

Traditions

Almost every small community builds up traditions over the years and Fort Myers Beach is no exception. Most deeply rooted of ours, perhaps, are the Fourth of July celebration; our aquatic Santa Claus and the Community Christmas party, the Blessing of the Shrimp Fleet, the Fashion Fiesta and our newest one, the Tarpon Hunts. All of these have had national publicity at one time or another and are a source of pride to the islands.

For a number of years the Beach had the only major fireworks show in the county and plans were made and moneys contributed largely by business people, well in advance of the big day. An expert, licensed pyro-technician, assisted by experienced local men, is in charge and from the pier where the action takes place, for a mile each way, throngs line the beach to watch the displays. Many take to the water and watch from boats in the Gulf. During the day the county park is jammed with picnickers, special events are scheduled for the daylight hours--boat races, water ski exhibitions. But the fireworks is always the grand finale.

The BIG FOURTH was started years ago when a number of local families pooled their individual fireworks to make a better display. The "shooting" was usually held at the Beach Hotel which was the central location and had the best facilities. The idea snowballed until the whole community became involved and today a special "Fireworks committee" carries on from year to year.

Christmas

As far as we have been able to learn, the Beach had the first Santa Claus to arrive by boat instead of by reindeer. Originating sometime in the "30's as a neighborhood affair held in various places, it eventually fell under the wing of the Beach Woman's Club, and became a community project. By 1950 it had grown to such proportions that the Woman's Club found it advisable to call for help from other organizations. In 1951 the party was held in what was called El Mercado Square --the first unit of Bigelow Center. The Woman's Club furnished and decorated the tree, the Legion bought the candy and the Auxiliary fixed the bags of toys and candies. The BIA, as usual, filled in wherever needed. Santa distributed the gifts and candies to

all children present, the Junior choir of the Chapel by the Sea sang and the whole community joined in the Christmas carols.

The next year the festivities were moved to the County Park with all of the organizations helping. The Legion Auxiliary was in charge, the B.I.A. set up the tree, the Beach Business Association decorated it, the Legion and their ladies furnished candy, nuts and fruits. the Woman's Club provided the Santa Claus suit, found a well-built Santa and organized the young peoples choir to spark the carol singing and Joe Ainsworth of Snug Harbor arranged for Santa to get here by boat since reindeers are reported to prefer the snow in the north.

Since that time. except for one year, the party has been held the week end before Christmas. a lot of hard work but an event looked forward to by adults as well as children.

A photograph of Santa arriving by boat appears at this point in the book (p.67).

The Blessing of the Fleet

"The Columbia Fish Company Dock was the center of attraction on Sunday, December 21. when the fleet of eleven shrimp boats was blessed by the Rt. Rev. H.T. Loutitt, the Bishop of the South Florida Episcopal Diocese. Crowds of people around the docks. on the bridge and in small craft, watch the forty-five minute ceremony.

"The shrimp boats, gaily bedecked with red, green, and blue pennants and American flags. formed in line and passed by the flagship, Columbian Star. There the Bishop conducted the traditional rites. After a song by the Beach School Glee Club, the Bishop delivered prayers for the crews and William R. Rumpf, master of ceremonies, lowered an anchor of white gladioli on the waters in memory of crewmen lost at sea.

"Miss Ann Reckwerdt and Buddy Mott were crowned Queen and King of the ceremonies.

"It Is hoped that this impressive ceremony may become an annual event." Thus read the Beach Bulletin story on the first blessing of the fleet in 1952.

This was the year Father John Hull came as vicar to St. Raphael's Church. He and Charlie Green, John Ferguson and John Pterudis organized the blessing. patterned somewhat on the much publicized blessing of the sponge fleet of Tarpon Springs. The ceremony was so impressive that each year the rites have been repeated with, perhaps, a different locale and a different cast of characters, but always solemn, always impressive.

Shrimp Festival

Our annual Shrimp Festival developed from a one-day celebration at the end of the Edison Pageant of Light Week which was designated as Beach Day. Various events were staged ranging from parades and bands through beauty contests and barbecues. After the first Blessing of the Shrimp Fleet, which occurred December 21, 1952, the ceremony became an important part of the February Beach Day. (There was no blessing in 1953, the first one being the last month of '52 and the second in February '54.)

As the activities increased and the number of events grew , one day was not deemed sufficient, so, largely through the efforts of the Lions Club aided by other civic minded people, Beach Day was dropped from Pageant week, rescheduled into March and became a week long festival.

The first Festival was held In March 1960. It has grown in size and scope until now thousands come to view the various eventsthe water sports, the selection of the Shrimp Queen and Junior Royalty, the gopher races, shell and flower exhibits, fishing contests, parades and bands, all climaxed by the spectacular blessing of the shrimp fleet. The Lions put on a big barbecue for the public, the Legion a fish fry, and the Episcopal ladies provide their celebrated shrimp rolls.

A photograph of a shrimp boat decorated for the Blessing of the Fleet appears at this point in the book (p.69).