

Florida native landscape flourishes in park

The Anna Maria Historical Park was once the city dump.

By Pat Copeland

SUN STAFF WRITER

pcopeland@amisun.com

ANNA MARIA – The city's historical park surrounding Belle Haven Cottage on Pine Avenue features a lush Florida native landscape and offers a peaceful haven from the outside world.

But it wasn't always a place of beauty. It was once the city dump. Concrete slabs and pipes, garbage, wood, rusted metal and debris filled the lot and fouled the banks of the canal. In addition, the Pelican Man had a cage there where he kept injured birds that he was rehabilitating.

All that changed when Mayor Ray Simches appointed a city development committee, which included Tom Turner, Bill D'Allard and Doug Copeland. Their task was to look at available properties in the city and make suggestions on which ones the city might develop.

"We looked at the old Islander building on Pine Avenue, but it was trashed and nobody thought it would be a good investment," Copeland recalled. "Then we looked at the area where the park is now, and decided to clean up the dump and turn it into a park."

Mike Miller, who was planting the area around city hall with Commissioner Mary Ross, said the Florida Native Plant Nursery had published a book called "Xeric Landscaping with Florida Native Plants," which intrigued him.

"We were going to make it a xeriscape, which is using plants that don't need a lot of water, then Mike (Miller) suggested that we look into native plants," Copeland continued. "Tom got grants from the Tampa Bay and Sarasota Bay estuary programs for plants and park materials."



Planting a park

Copeland met with the county extension agent and drew a design that included a beach dune area in the front and a maritime forest area on the side to complement the mangroves along the canal in the back.

The volunteers contacted the nursery then operated by Manatee County, where they got slash pines and a couple of small live oak trees. They bought silver buttonwoods, a large live oak tree, planting materials, shell for the pathway and a fence to screen the public works yard.

"The design was centered around the Pelican Man's cage, which was where Belle Haven is now," Copeland said. "Eventually, state regulations forced him to leave."

A group of volunteers, aided by the city's public works department, assembled to clear out the garbage, remove the invasive exotics and begin planting the park.

"Dennis Christie donated materials for the irrigation system, a friend and I built the bench by the canal and I made the sign," Copeland said.

"We got it established, put in plant identification signs and printed a plant guide and then I maintained it for two years with the help of the city public works staff."

Turner said park volunteers wanted to name it after Simches, but he refused. City commissioners took a poll of residents who named it the Anna Maria Historical Park.

The next phase

The next phase of the park came in the early 2000s when Miller and Tim Eiseler got together.

"I got the Environmental Education and Enhancement Committee started, and we got involved in the park," Eiseler said. "I was the liaison between Mike and the city."

"I had been working in the park a little, assisting George McKay, who had become public works director," Miller added, "Then Tim founded EEEEC and got a budget and started getting grants. I worked with EEEEC taking over the planting of the park."

They took out a ficus tree and planted more natives. Ingrid McClellan, executive director of Keep Manatee Beautiful offered plants and trees for Arbor Day celebrations.

EEEC, the city and the AMI Historical Society secured grants for more native plants for the park, the mangrove walk along the canal, the mangrove viewing platform and plant identification signs. EEEEC funded the mangrove walk infor-



PHOTO PROVIDED BY MIKE MILLER

Above, garbage and junk littered the area before volunteers made it a park. At left, the park pathway winds behind Belle Haven Cottage.

SUN PHOTO/PAT COPELAND

mation sign.

"We wanted signage and structure to give it a sense of permanency," Eiseler explained.

A sense of place

Over the years, the park's volunteers have given hundreds of hours to give the city a gift of beauty and show them how the Island once appeared.

"It's the natural state of a barrier island in Florida," Miller explained. "Three are three plant communities in one spot – the beach landscape, the maritime forest and the mangrove swamp along the canal."

"It's all of Anna Maria in once spot. The magic of this park is that is what Anna Maria would have looked like if no one had ever come."

Ed Chiles, who said he regularly takes people on park tours to show them a Florida native landscape, said. "It's who we are as an Island. The combination of the museum, Belle Haven and the park is incomprehensible in value."

"That path down to the water is possibly the most serene place in Anna Maria," Copeland added.

For a map of the park and its plants, go to Miller's Web site, www.perfectisland.us. Click on "Models," then click on #2 (the Historical Park) and then click on "Photo Map."



SUN PHOTOS/PAT COPELAND

At left, this area of the park shows newly planted plants and trees in 1993 with the Pelican Man's cage on the right. Above, the newly planted live oak in the center of the photo at the left is now a mature tree that shades the benches behind Belle Haven Cottage with other plants grown up around it.