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A LOOK BACK

The (would-be) Winter White House

After John Ringling became involved in the frenetic real estate boom of the 1920s, he effectively campaigned to publicize Sarasota, which by extension, would enhance his own holdings here. What was good for Sarasota was good for John Ringling.

Everywhere the Ringling Brothers circus toured, signs boasting of Sarasota's many virtues appeared on billboards and in circus programs.

Ringling Isles was advertised in circus brochures as "The Most Beautiful Real Estate Development in the World ... where the homebuilder will find the realization of his fondest dreams."

Ringling had helped persuade John J. McGraw to bring the New York Giants to Sarasota for spring training to garner publicity for Sarasota that sports writers would send back to the major newspapers of the north.

One of Ringling's biggest advertising coups was to have involved Warren G. Harding, the senator from Ohio who was elected the 29th president.

Ralph Caples, a Ringling friend, Sarasota booster and civic leader, had been in charge of Harding's train as the candidate whistle-stopped across the country during the 1920 campaign.

After Harding took office, Ringling hit upon the great notion of convincing him to use the Worcester mansion on Bird Key as the Winter White House.

With that hope in mind, the streets on Ringling Estates were named to honor America's presidents, with Harding Circle the centerpiece of the grandiose project.

At the time, the only residence on Bird Key was the Worcester Mansion, built by Thomas Worcester of Cincinnati to be the retirement home for him and his wife, Davie.

She had discovered the small island in 1910 while in Sarasota recuperating from an illness. Described as "a woman of great heart (who) loved intensely all that was beautiful in nature and humanity," she had written to her husband of the island's breathtaking beauty, ending with a hopeful, "This is what I want for my old age ... Oh! Words cannot paint the scene, imagination cannot conceive of such grandeur."

Moved to please his wife, Thomas Worcester bought the 14-acre island from the state in 1911 and began fulfilling her wish. Sand from the bay bottom was dredged to increase the key's size, and Davie Worcester began designing her dream mansion, which she named New Edzell Castle in honor of her ancestral estate in Scotland.

The Worcesters' mansion took nearly three years to complete. Said to have cost \$100,000, it was lavishly furnished and outfitted with such luxuries as electric lighting and acetylene gas. Looking at it from the shore, it "glowed with startling radiance." Sadly, Davie Worcester died before the New Edzell was completed, leaving a bereaved Thomas Worcester.

Ringling acquired the property in the early 1920s and offered the Worcester dream home to Harding shortly thereafter.

According to Ringling, the president loved the idea and "displayed all the enthusiasm of a big boy over his contemplated vacation in Sarasota." Ringling noted that the president's desk was covered with pictures of the Ringling yacht Zalophus, which would be at his disposal during "his sojourn on it as a haven of rest."

Before the plan could be carried out, President Harding, beset by the scandalous dealings of some of his cabinet members, died unexpectedly in California.

-- Jeff LaHurd, Sarasota County History Specialist
