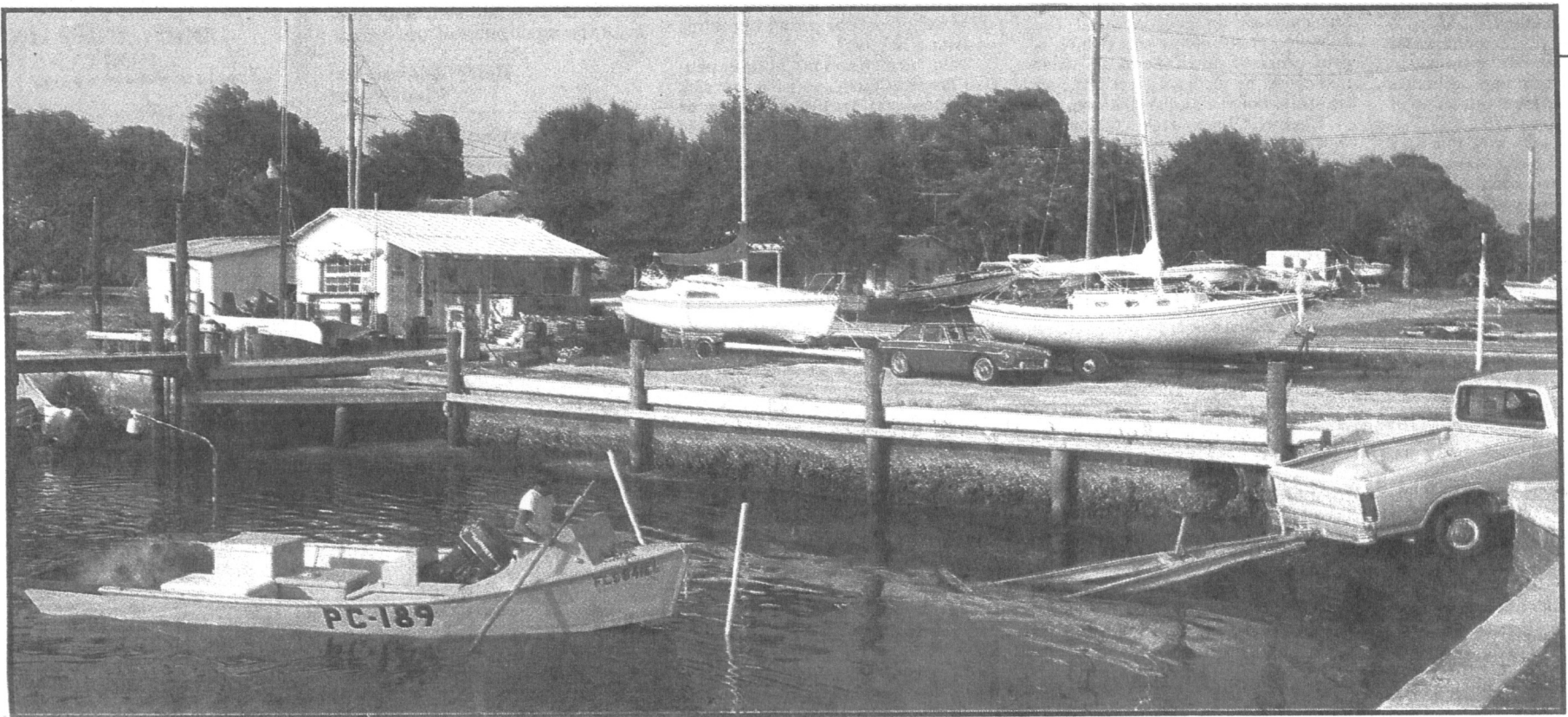


OZONA'S

HISTORY

CORNER



Marvin Thomas, a 40-year resident of Ozona, brings a 400-pound load of mullet into Speckled Trout Marina.

Identity crisis

Ozona working to keep growth from changing quiet community

By CLIFF PADDOCK
Clearwater Times Correspondent

OZONA — In this quiet village, fate or good luck has preserved a small-town atmosphere, where each generation has passed along portions of a history that stretches back to the 1860s.

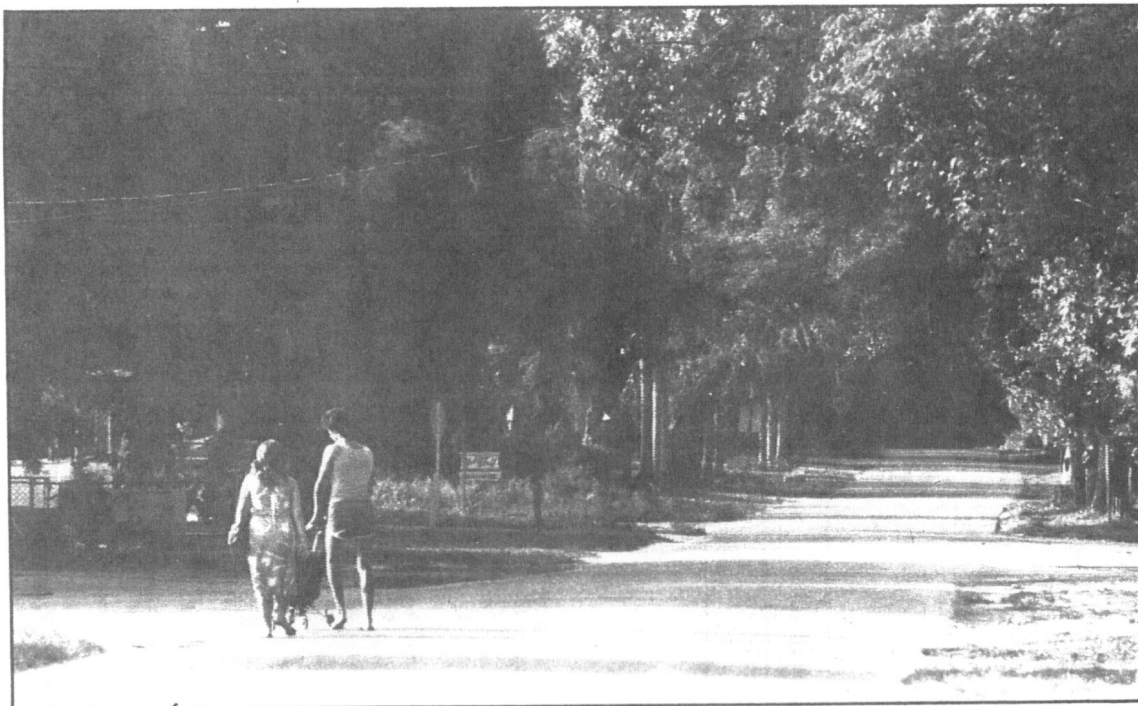
Tucked away between Alternate 19 and the Gulf, just north of Dunedin, the unincorporated community of about 500 families has changed slowly, blending transplants from the North with the "old-timers."

OAKS AND pines shade a variety of sand, shell and asphalt streets, many featuring "dead end" or "private drive" signs. Traffic lights are nonexistent; streetlights and sidewalks are scarce.

So pedestrians frequently stroll in the streets, and, as postmaster and Ozona native Jeanette Lindsey put it, "If somebody wants a streetlight, they can pay the power company to put it in."

Orange Street, a long-since bypassed part of U.S. 19, is flanked by Ozona's three-block-long business district. The post office, a real estate firm and a handful of other businesses mingle with older homes; a lawn service occupies a building that was once the village's only store.

Most of the new homes are along Smith and Sutherland bayous, as are the marinas and boat builders that make up about one-



A young couple walks down Orange Street, Ozona's main street.

Clearwater Times — STEVE HASEL

third of Ozona's 30-odd businesses.

Relaxing with a beer behind the open-air counter of the Speckled Trout Marina, owner Tom Carr said business "goes great guns until about July 4th," then things slow down until September.

CARR DOESN'T worry about storing boats in the open. Potential thieves and vandals are discouraged by the Florida Marina Patrol boat based at his lot, he said, adding that Ozona is so far off the beaten track "nobody (including criminals) knows where

the place is."

Ozona's appeal: 'It's country'

Peace and seclusion don't mean the community isn't changing. The Census tract that includes Ozona, Crystal Beach and the

coastal area north to Klosterman Road showed a population increase of more than 68 percent during the 1970s.

That's well behind the 273 percent jump during the same period in some sections of the Palm Harbor area, to the east. And the Ozona-Crystal Beach tract should show another 56 percent increase in the 1990 Census, according to Sandy Duncan of the Pinellas County Planning Department.

Not surprisingly, the local real estate community is ecstatic over the trend.

Judy Johnson, a realtor associate with Ozona's Charlie Earhart Realty, said, "It seems like nine out of every 10 people who walk in love Ozona.

"Some people compare it to a New England fishing town," she continued, while "some see it as a resort community."

Ruby Staunton, one of Ozona's newest residents, said she and her husband "like it because it's a quiet community" and "because it's country."

THAT'S AN assessment Ozona natives can easily understand, but they are concerned that growth may present a threat to their way of life.

"The newcomers come and start changing things and pretty soon they have just what they came from," Mrs. Lindsey said.

Bill Allison, president of the

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Photos by Steve Hasel

A pier near Limetta Street exemplifies Ozona's tranquil beauty.

Ozona from Page 1

Ozona Village Improvement Society tends to play down the division between old and new residents.

His organization has "a pretty good mixture," he said. "When the first settlers came, they weren't born under a palm tree," he added with a chuckle, "they all came from someplace else."

But the organization tries to "keep growth under control," Allison said. The group's "watch committee" is "trying to keep Ozona a quiet residential community."

'Yaller' Bluff begins to grow

Mrs. Lindsey may be outspoken in her criticism of present-day Ozona, but she has solid credentials as an authority on the way things were. Her great-great-grandfather, Walton Whitehurst, was one of Ozona's original settlers.

In his history of Pinellas County, W. L. Straub reported that Whitehurst built a home in 1868 in what was then called Yellow (or "Yaller") Bluff.

According to Enid Fishman and Edell Hogue, Ozona natives on Ozona Village Improvement Society's historical committee, the yellow sand bank from which the early settlement took its name stretched along the shore of Sutherland Bayou in the Limetta Street area. Nature and construction have concealed the bluff over the years, they said.

Mrs. Fishman and Mrs. Hogue both have close ties to Ozona's early days. Mrs. Fishman's great-grandfather William Thompson moved to Ozona from Georgia in the 1860s. Jim Craver, Mrs. Hogue's great-uncle, was an Illinois native who came to Ozona in 1877 and later became Ozona's first postmaster.

With the arrival of more settlers in the 1870s and '80s, citrus and fishing became thriving industries. The early businessmen survived by shipping overland to Orlando or by boat to Cedar Key, but the coming of the railroad marked a turning point in Ozona's history.

The Orange Blossom Railroad, now part of the Seaboard Coast Line, reached Yellow Bluff in 1888. With it came the first significant influx of tourists and winter visitors, including two doctors who are credited with changing the town's name.

Exactly why "Ozona" was chosen is unclear — most explanations relate to a definition of ozone as "fresh or pure air" — but there is general agreement on what was wrong with the name "Yellow Bluff." As historian Straub noted, "Anything 'yellow' in those days suggested (deadly) yellow fever."

The community became more organized in the late 1880s with the formation of the Ladies' Village Improvement Society. One of its major projects was the construction of a town hall on Bay Street. The white, wood-frame building still serves as the center of Ozona activities.

'Some people compare it to a New England fishing town. . . . some see it as a resort community.'

— Judy Johnson

brick building that now houses Ozona Elementary's administrative offices.

Faye Allison, a student at the school in the 1920s, recalls that even that modest structure was more than adequate in her day.

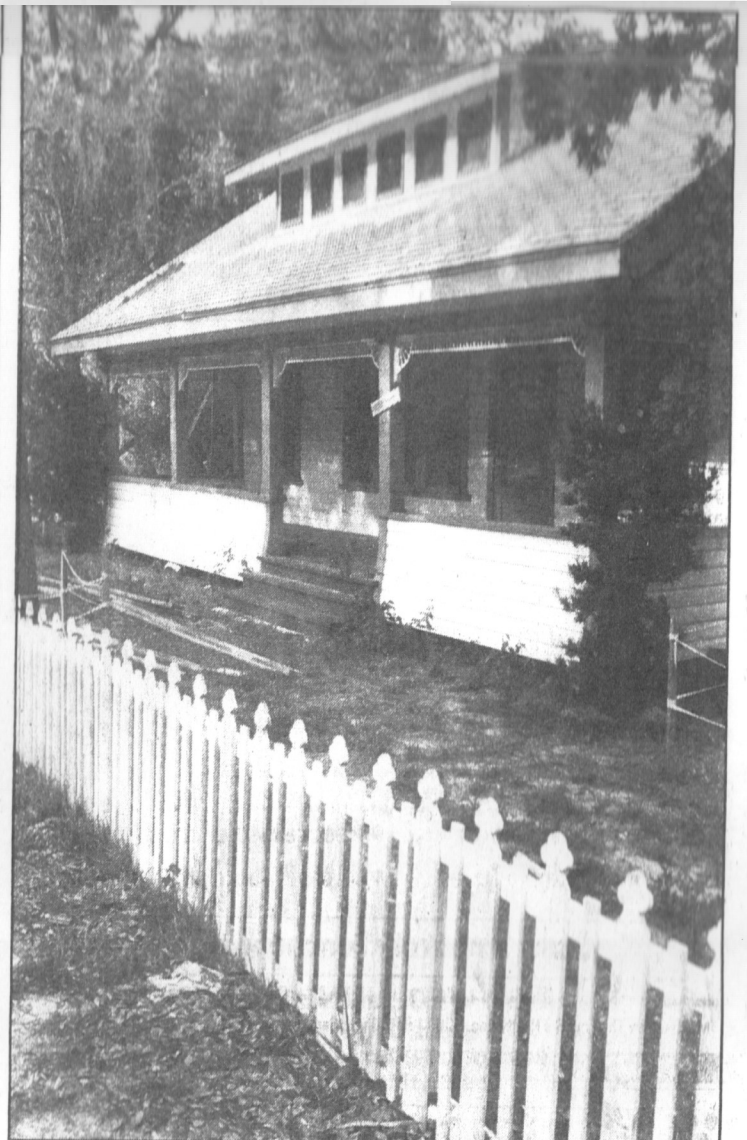
With just enough students to fill two classrooms, "we only had a principal and one teacher," she said. The other two rooms were unused.

Today, according to Hilda Hutto, Ozona Elementary's secretary/bookkeeper, the school will be forced to lease space at the Baptist church next door to make room for a projected enrollment of 627 in the fall.

That's nearly 60 more students than last year, an



Enid Fishman sits on her front porch with photos of her ancestors. Her great-grandfather William Thompson moved to Ozona from Georgia in the 1860s. One of Ozona's oldest homes, above right, will be restored and made into a seafood restaurant.



indication of the area's rapid growth. Much of that growth is actually in Palm Harbor, however, which seems to concern some Ozona residents nearly as much as the changes within their own community.

Tax plan causes concern

As Palm Harbor continues to grow, Mrs. Fishman worries that older communities such as Ozona and Crystal Beach may "lose our name and our identity."

"We don't want to be swallowed up."

Mrs. Fishman and Mrs. Allison both expressed concern over the impact of State Sen. Curt Kiser's plan for a special Palm Harbor tax district that would include Ozona. Recently passed by the Legislature and awaiting Gov. Bob Graham's signature, the bill would allow taxes in the district to be raised to pay for services such as libraries and recreation.

The measure will not create an incorporated city, but it would help protect the area from piecemeal annexation by neighboring cities.

Mrs. Allison and other Ozona residents are all in favor of fending off annexation, but several questioned how Ozona would benefit from a taxing district dominated by the much-larger Palm Harbor.

"We're kind of like a stepchild," Mrs. Allison said, "I'm afraid we'd get forgotten."

KISER, A Palm Harbor Republican, responded to those fears in a recent telephone interview.

Agreeing that Ozona and Crystal Beach are "distinct and unique" communities, he said the taxing district "isn't going to change very much. There isn't anything they're going to vote on that isn't going to benefit Ozona and Crystal Beach as much as Palm Harbor."

In any case, Kiser thinks Ozona's identity will continue to be protected by its relative isolation.

That, and the lack of available space, the residents say. As marina owner Carr puts it, Ozona's growth "is going to stop when they run out of land."

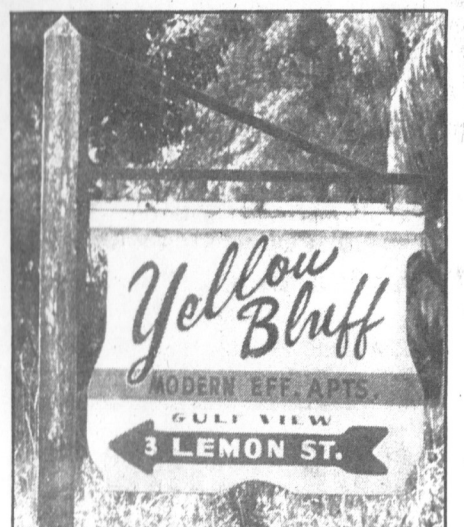
"There's not a lot of property for sale," agreed Ms. Johnson, and prices for available homes and lots are "anywhere from \$7,000 to \$40,000 more" than similar listings in Dunedin, she said.

Ozona may find that its past holds the key to maintaining a viable, active community in the future.

One example is the current conversion of one of Ozona's oldest homes into a seafood restaurant. Located just north of the post office, the former Lee home, with its wide veranda and natural wood floors, represents some of the better features of Ozona's early days.

"We're trying to keep the old Florida style," said Laurel Flowers, co-owner of the restaurant with her husband Mike. "Ozona really gives you that feel."

With its dusty streets, quiet waterfront and occasional sagging porch, Ozona is carefully guarding its share of that "old Florida style," surely a scarce commodity in Pinellas.



A sign reflects the past of Ozona, which was once known as 'Yellow Bluff' because of the yellow sand bank stretched along the shore near the early settlement.