

A Brief History of Bonita Beach/Bay Harbor Club  
Thirty-fifth Anniversary  
April 2019

**Bonita Beach:**

A description from a local realtor says, "Touched by the shimmering waters of the Gulf of Mexico, Bonita Beach offers a sample of warm, tropical breezes, swaying coconut palm trees, shore birds dipping into the surf to catch their daily meal, breathtaking sunsets, and sandy beaches covered with a variety of sea shells dotting the shore line." Combine this with beautiful Estero Bay, with its mangroves, frolicking dolphins, sleeping pelicans, fish waiting to be caught, and fun boats tied to the docks, we believe we truly live in paradise.

Recent discoveries place people living in Bonita 8000 years ago. In 1539, thousands of Calusa Indians were here when the Spanish came looking for the Fountain of Youth. The nearby town of Survey was formed in the 1870s and later changed its name to Bonita Springs. Population was small. By 1917, a barely passable road was completed between Fort Myers and Bonita Springs. Population increased, starting in 1925, with the arrival of the Fort Myers-Southern Railroad and then in 1928, when the Tamiami Trail was completed.

Out on the beach, there was a fish hut shoreline called Fiddler-ville, named for all the fiddler crabs found on the beach. In the twenties, the name was changed to Bonita Beach. A man named Kinley Engalson owned much of the beach in the 1940s, and fabricated a marketing plan for Little Hickory Island. It was not a popular idea. People didn't think the shoreline was good for anything but fishing and swimming, plus there were sand flies, mosquitoes, and the threat of hurricanes. After failing to build what appeared to be a planned community on the beach, Engalson sold his holdings.

The 1950s brought C.E. Rush who marketed the mostly barren Bonita Beach as a recreation mecca. He had a little restaurant where the public beach park is today and a real estate office. Most potential buyers thought living along the shoreline was dangerous at best, horrendously uncomfortable at worst. The project was a failure. The people who did live on the island had one telephone and had to haul all of their drinking water out from town because well water smelled of sulfur. However the fishing was fantastic, especially at Big Hickory Pass. The beach was very wide, lined with Australian pines.

The 60s brought Arnold Glazier who started building stilt homes along the shore. He became semi-famous, after surviving Hurricane Donna, for constructing tough, quality homes. Lots were 50 feet wide and spread from the surf to the back bay and sold for \$8,000. Finally Hickory Boulevard connected to the north with the opening of the Big Hickory Pass bridge in 1965.

The 1970s ushered in the first era of condominiums at the northern point of Little Hickory Island. The first condominium was the Egret, completed in 1972. This was followed by the Casa Bonita buildings, and Dolphin Way. In 1974, all construction stopped due to the gas shortage. Partially finished buildings were deserted by the contractors and developers. After a few years, with new organization, building began again, and the Bonita Beach Club, SeaScape, WindSong, and Sea Isles were all completed by 1980.

The building of the Ambassador by a group of investors from Ohio, was not going well, running into all kinds of problems. They connected with Neil Abrahamson to finish the project. The land the group owned consisted not only of the Ambassador property but property across Hickory Boulevard for another condominium. After the bad experience of the Ambassador, along with poor sales, some of the investors pulled out, leaving six men to finance the Bay Harbor Club project. The development company was named Bayview of Bonita Beach, Inc.

Located on the five acres where the new project would be built, was the Valhalla fishing camp. It consisted of small cabins that were rented to vacationers. When the land was cleared, many of these cabins were taken to Immokalee for housing. Some cabins were left and the local fire department set them on fire and used them to practice their firefighting skills.

Developer Neil Abrahamson, lived in a Sea Isles penthouse. He promoted and talked up the wonderful plans for the new Bay Harbor Club condominium to the Sea Isles owners and renters. A number of them signed up. The new condominium would be very similar to Sea Isles except the units would be larger and improved. The pool would be a larger – 25 feet x 50 feet. Monthly maintenance would be \$98.56.

Upon completion of Building I in November 1983, a sales office was set up in the lobby. Four models were available for view. The prices ranged from \$121,500 to \$164,000, based on the floor and stack. The units were basically the same with just a few options available: a built-in bar that changed the configuration of the master bedroom and bath, a Jenn-Aire barbeque in the balcony closet, an outside vent for the stove, a pocket door to the second bedroom, and upgrades for refrigerators and dish washers.

Investors and contractors were given the opportunity to purchase units. Some changes were made to some of these units and to a couple of pre-constructed bought units. Two units were combined, a sky light was put in one of the penthouse units, two units moved the living room glass wall further out on to the balcony – one about 3 feet and one about 8 feet, and at least one master bath was made into one large room rather than divided into sections. Today only one unit is owned by one of the original investors and contractors and he is Roger Hakim.

By 1985, Building II was completed and the sales office was moved to that lobby and stayed until November 1988. In July 1987, it was announced that all 104 units had sold, and the development company turned over control of the association to the owners. Twenty owners ran for election to the board. Nine were elected. During the first five years, minutes tell about tennis court problems, sewer plant concerns, the Batista land problem, beach access questions, ficus trees, pine trees, building defects, balcony tile, cats, heating of the pool, rental guidelines, congested parking, glass door sliders on balconies, etc. It all sounds a little familiar, doesn't it?

Carol and Mike Vito bought a pre-construction priced unit. They were hired as the Bay Harbor managers. The Vitos were the second people into the building and their unit became the manager's office. Carol and Mike were the managers until 1988, when Mike died. Another owner, Bruce McGinnis worked with Carol for one year. Carol retired and Bruce's wife Gloria took Carol's place to work with Bruce. The manager's office moved to the McGinnis' unit for 8 years. After 1997, managers were not owners or residents of Bay Harbor and managers were hired from the "outside." The manager's

office was in the clubhouse for 12 years until it was moved to a fixed-up closet, where it is still located today.

The early days brought wonderful fun parties. Very popular were the fish fries. The men would catch the fish which would be fried and together with all kinds of delicious foods, provide a fun dinner party for all. The Christmas boat party was very popular. The decorated boats would go down Hogue Channel, pass the pool where all the party goers would wave and shout. They took time out for the dinner party and then were at the rail again cheering the boats as they returned to the marina. Dances were fun, but proved too difficult to dance on the clubhouse carpet. Sing alongs were popular. An organ was donated to the club house and provided great fun for the residents.

Our social life has carried on. We play bridge and poker, exercise, do water aerobics while we talk, have discussions, and gather together for holiday parties, boat parties, luaus, Thirsty Thursday, Super Bowl parties, and celebrate St. Patrick's Day. We have made wonderful lasting friendships with owners from all over the country.

Since we celebrated Bay Harbor Club's 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary, we have tackled hard problems and concerns and have continued repairing, updating, replacing, and enhancing. The buildings have been painted twice, the seawall repaired, the landings have been tiled and windows added, all signs of indoor/outdoor carpeting have disappeared, the clubhouse has been renovated twice, a website has been developed, and we have Wi-Fi. Once again we have new screening, railings, and repaired balconies. Rules have been amended, key fobs have been added, pickle ball is the new exciting sport, the elevators have been updated, and we now enjoy Sally Sprinkles. Individuals have remodeled and updated their units and we have survived a few hurricanes.

We are proud of Bay Harbor. We want it to be the best on Bonita Beach. Today we can look back and look into the future and say, with confidence, Bay Harbor IS the best and it is our home.

Happy Anniversary, Bay Harbor!

Written by Susan Barley, Building I, Unit 12-C