



# WILTON MANORS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

## HISTORICAL NOTES

AUGUST 2018

### BETTY AND GEX WILLIAMS, INTERVIEW

AS TOLD TO MARY AND RON ULM,

AUGUST 28, 2013

By Mary G. Ulm  
Wilton Manors Historical Society

*Betty Morrison and (Edwin) Gex Williams, Jr. first visited Wilton Manors in 1949 and moved here in 1951. Gex (pronounced "Jay") was the son of E. Gex Williams and Helen King Williams. E. Gex was the son of William and Anna Williams, the cofounders of Williams-McWilliams Ice Cream. Gex, Jr., founded Williams, Hatfield, and Stoner, a civil engineering firm. As city engineer for many cities Gex helped develop South Florida's building codes. He designed much of the South Florida infrastructure residents take for granted today, including the replacement of septic tanks with modern sewer systems.*

*Gex, Jr.'s sister Helen, married George Richardson, Jr.*

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Betty and Gex Williams' first visit together to Wilton Manors occurred in 1949 when the engaged couple went to "hit some balls" at the golf range run by Al Hagen. The range was located on Wilton Drive where the current City Hall property is now.

The couple married in 1950 and came back to Wilton Manors to live after University of Florida graduation in 1951. The Chabot Apartments where they lived overlooked the No. 9 Fairway of the Richardson Golf Course (today's Richardson Historic Park and Nature Preserve). One evening Betty looked out the window and noticed that the Fairway looked a greyish-brown, as if it had been paved. But wait! It also looked as if it was moving and it was headed toward Wilton Drive. The couple ran outside to see thousands of land crabs moving in mass from the golf course across Wilton Drive, a distance of about 100 yards. The old joke around the golf course was that if you didn't watch the ball carefully, it would disappear down a crab hole!

In 1958 the couple moved with their three children: Gex, Steve, and Sandra to their newly purchased house at 625 NE 21<sup>st</sup> Court. This house was built in 1947 by Mabel Barwick, who ran a local insurance agency and real estate business on Wilton Drive. The home sat on almost an acre and was constructed of Florida cypress. The living room ceiling was 18 feet high at its peak and paneled with tongue and groove cypress boards long enough to reach the ceiling without any joints. The wooden paneling for the house is said to have taken up an entire box car when it was shipped by train.

At that time NE 21<sup>st</sup> Court ended at the Williams Driveway and there were no homes along today's NE 20<sup>th</sup> Street or NE 20<sup>th</sup> Drive. The backyard of the home looked out upon an undeveloped "Hagen's Island", which is today's Town House Isle. The location was ideal for raising a family. The boys fished upon the banks of the river, just a few steps from their yard. All the children visited Hagen Park and were involved in an active recreation program.

One special treat for the Williams children was watching the City's volunteer fire fighters practice and test equipment along the stretch of land at the river before Townhouse Isle was developed. (Wilton Manors had an all-volunteer fire department from 1952 – 1999.)

Another treat was getting a glimpse of the “Bird Lady” who lived in the “Castles” at Five Points, as locals referred to the entryway towers built in 1925 by Wilton Manors developer, E.J. Willingham. The towers were torn down in the 1960s, but live on in the official city logo. The “Bird Lady” moved into one of the towers rent-free and kept several parakeets, mynahs, and even an owl there until she was evicted in 1956.

Betty Williams was an avid gardener and often won awards for having the most beautiful yard. Quail, fox, and opossums were regular visitors, along with a variety of birds that nested there every year. “Hagen’s Island” was populated by ancient Cypress trees where parrots roosted, as they still do today.

Betty Williams led the Wilton Manors Cub Scout Troup for four years. She took the Troup for nature study at the woods at Richardson Golf Course. There, they identified cypress, oak, air plants, and wild orchids.

Betty also served on the Recreation Advisory Board at the time when the land for Colohatchee Park was purchased. She was the only woman serving on the Board at that time.

Gex Williams was one of the founding members of Williams, Hatfield, Stoner, a prominent engineering, land surveying, and planning firm. The business was located on Wilton Drive at NE 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue where the Executive Suites office building is located today. Gex served as the consulting engineer to the City for several years.

#### Answers to specific questions

#### **Q. Who lived in the upstairs apartment of the Carriage House?**

A. For several years two elderly ladies from the Northeast wintered in the apartment. Their names were Louise and Lizzie. They joined the family for Thanksgiving and Christmas Dinners and can be seen in one of the video recordings provided to the Society by the Williams.

In addition, Kamie Richardson lived in the apartment during the summer while she attended college.

#### **Q. Did Buddy Hicks ever live in the apartment?**

A. No, Buddy had his own home a few miles away.

#### **Q. What can you tell us about Buddy Hicks?**

A. Buddy served as the caretaker at the golf course and as driver and helper to Rachael Richardson<sup>1</sup>. He was quite the philosopher. Everyone loved him. He was a real help to Rachael. He prepared dinner for her and took it to her. He kept an eye on George and Gex Richardson when they were young. Even after the golf course closed in the late 1950s, he came and sat on the tractor and mowed the property.

#### **Q. What else can you tell us about the golf course?**

A. It was the only public nine-hole golf course in Broward County and received a lot of business from the same golfers day after day. George, Jr. would get up early to change the flag pole and cups to give the course a different play each day. This was when he was going to law school in Miami.

Also, Gex and George would play golf in the afternoons after work. Betty would watch to see when they were starting down the 9<sup>th</sup> green and go over from the apartment to sit on the bench and visit with George, Sr. as they finished playing.

#### **Q. Who lived in the old Willingham House after Rachael died?**

A. Gex’s parents, Edwin Gex Williams, Sr. and Helen King Williams lived there until their deaths. The house was quite old. It had exposed wiring, the kind with the little insulators. The house fell into disrepair and George Richardson had it torn down. The volunteer fire department burned it as a practice drill before it was torn down.

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<sup>1</sup> Wife of George Richardson, Sr.

**Q. Who else lived near you on 21<sup>st</sup> Ct?**

A. There were four houses built along 21<sup>st</sup> Ct down from Wilton Drive to the point where the street ended at the start of the Williams' lot. All of the houses are on the north side of the street. The first house belonged to Mrs. Turner, Sr. It was later purchased by one of the McJunkins. The next house was built by Carl Hiassen and later purchased by the Price family. Continuing east, the next house belonged to Roy and Martha Fairfield, and then the Barwick/Williams house was the last house on the street.

**Q. The house that was at 625 NE 21<sup>st</sup> Court is no longer on the property. What happened?**

A. After 32 years the Williams sold the house in 1991 to Stephen and Nancy Simmons who raised two boys and a girl there, just as the Williams had in the prior generation. Just before Hurricane Wilma struck in 2005 the Simmons sold the house and property to a developer who planned on building three homes of the large ¾ acre lot. The Simmons retained salvage rights to the house. Hurricane Wilma destroyed the trees and landscaping, but the well-built house survived without damage allowing the Simmons to later salvage the cypress paneling, the oak flooring, the attractive cypress front door and the 5 foot diameter chandelier, all of which found its way into the Simmons' new home in Harbor Beach.

**Q. What can you tell us about how the Williams-McWilliams Ice Cream Store began?**

A. Gex Williams's grandparents came to Fort Lauderdale in 1926 after their dry goods store in Missouri burned down. McWilliams was the husband of Gex's father's first cousin. In 1940 Gex's father decided that he would like to bring pasteurized milk to Broward County and he started a milk plant to pasteurize, bottle, and distribute milk. The milk plant also began distributing homogenized milk for the first time in Broward County. After school Gex worked at the plant running the bottling machine and homogenizer. His partner, McWilliams, was not interested in this side of the business and moved to Hollywood, where he continued running an ice cream store.

**Q. In doing research on Willingham when he lived in Idlewyld, we came across some Williams. Do you know if they were related to you?**

A. Gex's grandparents rented a home in Idlewyld in 1925, so it may have been them. Also, Betty's son-in-law was related to a Williams that also lived in Idlewyld. It could have been them.

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### ***Edwin Gex Williams - Obituary , May 13, 2017***

Edwin Gex Williams Jr, 89, a Ft Lauderdale native, passed away at the Woodlands of John Knox Village.

Gex was born June 10th, 1927 in the Ft Lauderdale home of E Gex and Helen King Williams because there was no hospital in Broward County. He grew up in the historic Rose Drive home built by his grandparents, which is now Gilda's Club House.

As a youth Gex (pronounced Jay) worked the family business Williams McWilliams, then Ft Lauderdale's only ice cream shop, and South Florida's first dairy to pasteurize milk. A proud Flying L, he played trumpet in Ft Lauderdale High's first band, and weekend USO dances for the troops during WWII. Gex graduated high school in January 1945, at 17 and enlisted in the US Navy. Gex's grandparents William and Anna Williams moved to Ft Lauderdale in 1923 and his parents, Gex and Helen Williams, followed in 1926. In 1928 they became members of First Presbyterian Church. His father was fifth Commodore of Lauderdale Yacht Club.

Joining his father's Pi Kappa Alpha fraternity at the University of Florida Gex met the love of his life, Pike Dream Girl Betty Morrison of Gainesville. In 1951, after earning a BS in Engineering, Gex returned to Ft Lauderdale with his wife Betty. Gex and Betty raised their 3 children Gex, Steve and Sandra in Wilton Manors where he founded the civil engineering firm of Williams, Hatfield and Stoner (WH&S). Gex's sister, Helen, married George Richardson and they became best friends and brothers, living and serving together in Wilton Manors as city attorney and city engineer for decades. In the 60's, 70's and 80's WH&S designed and oversaw expansions at Port Everglades, and Ft Lauderdale-Hollywood Airport, as well as Borden's South Florida Dairy. As city engineer for many cities Gex helped develop South Florida's building codes. He designed much of the infrastructure that South Florida residents take for granted today, including the replacement of septic tanks with modern sewer systems. Gex served as President of the Florida Engineering Society and the Rotary Club, as well as other professional and civic groups. He served on First Federal of Broward (later Glendale Federal) Board of Directors as a champion of affordable home loans.

To Gex, Ft Lauderdale was not just a good place to work, it was the best place to live and play. His passion for sailing and boating led him to become Lauderdale Yacht Club's first second-generation Commodore. As Commodore of the Gulf Stream Sailing Club he promoted family sailboat racing and cruising. Gex was Deacon and Elder at First Presbyterian Church and guided his life by the Golden Rule: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you". True religion for Gex was helping widows and orphans without fanfare or recognition. Many children in Wilton Manors were unknowingly helped by his kindness in sponsoring them in school and sport activities, senior trips and even weddings. People and relationships were always more important than money. His definition of success is leaving the world better than you found it. Gex's first words in the morning were generally, "another beautiful day in paradise". He has gone on to an even better paradise, and his beloved Ft Lauderdale is a little better for the time he spent here.

Gex is predeceased by his parents E Gex and Helen King Williams, and Judge George and (sister) Helen Williams Richardson. Gex is survived by his wife of 66 years, Betty Morrison Williams and their 3 children, 15 grandchildren and 20 great grandchildren. The Edwin Gex III and Judy Bixler Williams family: David and Melissa, Sandra, Anna, Katie; Mark and Jessica, Leah, Michael, Brianna, Brayden, Alyssa; Daniel and Jordan; Sarah and Seth Holman, Zeke; E Gex IV and Rachel, son; and Betsy. The Stephen Donald and Holly Anderson Williams family: Stephen and Kristi Del Sol Williams, Danielle; Matthew; Caroline; and Christopher. The Wayne and Sandra Williams Marlowe family: Rachael and Aaron Bullock, Jacquelyn, Rebecca, Micah, Malachi; Daniel and Florence Lambert Marlowe, Adelyn; Byron and Britney Roberts Marlowe, Peyton, Caleb; Susannah and Josue Galan, Elise, Lydia; and Caton.

## *Obituary of Betty Williams - October 29, 2021*

**Elizabeth Ann (Betty) Morrison** was born to Dr. Donald Morrison and Ottie Gray Morrison in Gainesville, Florida on October 28, 1929, the day the stock market crashed and the roaring 20's came to a close. Her father said the world would long remember her birthday. Betty grew up in the historic home originally belonging to her mother's parents with three older siblings, Dr. Donald Morrison Jr, Henry Gray Morrison, and Molly Mae Morrison. Several uncles and both her grandmothers also lived with her family. Betty's many talents were evident early in life. Always observant, she often found money on the ground, much to her sister's chagrin. At four years old, her father taught Betty the multiplication tables (with a dime incentive for reciting all the tables correctly) and delighted in showing her prowess off to his friends. As an adult, when making purchases, Betty accurately tabulated purchases in her head as fast as a cash register. (And often caught mistakes by surprised store clerks.) Betty's childhood was full of love and laughter, with a steady stream of friends and family filling their home. She often paddled the boat while her father fished on the Suwannee River. Her mother, an excellent cook, made every meal noteworthy in presentation and taste. Fresh flowers from her garden adorned the table. Betty followed in her mom's footsteps as a consummate entertainer, hosting many friends, family, and clubs. She kept files of invitations, menus, and table decoration sketches from her decades of entertaining. Betty attended Florida State University for two years. She often brought groups of friends home to Gainesville for weekend dances at University of Florida. She transferred to UF in 1949 when it became co-educational. Always proud of her sorority affiliation, she helped the new Eta Delta Chi Omega chapter with their first rush and initiation. As Pi Kappa Alpha Dream Girl, she met the love of her life, E. Gex Williams Jr. They married in September of 1950 and graduated the following December, Betty in Early Childhood Education and Gex with a degree in Civil Engineering. Gex, a Fort Lauderdale native, told her if she accepted his marriage proposal, she would never live north of West Palm Beach. Indeed, their first jobs were in West Palm Beach, where they lived for a year before moving to Fort Lauderdale. Betty taught second grade in West Palm Beach and then at Pine Crest School in Fort Lauderdale. Gex's bride supported him in all his endeavors such as starting a business, as first mate on their boat, and first lady to him as Commodore at Lauderdale Yacht Club. They made a great team aboard their sailboat as he skippered and she served hearty meals from the galley to fortify the crew through stormy seas. Together Gex and Betty instilled a love of the open ocean and the Bahama Islands in their children, grandchildren and friends. Betty is from a family of innovators. Her grandfather owned a brick business in Rome, Georgia, and secured two patents on a brick kiln he invented in the 1880's. She was proud to tell people that she had five dentists in her immediate family. Her Uncle Thad Morrison introduced the use of Novocain to the Southern Dental Society and helped standardize Orthodontics as a dental specialty. Her father was Florida's first orthodontist and former president of the Florida Dental Society. Her brother invented removable orthodontic aligners. He did not pursue a patent, but using models he created while straightening her son Gex's teeth, he presented the technology for the advancement of science and art at the annual session of Southern Society for Orthodontics. With a natural knack for problem-solving across many disciplines, Betty frequently sketched invention ideas and made prototypes. Whenever she and Gex did home improvement projects and additions, she drafted detailed plans with electrical and plumbing details all noted. Betty took pleasure in promoting women's higher education through her long affiliation as a PEO. She also was a Garden Club member, with a talent for growing flowers and making beautiful floral arrangements. Betty delighted in serving neighborhood children, sailboat crews and countless others in her community. She gave generously of her time and resources to care for people in need, following the example set by her mother. Betty made sure her grandchildren knew their manners and encouraged their imaginations in creative ways. She was a devoted grandmother and loved hosting frequent family gatherings so that cousins could be close friends even when separated by long distances. Her zest for life and love of family leave a legacy that continues to inspire future generations. Betty is predeceased by her husband Gex, her parents, her siblings, and her brother and sister-in-law, Judge George and Helen Richardson. Betty is survived by her 3 children and spouses, 15 grandchildren and their 10 spouses, and 30 great-grandchildren. The Edwin Gex III and Judy Bixler Williams family: grandson David, children Sandra, Anna, and Katie; grandson Mark and wife Jessica, children Leah, Michael, Brianna, Brayden, and Alyssa; grandson Daniel and wife Jordan; granddaughter Sarah and husband Seth Holman, children Zeke, Josiah, and Emma; grandson E Gex IV and wife Rachel, children Teddy, Jack and Georgianna; and granddaughter Elizabeth Anne (Betsy) and husband Nathan Mendel. The Stephen Donald and Holly Anderson Williams family: grandson Stephen and wife Kristi del Sol Williams, children Danielle, Olivia and baby boy Williams; grandson Matthew; granddaughter Caroline; and grandson Christopher. The Wayne and Sandra Williams Marlowe family: granddaughter Rachael and husband Aaron Bullock, children Jacquelyn, Rebecca, Micah, and Malachi; grandson Daniel and wife Florence Lambert Marlowe, child Adelyn; grandson Byron and wife Britney Roberts Marlowe, children Peyton, Caleb, and Jacob; granddaughter Susannah and husband Josue Galan, children Ricardo, Elise, Lydia, and Luisa; and grandson Caton Marlowe and Paula Driscoll and their child Beckham. Betty was especially close to her niece Kamie Richardson Gonzalez and nephews George and Gex Richardson, who lived down the street and grew up with her children. Her backyard was a playground for all the neighborhood children, whom she fed snacks and encouragement. Betty and Gex were grateful for the loving service in their home for almost 40 years by Muirl Davis, who became family to their children and grandchildren. The Williams family would like to thank the staff at the Woodlands who took wonderful care of Betty, and her compassionate personal aides over the past four years-- Iffanise Fleurinord, Enese Celestin, and Nicki Phipps.