

The Churches

As early as 1932 religious gatherings were held in a pavilion on the Beach known as "Red Coconut," and later in various homes and the school house.

Chapel By The Sea

In April 1936 Dr. William G. Kennedy, pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Fort Myers, succeeded in having the religious work on the Beach made a missionary project of the Presbyterian Church. At that time a lot was donated by Miss Ella Neems and another by Ulrich Eberhardt along with a generous donation toward a building. Through these and other substantial gifts by business firms and individuals, the Chapel was built, and the first service was held on Palm Sunday, April 10, 1938. Two years later an addition was made which included two class rooms, a kitchen and a pastor's study. The Rev. Mr. Linn, who fathered the church from the beginning, remained pastor until 1940. In December of 1940 a manse was completed and the Rev. D. Jenkins Williams became the first resident minister. serving the church until May, 1941.

Until the time the Episcopal Church was organized, the Chapel by the Sea was the only church on the Beach and many residents of various denominations cooperated with the Presbyterians by attending services and giving financial support. This led many people who were not versed in the early history of the church to form an erroneous opinion that the church was organized as a community church. As other churches began to take their places in the community it was felt that the time had come to exercise more Presbyterian direction.

After Rev. Williams' retirement, the Rev. William Hunter, who had occupied the pulpit during the summer of 1940 as a student in Princeton Theological Seminary, was ordained and took up his pastorate at the Beach. It was during Rev. Hunter's ministry that the original pews, the gift of Mr. and Mrs. Fred S. Fletcher, were dedicated on Palm Sunday, 1942, and two additional lots adjoining the manse were given by Mr. and Mrs. Ulrich Eberhardt. After Rev. Hunter's resignation in May 1944, the church was served for several years by a number of able ministers.

The Rev. T. J. Simpson of Hammond, Indiana, was installed as pastor in

December, 1948. He was an outstanding organizer who in his five years here, put the church on a strong financial basis, and in 1950 an addition, consisting of an assembly hall, a ladies' parlor, a pastor's study, a kitchen and storage rooms, was built.

In January, 1955, after acting as Stated Supply Minister for a year, Dr. George Bauer became regular pastor. Much beloved by the congregation, he was, upon his retirement, elected Pastor Emeritus of the Church. Rev. C. Melvin Elliott replaced Dr. Bauer and it was deeply regretted when he accepted a call to Largo in 1963.

Dr. John Williams and his wife Delia came to the church that fall. After living in the old manse for a few months, they moved into the new one just completed on Tropical Shores, the newest addition to the church property.

St. Raphael's Church

During Lent in 1949 Father Richard Brown came from Fort Myers and conducted services and evening prayer in the community hall. This was the first Episcopal services to be held at Fort Myers Beach. He conducted the same services again in 1950 and 1951. In March '51, Father Brown suggested that a mission could be started here and expressed his willingness to petition the Bishop. By March 11, 1951, twenty hopeful parishioners had signed the petition and selected the name, St. Raphael. Upon presentation of the petition, Bishop Loutitt of the South Florida Diocese gave permission to form an unorganized mission which, if successful, would be recognized as an organized mission at the end of a year. The first Senior Warden was Cyril Shawcross; Junior Warden, Frank M. Hitner; Secretary-Treasurer, Rodger Shawcross; and Board Members Cyril Harby, James A. Gwin and Kimball Davison.

Father Brown continued conducting evening prayers until December 1951, at which time the arrival of the first Vicar, Father R. P. Closson, and regular services began. The community hall and later the Estero Manufacturing building were used until the church was built. Through gifts and purchase, lots were acquired in Holiday Heights and the building was begun in 1953. The first services were held in the new structure on December 20, 1953, and the dedication with Rt. Rev. Bishop Brame officiating was held January 3,

1954.

Father John D. Hull came to the church October 5, 1952, and his inspiration can not even be estimated. His death in 1954 was a sad event for his devoted parishioners. The Auxiliary was formed in 1952, the Altar Guild in 1953.

Father Edmund Sills filled the pulpit from 1954 to 1957 and during his administration the vicarage was built and furnished. The parish house was planned and built during the ministry of Father Ralph R. Johnson who was Vicar from July '57 to the spring of '61. Father Richard H. L. Vanaman served from March '61 to April '62 to be followed by the present priest, Father C. A. Comfort.

Beach Methodist Church

In January 1953 a group of Methodists began meeting in local homes with the idea of forming a church when they felt their number warranted it. They soon outgrew the homes and changed the meeting place to the American Legion Hall, Rev. E. P. Hendry serving as their first minister. Plans for a new church building got underway and the foundation was laid that summer. From June to September 1954 services were held in the old Beach theater (now the San Carlos Marina boat storage.) and there was great rejoicing when the meters were turned on in the new building on October 11, 1954.

The Rev. Murray Carlton, Rev. Paul Buyers, Rev. E. J. Mayton all served the church within the next three years. In June, 1956, Rev. Otto Horsley came to the Beach and was very influential in building up the church. The congregation regretted his move in 1960. During the four years of his ministry the parsonage was completed (1956) and the church dedicated (March 16, 1958). The second addition was completed a few days before Christmas, 1959. Rev. Hugh Foster followed Rev. Horsley and then Rev. Richard Pifer served for a year. In 1963 Rev. Clinton Logan, the present minister, came to the church.

Ground breaking for the new forty thousand dollar Sanctuary, just east of the present building at Bay and Oak Streets, was October 31, 1965.

First Baptist Church

The FORT MYERS BEACH BAPTIST CHAPEL was started in June of 1953 by the Rev. Loren Williams, pastor of the sponsoring church, Riverside Baptist Church of Fort Myers. Rev. Williams served the Chapel as Preacher until October of 1954; then Mr. R. M. Lemly acted as supply pastor until the end of December 1954. The Rev. Robert Thurman was called at that time and served for a year as pastor of both the Russell Park Baptist Chapel and the Beach Baptist Chapel. Services were being held at the Beach Community Hall when Rev. Marvin Lynn came to the Chapel in November 1955 as full-time pastor, and immediate plans were laid to procure suitable property upon which to build a church.

In April of 1956 a tract of land on Connecticut Street was purchased. A "ground-breaking" for the first building was held on March 4, 1957, and the new building was dedicated and occupied on February 23, 1958.

Rev. Lynn stayed as pastor until December 1960, after which Rev. John T. James came in February '61. From 1961 to the present, the chapel has been self-supporting and membership has increased to approximately 150 members, with well over a hundred enrolled in the Sunday school. There is also an active training Union, WMS, G. A.'s and Youth Choir

Church of the Ascension

Late in 1953, a few of the Catholic families here, deciding that the drive into Fort Myers every Sunday was too long, organized a Catholic Mission on the Island. It was designated as St. Francis Xavier Mission, headed by St. Francis Xavier Church of Fort Myers. Its first Mass at Fort Myers Beach was celebrated on Sunday, December 20, 1953, in the dining room at San Carlos Inn (later the Driftwood Inn). In September 1954 services were moved to the Beach school.

Meanwhile twenty-one acres of land had been purchased from Leroy Lamoreaux on Estero Boulevard, plans for a long-range program drawn up and a church begun. The first Mass in the new building was celebrated on Sunday, March 6, 1955. Although the structure was yet without windows, the weather was beautiful and the congregation was elated to be in their

own building. Father Genovar of Fort Myers conducted the Mass and the Archbishop was there for the service. Father Haley came in the fall of 1957 as the first priest to live at the Beach. the pulpit having been supplied from Fort Myers prior to that time. The rectory on land donated by Leonard Santini was started and when Father Bernardo Martinez came in the spring of 1958 it was finished and became home to the priest. At the time Father Miguel Goni, the current priest, succeeded Father Bernardo in June 1961, the mission became a parish.

Another big step in fulfillment of the original church plan was the building of the beautiful new church, completed in 1964 and the conversion of the original structure into a parish hall.

Photographs taken in 1937 of the Third Grade class at the Beach School (Leonard Santini, Ralph Kingston, David Yeomans, Blanche Santini, Ellen MacDuff, Page Twiss, and Oscar McClenithan), and some of the mothers who made the school possible appear at this point in the book (p.33).

On foldout pages 34 & 39 of this book is a photograph of the certificate of a land grant made to homesteader Albert Austin in 1914.

Maps of Estero Island showing the lands granted to early homesteaders and the locations of the various organizations and buildings appear in this bold on foldout pages 35-38.

Photographs taken in 1937 of the First Grade class at the Beach School (Buster Blakley, Betty Jane Canady, Nell Santini, Jimmie Reece. Lynn Barbra, Josephine Canady, Robley Geddes, Laverne Yeomans, Frances Santini, Buster Fine) and of the Second Grade class (Betty Reese, Dolores Santini, Mina Geddes, Truda Barbra) appear at this point in the book (p.40).