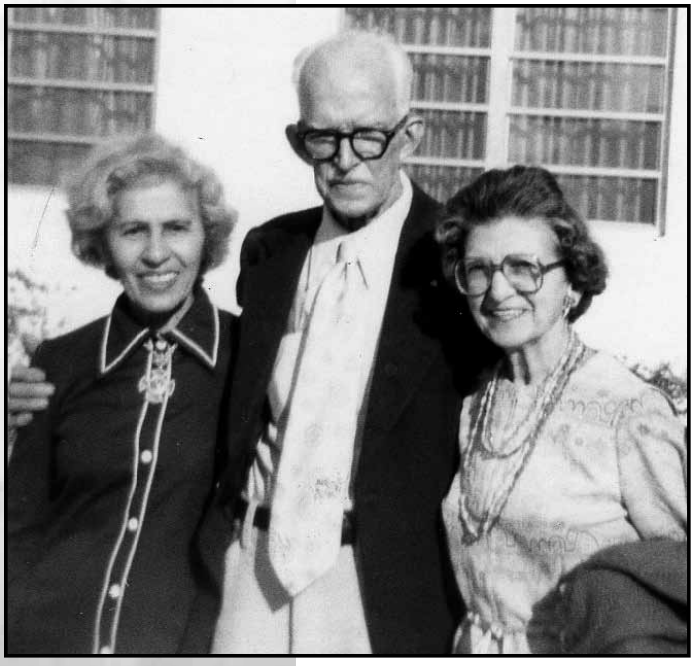
Pembroke Pines
I Remember When: The Early Years

By Gerry Witoshynsky



Estelle Kipnis (l), Bert and Helen Vogt, c. 1980. *(Photo by Gerry Witoshynsky)*

A Pembroke Pines pioneer resident, Gerry Witoshynsky has been Pembroke Pines City Historian since 1995 and Historical Society/Museum Director since 1980.

She was a Broward County Historical Commissioner from 1984 to 1988.

Dr. and Mrs. Walter Seth Kipnis had relatives in Hollywood that they wanted to live nearby. They found their perfect spot in the Pembroke Pines #1 subdivision, about 10 blocks west of State Road 441. The streets were crushed limestone laid out in a former cow pasture. The area was pancake-flat and described as "high dry pineland," 10 feet above sea level. The Kipnises tell the story that they bought their lot in 1954, went north for a time and when they returned, the Turnpike had been built on the eastern border of the new community!

Two of the Kipnis' neighbors were Albertus "Bert" Vogt and his wife Helene. Bert was an engineer who worked at the water pumping station at Holiday Park on the western end of Griffin Road. Bert's dad, Albertus Vogt, Sr., was a flamboyant Florida character involved in the early phosphate deposits industry in Polk County, Florida, in the 1800s.

My husband Alex and I bought a residential lot in Pembroke Pines in 1956, and moved into our completed house in March 1957. There was no city. It was just a group of homes built in plats of Pembroke Pines #1, Pembroke Pines #2 and Pembroke Ranches, started by the Flamingo Development Company in 1954.

Home of Dr. and Mrs. Walter Seth Kipnis, Southwest 13th Street in Pembroke Pines, c. 1950s. *(Image courtesy of Pembroke Pines Historical Museum)*

*Pinus Elliottii, var densa, c. 1980. (**Photo by Gerry Witoshynsky**)*

When we moved into our Southwest 10th Street house, we had one neighbor: Ruth Pearce and her mother Daisy Von Schleider. There were people to the south, at the rear of Southwest 10th Court and a few dozen homes farther south, surrounded by magnificent live oak trees and mature pine trees. These are the now rare Pinus elliottii, var densa, commonly known as Dade County Pine or Caribbean Pine. We learned this valuable tree was prized for its lumber that was impervious to the voracious local termites. The lot we chose had two fine specimens. We had one removed from our front yard, something I regret to this day.

Many of the first homes were built on 90 or 125 foot lots, but ours was 60 feet wide by 105 feet deep. The house was 1,000 square feet with two bedrooms and one and a half baths, and as first time homebuyers, to us it was wonderful! It was many years before we filled it with furniture and four children.

My daughter, Mary, was born at Mercy Hospital in Miami in November 1957. I remember that 1957-58 winter for another reason—it was cold! We had to run the gas wall heater most of the winter. A 2010 *Miami Herald* article confirms 1957-58 as a record cold winter.

Two-year-old Mary in her red wagon and I would tour the new homes in the area. We watched the road building equipment as it scraped the new streets for the Pasadena Homes section from Southwest 9th Street to Hollywood Boulevard. This was the first major planned development of multiple acres that would become common as the city moved westward.

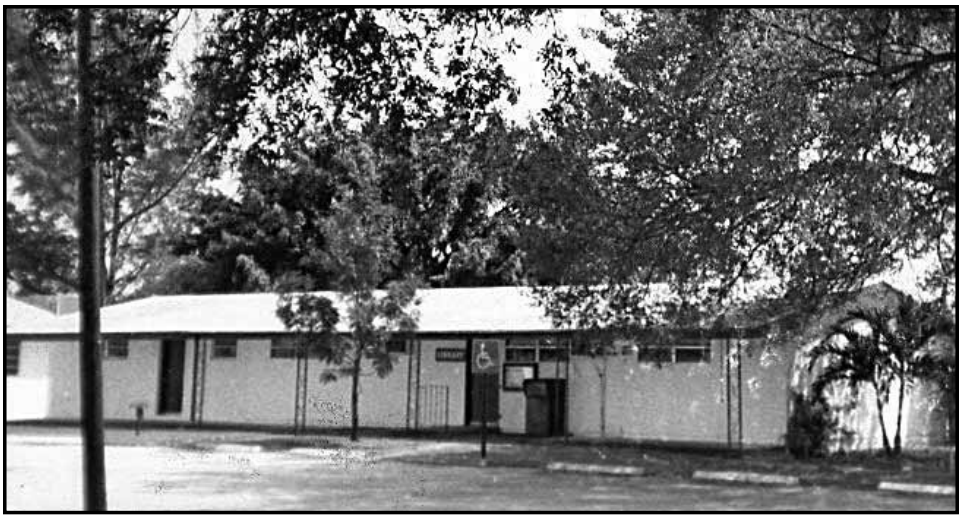
Other new neighbors eventually joined us — the Nortons; Bob and Ginny Neff across the street; and the Bells next door. I was disappointed when their house was built as it blocked my view of the beautiful sunsets.

Planes and Blimps

North Perry Airport, a World War II facility created as an auxiliary of Miami Naval Air Station in 1942, was a square mile property west of Southwest 72nd Avenue. The Broward County Aviation Department received the property from the U.S. Navy in 1957. One- and two-engine private planes used the field. The planes flew eastward over our Southwest 10th Street home. I got to know which planes where which by the sound of the motors. When I heard something unusual, I ran outside to see what new aircraft was going over. Once it was a twin engine DC-3.

One winter a fabulously preserved Ford Tri-Motor plane stayed at the airport. My sons, John and Mike, and I went for a ride in it, putt-putting along at a speed that seemed barely able to keep us airborne! John and Mike loved what they named the "orange-green dive bomber," a post World War II training plane; it made such a glorious roar as it departed the runway! \

Each winter a parade of blimps would dock at North Perry Airport to advertise for national corporations and to provide TV coverage of golf tournaments and



Pembroke Pines Public Library, Originally a Developer's Showroom, 1983. (Photo by Gerry Witoshynsky)

Super Bowls. I think I have photos of all 17 of them, plus some aerial shots from two of them when Alex and I were invited by the airport manager to take rides.

Animals, Birds, Snakes and Alligators

A not uncommon sight was a parade of dairy cows walking down the street. They would escape from McArthur's dairy farm north of Southwest 9th Street to Hollywood Boulevard. The farm workers would have to come and retrieve them. A resident on Southwest 12th Street once found a cow in his swimming pool! Jack rabbits and burrowing owls lived at North Perry Airport. The jack rabbits were thought to have escaped from the many brought here to act as lures for racing greyhounds at Miami tracks. A prairie dog (or woodchuck) lived behind the baseball fields at Kennedy Park.

Several residents had horses that they stabled west of University Drive. They would ride them around the neighborhood. I never saw or heard of any panthers or bobcats in the Village, but they must have roamed the open areas west of the airport. Raccoons, possums and eventually grey squirrels were commonly seen, and the birds were great friends! We put out food for them until the local cats became a danger. Cardinals, sparrows, blue jays and mourning doves were numerous. Nighthawks, also called mosquito hawks, flew at dusk. Brilliantly colored and handsome new residents, spotted-breasted orioles were seen in the neighborhood in the morning and late afternoon, indicating their presence by a distinctive, melodious song.

In the winter, we often saw birds such as painted buntings, and I remember a flock of cedar waxwings – most unusual visitors. Some winters when the weather was especially bad in the north, flocks of robins would come to South Florida. They would eat the overripe red berries of the non-native Florida holly and become intoxicated.

For years, we had black snakes that occasionally showed themselves. Tiny bright green snakes also lived in the yard, as well as foot-long dark grey snakes with bright orange rings around their necks. Not so welcome non-native *Bufo marinus* toads would appear; they were poisonous and could sicken dogs that bit them.

In the 1990s, bright green Knight's anoles lizards began appearing. In the 2000s, iguanas became common. During the cold spells of 2009-2010, many were found comatose or dead.

Pembroke Pines from University Drive westward was part of the Everglades. Everglades plus water equals alligators! Not as numerous now as they once were, they still show themselves. A special incident was caught by a newspaperman's camera when a large specimen crawled halfway up a Pembroke Lakes resident's door and noisily scratched at it. The invader eventually left to return to a nearby lake.

One day while I was in our City Hall on the sixth floor, I looked down at the waterway in the front of the building. In a rough spot on the east bank lay an alligator, sunning itself.

The Beginnings of City Facilities

Pembroke Pines was progressive in its development of planned unit developments (PUDs), such as Pembroke Lakes and Grand Palms. Condominiums were popular with retirees from northern cities. The community was innovative in the creation of its charter school system, to provide educational facilities when our growth outdistanced the ability of Broward County to fund and build schools.

We were fortunate to have Pines Elementary School built a few blocks east at Southwest 9th Street and Southwest 66th Avenue. Mary, John, Mike and our fourth son, Tom could walk the few blocks to the school. The Pines Village area eventually expanded with the building of the Pasadena Homes from Southwest 9th Street to Hollywood Boulevard. Southwest 72nd Avenue was extended from Southwest 9th Street to Hollywood Boulevard, whereas before we had to drive to Pembroke Road, east to State Road 441 and then north to the small shops just west

Pines Village Residence in Original Pembroke Pines Plat #2, 1957. *(Photo by Gerry Witoshynsky)*

Ford Tri-Motor plane, c. early 1990s ***(Photo by Gerry Witoshynsky)***

of the Florida Turnpike on Hollywood Boulevard. Usually we would drive to Publix grocery stores several miles away. The closest pharmacy was on State Road 441.

As a fledgling community in the early 1960s, we did not have any facilities. The county allowed us to create ball fields on the east side of the airport and the West Hollywood Community Center was built on Hollywood Boulevard west of Southwest 72nd Avenue. For a short time, the youngsters had pickup games on Southwest 13th Street across from what was started as a youth center in 1959. With incorporation, it became the Village Hall.

My sons John and Mike learned to swim at a neighbor's pool, donated as part of the slowly organizing Recreation Department activities. Estelle Kipnis, Carol Ludington, Helene Vogt and Theresa Winter were the leaders of a group that created a tiny library in the town hall; they asked residents to donate money and books to get it started. Eventually, a developer's sales office was donated to the city, under the condition it be moved from Hollywood Boulevard to a spot next to the city hall. This served as city offices before being used as the Pembroke Pines Public Library, until the Broward County South Regional Library was built in 1983 on the Broward Community College campus at Pines Boulevard and Southwest 74th Avenue.

Some years were especially dry with lawns suffering from lack of water. Our water came from the Welwyn plant, located in what became a part of the City of Miramar, and operated by Broward County. Barely a trickle could be coaxed from the garden hoses to water the lawns and many people invested in pumps for lawn care. The local ladies started a garden club to encourage home landscaping. Resident Ashley Hale, who served on the City Council, drove a city owned tractor around the area to cut vacant lots and mow the ball fields at Kennedy Park on the east side of North Perry Airport.

Pembroke Pines Civic Association Farewell Dinner, 1982. ***(Image courtesy of Pembroke Pines Historical Museum)***

Government and Politics

The Kipnises were world travelers before settling in Pines Village in their custom-built ranch style home at the corner of Southwest 13th Street and Southwest 69th Avenue. They inspired the first residents' organization, the Pembroke Pines Civic Association, formed in 1957. The group was responsible for the incorporation attempt of 1959, which failed, and the successful January 1960 election. After 25 years of leading the formation of the city, the association took the balance of the treasury and had a farewell dinner, complimenting itself for its service to the community and a job well done.

The 1959 election was declared invalid, so the first seven city officials designated as alderman lost their positions. The January 1960 election satisfied all legal requirements; so the city was officially born. Six new aldermen and one alderwoman were seated and Mayor Walter Seth Kipnis was reinstalled.

Most of the small town's population joined in the elections for city council and mayoral seats. Because of the two-year terms, elections were needed every year. I remember so many hot August days when we would deliver campaign literature door-to-door to approximately 1,900 single-family homes. Pembroke Pines residents were truly active citizens and demonstrated their devotion by working for the candidates of their choice.

Halley's Comet, April 1986 ***(Rendering by Gerry Witoshynsky, May 1986)***

It seemed like we had elections far too often. In 1961, an appointed charter review board wrote our city's operating legal document. But some residents insisted that the board should have been elected, not appointed. So an election was held to elect a Charter Review Board to write our charter, which in turn had to be approved with very few changes at an election.

I always followed local, state and national politics — the Graham for Governor campaign, Jimmy Carter's presidential campaign (I met several of Carter's "Peanut Brigade" at Pines Recreation Center) — and attended City Commissioner Harold Askew's campaign appearances with him and his wife Vicki when he ran for Broward County Tax Assessor.

The "Bob Graham for Governor" campaign in 1978 was enthusiastically endorsed by many Pines residents: Mayor Ron Villella and wife Lynn, City Clerk Margaret Bosarge and her husband Buddy, and Democratic Club members Joe Knetsch and his wife Linda were major supporters. As these people were busy during the day, I had the job of being at the Graham campaign office in a shopping center just east of Southwest 72nd Avenue on Pines Boulevard.

One of the most startling incidents occurred when a man came in and wanted to speak to me alone. We went to the back room. He told me he could get a lot of votes for Graham. One of Graham's opponents was Bob Shevin, State Attorney General. This man was an ex-convict and he could get many people to support Graham over Shevin! I do not recall what I told him; the other volunteers in the office were hovering nearby worried about my safety as the man revealed his message.

The Graham campaign ran smoothly, but the trip by the Pembroke Pines contingent to Tallahassee for the inauguration did not. Ron and Lynn Villella and I, plus another campaign worker, were stranded at the Fort Lauderdale-Hollywood International Airport. We finally boarded, but the flight was headed to Jacksonville! Ron rented a car there and the four of us, plus a Florida State University student headed west late in the afternoon to Tallahassee via Route 10. It was pitch black driving the two-lane road through the Osceola Forest. Ron was starving; the only edibles we had were a pack of gum and a half roll of Lifesavers! By the time we reached the Capitol, all the parties and receptions were over. Ron could finally get something to eat and Lynn could confess that she was numb from sitting on the seat belt mechanism in the center front seat!

On inauguration day, we sat on folding chairs on the west side of the new skyscraper capitol building. It was nearly freezing — and then the snow started! Only a few flakes fell, but it was another occurrence that made for a memorable journey and inauguration of January 2, 1979! Ron decided to resign as mayor of Pembroke Pines and stayed in Tallahassee, working for the Graham administration. Vice Mayor Paul Maxwell became mayor.

I was appointed to the Board of Adjustment at a City Council meeting in the 1970s by Mayor Chuck Flanagan. He had first selected Dave Hlay, but then changed his mind, saying he did not like Dave's jacket (a very loud plaid).

One issue I was pleased to be involved in was the long campaign to establish the South Campus of Broward Community College (now Broward College) at the northeast corner of North Perry Airport at

Winter Frost on Tom Witoshynsky's Car, Pembroke Pines, 12-25-1989. ***(Photo by Gerry Witoshynsky)***

Pines Boulevard and Southwest 72nd Ave. This struggle started in 1969 and went on for nearly 10 years, with "done deals" suddenly falling apart, then new avenues opening up. I was a citizen supporter attending meetings and writing to "Letters to the Editors" of local newspapers. Mayor Chuck Flanagan and State Representative Dr. Walter C. Young's help was vitally important in finally getting the project approved.

Rare Occurrences

The Florida Everglades is one of the perfect places on Earth to observe the night sky. One evening in 1986, my son John and I drove 30 miles west on Alligator Alley and parked the car. The stars were brilliant and in their midst was a fuzzy white object — Halley's Comet! It had returned on its 76-year orbit and we were fortunate to be able to see it. No long tail, but nevertheless a thrilling, once in a lifetime event.

Hurricanes, tornadoes, droughts, untimely deaths and plane crashes were memorable occurrences in our post World War II city. One Christmas, our daughter Mary gave us an orange tree seedling. We planted it in the front yard where it grew to maturity and produced beautiful honeybelle fruit. But it was condemned to death and cut down in 1999 during the 1995-2006 citrus canker epidemic.

There was a brief flurry of snowflakes around eight o'clock on the morning of January 19, 1977, probably the most southern incidence of snow recorded in the Sunshine State! On Christmas Day in 1989, we wrote the date in frost on my son Tom's Volkswagen!

Archaeological Digs

Buzzard's Roost

Our house and the rest of the Pines Village neighborhood were built on undisturbed ground, used only as dairy farm pastures starting in the early 1930s. But I found out eventually as I became more interested in our town and county history that there was an Indian encampment site within the Chapel Trail development at our far western border, just east of U.S. 27. It was called Buzzard's Roost, and was identified by giant old ficus trees growing on a slight rise out of the surrounding Everglades.

I was thrilled when, as city historian, I was invited to go with members of the Broward County Archaeological Society

The Family Channel blimp at North Perry Airport with Alex Witoshynsky in foreground, c. 1990s. (Photo by Gerry Witoshynsky)

on a dig at the site! This was in April 1987, when the land would be dry before the summer rains. We trudged laboriously through the growth of entangled Brazilian pepper trees *(Schinus terebinthifolius),* a non-native import covering the many acres of the designated Chapel Trail development site. I fell out of one of the trees about three feet above the ground.

We easily located the ficus trees and each member of the party scraped away low growing plants to dig in the soft black muck. I found snake and fish vertebrae, bird bones, turtle shells and what I believed was part of an alligator jawbone. Others found pottery remnants and seashell tools, indicative of occupation by ancient Indians, probably Tequesta, between 500 B.C. and 1500 A.D.

This site had been surveyed previously, but only casually, so important relics may someday be dug up. The developers were very responsible in setting aside a two-to-three-acre site for preservation and further exploration. My precious collection resides at the Pembroke Pines Historical Museum. I hope that someone with knowledge of the bones can someday positively identify them for me. The day we explored this site we saw feline animal tracks — perhaps those of a rare Florida panther — in the soft sandy ruts left by a truck.

Looking back …

…how could 50 years go by so fast! These are only some of the things I remember, living the history of Pembroke Pines, watching and participating in the founding and growth of our city. In 1980, Mrs. Estelle Kipnis and I, along with a group of other pioneers, incorporated the Pembroke Pines Historical Society. When the group disbanded and Estelle was no longer physically able to participate, I carried on the volunteer work of collecting and preserving Pines history in facilities provided by the city. Every minute has been more than worthwhile and I anticipate working on many more projects before I "retire."

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