

The reincarnation of the New Port Richey, Florida Finnish-American Club

By John Bechtel
Freelance Writer



Our story about the New Port Richey Finnish community really begins in the late 19th century when developers began draining the former Seminole swamps near the Gulf Coast of Central Florida and converting them to residential and farm land. Just a few miles from the Gulf, there was a giant natural sinkhole next to the picturesque Pithlachascotee River (just call it the 'Cotee). Because of its indigo blue color, it came to be called the Blue Sink and it became something of a tourist attraction. It had gently sloping banks and was surrounded by calming giant pine trees. Eventually someone changed the name of the sinkhole to a more appealing Orange Lake. Settlements developed on both ends of the lake, and the one settlement called itself old Port Richey, and the other one called itself New Port Richey. And that is what they are still called to this day.

During the roaring 1920's when everyone was living the high life and feeling no pain, Hollywood was in an expansive mood, and celebrities, then as now, were earning more money than they really knew what to do with. A well-known star of the silent films by the name of Thomas Meighan had decided he wanted a second home (or third, or fourth, or whatever) in New Port Richey. So he had a palatial home built on the river (yes, that river), and as the story goes, he persuaded some of his Hollywood buddies, both men and women, to come and take a look. A new theatre was built, christened the Thomas Meighan Theatre, and it was intended to be one of the finest in all of Florida for that time period. It was built within a few months of the construction of the Hacienda, a Spanish architecture new hotel a block west of the new theatre. The glitterati came to poke around, to see



Club member entertainers pause for a group photo during the club's 70th Anniversary celebration.

PHOTO: JOHN BECHTEL



PHOTOS: JOHN BECHTEL



lead, it is only a matter of time till many more follow, seeking the comfort of associating with a small group with the same heritage and that feels like family.

Finnish cookie "goodies", cake and great fellowship go well together, especially as the New Port Richey Finnish-American Club celebrates its 70th Anniversary.

More than 70 years ago, groups of Finnish folks in the New Port Richey area got together to send what was needed to relatives and friends that were left in dire circumstances in Finland after World War II. This was done over an extended period of time,
(Continued on page 00)

and be seen, and debate whether they too wanted to build on the river and become part of the vanguard of the Hollywood of the East as New Port Richey began to be called. Several more gorgeous, swanky homes were built on the 23-mile 'Cotee River, including one for Gloria Swanson, star of Sunset Boulevard and many silent films. The 'Cotee held promise of becoming the riparian Rodeo Drive. Unfortunately the theatre is still there, and the Hacienda has been under recent renovation, but Hollywood changed its mind and left town.

During the next three decades other, very different types of settlers began arriving in the area; older, retired, ethnic blue collar working people, attracted by the charm and very rural atmosphere of New Port Richey, and lacking the extreme cold temperatures of the North and Midwest. Not the least of these were aging Finnish farmers, miners, tradesmen and foresters, looking for someplace warmer to spend their retirement years.

As with all migrations, when a few



PHOTOS: CITYDATA.COM

New Port Richey's beautiful 'Cotee River Linear Park.



PHOTO: JOHN BECHTEL

Club members awaiting 70th Anniversary program.



PHOTO: JOHN BECHTEL

Dancers in Finnish attire, entertain club members with traditional dancing.

(Continued from page 00)

until it wasn't necessary anymore. The group didn't want to give up these friendships. Soon the Finns formed a non-profit club for the purpose of socializing, keeping the Finnish culture alive and service to the community.

Shortly after being founded in 1949, the Finnish Club of New Port Richey had 300 charter members and more were waiting in line for membership approval. Some brought children, but the grown children of others came to visit and developed a fondness for the expanding Finnish community and the area. By the 1960s, New Port Richey even had its own Finnish phone book.

For each couple who applied, they both had to be 100% Finnish. Eventually that was relaxed so you could each be half Finn (I guess so that two halves made a whole Finn).

Until 1978, the business meetings were held entirely in Finnish. By 1978 the membership rule was further relaxed so that a non-Finn could be a member, but had to be a Finn or married to a Finn to hold office in the club. Today, many of the members are descendants of those first members.

In the early 1950s, they pooled their resources and skills and built their clubhouse, just a few blocks from where Gloria Swanson's house once stood on the Pithlachascotee River. The hall has undergone several additions since then, paid for with money raised by sales of baked goods and crafts. When it was complete, it was a center for wholesome entertainment and social life. For years there was a program every Saturday night, with member participation in skits, poetry recitals, choruses, musical instruments such as the violin and accordion, folk music and dancing, and bingo. On many memorable Christmas occasions, a member who was also a school teacher brought a bunch of her students to perform. On other occasions the men would ham it up by dressing in hula outfits as women for vaudeville fashion shows. The club organized trips and cruises for members, and the hall was used for holiday celebrations, weddings, receptions, and even wakes and funerals.

The current president of the club is Ida Salmi Duffy, who is 100% Finnish. Her father came to the club in 1982. Ida (whose husband, Dick, is 100% Irish Catholic), became the club president in 2006, and together they have been indefatigable promoters of the Finnish community ever since. She and her husband (79 and 80 years old, respectively) have been at the heart of every activity and initiative for almost twenty years. It has not always been easy. With an aging building in an area known for its hurricanes and tropical storms, there are always financial issues to deal with. Repairs, both routine and unexpected, have to be arranged and paid for as needed. There are bigger capital improvements issues that have to be planned for, such as a new roof. Fund-raising events are a constant necessity, with no guarantees as to results. And there is always the challenge of finding volunteers to help with set-up and clean-up.

The club was organized by aging Finns seeking retirement in Florida. That generation has passed away, and the current membership, down to about 60 charter members, are older than many of the founders were when they started the club in 1949. Ida and Dick say they are some of the youngsters among the current membership. So the future of the club has been a nagging question for years. The future generations of the club members have little interest in continuing the legacy. They are happy for the satisfactions it has provided for their parents and grandparents, but it doesn't have the same appeal for them. Some might be willing to contribute, but it takes a lot more than that to run a successful club, and most of the kids move out of the area eventually. And some of the oldest members understandably choose to spend their remaining years with their grown children in other states.

In February of this year, Philip Johnson, Ph.D., the president of Finlandia University, and Jim Kurtti, the Director of the Finnish-American Heritage Center, both in Hancock, Michigan, made a stop at the club's 70th anniversary celebration in New Port Richey. During the month following that event, pictured here in this article, it was decided to put the club up for sale,



PHOTO: JOHN BECHTEL

The indomitable Ida Salmi Duffy, president of the Finnish-American Club of New Port Richey, who has been the driving force behind the club for decades.



PHOTO: JOHN BECHTEL

Philip Johnson, Ph.D., president of Finlandia University, Hancock Michigan, spoke at the anniversary.

and to donate the proceeds to Finlandia University, Finnish-American Heritage Center, Salolampi Language Camp, Bemidji, Minnesota, and the West Pasco Historical Society. Rather than let the club die slowly of attrition, it was deemed wiser to act proactively and put the funds where they can best be used to

benefit the future generations of Finnish-Americans, and where better to do that than at the only Finnish-American university in Hancock, and to preserve the history at the Finnish American Heritage Center? (Ida's mother attended Suomi College, before it became Finlandia University.) The Finnish values represented by the volunteer work and financial contributions of the New Port Richey Finnish-American Club over seven decades have been repurposed for renewed vitality and effectiveness.

Everything changes in life, and humans are well known for their adaptability. That was how the first generation of Finnish immigrants found their way to this country, and it is that same adaptability that is taking future generations to all parts of the globe in pursuit of yet-to-be-invented careers. Changes are necessary losses, just like watching our children grow up and leave home. Heritage is cherishing the memories.



PHOTO: JOHN BECHTEL

Director of the Finnish-American Heritage Center in Hancock, Michigan, Jim Kurtti, center joined Philip Johnson and Ida Duffy in celebration of 70th Anniversary.