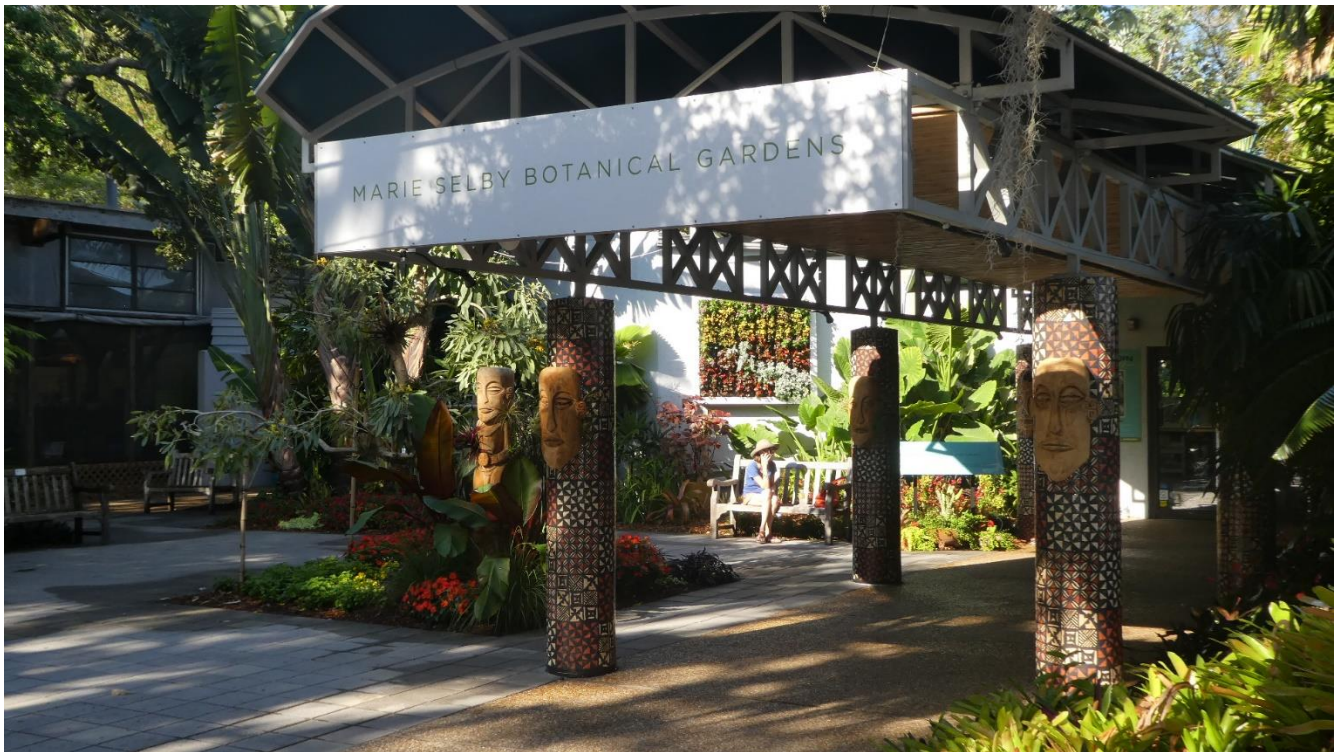


The Land of Selby Gardens:

The story of how a small strip of Sarasota waterfront became
a world class botanical garden

D. J. Turner



Sarasota 2019

THE LAND OF SELBY GARDENS: The story of how a small strip of Sarasota waterfront became a world class botanical garden.

Introduction

The Marie Selby Gardens is recognized internationally as a leading research facility for the study of epiphytes as well as a living museum of tropical plants which welcomes thousands of visitors each year. Myriad displays of showy orchids and exotic bromeliads in the display greenhouse and on the property enchant the first-time visitor. Walking paths wind through stands of palms and tropical bamboo, past a lovely koi pond, shadowed fern garden, spreading banyan trees, and colorful flower beds. But what makes this 15-acre park-like garden so breathtaking is its unique location. Situated on a peninsula at the confluence of Hudson Bayou and picturesque Sarasota Bay, the garden occupies nearly 2000 feet of waterfront on arguably the most expensive piece of real estate in Sarasota County. In addition to its beautiful bayside setting, the garden is only a few blocks from the city center with its high-rise condominiums and gleaming postmodern office buildings. This unique waterfront and urban location for a public garden, might offer the first-time visitor pause to wonder how this remarkable garden was born. This was certainly my reaction when I first visited Selby Gardens almost twenty years ago

Much historical research creates a causal chain of events which leads to an inevitable conclusion. As if when you look at all the events, no other outcome was possible. The fascinating part of this story is that events of this narrative all lead to outcomes other than a world class botanical garden on the shores of Sarasota Bay. Logically this small strip on Sarasota Bay should have been a government office building or a sleek row of luxury high-rises for the wealthiest of our citizens. Yet, in spite of these events, we are fortunate to have a public space where ordinary people can enjoy an unparalleled piece of old Florida, a small place of tropical wonder.

Yes, it was the home and gardens of Bill and Marie Selby. Most local residents know that on Mrs. Selby's death in 1971 she had deeded her South Palm Ave. property to a trust for the specific purpose of a public botanical garden. However, on the day of her death, although she had lived in her house for more than 50 years, she had owned most of the property she donated for only a few months.

Another remarkable part of the story was that Mrs. Selby had not spoken of her bequest and her executors were surprised by the inclusion. As a matter of fact, Mrs. Selby probably had not given much thought to endowing a garden in her name until in the very last years of her life when she was elderly and very ill. The reason is that the land which became the garden had been held by a patchwork of owners. They held title to that property through a series of twists and turns until the unlikely time when what had seemed impossible to achieve a few years before, namely a single owner, became for Mrs. Selby, a necessity.

My research about the interesting parade of people who once lived on this small piece of land is really a short history of Sarasota itself. Its early founding, its expansion and bubbles, its millionaires and socially elite and the philanthropic quality of its citizens which still remains.

In 1855, Robert Hunter purchased about 47 acres of public land on the Sarasota waterfront for .90 cents an acre or about 40 dollars. This low-lying land bordered both sides of Hudson Bayou and extended east about 1000 feet to what is now Orange Ave. At this time Sarasota was virtually unpopulated with only the Whitaker family homestead on the Whitaker Bayou several miles north and a small colony to the South near Phillippi Creek. Although there were no white families on the property, there is ample evidence that countless generations of Native Americans lived and fished in Sarasota bay. A large aboriginal mound located near what is now Mound St. testifies to the long-term occupation of this site.

Not much is known of Mr. Hunter but we can assume he might have entertained certain regrets about his purchase. Shortly after the sale, the Seminole Indians began the Third Seminole war under Chief Billy Bowlegs. The warriors swept through Sarasota burning the Whitaker homestead and its outbuildings to the ground and murdering the one resident who had foolishly refused to seek safety in Bradenton.

Things became even more uncertain during the Civil War when detachments of Union troops harassed and confiscated cattle and crops of the few citizens who had returned to the area after the conclusion of the Indian Wars.

In 1874, Philadelphia resident, Adolph Zakrzewski traveled to Florida and purchased the 47-acre tract from Hunter for 1,500 dollars. At that time the area was still very sparsely populated with no more than 100 families in the area. Most of the settlement was south of Hudson Bayou running down to Phillippi Creek.

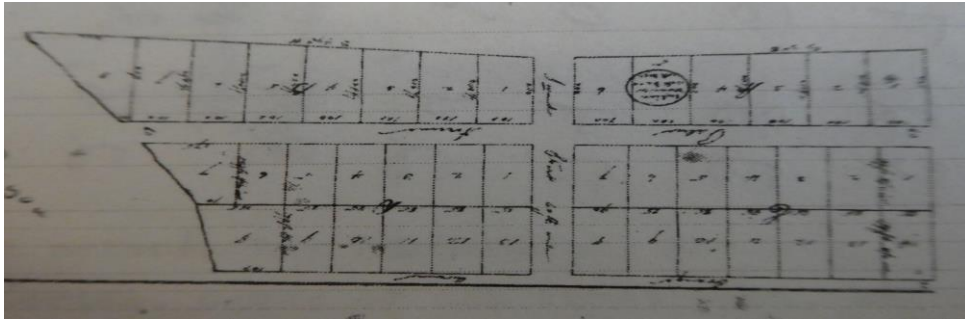
It would have encouraged Zakrzewski that homesteaders just south of his purchase were establishing a permanent community. The area around Hillview Ave. was settled by the Abbe family who opened the first post office. Caroline Abbe opened the first school in the area on the other side of Hudson Bayou in an abandoned fishing shack just across the water from Zakrzewski's property. Still, development proceeded in fits and starts looking for an economic base to sustain the growing population. Sugar, fish processing and tropical fruits were all experiments with decidedly mixed results.

Then in 1882, A.E. Willard purchased 94 acres in what would become downtown Sarasota. His land extended southward near Mound Ave and bordered the Zakrzewski property. His business schemes were a failure and he lost the land to the British owned Florida Mortgage and Investment Company. The Sarasota waterfront was still sparsely settled but things could be looking up for Sarasota. A group of investors developed a plan for the Ormiston Colony of Scottish settlers and platted out the downtown area in anticipation of the expected immigration. This would have made the Zakrzewski land a key piece in the expected development as the last undeveloped piece of the Sarasota waterfront lying between the Ormiston Colony to the north and the Abbe properties just to the south.

Unfortunately, the Ormiston Colony pioneers were unprepared for the rugged life Florida had to offer and the Scottish developers failed to anticipate the basic needs of the new arrivals. Within a year, most of the more the 50 colonists had left the area and the project collapsed in failure.

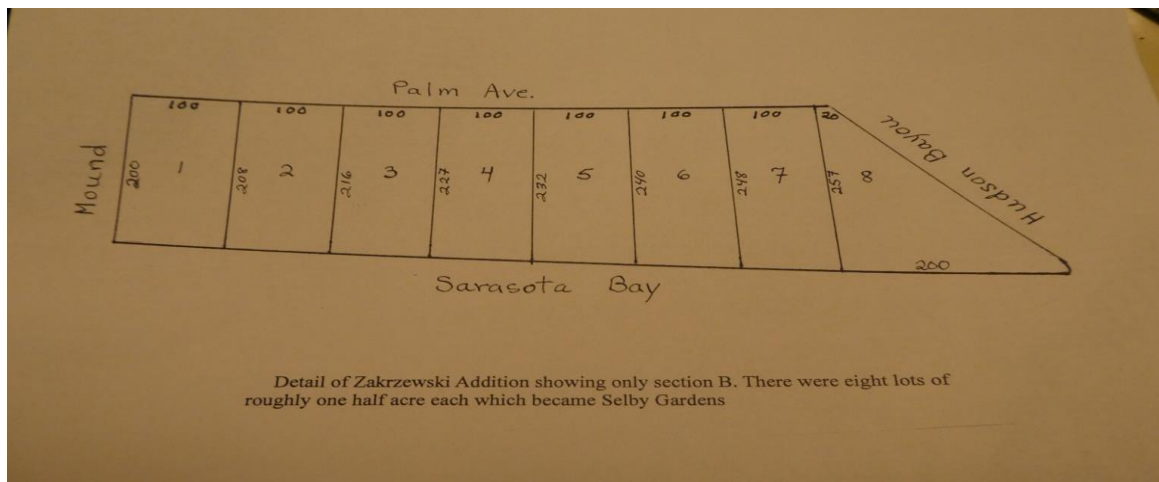
Zakrzewski must have had misgivings about the lengthy time that had passed and the pace of development. He had been waiting more than 25 years for the right time to develop when he died in Philadelphia in April of 1902. In his will, he left his Florida land to his wife Lumena. This land in his estate was then valued at 5,000 dollars.

While Adolph Zakrzewski was patient, his widow was not. Within a year of his death Lumena Zakrzewski had hired a surveyor and had platted out the Hudson Bayou property. As recorded in the



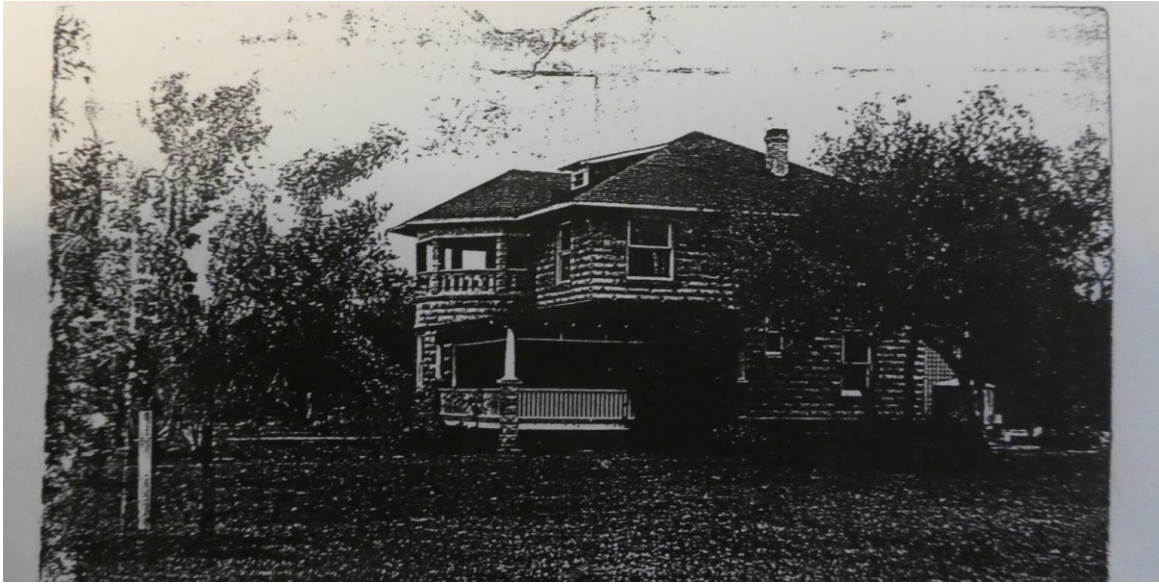
Manatee County records, she had the property divided up into half acre parcels and they were put up for sale.

The land that would become Selby Gardens was designated section B and was divided up into 8 one half acre parcels extending from Mound St. to Hudson Bayou and from the newly created Palm Ave. to Sarasota Bay. Altogether this land amounted to a little over 4 acres.



Over the next decade all the lots were sold to individual buyers. The new colony of Sarasota was attracting investors. These eight lots were sold and resold although no improvements were made to any of the properties.

The first person to build on one of the lots was F. M. Pearce Jr. who bought the center lots 5 and 6 in the summer of 1909. Interestingly, he built the house entirely on 5 leaving lot 6 vacant.



Original Pearce House c.1910 later additions would be made by Hemingway and Cantacuzene

This masonry house was built at 870 W. Palm and was situated slightly closer to the bay than to Palm Ave.

Pearce was an agronomist and planter from British Honduras (today Belize) where he had the government contract for sugar production. He moved to Sarasota with the hope of recreating a sugar industry here. He purchased extensive landholdings near Tallevest Road where Pearce Farms planted celery, tomatoes as well as sugarcane. But a few years later in 1916, he put his bayfront house up for sale.

In April of 1919, the fascinating Ida Smith Hemingway purchased the Pearce house and property and immediately began to leave her mark on Sarasota. Mrs. Smith Hemingway was from Chicago where she had married the much older Calvin Smith who was President of N.Y. Life Insurance Co. Her life was a swirl of social events and philanthropy until the untimely death of her husband left her a widow at the age of 56. She moved to Sarasota, and married Robert Hemingway, a business associate of her husband. Tragedy was to befall her once again. In 1916, while sailing in Sarasota Bay, a wildly swinging boom struck her new husband in the head and killed him. The couple had been married only 7 months.

Three years later, the twice widowed Mrs. Hemingway would pour all her passion into turning her house on South Palm into a recognized address in the city. Her first objective was to do a make-over of the house and grounds. She hired builders to enlarge the house and turned to Royal Palm Nurseries for advice on improving the grounds.

Her choice of the Reasoner Brother's nursery in Bradenton was a natural one. Royal Palm nurseries was founded in the 1880s and became the premier source for tropical plants in America. Their frequent and lengthy catalogs offered a dazzling array of hundreds of tropical plants from around the world. Thomas Edison was a customer of Royal Palm, ordering plants for his research at his home in Fort Myers. In 1918 Egbert Reasoner joined with William Cook to form Reasoner Bros-Landscape Architects. This was a winning combination. Mr. Cook was a landscape architect, a graduate of Cornell University. Reasoner's knowledge of tropical plants and Cook's architectural skills allowed them to create "well balanced and harmonious plantings". This was the first professional landscape architectural firm in the area and the business was immediately successful. Mrs. Hemingway's property

was one of their first commissions and the firm would go on to continued success with a glittering array of prestigious clients like John Ringling, Potter Palmer and the Deering estate in Miami.

Mr. Cook offered Mrs. Hemingway a dramatic landscape in the Italian style: semi-circular piazzas, terraces, pergolas, winding walks and a circular rose tea garden. He sketched out for her the appropriate shrubs and flowers and placed recommendations for palms, bamboos and vines. We can also assume that there were a large number of hibiscus, a bit of a specialty for Reasoner who had created hundreds of spectacular hybrids.

She christened her remodeled home “Afterglow” and during the roaring 20's, it became a sort of salon where this “artistic and talented woman” would host luncheons and literary events. She was well known for her philanthropic efforts in improving the lives of Sarasota's African-Americans.

“Afterglow” was still the only structure on this section of the waterfront. This beautiful house and elegantly planned gardens would be visible to all from the bay and many boaters would undoubtedly remark on the attractiveness of the property. Two of those people was William and Marie Selby.

William and Marie Selby married in 1908 in Marietta, Ohio and came for their first visit to Sarasota that year. Entranced by what they saw and by the opportunities for boating, fishing and hunting, they made yearly winter trips in the succeeding years.

Bill was the scion of a wealthy oil family whose business was started by his father Frank Selby in 1897. Selby Oil and Gas was an exploration and drilling company with holdings in the Midwest and then later in Texas and California. Bill joined the business as a partner in 1906 at the young age of seventeen. Although Bill would often be required to attend business meetings, he was able to spend winters in Florida pursuing his pastimes.

Marie was born Mariah Minshall in West Virginia in 1885, the youngest of five children. She was descended from Quakers who had settled in Pennsylvania during the Colonial Period. Her grandfather, William Minshall, after a reportedly dissolute youth, married and became a respected lawyer and legislator in Springfield, Illinois. He befriended and supported the young Abraham Lincoln and helped him set up a practice in the city. Her father, Frank Minshall, a petroleum geologist, was a cultured, literate and thoughtful man who encouraged his children to read and study the compelling issues of the day. In a letter to Marie's older sister, he encouraged his daughter to read the works of Spencer and Darwin and not to be afraid to examine old dogmas in the fresh light of new scientific insights.

Marie shared her husband's passion for the outdoor life as well as his love of the automobile. Indeed, she was one of the first women to drive across the country. Although she was petite and soft featured, it belied her spirited character. She loved camping and was an able horsewoman. But in addition to her sportsman's skills, she had cultural interests as well having been trained as a classical pianist. “Will” Selby began his courtship of Marie in 1906. It was likely that their fathers were acquainted, both having roles in the nascent American oil business. Family letters from Marie's mother recount how Will stopped by and paid his respects before heading down to West Virginia to court Marie. Two years later, they were married.

The couple would usually arrive in late December or January and would return to Marietta in April. Normally, they would reside at the Belle Haven Hotel on the Sarasota waterfront but sometimes would rent a house for the season and invite their parents to stay with them as guests.

About the same time, another Midwestern family was visiting Florida whose presence would have a enormous impact on the region. Mrs. Bertha Palmer, Chicago socialite and businesswoman, arrived in 1910 and purchased vast tracts of land from Venice to Sarasota. Her presence and social standing did much to establish Sarasota as a destination for the Midwestern elite.

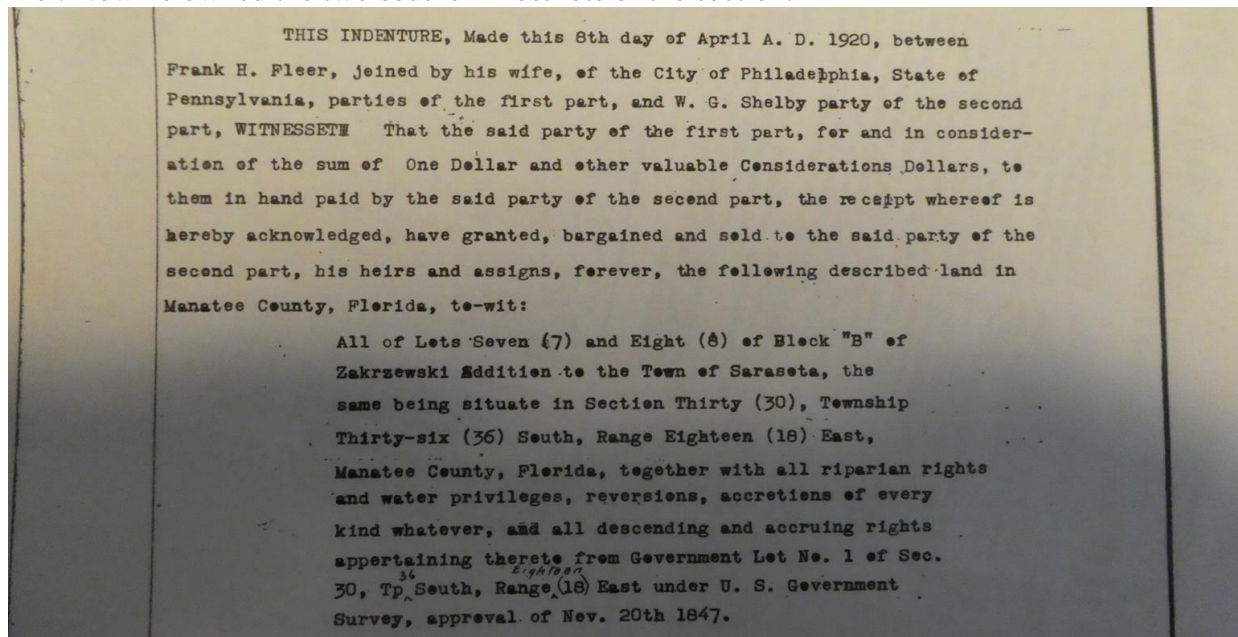
The Selbys enjoyed the natural resources of the region, especially the water. They liked fishing in the Myakka River and cruising in the Gulf of Mexico. Starting in 1916, they would bring their own boat christened Bilma (a combination of their names) to allow them to spend more time on the water.

They also participated in the growing cultural activities of the area. The local paper reported on a musical recital in which Marie was a featured vocalist.

At this time, the Selbys may have been thinking about buying some land and building a winter retreat from the cold. They had visited almost every winter for the past twelve years and they were ready to put down roots in this area of growing popularity and real estate value.

But where to buy? The absolute requirement for Bill was a convenient and nearby mooring for his boat and perhaps, for Marie, a suitable place for a garden. The area south of Mound looked like a possible location. There was deeper water in the Hudson Bayou and Mrs. Hemingway's gardens showed what could be grown in that location. Bill considered other locations such as land on Siesta Key but on April 8, 1920, Bill made a decision and purchased lots 7 and 8 on South Palm Ave.

Lot 8 was the southernmost lot of the B division. It was a triangular shaped lot ending at a point which extended into the Hudson Bayou. The land had been sold by Lumena Zakrzewski in 1913 to another Philadelphian, Frank H. Fleer. Mr. Fleer perhaps felt the irregular nature of the land would make it difficult to build so in March 1919, he also purchased the adjacent lot 7 from Julius and Rose Frankel. Now he owned the two southernmost lots of the section.



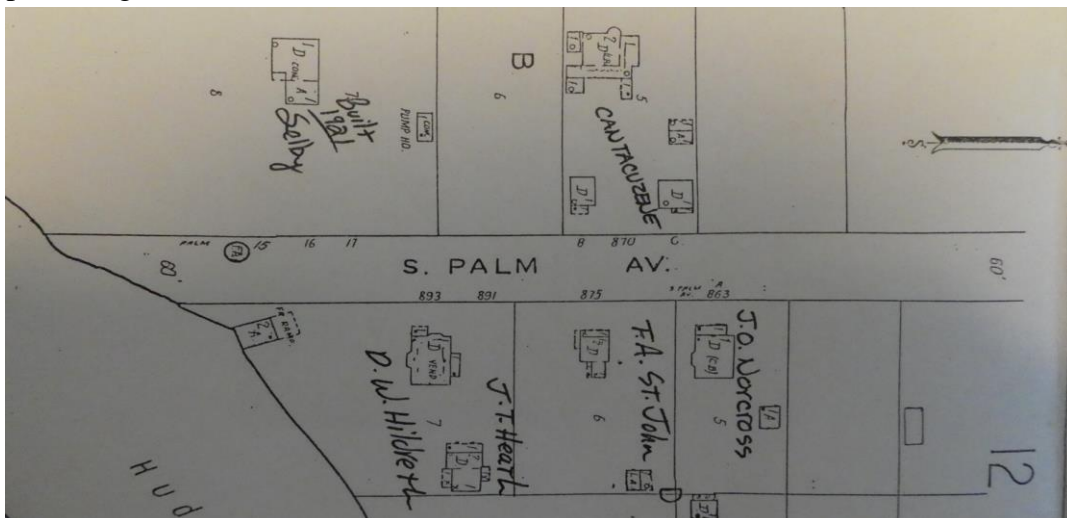
Original deed from Manatee County for lots 7 and 8. Note misspelling of Selby.

A year later on April 8, 1920, Mr. Selby purchased both lots amounting to about 1.2 acres from Mr. Fleer, who netted a substantial profit. According to the tax stamps Selby paid about 15,000 dollars for the two lots (about \$200,000 today). One interesting oddity of the deed is the misspelling of Bill's name as "Shelby", a common mispronunciation even today. (Plate4)



The Selbys were now approaching middle age. They had made their decision to build a permanent winter residence and Bill wasted no time in molding the landscape to their personal needs.

Three weeks after the purchase, Bill applied for permission to dredge a yacht basin and create a 6x60 foot channel into Sarasota Bay from the mouth of Hudson Bayou. In June, he received permission to use the dredged muck and sand to shore up his low-lying property and build a sea wall. He was allowed to extend Palm Ave. 125 feet into Hudson Bayou. This was a master move in that it allowed the Selbys a safe place for their yacht Bilma but also increased and protected the southernmost part of their property. By comparing plat maps by Zakrzewski and early Sanborn maps, it appears that Bill added around a quarter acre or more to his property. His total holdings now were probably approaching an acre and a half.



Sanborn map of South Palm c.1930. Note extension into Hudson Bayou and natural curve of coastline altered by dredging and seawall. Footprint of Peace House recognizable; Payne House has not yet been built.

Now that the nautical requisite was in place, Bill and Marie thought about the house and grounds. Impressed by the manner in which their neighbor's landscape had been planned, they also contacted Royal Palm Nursery for a consultation. Landscape Architect Cook arrived with his staff and drew up a landscape plan for the Selbys. As contemporary photos show, it was a bleak landscape after the dredge and fill. All of the native mangrove had been removed and replaced with yards of sand and gravel which now covered the bottom third of the estate. All that remained in the southern end of the property were a handful of tall pines. Cook's plan included trees, palms and bamboos and Mrs. Selby was in no hurry to build a house preferring to wait until the trees had matured and there was a more aesthetic landscape.

The Reasoner Bros. catalogs offered over 1,200 different varieties of tropical plants for sale, so Mrs. Selby had a world of plants to choose from. Nearly all of the legacy plants in today's garden were available for sale by the Reasoners.

At that time, Bill and Marie were living on their yacht. They may have stayed through at least part of the summer, as he was methodically finalizing the details of their new home. The plan at that time was to build a garage and servant quarters on the property first. The Selbys would live on their yacht while their home would be built the following year.

While they contemplated the size, style and location of their house Bill extended his real estate holdings. He bought 5 and one half lots on Siesta Key and the nearby Curren Cottage on South Palm which he intended to use for a caretaker house.

Over the summer, the Selbys decided to move the timeline forward on building their winter home. Perhaps living for extended periods on the yacht was tiresome, or perhaps they were just impatient to put their life back in order, but in the fall, they announced they would begin construction that winter. Bill told reporters that he had budgeted 50,000 for its construction.

We don't know for sure the name of the architect but in a 1975 interview, local resident John Browning remarked that his father Alex Browning was responsible for the design of the Selby House. Alex's father was one of the first settlers arriving with the ill-fated Ormiston Colony. Alex Browning was the first registered architect in Sarasota. He had been associated with Frank Lloyd Wright during his time in Buffalo. Browning is also credited with designing and building the Tampa Bay hotel in the 1870's.

We do know that Browning also had a cottage on South Palm and was the city engineer for Sarasota. Selby would have had contact with Browning when he was dredging and erecting the seawall before he began construction on his house. So, it is reasonable that Selby might have turned to Architect Browning for help in a design of his house. We do have documentation, however, that builder of the Selby House was Contractor Carman who began construction in January 1921.

The original house was relatively small and set back on the property. It would have been a vacation home where they would spend 4 months each year and as they were childless after 13 years of marriage, it was unlikely they would be needing extra space for a growing family. Also, the dredge and fill would have left the lower portion of the property unsettled and potentially subject to flooding. This risk may have been part of the reason for the placement of the building high on the property.

The house was quickly constructed using a new patented method of building called the Van Gelder process. This required a special machine which would produce two parallel four-inch thick concrete walls with a five-inch airspace. The sections would be molded in five-foot sections reinforced with twisted cable wire. The advantage to this method besides its rapid assembly, was that it created a damp-proof, vermin-proof and fire-proof building.

The Spanish-style building was completed the fall of 1921 and the Selbys moved in on October 24, 1921. The reaction to the house was positive, reporters called it "attractive and artistic". The Selbys named the house "Bay Haven," and almost immediately the Selbys would discover just how much of a haven it would provide.

A mere three days after the Selbys moved in, Sarasota was struck with a devastating hurricane on Oct. 27th, the most destructive storm on record to hit the Gulf Coast. Winds were estimated at more than 75 mph, tides were 10 feet above normal and all of the docks along the bay front were completely demolished from the high waves. The railroad dock was destroyed and washed ashore near the Belle Haven Hotel. All along the coast houses were damaged and many were washed right off of their foundations. John Ringling's boat The Zumbata was ripped from its mooring and was washed ashore heavily damaged.

For the Selbys, it was the first time in Florida during hurricane season and they certainly had cause for concern. The untested house had used a new pre-fabricated technology of construction that was imported from the North. Would it withstand hurricane winds and driving rain? Would the newly dredged yacht basin in Hudson Bayou protect Bilma? Would wind driven waves roll over the newly filled southern edge of his property and wash away the new plantings as well as the seawall? When the storm passed, Bill and Marie must have felt relieved and comforted that their home and yacht basin, for the most part, withstood the tempest.

Now that he was settled in, Bill looked around for other property to acquire. He thought the upper Hudson Bayou would be a good investment, and in 1922, he bought ten lots on the north Branch of Hudson bayou near Hudson and Novus Streets.

While Bill was buying property in the area, a much more significant sale took place next door. In 1922, Mr. William H. Schmidt, a Chicago banker purchased lot 6 from A.O. Morton for 12,000 dollars intending to build his winter home there.

It is puzzling why Bill would not have bought the empty lot which was between his property and Mrs. Hemingway's "Afterglow. Perhaps he was put off by the high price, or maybe the sale was private, but he was able to partially correct the oversight a decade later.

The real estate market was booming at this time. Developers and private individuals dreamed of riches in the ever-expanding real estate bubble. Bill Selby was no exception. Bill, however, canny or lucky, sold many of his early purchases at a profit before the crash came later in the decade. In fact, he was prominently featured in one of the many real estate promotional ads in the local papers. Braeburn developers was offering choice lots and pointed to the example of Commodore Selby who had made a startlingly large profit of 23,000 dollars on a recent transaction. His new title came from his election in the U.S. Power Boat Assoc. and the Sarasota Yacht Club.

The Selbys were pleased with their winter home and its location. For this couple who were interested in nature and the outdoors, this place was indeed a piece of paradise. The limpid waters of Sarasota Bay were rich with fish. Marie could watch elegant and graceful shore birds feeding in the shallow oyster beds near the tip of their property. Groups of dolphins would be a common sight from her bedroom window and she could marvel at the manatee which would cruise past her dock on Hudson Bayou. She and Bill could enjoy sunsets over the unspoiled landscapes of the nearby barrier islands. They had found a beautiful refuge from chilly mid-western winters. Plantings had been made and the landscape was taking on a more attractive appearance with palms and shrubs softening the formerly harsh landscape. But there was a concern. The house was too small, to entertain overnight guests or family that might want to come for the season.



Selby House c.1927 before the second floor was added (Courtesy Selby Foundation)



View from Hudson Bayou c.1927 showing Selby yacht and new seawall. (Selby Foundation)

Bill, in his usual methodical manner, would attack this problem in two ways. In 1926 he commissioned the Tampa architectural firm of Blackshear and Kennard to build a \$4,000 addition to their home. In a separate commission, he contracted them to build a two-story apartment building nearby on Palm Ave just on the other side of Mound. This attractive Spanish style building at 535 South Palm Ave was used to house Selby guests and family but also leased seasonally to winter travelers looking for elegant yet practical accommodations.

Still needing more space, in the summer of 1928, Selby contracted George Albree Freeman of New York and Sarasota to make extensive additions and alterations to his home. The permit estimate was for \$8,342, and this is likely the time that the second floor was added.

Freeman was Sarasota's most respected architect. His portfolio of works is impressive: he designed homes for such elite customers as J. Pierpont Morgan as well as several local institutional buildings

including First Christian Science Church and the Sarasota Post Office.

Contemporary photographs from this time show the Selby property with the completed additions. They reveal a transformed landscape showing a carefully groomed great lawn and curving pathways bordered by healthy, growing palms and shrubs. South Palm Avenue would have shown a pleasing face from the Bay, with the expanding Selby garden next to the established garden of Mrs. Hemingway which had been described as the most beautiful garden in Sarasota. Aerial photographs from the period clearly show the sandy, new-made appearance of the southern part of the Selby property, with the house nestled in among mature trees. The adjacent lot of Mrs. Hemingway's showed her house facing South Palm with a large landscaped front yard and a tree canopy around the property. The natural tree canopy extended all the way to the intersection of Palm and Gulfstream. The surrounding area exhibited a quite different look with a virtually treeless waterfront extending to newly dredged Golden Gate and an increasing urban landscape dotted with orchards. The only ribbon of natural vegetation, the last stretch of greenspace on the water, were the eight lots north of Hudson Bayou.

Mrs. Hemingway was, according to contemporary accounts, a "serious entertainer". It is not known how often the Selbys were present at her soirees but we do know that Mrs. Hemingway and Mrs. Selby were certainly on cordial terms. They would have tea or play bridge together on occasion, where they likely discussed their mutual interest in gardening and landscape design.

In 1926, several women met to create the Founders Circle, a garden club whose successor organization still exists today. We know that Mrs. Selby, Mrs. Ringling and Mrs. Ralph Caples were among the charter members. The group would meet at different members' homes for tea, a presentation and often a tour of the host's garden. The group worked to beautify the city's public areas as well as to advise on home gardens.

On Jan. 9, 1929, Marie felt confident enough about the appearance of her new garden to invite the Founders Circle to South Palm for a garden tour. The members were delighted with the work that Mrs. Selby had done calling it "one of the loveliest places in Sarasota."

A few months later on March 13, the Founders met at Ca'd 'Zan, the Ringling home, and Mrs. Selby presented a paper about lawns and hedges. This was something she had been working on at her own property. She recommended various species which might give a hint as to what she herself had planted on her own property. She thought highly of syringa cherry, pittisporum, turk's cap, lygustrum and Australian Pine. In addition to the aesthetic consideration of a beautiful landscape, Mrs. Selby offered practical hands-on advice for the ladies. She was quoted as advising "that tankage, bone meal, or some other fertilizer be used on lawns after the Italian rye had died out and gave her opinion that St. Augustine grass was greener than Bermuda for spring planting."

In 1927, when she was 72 years of age, Mrs. Hemingway decided to sell her beloved "Afterglow" and she moved into an apartment in the city. However, the indomitable Mrs. Hemingway was not content with a passive retirement. Shortly after her move, she opened Hemingway's Books and Antiques near the Edwards Theater Building at Five Points. Her stock consisted of new books and select antiques as well as a circulating library. This was significant; she had created the first bookstore and the first library in Sarasota.

She gamely ran the shop through the worst periods of the depression, placing numerous ads in the local paper announcing the latest best sellers for sale. In 1937, she moved the shop to Main St. and turned over the management to one of her employees. She died in 1944 at the age of 89.

The new owners of Afterglow, and the new neighbors of Bill and Marie Selby were probably the most exotic and romantic couple in Sarasota history: Mikhail Cantacuzene and Julia Grant Cantacuzene, the Count and Countess Speransky. Prince Michael was a Russian noble with vast estates estimated to be 80,000 acres, near the town of Poltava in Central Ukraine. He was a dashing military

officer who had been posted as a military attache in Rome. Julia was the granddaughter of President Ulysses S. Grant and had, in fact, been born in the White House in 1874. Not only had she a fine political pedigree, but she was also the favorite niece of the aristocratic Bertha Honore Palmer, whose land purchases and promotion helped create Sarasota.

Julia admits she was a spoiled, pampered child, the only female of her generation. She was certainly doted on by Bertha who frequently took the young lady to Europe on the watch for a proper match. There was nothing unusual in American merchants looking to burnish their line with European royal blood. Julia was introduced at the balls and social occasions. She was described by the N.Y. Times as having “dark, good looks, dancing ability, wit and linguistic aptitude”.

As Julia writes in her autobiography, *My Life Here and There* published in 1922, she was walking on the beach at Cannes in the summer of 1899, when she saw a handsome young man sitting in a chair. When he looked up and saw her, he dropped what he was holding. Julia approached to help him recover the items, and it was apparently love at first sight. The courtship was quite brief; 48 hours later the paramours were engaged to be married.



Julia Grant Cantacuzene, The Countess Speransky

Tongues wagged, of course, about the motives of the two lovers: adventurer, social climber, but the engagement held. Here is how Julia describes the meeting: “Whether it was the fine weather and the beauty of Cannes or the power of eloquence he displayed....I found myself, in spite of my intentions, engaged to Prince Cantacuzene”. It was indeed love at first sight.

Unfortunately, Julia was scheduled to return to the U.S. The lovers were separated for four months until they were reunited in Newport for the wedding, at a house rented especially for the occasion by Aunt Bertha. In September, they wed. Julia was 23 and the Prince was 24. Immediately after the

reception, they they sailed off to Paris for their honeymoon on a private yacht.

The next nearly two decades were happy ones for the Cantacuzenes. They lived at their castle in Ukraine or in St. Petersburg, which Julia wrote about in another of her books entitled *Revolutionary Days*, published in 1919. The outbreak of WW I and the subsequent Bolshevik Revolution changed everything. The Prince, now a Major General, led the defense of Kiev and was commander of the last remaining regiment in the city as well as being credited for the last recorded cavalry charge in military history. As the revolution churned victims among the supporters of the Old Regime, the Cantacuzenes decided to flee Russia to save themselves. They fled St. Petersburg in 1917, escaping to Finland with the few possessions they could carry and their jewels sewn into the hem of Julia's dress.

Julia had visited Sarasota with her Aunt in 1910, and it was here that the now destitute aristocratic couple came for refuge. Bertha suggested they could reside at her uncle's house, the famed Acacias near Whitaker Bayou. They arrived in Sarasota in August 1922. Julia was now a published author, having written three books about her life growing up in the White House and her life in Russia which had been cut short by violent revolution. The books had been well received.

Bertha died in 1918 and left Julia a handsome trust fund. Finally, the Cantacuzenes could relax in their new-found financial security.

On June 28, 1927, five years after arriving in Sarasota, Count and Countess Speransky purchased lot 5 of section B, the Pearce/Hemingway house. They only bought the house and land on lot 5, Mrs. Hemingway having had sold off lot 6 some years before. The price was \$40,000, and immediately the noble couple made plans for extensive alterations and additions which were expected to cost \$5,500 dollars more. The renovations were completed by September, and the couple moved in their new home in October.

It is probably at this time that several outbuildings were constructed on the property for servant quarters. Maps of the period show the original Pearce house had been doubled in size with a footprint significantly larger than the Selby house. Although half a dozen new structures had been built on the east side of South Palm, the Selbys and the Cantacuzenes had the only buildings on the waterfront.

The Cantacuzenes would certainly have been acquainted with the Selbys as they had already been Sarasota residents for five years. Julia, being a niece of Bertha Palmer, would have been a natural bridge as the Selby and Palmer families already had business dealings. Prince Cantacuzene was manager for Palmer Estates and was given a job as vice-president of Palmer Bank on Main St. where the Selbys were customers.

Although the two couples are occasionally mentioned as attending the same charity functions, it is unlikely that they shared more than a neighborly friendship.

Marie Selby has been described as shy, unpretentious and unassuming. She enjoyed playing the piano. According to her cook, she was serious and frugal. Bill, on the other hand, was well known for his bonhomie and gregariousness. Sporting a ten-gallon hat, munching on a cigar, Bill was a regular feature at the local soda fountain where he talked fishing and hunting with his friends. He was also an avid golfer, one of his newest pastimes. A new 18-hole course had just been completed in Sarasota. Bill competed in tournaments and was a member of the Alibi Club, that would gather at the 19th hole to discuss, and make excuses, about the match. Bill was elected speaker of the club and was described by his contemporaries as a "genial prince of good fellows."

The Selbys also reveled in the outdoor adventurous life. The childless couple would go off together for road trips, camping trips, hunting expeditions or fishing trips on the Bilma. This would seem quite a contrast to the Cantacuzenes who would have felt more at ease in the courts of Europe than in a camper in Myakka.

The year 1926 was a harbinger of bad news. Historians debate whether it might have been the severe winter or yet another devastating tropical storm, but real estate prices suddenly deflated. The bubble burst. Cynics joked that Sarasota had run out of gullible fools to purchase property for inflated prices. The collapse was devastating. Projects, developments and grand schemes went silent. Hotels, half-finished, were abandoned, investors as well as speculators were ruined. Many expected the market to recover, but the nationwide crash of 1929 sealed the fate of even the most optimistic builder. Sarasota sunk into a real estate lethargy that would last almost 30 years.

As the depression deepened, foreclosures became more common. People just walked away from their land purchases not bothering to pay their mortgage nor even their local taxes. Businesses folded and optimism declined. Even the venerable Royal Palm Nursery would go bankrupt a few years later.

The Selbys, with a reliable source of income from their oil business and Bill's prudent selling of much of his holdings two years before, left them secure and able to take advantage of new opportunities.

By 1933, the Selbys had been in their house for more than a decade, but it still remained only their winter home. But in April of that year, Bill had the opportunity to correct a mistake that he made a decade before. Lot 6, the half-acre parcel measuring 100 x240 feet between Speranskys and the Selbys was in foreclosure. This was the same parcel that he could have bought in 1922 for \$12,000, but somehow it did not happen. It appears that Count Speransky, perhaps through his connections at Palmer Bank heard about the foreclosure and contacted Bill Selby with a proposition. Would he be interested in buying the property together and roughly splitting the property down the middle?

Bill accepted the offer, and Prince Michael started the process. There were state, county and city taxes in arrears as well as miscellaneous expenses for legal costs and foreclosure proceedings. The lot was divided roughly in half with the Prince getting a slightly larger piece of 13 427 sq. ft. and the Selbys receiving 11,051 sq. ft. When it was all said and done, the fees amounted to just over \$4,000. with Mr. Selby having to pay just a little over \$1,800 for his quarter-acre share. He must have felt vindicated as this empty lot had sold for much more 10 years before. And to celebrate, the Selbys took off on a summer road trip through the Western States returning to Sarasota in early October, after having traveled 19,000 miles!

Now both neighbors had some breathing room and an enhanced sense of privacy, knowing that no one would be able to build so close to their property. This was also a fortuitous land sale for the ultimate future of Selby Gardens. Had a winter home been built on that parcel, it would have complicated and perhaps made impossible the eventual Selby Garden footprint.

Although the Prince had made a brilliant real estate move in acquiring the adjacent lot, other aspects of his life were not going as smoothly. After 35 years of marriage to Julia Grant Cantacuzene, the pair divorced in 1934. The Prince, as impulsively as he proposed to Julia on that beach in Cannes after knowing her for only 48 hours, fell deeply in love with a teller at Palmer Bank. Julia was humiliated and the divorce proceedings were settled in record time. They were divorced on the sensitive grounds that the Prince had "failed to show interest in matrimonial duties".

Julia immediately left town and resettled in Washington while the Prince married his paramour.

Neither of them appeared to have lived at South Palm in that period. The newlyweds rented a house on Siesta Beach and then the Prince put up the Palm Ave. house for rent. Julia felt a strong attachment to the area and she later bought a winter home near Philippi Creek. She was active in the local literary scene and gave frequent readings from her books. No doubt she would have visited Mrs. Hemingway's bookshop on Main St. which would have stocked her titles, and the two women must have had lively reminiscences of their days at "Afterglow."

Although matters were unsettled for the Cantacuzenes, the Selby's were about to gain a new neighbor, one quite similar to them in class, interest and background. In 1934, Chisty Payne of

Fairfield, Ct. purchased lots 1 and 2 of the Zakrzewski addition for \$15, 000.

The Paynes had a longtime connection with the city. Christy's father, Calvin Payne, first came to Sarasota in 1911, about the same time that the Selbys were enjoying the beautiful winters here. Calvin Payne was an executive with Rockefeller's Standard Oil and he had bought a winter house on Gulfstream Ave. He was an early supporter of the city, building a dock and donating the land just outside of downtown which stills bears his name, Payne Park.

Christy Payne, like his father, was an oil man with Standard Oil. He had spent many wonderful seasons in Sarasota with his family and when he retired, he decided to build a house close his father's winter home.

On June 2, 1934, Christy Payne of Stamford Connecticut purchased the two lots of Block B for the stated price of \$15,000. Mr. Payne, anticipating his retirement had thought considerably about where and what type of winter home he should build. He and his wife loved to travel through the South and had appreciated the antebellum Georgian mansions which grace southern towns. Christy would even make sketches of architectural details he found attractive keeping notebooks and clippings of features he would later incorporate into his home. As soon as he completed the land transaction, Christy engaged architect A.C. Price and the builder Paul Bergmann to realize his dream.

This was the depths of the depression; a new president had been elected and people hoped that the long years of unemployment and economic downturn would be ending. Looking for perhaps a glimpse of recovery, the local papers noted Mr. Payne's intention to build and featured his plans in an article about building permits issued that month. The headline said it all: "Building Total in February Tops 6 Year Record." The article goes on to say that of the \$33,000 worth of permits issued that month, nearly half of that total was for the single \$15, 000 permit of Christy Payne to build a 10 room Georgian colonial style mansion at the corner of Mound and Palm. Interestingly the article said that the home would include an asbestos room. It has been subsequently claimed that the mansion would ultimately cost \$50,000 to build. (see addendum)



Construction of Payne Mansion 1934

Christy and Anne Payne moved into their new home on August 21, 1935. Now there were three houses on the strip of land that would become Selby Gardens. However, there were still two lots that were underdeveloped, two half acre lots 3 and 4, between the Cantacuzenes and the Paynes. Currently the Michaels banquet building is on that site.

On March 2, 1936, seven months after moving into his winter house, Mr. Payne, now listing Sarasota as his official residence, purchased those two vacant lots from Ida Klein. Now, there were just three owners of the 8 original lots. The Selbys owned two and a half lots, Prince Michael owned one-and one-half lots but the major property holder and crucial player was Christy Payne, who owned four lots, half of the future Selby Garden footprint.

The Selbys and the Paynes would seem to have lived parallel lives. Both families had spent a lifetime in the oil business. The men loved boats and fishing, the women adored gardens. During this time Mrs. Selby was particularly active in Garden Circle activities. She hosted meetings at her home and sponsored arrangement competitions. In a 1934 newspaper announcement, Mrs. Selby was credited with chairing the staging committee of the garden show and requested members "to bring hammers, scissors and garden shears" for some hands-on preparation work.

Anne Payne and Marie Selby appear to have been close friends in the early years attending garden and social functions together. They both attended a luncheon at the Ringling Hotel, for example, in Feb. 1936. In December of 1937, Martha formed her own Palm Circle, a new addition to the Federated Garden Clubs. There were now six circles, and each held separate meetings often having a presentation from one of the members on some aspect of horticulture. Occasionally, they would invite an outside guest like landscape architect Cook who was a popular speaker.

Bill Selby and Christy Payne continued to enjoy their pastimes. Christy was a champion tarpon angler and he also enjoyed a round of golf. But it was Bill Selby who became the dedicated golfer, playing in many tournaments and at times, doing pretty well.

From the end of the Depression through the Second World War, both couples settled into a pattern of social and charitable work during their winters in Sarasota. The Selbys, around this time, purchased a fishing camp on Lake Okeechobee. In the late thirties Bill would spend an increasing amount of the time at the camp, sometimes accompanied by Marie, but often in company of a select few of his "fishing buddies" and invited guests. Bill was a baseball fan and would invite his favorite ballplayers to accompany him to the camp for a weekend of fishing. He even purchased a special car just for fishing: a Suburban station wagon in which he removed the back seats to be able to haul all his tackle.

Christy was now retired, but Bill was still active in Selby Oil. He would make frequent business trips for up to several weeks at a time, then rush back home for another frenetic round of golf, fishing, and yachting.

Bill and Christy were both boat owners and each retained a private captain for their boats. Christy kept his boat in the yacht basin at the foot of Palm Ave near the dock for the Bilma. In January of 1939, Bill, Christy and other influential boaters founded the Longboat Key Yacht Club. Bill was elected Commodore and Christy was on the board of directors. Marie and Martha were involved in many of the social activities attached to the Club.

South Palm Avenue must have presented a pretty setting during the late 1930's. There were three properties along the water. Both the Selbys and the Paynes had noteworthy gardens although the Cantacuzene property, which once had been a showplace, was probably getting a little careworn. After the divorce, Prince Michael leased out his Palm Ave. home, and we can assume that the gardens although most likely maintained, would not have been improved. Nevertheless, this was the time in which Mrs. Selby could enjoy a stroll over to Main St. and appreciate the small strip of paradise along the waters of Sarasota Bay.

Frank Selby, Bill's father, died in 1946 and two years later, Bill merged Selby Oil with Texaco and Standard Oil of New Jersey. He effectively retired from an active role in the oil business. He was 64 years old. Bill could now devote more time to his many endeavors and properties, including the cattle ranch near Myakka City that he purchased in 1937 where he would breed award winning Angus stock.

The year 1948 would also bring changes to the land that would become Selby Gardens. Prince Michael Cantacuzene sold his property, consisting of lot 5 and the northern part of lot 6, and his home to Eunice and William Wainwright for \$40,000.

Although the lives of the Cantacuzenes who lived in this house ended in disappointment and divorce, the hapless Wainwrights seemed to have had nothing going their way. They appeared to have lived an unexceptional period on South Palm until Eunice was hospitalized. Perhaps this was the reason for their slow and painful descent into bankruptcy. Starting in the early 50's, the couple found themselves subject to multiple lawsuits for non-payment. We have no way of knowing the condition of the Cantacuzene house when the Wainwrights purchased it, but we can assume that as a former rental, it was likely to have had deferred maintenance. One of the primary claimants was a construction company which may have been contracted for repairs to the home. Things got more desperate for the couple and by the mid -1950's, they stopped paying their property taxes. Then in 1956, the harried Mr. Wainwright was dragged into court and fined for passing a worthless check and suffered the indignity of a fine and public humiliation. The financial straits of the couple deepened and they stopped paying their mortgage. The property was foreclosed by Sarasota Federal Savings on June 25, 1958.

The mid 1950's also brought profound changes to the other residents of South Palm as well as Sarasota itself. In 1955, Anne Payne died, leaving Christy a widower and depriving Mrs. Selby of her sympathetic neighbor. Just one year later, William G. Selby died. He had spent the summer of 1956 fishing in Minnesota and returned to Sarasota in the fall. He complained of fatigue and was hospitalized. The fateful diagnosis was leukemia, and on December 4, 1956, Bill passed away.

William Selby's death was front page news. In bold type the headline of *The Sarasota News* announced "Selby Bequeaths Fortune to Science." This was the lead story displacing the Suez Crisis and the Revolt in Hungary. It was front page news not because he was a civic leader; he had never mixed much in politics or community organizations like Rotary or Kiwanis. It was front page news because Bill Selby was one of Florida's wealthiest citizens and most people weren't aware of it. Although the Selbys lived an enviable life style: seasonal moves, new cars, fishing camps and ranches, they personally lived very modestly. In fact, Bill had the reputation of being notoriously cheap, "tighter than wallpaper" remarked one local wag. Marie was reported to use candles to save on electricity.

Bill was a big man about 6 feet tall weighing around 250 pounds. Friends remember that he was a casual dresser usually attired in comfortable clothes, cowboy boots and with an unlit cigar in his mouth. His favorite hangout was the lunch counter at Badger's Drug at the corner of Pineapple and Main where he would read the paper, check the market, and swap hunting and fishing tales with the locals. That this man was worth 12 million dollars would certainly have been the topic of conversation at Badger's the next day.

Another reason that this was front page news was that it was revealed that the Selbys had made plans to give away their entire fortune. Several years before, Bill had created the Selby Foundation with a seed grant of \$200,000. He instructed that on his death, half of his estate was to go to the foundation and the remaining half would remain with his wife Marie until her death when it all would go to the foundation.

The goals of the Foundation were noble. It would offer scholarships to deserving individuals interested in science and medical research. These grants would be awarded without regard to race creed, nationality, color or sex. The Foundation would also offer grants to groups engaged in

“educational purposes of a public nature.” Palmer Bank would be the executor of the estate, and Mrs. Selby would become a “directing influence of the Foundation”.

There were a few interesting details of his will. The 12-million-dollar estate consisted of more than \$10 million in oil stocks and bonds. There were scattered real estate holdings of which the Selby house and property was appraised for \$80,000. And finally, he left his beloved Okeechobee fishing camp to his three fishing buddies.

The middle of the 1950's were times of dramatic changes in Sarasota as well as for Mrs. Selby. The thirty years from when the Selby's finished building their Sarasota home until Bill died in 1956, was a period where little changed in Sarasota. The real estate crash of 1926 and subsequent national Great Depression followed by WW2 allowed for little private building or structural change. The roads, schools, and shopping areas still reflected a bygone age. But this sleepy seasonal town was about to be roughly awakened and abruptly changed. Starting in the early fifties, the population started to increase along with a rapid surge in property values. Returning veterans were starting families, and their children would be known as the baby boom generation.

Sarasota had changed its form of government becoming a city manager style administration and hired Ken Thompson from Miami who would attempt to remake Sarasota into his vision of a modern progressive community. Not everyone shared this vision and that resistance would ultimately create at least the partial explanation for the creation of Selby Gardens.

It is interesting to speculate on the motives and thinking of people who have changed our world. When Marie died, she asked that the garden be called the Marie Selby Botanical Gardens. Not including Bill and using her name alone meant that this was a very personal decision. It can be seen as a statement and perhaps even a reproach to those who promoted progress over conservation. Neither Bill nor Marie left us with documents about their philosophy of life. There are no personal letters, diaries, or published interviews to gain a glimpse of their thinking. All we have are scattered documents and reminiscences of people who knew her late in life. If we want to get a glimpse of what she was thinking, we have to look at her deeds. The narrative of events from the death of her husband to her own death in 1971 show her to be a person concerned by what she considered reckless development and identifies her to be a quiet and determined conservationist and preservationist.

Sarasota was changing. There were new schools, roads, stop lights, and municipal buildings. Strip malls were the latest innovation in retailing. Orchards, farms and undeveloped land were being surveyed and platted for new communities, echoing the frenzied activity of the 1920's. Many of these changes would not have affected Mrs. Selby either way. But other changes would directly concern her life. One of the positive things enacted early on by the Thompson administration was an improvement of the sewer system which had been discharging waste directly into Sarasota Bay. During low tide, residents complained of the nauseating odor. Other changes would not have been so welcome.

In 1958, the city made a decision that would have a major impact on Sarasota. It was decided to reroute U.S. highway 41 along the waterfront and then east up Mound Street to intersect with highway 301 at the top of Lukewood Park. This would entail the creation of a new road along the waterfront, the widening of Mound and the evisceration of beautiful Lukewood Park. At that time, there just a few houses along Gulfstream Ave whose owners would lose their access to the water. Formerly, northbound traffic would slow and make the 90 degree turn onto the two lanes of Mound where it passed the entrance to South Palm, where Calvin Payne had built his home. The two-lane street had been only 60 feet wide and handled just local traffic. Now everything was transformed. After massive landfill, a four-lane highway was built along the waterfront. The corner of Mound was widened to 100 feet and became a curve, so that the four lanes of highway traffic could round the corner a high speed expanding into six lanes. What would have formerly been a simple act for Mrs. Selby to cross the road to walk to downtown was now the formidable task of crossing a six-lane highway of fast-moving traffic running

through the city at all hours of the day and night. This was a very controversial decision: lauded by some, condemned by many.



Sanborn Map of 1959 showing Payne and Selby House. Note that Mound St. has been widened to 100 feet and the projected line of a sea wall in Sarasota Bay. Selby house on Lot 7 and the Payne House on Lot 1. The Pearce/Cantacuzene house at 870 S. Palm has been demolished.

While construction of the new highway was underway, another project began that would engender even more controversy. Arthur Vining Davis, a nonagenarian developer, purchased most of the holdings of the islands in Sarasota Bay from the Ringling estate. The first project that the Arvida Corporation would undertake was the development of Bird Key. This was a long narrow key with one quite elegant house in which John Ringling's sister lived. The corporation easily received permission from regulators to enlarge the key from one house lot to 511 house lots. This was a massive project of dredging and filling that destroyed acres of valuable sea grass and fish habitat. For years, the trucks with their loads, the dredges, and the machinery transformed the skinny sandbar into the exclusive community of Bird Key that we know today.

Bird Key was directly west of the Selby property. Mrs. Selby's bedroom window looked out over Sarasota Bay directly into a construction site. The opposition to Arvida only intensified when they announced their intention to similarly develop Lido Key. A group of concerned citizens formed Save Our Bays led by Ted Sperling. They were successful in limiting further development but there was nothing they could do to undo the damage on Bird Key. Mrs. Selby was so distraught by the ecological damage that she could no longer bear to even see it. She instructed her gardener to plant bamboo and other fast-growing plants along the waterfront so that her view of the damage would be forever blocked. Even when the invasive Brazilian pepper trees started growing there, she left them as a further visual screen.

1958 was also a critical year for Mrs. Selby's immediate neighbor. The Wainwrights, who had bought the Cantacuzene mansion a decade before, were now totally bankrupt. The liens, lawsuits, delinquent taxes and bills were just too overwhelming. On June 25, 1958 the bank foreclosed on the

property. Less than two months later, E.R. Leedham bought the property out of foreclosure for the modest sum of \$18,000. After clearing liens, and taxes, he flipped the property a few months later for \$31,800, netting himself a tidy profit. On Nov. 26th, 1958 the new owner of record was the local real estate investor Fred F. Woolley.

The purchase by Woolley of the house and lot 5 and part of 6, adjacent to Mrs. Selby's property set in motion the final chain of events that made Selby Gardens possible. But at this point and for the nearly the next decade, the likelihood of a public garden being ever built on this property was negligible.

We don't know the condition of the Wainwright house when it was sold to Woolley. There are no contemporary photographs. From the Sanborn Insurance maps, we can see the footprint of the house which stood approximately where the collection greenhouses now stand. We can see the original outline of the Pearce house and the subsequent additions made by Hemingway and the Cantacuzenes and then suddenly, around 1959, the house disappeared.

Looking at aerial photographs from the period, you can see the Selby house and the Payne house and between them a long white scar of sand. The house and the vegetation have been uprooted and removed leaving a barren stretch of disturbed earth. Photographs of South Palm Ave taken a few years later show that the only thing remaining of the house was a broken dilapidated fence running along the street.

All these events happening in such quick succession must have alarmed Mrs. Selby: the death of her husband, a six-lane highway at the end of her dead-end street, overbuilding in the Bay outside her window, the house next door torn down and the forlorn lot now owned by an investor whose plans she did not know. If Mrs. Selby thought these were the most trying times, she was mistaken, for things were soon to become far more complicated.

Jack West was a talented, self-confident architect who set up a practice in Sarasota in the late 1950s. A student at Yale, he studied under Vincent Scully and was steeped in the modern ideas of the Bauhaus Movement. His influences were the clean designs of Gropius and Mies van de Rohe and the philosophy of Le Corbusier. He worked for a time in the studio of Paul Rudolph and Ralph Twitchel, founders of the Sarasota School of Architecture. West was a visionary and a planner and sat on the County Planning Board and then the City Planning Board. More importantly, he was philosophically allied to city manager Ken Thompson.

In 1960, although Sarasota was booming and its population was increasing, growth was uneven. The downtown was becoming shabby with empty storefronts as merchants relocated from Main St. to the fashionable strip malls. The city administration had been housed since 1917 at the Hoover Arcade on the waterfront and Thompson wanted new quarters.

West thought about the problem of revitalizing the Downtown and re-imagining the waterfront. He was part of a team that produced a Sarasota Master plan entitled Main Street Revisited. He envisioned sweeping changes to the waterfront and a special design for lower Main St. He created a drawing and then built a model which was prominently displayed in an empty storefront window. It called for the building of what was essentially an elevated pedestrian zone running from 5 Points down Main St and then flying over the Bayfront highway to the newly built Bayfront park. Starting with a large elevated dome of stores, shoppers could then exit on the second floor, walk along the elevated promenade, while traffic and parking were on the street level. This was not only a completely new vision of Sarasota, it was a different way of looking at the urban structure. He was not only interested in designing buildings but in redesigning the heart of the city.

At that time, alternative sites were proposed for a new city hall and the city manager asked architect West to come up with some recommendations. On June 9, 1960, West released his report envisioning a massive new complex which combined both City and County staff in one building. He

recommended three locations, two on city property, but his preferred location was audacious and unexpected. He recommended to the Commissioners that they purchase the shore-front land between Mound and Hudson Bayou: in other words, all the land including the Selby property and the Payne property along South Palm Ave. West believed that this would be an excellent site and would connect with his vision for Main St. Even though this was desirable shore-front property, he believed the real estate could be purchased for around \$600,000. The Selby and Payne houses would be demolished, of course, replaced with a multi-million-dollar modern City and County Government Center. The commissioners agreed with the recommendation and voted to instruct negotiators to immediately begin discussions with the owners for the sale of their property.

According to City Attorney Robert Fournier, eminent domain rules were much looser during the 1960s. Any project serving the public purpose or public necessity could in effect take private land for just compensation. The building of a government center would seem to meet those criteria. Mrs. Selby and Calvin Payne would just have to move and their homes would be demolished.

Unfortunately, West did not keep a copy of the original 1960 report. However, the previous year he had helped prepare the Sarasota Master Plan which clearly shows the direction of his thinking. Lower Main St connects with a series of modern high-rises running south along Bayfront Ave. The most startling image from today's perspective was across Mound Ave. On the drawing, notice that instead of the Selby and Payne House there appear a parking lot and a single tall glass slab building resembling the recently built United Nations Building surrounded by a park.

The reaction was immediate. Some praised the decision as another step in the improvement of the waterfront and noted the advantage of keeping the Center near downtown. Others blasted the proposal for being far too expensive. Some fiscal conservatives regretted that this valuable property would now go off the tax rolls. Why purchase the most valuable private land when there was alternative city -owned land available. Why not build it in Payne Park, someone callously suggested.

Only a few voices decried the continued destruction of the waterfront. It was rumored that Mrs. Selby would, in fact, donate her land to the city for a park, but was not keen on the idea of her property as a building site. The Woolleys, who owned the middle section, let it be known that they would prefer to develop their property and would sue if the city tried to force a sale.





*West's 1963 rendering of a new County/City Government Center
(Courtesy of Sarasota County Historical Resource)*

To mollify critics, proponents said the new Government Center would be like a campus with sidewalks and that the parking lots would be pleasingly landscaped and park-like. The West archives contain a rendering of a Government Center he drew in 1963 for a different site in the city and we can assume it would have been similar to his plans for Palm Ave. The rendering envisioned two glass and steel buildings: one a low round building and the other a tall slab-like tower connected by a covered terrace. The lot would have to be expanded into the bay, requiring a considerable amount of dredge and fill. The Sanborn map of 1959 indicated the line showing allowable limits of the new sea wall.

Karl Bickel, in a scathing rebuke to the city, accused commissioners and city manager of bad faith. Referring obliquely to Mrs. Selby he asked how could you trust a city with a donation for parkland having just seen what happened to the waterfront and Lukewood park which had been ripped in two for the new highway. Those who considered giving the city land for parks should be wary, he counseled. Mrs. Selby was listening.

Critics of the project were not assuaged, and they continued over the next two years to criticize and mock the project. Derisively calling the projected building “The Pentagon on Palm” they again lambasted the cost and location, saying that the increased traffic would be disruptive and parking would be a problem. Concerns that the city dismissed as being overblown. Some libertarians were also worried that the concentration of power in one building would itself be dangerous, like creating some super government that would not be in the people's interest.

We don't know what Mrs. Selby was thinking at the time. She had become a noteworthy figure in the community after the existence of the Selby Foundation became public. Its charitable giving was reported weekly in the local press. Grants for colleges, libraries, old age homes, parks and hospitals set an unprecedented standard of selective charitable giving. She certainly would have been listened to by city officials. Perhaps she was quietly and effectively advocating for a different site.

After nearly three years of fruitless discussions and negotiations the matter was officially “quashed” in the summer of 1963. Continuing rancor between city and county commissioners led to a total breakdown in communication with commissioners even refusing to speak to each other. Both entities decided to build separate buildings. In 1964, a bond was passed to build the new city hall on 1st St. It was completed in 1967 and was designed by Jack West. This was a vastly scaled down version of his plans for a government center on the same site. The County built their building in 1973 on Ringling Blvd., a building in a totally different style from the Sarasota School.

The land that would become Selby Gardens was still intact. The property was not taken by eminent domain and it was not razed for a government center, which seemed almost certain in 1960. But there were other, even more serious threats on the horizon.

RF-B was a zoning category which allowed high-rise, high-density use. In the early years of the following decade, the city would allow the use sparingly for individual projects. But in 1962, the planning board and city commission decided that Sarasota could become a small Rio de Janeiro with gleaming white high rises all along the waterfront. In that year, they approved the rezoning of the waterfront from Golden Gate Point to Mound St. as being suitable for high rise development. This was a calculated move by the city to increase housing available to the massive influx of new arrivals and to greatly swell the tax base.

Also, in 1962, Christy Payne died in his South Palm Ave. home. He was 88 years old. Mr. Payne left the house to his two children, Christy Payne Jr. and Martha Payne Emerson. Christy Jr. was a businessman who like his father worked in the petroleum field. He was nearing retirement and planned to relocate to Sarasota. However, when he and his sister inherited the property, they also inherited a bit of a dilemma. Christy Payne senior had been seriously ill for the past year and a half, so negotiations for the sale of the property to the city would have been known to his son. Now his father was dead and there had been no resolution to the final siting of the new County Government Center. The best option seemed to be to just leave the house vacant until it became clear what the City/County would decide to do and then make a decision. With the collapse of City/County cooperation and the quashing of that proposal in 1963, the Payne children had to make a new decision because now the house and land would not be sold to the county.

Although both children had a deep fondness for their father's winter home, which was so much an expression of his tastes, neither of them seemed to be particularly interested in living there. Perhaps it was the roar of traffic going past the property, the idiosyncratic design of the interior with so many stairs to climb or maybe they just wanted something newer with central air conditioning and modern plumbing. Either way, there were bound to be maintenance issues of an older house that had been shuttered for two years.

Christy Payne Jr. was scheduled to retire the next year, so he postponed taking any action. The house remained vacant. Meanwhile, Fred Woolley, the real estate developer who had torn down the Cantacuzene house, also passed away and in his will, he left his property to his daughter and the First Church of Christ. Marie Selby was one of the first residents on the street and now she was the last and only occupant of the west side of South Palm Ave, the land that would become Selby Gardens.

In 1964, there was a building fever in Sarasota. Landmark buildings were torn down. Mediterranean style buildings were replaced by straight-edged white and glass buildings inspired by the School of Sarasota architects. In that year, the first high-density high-rise building, Gulfstream Towers, was constructed near the intersection of Gulfstream Ave. and Main St. Designed in the Sarasota School style, this clean, modern looking building had 70 living units for year-round residents or winter snowbirds. Another dramatic change Mrs. Selby witnessed was the destruction of the building on Five Points which housed Badger's Drugs. It briefly became a parking lot and then was replaced by a twelve-story building. She must have felt the loss of her husband's favorite haunt and realized that the Sarasota that she and Bill had known was being lost forever.

Christy Payne Jr. retired to Sarasota in 1964. By this time, it was evident that he needed to make a decision regarding the future of his father's house. The county was no longer interested in the land for an administrative center so the options left was to sell or lease the house or move in himself as his winter retirement home.

There was a third option, something the Wooley family who owned the middle lots wished to do;

they wanted to develop the property. There was something special about that strip of waterfront land. The land was directly on the water and the property owners still retained their riparian rights: the right of use to build docks, piers and boat lifts for example. All the other property along the waterfront had sold their riparian rights to the city when the Highway 41 was rerouted. Also, there was the aesthetic angle. Views from South Palm Ave property were unobstructed and natural while the views from the new condominiums on Gulfstream Ave. were overlooking a busy highway.

There was only one small hurdle. The RF-B zoning which allowed for high density dwelling and multi-family use ended at Mound St. All the land from Mound St. to Hudson Bayou was still zoned single- family residential. Things were about to take a dramatic and fateful turn.

Early in 1964, a consortium of property owners including Mrs. Woolley and Christy Payne Jr. hired an attorney and petitioned the city for a change of zoning for lots 1-6. The new high-rise zoning would begin at Mound St. and end at the property line of Mrs. Selby. The commission approved the petition on Feb. 17, 1964. Mrs. Selby was conspicuous by her silence. She did not attend the meeting nor did she speak out against the zoning change but surely, she must have felt uneasy. After weathering an attempt to take her property by eminent domain a few years before, she now faced another serious threat engineered by her neighbors. She now was looking at the real possibility that she would have apartment towers built literally in her back yard. A look at the new zoning maps would speak volumes. The entire Sarasota waterfront beginning in an arc from Golden Gate point to Hudson Bayou was all now primed and approved for high rise condominiums. The buildings could rise potentially to 180 feet. Every piece of property was now fair game except for one; the 2 acres at the very end of Palm Ave owned by Marie Selby, the last spot of residential zoning on the waterfront.

It is impossible to know exactly what Christy Payne Jr. was thinking when he sought the zoning change. Was it a hedge or a clever move to increase the value of the property even if it were never to be developed? For the last several years, he had assumed that the county would buy his father's house and tear it down. Perhaps he felt that the new trend of modernism and replacement was unstoppable. Maybe he believed that the rendering by Jack West was indeed the future. Many people argued that high rise development would be the new face of Sarasota; it was inevitable and it would be foolish to think you could live in the past. The future was here, with air conditioning, two car garages and modern plumbing.

Nevertheless, he was conflicted. It was his father's house and it was such an expression of his personality. Then something happened which represented the perfect solution to Christy's dilemma and most likely saved the Payne mansion from the wrecking ball.

Dr. James and Patricia Paulk lived on Oyster Bay in a recently built home at 1321 North Lake Shore Dr. in South Sarasota. James was a successful orthodontist and Patricia was active in the social and entertaining scene. The Payne and Paulk couples undoubtedly knew each other socially. During some casual conversation, Patricia may have mentioned to Christy how much she loved and admired his father's house with its elegant pillars. Every time she drove past, she imagined how lovely the house could be if its facade and gardens were restored. Christy thought of the perfect solution to his dilemma; they swapped houses.

In the late spring of 1964, the Paulks bought the Payne house for \$74,500 and Paynes bought the Paulk house for \$42,700. And everyone was very happy. Christy saved his father's house without having to live in it or sell it to developer, and now he could live on a quiet dead-end street on Oyster Bay. Patricia Paulk could live out her dream of restoring the Payne property and live amid the bustle of downtown.

She oversaw redecoration of the interior and filled the house with period antiques. She lavished care on the gardens, restoring them to the beauty back when Martha Payne lived there so many years ago. Indeed, in April of 1966, Mrs. Paulk had an open house to show off her restored showpiece and the formal garden restoration.

It is perhaps surprising that the Paulks would have purchased a home adjacent to lots that had just been rezoned high-rise. Christy didn't conceal the zoning change in fact, on the deed itself is included the conditions that the property is 'subject to taxes for 1964, easements, restrictions and reservations of record and applicable zoning regulations.' Perhaps the Paulks didn't find the idea of living next to a 70-unit high-rise a disconcerting thought. Maybe they imagined that any development, if it indeed ever happened, was years down the road, especially on their little strip of waterfront.

If the Paulks were naive and Mrs. Selby a bit uneasy, the hammer fell on December 14, 1965 and suddenly things became a lot clearer.

In a very coordinated sale, a legal entity called Coastal Development Corporation purchased at the same time all the property between the Selby and the Payne house, lots 3-6, for \$120,000. There were four owners who all came together to make the sale possible. The largest sellers were Christy and Katherine Payne who sold their lots 3 and 4 (about an acre of land) where the present banquet room now stands.

It looked like the inevitable was finally going to happen. Private development was in play. But who was Coastal Development and what would be their plans? Maybe it wouldn't be so bad, perhaps they would build a few tasteful townhouses instead of looming towers. A local reporter interviewed the spokesman for Coastal who was a local Realtor named Dewey Kennell. He was said to be linked to the corporation which had no legal address in Sarasota.

"Who works for Coastal, what its plans are for the land or when they plan to do something about the property are not known," wrote the reporter.

When he pressed Dewey for more information, he received a terse "no comment". Kennell promised to tell him more "when we're ready to".

But it took them a while to get ready. Perhaps they were playing the long game. They could have been waiting for Mrs. Selby to die or put the house on the market. She was 80 years old at the time and becoming quite frail. Perhaps they could persuade the Paulks to sell and then own the entire strip. But instead of patient waiting or breaking ground, they unexpectedly flipped their investment.

On April 18, 1968, Ben Feder, a New York-based land developer, bought out Coastal Development Corp.'s holdings on South Palm for \$216,000. Almost doubling their money in two and half years was a fine return on investment for Coastal. However, as Coastal was coy about their plans, Feder was forthright. Yes, he was going to build high rises. Yes, he was an experienced builder and yes, he was going to build luxury residential units right here on the bay front in Sarasota.

In 1960, Marie Selby, then four years a widow, was 75 years old and by most accounts still quite fit and active. She was still spending the summer months in Montana and was still able to drive herself for the long trip in her lavender Eastwood Cadillac. She had however, sold her 3,000-acre Myakka City ranch a couple of years before, but she still enjoyed horseback riding and was very active in helping to manage the Selby Foundation.

She had reduced her social calendar and appeared infrequently at social luncheons and teas. She would however, still attend dedications of worthy projects that she especially supported. For example, in 1962, she was present at the opening of a new animal shelter and presented a personal check for \$25,000 in addition to the funds provided by the Selby Foundation. Later that year she was photographed at a ceremony where she was awarded a life membership in the Sarasota Garden Club in



Marie at 83 with her grand-niece Sarah Haynes(1968)

recognition of her long work in the Garden Circles organization.

The last recorded time Mrs. Selby appeared in public was in 1968 where she attended a ceremony honoring the original members of the Founders Circle. Along with her old friend Mrs. Caples, there was another guest with whom she could share memories. Julia Cantacuzene, her old neighbor 35 years before and who shared her love of gardens, was in attendance as well. No doubt the two women could have reminisced and commiserated with each other over the unpleasant changes that had befallen their little strip of bayfront. The house of the Countess had been demolished a decade earlier along with her gardens, and the County had nearly seized the land for an office building. Instead of a quiet dead-end street, it now felt like an exit off a highway. And no doubt, Mrs. Selby informed

Princess Cantacuzene about the latest efforts of developers to pave over and construct condominiums on her former property.

Mrs. Selby's health had begun to decline in the late 1960's and she no longer traveled for vacations spending most of her time at home. In November of 1968, she was awarded the prestigious Citizen of the Year Award for her multifaceted charitable works and civic improvement, but she was too ill to attend and sent a representative to receive the award in her place.

According to her cook and caregiver, Juanita Hamilton, Marie seldom left the house and spent an increasing amount of time in bed. Dr. Luer, her physician, said that as her illness progressed, she began to lose interest in her surroundings. The landscape around the house was barely maintained. Invasive plants were crowding out the gardens. By 1970, with the exception of a few students who came to thank her for their scholarships, Mrs. Selby was a recluse. She expressly asked reporters not to call or visit and said she would not grant them an interview.

It is in this context of her frailty and seeming disinterest that the last part of this story is so remarkable. Ben Feder was a serious developer. He had hired an architect and engineer; he had made proposals to the city commission. He was an experienced developer with a project in California and in other parts of Florida. He also had a local connection, owning several shops on St. Armands Circle, Lido Key. It was simply a question of when, not if he was going to build. But perhaps he felt that the time was right to expand his purchases.

Mrs. Selby was ill and in her 80's, maybe he could wait and try to buy the land from her estate, but surely as a shrewd businessman he must have made inquiries to the Paulks and Mrs. Selby inquiring if their property might be for sale at the right price.

The idea of a high rise building in her backyard must have been alarming for Mrs. Selby. Not just the fact of a 180-tower overlooking her house, but the noise and chaos that would attend its building. Pile divers, heavy machinery, countless trucks back and forth along South Palm would have been a serious worry for Marie.

She did have options; she had resources. She could try planting vegetation as she did to block the view of the Bird Key development although nothing would grow to that height of a building in her lifetime. She could move. She had connections in Montana and Ohio or she could have lived in one of her apartments or anywhere else she chose in Sarasota. But there was another other option, a radical one.

The conversations between Ben Feder and Mrs. Selby are not known. They were probably conducted through their attorneys. But I imagine one possible scenario might have gone something like this. Ben Feder might have asked Mrs. Selby what would it take to buy her property. And then Mrs. Selby would have asked in a weak but firm voice “My property is not for sale, what would it take to buy YOUR property Mr. Feder?

And so, the sale happened. On August 25, 1969, Mrs. Selby purchased all of Feder's land along South Palm. Although fragile, ill and housebound, she was determined to stop the construction once and for all. Now she controlled all the land from Hudson Bayou until the Payne mansion. She had exercised her most radical option, she bought out the developer and shut the project down.

According to tax stamps Feder drove a hard bargain and Mrs. Selby was forced to pay \$356,000 for less than two acres of undeveloped land. Probably a record price for that time. Feder had owned the land for less than a year and a half and had made no improvements. He had purchased the land for \$218,000, and now he had realized a very good return on his investment. Interestingly, while the land purchases of the developers for that property were deemed newsworthy, Mrs. Selby's quashing of their plans was never reported. There were no stories about how an aging widow had shut down a multi-million-dollar housing project. In fact, the only way the public would have known of the sale would have been to read the fine print in the real estate transaction column.

In an ironic way, Ben Feder was responsible for the garden being on Palm Ave. If he had refused to sell his land and gone on to develop the property as he had intended, the small amount of land Mrs. Selby owned could have been nothing more than a pocket park. His motives however, were clearly financial no matter what the positive outcome for garden enthusiasts.

It is likely that her purchase at that inflated price per acre was purely a defensive move. There is nothing to indicate she was thinking of a public garden at that time. Now she could rest peacefully in her home for the rest of her life without the worry of living in a construction zone. During her restful afternoons, she could indulge in reveries on all the changes that had happened to South Palm Ave since she and Bill first saw the property 50 years before. She thought back on all the interesting neighbors she had known and the beautiful gardens they had planted: Mrs. Hemingway, Julia Cantacuzune and Martha Payne. At one time in the 1930s, she could walk the entire length of the street and pass a continuous stretch of lovely gardens. Some people couldn't appreciate the value of that natural beauty and would have preferred to see commercial development but she by her dramatic purchase had foreclosed that result forever.

Although she had forestalled development for now, however, it was likely that after her death, the developers would be back with their wrecking balls and cranes. Mrs. Selby meditated about this possibility for a year. Then she decided to do something to keep the builders from her land forever. She would make her property available to future residents of Sarasota, so that they too could appreciate the beauty of the land, as she and Bill had. According to Dr. Luer, she probably envisioned a well-landscaped public garden where clubs could hold meetings and social events like those of the Sarasota Garden Club.

Mrs. Selby had written a will. The bulk of her estate, estimated at nearly 100 million dollars, would go to the Selby Foundation, that Bill had created back in 1956. She left small amounts for her staff. To her nieces, she left her cherished Lincoln letter sent to her grandfather Minshall and a modest amount of stock to family members.

On Oct. 8, 1970, a little over a year after she had purchased the lots from Feder, she added a codicil

to her will that would leave all her land and home as well as two million dollars, for the express purpose of the creating the Marie Selby Botanical Gardens. From her will we learned that a few months earlier, she had created a trust to manage and curate the new garden under the auspices of Palmer Bank. It was done. Apparently, Mrs. Selby had heeded the warnings of Karl Bickel and chosen not to leave her land to the city or state as did John Ringling but rather to a private entity. And again, just as her husband did when he created the Selby Foundation, she apparently told no one. The world did not know of her intention until 8 months later when on June 17, 1971, Marie Selby died.

The bequest and funding had been kept confidential. Dr. Luer, Marie's physician and a well-known orchidologist, said that Marie had never let on about her plans for her estate. In fact, Dr. Luer, also a trustee at Palmer Bank, was in the room when the will was read, and he was completely surprised. The first inkling that the public had of the bequest was a brief newspaper article on July 11, less than a month after her death. The piece announced the gift, but said it would take one to two years to settle the estate. In the meantime, a committee was being formed. In an ominous note of caution, the committee announced that although the Hudson Bayou location had been mentioned, the committee had the right to select another site for the garden.

Although Marie had succeeded in defeating the developers plan for high rises and although she thought that she had saved her beautiful waterfront land for a garden, things were still unsettled. Those who were excited about the Palm Ave location, would have to wait until the committee made their final decision.

A month later, it looked as if Mrs. Selby's careful planning would be for naught. In an interview, William C. Coleman, President of Palmer Bank and Trustee of the Marie Selby Botanical Gardens made a troubling announcement. There are, he said "no definite plans until the estate is settled, but the botanical gardens probably will not be located on the South Palm Estate". In other words, the Garden will probably be somewhere else.

There were many who thought the South Palm Estate was just a bad idea. It was too small. It was in a residential neighborhood with a mishmash of zoning regulations, and it would be too complicated to open a public garden there. And most importantly, the land was worth a fortune. Why not, they argued, sell the land and locate the garden someplace else in the county. Instead of 5 acres, you could have 50 acres for a first-class botanical garden. Furthermore, the bay front land could be privately developed and create a huge increase in taxable property instead of taking it off the tax rolls. These were powerful arguments, and the one about the complications of zoning regulations would prove to be prescient.

The Committee struggled with various options and considered different sites in the county as possible locations for the new garden.

Dr. Carlyle Luer had just finished his landmark work on the Native Orchids of Florida published by the New York Botanical Garden. He suggested to Bill Coleman that the Palm Ave site would be suitable for a specialized garden. One that focused on research into epiphytic plants like orchids and bromeliads.

There was considerable discussion and opposition to the garden from more than one source. But after consultations with botanists from University of Florida and the New York Botanical Garden, the committee finally agreed that specializing in epiphytes would be feasible for the small area on Palm Ave. On June 17, 1972 almost exactly one year after Marie had died, the Committee made a public announcement that the site on Palm Ave had been selected and epiphytes would be the focus.

Plans moved forward and a director was hired, Cal Dobson from the University of Miami. The estate itself had had many years of minimal maintenance and had become a tangle of weeds and invasive plants. There was much clearing and construction to do. The gardens small size was still a concern but if the Payne House, still owned by the Paulks, could be purchased, it would add another acre to the garden. This would also give the garden control of all the land from the Hudson Bayou to

Mound: all the original eight lots platted out by Zakrzewski in 1903. The Payne house, after all, was in the RF-B zone and could still be developed as a high-rise building diminishing the ambiance of a garden. In the spring of 1973, Dr. Luer, who knew the Paulks socially, entered into negotiations for the purchase of the house and land for use of the Garden. The asking price was \$250,000. That was too much for the resources of the garden. The price was probably based on the inflated price that Marie Selby had to pay for the adjacent vacant lots a few years before. Dr. Luer assured the Paulks that the house would become part of the garden and succeeded in getting the asking price reduced by \$75,000. In March of 1973, the Paulks agreed to sell the house to Selby Gardens. The final selling price was a more reasonable \$185,000 dollars, with Dr. Luer making an emergency loan of \$75,000 to the garden to make the sale happen.

This was probably a fair price for the house and land, it was a similar price to what Mrs. Selby had paid for the undeveloped land next door. It was also a good return for the Paulks who had lived there for just under ten years. Mrs. Paulk deserves credit for the preservation of the Payne Mansion. She wanted to live in a house that many people had already accepted would be demolished to pave the way for new condominium towers. She restored the interior and replanted Martha Payne's gardens. She resisted the inevitable offers from developers like Coastal Corp and Ben Feder and then sold her property to the Garden at a reasonable price. The Payne Mansion became a Museum of Botany. This was not the favorable outcome one would have expected just a few years before.

This should be the end of the story of the almost exactly 100 years of the land that became Selby Gardens. Adolph Zakrzewski had purchased the land in 1874, and a century later it was again in the hands of a single owner. In spite of all the complicated land sales, foreclosures, threats of eminent domain and grandiose plans, the impossible happened. Instead of the Pentagon on Palm, it became the Miracle on Palm, and the Marie Selby Botanical Gardens was a reality. Almost.

The Garden owned the land, they had the funding, the staff and a growing number of members. All they needed was to get the proper permits and the Garden would be a reality. Herein lies an almost comical story if it hadn't created such a frustrating waste of time and money. It almost reads as if there were someone at city hall who was determined to thwart this project or at least someone who was not about to round-off any corners in the strict interpretation of building codes.

It all began in the late summer of 1973. The garden needed greenhouses for the weather sensitive plants, as the collection had already begun and there were a thousand orchids that needed shelter before the winter set in. A contractor was found to build two greenhouses for \$110,000. The garden staff thought it was a good design, and construction was expected to begin shortly, leaving plenty of time to get the plants inside before a frost.

In September, when the contractor went to the planning board for what he thought would be a routine building permit, it set in motion what was later called the "greenhouse dilemma". On Sept 6, the planning board listened to the greenhouse plans and came to the conclusion that they could not approve the permit because....the building would be too low! Although Mrs. Selby had purchased the property, the zoning remained, in fact, high-rise and you can't build a low-rise greenhouse in a high-rise zone. That was the law. This catch 22 could only be resolved through a zoning change or an amendment to the existing zoning code. The Planning Board could have denied the permit outright but instead, tabled it, waiting for the opinion of the City Commission.

That Sunday, the Herald Tribune wrote a scathing editorial entitled "Orchid Emergency" and called on the Commission to meet in emergency session and amend the ordinance allowing a greenhouse to be built before hundreds of orchids perished without winter shelter. The Commission acted with speed and by Sept 18th, had finally approved the amendment. So, it was back to the planning board at the end of October. The Planning Board now approved the greenhouse design, citing the unusual extenuating circumstance of "orchid hardship". Finally, on November 13th the full City Commission approved the

site plan and construction finally began.

During the summer of 1974, the garden was busy, with many volunteers clearing the landscape and building arbors, pergolas and walkways. Everything seemed to be going smoothly and the directors of the garden were confident that they would be able to open to the public in November of 1974.

Now that the opening day was approaching, the directors turned their attention to the mundane obligation of providing parking for visitors. The garden had acquired property on the east side of South Palm that would make a 116-space lot. That side of the street, unfortunately, was still zoned residential, so again, they would have to appear before the Planning Board to seek a variance to build off-street parking. Whereas the snafu over the building of the greenhouses seemed to generate support and sympathy over bureaucratic red tape, the parking raised different issues and emotions.

Now there was concern about the impact of traffic on South Palm and the impact on the neighborhood, the same concerns that were raised when the city wished to build a city hall on the site which were dismissed as overblown. Part of the problem was how the garden defined itself. Was it a research and scientific garden open to the public or rather, was it a "tourist attraction"? When one member of the planning board discovered that the Garden intended to charge admission and sell plants and food inside, he claimed the Garden was being disingenuous and was really creating a tourist venue. If indeed it were for tourists, would there be entertainment, amusements? He argued that the off-street parking application should be denied. Fortunately, other members of the Board disagreed and supported the Garden's request for a variance. The vote was 3-1 for approval.

The City Commission had to weigh in again. They were scheduled to vote on the parking lot on the Oct 8 meeting, so things were still on track for a November opening. Although there was some discussion of the impact of a large parking area in a residential zone, the Commission approved the exception but added a note of warning. The granting of the exception "required the management of the gardens to keep the operation low key so as not to attract a large number of visitors"

By the middle of November, the Garden directors realized that it would be impossible to be ready to open that month. Everything was taking a bit longer than planned but they were confident that in a few weeks they would be ready. They made an announcement: The Garden would officially open on Saturday, December 7, 1974.

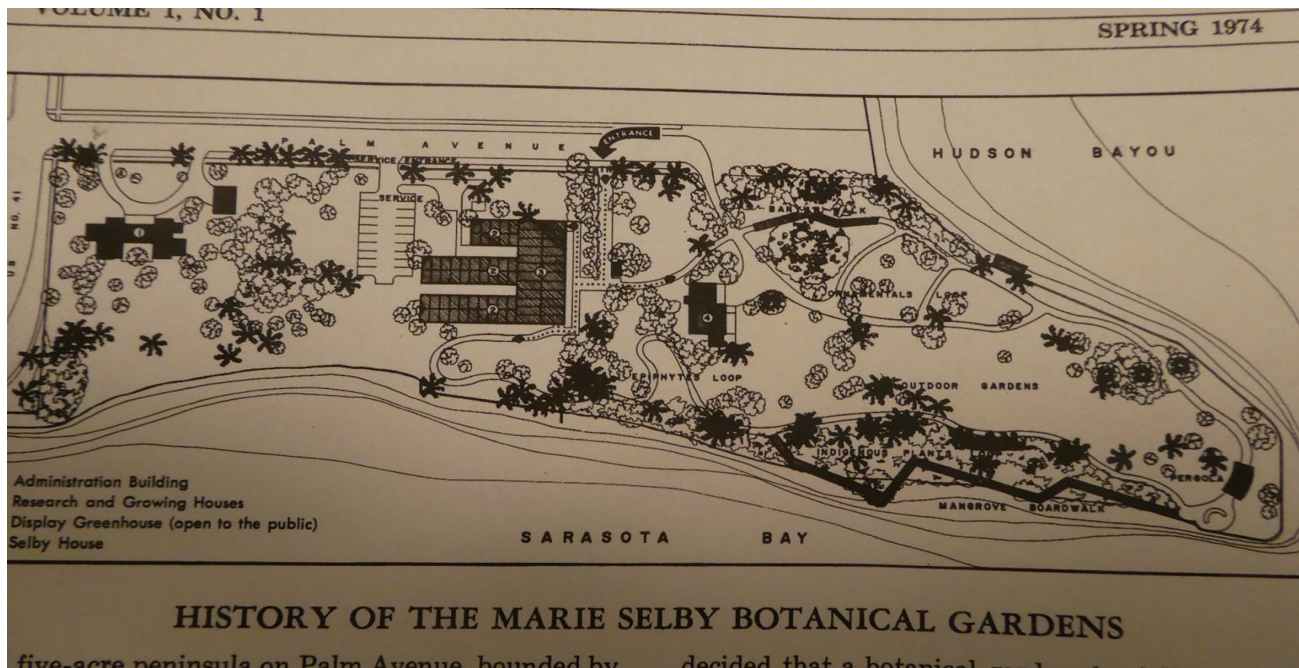
On Friday, the day before the scheduled opening, they received some bad news. The City Parks Dept had refused to issue permits to remove some of the oaks for the off-street parking area. The opening was postponed as the directors scrambled to meet with the Park Department and redraw the lot and try to save the trees.

Garden staff met with city staff and they explored different ways to reconfigure the parking lot. After several permutations they reached an agreement where the trees could be saved. But instead of relief that a compromise had been found, it turned to consternation because a new design required a new exception. That meant they would have to again publish a public notice, allow public comment, appear before the planning board and again get City Commission approval for a second time. A time consuming and potentially dangerous move which could mean different conditions or an outright denial of the proposal.

Approval was granted, but the garden was still dotting i's and crossing t's, making sure they had considered every arcane aspect of city regulation. They were building restrooms and a ticket booth and crossing their fingers that nothing would be too low or too high, or somehow contravene some federal, state or local regulation. Cal Dodson was optimistic however and announced it would open in June. Even though the garden remained closed, there were now 500 members.

June came and went. Finally, there was the announcement that the garden would open on July 7, 1975 at 10AM. There must have been some anxious moments that weekend that yet another glitch might appear. But on Monday morning the Garden finally opened to the public, charging one dollar

admittance. Fully nine months after the date of the first announced opening and countless meetings and hearing later, The Marie Selby Botanical Gardens was born.



Drawing of Selby Garden when it opened in 1974. Greenhouses where the Cantacuzene house stood.

Bill and Marie Selby came to Sarasota in 1908. They bought some land and built a house. They died, and Marie left the land for a public garden. That is a true statement but it conceals the torturous route to arrive there. Looking back over the history, it is really the story of outstanding women: Ida Hamilton, Julia Grant Cantacuzene, Martha Payne, Patricia Paulk and Marie Selby. All these women, who all loved gardens, laid the foundation which inspired and allowed the garden to come into existence.

Although there are millions people who look at the bay front location of Marie Selby Gardens today as natural and could not conceive of it in any other place, there were in fact only two people who seriously imagined the Selby Gardens where it is today; Marie Selby and Dr. Carlyle Luer.

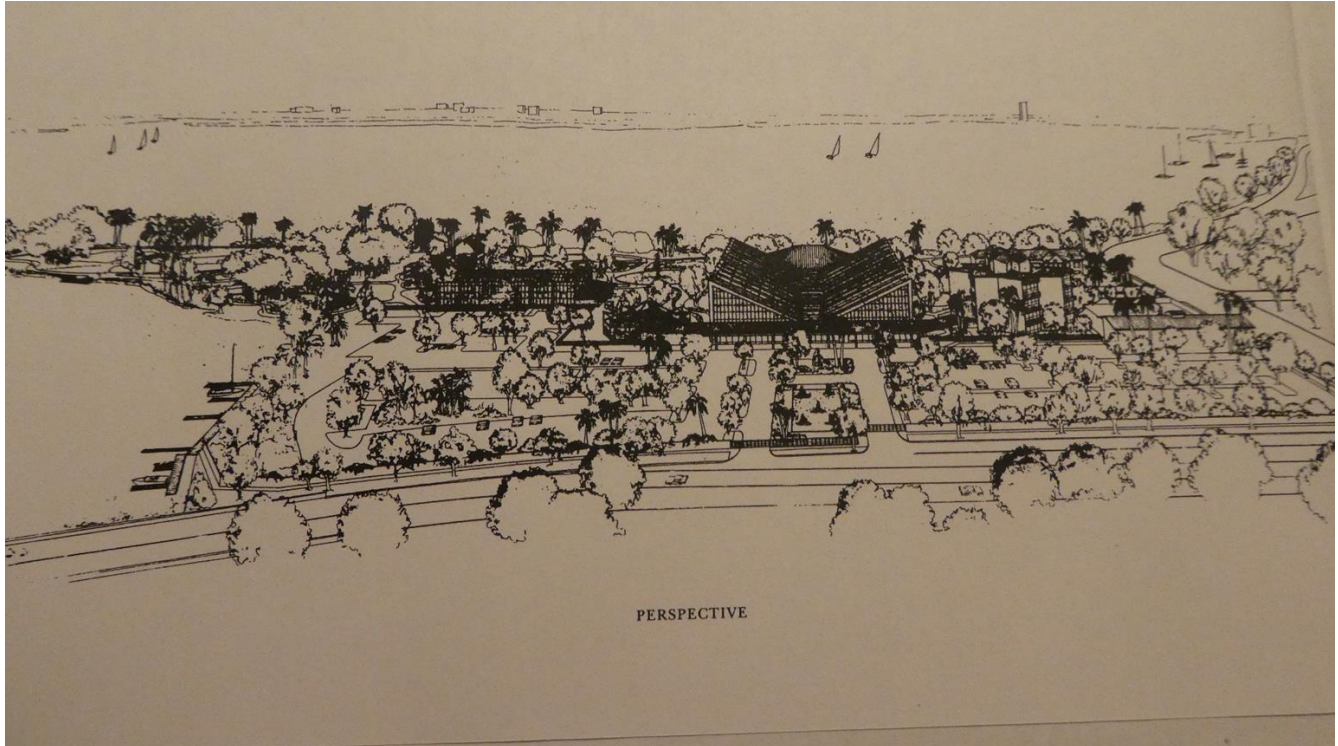
Afterword

Christy Payne Jr. After Mr Payne sold his father's house and moved to Roberts Bay he became an environmentalist and involved himself in conservation efforts. He was a member and then president of Save Our Bays an activist organization that sought to protect the bay and the fish stock. He retained a fondness for his father's house and his last wish was that memorial donations be made to Selby Gardens for the preservation and improvement of the Christy Payne House. He died in 2000.

Julia Dent Cantacuzene, the Countess Speransky. The Countess died on Oct 4, 1975 just a few months after the Selby Garden opened. She was the last survivor of the colorful residents of South Palm in the 1930s. She was 99 years old.

Jack West. Architect. Mr. West died in 2010. In the 1960s, he felt that a government center would

be the best use of land along the South Palm bay front. However, in 1984, he accepted a commission to create a new landscape plan for the Garden. (illustrated below) In 1987 he designed the Education/Activity Building next to the Payne House. The structure was built on stilts to conform to new FEMA requirements and it had a copper batten roof connected to an underground cistern. The projected cost for the building was \$741,000. Unfortunately, while copper is an essential micronutrient for plants, in higher concentrations, it can be toxic for certain copper sensitive plants, especially bromeliads. There was also a problem of infiltration of salt water; the use of the cistern was discontinued.



Jack West's Plan for the reconstruction of Selby Gardens 1984

Addendum

The value of the permit raises questions about the often-repeated assertion that the Payne Mansion cost \$50,000 to build. The first time I found this figure is mentioned was in a 1979 article written by Theo Douglas after the Payne Mansion was included in a Designer's Showcase. The information he provided sounded credible and detailed: the building was contracted for \$40,000 to build, and overruns pushed the figure up to \$50,000. Understanding Christy's detailed plans and sketches, one could anticipate that there might be ongoing changes during construction that led to overruns. However, there is no documentation or source noted for this information. Even Mr. Douglas hints at a little skepticism about the price when he goes on to note that this was at the depth of the Depression and that prices

were unusually low. Comparing the cost of labor and materials at that time, fifty thousand dollars to construct a house seems like a fortune. At that time labor was about 50 cents an hour and you could construct an ordinary home for less than \$2,000. On the Sarasota real estate market at that time were substantial houses in desirable locations for \$7,500 that included the land.

One way of reconciling these figures is that the permit estimation was premature or what I believe is more likely, is that the \$50,000 was the combined price of the house and the land.

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Special Thanks

Norma Carlson, Kari Cain for proof-reading and editing
Bruce Holst, Selby Garden Archives
Molly Swift, Selby Foundation Archives
Staff at Property Records Sarasota and Manatee Counties
Larry Kelleher, Sarasota County Historical Resources
Robert Fournier and Charles Ball for legal advice
Cliff Smith Sarasota City Planner
Joe King, Jack West Archives
Sarah Haynes and Richard Haynes for Selby Family documents and photographs
Dr. Carlyle Luer
Scott Profitt

