

Palm Pavilion 1964 to Present - The Howard Hamilton Family

After repeated approaches by Howard Hamilton, Jesse Smith - the last of the original founding partners who created the enterprise on North Clearwater Beach, sold the business to his patrons Howard and Jean Hamilton on April 1, 1964. Jean recalls vividly, I remember Howard saying, "I must be a fool...but I just bought the Palm Pavilion."

Howard was an engineer with a degree from Georgia Tech and worked by day for GE while his wife raised their four sons at their home in Clearwater. Smith's former employees continued to operate the business in much the same way. At that time, it was the only place on the beach visitors could get a hot dog and cold drink.

From the 1920s to early 1980s beach pavilions provided changing rooms. Visitors would come to the beach in their street or work clothes, rent space to change into beach attire and store their clothes. When finished playing in the sand or water, they could change back into their regular clothing and leave the island for the mainland.

"Society and dress codes were much more formal then. Wearing a bathing suit any place other than the beach or pool was, well, something you just didn't do," said Jean Hamilton. "Beach pavilions were just a way of life."

Early on the Howard Hamilton listened to his customers and observed activities throughout the island. He also recognized the potential South Clearwater Beach had for development and the need to provide basic services to visitors on that public beach - restrooms, snacks and beverages. Howard Hamilton approached the city in 1966 and urged them to provide these services to beach-goers. City hall dismissed him. Two years later they came looking for Howard. Shortly thereafter he leased a small piece of land and at his own expense built a pavilion. By 1969, South Beach Pavilion was selling food and beach sundries, as well as renting umbrellas and cabanas. South Beach grew in popularity and resulted in the city expanding the lifeguard hours from a seasonal operation to now being the only beach in Pinellas County protecting users 365 days a year. While the family no longer operates that concession, Howard was right on target. Today, this is the busiest beach on the island.

Tourism grew rapidly in Florida and on the island of Clearwater Beach due to scheduled airline service, interstates and air conditioning. Development for the sake of development can often eliminates the very essence of why people visit a destination. Howard and Jean Hamilton recognized the need for change, but at the same time in keeping those things that make the community and the experience unique. In the early 1980s the demand for bathhouse changing rooms waned and they were removed. The Palm, as it was now called, continued to maintain their food and beverage service and shop.

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Palm Pavilion 1964 - Present
Add One

Each of the Hamilton sons - Ken, Wade, Hoyt and Dale - grew up assuming some small role for their dad, be it sweeping the floors, serving as the bathhouse attendant, icing up the beer to keep it cold or when tall enough to flip burgers on the grill. After the bathhouse was removed, a miniature golf course was built on the Palm Pavilion Inn's present-day parking lot. Beach umbrella or cabana rentals were added at some point. Each of these became the boys' responsibilities too.

Howard and Jean retired from the day-to-day operation of the business in the late 80s, giving the reigns to their son Ken who became involved in 1979. As his father had listened closely to the visitors during the 60s, son Ken observed how the dining habits of vacationers were changing - away from evening meals in a visitor's motel room. It took some convincing of his parents by he and his brothers, but eventually the second generation Hamiltons won out, making plans to expand the dining business.

This first major renovation occurred in 1995 when the hours of operation were extended into the evening, the menu was expanded and an outside deck was added to accommodate outside dining and weekend entertainment. Five years later, due to its success, the Palm Pavilion further expanded its outside seating area and converted the, then, shop to a dining room/group events space. The most significant change was removing the shoebox-size kitchen on the west wall, which blocked the vista of the beach and Gulf of Mexico, and relocating it to the opposite side of the building. The new state-of-the-art kitchen was capable of handling a much larger menu. The full service restaurant with a staff of 125 full and part-time staff now features a menu comprised of appetizers, salads, burgers, wraps, sliders, sandwiches, tacos of all types, seafood, steak, smoked ribs and desserts. In keeping with tradition, hot dogs and its famous beach burger are also offered.

Like Jesse Smith, Howard valued the importance of community involvement. In the early 1960s, he chaired the capital campaign to build Clearwater's original Highland Avenue YMCA building. He was also commodore of the Carlouel Yacht Club on Clearwater Beach and active in many other projects.

The love of baseball has been passed down from Howard to his sons. He grew up not too far from the Philadelphia Phillies first two Clearwater spring training sites. The Hamilton family has had a long-time relationship with the Philadelphia Phillies' owners, management and teams and works closely with elected officials, the chamber of commerce and city management and its parks and recreation department to make sure - one of the oldest, continuous one-name, one-city spring training franchises (since 1947) remains in town. Howard also followed the Tampa Bay Rays later in life and never missed a game.

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Palm Pavilion 1964 - Present
Add Two

During the peak of spring break in 2014, Jean Hamilton, her sons and employees took a few minutes to recognize Howard, who had passed away in 2012 at the age of 79, and to celebrate 50 years as owners and operators of the Palm Pavilion. With Jean's passing in early 2017, the Palm Pavilion is now fully in the hands of the second generation of Hamiltons.

Following in the footsteps and examples set by his parents, son Ken, in addition to leading the Palm Pavilion, has served on the board of directors of Ruth Eckerd Hall, Morton Plant-Mease Hospital, Homeless Emergency Project and was, at the time, the youngest president of the Clearwater Regional Chamber of Commerce. In 2016, Ken was recognized for his accomplishments when he was named Mr. Clearwater the highest honor in the city.

Continuing in Jesse Smith's footsteps, son Hoyt has served as a City of Clearwater councilmember from 2001 to 2006 and again from 2014 to 2022. As the family also owns the neighboring Palm Pavilion Inn, he served as chairman of the Pinellas County Hotel and Motel Association in the late 90s, after 10 years on the board of directors. While on the city commission, Hoyt served as the Clearwater representative on the Pinellas County's Convention and Visitors Bureau for four years, as well as on the Barrier Islands Governmental Council for four years.

Son Wade prefers to stay behind the scenes. He oversees the physical plant of the Palm Pavilion and could have easily eliminated some of the original wood to make maintenance easier or to increase seating. Instead he has worked to insure the legacy of his parents - architectural integrity - remains intact.

Today Ken's son serves as manager of The Palm Shoppe and online store, while Hoyt's son is one of the restaurant's managers. They both aspire to learn every aspect of the business so someday they may be able to become the third generation to lead this popular Clearwater Beach landmark attraction.

According to the state of Florida, this is the oldest operating beach pavilion in the state of Florida. Research shows this rare designation also encompasses the entire southeastern U.S.

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