

Friends of the Randell Research Center

Vol. 3, No. 4

December 2004

In the Aftermath of Charley Pineland's Historic Ruby Gill House and Post Office

by Karen J. Walker

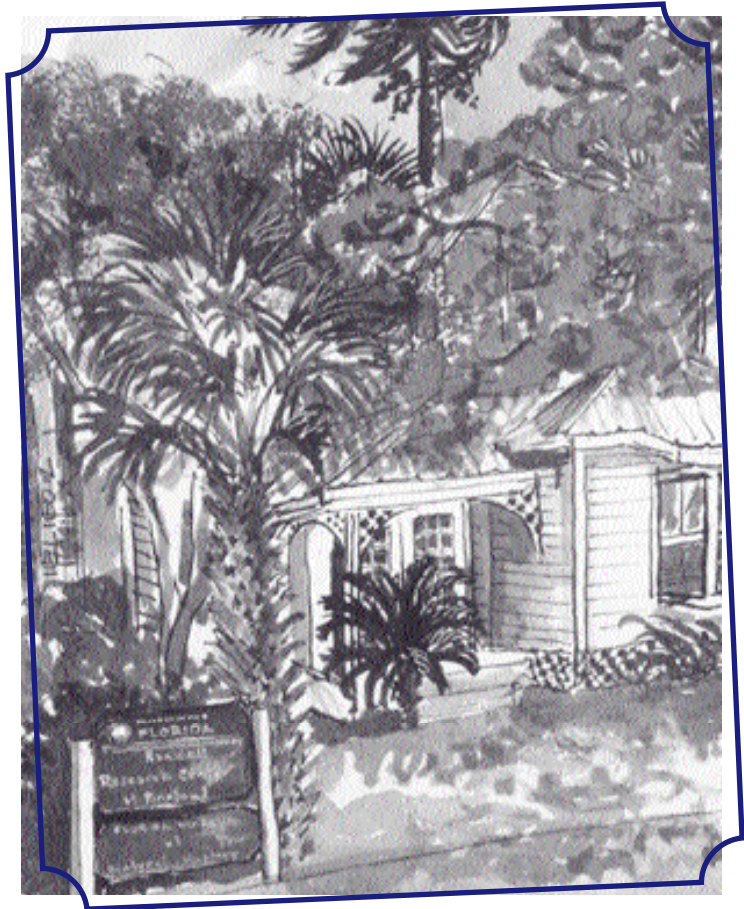
On August 14, I pushed water out of Ruby Gill's front door with a heavy heart, tempered with feelings of relief that the house was still standing. The house that now serves as RRC headquarters sits next door to the picturesque little Pineland post office. Although the Pineland community treasures its post office, many are unaware that it and the RRC house next door are closely associated.

Predating the Wilson home (today's Tarpon Lodge), the Gill House (1922, remodeled 1982) and post office (1925) are two of Pineland's oldest buildings. They have survived hurricanes of 1925, 1926, 1933, 1941, 1944, 1947 (George), 1960 (Donna), and now Charley in 2004 (see *Friends Newsletter* vol. 3, no. 3). Both the house and the post office lost portions of their metal roofs to Charley. Current postmaster Gina Poppell worked over the weekend cleaning up debris even though her own home was badly damaged. She opened on Monday, amidst the pounding of Bill Marquardt's hammer as he patched the damaged roof. Pineland's was the only post office open for business on Pine Island.

The RRC's house is named for Ruby Gill, who in 1922 at age 35 came to Pineland with her husband Percy. They bought several acres of orange groves and built the two-story house. In 1924, Ruby succeeded James Wheeler as postmaster, but soon afterwards a violent storm swept away the tiny post office, then located on the waterfront. Ruby built the current office next to her home, where it would be more protected. Early on, she also operated a small store there as well. She served on the county electric board and was instrumental in bringing electricity to Pineland in 1941. She was postmaster until 1957.

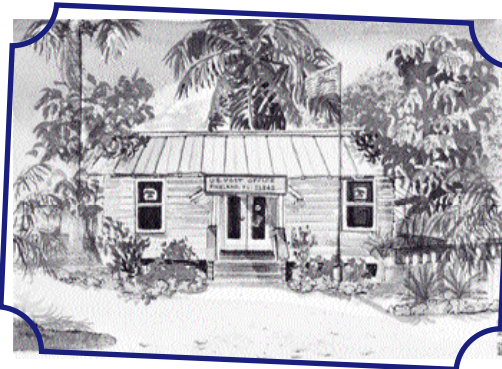
Today the post office is a vibrant symbol of Pineland's community identity. At least twice in the past, the U. S. Postal Service (USPS) has wanted to close the office, but residents convinced the government to keep it open (John L. Lewis, possibly Pineland's most famous resident, led one effort in the 1950s).

Few realize that the post office and the Gill House are one property and that the USPS rents the post office building. Ruby Gill (and Percy, who preceded her in death) was the owner until she died in 1969. Since then, each new owner has continued to rent the post office to the government. The current owner is Lee County. The property (8+ acres, the Gill House, and the post office) was bought for \$400,000, with Lee County paying the appraised value of \$389,000 and the Stans Foundation making up the \$11,000 difference. The purchase could not have happened



The historic Ruby Gill house in Pineland. (Watercolor by Mel Meo)

without the commitment of the RRC to manage the property. Recently the Florida Museum advanced funds to install new roofs on both buildings, but interior repairs still remain to be completed for both structures.



The RRC plans to continue using the Gill House as its headquarters, and to continue leasing the post office to the USPS. Both structures will remain permanent historical features of the Pineland community, accessible to the public through the daily operations of the RRC and the post office. Ruby would not have had it any other way.

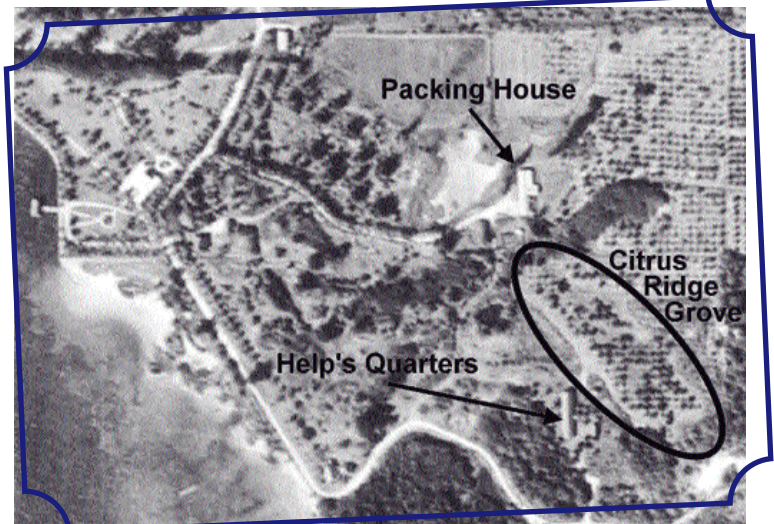
The historic Pineland post office. (Watercolor by Mel Meo)

Citrus Canker Fells Last Remnant of Pineland's Historic Grove

by John Worth

In the aftermath of Hurricane Charley, Pineland recently experienced yet another blow, affecting both its tree-filled landscape and another remnant of its early 20th-century history. In mid-November, state inspectors discovered traces of the dreaded citrus canker (*Xanthomonas axonopodis*) in some of the new growth on trees in the middle of the sand ridge known as the Citrus Ridge. The bacterial pathogen, which causes unsightly lesions on citrus fruits, and which can also defoliate severely infected trees and cause fruit to drop prematurely, was also discovered at several nearby yards in Pineland. Under Florida law, all trees within 1,900 feet of the canker must be destroyed. Within a few days, all citrus trees from the Pineland site had been cut down.

Our little grove was one of the last traces of Pineland's historic citrus industry, which emerged during the first decades of the 20th century and was still thriving as of the time of a 1944 aerial photo showing not only the groves, but also the nearby packing house and help's quarters, both of which were originally located on the Pineland site property. The only standing structural remnant of this era, a wooden barn still being used for the RRC tractor, was utterly destroyed by Hurricane Charley. And so the subsequent loss of the Citrus Ridge grove leaves only a handful of original coconut and royal palms alongside the historic road that ran between the packing house and the shore (the road is now being restored and maintained thanks to PalmCo, Inc.).



1944 aerial photo of Pineland showing Citrus Ridge circled in black. (Digital base photo from Aerial Photography: Florida project, State University System of Florida, www.uflib.ufl.edu/digital/collections/flap/index.htm)

If there is a silver lining to this loss, it is that visitors are now afforded an unimpeded view of the eastern half of the Pineland site surrounding Citrus Ridge. Once the three-year quarantine period expires, new citrus trees can be planted. In the meantime, Citrus Ridge will remain curiously bare, standing in mute testimony to the end of an era in Pineland.

Staff Spotlight: Craig Timbes

by John Worth



(Photo by John Worth)

We at the RRC are

pleased to welcome Craig Timbes to our staff. Craig has taken over the position of Operations Manager, with duties ranging from site and machinery maintenance to helping with coordinating volunteers for site clean up.

Craig has resided on Pine Island for six years. During this time he was a data specialist for Walt Disney World and a chef at Rondell's Restaurant in Matlacha.

He has been active in the local community and was instrumental in coordinating the extensive cleanup efforts for the site after this year's devastating hurricane season.

Craig looks forward to many years of service to the Randell Research Center as well as the local community and we are happy to have him on the team...

Welcome Craig!!!!

Central Michigan University Students Volunteer with RRC

by Craig Timbes

On the 28th, 29th & 30th of December eleven students from Central Michigan University volunteered their time at the RRC by helping beautify the interpretive trails following major cleanup work that took place after the devastating hurricane season of 2004. Glen Newman, Sarah Kropiewnicki, Marlana E. Taylor, Ryan Kracht, Alicia Garcia, Ashley Brandys, Brian Zervas, Sarah Stechshulte, Dan P. Rinke, Taylor Walker, and Akemi Komatsu toured the trail before going to work collecting residual debris and wind-blown palm fronds. The students worked extremely hard and were motivated by the pleasant weather during their stay. On the 28th, the students were treated to lunch by office manager Jennifer Jennings. We look forward to their return one day, as well as continued progress from all of our volunteers and staff at the Randell Research Center.

Calusa Heritage Trail Opens to the Public

by Bill Marquardt

On December 10, over 150 people showed up for the official opening of the RRC's new Calusa Heritage Trail. The Trail, funded by the Florida Department of State, Division of Historical Resources, consists of graded pathways, a bridge, and 13 professional-quality signs that provide a self-guided tour. The sign text was written by Darcie MacMahon, Karen Walker, John Worth, and me. The art work is by Merald Clark, and the graphic design is by Synergy Design Group of Tallahassee.

After enjoying refreshments donated by Joyce Mutz and listening to a few remarks by me, the crowd watched as John Worth and Lee County Commissioner Ray Judah used a sharp flint knife to cut the ribbon, after which the visitors became the first to walk the new Trail. The "ribbon" was a 12-foot-long band of woven palmetto leaves made for the occasion by Dick Workman.

In my remarks, I first acknowledged the herculean efforts of our local staff – John Worth, Craig Timbes, and Jennifer Jennings – in getting the storm-damaged site ready for visitors. I also acknowledged the hard work and craftsmanship of John Paeno, who constructed the observation decks and boardwalk while employed by the RRC. I explained that the Trail is the next phase of a several-phase project to establish a center of research and learning. The first phase was the pavilion, rest rooms, and parking lot, completed last year. The second phase is the Trail, now open. The third phase will be a classroom that will seat up to 50 people for school programs and public events.

We hope to construct the classroom next fall, pending receipt of State matching funds. We would not be in a position to have funds matched by the legislature without the help of many loyal supporters. Major donors were the Stans Foundation, Dwight and Susan Sippelle, Anina Hills Glaize, and Paul and Warren Miller. Also contributing generously were Virginia Amsler, Tommy Taylor, Michael Hansinger, the Bonita Bay Group, Linda and Nick Penniman, Robert A. Wells, Jr., Charles B. Edwards, the Southwest Florida



A few raindrops were not enough to deter the opening-day visitors to the Calusa Heritage Trail. In the foreground, John Worth cuts the ribbon, assisted by county commissioner Ray Judah. (Photo by W. Marquardt)

Community Foundation, Lee Newsom, Paul Benedum, and many others who donated cash gifts.

We have also benefited from the donated professional services of Jeff Mudgett (architect), Tim Keene (engineer), Bob Rude (engineer), Dick Workman (environmental consultant), and Ted Baer and John Cauthen (vegetation removal services). Mariner Properties Development Corporation provided a significant discount on wetland mitigation credits through their Little Pine Island Mitigation Bank. Deep South Native Nursery and Pine Breeze Nursery were particularly generous with donating native plants for our landscaping. Mark Dean of Palmco donated many palm trees (not once but twice, due to hurricane damage) to restore the historic palm-lined road that once wound its way to a citrus-packing barn. We appreciate the support of the Southwest Florida Council on Environmental Education, the Lee County Visitor and Convention Bureau, the Greater Pine Island Chamber of Commerce, the Florida Native Plant Society—Coccoloba chapter, the Matlacha Mariners and Hookers, the Pineland Marina, and the Tarpon Lodge. Finally, we owe a tremendous debt of gratitude to the volunteers and docents who faithfully serve the Center. Thank you, one and all.

New and Renewing Friends of the RRC from October 1 to December 31, 2004

(Please let us know of any errors or omissions. Thank you for your support!)

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A Presidential Visit

Pineland Site Toured by the Carter Family

by John Worth

On December 28, the Randell Research Center was honored by a visit by the family of former President James Earl Carter and his wife Rosalynn, along with all four of their children and all but one of their eleven grandchildren. During their holiday vacation in Cape Coral, the Carter family spent a full day touring Pine Island Sound, beginning with the Pineland archaeological site, followed by a cruise to nearby Cabbage Key, Useppa Island, and Cayo Costa State Park. Accompanied by RRC Advisory Board member Randy Wayne White, as well as staff members Jennifer Jennings and Craig Timbes and volunteer Terry Pierce, I led the group of 24 family members and their security detail around the new Calusa Heritage Trail for about an hour in the unusually brisk morning air. As gauged by the positive reaction of our guests, the tour was a success, and marks a milestone in the visitorship of the RRC – a visit by a former United States president and Nobel Peace Prize winner, along with almost his entire family.



President and Mrs. Carter (top) in front of Brown's Mound with Terry Pierce, Craig Timbes, Jennifer Jennings, John Worth, and Randy Wayne White.

(Photo by Art Schmidt)



President and Mrs. Carter (left) inspect an interpretive sign along the Calusa Heritage Trail.

(Photo by Art Schmidt)

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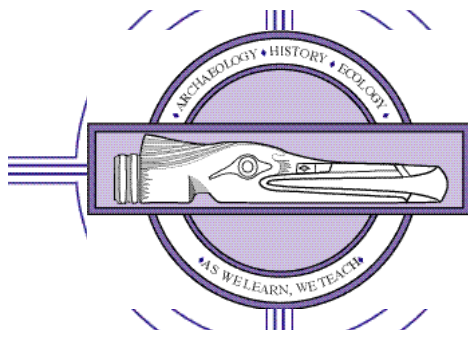
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Friends of the Randell Research Center

Pineland, Florida • December, 2004
Phone (239) 283-2062 E-mail: johneworth@comcast.net

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You are cordially invited to join, or renew your membership in, the RRC's support society, *Friends of the Randell Research Center*. (Current members can find out when their memberships expire by looking at the address label on their newsletter.)

All Friends of the RRC receive a quarterly newsletter and free admission to the Calusa Heritage Trail at Pineland. Supporters at higher levels are entitled to discounts on our books and merchandise, advance notice of programs, and special recognition. Your continuing support is vital to our mission. It means more research, more education, and continued site improvements at the Randell Research Center. Thank you.

Sincerely,

John E. Worth, Ph.D.
Coordinator of Research Programs and Services
Randell Research Center

Please check the membership level you prefer, and send this form, along with your check payable to Friends of the Randell Research Center, to:

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- Sustaining Members (\$5,000-\$19,999), Benefactors (\$20,000-\$99,999), and Patrons (\$100,000 and above)** receive all of the above + complimentary RRC publications and special briefings from the Director.
- Please use my gift** to obtain matching funds from the National Endowment for the Humanities.

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by Darcie A. MacMahon and William H. Marquardt
U. Press of Florida, hardcover \$39.95



Culture and Environment in the Domain of the Calusa

edited by William H. Marquardt; Monograph 1, softcover \$25.00

Sharks and Shark Products in Prehistoric South Florida

by Laura Kozuch; Monograph 2, softcover \$5.00

The Archaeology of Useppa Island

edited by William H. Marquardt; Monograph 3, hardcover \$35.00, softcover \$20.00

New Words, Old Songs: Understanding the Lives of Ancient Peoples in Southwest Florida Through Archaeology

by Charles Blanchard, illustrated by Merald Clark
hardcover \$24.95
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Fisherfolk of Charlotte Harbor, Florida

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VHS video \$19.95

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