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HCC in the News: Historians trace roots of South Hillsborough County communities

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A project celebrating the history of Ruskin, Wimauma, Gibsonton and other communities in south Hillsborough County is building momentum at the SouthShore campus of Hillsborough Community College (HCC).

The HCC campus in Ruskin is an historically appropriate place for the project to unfold, given that Ruskin was founded more than a century ago on the principles of higher education and intellectual expression.

Ruskin is just one of several communities, including Apollo Beach and Sun City Center, south of the Alafia River that will be profiled in the Southern Hillsborough Historical Connection, a virtual history compendium that is being built piece by piece on an HCC digital library website dedicated to the archival project. HCC SouthShore Dean Dr. Craig Hardesty has embraced the area's history since moving from a position at the HCC Plant City campus to the SouthShore campus when the latter opened in 2008.

"History is something I grew up with," says Hardesty, who was born in West Virginia and comes from a long line of coalminers.

Soon after becoming dean of the SouthShore campus [2], Hardesty was approached by a Ruskin native who traces his roots back to the community's early settlers.

"Dr. Arthur 'Mac' Miller came to me soon after I became Dean in 2013 and started telling me the history of the area," recounts Hardesty, who majored in math and minored in history at Marshall University [3] in West Virginia. "He said we need to preserve the history before it's gone. Like it or not, this area will look like Brandon in 20 years."

Ruskin history includes family legacy

Miller knows all too well how much his community has been changing in recent years. He's lived all of his 79 years in Ruskin, a community his grandfather, Dr. George Miller, helped establish when he and his family moved to the area from Missouri in 1906. Miller and his three brothers-in-law, A.P. Dickman, N.E. Dickman and L.L. Dickman, transformed thousands of acres of swamp, scrub and forest into a thriving agricultural community named in honor of English essayist and social philosopher John Ruskin, who believed in free education for individuals among the working classes.

The Ruskin Post Office was opened in 1908, and in 1910 the town was officially platted by the Ruskin Commongood Society as a cooperative "intentional community." It was the fifth and last U.S. town named Ruskin that was founded on communal utopian principles, and today is the only of these turn-of-the-century communities to remain.

In its early years, the community of Ruskin printed its own money called scrip, which was redeemable in land. Meanwhile, women could vote in Ruskin elections nearly a decade before women elsewhere in the United States gained the right to vote in 1920 upon the ratification of the 19th Amendment. Ruskin College offered locals vocational and academic courses; the college's main buildings burned down in 1918, and a year later closed its doors after Miller, who served as the school's president, passed away.

In the years that followed, Ruskin turned to its agricultural roots, becoming known as "The Nation's Salad Bowl," a place where tomatoes, lettuce and other crops grew in abundance. By the 1950s and '60s, the Ruskin name was seen in grocery store produce aisles from St. Louis to New York.

"Ruskin was at the epicenter of many agricultural innovations," Miller says. These include shipping grocery-ready produce in refrigerated trucks and packing produce in cellophane.

Ruskin remained principally an agricultural community into the 1980s. In 1986, Interstate-75 was completed through south Hillsborough County, and things soon began changing.

"Then came death by interstate and big-box store," says Miller, who recalls the plethora of mom-and-pop restaurants, stores and other establishments that once proliferated along U.S. 41 and U.S. 301 in Ruskin and other communities south of the Alafia River.

The Coffee Cup Restaurant was perhaps one of Ruskin's most significant business losses.

"It was the daily heartbeat of the community," says Miller of the diner that Ester and Paul Dickman built in 1927. Located near

the intersection of U.S. 41 and Shell Point Road, the Coffee Cup Restaurant was the place to go for good coffee, delicious homemade pies and even fried chicken.

In 1911, the Dickman family also built the house Miller lives in today. It is listed on the National Register of Historic Places and is an official landmark of Hillsborough County. The house is unsurprisingly a point of pride for Miller, who followed in the intellectual footsteps of his grandfather and served as a British literature professor at New College [4] in Sarasota from 1964 through 2003.

Miller's efforts to record Ruskin's roots are nothing new. He began tracing the community's history in earnest in the early 1970s.

"I have access to a lot of the town's history because it was kept in my family," says Miller. In the early 1980s, he recorded oral accounts from locals who were among some of the last members of the community's founding generation. With that early Ruskin generation now gone, Miller feels compelled to obtain whatever strips of early Ruskin history remain, including vintage photographs of those townspeople.

"We need to put names with the faces in these pictures while the people who remember them are still here," says Miller. "The conservation of local history is essential. Particularly since this part of Florida is susceptible to hurricanes."

Miller grimly points to an area of his home where many of his archives are stored. "It's three-and-a-half feet above sea level over there."

Archival digitization will save history for future

Miller believes one way he can spare his community's history from rising ocean levels, not to mention suburban sprawl, is with digital archiving. "The idea with digitization of this information on the internet is that we can have multiple overlaps so if we have a 10-foot tidal surge here our history isn't lost."

Until recently, much of Ruskin's history was stored in the form of photographs and community record books found only in Miller's home. However, over the past couple years, Miller has gained an enthusiastic archivist partner in HCC SouthShore librarian Kathleen Braund. She has taken up the cause of digitally preserving the history of Ruskin, Riverview, Balm, Boyette and nearby communities. Braund has been working with Miller to digitally scan or photograph every historic relic they can get their hands on.

"Dr. Miller has so many things," exclaims Braund, who has fallen in love with the area's history since moving to south Hillsborough County from Michigan in 2009.

Braund says she has added more than 5,000 items to the digital archive collection that she has built at the HCC SouthShore campus. It was a project she originally began working on alongside her fulltime job as a librarian at the college's library. The project became so large that she had to make a choice: continue working as a fulltime librarian or focus on the history project.

"I decided I'd work 20 hours per week as a librarian and focus my time and efforts on the history project." And so she has, recently stepping down as a fulltime HCC librarian and now finding herself headlong into the multiyear archiving project that she loves doing.

"I don't consider any part of this work hard," Braund says. "It's all fun. To learn all of this history -- it's amazing I can do that."

While the project has been a labor of love for Braund, funding the research and archiving efforts had become financially difficult. So she began searching for financial assistance to help fund the project. In April, she gratefully accepted a $20,000 grant from the Tampa Bay Community Foundation of Sun City Center to pay for archiving equipment such as a camera, computer and scanner. The money doesn't cover all of the project's expenses, but it goes a long way toward preserving pieces of the past.

These pieces include a license plate from local circus magnate John Ringling; many of his performers wintered in Gibsonton, a place known as "Showtown U.S.A.," where special zoning laws permit circus performers and carnival operators to keep live grizzly bears, ride equipment, and trapeze apparatus on their property.

Braund also recently photographed a commemorative T-shirt handed to those who attended the grand opening ceremony for Sun City Center in 1962. She's impressed that the popular retirement community, built by prolific developer Del Webb on 12,000 acres, still has its original street signs bearing names of silent era film stars such as Charlie Chaplin, Mary Pickford and Lon Chaney.

Other relics Braund has scanned capture Wimauma's early history as an important railroad head, the development of Apollo Beach by Del Webb in the 1960s, and the growth of Riverview, which was founded along the Alafia River in 1885. Also included in Braund's archive collection are reminders of south Hillsborough's more distant past. These include photographs and information profiling local prehistoric fossils, art and relics from the area's native peoples, artifacts from 16th-century Spanish explorers, and accounts of several regional ghost towns, including Ross, Peru, Boyette and Balm.

Researchers, locals and others interested in the area's past can find the growing archival collection at the Southern Hillsborough Historical Connection website [5]. "The goal is to link something about each community, including photos, history, trivia," Braund says.

She is requesting anybody who has anything vintage or historical in nature from any of the communities south of the Alafia River to please consider letting her know.

“It could be anything. Photo albums, school yearbooks, scrapbooks, newspaper clippings,” she notes. “I’ll even scan or photograph the items in their [owner’s] homes if they don’t want the objects out of sight.”

Nothing from south Hillsborough County’s past is too insignificant for Braund. “It really excites me to find these relics.”

Have a historic relic you want to share? Email Kathleen Braund [6] at Hillsborough Community College [7].

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