

# Man's Influence on the Upper Keys

*A series of six paintings designed for the Murray E. Nelson Government and Cultural Center.*

The criteria for my images in the series was things built by man, which had survived over a half century and have been a part of our lives today. I felt that most of the art in the keys celebrates our beautiful nature but I wanted to add the human element. It is a blending of art and history that is to be a lasting tribute to "man's influence" in the Upper Keys.

I am deeply indebted to Jerry Wilkinson, president of the Historical Preservation Society of the Upper Keys, for his help with the research for my project.

Cris Sandifer



## Jewfish Creek Drawbridge

Henry Flagler began construction of the Key West Extension of his East Coast Railroad in 1905 by dredging and filling a 20-mile rail bed from Florida City on the mainland through the Everglades to Jewfish Creek. Construction of the Jewfish Creek Railroad Bridge was started in November 1906 and the completed bridge had its official opening on February 5, 1907.

After the 1935 Labor Day Hurricane, the railroad was abandoned and vehicle traffic continued to use State Road 4-A, which is today's Card Sound Road. During World War II, the Navy wanted a better and shorter route to and from the Florida mainland, and the 18-Mile Stretch was built on top of the abandoned railroad right-of-way. Federal funds were used and



Highway U.S. 1 was born in the Keys. At Jewfish Creek the swing bridge was replaced with a bascule bridge for autos. The concrete posts bore an inset date of 1943. The old railroad bridgetender's house remained the bridgetender's living quarters until the 1960s.

The new elevated causeway crossing both Jewfish Creek and Lake Surprise was opened in late 2008 and the Jewfish drawbridge has been removed. Many of the Keys residents will have lingering memories of the large osprey nest there, and waiting for the bridge barricades to open so the traffic could start moving again.

## Largo Sound Rock Castle

A European-styled native coral rock home was built in 1920 for a New Jersey dentist, Dr. George Engel. The walls are three feet thick at ground level and tapers to 16 inches at the top. Mrs. Engel stayed alone in one of the towers through the Category 5 Labor Day Hurricane of 1935. The storm surge floated the first floor furniture, which pounded on the floor of the tower beneath where she took refuge. It is said that Mrs. Engel continued to hear the furniture banging on the floor after the hurricane.

Dr. Engel died in 1945 and the castle remained vacant until the mother of a local attorney, Jeff Gautier, purchased it in 1952. She remodeled the house and removed the stone parapets along the roofline for safety reasons. While it was vacant, others claimed to have heard noises like the banging of furniture coming from the house. Hence, it was sometimes referred to as the "haunted house on Largo Sound."

"The Castle" remains one of the oldest structures in the Upper Keys still standing in its original location



at the foot of Oceana Drive, mile marker 103.5 oceanside.

## Marvin D. Adams Waterway

The construction of the Cross Key Waterway, or the Key Largo Waterway as it was then known, was started in 1956. Today, most simply call it "The Cut." Marvin D. Adams purchased 50 acres of land in the narrowest part of the island of Key Largo.

Barney Waldin had invented a side-mounted coral cutting machine and agreed to excavate The Cut for the coral fill material. Both canal ends and the highway/utility portion were left untouched. Barney excavated the 100-foot-wide, 40-foot-deep plugged canal in a year and a half. Some time passed before The Cut was completed due to permit issues, highway and utility bypasses and reconstruction. The waterway opened in February 1961 for maritime traffic, and technically made Key Largo into two islands.

## The African Queen

The African Queen was built in Lytham, England in 1912 for service on the Victoria Nile and Lake Albert, where the movie named after her was filmed in 1951. She was used by the British East Africa Company from 1912 to 1968 to shuttle passengers and cargo across Lake Albert, located on the border between the Belgian Congo and Uganda. She was Humphrey Bogart's and Katherine Hepburn's original movie boat and she is listed on the National Register of Historical Places. The adventurous Queen has been around the world twice but now resides on the canal adjoining The Key Largo Holiday Inn (mile marker 100). She is owned by Capt. Jim Hendricks and is on free public display.



## Caribbean Club

In 1939 Miami Beach developer Carl Fisher began constructing the Caribbean Club, but failing health precluded him attending the January 1940 opening.

Tom Handley purchased the club as more or less a gambling resort. In 1947, producer John Huston and Richard Brooks came to Key Largo to write the screenplay for a movie based on Maxwell Anderson's Broadway play "Key Largo." The club was closed for the summer, as many Keys commercial businesses were in the 1940s, but Huston leased it as a work area. Huston used photos of the club's façade and local sites to build the film set on the Warner Brothers Hollywood lot. Key Largo gained international popularity by the use of its name in the film released in 1948.

A 1955 fire in the hotel portion of the club took the life of a Miami woman allegedly in the room of a Long Island doctor and prompted an investigation. Ruthie Whitehurst purchased the club from Richard Craig in 1962. Now her three children are carrying on the Whitehurst tradition and operating the club today.

The Florida East Coast Railway put markers along the track every mile from Jacksonville to Key West as guides for the engineers. This is one of the two markers remaining today, but it is not in its original position. It was moved to the Caribbean Club a few years ago from about two miles further south.

## Old Methodist Church

The Barnett Methodist Church, originally of Planter, then of Tavernier, was destroyed by the 1935 Labor Day Hurricane. This structure was built from the scavenged hurricane debris in 1936 as the Tavernier Methodist Church. In 1957 the congregation built a new church at the present location, mile marker 93, as the Burton Memorial United Methodist Church. They



sold the old church building to Masonic Lodge #336 in 1959. In 1981, the Masonic Lodge decided to replace the old wooden building with a new concrete building; therefore, the old building had to be relocated or demolished. The community formed the Old Tavernier Town Association, purchased the former church structure and some lots on U.S. 1.

After the Sunday school annex was removed, the building was first moved to Doug and Clara's Grocery to await permits and preparation of the newly acquired lots. Finally, in 1982 it was moved again to its present location at mile marker 91.7. The building is now the offices of the Free Press.

## The Tavernier Movie Theater (Hotel)

The 1930s were depression times for most, but Tavernier's H.S. McKenzie first operated an outdoor theater along with his other businesses. Evidently business was so good that he converted another small building as an indoor theater. In 1935 there were about 750 World War I veterans working in the Upper Keys building a highway to replace the auto ferry. They lived in three work camps and off-work entertainment was at a premium.

In early 1935 "Mac" decided to expand again and started to build an indoor, concrete-block theater but the Labor Day Hurricane intervened. His incompleted theater building was used as a first aid and Red Cross center. The building eventually was completed as a theater; however, the 1935 hurricane and the loss of the railroad had devastated the local economy.

In about 1939, the structure was converted to a hotel for a new type of business — tourism. There were few places for tourists, principally clients of fishing guides, to stay. Today, the building is the Tavernier Hotel at mile marker 91.8 oceanside.



## The Tavernier Tea Room

The small building on the right preceded the movie theater by a few years and had its own colorful past. Originally it was the Tavernier Tea Room and it was operated by H. S. "Mac" McKenzie when he first came to Tavernier in 1928. It is not certain whether Mac built the Tea Room or whether it came with his association with O.M. Woods. During Prohibition it was a popular gathering place, as the "tea room" was a liquor and gambling establishment. Mac's daughter, Joanne, recalls that her mother, Hazel, Dana White and Thelma Copy did work there. The building survived the 1935 hurricane, as did most of Tavernier.

The exact date is not known, but later the building became "Harry's Place" owned by Harry Harris. He moved the bar across the highway during World War II. Eventually Harry actually used it as his office while he was a county commissioner.

## The Artist: Cris Sandifer

Cris has spent most of her career working as a commercial artist and painting in her spare time. She has had her own art studio, Eldorado Graphics, in Key Largo for over 20 years creating publications, advertising and commercial design.

She attended the University of Kansas as a Fine Arts major and the Kansas City Art Institute. She has been a designer for Hallmark Cards and an art director for various electronic firms and advertising agencies. She works in watercolor, acrylics and oils as well as creating computer and digital art.

Cris has also been active in the community and is the immediate past President of the Purple Isles Art Guild and presently is Chairman of the Board of the Florida Keys Council of the Arts. She is also an avid sailor and a past Commodore of the Upper Keys Sailing Club.