

Odds and Ends of Davis Islands History

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I thought I'd open up the New Year with a series of bite-sized bits of Davis Islands history – items that by themselves do not necessarily warrant a full article, or topics where information is scarce, but are interesting none the less.

Some of these stories can, and will, be expanded when new information becomes available. Chief among those topics are the stories of two long-time Davis Islands employees, Lauriston G. Moore and Edith Davis (no relation to D. P. Davis). Both Moore and Davis started working for D. P. Davis during the early stages of the development of the Islands. When Stone & Webster purchased the project, Moore became a vice president in Davis Islands, Inc., and was the resident manager of the property. Edith Davis worked first as a stenographer, then as executive secretary for the company. Moore and Davis both lived on the Islands from the 1920s until their deaths in the 1950s.

Other Davis Islands topics are much more trivial, but no less interesting. Things were very different on the Islands in the 1930s. There were only about one hundred buildings on Davis Islands, with the vast majority located on the northern end. This left hundreds of acres of land lying fallow. Part of that land was covered by clover, which grew to an amazing seven feet high according to an article in the May 17, 1936 *Tampa Morning Tribune*. The clover seeds were in bales of hay from the Midwest, which were brought to the Islands in the 1920s for the mules and horses used during the early stages of construction.

Though the Islands have always been regarded as a great place to live, it has also had its share of problems. During the 1930s, the city decided that it would use vacant

land at the southern end of the Islands as a garbage dump. Despite numerous complaints by residents, the dump was not removed for quite some time.

Another sanitary problem to plague Davis Islands was an invasion of rats, fleeing the Hyde Park area in 1976. The discussion of why this was happening (a spate of demolitions in the old neighborhood) and how to get rid of them consumed a large quantity of ink in the *Tampa Tribune*.

Other creatures have visited the Islands within the last eighty years, but perhaps none were more dangerous than the seven foot “crocodile” (it was really an alligator) pulled from the canal on the west end of Peter O. Knight Airport on October 27, 1937. A man named Leroy Johnson was fishing in the canal when he saw the gator and, not knowing if he was “seeing things,” decided to shoot a load of buckshot into the water. He then pulled the live, but wounded, animal out of the water and took it to the *Tampa Daily Times* building in downtown Tampa, where a photographer documented the story. Why Mr. Johnson had a shotgun with him while he was fishing on the Islands is still a mystery, but he must have been happy he did.

If you have any stories about life on Davis Islands, or if you have any information or photographs relating to the ones mentioned here, please feel free to contact me at the History Center. You can reach me by phone, (813) 228-0097, or by email, rkp@tampabayhistorycenter.org.