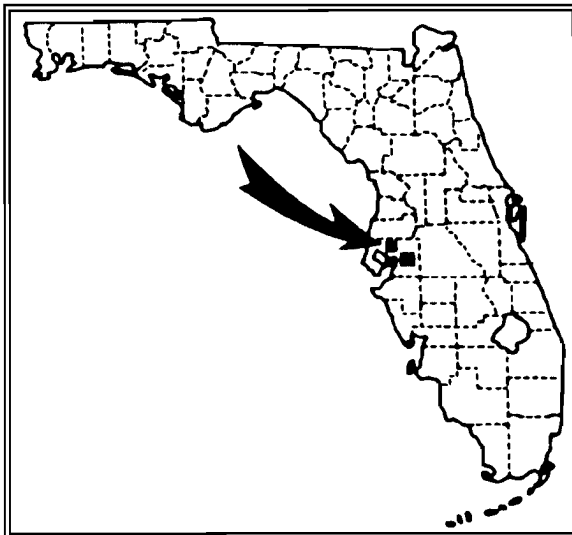


# Gibsonton, Florida—Seasonal Retreat for the Carnival-Circus World

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The occurrence of the autumnal equinox not only signals the arrival of the Fall season, but also the annual migration of thousands of showmen to their winter homes. With the cessation of state and county fairs across the country, machinery, animals, and show equipment are loaded onto trucks to begin the homeward trek. During the winter months, these circuit entertainers use the off-season to practice new acts, sew new costumes, repair rides, and enjoy some recreational pursuits (Figure 1).

This annual migration results in large colonies of showmen settling in Michigan, California, Texas, and Florida. They tend to congregate in small communities that serve their specific needs for recreational clubs, circus and carnival novelties, and a climate conducive to a working vacation. The largest community of showmen in the United States is found in the Gibsonton-Riverview area of Florida, which is on the old



Atlantic Coast Line Railroad between U.S. Highway 41 on the west and I-75 on the east, next to Tampa Bay (George Sanders, interview, April 1989). A smaller contingent is also found in the north central part of the city of Tampa (Figure 2).

In early autumn, the interstate highways are dotted with brightly-decorated trucks,

*Figure 1. Winter home of showmen*

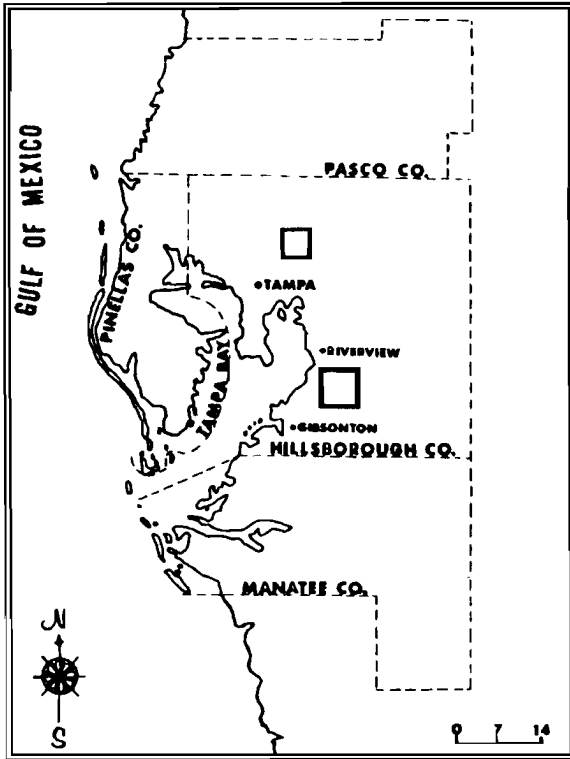


Figure 2. Showmen settlement pattern

vans, and cars converging upon the area. The population of the Gibsonton-Riverview region multiplies during the winter months (George Sanders, interview, April 1989). Signs along U.S. Highway 41 near Gibsonton herald their arrival. Thus, a sleepy summer community suddenly becomes alive with the sounds of vigorous activity. During this time businesses in the area report a 50% to 75% increase in sales (White, 1988). Friends and acquaintances meet at the showmen's clubs and bars and

exchange stories of their travels during the past show season (Figure 3).

This region of Florida boasts mild, somewhat dry winters. While the city of Tampa is a rapidly-growing urban area, the Gibsonton-Riverview community is, by comparison, a rural environment. Nestled in a low area are the somewhat poorly drained Leon Fine Sand Soils, underlain by a shallow hard pan. The district is on the fringes of mangrove swamp and supports a natural vegetation consisting primarily of longleaf pine, sawpalmetto, runner oak, and wire grass (USDA, 1950).

Besides the showmen's enclave, this area supports other small economic activities including tropical fish farms, Hartz Mountain pet supplies, truck farms, and show-world specialty shops. These shops provide the

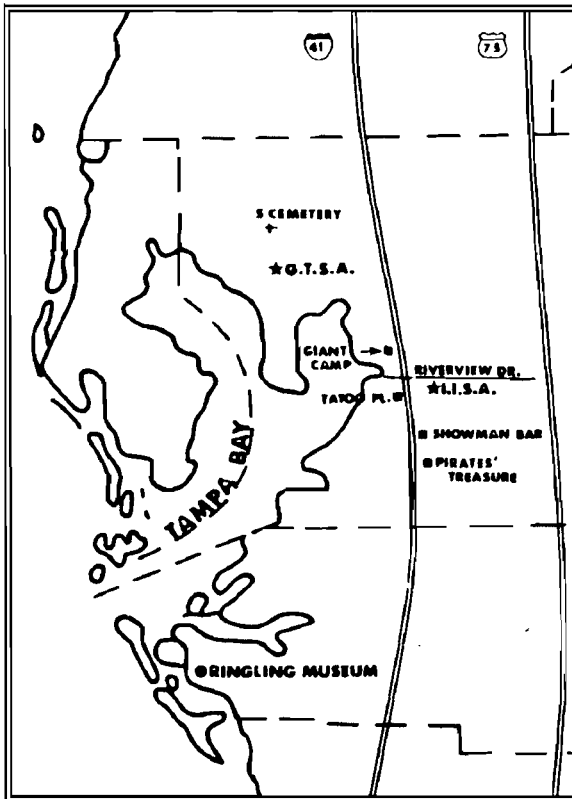


Figure 3. Showmen community sites and facilities

materials needed by the entertainers for novelties, fabrics for costumes, replacement parts for rides and other attractions, etc.

During the winter season, old and young alike, both carnival and circus people, discuss their travels and experiences. This research focused upon four basic questions:

1. Why did the carnival-circus showmen originally settle in this area, and who were the founders?
2. How do the carnival and circus people interact?
3. What are the activities in which the showmen engage during their stay in their winter home?
4. What are the trends and challenges for the future of the community?

## History

Warm weather and good fishing attracted showmen Eddie and Grace Le May to the area in December 1922. Camping in a tent, the Le Mays decided the following year to build a cabin and locate permanently in the area. Except for a farmer and his family, the nameless, undeveloped expanse along the Alafia River was without streets, houses, and amenities. The owner of the property, Tampa lawyer and real estate

speculator John B. Gibson, Jr., realized the potential for development and profit and subsequently platted the site with a dirt road grid and lent his name to the fledgling community (Anonymous, 1958).

Soon, others from the showmen world of carnival, fair, and circus life were attracted to the area by reputation. By 1928, some thirty people lived on the campsite, mostly in tents, but a few in converted buses (Kobler, 1953). Rates were modest, with 1928 prices of \$1.50 per week for a camping permit. For \$100, it was possible to spend the entire winter living on local fish, basking in the warm salubrious climate, and enjoying the revelry and camaraderie of fellow “carnies.” John Whittaker (interview, March 1988) introduced the first trailer in 1932. By the 1940’s the population of the tent city, including a few trailers, had expanded to an estimated 400-500, and occupied a site that today is Williams Park next to U.S. Highway 41 (Anonymous, 1958).

In 1933, the Le Mays bought a cabin south of the Alafia River. In 1941, the Le Mays left show business and built and operated Eddie’s Hut at what today is U.S. Highway 41 and Gibsonton Drive just south of the Alafia River (Johnny Whittaker, interview, March 1988). There they continued to serve the growing community with a hut complex that included cabins, rooms, a bar and grill, and a trailer park. This “grease joint,” as the “carnies” called it, became the social center for the “outdoor showmen.”

During and following the World War II era, showmen and “marks,” or non-carnival people, continued to settle in the area as the community of Riverview, originally called Peru, expanded on the north bank of the Alafia River with Gardenville, Remlap, and Adamsville extending south beyond Gibsonton. The settlements and villages assumed appropriate names from early local pioneers such as Gibson, Adams, and Palmer (Remlap spelled backward) or a prominent geographic feature or activity such as “river” and “garden.” Many area place names such as Bullfrog Creek, Whiskey Stump Key, The Kitchen, and Hog and Hominy Cove add local color to the map.

Gibsonton developed a real spirit of community as more showmen settled the area. The community became more than a seasonal place in which to

live and recuperate from the arduous entertainment circuit. It served as a "communication center," a source of supply, credit, and support, and an employment exchange. In short, it served as home base for the showmen where they could relax in the relative privacy of their enclave.

With the nearby opening some 60 years ago of the U.S. Phosphoric Products Corporation (now called Gardinier Inc.), an influx of non-showmen settled the area. As the plant grew in size and importance and quarrying operations expanded, port facilities were developed. Eventually, the residents donated their original land site for the establishment of Williams Park. Most located further inland east of U.S. Highway 41 (Tamiami Trail).

Today the showmen, concessionaires, and ride operators have settled on both sides of the Alafia River that serves as a boundary between the communities of Riverview on the north bank and Gibsonton on the south. By the mid-1950's, Gibsonton's population had grown to seasonal highs of approximately 500 summer residents and twice that figure during the winter months when the "carnies" returned to their Florida retreat after a busy summer on the road (Preston, 1954). October through April is the time to relax, fish, reflect on the past season, and prepare for the next. As the nearby Tampa urban area expands south, Gibsonton continues to attract new residents, most of them non-show people. The showmen, however, though fading in dominance, are still the element that gives character and color to the community. Lacking definitive boundaries, the unincorporated community has reached an estimated population of 8,000 (quote from Shirley Mims, Librarian, Hillsborough County Planning Commission, in White, 1988).

The casual visitor to Gibsonton is quickly aware that this is no ordinary community reflecting residential clones elsewhere in the United States. Gibsonton is special and unique. Large carnival trucks parked in driveways, trapeze and aerial equipment in front and back yards, elephants, monkeys, and horses roaming enclosed areas, garage doors and houses painted with colorful carnival or circus scenes—all are in evidence as one wanders the narrow streets.

As Bill Rodgers (interview, October 1988), owner of the Pirates Treasure Cove where many people shop, observes: it is not in every community that one can spot a ferris wheel, popcorn machine, or aerial equipment in a residential yard (White, 1988). Often, signs on houses, vehicles, or in yards identify the local residents and their activities and areas of expertise. The cast of players comprising the community is equally interesting, as one might meet an aerialist, sword swallower, animal trainer, clown, or a performer with some physical anomaly regarding weight, stature, or unusual talent or skill, such as diminutive 45" Dolly Reagan Scott, a 46-year veteran of the show world (Mahan, 1988). One of the more celebrated couples in Gibsonton were Al and Jeanie Tomaini. As local fire chief, Al, the former circus giant, stood 8'4¼" tall while his wife Jeanie—born without legs, was but 30" in height. Together they operated the Giant Fish Camp, a bait and small restaurant complex in the community. As a widow, she still operates the camp.

Variety abounds on four-lane U.S. Highway 41, the chief artery of Gibsonton. Besides the Giant Fish Camp, a tattoo parlor, a large souvenir and fireworks store, a carnival supply shop, individual houses, and a popular nightclub/cocktail lounge are parallel to the highway. The latter, the Showtown Club, serves as unofficial social center, local watering hole, dance hall, and communication exchange for many. The decor, including colorful wall murals, depicts show life. It serves as a rallying point for activities such as the annual "Christmas in July" celebration.

### ***The International Independent Showmen's Association***

Hillsborough County in the Tampa Bay area has the largest concentration of showmen in the U.S. with enclaves in Riverview, Gibsonton, and the north central area of Tampa. Within Florida, Miami also has a cluster of carnival people, while the Sarasota-Venice area is noted historically for its circus folk. In the Gibsonton-Riverview area, the carnival and circus people live in harmony despite some historic differences between the two performing groups. The International Independent Showman's Association (IISA) in Riverview, across the river from Gibsonton, was formed

in 1960 as an outgrowth and splinter faction of the Greater Tampa Showmen's Association organized in 1948. The Tampa club, recipient of thousands of dollars from famed Sally Rand, served the showmen's community as the elite, prestige establishment. The IISA is today a large organization of approximately 1,000 members of the carnival and circus world serving the Gibsonton-Riverview area and beyond. Meeting rooms, bar, restaurant, and offices are housed in the main building. Directly behind the clubhouse structure is a spacious exhibit hall that serves as site for the annual carnival trade show held each January. "Manufacturers and distributors from all parts of the world come to the Gibsonton trade exhibit because, with so many carnival people in the area for the winter, they get more exposure here than anywhere else in the U.S.," said Doris Clark, past president of the IISA (Mercke, 1981). Behind the exhibit hall is a baseball diamond and large area that serves as the location for the Gibsonton annual showmen's circus held each January. Held under a big top, this charity event is a local club effort to activate community performers with all proceeds going to the Florida Sheriff's Boys Ranch, the local junior high school, and the handicapped Boy Scouts. Normally a full tent is assured for each performance. Opened in 1986 and housed in several small rooms in a separate one-story structure is the IISA museum, one of six carnival museums in the United States (George Sanders, interview, April 1989). Museum curator George Sanders is "a kiddie ride operator" who has managed to collect diverse memorabilia from the carnival-circus world. In his offseason months, he catalogs the many items stored in the museum, including carnival posters, ferris wheel seats, kewpie dolls, books, photographs, a banjo lamp for midway lighting, and giant Al Tomaini's size 24 shoes.

Also in the area is a retirement facility for showmen. Except for the museum, the complex is not normally available to the public and operates as a private club. This special identity and camaraderie among the carnival people extends to the grave. On nearby U.S. Highway 301 west of the Gibsonton-Riverview area in the local cemetery is a special showman's plot that includes an \$80,000 mausoleum for show people. In Tampa, Showmen's Rest Cemetery in addition to ground burial plots contains a mausoleum as well as memorial statuary.

### *The future*

The community of Gibsonton is rich in carnival tradition. The small modest one story dwellings reflect the liberal zoning that helped attract residents to the community. In many ways, the carnival community is facing a crisis for identity and survival. Family tradition and love of the profession are threatened by new challenges. Within the past ten to fifteen years, government tax and licensing regulations have severely curtailed the occupations and activities associated with show business. The Department of Transportation more closely regulates drivers of trucks, trailers, and other show vehicles, thereby discouraging many traditional acts in need of such conveyances. Stricter regulation of animal acts also has resulted in a decline in that area. The current trend is for use of larger, more expensive equipment and rides, such as the water flume. So, smaller operators are forced to merge to remain in business or to cooperate with others to afford larger rides or acts. The number of thrill rides is increasing, as side show attractions decrease (Sanders, 1987). People still are interested in side show oddities, but modern techniques in makeup and illusion can today create oddities more awesome than real life itself. Recent mishaps on amusement rides in Florida have resulted in expensive litigations and have brought all such operations under tighter inspection and control. As the number of tent circuses and carnivals declines, the carnival world becomes more dependent on state and county fairs for income. Consequently, as the carnival world undergoes an evolutionary metamorphosis, so does Gibsonton and its residents. As more "markers" arrive in the community and carnival people experience increased economic and regulatory pressure, Gibsonton struggles to maintain its tradition, uniqueness, and preeminence in the carnival-circus world.

Gardinier Inc., the local fertilizer company, following a phosphoric acid spill in the Alafia River, in May 1988, is attempting to improve its relationship with Gibsonton (Orsi, 1988). Local residents complain about the fumes and odors that frequently blanket the area. The Environmental Protection Agency has investigated many such complaints. Earlier mishaps at the plant resulted in warnings and fines by the State (Burr, 1988). The community now finds itself in the spotlight. The Alafia



River, one of four Hillsborough rivers emptying into Tampa Bay, is recognized as the most polluted, mainly from the waste of phosphate companies and other industries along its banks. With at least 28 known archeological sites on the Alafia as well as a refuge for much wild life, the river's pristine beauty is threatened. The expansion of Gibsonton and Riverview along its banks can only complicate environmental concerns (Kleman, 1987).

Favorable geographic factors helped spawn the community of Gibsonton earlier in the 20th century. As the century closes, geography again is a matter of interest and concern. Not only are cultural and historical forces at work bringing change to the community, but modification of the physical environment is of great concern. The carnival-circus enclave of the show world faces change and challenge for the future.

### *Summary*

Since the early 1920's, the population of showmen has grown steadily within the Gibsonton-Riverview area. The physical and human geography of the region has resulted in its becoming the largest winter home for showmen in the United States. A place where carnival and circus people live, work, and play in harmony, these people have built two attractive clubs, designed and built their own cemetery, and established a permanent and unique enclave. They have also created an historical museum and a newsletter. Many articles and books have been written about their lives, travels, and history. However, unlike other ethnic, religious, or political communities, the Gibsonton-Riverview community includes such diversity as mechanics, concessionaires, small entrepreneurs, aerial artists and animal trainers. This community is truly a cultural phenomenon.

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