

Palm Pavilion 1926 to 1964 - The Early Years

After returning from the Great War, Jesse G. Smith, who served as a U.S. Navy radio operator aboard ships crossing the Atlantic Ocean, traveled from his home in Louisville, KY to the Tampa Bay area by train. Smith was one of the five founding partners who incorporated the Palm Pavilion on May 31, 1926.

It is not known how the men - Frederick G. Nelson; Jesse G. Smith, then of Tampa and later of Clearwater; Clay Costigan; John A. Farmer of New York City and later of Madison, N.J.; and Eugene W. Murray of New York City and later of East Orange, N.J. - met, how the bathing pavilion concept evolved or how the location was selected.

“It is possible they met during World War I, said Hamilton. “At least two of the men were from places where beach pavilions were well established. With the first bridge to the island opening in 1917, perhaps someone from Clearwater was among the group and collectively they saw an opportunity.”

According to Smith’s daughter Susan Emmons, from the beginning The Pavilion, as it was then referred, was open year-round, seven days a week, which included evenings in all but the winter months. The Pavilion featured a bathhouse on the side of the building opposite the beach with lockers and towel and wool bathing suit rentals; a dance floor with jukebox music and a skee-ball alley. The latter two were housed within the present-day dining room. A picnic area or deck was built directly on the sand off the north side of the building.

Orders were taken from customers at a counter in front of a small kitchen housed on the west wall. Here, hamburgers, ham sandwiches and hotdogs were prepared and served on grilled buns with or without cheese. Popcorn was also available from a machine situation on the “front porch.” At that time the main entrance was on the south end of the building overlooking the parking lot with steps down to the sand beach.

From the 1920s on, bottles of soda and beer were cooled in bins of ice, as refrigeration was not yet readily available. The ice came from the Clearwater Ice Plant. At some point a small, refrigerated unit housed ice cream served in cones, although drinks continued to be iced down well into the 1960s.

Due to the rules of society and dress codes, beach-goers would arrive at The Pavilion in their street clothes, rent a locker across from the food counter, change into their beach attire in the ladies or men’s bathhouse and after time on the sand or in the water change back into their street clothes. The bathhouse or changing room consisted of several rows of stalls, each with a bench, hooks and a locking door. Showers were available, as well as a hand wringer to press out the water from wet bathing suits. An attendant (staff member) had the key to access the numbered lockers and would let people into their lockers as needed.

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The skee-ball alley was on the far side of the dance floor near the north wall. The Pavilion was such a popular destination for military personnel from MacDill Air Force Base in Tampa during World War II that the alley was converted to a changing room for the large number of soldiers coming to the beach on Sundays. Emmons shared that her mom joined her dad in helping check in the busloads of soldiers. Rows of shelves were added to the alley to accommodate baskets to store the servicemen's clothes.

In the early 1940s, the dance floor space was converted to a swimsuit and beachwear shop. Today this area serves as the Palm Pavilion's enclosed air-conditioned dining and group events room.

"My father was one if not "the first" businessman to hire an African-American salesperson," said Emmons. "Bertha Shawders worked at The Pavilion and was greatly loved by the customers."

While much has changed, much has stayed the same. As is now, the flooring was made of wooden boards with an open space between each board for the sand to drop through along with the occasional change. Emmons recounts how children would crawl underneath the floor to collect money that had fallen through the cracks.

In the beginning, the distance between the Gulf of Mexico and The Pavilion was much closer, separated by a narrow stretch of sand beach. A 1935 storm separated the picnic area deck from The Pavilion; it then floated northward to near Kipling Arms Apartments (previously known as 880 Mandalay), presently known as Regatta Beach Club. Hurricane Easy came calling in September 1950. Parts of the building were damaged by saltwater including much of the shop's stock.

Emmons reported that the beach changed dramatically over the years with portions of it disappearing after storms. For a number of years beach residents and business owners paid to have jetties built and large volumes of sand pumped to enlarge the beach. The tides and storms usually carried the new sand away. A concrete groin, perpendicular to north beach near the Rockaway Public Parking Lot and Mandalay Pier Pavilion (removed in fall 2012), had lasting effects as the beach has grown significantly since it was installed.

Jesse Smith bought out his other partners during the 1930s. In late 1947 he and his wife Nathalie are listed as the owners and the general nature of the business then was a "public bathhouse and retail merchandise."

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Records from October 1955 indicate, in addition to being a bathhouse, the Palm Pavilion sold sportswear and operated a snack bar. A year later the snack bar was described as a "Lunch Room." In 1960 John Abner of Clearwater, Fla., joined the organization and by October 1961 the business is no longer described as a bathhouse, but as offering bathing accessories and having a lunch room.

Reminiscing about The Pavilion, Mrs. Emmons shared, "My sister and I spent a lot of time at The Pavilion - swimming and later working in the store. Dad was a strong proponent of customer service and wanted everyone to feel welcome. My sister and I were trained to reach out and help customers. He made life-long friends with many of them who would come south each winter and always came to The Pavilion.

Our family lived in Clearwater near Crest Lake and I helped my dad when he wanted a break from working seven-days a week. He was community minded...a member of the Rotary Club and served on the Clearwater City Commission during World War II (from 1941 to 1946) when George R. Seavy was mayor. He was also interested in helping youth and sponsored one of the sailing prams when the program started in the late 1940s.

On April 1, 1964, Smith sold the business to two of his patrons Howard and Jean Hamilton and retired. A native of Oklahoma City, OK, Jesse Smith married the former Nathalie Keay and were the parents of two daughters. Smith led the Palm Pavilion for 38 years until the sale of the business. He remained in Clearwater afterwards, passing away on March 4, 1980 at age 84.

While Smith had purchased a round-trip train ticket back to Louisville, KY, this daughter reports that the ticket was never used.

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With much appreciation to Susan Smith Emmons, younger daughter of Jesse Smith.

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