Studies Center. He specializes in Florida, Latin America, international affairs, and social history. "Tampa's Own Sea Wolf: Hudson 'Gene' Holloway" is the third of his articles to appear in The Sunland Tribune. "Tampa and World War II: A Culinary Crossroads" and "The Ignoble Experiment: Restaurants and Prohibition in Tampa" appeared in volumes 2001 and 2002, respectively. He co-authored The Seabreeze by the Bay Cookbook and is currently writing a social history of Tampa focused on its restaurants. He is pursuing a degree in library and information science.

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