



WILTON MANORS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

HISTORICAL NOTES

OCTOBER 2008

JEAN WALKER FRENCH ROB FRENCH 2008 CITY PIONEERS

by Paul A. Kuta and Benjamin Little

Wilton Manors Historical Society

Mrs. Jean Walker French and her son, Rob French, are Wilton Manors' 2008 "Pioneers." This is an honor bestowed by the City Commission on people who have been important in the City's evolution. The Historical Society nominates candidates who then represent the City at the Broward County Historical Commission's annual "Pioneer Days." This year, the Pioneer Days ceremony will be at the E. Pat Larkins Community Center in Pompano Beach on Oct. 11, 2008.

Mayor Newton honored Jean and Rob with a City Proclamation at the City Commission Meeting on September 9th.

At age 16, Jean Walker drove from New York to Florida with her parents and brothers in a Stutz Bearcat automobile, arriving in Ft Lauderdale on December 16, 1936. Jean attended Ft Lauderdale High School and, as a student, entered a training program at Broward General Hospital, then located in a converted 3-story apartment building. After graduation, Jean became a bookkeeper at the hospital.

She married Edward French in July 1940. During World War II, they went to Connecticut for four years where Ed worked in defense plants. Their first son, David, was born there in 1943. They returned to Florida in 1946 and bought a house on N.E. 6th Lane in Highland Estates, putting them here when the Village of Wilton Manors was incorporated in May of 1947. The family left a Roy Roger's movie in Ft Lauderdale in the fall of 1947 and walked into a

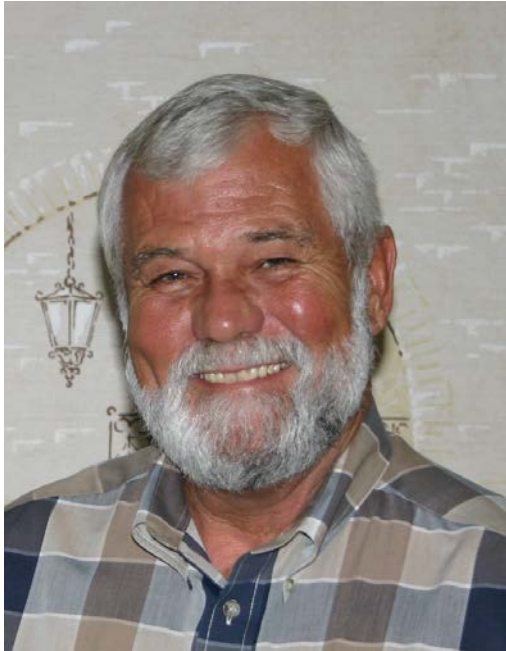


devastating hurricane. Jean remembers the ride back up Andrews Avenue as “really exciting.”

Jean's second son, Rob, was born in 1949. She recalls daily walks in the late 1940's to the new Manor Market on Wilton Drive, then the only grocery store in town, because refrigerators were not available so soon after WW II. Jean was a charter member of the Covenant Presbyterian Church founded in 1949 and chaired the annual March of Dimes drives, assisted by Village Clerk Marcia Stafford. Jean's sons attended Wilton Manors Elementary School, which opened in 1951.

Jean (a talented artist) served as an arts and crafts volunteer during the summer under the city's famed Recreation Director James McGivern. She later went on to work in recreation programs in other Broward cities. A commercial painting contractor, Ed French opened his own painting business in 1947, which exists to the present day. With the growing family, Jean and her husband bought two lots on N.E. 25th Street from John Pederson in 1952. She still lives in the home she and Ed built there in 1953.

Rob French grew up when Wilton Manors still had lots of wide open spaces to roam and



everyone knew one another. Rob played Little League Baseball at the then new Mickel Field. In later years, he became President of Wilton Manors Baseball, and continues as a lifelong booster. As a teenager, Rob pumped gas at a full service gas station (Remember them?) where Hamill's Firestone is now located on Andrews Avenue. After the Richardson Golf Course closed, Rob and friends continued playing there with buried coffee cans. In 1958, he opened a savings account at Wilton Manors National Bank (now the SunTrust Bank on NE 26th St.) and got his first car loan there in 1966. As a young man, Rob was a “regular” at the A&W Root Beer stand at Five Points and the Royal Castle (hamburgers) at the other end of Wilton Drive (now the Siam Thai restaurant).

Rob took over Ed French Painting, Inc. in 1980 and remains as President of this highly respected Broward firm. Rob has been active in the Wilton Manors Kiwanis Club for decades. He has held several offices, chaired innumerable fundraising and charitable events, and continues his strong focus on programs that serve children. Rob and his wife Poco, who is also an active civic volunteer, have been married for 30 years. A "dynamic duo," they have devoted much time and their considerable talent to the betterment of Wilton Manors. They are the proud parents of two children, Andrew and Bridget, and reside on Coral Gardens Drive.

This is the second year that the City has chosen multi-generation “Pioneers.” In 2007, the recipients of this honor were Madgeline Thuma and her daughter Cynthia. Commissioner and Historical Society President Diane Cline said, “Wilton Manors is a real community

where community values are passed on from generation to generation. Jean and Rob, Madgeline and Cindy are fine examples of this.”

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