

**SARASOTA COUNTY WATER ATLAS
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
NEW COLLEGE OF FLORIDA — SPRING 2010**



Linda W. Mansperger has been the Executive Director of Gulf Coast Heritage Association, Inc., the not-for-profit organization that owns and operates Historic Spanish Point, one of Florida's premier historic sites, since 1985. She manages the restoration and interpretation of Historic Spanish Point, one of Florida's premier historic sites. With 30 acres overlooking Little Sarasota Bay, the site preserves and interprets 5,000 years of southwest Florida history. Open daily, Historic Spanish Point welcomes 28,000 visitors annually including 4,000 school children participating in curriculum-based field trips. The museum is accredited by the American Association of Museums.

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Quinn: So I thought maybe if we could start with a brief, general history of the site...

Mansperger: Okay.

Historic Spanish Point has three primary historical eras that's interpreted. The first is the prehistoric people arrived here as early as 3000 BC. We're talking about water—they were very much connected with the water and the bays. They were not farmers, they were hunters and gatherers anthropologically, and subsis... lived primarily off of the abundant seafood and naturally growing plants and vegetables that they could eat without having to cultivate crops. There's two shell mounds, or middens, at Historic Spanish Point. The oldest is Shell Ring Midden. It's the Archaic Period anthropologically, and that's the oldest one—3000 BC to around zero. Some of the earliest pottery in the United States has been found in that midden. "Midden" is another word for a garbage dump or mound. The other, the Shell Ridge Midden, is the one we interpret with the "Window to the Past" exhibition. I don't know if you went in that, but, but that is more, is also associated with the burial mound.

Quinn: Is that more the Calusa era or...?

Mansperger: It's pre-Calusa in that the people here—that one dates from about 300 BC to 1000 AD—and for reasons unknown to us the village at this location moved away. They may

have gotten sucked into the Calusa tribe, further south because of the time of European contact. That was a major (*pause*) community focal point.

Quinn: They had a big tribute network. Yeah.

Mansperger: So, as I said before, depending on the bays and the ocean for food sources was critical to these early populations. The next period of history at Historic Spanish Point was the John and Eliza Webb homestead. John and Eliza and their five children came here from Utica, New York, in 1867. This was just two years after the end of the American Civil War and four to six years after the passage of the Homestead Act, which was a federal law that gave people the right to claim up to 160 acres of federal land if they lived on it for five years and they made improvements on it. And John did that at Historic Spanish Point. Actually, I believe his, his parcel was 147 acres, which I attribute to the fact that it's an odd-shaped piece of property, but whether or not that had anything to do with it or not I've never really researched. A lot of Florida was settled by homesteaders just like the West was settled by homesteaders.

Quinn: Mm hmm.

Mansperger: And since we're talking about water... Again, water for transportation was critical to the Webbs. They came here by boat, the sailing schooner the *Sarah Helen* was coming from New York to Manatee, which was a bigger community at the time than Sarasota was. And actually, it wasn't going there; it stopped there. It was going to Cedar Key, where it was picking up wood to take back to the Favor Pencil company for making—cedar was a good kind of wood for making—pencils. And if you think about geography, if you're sailing down on a schooner on the East Coast of the United States, you go down by all the major points around the peninsula of Florida, and the *Sarah Helen* stopped at Key West. Interestingly enough, in 1867 Key West was probably the largest city in the entire state of Florida, and it was a major port of entry because it was right there on the Gulf Stream and everything was transported by water. While in Key West, John met a person that he later referred to in a letter as “an old Spanish trader.” My personal theory is that he was probably from Cuba, with Cuba 90 miles from Key West.

Quinn: And still a Spanish colony.

Mansperger: And still a Spanish colony at that time, or a Territory. So this Spanish trader told John about a high point of land a few miles south of where the Whitaker place was. The Whitakers were an early pioneer family in Sarasota. You may have heard of Whitaker Bayou.

Quinn: Indeed.

Mansperger: So that's their history. So John and Eliza did go to Manatee. They looked around for several months finding a place to claim as their homestead, and then did select what is now part of Spanish Point. And named it Spanish Point because of the obvious point of land that extends out into Little Sarasota Bay, which as we now know is a prehistoric shell mound or midden, and in honor or because of the Spanish trader. So our institution took the name Historic Spanish Point simply to help people of the day to understand that this is not another residential section, it is a historic site museum, and so we put “historic.” But that's the story of Spanish Point. So talking about John and Eliza Webb and their five children, homesteading here—They, they were certainly very industrious people. And for a museum that wants to interpret a time pe-

riod, we couldn't have asked for a better poster child to be our representative, because they got involved in several major Florida industries of not only the 19th century but continuing to today. They put in, eventually had over ten acres in cultivation, much of which was in citrus. And the Florida citrus industry is still pretty important today. And you mentioned earlier the Webb packing house...

Quinn: Yeah.

Mansperger: ...so in order to get their crops to market, they packed fruit here at that packing house and then again through the waterways on their own sailboats and various crafts would take that produce either back to Key West or to get packed on larger schooners and shipped up north. Or sometimes they'd sail it to Cedar Key, because by the time they were established there was a railroad line that went as far as Cedar Key. Again Cedar Key was quite an early—you know, today, it's not much but historically it was a major port. Again because, then, it was connected to the railroads. So we're able to interpret the early citrus industry and the importance of the water transportation to get those crops to market.

Secondly, John and Eliza Webb quickly realized that they were not going to successfully maintain a lifestyle that they wanted to enjoy and were thinking that diversifying their income streams, and began to take in winter boarders, what we would call, we would call them tourists today. But they were always referred to them as "winter boarders," and they began what they called Webb's Winter Resorts, one of the first tourist establishments in Sarasota County. Again, very nice for us in this museum business to be talking about the start of tourism in our area which is very important today as well. And they would go to Manatee which was a... or soon became Bradenton... or up to Sarasota to pick up boarders, who would come from other places by boat and later by railroad and bring them to Historic Spanish Point by boat. I mean, we like to think of the, the waterways as you know, as the main highways of that time period. There was no [U.S. Highway] 41 at that time, there was no [Interstate Highway] I-75. You know, to travel anywhere would be by ox cart if they had to go to the county seat. Manatee, it was all part of Manatee County, at that time. At one point in time the county seat was way east. I'm drawing a blank on where it was right now, thought it may come to me later, but they would have had to go by ox cart and it would take like two days, where they could sail in a few days to Bradenton. You know water transportation to them.

And just as a little sidebar, by the 1870s there were actually scientists from the Smithsonian Institution coming here to do research, someone like conchologist—what do they call the people who study shells? I want to say, I don't know what the right word is—but coming and staying and Webb's Winter Resort, so there's... There was certainly a scientific community coming here as winter boarders. And part of that then, a third industry that they got involved with, two of the Webb sons and then a son-in-law, Frank Guptill, operated a boat-building facility here—we have some interpretation of that—so they were actually building their own boats. Repairing boats, again making that connection, because they knew how critical it was to be able to be connected. John and Eliza applied for the post office for Osprey and named it Osprey so there's that connection.

The third era of Historical Spanish Point surrounds Mrs. Potter Palmer. Palmer was a wealthy widow of a Chicago entrepreneur businessman, Potter Palmer, and at the age of 61—I believe

she was 61—she gave up her life in Europe, probably because World War I rumblings were starting to happen, and decided to visit Florida and came down here. She had two sons, adult sons by that time, and what is significant about Palmer is that within the eight years of her life here she gradually acquired one fourth of present day Sarasota County.

Quinn: Yeah, I know.

Mansperger: And see, you see a lot of references to Palmer’s name again. She travelled by boat the first time she came down here and eventually the railroad was extended to Sarasota and she was instrumental in getting the railroad extended from Sarasota down to Venice. Which would have stopped here, so. You know the connection to the water was important during her time. And this won’t impact your report, but what was so important to us is that, then, what is Historic Spanish Point—the thirty acres—remained in the Palmer family for the next sixty years. And it was her grandson that sponsored archaeological work on the property that really documented the shell mounds or middens, and it was her grandchildren that supported the listing of the property on the National Register of Historic Places, and it really documents the remnants of what was the pioneer homestead and the prehistoric village. And so then the next natural step was finally was for the heirs of Mrs. Palmer to donate the National Register site to the not-for-profit that operates today, and that happened in 1980. So we’re celebrating thirty years and were celebrating the 100th anniversary of when Palmer came to this area, so having said all of that, that’s sort of the history, and I think that kind of answers your first question. Probably more in detail...

Quinn: That was excellent.

Mansperger: (*Gesturing*) I have to move my hands, I’m glad we’re not on TV,

Quinn: (*Laughs*)

Mansperger: See all this “What’s she doing with her hands stuff?”

Quinn: It seems to me that both the Webb family and the... Mrs. Palmer were instrumental in a lot of different industries, most particularly the citrus and the tourist industry in kind of like taking what Flagler and Julia Tuttle did on the East Coast and bring that to the West Coast and really cementing those two industries as central to the region’s economy. Um, hmm. I think.

Mansperger: Want me to expand on that a little bit?

Quinn: Maybe, a little bit, yeah.

Mansperger: Okay, because I know a little bit about Florida history and I think of—do you know Miami at all—because you mentioned Flagler?

Quinn: Yeah.

Mansperger: Well, down in Coconut Grove there is a Peacock Inn... I don’t know if you’re familiar with Coconut Grove. It’s a very—it’s probably one of the oldest villages of what later became Miami, and it predated when Julia Tuttle came. And it induced Flagler to bring his railroad, that... They were contemporaries of Palmer—early 1900s. The little Peacock Inn was a tourist

resort with winter boarders for the same time that the Webbs were running Webb's Winter Resorts. It's interesting that they called them winter boarders, we call them winter boarders. We actually have some people, that... It was the Gilpen family that spent several months at Peacock Inn and spent time at Webb's Winter Resort. So there's a real connection of the two, although I don't think that the Webbs and the Peacocks knew each other. And there was a gentleman that came to Coconut Grove by the name of Ralph Munroe who is credited with bringing a style of sailboat to Florida called the Sharpie. I don't know if you've heard of the Sharpie sailboat before, but it's a shallow-draft vessel that's ideal for shallow bay water.

Quinn: Yeah, get stuck out there easy.

Mansperger: And it may have been instrumental in Biscayne Bay, but it was even more instrumental on the West Coast of Florida, or at least in this area because our bays are...

Quinn: ...very shallow, sand bar everywhere, yeah.

Mansperger: Yeah, there's that other connection of Ralph Munroe in bringing that. Now Flagler, you know, came to Miami 19...

Quinn: Right around the turn of the century,

Mansperger: 1901, 1902... and of course Palmer's over here in 1910, but you know they're more similar cause he's a millionaire from the oil industry that brought his hotel and gradually worked down (*drawing map in the air*)—I should do this backwards—worked down the East Coast (looking at you) and Palmer came down and came over to the West Coast. But she wasn't like Plant and Flagler, she wasn't into the big hotels. She never built any big hotels. She did s...

Quinn: She did more of a ranching and...

Mansperger: Yeah the big ranching... She—now she did some—she was into real estate development and she talked about planned communities.

Quinn: Which is a huge thing here, too...

Mansperger: Yes, which is huge but never, you know, never doing, Tampa Hotel—you know, where the University of Tampa is now—what Flagler did. Not with The Breakers and up in St. Augustine. So they were different in that aspect, but they both came from the money side of stuff and came to Florida and saw opportunities to be invest... to invest. So what I like about Palmer though, is, you know, we identify with her that, you know, that she was a woman doing this stuff.

Quinn: Mm hmm.

Mansperger: The men, you know, they were everywhere. She was certainly a woman ahead of her time. And she had the money to do it and that, of course, made a difference. She didn't have to claw her way up, she had the money to do it, so...

Quinn: Do you know if she might have been active in the women's suffrage movement, or...

Mansperger: She was, yes and no. She was not a suffragette. You know, she didn't, you know, chain herself to the White House or anything like that, but she was very much a supporter of women's rights and sort of different... She wasn't concerned about them getting the right to vote. She was more interested in them getting educated and in getting equal opportunities for jobs and for being able to improve their own standings and social skills, etc. But I never really, you know... She didn't focus on they've got to have the right to vote. That's a little different than some of her contemporaries.

Quinn: She kind of more of uh, say, a parallel movement, to a Booker T. Washington kind of than the Du Bois.

Mansperger: Exactly, exactly... So, in fact, one of the outstanding things about Palmer is that she was the chair of the Board of Lady Managers for the Women's Building at the Columbian Exposition.

Quinn: Interesting.

Mansperger: And the Columbian Exposition was in Chicago.

Quinn: Yeah

Mansperger: In 1893—they missed 1892 by a year

Quinn: Something out of my favorite history books.

Mansperger: Oh, you liked that?

Quinn: Yeah.

Mansperger: Well, you might have read that Mrs. Palmer was referenced in that a few times, but...

Quinn: But I didn't make the connection

Mansperger: Well, that's our Mrs. Palmer

Quinn: Yeah.

Mansperger: And you know I can... I'll paraphrase what her speech was at the dedication. It was something to the effect of, that it's interesting that the federal government—no, what, no—I'm going to mess this up, Justin. Let's see, something to... I want you to get this quote right, I mean, just for your own personal stuff. So I'll have to read it to you, because I'm starting to paraphrase, and it's coming out sounding weird.

Quinn: *(Laughs)*

Mansperger: Let's see if I have it...

Quinn: I have trouble paraphrasing myself, so...

Mansperger: (*Laughs*). I like that. Oh, gosh, don't tell me I didn't quote her in this.. Hmm. Ah, here it is: "Even more important than the discovery of Columbus, which we are gathered together to celebrate, is the fact that the general government has just discovered women'. Palmer asserted that women have no desire to be helpless and dependent. Having the full use of their faculties, they rejoice in exercising them. This is entirely in conformity with the trend of modern thought and the right of self development. 'Our highest aim now is to train each to find happiness in the full and healthy exercises of the gifts bestowed by a generous nature. Ignorance is too expensive and wasteful to be tolerated. We advocate, therefore, the thorough education and training of women, to fit her to meet whatever fate life may bring, not only to prepare her for the factory and workshop for the professions and arts, but most important than all else to prepare her for presiding over the home'." So, anyway... So that's, that's sort of a comparison of Palmer and where her focus was.

Quinn: The depiction of the Columbian Exposition and her connection—the area's connection—to what... a lot of things people think of as modern, like the women's rights movement and real estate development and tourism and globalizing forces. Um, all these different connections, all across the country, even the world. I think it's really impressive that, that it's been around for over a hundred years...

Mansperger: (*Laughs*) Yes.

Quinn: And people think that this is a recent phenomenon.

Mansperger: Um hmm, um hmm...

Quinn: Let me see if I have anything else that we haven't covered... (*Pause*) I think we have just about everything I wrote down from the website and the literature of topics to cover. You were really succinct and focused.

Mansperger: Well, thank you, you know...

Quinn: Can you think of anything you want to add?

Mansperger: Well, the only... the, you know... As a museum today—and I know you're talking about water and Sarasota County and all that kind of stuff—you know, the other commitment that this organization has, as a museum, is to protect and interpret the natural environment. And you certainly saw that when you walked around, you know.

Quinn: Mmm, yeah.

Mansperger: We want people to understand what the mangroves are. We want them to understand...

Quinn: ...what sea grapes are, and I never knew that you can use them for jam. Yeah.

Mansperger: Yes. Yeah, or... and the unique thing—"unique" is an overworked word and I'll take that out—but an *interesting* thing about Historic Spanish Point is because it falls at the northern edge of the tropical zone and the southern edge of temperate, sort of subtropical, you

know, in this area. But we're on the water and so we have, like, over two hundred species of plants that grow just on that little thirty acres—native plants that grow on just that little thirty acres. So people can really see a rich variety of native plants, whether it's the gumbo limbo which is a tropical tree and doesn't grow much further north than this, or something that's, you know, that's in its southern range, like the southern magnolia, you won't find southern magnolias growing in Naples and you won't see gumbo limbo growing, you know, up even in Clearwater, probably, unless somebody plants it and nurtures it and keeps it... So, so you know the value of the property beyond its prehistoric and historic value is also that it's...

Quinn: Ecologically transitional.

Mansperger: Ecologically transitional... I like that, and a showcase for people to come see, you know. You may have noticed our butterfly garden for example, primarily made of plants in that butterfly garden. And I'll never forget when we dedicated that and all these, the butterflies hopping around, and if you've gone to some butterfly gardens at other places, like at the University of Florida they have a huge one at the museum of Florida.

Quinn: Massachusetts has one, too.

Mansperger: Massachusetts yeah. They're always enclosed.

Quinn: Yeah.

Mansperger: And some of them said, "Well, how do you keep the butterflies to stay here since you don't have it enclosed?" Uh, light bulb, you have the plants that they like (*laughs*), they're going to hang out. You know. And you have to have the plants that the caterpillars like as well as the plants that the butterflies like. But you'll have a plethora of butterflies just by having the right plants. You don't have to screen it all in or anything like that. I understand that certain museums have collections and they have rare butterflies and they have... they need to screen them in, and I'm not faulting them, but you can... When you want to showcase for people that come and visit, you know, they can just put a few plants in their backyard and...

Quinn: ...get the same kind of thing.

Mansperger: ...and have butterflies. It doesn't take anything, you know, so we're proud of the fact that we preserve a lot of native plants and we try to showcase that and educate people about that. So I think that ties into the whole water thing, you know, they get the vistas that they get to see the shoreline plants that they get to see. So, if you use that or not that's up to you but I wanted to add that.

Quinn: Well, I'll try to. It's getting into the transcript, that's for sure.

Mansperger: Okay. Good. Alright, that's about all I have to say.

Quinn: Very good. Thank you.

Mansperger: Alright. Thank you.