

Twentieth Century Journey: A History of the City of Oakland Park

Broward County Comprehensive Survey Phase XI

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Introduction

In its twelve year existence, the Historic Broward County Preservation Board has identified, evaluated, protected, and interpreted Broward County's historical resources. Moreover, each year since 1981, the Board's manager has written and compiled a lengthy narrative history of one of Broward's most significant communities. Hollywood, Dania, Davie, Pompano Beach, Deerfield Beach, Plantation, Hallandale, Fort Lauderdale, and Oakland Park have served as subjects for developmental histories.

In addition to a detailed history of the community of Oakland Park, the Broward County Comprehensive Survey Phase XII contains a listing of the city's most historic structures, as well as a listing and description of each of the thirteen properties in Broward County that are listed on the National Park Service's National Register of Historic Places, the official list of buildings, structures, sites, districts and objects that are considered significant in American history, architecture, archaeology, engineering, and culture, and deemed worthy of preservation. Although the number of such structures is relatively small, it is growing rapidly as Broward Countians are beginning to evince a strong awareness and appreciation for their historic built environment.

The Broward County Commission has enthusiastically supported historic preservation in the county for many years. The Historic Broward County Preservation Board has been the beneficiary of its largesse for more than a decade. Beth Chavez, Assistant Director of the Division of Public Services, has assisted the Board with county-related matters for several years. Mary Becht, Director of the Broward County Cultural Affairs Council, has also been very helpful and supportive.

Several persons were instrumental in the completion of this work. My greatest debt lies with Rodney Dillon, Coordinator of the Broward County Historical Commission. Mr. Dillon guided me to valuable source material on the City of Oakland Park, encouraged my work, and provided it with sagacious editing. Dorothy Bryan, scion of a pioneer Fort Lauderdale family, and Helen Landers, Broward County historian, who also work for the Broward County Historical Commission, were very helpful, too. Darleen Mitchell, former Clerk of the City of Oakland Park and a pioneer member of that community, and Carol Gold, Assistant City Clerk, as well as other members of that municipality's administration, were extremely helpful in providing information and records for my perusal. Midge Turpen, Oakland Park historian at the time of her death in 1989, first piqued my interest in the community through her enthusiasm for and knowledge of its history.

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Chapter One

In the Beginning—The Oakland Park Area in Early Times

Located in the geographic center of eastern Broward County, bustling Oakland Park claimed 27,000 residents by the early 1990s. Incorporated first as the City of Floranada in 1925, and four years later, as the City of Oakland Park, this municipality comprises 6.77 square miles. A residential community with busy retail centers, a large array of warehouses, and small manufacturing plants, Oakland Park lies nearly three quarters of a mile west of the Atlantic Intracoastal Waterway. Oakland Park's boundaries are highly irregular and, with few exceptions, are not defined by natural features, like many other communities. Oakland Park shares borders with several other Broward communities. Oakland Park abuts Fort Lauderdale and Tamarac on the north, Wilton Manors and unincorporated Broward County on the south, Fort Lauderdale (again) on the east, and Lauderdale Lakes on the west. The north fork of the Middle River, a major stream that stretched from the Everglades east to the East Coast Canal (part of today's Atlantic Intracoastal Waterway, it consisted of the waters lying immediately north of today's East Las Olas Boulevard) lies south of Oakland Park and comprises a tiny portion of its southern border; the C-13 canal, an arm of the South Florida Water Management District, lies near the northwest perimeter of the community.¹

Historically, Oakland Park has been defined, both spatially and commercially, by two artificial features. In 1896, the rolling stock of Henry M. Flagler's Florida East Coast Railway (FEC) punctured the wilds of south Florida, bringing dramatic changes to the area. The FEC's right-of-way proceeded on a slight southwesterly diagonal through the future Oakland Park en route to the Miami River. Nearly twenty years later, roadbuilders completed the Dixie Highway, the first roadway connecting south Florida with the northern United States. The Dixie Highway runs parallel to the FEC tracks. Both roadways served as the focal points for a tiny farming community that arose slowly around them. Both but especially the railroad, served as commercial spurs to farmers and other mercantile interests in Oakland Park. Each continued to play a major role in the community's commercial activities until after World War II, when other modes of transportation stripped the rail of much of its importance, and I-95 and the Florida Turnpike, the "super highways" west of the Dixie Highway, drew a significant volume of traffic away from the old road.

Fifty years ago, Oakland Park was overwhelmingly rural and contained just 815 residents; cows and hogs still strayed on to the city's primitive roads, to the consternation of many residents. The city's meteoric growth since then has been inextricably bound to the spiraling development of Broward County. Created in 1915 from portions of Palm Beach and Dade Counties, rural Broward County claimed 39,394 residents in 1940. Fifty years later, the county contained 1.25 million residents. Today's Oakland Park is virtually indistinguishable from countless residential communities that comprise Broward County. Vacant land is sparse, and memories of its recent, rural past have receded.²

In earlier times, the area hosting today's Oakland Park was a dense wilderness dotted with pine trees and palmetto scrub. The city rests upon a coastal ridge, an oolite limestone bluff that

undergirds the eastern sector of Dade and Broward Counties and represents the only high ground between the Atlantic Ocean and the Everglades. Two feet below the surface of the land lies solid rock. East of the ridge the warm waters of the Atlantic Ocean have proved a seductive lure to generations of residents and visitors. Several miles west of the ocean, the ridge gave way to the Everglades, a slow moving, freshwater swamp sixty miles wide and one hundred miles long that stretched across the lower Florida peninsula. Following Everglades reclamation, or drainage, in the early 1900s, settlement pushed west of the ridge; the borders of today's Oakland Park attest to this movement, since they include a vast area of reclaimed swamp land.³

Recent archaeological discoveries suggest that human beings inhabited parts of today's Broward County several thousand years ago. The Tequesta Indians, the first residents identified and named, roamed the region from the Florida Keys to southern Palm Beach County between the Atlantic Ocean and the western environs of the peninsula. The Tequestas represented one of six major Indian groups, consisting of several hundred thousand members that occupied Florida at the time of the first Spanish contact in 1513. Hunters, fishermen, and food gatherers, these aborigines built a camp on New River 2,000 years ago.⁴

European contact proved cataclysmic for Florida's aborigines. Victimized by European-introduced diseases, slave raiders, and internecine warfare, the Tequestas, who claimed several thousand tribesmen at the time of the *entrada*, saw their ranks diminish alarmingly until they disappeared in the late 1700s. With the extinction of the Tequesta, the area encompassing today's Broward County was bereft of people.

By the late eighteenth century, Spain had controlled Florida as a colony for more than 200 years. The Second Spanish Period, a reference to Spain's final era of control following a twenty year British interlude, stretched from 1783 to 1821, at which time the Iberian power sold Florida to the United States for \$5 million. The Second Spanish Period was marked by a sharp departure in policy from the earlier or First Spanish Period. In the latter era, Spanish encouraged settlement in Florida in an effort to develop the underpopulated, isolated and impoverished colony. By the final decade of the 1700s, a tiny number of settlers had accepted the generous Spanish offer of land and were living along the banks of the New River. A short, deepwater stream, the New River received its name from the Spanish because the forces of nature had change its contours over time giving it the appearance of a new body of water.⁵

By the early decades of the 1800s, several families, who were engaged in agriculture, wrecking, and coontie starch making, comprised the New River colony. Wrecking, also called salvaging, involved the retrieval of ship cargo from disabled vessels on the Great Florida Reef; a watery bramble bush lying near the shoreline of Broward County, the reef took its toll of hundreds of ships in the region in the nineteenth century. Upon learning of the presence of a ship on the reef, wreckers hurried to it to salvage the vessel's cargo. Wrecking provoked great controversy because of the gusto employed by its operatives in stripping a disabled vessel, as well as their fees for this service. With the establishment of a United States District Court in Key West in the second decade of the nineteenth century, salvaging became regulated. The appearance of

lighthouses reduced the number of ships victimized by the reef, thereby weakening the industry as the nineteenth century progressed.⁶

While wrecking remained a viable “industry” in southeast Florida for much of the nineteenth century, the production of coontie starch proved even more significant and long-lived. Most settlers in nineteenth century Broward County knew the technique, contrived by the Indians, for converting the tuberous root of the short coontie plant, *Zamia floridana*, with its thin green leaves, into starch. Manufacturers crushed the root with mortar and pestle, then washed and strained the edible starch from the toxic residue. Called coontie or comptie, the starch was marketed under the name arrowroot. Arrowroot was used for baking bread, wafers and biscuits.⁷

Wrecking and coontie starch manufacturing were, in addition to farming, the chief livelihoods of the colony living on both banks of the New River in 1830. Six years later, the community had virtually vanished following an Indian massacre of the family of William Cooley, who lived on the north bank of the river near the forks. The massacre represented one of the most sensational chapters in the long, bloody Second Seminole War (1835-1842), waged between the Seminole Indians and American forces.

Renegade members of the huge Creek nation inhabiting Georgia and other part of the southeast United States, the Seminoles came to Florida at the behest of the Spanish in the early 1700s and served as mercenaries along the colony’s northern border, which had suffered punishing British raids from Carolina for many years. Their numbers remained small at the time of the American acquisition of Florida. While Spain was unsuccessful in developing Florida during her lengthy stay, the United States moved quickly in that direction. Rapacious American land seekers prevailed upon their government to remove Indians still living in Florida whom they believed were impediments to the territory’s development. The presidency of Andrew Jackson (1829-1837), an inveterate Indian hater, marked the apex of the American effort to remove all of the Indian groups east of the Mississippi to Indian country, west of the river. When a faction of Seminoles, led by Osceola, opposed the removal effort, the Second Seminole War erupted in December 1835. Less than one month later, the Cooley massacre took place. Sixty years passed before another New River community arose along the broad banks of the stream.⁸

In addition to depopulating the New River community, the Second Seminole War led to the establishment of a fort in 1838 near the forks of New River. A small, unimposing complex on the north bank of the stream contained room for soldiers and a defensive picket. Forts in that era often received their name for the soldier in charge of the force responsible for their construction. In this case, the fort was named for Major William Lauderdale, who commanded the force charged not only with constructing a fort on New River, but also ridding the area of Seminole Indians. Major Lauderdale’s troops and subsequent military forces met with some success in this mission, but settlers refused to return to New River.

Population figures underscore this point. In 1836, Florida's territorial legislature created Dade County, which initially included today's Broward County and several other parts of southeast Florida. A vast unsettled area, Dade County, by the 1870s, stretched for more than 170 miles in a north-south direction; yet it contained just eight-five settlers at the outset of that decade. As late as 1890, the county included less than 900 inhabitants, a small percentage of whom resided in today's Broward County. By the latter part of the nineteenth century, however, developments were underway that would dramatically transform the vast wilderness into an area dotted with several communities.⁹

In 1890, the first concerted effort to farm commercially in the area of Broward County appeared with the activities of the Florida Fiber Company, which purchased 1,310 acres on the Middle River for the cultivation of sisal hemp, a fibrous plant used in the manufacture of rope and other textiles. This agricultural experiment, however, failed, and the company discontinued operations in 1895.¹⁰

In 1891, a United States Post Office opened at the Fort Lauderdale House of Refuge, a federally-operated beach facility designed to assist mariners involved in accidents. In 1892, the County-authorized Lantana Road, stretching from Lantana on the southern edge of Lake Worth in Palm Beach County to Lemon City near Miami, opened for traffic. Soon after, the Biscayne Bay Stageline began operating over the new pathway. The road extended through part of today's Oakland Park.¹¹

Later in the decade, the activities of Henry M. Flagler and his Florida East Coast Railway would radically transform all of southeast Florida. A multi-millionaire from his partnership with John D. Rockefeller in Standard Oil, Flagler had retired to St. Augustine in the 1880s, but soon grew restless. By the middle of the decade, Flagler had abandoned his retirement and plunged into developing a rail and hotel empire along Florida's undeveloped East Coast. By 1894, Flagler's jerry-rigged railroad, later called the Florida East Coast Railway, stretched from his headquarters in St. Augustine to West Palm Beach. Julia Tuttle, and William and Mary Brickell, Miami's leading citizens, offered Flagler large amounts of land if he would extend his rail to the Miami River; Flagler spurned these offers until the winter of 1894-1895 brought a great freeze and widespread destruction to the state's agricultural crops, but spared those in south Florida. This development caused the railroad baron to reconsider, because it became apparent to him that the region's mild weather made it conducive to year-round agriculture and a consequent carrying business for his railroad, as well as a flourishing tourist trade.

A widow who lived on the north bank of the Miami River, the persistent Tuttle had offered Flagler one-half of her 620 acre tract of prime land, while the Brickell family, which operated an Indian trading post on the south bank of the stream, also offered a portion of their vast holdings in Miami and Fort Lauderdale, at the time a tiny settlement hosting an Indian trading post and the county road's ferry crossing over the New River. Flagler met with Tuttle in the spring of 1895 and agreed to extend his railroad to Miami in exchange for the proffered land, as well as an additional right of way acreage from the State of Florida.¹²

Soon large work gangs were clearing vast wilderness areas and laying rails through Dade County. The first train steamed into Fort Lauderdale on February 22, 1896; two months later, the railroad crossed the New River on its way to Miami. As part of his agreement with Julia Tuttle, Flagler consented to create a city on the Miami River and build a large tourist hotel near its mouth. Flagler was less committed to developing Fort Lauderdale which he viewed as a settlement primarily suited for agriculture.¹³

The entry of the railroad into today's Broward County made the area, for the first time, readily accessible to other parts of the state. This enhanced accessibility brought growing numbers of settlers and visitors to the area. It also led to an agricultural boom, as farming communities stretched along the railroad's right of way, from Deerfield in the north to Hallandale near the southern border of today's Broward County. Each was linked to outside markets by the railroad. With the continuing influx of settlers, Dade County's population rose to 4,955 by 1900, and to nearly 34,000 ten years later. Fort Lauderdale, whose population was negligible in the early 1890s, claimed fifty-two residents in 1900, and 143 ten years later. With their populations growing quickly, Dania and Pompano incorporated as towns in 1904 and 1908, respectively.¹⁴

Chapter Two

The Early Oakland Park Community

The area encompassing Oakland Park also felt the impact of the railroad's entry in the region, and its recorded history began soon after that event. Thomas, "Uncle Tom" Whidby, the first settler for whom there is recorded information, arrived in Fort Lauderdale from Georgia in 1899 at the age of thirty-four with hopes of restoring his failing health in the area's mild climate. He purchased parcel of pine and palmetto wilderness near the county road and built a house on a portion of the property. The Whidby tract was located in the northeastern portion of today's Oakland Park. The Whidbys' first winter in south Florida was uncharacteristically cold, causing the discouraged settler's return to Georgia. Whidby and his wife came back to south Florida in 1901 and built another house on the same site. Whidby built a farm near today's N.E. Thirty-Eighth Street and the Florida East Coast Railway tracks. He remained at that location until his death in 1952 at age eighty-six.¹⁵

The Whidbys counted few neighbors in their early years in Oakland Park. Tom Whidby remembered Joe G. Farrow, a part-time resident, as well as a "colored bachelor" whose surname was Poole (Whidby failed to mention his first name). Farrow came from Georgia to Fort Lauderdale in the 1890s, and opened the Biscayne Stagecoach Line for Frank Stranahan, who settled on the New River at that time.

There was also a Seminole Indian camp to the northwest of Whidby's property. Nearby was a body of slow moving water, today's Cypress Creek; the Indians called it Saukee Hatchee. They crafted dugout canoes from the cypress trees in the region. These vessels were especially suited for navigating the waters of southeast Florida.

Whidby characterized his Indian neighbors as "good people," whom he "trusted...with anything, and they never disappointed me." Seminoles hunted rabbit, deer, quail, turkey, doves, alligators, bear, wildcats and panthers in the vicinity of Whidby's homestead. There were five Indian mounds in the area. They were not, however, burial sites, but markers for areas containing concealed Indian valuables.¹⁶

Farming was the primary livelihood for the few settlers living along the coastal ridge in that era. These settlers cultivated a wide variety of crops. The region's soil varied from muck near the beach to sandy ground in the vicinity of the railroad tracks, which represented the heart of early Oakland Park. Although the soil and topography were not ideal for a vigorous agriculture, the crop yield, nonetheless, was bountiful because farmers planted in the rich river valleys. Moreover, tomatoes, beans, and other popular crops did not required extremely rich soil for cultivation. Elizabeth Warren, who came with her family to nearby Pompano in 1899, recalled that her father grew tomatoes, bell peppers, and eggplant. The family raised "all kinds of vegetables" in its private garden. Other common crops were pineapples, string beans, sweet corn, palmetto cabbage, and seagrapes. Some citrus groves were also present in the area. Farther south in the bustling farming community of Dania, tomatoes, citrus, potatoes, peppers,

squash, eggplants, beans, peas, cauliflower, and cabbage grew in abundance. Nearby Hallandale offered more than twenty varieties of vegetables.¹⁷

Almost as critical to the development of the Broward County area as the entry of the railroad was Everglades reclamation, a state-sponsored program for draining the wetlands that began in 1906. Advocates of converting the wetlands into rich farming communities had actively espoused the idea since the mid-nineteenth century. In 1850, the Congress of the United States enacted a law awarding to the states their wetland areas for the purpose of drainage. Florida received ten million acres of swamp land under the terms of this act. Shortly thereafter, the State of Florida created the administrative machinery to bring reclamation closer to reality.¹⁸

In 1882, Hamilton Disston, a wealthy Philadelphia saw maker with an abiding interest in Florida as a fishing paradise, purchased four million acres of wetlands for twenty-five cents an acre. Employing dredges to create drainage canals, Disston reclaimed about 50,000 acres of swampland primarily in central Florida. Farming communities appeared on a portion of the reclaimed land. Sugarcane, rice, potatoes, peaches, grapes, pineapples and many varieties of vegetables grew in the rich muck land while cattle grazed on virgin grass. Although Disston's economic difficulties and death in the early 1890s ended his ambitious plans for reclamation, he had demonstrated that the endeavor could succeed. Disston's financial problems with the experiment also indicate that an undertaking of that scope was generally beyond the means of private capital.¹⁹

Another decade passed before reclamation activity again commenced. Florida Governor William B. Jennings, a champion of drainage, served as a trustee of the Internal Improvement Fund, which managed swamp and overflowed lands. In 1904, he announced that "his first and chief duty in handling (these lands) was to have them drained and reclaimed." Jennings outlined a plan to lower the water level through the creation of canals from Lake Okeechobee to both coasts of Florida.²⁰

The movement for Everglades reclamation reached fruition during the memorable tenure of Jennings' successor Napoleon Bonaparte Broward, Florida's governor from 1905-1909. Broward ran for governor on an ambitious platform that championed Everglades drainage. For Broward the Everglades contained the richest soil in the world. By converting the swamp into farmland through drainage, Florida would be able to raise enough sugarcane to satisfy the entire national need. Broward also believed that the reclaimed Everglades would ultimately serve as the nation's "breadbasket." He predicted that a system of public drainage ditches would successfully and safely drain the Everglades. Broward received strong assistance for his program of Everglades drainage from the State Legislature.²¹

Everglades reclamation began under State auspices in the summer of 1906, as the Everglades, a large drainage dredge, cut a ditch in a westerly direction from the north fork segment of the New River's South Fork, and, in the process, created the North New River Canal. A second dredge began cutting the South New River Canal ten months later. Drainage followed dredging as nearby swamp water flowed into the new canals. Workers removed and burned the

sawgrass that formerly grew above the watery surface of the Everglades, thereby exposing its rich soil. Tomato, sugarcane, and other crops grew quickly in the reclaimed lands.²²

Everglades drainage was beset with technological and financial problems; the State finally withdrew its sponsorship of the costly program following the collapse of the Florida real estate boom of the mid-1920s. Long before then, the drainage canal system in Broward County had been completed, with the North New River and Hillsboro Canals reaching Lake Okeechobee deep in the Everglades; the South New River Canal joined the Miami Canal, which also flowed into the lake.²³

Everglades reclamation dramatically changed the destiny of southeast Florida by significantly increasing the amount of habitable land in the region. Until then, only the coastal ridge and scattered areas of high ground west of it were suitable for settlement. With drainage, settlement began its inexorable push westward, a movement that continues today. Drainage contracts brought additional persons and national attention to southeast Florida. The future of Fort Lauderdale, destined to become Broward County's flagship city, was ensured as produce from newly-reclaimed land moved by way of the North New River Canal and the New River to the Florida East Coast Railway for shipment to outside markets. Drainage also brought a wave of land speculation. After 3,000 new owners of reclaimed Everglades land poured into Fort Lauderdale for a land "lottery" in March 1911, startled residents decided to incorporate as a town. Four years later, Broward County incorporated, but only after rancorous politicking at the local and state levels of government. The State named the new entity for Governor Napoleon B. Broward, the person most responsible for its early development.²⁴

Without the creation of Broward County, the area that would later become Oakland Park grew slowly amid a region of small farms called Colohatchee. Colohatchee stretched north from today's N.E. Sixteen Street to Commercial Boulevard and west from the FEC Railway tracks to Powerline Road. Few people lived there. Darlene Mitchell, a lifetime resident of Oakland Park, averred that when her grandparents arrived in 1914, there was "nothing there." Many years later she still "wasn't allowed to walk home at night along Dixie Highway not because of any crime, but because there were wildcats living near the North Fork of Middle River."²⁵

Even with its tiny population, the area comprising the future Oakland Park hosted a school as early as 1914. Mattie Raulerson Baker, who hailed from Volusia County and held a college degree, opened the Prospect School amid cramped quarters in her brother's home in the region of today's Oakland Park. Mrs. Baker taught fourteen students, grades one through six, in the 1914-1915 school year. In September 1915, the Prospect School moved east of its original venue, but remained within the confines of Colohatchee, as students received instruction in a converted barn owned by Tom Whidby. The school's enrollment rose to twenty. Children living a mile or two south of the Prospect School attended the Fort Lauderdale School. E.A. Bras of Colohatchee transported them to school in a canvas-covered wagon pulled by ponies. One resident recalled that these children "would jump in and out of the wagon, pick flowers, chase small game and fowls, and engage in 'devilments' on their way to school."²⁶

By 1918, several farming families had moved into the community and had established farms. Many built simple pine cottages; some placed rough stucco over the wood. By then, the Colohatchee Women's Club (today's Oakland Park Woman's Club) was already two years old. Its quarters were located on the Dixie Highway and today's N.E. Twenty-Fourth Street.²⁷

In 1922, the *Fort Lauderdale Sentinel* reported that a movement was underway by Florida cattlemen to build a slaughterhouse and packinghouse in the region of Colohatchee. A few months later, the Southeast Packing Company announced that it was constructing an abattoir at Colohatchee, "just north of Fort Lauderdale" on the north bank of the Middle River near the FEC Railway tracks. The structure's towers rose three stories above the verdant terrain. The company imported hogs and other animals from Lake Okeechobee, by way of New River. From the mouth of the stream the animals entered New River Sound, traveling two miles north to the Middle River, where they were unloaded at the packing company's dock. While the abattoir was still under construction, the slaughter took place under "convenient trees." The company hauled the finished products by rail to Miami where they were placed in cold storage.²⁸

Nineteen twenty-two also marked the year that the Barkdull Investment Company of Miami, a real estate development firm, acquired 810 acres of virgin land near the north fork of the Middle River. The land, said to have been strikingly beautiful, stretched from the Florida East Coast Railway tracks to the East Coast Canal. Because a great stand of oak trees framed the north bank of the Middle River, the company decided to name its prospective development Oakland Park. The company began subdividing lots and constructing streets; the two major thoroughfares measured eighty feet across; the remaining roads were forty feet wide.

The Barkdull Investment firm also announced that Screen Talent Studios, a moving picture company, had purchased ten acres in Oakland Park for a \$3 million movie studio. Screen Talent Studios also purchased 300 lots for a "Greenwich type" village for "motion picture people." Studio officials were reportedly planning to move to the area, too.

At the same time, *Miami Movie Magazine*, in collaboration with Screen Talent Studios, instituted a thirty day subscription campaign. Each new subscriber would receive a free lot in Oakland Park. Stirred by this unusual excitement in the region lying to the north, the *Fort Lauderdale Sentinel* boasted that Oakland Park would "become a home for moving picture people... There will be 19 movie artists employed the year round." Neither the studio nor the village, however, came to fruition.²⁹

In August, 1922, the *Fort Lauderdale Sentinel* reported that the "Town of 'Oakland Park' (is) Now on the Market." A community was taking shape east of the railroad tracks and north of the Southeast Packing Company's new plant on the Middle River. By the later part of that month, the Barkdull Investment Company had sold 417 lots in Oakland Park and claimed that only seventeen remained. Street paving was proceeding rapidly. Meanwhile, the company had contracted with the Southeast Packing Company to install electric lights in Oakland Park by the fall of 1922.³⁰

Oakland Park opened officially on February 14, 1923. Several thousand persons, attracted by the developer's offer of a free barbecue, gathered in the piney woods near today's Oakland Park Boulevard and N.E. Thirty-Fourth Street for the opening festivities. Some came from as far away as Fort Pierce and Miami, causing a mile-long traffic backup on Dixie Highway. Attendees helped themselves to barbecued beef, pork, and mutton. A band from Lake Worth provided music. A series of speakers addressed the crowd. Broward County's State Legislator, Carl P. Weidling, exclaimed that the new packing plant was the "greatest asset our county had."³¹ A Dr. Tiebald, a meat inspector from Miami, claimed that this facility was the finest equipped meat packing plant for its size in the United States.³² Not to be outdone, the *Fort Lauderdale Sentinel* gushed that the community's official opening represented the "greatest day in the history of our county."³³

In the months following the barbecue, many new residents, including Charles Rouse, James "Charlie" Harrison, the Stricklands and the Newtons, built homes and began farming in Oakland Park. New businesses opened, including Harry Wimberly's grocery store near the Dixie Highway. With meat sales rising, the Southeast Packing Company began construction, in 1923, of a large smoke house for curing meats.³⁴

The flurry of activity in Oakland Park was replicated elsewhere in a region and state swept up in the great real estate boom of the mid-1920s. The boom resulted from several factors. In the 1920s, the nation experienced widespread prosperity, witnessed significant transportation and technological developments, embraced consumerism, pursued leisure activities with great zest, and indulged in an orgy of financial speculation. Amid an atmosphere of optimism over the nation's future, many Americans became convinced that a modicum of money invested in the right commodity would bring wealth to its investor.

For a variety of reasons, Florida real estate was among the most alluring investments, especially land in the sun-drenched southeastern sector of the state. The automobile, a common mode of transportation in the 1920s, brought Florida closer to the populous northeastern and midwestern United States. To facilitate the passage of cars through the state, Florida accelerated a road building program instituted in the previous decade.³⁵ The state also abolished inheritance and income taxes in this era. Communities in south Florida and elsewhere engaged in lavish—and effective—promotional campaigns. Accounts of persons who had become wealthy overnight in Florida real estate ventures circulated throughout the country. Their stories of "instant wealth" made it appear that "profit waited for the taking, and Florida in a very real sense was a modern, latter day gold rush."³⁶

As reports spread of phenomenal profits in Florida real estate, large numbers of speculators poured into south Florida. By the mid-1920s, the price of land had spiraled to unheard of heights. M.A. Hortt, a prominent Fort Lauderdale realtor, recalled that two lots that sold for \$6000 at the beginning of 1925 commanded a price of \$150,000 by the summer of the same year. An estimated 6,000 licensed real estate operators stalked the streets of Fort Lauderdale and the surrounding area in 1925, while other, untold thousands worked without the benefit of licenses. Hundreds of new subdivisions, ranging from tiny developments encompassing just a

few blocks to large, incorporated communities like Coral Gables, rose quickly in the piney woods and subtropical wilderness.³⁷

Although the boom had ended by 1926, for reasons that will be explained in the following chapter, it left behind a rich legacy. During that era, many of the new communities exhibited the striking Spanish-eclectic or Mediterranean Revival architectural motif. Elements of this style include arched entry ways, quaint courtyards, loggias, balconies, and barrel tile roofs. The area's permanent population increased significantly. Growing cities like Miami quickly became metropolitan centers, while smaller communities were also transformed in a variety of ways. Nowhere was this last point more evident than in the experience of Oakland Park, which metamorphosed from a small farming community into a component of Floranada, one of the boom's most flamboyant and whimsical developments.

The directions that Oakland Park followed during the boom were determined not only by Floranada, but also by Fort Lauderdale and Pompano. Containing just 2,065 in 1920, Fort Lauderdale exploded into a community of nearly 16,000 residents in 1925. Formerly a quarter of modest scale, downtown Fort Lauderdale was transformed by numerous new building projects, and even welcomed its first "skyscraper," the nine-story Sweet Building on South Andrews Avenue near the New River. New subdivisions spread across the verdant landscape that framed both sides of New River. By August 1925, Lauderdale Harbors, a posh subdivision in the city's eastern sector, was selling more than \$1 million in property weekly. In October 1925, Fort Lauderdale's real estate sales exceeded \$168 million.³⁸

Amid this heady atmosphere, Fort Lauderdale announced, in October 1925, its intention to extend the city's municipal limits as far north as the southern boundary of Pompano, thereby annexing the area encompassing Oakland Park. Such action required, as its first step, an act of the Florida legislature. Oakland Park residents were divided over this prospect. Some expressed their concern over the inability of the annexation faction to assure them of the date when utilities services, as well as police and fire protection, would be available if Oakland Park was to become part of Fort Lauderdale.³⁹

The expansive community of Pompano also evinced its desire to annex the rich farming area south of it. Pompano officials promised residents of Oakland Park that they would expect utilities services within thirty days, if they agreed to annexation.⁴⁰

Oakland Park's citizenry, however, decided against these offers. In a series of meetings in October 1925, Charles E. Rouse, chairman of a citizens committee examining the issue, along with other residents, carefully considered the offers of annexation. They decided that Oakland Park, which already possessed its own electric lights and other utilities, could organize itself quickly and efficiently as a town and acquire additional utilities and street improvements. Incorporation proponents envisioned a community stretching for four miles in a north-south direction, and extending from the Atlantic Ocean west for two miles to a point just beyond the Dixie Highway. Its estimated population ranged from 1,800 to 2,500.⁴¹

Even after this meeting, the city of Fort Lauderdale maintained its desire to annex Oakland Park. Annexation proponents in Fort Lauderdale argued that Oakland Park's electric remained in excellent condition. Should the city of Fort Lauderdale annex Oakland Park, annexationists argued, "We would recommend that the property (the packing plant) be purchased as part of the utility service of the city."⁴²

Worried by Fort Lauderdale's persistence over this issue, the champions of incorporation for Oakland Park announced that they would hold an incorporation meeting on November 30, 1925, at the Colohatchee Women's Club. Charles Rouse argued that "at present Oakland Park has a plant which is furnishing both electricity and water. The city (Fort Lauderdale) said it would take it over for us, but as far as that goes, once the incorporation takes place, we may take the plant over for ourselves. We can see absolutely no advantage in becoming a part of the city of Fort Lauderdale on that basis."⁴³

Chapter Three Flamboyant Floranada

The movement to annex Oakland Park came ultimately, however, not from Fort Lauderdale, or even Pompano, but from another municipality. At a special session of the Florida Legislature, held in November 1925, State Representative Carl P. Weidling introduced a bill providing for the incorporation of the development of Floranada. The proposed limits of the new municipality included the area encompassing Oakland Park. The bill became law on November 26, 1925, forcing surprised residents of Oakland Park to again confront the specter of annexation. A few days later, Oakland Park residents, in a mass meeting, agreed to meet with officials of Floranada and discuss the situation.⁴⁴

At this meeting, on December 3, 1925, the Oakland Park faction, with no options, agreed to merge with Floranada. The new community of Floranada would cover a vast area. It spread over twelve square miles, stretching from the Atlantic Ocean to State Road Seven in the west, and the northern limits of Fort Lauderdale in the south to the southern border of Pompano in the north. The legislative act creating Floranada also provided the community with its first ordinances, which were typically concerned with disorderly conduct, prostitution, the transportation or possession of intoxicating drinks, and provisions for the disposal of "human excrement within city limits." A segment of the last ordinance declared "open privies a nuisance." Another ordinance addressed itself to "providing for and preserving peace, preventing conflict and ill feeling between white and colored races and promoting general welfare of the city by providing for the use of separate blocks by white and colored people for residences and other purposes." The community contained a small black farming element. Segregation or the color line was the order of the day throughout the South.⁴⁵

A hybrid term referring presumably to Florida and Canada, Floranada was the creation, in the words of one observer, of a "group of blue blooded socialites from the cream of New York and Philadelphia society along with members of nobility and even royalty." Many of these socialites spent their winters in Palm Beach. In 1925, they organized the American-British Improvement Corporation to develop the Floranada Club, an exclusive development on a vast expanse of land bordering the Atlantic Ocean between Fort Lauderdale and Pompano. Directors of the American-British Improvement Corporation included the Earl and Countess of Lauderdale who resided in London, Mrs. Horace E. Dodge, formerly an owner of Dodge Brothers, Inc., Detroit, Mrs. Edward T. Stotesbury, a Philadelphia socialite whose wealth emanated from her stake in the Drexel Improvement Company and other interests, Lord Thirlestane of London, the King of Greece (whose name was not mentioned in the promotional literature or in articles on the development), Samuel M. Vauclain, President of the Baldwin Locomotive Works, Mrs. Alexander W. Biddle, a member of one of Philadelphia's most prominent families, John S. Pillsbury, vice president, Pillsbury Flour Mills Company, William H. Williams, chairman, North Central Texas Oil Company, the Viscount Molesworth of London, and J.H.R. Cromwell, Chairman, Cromwell-Dodge Company. The Corporation maintained offices in downtown Fort Lauderdale and on Park Avenue in New York City.⁴⁶

For the Countess (Gwendolyn) of Lauderdale, the Floranada Club was the culmination of a decades-old dream. She had discovered the area where the development would lie on a yachting outing in the early 1900s. Upon hearing that the settlement of Fort Lauderdale bore her family name, she thought that her informants “must be joking... Perhaps my original enthusiasm was heightened when I discovered that it was a great, great uncle of my husband who, building a little fort to fight off the Indians had it named for his grandfather, the Seventh Earl of Lauderdale.”⁴⁷ The Countess’s claim is unsupported by historical fact. Nevertheless, she held that “that bit of Florida has remained the most wonderful place I know.”⁴⁸ From such impressions the American-British Improvement Corporation and the Floranada Club were born. For the Countess and other directors of the company, the Floranada Club represented a new resort community which would also be extremely profitable—since everyone seemed to be realizing fortunes in Florida’s overheated real estate market.

If Fort Lauderdale of an earlier era was the muse for the Floranada Club, the financial largesse of Misses Dodge and Stotesbury, and the aggressive personality of James Cromwell were the elements that made it reality. Cromwell was the step-son of E.T. Stotesbury of Drexel Investment Company and son-in-law of Mrs. Horace Dodge. In 1923, Mrs. Dodge sold the Dodge Motor Company for \$146,000,000 in cash. Cromwell became the president of the Floranada Club and the facilitator for its development.⁴⁹

The core of the development was 3,600 acres of prime oceanfront land that the American-British Improvement Company acquired in 1925 from Chicago Attorney and Broward land baron Arthur T. Galt. Galt’s father had practiced law with Hugh Taylor Birch, one of Fort Lauderdale’s pioneer citizens and a recluse among his hundreds of acres of subtropical splendor on the beach just east of Fort Lauderdale. Galt had purchased the land, located northeast of Oakland Park, in the early 1900s. The tract included three-quarters of a mile of oceanfront land and three and one-half miles on the west side of the Intracoastal Waterway reaching from today’s Commercial Boulevard to the south fork of the Middle River. The property extended west to the railroad tracks and included a tiny portion of land in the vicinity of today’s Oakland Park Boulevard, which extended a few blocks west of there. This exclusive area comprised the Floranada Club, described as a “city within a city.” Galt sold the property to the American-British Improvement Company for \$8 million, with a down payment of \$1 million.⁵⁰

The Countess of Lauderdale and other principals in the organization planned “the Biarritz of America” with a subtropical flair on this large scenic tract. The Floranada Club would consist of exclusive residences built on lots ranging in price from \$4,500 to \$7,500, which represented steep prices even by the inflated standards of the boom. The Floranada Club sought “Those people who appreciate the value of owning a home safeguarded by proper restrictions.” Owners of property in this section would command access to the Floranada Clubhouse and Resort, an 18-hole golf course, yacht club, and Roman baths.⁵¹

Drawing on the considerable wealth of its principal investors, the Floranada Club, had, by late 1925, begun platting lots and preparing the construction of several signal structures, including a large, elaborate administration building that would also serve as city hall. The Spanish-styled

structure included huge mahogany doors and imported marble floors under a cathedral-domed, two story main roof.⁵²

Developers also planned twenty miles of roadways, including the sixty-foot wide Floranada Road, which would also contain a canal meandering through its center. The scenic road would sweep through the center of the Floranada Club. Developers also planned a spectacular widening of the Dixie Highway to 144 feet in the vicinity of the Floranada Club House and Resort. Additional broad streets, superior electric and water supply systems were also planned.⁵³

Prime homesites would arise on both sides of the Florida East Coast Canal. These sites were covered by a thick subtropical forest. To maintain the rustic ambience of the proposed homesite, developers assured investors that "Every possible means is being devised to spare the trees."⁵⁴

In December 1925, the American British Improvement Company commenced a survey of the area comprising the Floranada Club. The developers denied rumors that only large tracts of land would be sold. Instead, lots of all sizes would be placed on the market. In December 1925, two ships chartered by the developer arrived on the New River with construction materials, as well as a large number of portable homes for company executives. The homes were destined to reside on the beach until they were replaced by a permanent building.⁵⁵

Floranada was clearly a bifurcated community, a hybrid of two distinct elements. The older farming community of Oakland Park contained a few hundred small farmers and their families living in modest quarters. By contrast, the Floranada Club, the city's other principal component, was designed as an upscale community for wealthy, high society residents under the directions of society types. The contrast could hardly have been greater. This division was reflected in the names of institutions some of which were prefaced by "Oakland Park," others by "Floranada." The division further manifested itself in the composition of the new city's government whose ranks were filled almost exclusively by principals of the American-British Improvement Corporation, which reportedly matched them with their offices before incorporation.⁵⁶

The city of Floranada's institutional development received a significant boost because many of its institutions had begun at an earlier time with the community of Oakland Park. By the beginning of 1926, Oakland Park Elementary School was operating from new quarters in a beautiful Spanish-styled building (the school had opened in the previous September in a group of cottages). The new school building contained six classrooms for grades one through six. Two hundred children enrolled in the school in 1926. Parents of students created a Parent-Teachers Association, which grew quickly, containing eight-five members by February 1926. Two months later, Oakland Park residents organized a Methodist Episcopal congregation. The edifice for the Oakland Park Methodist Episcopal Church consisted of a wood frame structure constructed at an estimated cost of \$2,000. A large number of volunteers, working long hours, built the church in just four days.⁵⁷

While new institutions continued to appear, Floranada moved quickly to increase its size through the annexation of Lauderdale-by-the-Sea, another boom-era community lying just north of it, and tiny Pelham, a settlement that spread over a three block area between Dixie Highway and the railroad tracks. By April 1926, Floranada possessed a new, improved water supply system through an arrangement with the developers of the Floranada Club. Improved lighting was another advance accompanying the creation of Floranada. By May 1926, twenty miles of roadways were under construction. Most spectacular of the road building projects was the aforementioned widening of the Dixie Highway through the Floranada Club House and Resort. At the same time, the county constructed a bridge across the Florida East Coast Canal at today's Oakland Park Boulevard.⁵⁸

Accompanying these accomplishments, however, were serious financial problems because the boom, at the time of Floranada's incorporation, was already beginning to dissipate, bringing a sharp decline in property values throughout south Florida and elsewhere in the state. In the meantime, lavish spending by the American-British Improvement Corporation caused its debt to spiral. Generous support from major investors enabled the American-British Improvement Corporation's president and chief executive officer, James Cromwell, to continue spending and building in the spring of 1926, when the boom was ebbing. According to one journalistic account, Cromwell, who also served as the first mayor of Floranada, received the nickname "Carry-on" from south Florida developers because he "has proved his serene faith in Florida, and the particular development in which he is interested by adding to the working forces which are rushing operations at Floranada to completion."⁵⁹

Cromwell even oversaw completion of the new administration building of the Floranada Club in March 1926. This milestone allowed Floranada government officials to move their offices from the Broward Hotel in downtown Fort Lauderdale, to Floranada. At the same time, work on the eighteen hole golf course was nearing completion, and Floranada was awaiting the imminent opening of a post office. With the large, main cable already on the ground, telephone service was expected to commence shortly, too. However, few other projects, including several elaborate buildings, made it off the drawing board.⁶⁰

By the middle of 1926, the great Florida land boom was over, the victim of several setbacks beginning in the previous year. In June 1925, Federal Bureau of Internal Revenue agents began examining the profits of south Florida real estate speculators. Later, the Bureau ruled that the entire amount of the purchase price for real estate had to be reported as income. This ruling posed serious problems for speculators who could realize on paper huge profits from sales, but who were lucky to receive twenty or twenty-five percent of the sale price in cash. Accordingly, "many a paper millionaire began to squirm and cut back on freewheeling adventures," causing a slowdown in real estate activity.⁶¹

Unable to handle the accumulating mass of building supplied earmarked for southeast Florida, the Florida East Coast Railway declared, on August 17, 1925, an embargo on the shipment of all freight arriving in carload lots. Later the embargo was extended to include smaller quantities of

freight, and all commodities except foodstuffs. The embargo was not lifted in its entirety until the spring of 1926.⁶²

The embargo spelled trouble for building contractors and developers, who shared the sentiments of one Fort Lauderdale contractor who announced in late August that if the “embargo does not let up in a week, we shall be forced to stop our work.”⁶³ To maintain an adequate supply of building materials, many developers, such as the American-British Improvement Corporation, turned increasingly toward water transportation. However, this avenue of supply, which utilized both New River Sound (a portion of today’s Atlantic Intracoastal Waterway lying immediately south of the Las Olas Boulevard Bridge) and the New River, was unable to provide enough materials to meet the demand. The shortage of building supplies crippled the boom because without the continued construction of new buildings, a collapse of boomtime speculative prices was assured.⁶⁴

The dearth of housing, especially in low cost units, discouraged laborers, a precious commodity in the boom, from moving to Fort Lauderdale, thereby contributing to a labor shortage that became another factor in the construction slowdown. The housing shortage also led to rent profiteering, and a wave of bad publicity that dampened the desire of many investors to visit Floranada and other developments, and caused others to leave. Complaints over high prices extended to many commodities and services.⁶⁵

State and institutional assaults also weakened the boom. The state of Ohio passed “blue sky” laws in 1925 that forbade certain firms from selling Florida real estate there. Stung by the loss of large amounts of money from their deposits by Florida-bound speculators, banks in the Buckeye state warned against Florida’s risky real estate market. Because of numerous allegations of fraudulent land promotions in south Florida, the National Better Business Bureau, with help from its Florida chapters, commenced a comprehensive investigation. Some of the charges proved valid. The attendant publicity caused many prospective investors to hesitate. Others paused because of stock market declines in early 1926. By the spring of that year, buyers were no longer plentiful. Many of the real estate offices along Andrews Avenue in Fort Lauderdale and Flagler Street in Miami and elsewhere had closed or were nearly empty. Paper profits on real estate transactions were lost when people began to default on their payments. The spring and summer of 1926 witnessed a mass exodus of speculators. The boom was over.⁶⁶

The end for the American-British Improvement Corporation came in May 1926, when it filed for bankruptcy in a federal court in Jacksonville, listing its assets at \$2.5 million, and its liabilities at nearly \$8.6 million. The American-British Improvement Corporation incurred massive debt from its elaborate development activities, while selling few lots to relieve its financial burden. After examining its ledger and assessing Floranada’s future prospects in the spring of 1926, the company’s investors decided to suspend operations before incurring additional losses. For James Cromwell, the company’s guiding spirit, the decision was especially painful. Cromwell believed strongly in the eventual success of Floranada, and he maintained a frenzied spending and construction program up to the time that the company declared itself insolvent.⁶⁷

In light of the bankruptcy news, J. Dewey Hawkins, the lone commissioner who was not a member of the developer's group, declared that the company's bankruptcy would not hinder the operations of the city government. However, the city government would have to be reorganized, since several members of the city commission were also officials of the bankrupt company and were expected to resign their offices. The American-British Improvement Corporation failed to pay Arthur Galt beyond the initial downpayment of \$1 million; accordingly the improved property was returned to him. However, the company, in an unprecedented gesture toward its investors, instructed its attorneys to comb the area in an effort to locate every investor; each of those located was reimbursed for the total amount of his investment.⁶⁸

As Commissioner Dewey Hawkins had predicted, Floranada's government was reorganized in the summer of 1926, following the resignations of its mayor, two commissioners, and treasurer. The new government included Hawkins, who became mayor. A native of northern Florida, Hawkins came to Oakland Park at age twenty-two in 1922 to farm. Possessor of unusual qualities of leadership, Hawkins served first as mayor of Floranada and then the top elected official of Oakland Park for more than a quarter of a century.⁶⁹

Hawkins and other members of the new city government declared bravely—but naively—that Floranada would continue its development plans despite the insolvency of the American-British Improvement Corporation. Efforts were soon underway to organize a refinancing scheme for Floranada. In the meantime, several more city officials resigned. The political upheaval even affected the tiny police force where three men held the office of chief of police in 1926.⁷⁰

Despite the community's financial problems, life seemingly changed little for the majority of residents who continued to farm. New institutions appeared, including a Floranada Chamber of Commerce; the *Miami Herald* instituted home deliveries; the chief of police waged war on speeders along the Dixie Highway with assistance from the city commission, which ordered two large signs posted at the northern and southern limits of the city to warn travelers to stay within the speed limit of twenty-five miles per hour.⁷¹

New residents continued to arrive. Eileen Hall came to Floranada from Michigan in July 1926. "Mosquitoes had invaded our house for the weeks that it was vacant," she recalled. "The beds were draped with mosquito netting, but the little pests had found their way under that cover... our parents fought mosquitoes all night." Mrs. Hall also remembered that "kerosene lamps and stoves were accepted in a pioneering spirit by all of us who had been used to electricity and natural gas and roaring coal furnaces in the north." Eileen Hall's family was "captivated by the sunny skies, the whispering palms, the brilliant blossoms, the Atlantic-washed beaches... We had the breeze from the Gulf Stream... pines and palms... a tropical moon at night."⁷²

In the aftermath of a mighty hurricane that brought devastation to Oakland Park and south Florida (including the destruction of the Hall's family home), financial conditions worsened, and Florida fell into an economic depression three years before the rest of the nation. Floranada retrenched in light of worsening economic conditions. In April 1927. The municipality voted to

replace its city charter, considered irrelevant, since it was a creature of the boom-era with its lofty expectations.⁷³

Despite the continuing economic downturn, some improvements occurred. The Oakland Park Elementary School received a splendid 500 seat auditorium in 1927. In the meantime, the city prepared to construct a new city hall, commissioning Francis Abreu, a prominent Fort Lauderdale architect, to design the structure. However, deteriorating economic conditions prevented the construction of the building.⁷⁴

In the spring of 1929, the citizenry initiated the process that would lead to the dissolution of Floranada by demanding, first, sweeping changes in the city's charter, and, ultimately, its abolition. They argued that such actions were necessary because Floranada was now a small agricultural hamlet, and it was disadvantageous to taxpayers to continue to support an infrastructure totally out of alignment with the settlement's actual size and focus. Residents complained that they were paying taxes for which they received no benefit aside from street lighting along Dixie Highway.⁷⁵ The State Legislature responded to these entreaties by enacting a law for "the abolition of the municipal government of the city of Floranada." The legislation also provided for the creation of the municipality of Oakland Park, with sharply reduced boundaries, if the electorate agreed to it. The core of the new municipality would stand near the railroad tracks and today's N.E. Thirty-Fifth Street, which represented the center of the early farming community of Oakland Park.⁷⁶

In May 1929, Mayor Dewey Hawkins called a citizens meeting for Oakland Park Elementary School to discuss the recent developments affecting their municipality. Participants scheduled a vote for June 18 in the school to decide if it wished to abolish the city of Floranada. If a majority favored this course, another election would be held on the following day to determine if Oakland Park should be incorporated as a municipality to replace Floranada. However, if the electorate decided to retain Floranada, the incumbent city officials would remain in office until the next regularly scheduled elections, and the city would cancel the vote on the following day.⁷⁷

Chapter Four

The City of Oakland Park

On June 18, 1929, the electorate, voting at Oakland Park Elementary School, abolished Floranada, adopted a new charter creating the city of Oakland Park, and elected new governmental officials. The new municipality also assumed Floranada's debts. While Floranada had consisted of twelve square miles, newly-incorporated Oakland Park contained just three-quarters of one square miles.

Less than two weeks later, on July 1, 1929, the city of Floranada passed out of existence. Soon after, the old and new city councils met to clear up all outstanding business related to the change of administration. At the meeting, the outgoing council turned over to the incoming lawmakers the defunct municipality's records, property and monies, along with its seal.⁷⁸

At the first meeting of the new city council of Oakland Park, members selected officers while Dewey Hawkins was sworn in as mayor. Frank Bingham won re-appointment as Chief of Police. The lawmakers also provided for their municipality's purchase of the equipment of the moribund Southeast Packing Company, which provided it with its own water and electric works.⁷⁹

In Oakland Park's first months as an incorporated entity, additional persons moved there from other parts of Florida and the southern United States. Many were drawn to the community, as they were in earlier times, for its farming, dairying, and cattle-raising opportunities. Farming continued to dominate the economy of Oakland Park; beans, tomatoes, peppers, and cucumbers constituted the most important crops. Farmers generally carried their produce to market in Pompano. Mayor Dewey Hawkins, one of the largest farmers in Broward County, owned a packinghouse at N.E. 34th Court and the FEC Railway tracks. In 1929, he counted, among his crops, twenty-five acres of peppers. In November 1929, Hawkins shipped the season's first carload of beans out of Broward County.⁸⁰

In 1930, the community contained 463 residents. Segregated and victimized by Jim Crow legislation, Oakland Park's small black population, like African-Americans elsewhere, possessed few of the amenities and opportunities of white residents. The council recognized the educational needs of the small black population, albeit tardily and tepidly, when, in 1929, it approved a motion to circulate a petition for a "colored" school in the community. However, a black school did not begin operating in Oakland Park until two decades later, when the Woodson Elementary opened.⁸¹

Oakland Park was the lone city in Depression-era Broward County to remain debt-free. One of the factors contributing to this accomplishment was the fact that governmental costs were minimal. For instance, city salaries for April 1932 amounted to \$85.00. At the time, Oakland Park employed one policeman and lacked a fire department. The city of Fort Lauderdale provided firefighting services to the community.⁸²

Since the economy of Oakland Park was based on farming, few persons went hungry during the Great Depression, the severe economic downturn that ravaged the United States through the 1930s. Some farmers in Oakland Park even operated on a profit margin through shipment of produce to other parts of the nation. Residents of Oakland Park, however, suffered in other ways from the effects of the Great Depression. Many were unable to pay their property taxes, prompting the city council in 1936 to accept truant taxes at a greatly reduced rate. Mayor Hawkins himself helped many persons during the Depression. He instructed McCarty's Grocery Store, a major business, to provide food to the needy and bill him for it. Although Hawkins was the city's most visible person, the public remained ignorant of his role here. At Christmastime, Hawkins typically sat in the city park, handing out \$1 bills to youngsters.⁸³

Despite nagging economic problems, citizens of Depression-era Oakland Park enjoyed Saturday night square dances in a park pavilion. Youths enjoyed barn parties, rode their horses in the streets, fished in nearby streams, and swam in the warm Atlantic waters. Darleen Mitchell, the first child born in Floranada following its incorporation, recalled that "if it was very hot in summer, we'd ride out west on Oakland Park Boulevard, just past (Highway) 441 to a ranch (in today's west Broward community of Tamarac) friends of the family had, because it was cooler." Mitchell remembered that Oakland Park in the 1930s was a "great place for a kid. The only thing you had to worry about was snakes."⁸⁴

The city's economic climate improved in the mid-1930s when the old packing plant of the Southeast Packing Company on the Dixie Highway near the north fork of the Middle River was converted into a canning plant. Approximately one hundred men labored in the plant during peak periods each year.⁸⁵

Despite its staid reputation and small population, Oakland Park was not free from criminality and controversy. In 1929, with the era of National Prohibition entering its final phase, hijackers bound and gagged a guard before carrying away a cache of confiscated liquor temporarily stored in the home of Mayor Hawkins. The hijackers escaped in a waiting boat and were not heard from again. In 1930, Mayor Hawkins invited Chicago gangster Alphonse Capone, "Public Enemy Number One," who was *persona non grata* in his adopted town of Miami Beach, to visit Oakland Park. Hawkins averred that if Capone "obeys the laws and respects the rights of others, he can remain as long as he likes. Our city offers many attractions to prospective residents. We have no bonded debt and there is money in the treasury... Oakland Park is a city of opportunity."⁸⁶ It is doubtful that Capone accepted Hawkin's invitation. Two years later, it would not have mattered, since Capone had moved to a new home: the Atlanta Penitentiary.⁸⁷

Other controversies followed. In 1936, Paul E. Dettra, described in the press as a "fever machine" operator for the jerry-rigged device he employed to lower the temperatures of patients with hyperthermia, or extremely high fevers, was tried and acquitted on a charge of unlawfully using fever therapy in treating Kella O'Leary who died shortly after the treatment. As mentioned earlier, on more than one occasion in the 1930s, citizens complained to the city

council of hogs and cows running wild in Oakland Park. Ella McBride advised the lawmakers that Carl Goodbread's hogs had entered her yard and eaten her mangoes.⁸⁸

The city conducted periodic "improvement" campaigns. In 1938, the council instructed the city attorney to draw up an ordinance governing the hours of operation of beer parlors and public dance places. In the same year, Oakland Park residents undertook cleanup of the physical environment. Participants sought to beautify their city by removing trash and other eyesores from its streets, sidewalks, and vacant lots. They also endorsed the organization of a permanent civic improvement club and adopted a civic creed.⁸⁹

In the later 1930s, the city undertook an ambitious street improvement program and began construction of a new municipal park east of the railroad tracks near the community's core. The park offered shuffleboard courts, which held wide appeal to residents and tourists alike. The municipality also purchased twenty-five acres on Prospect Road near the northwest limits of Oakland Park for construction of a municipal cemetery. Prior to the cemetery's opening in the early 1940s, the bodies of Oakland Park residents were buried in Fort Lauderdale's Evergreen Cemetery and at other burial sites in the county.⁹⁰

In 1941, however, the community organized a volunteer fire department, and provided it with a fire engine and other equipment. The new department claimed thirty-six charter members. Seventeen years later, the city created a regular fire department.⁹¹

Amid these changes, the city's population was expanding significantly. The State of Florida's population census for 1935 indicated that the community contained 557 residents, ninety-one of whom were black. By 1940, the figure had risen to 815, while Broward County, in the same year, contained 39,794. Despite its growth, Oakland Park remained a small rural community of modest homes, rocky or sandy roads, and few other amenities. Vacant lots, often overgrown with palmetto scrub, dotted the cityscape. Fields of beans, peppers, and tomatoes grew next to houses and businesses. There was no city hall; instead, the municipality's offices were located in rental spaces and in the homes of the citizenry. The city clerk maintained his office in a corner of one of the five "general" stores in the community. The United State Post Office stood in a portion of McCarty's store; since there was no home delivery of mail, residents called at the facility for their letters and packages. The police force consisted of the chief and no one else. The city did not possess a bank, drugstore, "5 and 10 cent store," or restaurant. There was no bus service within the community nor between it and nearby municipalities. A school bus carried older students to Fort Lauderdale High School. If a student missed the bus, the only sure way to reach the school was on foot. The canning factory, which employed many residents seasonally, was the settlement's largest industrial unit. A large vegetable packinghouse sat next to the railroad tracks near the heart of the community. A poultry farm boasted that its 48,000 broilers made it the largest broiler farm in Florida.⁹²

Oakland Park's Methodist Church, the community's lone religious congregation, lost its house of worship in the hurricane of 1926. The congregation built a new church in 1928. The Methodist Church was ecumenical because several faiths used its facilities for services. Civic

groups also met there as well as at the Oakland Park Elementary School. The church sponsored many noteworthy activities, including youth picnics on Las Olas Beach (today's Fort Lauderdale beach) and athletic events. The Parent Teachers Association of the Oakland Park Elementary School was another active force in the community. It staged plays and, later, carnivals to raise funds for assisting delinquent children, for new furnishings and equipment for the school and cafeteria, and for other causes.⁹³

In spite of its size and rural composition, Oakland Park was anything but an isolated settlement owing primarily to its location in Broward County, and for the fact that the Florida East Coast Railway's right of way and two major highways either bifurcated it or ran parallel to its perimeter. Even winter visitors discovered Oakland Park. The *Fort Lauderdale Daily News* reported in 1940 that many visitors were building homes there. Winter residents continued to build "modernistic" homes. The increase in the permanent and winter population of Oakland Park (which the *Fort Lauderdale Daily News and Evening Sentinel* believed exceeded thirty-five percent for the first two years of the 1940s) prompted the city to add water mains and enlarge some of the existing lines to accommodate new demands.⁹⁴

The decade of the 1940s marked the beginning of an era of accelerating change for Oakland Park and for all of Broward County. While the city's population rose to 1,295 during the decade, the number of residents of Broward County leaped to 89,933. New subdivisions began to appear in many parts of the county's vast undeveloped areas. Coming as they did late in the decade, these developments, in retrospect, appeared far off in 1940, in a world at war.⁹⁵

After the United States entered World War II in 1941, Oakland Park residents organized an airplane spotter group for the purpose of reconnoitering the possible movement of enemy aircraft in the skies above the city. Spotters operated from a tower near the center of the community. Volunteers maintained a twenty-four hour watch daily. All "able-bodied" persons were expected to serve as spotters for two hours each week.⁹⁶

The war also meant travel restriction owing to gas rationing and blackouts as a result of the presence, in the early stages of the conflict, of German submarines in the nearby waters of the Atlantic Ocean. Many residents observed submarine sinkings of allied and neutral ships. Many young men and women from Oakland Park served in the armed forces of the United States. Several distinguished themselves through valor in battle. Some lost their lives. The city erected, on the tiny building housing the post office, a wooden plaque containing the name of the fifty-two residents of Oakland Park who served in the armed forces.⁹⁷

The community continued to develop during the wartime era. In addition to the opening of a new cemetery and shuffleboard courts, Oakland Park acquired a new post office, and a municipal garage, and unveiled plans for a city hall. Municipal services expanded after the city contracted with the Swaggerty Bus Company of Fort Lauderdale for transit service between the two communities.⁹⁸

Many organizations remained active in a host of endeavors. Residents and tourists organized a shuffleboard club, which maintained an exceedingly active schedule. The Colohatchee Women's Club, the oldest organization in the area, immersed itself in a wide array of civic and philanthropic activities after moving into a new clubhouse near the center of Oakland Park. The club pressured the city council for numerous improvements, including mandatory licensing of dogs to reduce the problem of strays in the community. The Oakland Park Methodist Episcopal Church remained the center of many community activities. In 1941, the institution acquired four additional lots east of the church for construction of a Sunday School pavilion. Boy Scout troops used the congregation's facilities partly because their scoutmaster was also the pastor of the parish. The Woman's Society of Christian Service represented a parish organization with a large, active membership.⁹⁹

Even before the war had ended in victory for the United States and her allies, Oakland Park was preparing for the celebration and the expansive post war period. Fearful of the rowdiness that could accompany a celebration marking the end of hostilities, Oakland Park's city council passed a motion in September, 1944, calling for Mrs. Evelyn Campbell, who owned and operated Campbell's Lunch Room, the lone purveyor of alcoholic beverages¹⁰⁰ (beer and wine) in the community, to close her business on the day marking the end of the war (referred to as "Victory Day"). The victory celebration came in August 1945, with the Allied defeat of Japan, the last of the Axis powers to surrender. Although the celebration was countywide, most of the revelry took place in downtown Fort Lauderdale and at Port Everglades.

Chapter Five

A Postwar Boom, Oakland Park from 1945-1960

Oakland Park was poised for significant changes as the nation returned to peace following World War II. In the two previous decades, the small farming community's physical dimensions had changed little. Homes stood to the north of the historical core, the area intersected by the FEC Railway tracks/ Dixie Highway and approximately 35th Street. To the east sat additional homes and a few businesses; farms dominated the western and southern sectors of the community.

Oakland Park offered interesting contrasts in the early postwar years. Depending on the observer, the community was either maturing quickly by shedding many of its rural trappings, or it remained a tiny settlement strongly influenced by its farming roots. New residents from larger cities almost always embraced the latter view. Juanita Gusweiler arrived in Oakland Park in the middle 1940s from Cincinnati. For her, Oakland Park "was really country...The kids used to ride their horses up and down the streets. There were cow pastures all along Dixie Highway."¹⁰¹ Indeed, cows and other livestock continued to stray away from their pastures and farms, and residents continued to complain to the city council.¹⁰²

In 1948, Oakland Park resident Ken Powell brought his bride, Joanne, home from Lincoln, Nebraska. Joanne Powell viewed her new home as "a real wilderness area." She recalled that there were "no libraries, no sidewalks, no phones, no mail delivery. I was really upset... It was like turning the clock way back." The Powells lived without a telephone for four years. Residents relied on four-wheel drive vehicles to travel west. A storm in 1948 flooded the community. Joanne Powell remembered that in the aftermath of the storm, she "had to do the laundry, so I ended up floating baskets of laundry on rubber life rafts out to the line."¹⁰³

Contrary to these perceptions, Oakland Park began to change dramatically in the postwar era. After climbing to 1,295 in 1950, Oakland Park's population jumped to 5,331 by the outset of the following decade. Broward County's population growth was also astounding, leaping from 83,933 in 1950, to 333,945 in 1960.¹⁰⁴

Oakland Park's physical dimensions grew, too, as the city mounted an intensive campaign to expand its borders through annexation. Expansion stemmed in part from the city's desire to attract additional tourists by bringing into its corporate boundaries a large oceanfront area. The same process, however, brought great controversy with it.

In 1947, the Florida Legislature passed the Enabling Act, which provided for a vast increase in the size of Oakland Park pending the approval of both its electorate and the voters in areas included in the proposed annexation. The act provided for the expansion of Oakland Park from 361 to 1,035 acres, with its eastern limits abutting the Atlantic Ocean. The annexed territory also included an area extending north from Ocean Boulevard (later called Oakland Park Boulevard) for a distance of one-half mile. The area would include a portion of the old Floranada development. The southern and western boundaries would remain essentially as

they were before the passage of the Enabling act. Several months after the Enabling Act became law, voters approved annexation by a large majority.¹⁰⁵

This action raised the ire of Arthur T. Galt who claimed ownership of eighty-six percent of the annexed land. Galt filed suit in Broward's Circuit Court to stop annexation, claiming that the process providing for it was a "farce," since only two registered voters resided in the annexed area. Galt also argued that Oakland Park was not in a position to provide water and fire protection to the new area. For these reasons, Galt requested the Court declare the Enabling Act null and void, and that the city of Oakland Park be enjoined from levying or assessing taxes or exercising jurisdiction or control over the annexed territory.¹⁰⁶

In 1949, the Circuit Court quashed Galt's suit, thereby upholding Oakland Park's new boundaries. Later in the year, however, the Florida Supreme Court declared the Enabling Act of 1947 unconstitutional and void. This ruling reduced Oakland Park's territory to its previous size.¹⁰⁷

In 1951, the city council again indicated its desire to extend the city limits of Oakland Park to the ocean, from the southern border of the municipality to its northern boundary. A bill introduced for that purpose passed the Legislature, but complications arose when a similar bill providing for the expansion of Fort Lauderdale and the annexation by that community of a part of the oceanfront property claimed by Oakland Park was also enacted. What the *Fort Lauderdale News* described as an "annexation war" between the two communities was averted by another legislative act denying Oakland Park's bid for oceanfront territory, while awarding Fort Lauderdale a large oceanfront area as far north as Ocean Boulevard.

Soon after this setback, Oakland Park's electorate again voted on a bill for annexation of an area roughly equal to—and following the contours of—the proposed area of 1949. The bill also paved the way for annexation of the tiny Dye subdivision, with its seventeen residents, situated just south of the southern limits of Oakland Park. Voters again approved annexation by a large margin. The city then awaited the reaction of Arthur T. Galt.¹⁰⁸

Galt answered the latest "assault" on his property in December 1951. In conjunction with Coral Ridge Properties, an ambitious Fort Lauderdale development company with its own designs on Galt's property, the millionaire Chicagoan filed suit in Broward's Circuit Court to remove more than 1,000 acres of his land from Oakland Park. The suit was similar to the previous one. It held that the plaintiff owned eight-six percent of the annexed property, that the land was completely undeveloped, and that no residents of the property voted in the annexation election. Additionally, the suit maintained that the sole purpose of the annexation was to permit the city of Oakland Park to assess taxes against the property. Again, Galt was victorious in the courts, causing Oakland Park's holdings to contract to their previous dimensions. In 1953, Galt sold the land that Oakland Park had annexed earlier—and more, 2,466 acres in all, to Coral Ridge Properties for \$19,387,000, a figure representative of one of the largest real estate deals involving unimproved land in the nation's history. Today this land hosts Coral Ridge, a vast residential neighborhood in northeast Fort Lauderdale.¹⁰⁹

By 1953, Oakland Park had embarked on a more gradual course of expansion, extending, through annexation, its eastern borders to Federal Highway. In the south, Oakland Park pushed its borders twenty feet beyond the south bank of the North Fork of the Middle River. This expansion led to the legal designation “Greater Oakland Park” in describing the rapidly growing city. Additionally, in return for Fort Lauderdale’s acquiescence in Oakland Park’s annexation of territory to its north that both communities desired, the latter agreed, in 1953, to forgo its long held desire to annex beachfront property.¹¹⁰

Annexation was but one of many new trends and changes in postwar Oakland Park. In 1946, the city council provided for the division of the city into northeast, northwest, southwest, and southeast quadrants with the Dixie Highway serving as the east-west and Oakland Park Boulevard the north-south dividers. Many streets represented northern extensions of thoroughfares emanating in Fort Lauderdale, and they assumed the same names and numbers as these arteries.¹¹¹

Change also manifested itself in Oakland Park’s evolving attitude toward prohibition of alcoholic beverages within the city limits. Oakland Park was Broward County’s lone “dry” municipality at the dawn of the postwar era. While moonshine stills continued to operate near Dixie Highway and N.E. Thirty-Eighth Street, the Council considered in the late 1940s, licensing liquor stores for dispensing mixed drinks. In 1948, the community became officially “wet” following a special election in which the votes overwhelmingly approved the sale of intoxicating liquor and the operation of bars and package stores within their municipality. Shortly after the vote, the city council enacted an enabling ordinance paving the way for the approval of bar and package store applications. In March 1948, the Council approved the first liquor license for a bar on East Oakland Park Boulevard. Some of Broward County’s most popular bars, restaurants, and nightclubs operated in subsequent years and decades along Oakland Park’s major thoroughfares.¹¹²

Increasing changes amid the community’s explosive growth led to growing demands on the government of Oakland Park, which, as late as 1950, contained just three paid employees, a chief of police who also served as sanitation inspector and meter reader, a trash truck driver, and a city clerk. However, the municipal government was growing and reorganizing in the expansive postwar environment. The number of city employees grew significantly in the 1950s with the organization of a building department and a permanent fire department, which consisted of three firemen. By the late 1950s, the police department had grown to include five members.¹¹³

The city government also instituted hourly bus service between Oakland Park and the city of Fort Lauderdale (one way fare was 20 cents); by 1953, the bus service between the two communities was operating at thirty minute interludes, while the fare had risen to a quarter each way. Earlier, in 1947, bus service commenced between Oakland Park and the community of Wilton Manors, lying just south of it.¹¹⁴

As Oakland Park grew, the necessity for additional services and facilities became critical. For decades, the city of Fort Lauderdale provided Oakland Park with its water supply. In 1951, Oakland Park began to construct its own water system through a bond issue totaling \$220,000. The project involved construction of facilities for pumping and filtering water from a well field immediately west of Oakland Park's western limits. The new system became fully operative in 1952, pumping 86,000 gallons of water daily. Mayor Hawkins boasted that the new plant would supply his community with "the best water it ever had." Soon after the new water system became operative, Oakland Park began supplying Wilton Manors with water, thereby adding 500 more consumers to the service. Oakland Park sold the water to Wilton Manors at a rate of 25 cents for 1,000 gallons. In 1956, Oakland Park achieved another milestone with the institution of mail delivery.¹¹⁵

The continued presence of unattended trash and garbage, as well as standing water, prompted the city of Oakland Park to commence additional cleanup campaigns. In 1946, several farmers, concerned over the mosquito and bug menace, volunteered their tractors to remove weeds from vacant lots. Because the garbage pit in the western environs of the community was poorly maintained, Mayor Hawkins used his bulldozer to clear it in 1949, after which he dumped ten loads of rock into the pit.¹¹⁶

The presence of large numbers of mosquitoes, especially in the summer rainy season, presented an intractable problem for citizens of Oakland Park and of other parts of southeast Florida. To mitigate this menace, Oakland Park requested, in 1945, that Broward County's Mosquito Control Board "investigate and determine the advisability of spraying the infested areas within the confines of Broward County...to eliminate the suffering and inconvenience of the public in general." Despite assistance at this level of government, these pestiferous insects continued to bring misery to residents of the area. In 1953, Mayor Hawkins recommended that the Council initiate a program for the removal of standing water in Oakland Park. Soon after this recommendation, impatient citizens asked the city council to institute a program of mosquito control. Finally, in 1957, the city purchased a fogging machine for mosquito control, and hired an operator at \$1.75 per hour to use the device for a few hours nightly, twice weekly.¹¹⁷

In 1946, Oakland Park's volunteer fire department built the municipality's first city hall just west of the Florida East Coast Railway tracks on N.W. Thirty-Sixth Street. The city also began to enhance its limited recreational offerings by developing a block in the heart of the community into a sporting facility featuring a baseball diamond and tennis courts. In 1948, the city of Oakland Park began screening moving pictures in the city park. Three years later, it placed an illuminated Christmas tree in the park for the holidays.¹¹⁸

Oakland Park sometimes displayed a political culture considered enlightened for the times. In 1945, Elizabeth Tucker became the first woman to gain election to Oakland Park's city council, and one of the first of her gender to hold political office in Broward County.¹¹⁹ Even this development, however, paled in comparison with the decision of Mayor Hawkins to retire from office after his term expired in 1947. After serving for twenty-one consecutive years as mayor,

Hawkins decided to forgo another term “for a rest.” He had attempted to retire on two other occasions, “But the voters wrote my name on the ballot and I kept on the job.”¹²⁰ After two years on the sidelines, however, Hawkins became a candidate again for mayor in 1949; he won election handily. Hawkins served six more years as mayor until failing health forced him to quit. In announcing his decision to retire from office, Hawkins claimed that he wanted to “get out and have time to live and enjoy my friends and devote more time to my business... We have been able to keep the town out of indebtedness and taxes are down to a minimum.”¹²¹ He died in 1958 at age fifty-eight. The possessor of extensive cattle interests and real estate holdings, Hawkins was not only a giant politically, but in business as well. Many people considered him the most successful rancher in the state of Florida.¹²²

Since homicides were a rarity in Oakland Park, the community was shocked upon learning of the murder in 1953 of Nels E. Olander, a pioneer resident, by Herbert W. Wimberly, the scion of another early family in the community. Olander was married to Wimberly’s sister. Wimberly claimed that while he was sleeping at the Olander home, someone poured water on him, causing him to awaken abruptly, grab the gun lying by his side and fire it at a fleeing figure in the darkened room. The prosecution testified that there had been lingering hostility between Wimberly and Olander over the former’s mistreatment of Wimberly’s sister. The jury found Wimberly guilty of second degree murder.¹²³

Although controversy in Oakland Park rarely reached the proportions of that in Broward County’s larger municipalities, it occasionally touched the municipality’s most important officials. Police Chief John Barnhill drew criticism in 1951 for allegedly threatening Mrs. J.W. Pilcher and Mrs. Rosa Ramsey, two Caucasian women who employed black nurses in their homes, with a cross burning or stoning of their dwellings. Barnhill denied the accusations, explaining, instead, that he had asked the women to prevail upon their help to discourage their male callers from parking their cars in the “middle of the street,” thereby blocking traffic. Apparently frightened by the incident, Misses Pilcher and Ramsey moved away from Oakland Park. Three years later, the city council fired the controversial police chief for not “doing what we (the council) felt was his duty.”¹²⁴

The Council sometimes found itself embroiled in controversy of its own. In 1959, councilman Palmer Delegal, a stormy member of this body, resigned from a committee charged with overseeing the job performances of city employees because, he claimed, his “recommendations don’t mean a thing.”¹²⁵ Delegal claimed that he had received numerous complaints from residents over city employees who were “gold bricking” on the job, and he was angry because of his inability to “keep a check on city employees.”¹²⁶ In the same year, council members Glen Berning and Eddie King offered to resign after they were criticized for recommending that information uncovered in a police department investigation be withheld from the press. Even controversy touched the sainted Dewey Hawkins. One year after his death, the *Fort Lauderdale News* reported that Mayor J.W. “Bill” Stevens had discovered, by accident, that Hawkins had been obtaining water free of charge from an unmetered pipeline extending from a city main to his property. The pipe was discovered accidentally. Stevens, however, quickly retracted this

claim, after claiming that he had found evidence that the pipeline in question did not extend to Hawkins property but ran, instead, along a county right-of-way.¹²⁷

When Hawkins had arrived in Oakland Park in the early 1920s, the community contained just six families and several homes. By the time of his death, Oakland Park's booming population growth had led to the construction of many new subdivisions. In the immediate postwar period, the housing shortage grew acute, as the community expanded quickly, while wartime restrictions on building materials remained in effect. Even returning servicemen and their families felt the crunch. With the lifting of restrictions on building materials in 1946, the city was deluged with applications for building permits, prompting the creation of a building code. As development spread to new areas, Oakland Park built new roads or expanded and improved existing thoroughfares.¹²⁸

Beginning in the 1950s, most of the agricultural land near the city's core was transformed into new subdivisions. Coral Park Properties developed Coral Woods, a subdivision in the eastern portion of the city, in the middle 1950s. By 1957, developers were preparing the new subdivision of Coral Terrace north of Coral Woods. By decade's end, many additional subdivisions in recently annexed portions of Oakland Park were opening.¹²⁹

The city's expansion also contributed to the construction of a new \$1 million span over the Intracoastal Waterway at Oakland Park Boulevard in 1956. Although the bridge was outside the city limits of Oakland Park, it provided residents of the community with easy access to the beach. The new causeway was the third of six county bridges completed in this period with funds from a \$6 million county bond.¹³⁰

New businesses and institutions also appeared. Commercial development advanced rapidly along the city's major roadways. The Mai Kai Restaurant, an exotic purveyor of fare and entertainment on the Federal Highway, opened in 1956. It has remained a favorite of visitors and residents since then. Sears Roebuck Company opened a large warehouse and service center east of the railroad tracks near Northeast Thirty-Eighth Street in 1956. The venerable Colohatchee Women's Club became the Oakland Park Woman's Club in 1950, and moved to new quarters near the center of the city. In 1955, the Woman's Club opened a library, which became the municipal library in 1958. The Woman's Club provided the library with its first 1,200 volumes. Although the city operated the facility, the Woman's Club served as its home until a new library building opened. Another institution that acquired new quarters was the Methodist Church, which dedicated a new house of worship in 1954. The Oakland Park Tent Theater falls in the category of unusual institutions. Opened in 1957 on the grounds of the Oakland Park Poultry Farm in the southern environs of the city, the institution offered lived theater featuring an experienced stock company. Two Cleveland producers, who wished to feature current Broadway hits, were the catalysts for the Tent Theater.¹³¹

Chapter Six

A Generation of Change, Oakland Park Since 1960

Oakland Park's development since 1960 has eclipsed everything that came before. The community's population increased nearly fivefold between 1960 and 1990. This growth was, in large measure, the result of a continuing resolve on the part of the city to annex nearby areas, as well as the meteoric expansion of Broward County. The county's population soared from 333,945 in 1960 to 1.25 million by 1990, as its allure of weather, water, and attractive employment opportunities led to an accelerated influx of new residents.¹³²

Oakland Park's greatest growth took place between 1960 and 1980, when its population rose from 5,331 to 22,944. The city contained 26,326 resident in 1990. The decline in Oakland Park's growth rate in the 1980s stemmed from the fact that it had developed nearly all of its vacant land, leaving little room for additional expansion, while the municipality's robust annexation campaign had come to an end.¹³³

The population census for 1990 indicated that seventy-five percent of the city's population was non-Hispanic Caucasian, thirteen percent African-American, and twelve percent Hispanic. Attracted by the city's moderately-priced housing, entry-level positions, and a pleasant ambiance, Oakland Park's Hispanic population, drawn primarily from Dade County's huge Cuban refugee population, **flocked to the city, settling in almost seamlessly as new residents.**

Along with Pembroke Pines, **Oakland Park claimed** the second highest percentage of Hispanics (after Miramar) among the county's twenty-nine municipalities.¹³⁴

Oakland Park's dramatic physical expansion was especially robust in the early 1960s. In the decade's opening year, the city annexed a wedge of land, about one square mile in size, northwest of it. Soon after, residents of Sleepy River Acres, west of the center of Oakland Park, chose to join the latter instead of Fort Lauderdale, which was also bidding to annex their community. At the same time, Oakland Park annexed Twin Lakes, a 700-acre subdivision lying northwest of it. By virtue of this addition the size of Oakland Park doubled. At the end of the 1960s, Oakland Park annexed Harlem-McBride lying immediately west of it. Consisting of several subdivisions, Harlem-McBride, which was predominantly black, had been targeted by elements of the city government for annexation ten years earlier; on that occasion, however, its racial composition blocked annexation.¹³⁵

Continued growth in the early 1970s stretched the borders of Oakland Park from the boulevard by that name on the south to Commercial Boulevard and some nearby areas beyond it to Northwest Fifty-Third Street. The Federal Highway served as the city's eastern border and Northwest Thirty-First Avenue represented its western edge. The city's aggressive annexation movement continued, with some setback, until the early years of the 1980s. The final annexation pushed the corporate limits of Oakland Park west of Interstate 95. This area contained a large black population.¹³⁶

Oakland Park's infrastructure struggled to keep up with the community's quickening growth. Roadbuilding continued at a brisk pace, although the most important development here, the completion of Interstate 95, did not involve the city's initiative or finances. I-95 spews heavy traffic onto Oakland Park and Commercial Boulevards. Because of increasingly heavier traffic, these major east-west arteries have undergone several enlargement projects in recent decades; other, less-traveled roads have also been enlarged. With the emergence of I-95 and the growth of the Federal Highway and other roads, traffic has lessened on Dixie Highway, the community's first major thoroughfare.

The FEC Railway, however, remains an important freight conveyor, after abandoning passenger service in the early 1960s. Occasionally, the old railroad, the center of so much community activity in an earlier period, draws attention. In 1979, three teenaged boys threw a mainline switch at Oakland Park, causing the derailment of a southbound train hurtling at a speed of forty-five miles per hour. Although the train suffered significant damage, no one was killed.¹³⁷

Business and institutional growth has remained robust. In the early 1970s, city officials announced that Oakland Park contained more acres zoned for industrial growth for its size than any of the surrounding communities. By then, "the former cattle-raising and bean picking center" had pegged "its economy (to) more than 1,000 warehouse industries." The Sears warehouse and service center remained one of the largest and most important repositories. In the early 1970s, Broward County's Parks Department opened an office building and warehouse near the core of Oakland Park, while the county's Board of Public Instruction built a warehouse, maintenance and transportation complex elsewhere in the municipality. Numerous malls, shopping centers, restaurants, and lounges have opened along Oakland Park Boulevard, Powerline Road, and the Federal Highway in recent decades. As the 1990s began, Oakland Park's economy continued to offer a mix of small businesses, rental accommodations, restaurant and entertainment venues, and warehouses.¹³⁸

Indicative of the vast changes that have overtaken the city in recent decade was the decision by Charles Delegal in 1991 to sell 12.7 acres of farm land in the 4100 block of Dixie Highway. The Delegal family had lived on the property since 1927. The last cow pasture east of I-95 in Broward County, the property contained just one brown cow and three calves in 1991. The area had been zoned for light industry.¹³⁹

Governing Oakland Park has become more complex as its growth accelerated. To enable the municipal government to respond more effectively to the needs of the community, the city introduced the office of city administrator in 1965. Two years later, the State Legislature amended the city charter, replacing the office of city administrator with city manager. The manager answers to the city council, but functions as the most important municipal official since he or she implements many of the council's decisions and oversees the operation of a government with 311 employees in 1990.¹⁴⁰

Although city council meetings are dominated by zoning, licensing, and a host of other prosaic local matters, Oakland Park's lawmakers have occasionally involved themselves, with great

passion, in issues reaching far beyond the borders of the community. Concerned over the deterioration of relations between the United States and Cuba in 1960, the city council grew fearful of a Cuban attack on south Florida. Accordingly, it called a special meeting to plan civil defense measures for the area! Despite strong opposition, the Council approved. In 1983, a resolution encouraging “all responsible adult citizens to possess firearms and acquire the necessary knowledge for their use to fulfill themselves, their family and their country.” Citizen pressure prompted the mayor to veto the measure. For the next three years, the Council remained fractious and divided over this issue, while angry residents vented their unhappiness with lawmakers.¹⁴¹

In the mid-1980s, Mayor Glenn Dufek, with support from councilwoman Mary Laveratt, issued a proclamation equating abortion with the Nazi’s extermination of six million Jews. In the following year, the city council grappled with the emotion-charged abortion issue. Councilwoman Laveratt, the lightning rod for much of the impassioned debate, argued that “My city is representative of the nation. President (Ronald) Reagan’s overwhelming electoral majority shows us that. The pro-life issue was what elected him. People in this country have come around, so what we are doing here is consistent with the mood of the country.”¹⁴²

In 1986, the controversial Laveratt assumed the post of mayor under the rotating mayor arrangement. Before she became mayor, the council, anticipating that Laveratt would use her new post to issue an inordinate number of proclamations independent of it, adopted a requirement that all city proclamations would need the approval of a majority of the lawmakers. As mayor, Laveratt found herself increasingly at odds with the city council. Finally, in 1987, Laveratt sued the city, charging that other council members had conspired to deny her the traditional powers enjoyed by the mayor of Oakland Park, a reference to the new requirement for issuing proclamations. A federal judge dismissed the suit. Laveratt’s actions and those of other council members in the 1980s prompted the *Miami Herald* to characterize Oakland Park as a “town of offbeat politics.”¹⁴³

Clearly, the municipal government faced more pressing problems, for the era beginning with the tumultuous 1960s brought a soaring crime rate, an accelerating rise in the use of illicit drugs, growing racial antagonisms, and the persistent challenge of providing adequate services for a rapidly growing population. One of the most celebrated crimes of the early years of the era appears harmless in comparison with what came later. In 1960, the Oakland Park Lions Club sponsored an “Obscene Smoker,” an event that attracted 600 beer-swilling “wildly cheering males,” who paid to watch the performances of seven “strip tease artists” and to view stag films in a new warehouse at Northeast Fifth Avenue and Thirty-Ninth Street. Soon after the event became public knowledge, the State of Florida and the Federal Bureau of Investigation launched investigations. Five men singled out as sponsors of the event were tried on felony charges, and convicted.¹⁴⁴

Many entertainment spots, including the popular Mai Kai Restaurant, experienced minor problems with the law because of loud music and late hour noise which drew complaints from residents in the vicinity. Studio 51, a discotheque that operated on East Oakland Park

Boulevard in the 1970s and 1980s, eventually closed because of frequent complaints from neighbors who had grown tired of its late night revelry. Elements of the populace, along with members of the city council, also battled establishments offering nude dancers and X-rated books and videos.¹⁴⁵

More intractable crime problems appeared with the drug epidemic, especially after the introduction of crack cocaine in the mid 1980s. The city's police responded energetically to the problem, posting signs on suspected crack houses before destroying many of them. Rampant drug use and crime was especially severe in Harlem-McBride, a blighted thirty-six acre quarter, where angry residents challenged the police to eliminate the worsening drug problem. In 1989, Mervin Span, a black activist, complained that "we're trying to prevent a murder in this community...we've had two shootouts."¹⁴⁶

Harlem-McBride was Oakland Park's most visible black neighborhood. At the time of its annexation in 1969, the quarter, described as "pathetic" in one account, lacked paved roads, sewers, and street lighting, as well as running water. Although annexation brought with it many services and improvements, Harlem-McBride continued to languish in poverty and despair. This condition prompted the city of Oakland Park to introduce additional improvements there. In the 1980s the municipality began replacing dozens of shacks in Harlem-McBride—and elsewhere with new homes through federally-provided Community Developments Block Grant funds. The city also purchased empty lots and awarded them to first-time homeowners in this manner. These and other improvements prompted activist Span to exclaim that "as the neighborhood takes on its new look, residents are taking on new initiatives. They are bringing complaints and compliments to city officials and they are beginning to attend city council meetings."¹⁴⁷ In 1990, Habitat for Humanity, a national organization that builds low-cost housing for needy families, constructed a small number of homes in Harlem-McBride.¹⁴⁸

Oakland Park has displayed a progressive touch in other ways, too. In 1974, it became the first municipality in Broward to organize a public safety department, which offers police and fire protection. The municipality was also the first Florida city to comply with a new state law requiring all cities and towns to initiate recycling programs by July 1, 1989. In 1988, city worked began traveling from home to home collecting newspapers, bottles, and cans.¹⁴⁹

The city registered many other gains. Oakland Park organized a recreation department in 1960, beginning with two part-time employees who supervised children's activities at the recreation center. In the following year, the recreation department hired its first full time employees. By 1991, the staff labored at a wide variety of tasks in the city's parks, which had become the venues for popular recurring events. A city-sponsored Youth Day, which, by 1990, had been operating for more than three decades, drew thousands of persons annually. The city library, which received a permanent home in 1964, across the street from the Woman's Club, instituted an annual "Art in the Park" festival in the 1970s. In 1987, sixty-three artists painted on the grounds of the library to celebrate National Library Week. As the era unfolded, the library increased significantly the size of its physical plant and its holdings. A new city hall opened in

1963; six years later, it expanded to include a second floor. In 1990, the structure received an extensive facelift. In the meantime, the city had built several other facilities, including a new police/ fire station, two new parks, a central public safety station, and it had expanded the size of the Public Works Building.¹⁵⁰

Two old community structures received a great deal of attention in this period, underlining Oakland Park's rich heritage and its citizenry's growing appreciation for it. The Oakland Park Elementary School, the oldest operating educational institution in the county, and the heart of the community for several decades, gained admission to the National Register of Historic Places in 1987. Administered by the National Parks Service, the National Register contains a listing of buildings and other historic elements considered significant in American history, architecture, archaeology, engineering, and culture, and deemed worthy of preservation. Oakland Park Elementary School is one of a small number of buildings to receive this recognition in Broward County. No other structure in the county has hosted the variety of events and meetings as the Spanish styled school that resides at 936 Northeast Thirty-Third Street.¹⁵¹

Oakland Park Elementary School's accession to the National Register represented another accomplishment of the Oakland Park Historical Society. Founded in 1974 to preserve and disseminate the history of the community, the Oakland Park Historical Society operated for its first two years without a home. In 1976, the Society acquired a permanent home by accident after Midge Turpen, one of the organization's guiding lights, and the city's historian, passed a small wood frame house in poor condition on Northeast Thirty-Ninth Street. A sign in front of the structure bore the legend "Free Home." The building's owner stipulated that if someone claimed it, that person or party would have to move it. Built in the 1920s, the structure had served, for a time, as the home of Mayor Dewey Hawkins.

The Oakland Park Historical Society wanted the building for a clubhouse and museum, but it lacked the money to move it. In the Bicentennial year of 1976, the city awarded the Oakland Park Historical Society a grant to move the building two and one-half blocks from its original location onto city property at 3876 Northeast Sixth Avenue. The roof suffered severe damage during the three-day move over narrow streets and low-hanging tree branches. An intense period of restoration work followed its relocation. In 1977, the newly refurbished building began hosting meetings of the historical society; it also served a pioneer museum.¹⁵²

Restoration, care, and a near reverential attitude toward the aforementioned structures underline Oakland Park's appreciation for its unique history amid an era of accelerating change. Few other municipalities outside of south Florida can claim as intense a twentieth century journey through wilderness, farming, boom-bust, and urbanization phases as Oakland Park. And even in burgeoning south Florida, Oakland Park stands apart for having experienced—and survived—the uniquely bizarre Floranada phase of its history!

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