

TRACKS OF TIME

Monthly Publication from the Zephyrhills Historical Association

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August 2021

There will be NO scheduled business meeting in September.

Future Meetings

Folks, given current conditions in Florida concerning the Covid-19 virus, especially the Delta mutation, I feel it would be less than wise to return to our meetings. I did not consult with other board members concerning this, but rather made a unilateral decision. I take full responsibility. When we do return, we will probably need to wear our masks, at least until all of us have been immunized.

Regarding a meeting place, I have spoken with Billy Poe, City Manager, and he assures me he will work with us on providing a meeting place. Both Ray Alvarez and Erica Freeman also have stepped forward with ideas we might pursue. We will consider our options when it comes time to resume our meeting.

I had thought we might continue our fundraisers with Sergio's in September, but, there again, I feel it might be better to postpone that at least a month. I appreciate your patience during this difficult time. Our Facebook page has become quite busy, so we have not completely lost our influence in the community. Stay safe!

We may get back to our fundraisers in October at Sergio's.



38461 County Road 54
Zephyrhills, FL 33542
813-788-5969

Email: zephyrhillsmgr@patriotstorage.com

5x5 | 5x10 | 10x10 | 10x15 | 10x20 | 20x20 | RV | BOAT

Jeff Miller

Pasco County Historian

For a walk down memory lane visit

www.fivay.org

Please consider contributing old photos for the website.

My email address is on the opening page

ZHA Mission Statement

The mission of the Zephyrhills Historical Association is to research, gather, and share local historical information with all generations, through our literature, programs, and scholarships, and to volunteer assistance to the Zephyrhills Depot Museum and WWII Barracks Museum.

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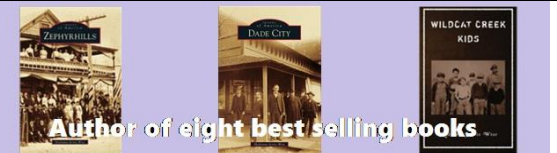
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| | | |
|---|--|--|
|  | <p>Clereen Morrill Brunty ZHS Alumni Contact</p> |  <p>Author of eight best-selling books</p> |
| <p>clereen@gmail.com 813-782-8763</p> | | <p>Madonna Wise Books Author, Research & Consulting Madonna Jervis Wise Zephyrhills, Florida Murphy, North Carolina</p> <p>813-469-8627 MadonnaJWise@gmail.com http://madonnawisebooks.wordpress.com</p> |

Editor: Jerry Pricher, 5138 20th Street, Zephyrhills, FL 33542
 Phone: 813-788-2547 email: jerry@pricher.net

School Fire

by Erica Freeman

Dozens of school buildings have been in the Zephyrhills area since Europeans first settled here. However, only one comes to mind to many of our current residents. It’s a building so iconic that even after demolition, it sets the tone for all public use buildings. Whether we knew it as the high school or Raymond B. Stewart Middle school, it was the source of happiness with friends and anxiety over tests. There were also the rumors. Had it been burnt to the ground? Did someone die? Was it set on fire to cover up a murder? What was the real story behind the 1933 fire?



In 1925, Zephyrhills’ first high school building was almost fifteen years old, over-crowded and old-fashioned compared to the new brick buildings. The all-wooden structure could be described as a firetrap. The community rallied together to build enthusiasm. A series of elections was held, including deciding the location. The “hill in the north central part of town, just south of the Wilkins’ Sanitarium”, as described by the Dade City Banner, was deemed perfect. That Dade City

newspaper announced the school would “occupy all of Block 69, fronting on Eleventh Street” and be “sufficiently distant from the hard surface road running to Dade City that danger from traffic is avoided.” With permission from the county school board, the final election decided that \$50,000 in bonds would be used to build the new school. Reports that it would be ready for the school term that year were greatly exaggerated.

In August 1925, Spangler Construction is given the contract for the new high school. As their November 1925 advertisement in the Tampa Tribune states, “We are a firm of national experience” with their offices cattycorner from the city hall in downtown Tampa. Construction was delayed due to lack of materials. However, by January 1926, a Dade City company, Jones & Son, was awarded the contract for painting and finishing touches. Except that the building wasn’t ready for that yet. On June 12, 1926, it was announced by several papers that Spangler had gone on a boat to Havana, Cuba. It was a common tourist and business destination so it was assumed he would be back. He was never seen again. Work stopped at the school. Workers were owed backpay as were creditors and material suppliers. Spangler’s company was in debt.

By July 13, 1926, the Dade City Banner was reporting that Spangler had gone to South America. The school board and bond company, Southern Surety, came to an agreement that the school board would pay \$5,000 in debts due to the school construction and the bond company would pay any expenses over the original budget for the school. Construction restarted and was complete when the students returned from summer break on August 30th. Between the new school, new businesses and more people being attracted to the area, Zephyrhills was so proud it held a “Home Coming Day” one month later. “All their friends, their relatives and friends are cordially urged to come home on that day” to see how much the town had changed since incorporation.

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Zephyrhills High School contained an 80 feet long auditorium with “comfortable opera chairs”, heating “by a modulating steam plant of the most modern type” and two restrooms with “modern drinking fountains, of a type which not only throws a central jet, but small streams from all sides, making it impossible for the children’s mouths to touch the faucets, assuring perfect sanitation.” The majority of the articles in the Dade City Banner, Zephyrhills News and others stressed the build was “practically fireproof” despite the wooden stairways, doors, decorative features and more. A few months later, in January 1927, Dade City opened their new grammar school. It cost three times as much as the Zephyrhills High School which allowed extras like metal encased stairwells to protect from fire. Students still use this building today as the main structure of Rodney B. Cox Elementary School.

At 2:30 AM, Frank Forbes, a night watchman, saw flames coming from the west wing of Zephyrhills High School. It was August 29, 1933. Disaster appeared to be averted. The first-floor walls didn’t crumble. Thick in the Great Depression, Pasco County was lucky to be having an eight-month school term although not due to start for over another month. No student could have left the gas on accidentally or some other mistake. It was thought at first to be arson, but there were more important matters to concentrate on until two weeks later.

Mary Kahler reported in the Dade City Banner that “Quite a number of the citizens of San Antonio were aroused on Saturday morning at about two o’clock by hearing shots fired, and looking out of their windows they saw that nearly the whole town was illuminated with the blaze of a burning building. On going in the direction of the fire they found it to be the public school. The local fire department responded but the fire was too far under way before discovered and nothing could be done to keep it from spreading, as the grass all around was on fire.

One could get no nearer than the sidewalk because the heat was so intense, and there remained nothing but broken bricks, ashes, and twisted tin to tell of the tragedy.” It was the same timing of Zephyrhills’ fire, but without a night watchman, nothing was left. It was now clear an arsonist was in Pasco County. Which community would be struck next? The answer came just two weeks later.



In the early morning of September 30, Trilby’s “splendid brick building” was taken by fire. Once again, it was the same modus operandi as the first two fires. The school board and the board of county commissioners offered a \$1,000 reward for information leading to the arrest and conviction of the arsonist. Armed with a tip that someone had attempted to burn the brand-new Sand Pond school, Sheriff C. E. Dowling looked into the sales of lead pencils in the area. He interviewed a transient family in Slaughter. The Willis family admitted to camping at the Sand Pond school overnight, but not arson. However, after finding “crayons, crayolas and similar evidence”, they were arrested and taken into custody.

No one was ever convicted of the school fires although they did stop by 1934. It was November 1935 before money and plans were arranged through the Works Progress Administration to build a new high school at Zephyrhills. The new school cost \$28,000 and was a simplified version of Floyd Hamill’s plans for the original building, keeping red brick with arches. Although it was thought that the first floor could be preserved, the entire school footprint was rebuilt into a sprawling one-story edifice instead of the two-story building before. Bricks and other materials were reused as much as possible. On September 7, 1936, Zephyrhills High School was once again dedicated to great fanfare from the community and “many out of town guests” who joined in the combined Labor Day festivities. Rumors may have been exaggerated. No one died in the 1933 fire. No bodies were found. However, the truth involving a scam artist contractor and a serial arsonist is far more interesting. While the 1936 building was demolished in 2005, its style of red brick with arches is emulated in the new school building, City Hall and Zephyrhills Public Library. Its legacy lives on forever.