

WALDO, WE HARDLY KNEW YE

BY GREGORY ENNS



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One of Florida's biggest dreamers and doers, Waldo Sexton brokered some of Vero Beach's most important land deals while building quirky restaurants, a hotel and a tourist attraction that would give the city much of its personality.

Five decades after his death, Vero Beach's iconoclastic
Waldo Sexton continues to fascinate and surprise

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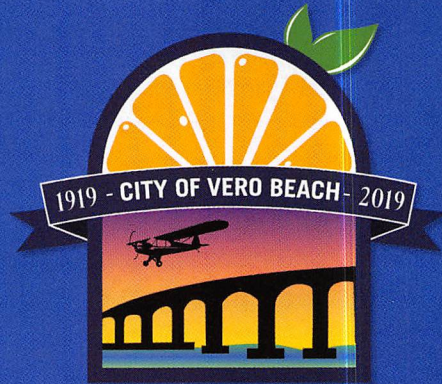
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VERO AT 100

VERO at 100

Celebrating a Century

1919-2019



As Vero Beach prepares to celebrate its 100th anniversary in 2019, no one figure stands taller in the city's history than Waldo Sexton. He is Vero Beach's most iconic figure, celebrated and written about more than any other.

Quirky, eclectic, ubiquitous, enigmatic.

Waldo's entrepreneurial drive and vision permeated every sector of early Vero commerce: real estate sales, residential development, citrus cultivation, cattle ranching, dairy farming and tourism.

His larger-than-life imprint remains indelibly planted on Vero Beach through many of his works that still stand: McKee Botanical Garden, the Driftwood Resort, and the Ocean Grill, Patio and Szechuan Palace restaurants.

He helped develop Vero Beach Country Club and negotiated the sale for the land that would become the Riomar subdivision and John's Island. A collection of bells, many of those acquired by Waldo, can be seen placed discreetly at venues throughout Vero.

His passion for beautifying the city's landscape extends from the water oaks at 14th Avenue to laurels along 21st Street, royal palms on Royal Palm Boulevard, Royal Palm Place and McKee Botanical Garden, and banyan trees throughout the city.

At one time, he was president of 17 corporations, 12 of which were still in existence in 1958. He created a test for confirming the outstanding attributes of Indian River citrus and through his involvement in various organizations, including the Indian River Citrus League, he helped develop its worldwide reputation.

He was a master publicist, stuffing in his pockets McKee Jungle Gardens pamphlets and flyers extolling the features of Vero Beach to hand out on virtually any trip he took — or constantly prodding writers for publications like the *New York Times* or *Saturday Evening Post* to spotlight him and his attractions and the wonders of Vero Beach.

An artist and amateur architect, his greatest gift was salvaging the refuse of Palm Beach mansions to create new structures, perhaps just as structurally sound but looking as if they had been haphazardly put together or were organic to the landscape.

One of 20th century Florida's biggest dreamers and doers, his legacy continues today, carefully nurtured by family members and strangers alike.



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Salesman Waldo Sexton, third from left, oversees the demonstration of the Spalding Deep Tilling Machine in 1913, the year he arrived in Vero.



TRIPSON FAMILY COLLECTION

Waldo Sexton grew up on a farm in Indiana and never strayed too far from his roots. After arriving in Vero Beach in 1913, he would engage in citrus growing, dairy farming and ranching, among many other pursuits.

Fascinated with his various works, who doesn't automatically embrace his spirit when hearing the story of his response to a woman taking a tour with him of the Driftwood? Impressed with a morning tour led by Waldo, the woman took another one in the afternoon. When the woman noted in the afternoon tour that his stories about certain objects were not the same on the tour she had taken earlier in the day, he retorted: "Madam, I'd rather be a liar than a bore."

The anecdote has given generations of Vero natives and newcomers the license to embellish stories about him to such a point that much of what is shared about him today is more apocrypha than fact.

Luckily, his penchant for publicity left a long trail of newspaper interviews and articles about him — often enough to identify inconsistencies and divine the truth through what he repeated most often.

PRESERVING A LEGACY

Five decades after his death, Waldo's family has preserved his legacy through their ownership of many of his works and valuable properties. While all four of his children are now dead, the real estate is controlled by Sexton Inc., a corporation consisting of Sexton descendants from the four families, each controlling about 25 percent of the shares.

The properties are leased with strict provisions on any changes or improvements that leaseholders can make, ensuring that the character remains intact. Even his original 1917 homestead on 12th Street remains in family hands, occupied by his grandson Mark Tripson and altered little since his death.

Waldo's legacy has also been preserved in the Archive Center at the Indian River County Main Library, which has an >>

extensive collection of photos and newspaper clippings from the days of Waldo.

Son Ralph, who headed Sexton Inc. and died in 2014, just two days shy of his 87th birthday, commissioned the only biography of his father, *Tales of Waldo E. Sexton* by George W. Gross, published in 2001. "He spent time with George Gross writing *Tales of Waldo*, giving verbal accounts through his gift of story-telling and his steel-trap memory by which they put together the book," said Ralph's son, Sean Sexton.

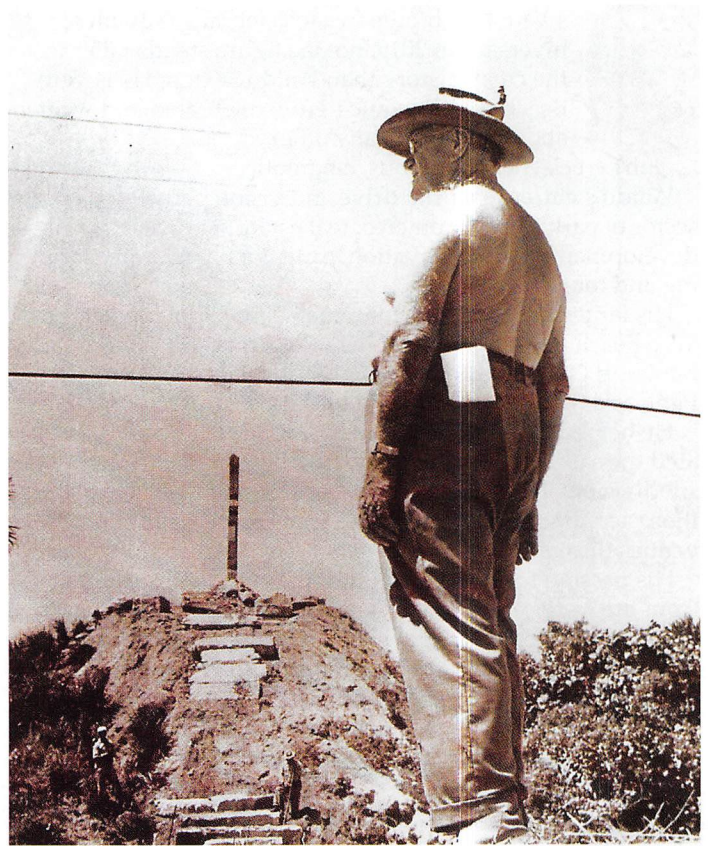
Sean Sexton is the author of another authoritative source, *Waldo's Mountain*, about the hill, now long gone, that Waldo built beachside in Vero across the street from what is now Jaycee Beach Park on A1A.

EARLY YEARS

Waldo was born in Moral Township, Indiana, the sixth child of Isaac and Sara Buckingham Sexton, descendants of families that had settled the Kentucky and Indiana wilderness. Waldo grew up on his parents' 80-acre farm and, according to Waldo biographer Gross, was notified by his father at the age of 10 that he and his brothers were to take over all the work in the fields.

Luckily, Waldo excelled at academics and qualified to attend Shelbyville High School, where he played football. Blessed with a stout physique, he was a powerful force on the field and known to be fearless.

He enrolled in Indiana University in 1908 to study medicine but later dropped out and entered Purdue University to study animal husbandry, graduating in 1911. Financing his education himself, Waldo held jobs stoking furnaces and waiting tables before going into sales. He would buy frater- >>



SEXTON FAMILY COLLECTION

One of Waldo Sexton's last works was his Waldo's Mountain, a free tourist attraction at Bethel Creek in Vero Beach.



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Waldo Sexton's 1917 homestead on 12th Street, now owned by his grandson Mark Tripson and his wife, Hildie, still reflects Waldo's eclectic style.

THE LIFE OF WALDO SEXTON

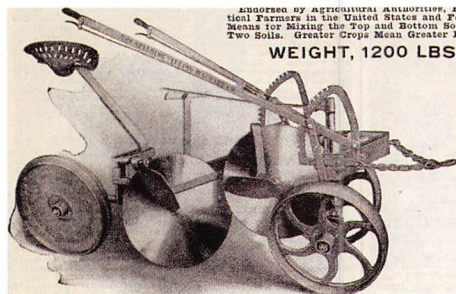
1885 — Waldo Emerson Sexton is born March 23 in Shelby County, Indiana, the sixth child to Isaac Sexton and Sarah Buckingham Sexton. Throughout childhood, he works on the family's 80-acre farm.

1906 — Graduates from Shelbyville (Ind.) High School and enters the University of Indiana to study medicine but later drops out and enrolls in Purdue University to study animal husbandry in 1908.

1911 — Graduates from Purdue and moves to Barberton, Ohio, where he works as manager on the farms of O.C. Barber, known as the Diamond Match King.



1913 — Begins work as a traveling salesman for the Spalding Deep Tilling Machine and travels to Vero for a demonstration. When the demonstration goes awry, he decides to make Vero his home, buys small plots of land and works as a sales agent for Indian River Farms Co.



1915 — Begins the purchase of large pieces of property on the beach and southwest Vero.

1917 — Moves into his bungalow on 12th Street as a bachelor.

1918 — Marries Elsebeth Martens. They later produce a family of two girls and two boys.

1920 — Opens Oslo Packinghouse.

1924 — Founds Vero Beach Dairy, the first commercial dairy in the area.



1932 — Opens McKee Jungle Gardens with Arthur McKee.



1934 — Begins building the Driftwood — then referred to as the Breezeway — as a weekend beach getaway for his family. The project evolves into a hotel that becomes known as the Driftwood Inn and a restaurant now known as Waldo's.

1937 — Completes and opens what would become known as the Patio restaurant.

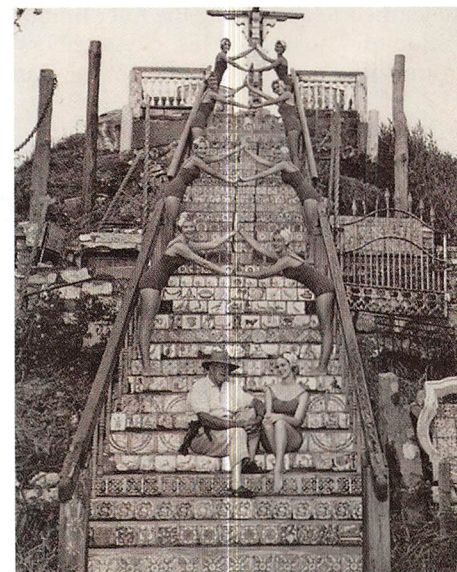


1941 — Completes the building now known as the Ocean Grill, which opened as Gus and Emma's Ocean Grill.



1943 — With 160 acres received from the dissolution of the Kenmore Cattle Company held with three other partners, starts Treasure Hammock Ranch.

1947 — Begins a series of hospitalizations for the treatment of manic depression.



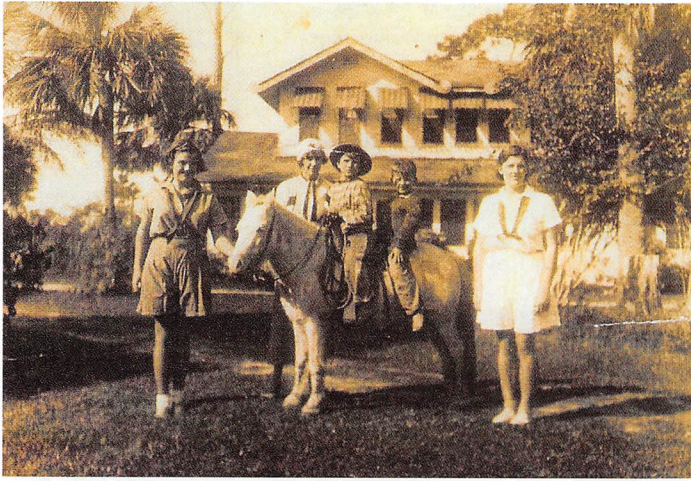
1956 — Begins building Waldo's Mountain and completes it in 1960.

1957 — Completes and opens the Turf Club, now the Szechuan Palace.

1958 — Waldo Sexton Day is celebrated in Vero Beach on Nov. 5.

1967 — Dies Dec. 28 at the age of 82 and is buried in Crestlawn Cemetery in Vero Beach.





SEXTON FAMILY COLLECTION

Waldo's 1917 homestead as seen in the 1930s after a second floor is added. Siblings Barbara Sexton, left, and Jacqueline Sexton, right, are with mom Elsebeth behind the pony. Brothers Ralph, front, and Randy are on the pony.

island accessible only by boat — the first bridge wouldn't be built until 1920 — where he would create the Driftwood Inn and Ocean Grill as well as build Waldo's Mountain.

THE WORK BEGINS

At the time Waldo arrived in Vero, Florida was neither a retirement nor tourist mecca. Yet Waldo saw the promise and potential of it all. And the work ahead did not intimidate the six-foot-one, 200-pound Waldo. In 1958, for example, he claimed as one of his life's accomplishments clearing and grading "the right of way from the old wooden bridge to A.B. Michael's house [on Orchid Island] by manpower alone — no mules, no tractors, no bulldozers."

Waldo initially began working as a sales agent for the Indian River Farms Co. In 1914, he formed his own real estate company. By 1917, he went into farming for himself, planting 10,000 citrus trees the first year and building a small house on 12th Street that would become his homestead.

In 1918, he married Elsebeth Martens of Franklin Park, Illinois, who decided to stay in Vero after a visit with her father. She and Waldo met at the Sleepy Eye Lodge. A graduate of the University of Chicago, she was also the piano player at the local silent theater in Vero.

"She only knew two selections: 'Hearts and Flowers' and 'Johnny Get Your Gun,' which she played alternately as the scene dictated," Sean Sexton wrote. "She and Waldo married and he took her to live in the small two-room house on his property [on 12th Street] where she found he lived in one room and kept the other full of feed."

Waldo and Elsebeth raised their four children at the home that they expanded over time. On the business side, Waldo continued to devote himself to ventures that would ensure his family's security. He had planted citrus groves and opened Oslo Packinghouse in 1920, and in 1924 founded his Vero Beach Dairy.

Waldo's creative period — the time for which he is best known for the buildings he created — lasted from the early 1930s through the late 1950s when he finished his last projects.

As the Great Depression approached and Florida's land boom went bust, new estate taxes forced the heirs of robber barons in Palm Beach to give up their mansions, with some falling under the wrecking ball. Sensing opportunity, Waldo >>

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began making trips to Palm Beach to salvage items from the mansions, whose contents were often put up for auction before being razed. Waldo could often be seen sitting at the auctions, a bag of silver dollars on the floor in front of him, ready to purchase. "I like things nobody else wants," he said.

Once, when he learned that a salvage company was razing an estate and he could purchase contents but would have to pick them up that day, he sent his fleet of dairy trucks to Palm Beach to retrieve the tiles, which were used to decorate Waldo's Mountain.

McKEE JUNGLE GARDENS

With partner Arthur McKee, Waldo formed Royal Park Exotic Nurseries in 1925. By 1929, work on McKee Jungle Gardens began as the nation began slipping into the Depression. The gardens were completed in 1931 and officially opened Jan. 1, 1932, becoming the region's foremost tourist attraction and putting Vero on the tourist map.

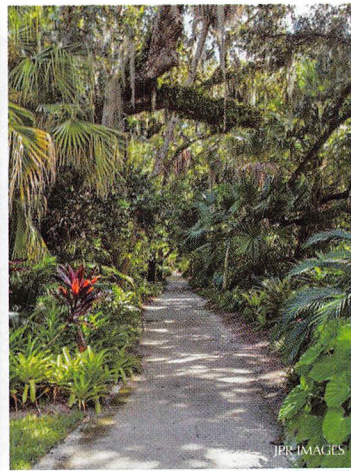
"He saw 100,000 cars a year going down U.S. 1, and he said how are we going to stop them and make money from them?" said grandson Mark Tripson, who is now president of Sexton Inc.

McKee Jungle Gardens contained more than 2,000 botanical species grown throughout the world, as well as jungle trails and the 300-tree Cathedral of Royal Palms planted by Waldo. Later additions included Waldo's Hall of Giants, which features the longest mahogany table in the world, and his outdoor Spanish kitchen, modeled after one Waldo had seen in Mexico. In the early days, Waldo and McKee populated the gardens with 300 animals, including macaws, toucans, flamingoes, alligators, deer, wildcats, a wrestling bear and >>

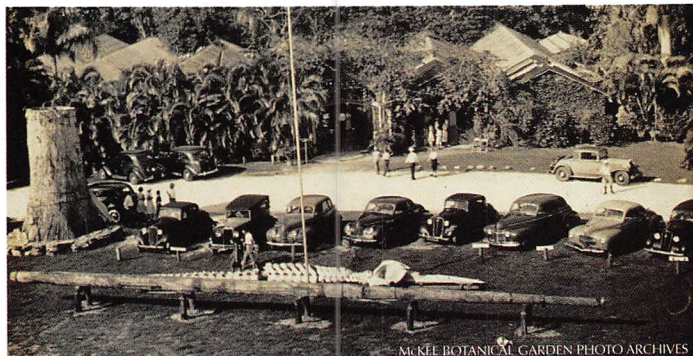


McKEE BOTANICAL GARDEN PHOTO ARCHIVES

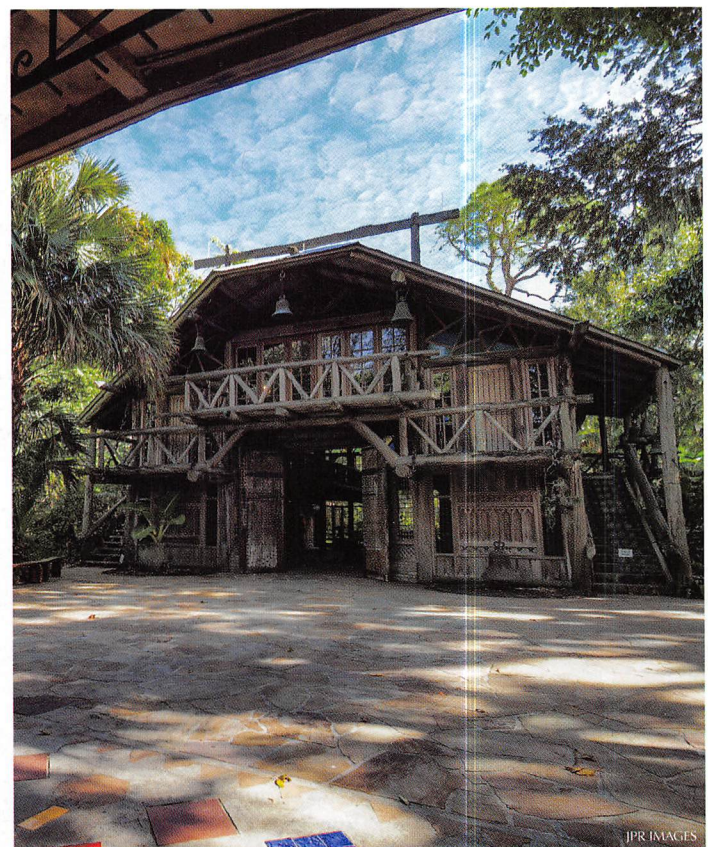
Waldo Sexton, left, developed McKee Jungle Gardens with Arthur McKee.



JPR IMAGES



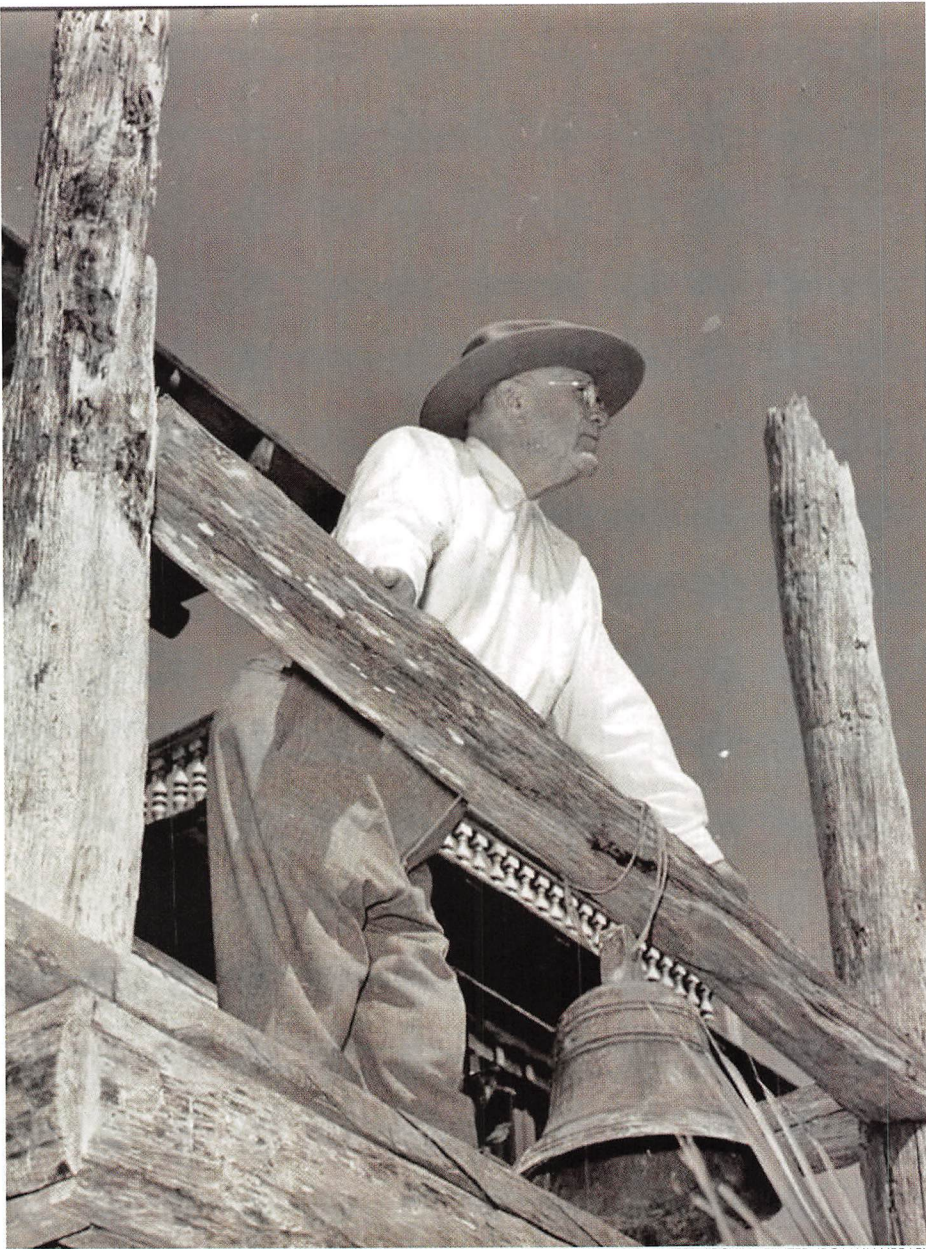
McKEE BOTANICAL GARDEN PHOTO ARCHIVES



JPR IMAGES

At top left, the entrance to McKee Jungle Gardens as it appeared in 1932. Passersby on U.S. 1 could see a giant whale skeleton that McKee visitors encountered before entering, bottom left. Today, Waldo's Hall of Giants, right, which features the world's largest single-piece mahogany table, remains one of the popular attractions at the gardens.

VERO AT 100



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Waldo looks out to the Atlantic from his Driftwood Inn.

various types of monkeys.

As war approached and temporarily forced the closure of the gardens, Waldo sold his interest in the gardens to McKee after 1941.

THE DRIFTWOOD

With lumber rescued from his barn destroyed in a hurricane, Waldo began building what would become the Driftwood in 1933. He enlisted the Rivenbark family of carpenters, who also helped with the construction of the Hall of Giants and later the Ocean Grill and Patio. The Driftwood was originally built as a weekend beach house for his family.

The original building featured a 25-foot breezeway between two sections. The rooms in the sections, which had an upstairs, featured furniture made of driftwood and various objects Waldo collected over the years. "He built with things from the sea and felt the sea could take them back whenever it wanted," said his granddaughter, Logan Tripson Geeslin.

The building's unusual appearance created a demand to rent out rooms, especially since there was only one other hotel on the beach at the time. Elsebeth soon found herself in the hotel business. The venture proved profitable, and Waldo added various wings and rooms over the years.

Besides McKee Jungle Gardens, the Driftwood is one of the few Waldo creations that the Sexton family does not own today. The hotel was sold in 1979 and turned into time-share resorts.

THE OCEAN GRILL

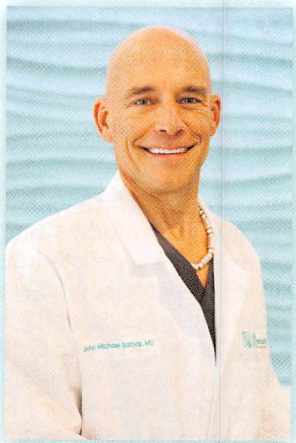
Waldo built the Ocean Grill on a 250-foot piece of oceanfront property he bought in 1925. The property was originally leased for a hot dog and ham->>



The Driftwood, left, as it appeared in 1933. It was originally built as a weekend getaway for the Sexton family, but soon evolved into a hotel and was expanded over the years, at right.



SEXTON FAMILY PHOTOS



Dr. John Michael Sarbak

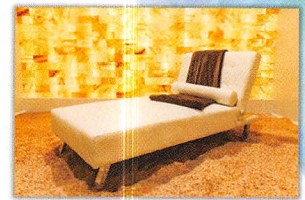


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The Ocean Grill, above, has survived multiple hurricanes, despite its proximity to the Atlantic Ocean.



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The Ocean Grill made its debut as an open-air patio, above, on New Year's Eve 1941 but closed the next day because of no-see-ums. Waldo quickly covered it up and the patio became the main dining room, below.

burger stand, which Waldo later demolished to build a patio dance floor. The Ocean Grill opened New Year's Eve 1941, offering "dancing under the stars," but closed the next day because the no-see-ums arrived at sundown and were fierce.

The patio was covered over immediately and converted to the main dining room. "This structure, like others that were built by Waldo, was not so much designed-and-built, but collected and assembled," biographer Gross wrote. "It gave the appearance of a scrap-wood look on the outside, and a hodge-podge of objects inside, including Tiffany lamps, a number of old paintings, iron grill work, and various artifacts from ships."

The main dining room also features a large round mahogany table and a huge wrought iron lampshade. Since 1965, the restaurant, one of the most popular on the Treasure Coast, has been operated by the Replogle family, which leases it from Sexton Inc.

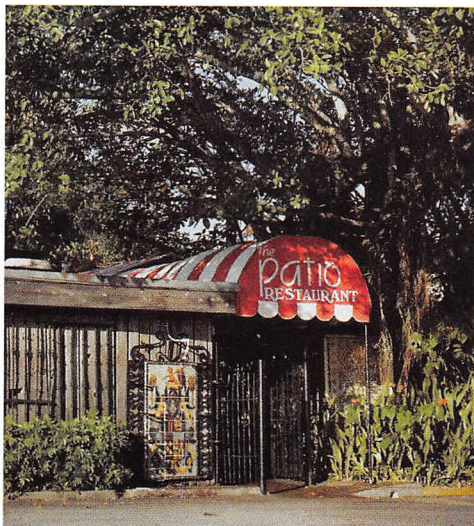
THE PATIO

The Patio began as a real estate office and a fruit stand that was opened in 1935 by Waldo's sister, Lulu Sexton Sleeth. Gas rationing during World War II reduced traffic on U.S. 1 and the fruit stand was closed. The office space over the years housed a dress shop and later an ice cream and hamburger stand.

By late 1950, the Patio had become an open-air restaurant, >>

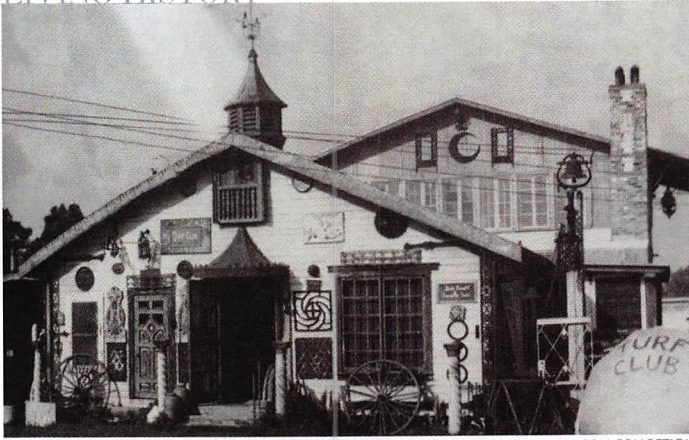


INDIAN RIVER MAGAZINE

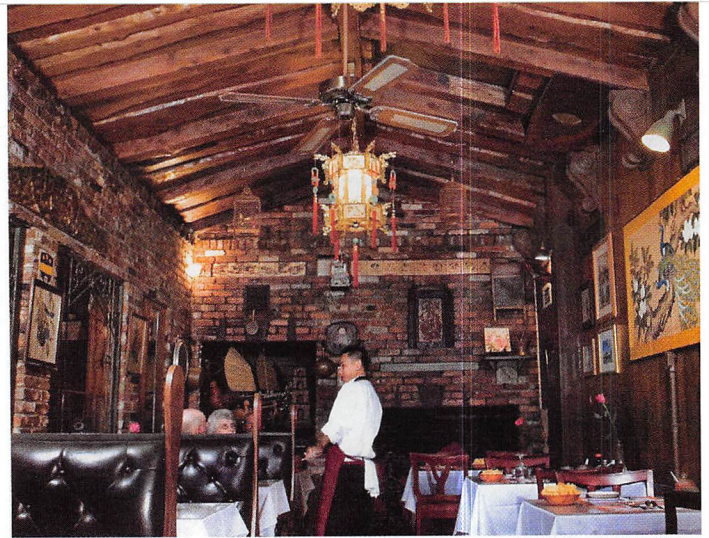


INDIAN RIVER MAGAZINE PHOTOS

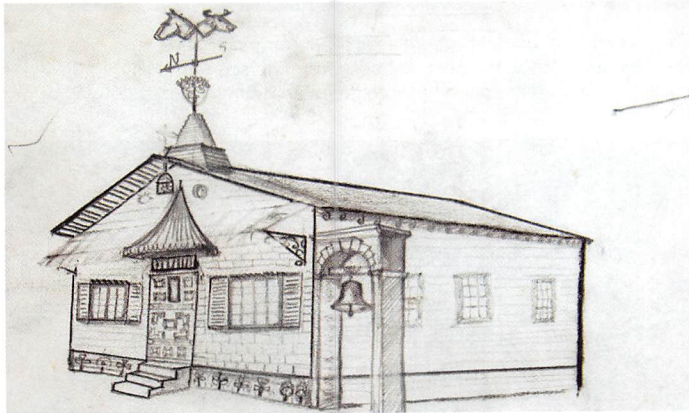
The Patio restaurant features grillwork, tiles and hand-carved panels recovered from various Palm Beach estates.



JIM WILSON COLLECTION



2007 INDIAN RIVER MAGAZINE



JIM WILSON

Waldo opened the Turf Club, top left, in 1957 as a place where artists could exhibit their works. After that proved unprofitable, he transformed it into a restaurant. The Szechuan Palace, top right and lower right, has operated in the building for the last 28 years. Amateur historian Jim Wilson recently acquired a 1956 sketch pad of Waldo's that shows a rendering of the Turf Club, lower left, that was developed by Waldo and another artist. Waldo claimed that the weathervane on the original building came from the barn of the famous thoroughbred Seabiscuit. Hence, he dubbed the building the Turf Club.

featuring grillwork, tiles and hand-carved panels recovered from various Palm Beach estates. Today, the restaurant operates as the Patio Seafood Tavern under a lease with the building remaining under the ownership of Ralph Sexton's heirs.

WALDO'S MOUNTAIN

Waldo's Mountain, started in 1956, was one of Waldo's last major projects. When a Jacksonville company was dredging nearby property, Waldo saw opportunity and encouraged the operator to dump the fill in low-lying spots on his oceanfront property.

When Waldo returned a few days later, he was surprised to see a mountain of fill towering above the trees. Positioned between the Atlantic and Bethel Creek was the 54-foot-high "mountain." Waldo would build a set of concrete and tile stairs leading to a large cross at the top as well as king and queen thrones. Unlike his other projects, he sought no profit in it. Instead, he promoted it as a free tourist attraction and place of reflection that travelers could use as a stop while driving along A1A.

The mountain became a spiritual endeavor for Waldo, who didn't discourage comparisons of various mount references in the Bible to it. He'd hoped that an artist colony would develop around it.

His visions for the mountain were so elevated that he even invited candidates Richard Nixon and John F. Kennedy to debate at the foot of the mountain during their 1960 presidential race.

The mountain was vandalized over the years and was razed in 1973 with the fill being used to shore up the Driftwood and Ocean Grill during a storm threatening the buildings. Though occupied by condominiums, the land underneath remains owned by another Sexton family corporation, Oslo Packing Inc. >>



SEXTON FAMILY PHOTO

Waldo with members of the synchronized swimming team known as the Dolphinettes on Waldo's Mountain in the 1950s



SEXTON FAMILY COLLECTION

Three of the four Waldo Sexton children, Jacqueline (Jackie) Sexton Daley, Ralph Sexton and Randy Sexton, share a laugh about old times as they visit at one of the many gatherings of their large family when Jackie visited from her home in California. All are now deceased.

SZECHUAN PALACE

The origins of the building today known as the Szechuan Palace began when Waldo saw a small building being moved down State Road 60. The building had been Ard's Grocery store, and Waldo convinced the driver to deliver it to a lot he owned on 43rd Avenue, where it has resided ever since.

Waldo initially opened it as the Turf Club in 1957 as a place where artists could exhibit their talents. When that venture proved unprofitable, he transformed it into a restaurant. Though lacking many of Waldo's touches on the exterior, the

inside is pure Waldo, with worm-eaten wood, plaster medallions, ornate wrought iron touches and various art works.

The restaurant building has been operated as the Szechuan Palace for the last 28 years with the Liang family leasing it from Sexton Inc.

THE PATRIARCH

Waldo had a vision for the future of his children — Jacqueline, Barbara, Ralph and Randy — and the generations beyond.

Waldo and Elsebeth, who loved word games, emphasized >>

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learning in the house, and Waldo would offer his children and grandchildren \$100 if they would achieve milestones such as learning the books of the Bible or memorizing the multiplication tables up to 24.

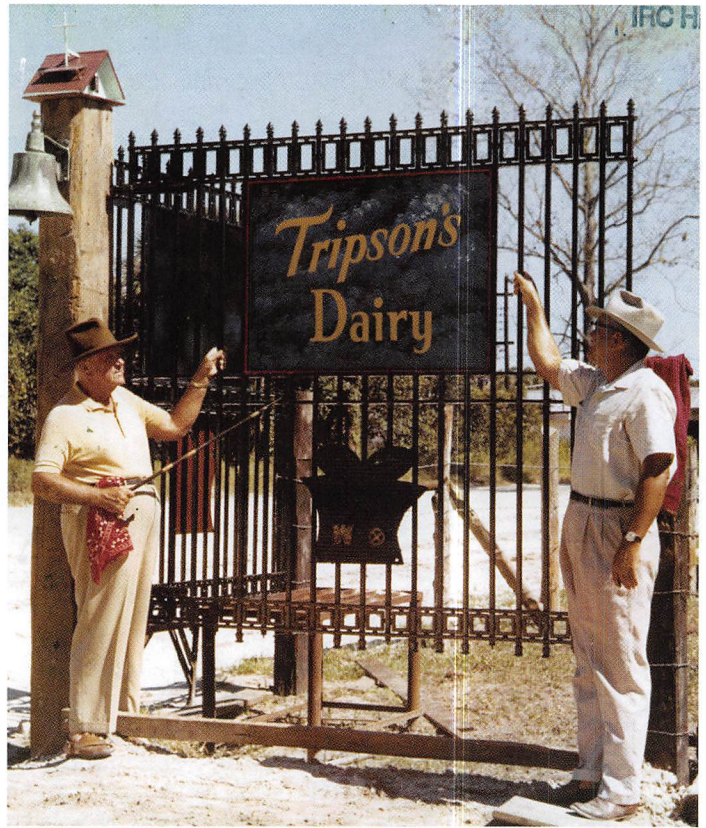
The children had few restrictions or responsibilities, except the care of various pets, which included a macaw, monkey, goats, several dogs and a clowder of cats to keep rats down in the dairy barn. Waldo also gave each of his children a pony.

“Daddy always wanted us to have experiences that he never had and so he took us on all sorts of trips,” Barbara told biographer Gross. “He even took us to West Palm and the cemetery there, where his favorite marker read: ‘That which is so universal as death must be a blessing.’”

As the children of two rare parents who had graduated from college, all four children earned higher degrees themselves: Ralph and Randy at the University of Florida; Jacqueline at Sweet Briar (Waldo tried unsuccessfully to finance one of her years with a railroad car full of grapefruit); and Barbara at the University of Arizona.

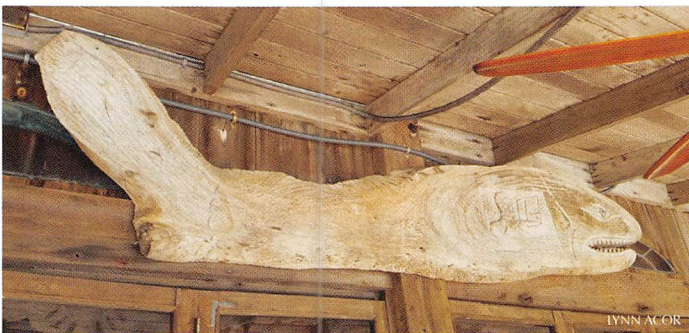
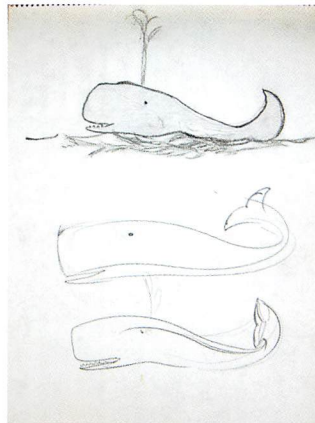
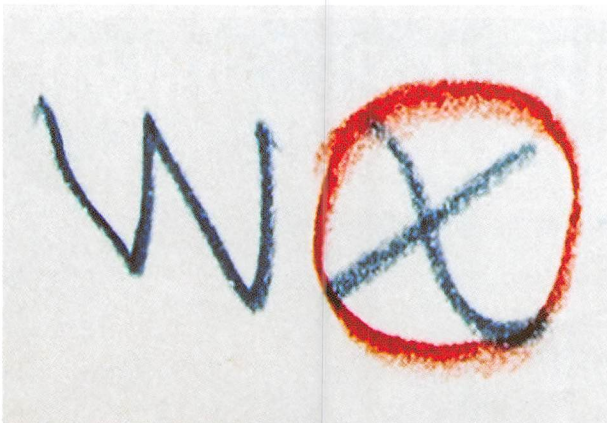
Except for oldest daughter, Jacqueline, who would marry an Episcopal priest and live in California, each of the three other Sexton children followed paths forged by their father. Oldest son, Ralph, bought Treasure Hammock Ranch and Waldo’s beef cattle interests. Youngest son, Randy, bought the groves and packinghouse. Daughter Barbara married John Tripson, who would buy Waldo’s Vero Beach Dairy and transform it into Tripson’s Dairy, serving much of the Treasure Coast.

Barbara and John Tripson lived with Waldo and Elsebeth after their marriage. But when Barbara became pregnant with their first child, Waldo took action. “I’ve already raised four >>

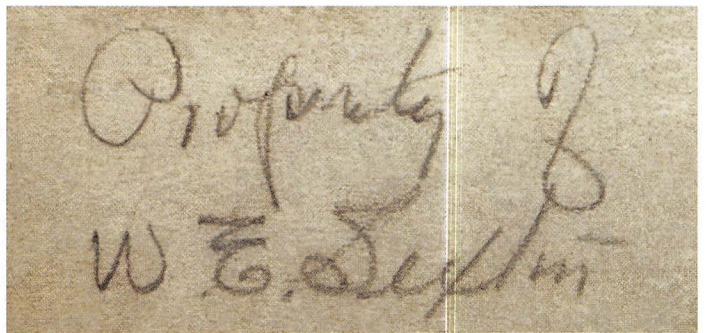


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Waldo, left, and son-in-law John Tripson stand in front of the entrance to Tripson’s Dairy, which Tripson bought from Waldo as Vero Beach Dairy. The dairy was located on the original Sexton homestead.



LYNN ALOR

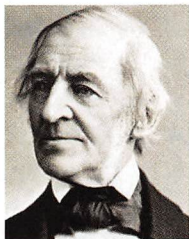


JIM WILSON COLLECTION

Besides a rendering of the Szechuan Restaurant, a 1956 sketch pad of Waldo’s recently acquired by amateur historian Jim Wilson contains other projects of Waldo’s that came to fruition. The pad included a sketch of a whale, middle top, that was carved and now hangs at Waldo’s Restaurant at the Driftwood Resort, bottom left, and a sketch of Waldo’s Mountain, top right. Although Waldo possessed many talents similar to a sculptor, he had limited drawing skills and often enlisted the help of others to create artistic renderings of his visions. Many of the sketches in the pad were drawn with assistance from the artist Leo Sexton (apparently no relation) whose help Waldo enlisted during a visit to see his daughter in Belmont, Calif., in 1956. The pad also included his signature, bottom right, and familiar WS brand, top left.

10 THINGS YOU PROBABLY DON'T KNOW ABOUT WALDO SEXTON

1. He was named Waldo Emerson Sexton after Ralph Waldo Emerson, who led the philosophical and social movement known as transcendentalism, which holds that divinity pervades all nature and humanity. Sexton also named his oldest son, Ralph Waldo Sexton, after Emerson. Waldo's philosophy — "work with nature" — seems aligned with transcendentalism and is reflected in the buildings he would create.



2. He developed a test to analyze the superior qualities of Florida oranges, and the results helped promote the worldwide reputation of Indian River citrus.

3. He developed three varieties of avocado, one of which is named Sexton.



4. He had an affinity for silver dollars. He carried sacks full of them to buy salvaged items during his buying trips to Palm Beach mansions falling under the wrecking ball, gave them to his California grandchildren during visits and tossed a chest full of them to parade-goers on Waldo Sexton Day in 1958.

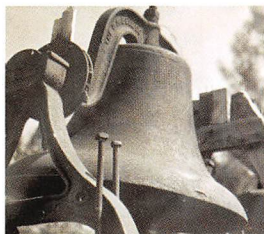
5. He suffered from manic depression and was hospitalized repeatedly, with the depressive episodes often occurring after the completion of a highly creative project. He had several stays at the Menninger Clinic in Topeka, Kansas, where family members say he met fellow patient Judy Garland and members of the famed Barrymore acting family. One of Waldo's older brothers, Enoch, died of suicide in 1924 after a nervous breakdown. Another older brother, William, a police officer, died of drowning when swept off a boat attempting to rescue flood victims.



6. He was friends with the celebrated writers Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings and Zora Neale Hurston, with whom he had a correspondence over several years.

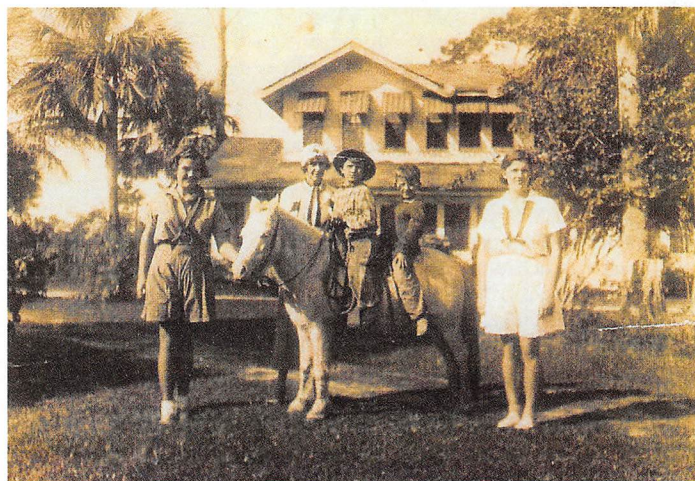


7. He had a spiritual streak. His parents were members of the Methodist Protestant Church in Indiana and he helped build the Community Church of Vero Beach, though he did not regularly attend it. He awarded his older grandchildren

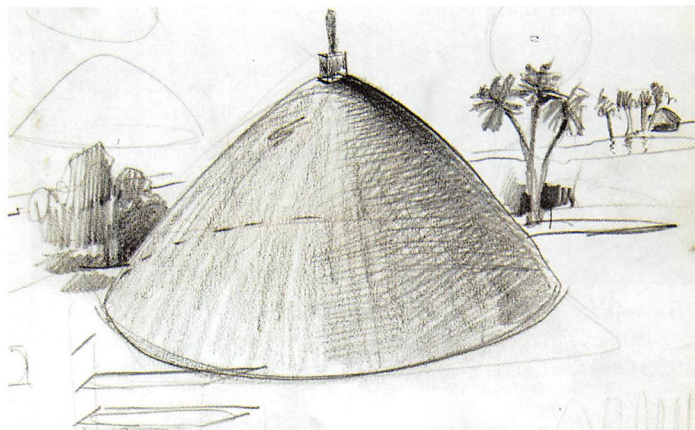


money if they learned the books of the Bible. He said he built Waldo's Mountain because of its Biblical implications. He acquired and collected bells, often giving them away to friends and churches. "When I give them away to a church, I ask them to pray for me. I'm a sinner."

8. Though he lived full-time in Vero beginning in 1913, three of his four children (Jacqueline, Barbara and Ralph) were born in Chicago near their maternal grandparents' home because Vero had only one doctor and no hospital. Only the youngest child, Randy, was born in Vero.

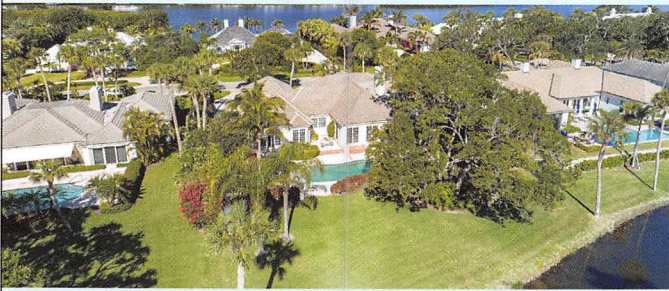


9. He championed the virtues of the "guinea cow," a small cow said to originate with the Spaniards' arrival in Florida in the 16th century. He boasted that the cow required less feed and produced more higher-priced cuts than other beef cattle.



10. He was a frustrated artist who lacked competent drawing skills. Though he would sometimes enlist the services of architects and friend, landscape painter A.E. Backus, to create artistic renderings of his concepts, he often completed them based on his own crude drawings.

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children," he is reported to have told the Tripsons. "I'm not going to raise yours."

Thus, he immediately started to build a house for Barbara and John next door. The four Tripson children grew up with their grandparents living just a few feet away and the Tripson dairy operations almost as close.

"I would go over in the morning and Papa would make me a jelly omelet," recalled granddaughter Logan Tripson Geeslin. "He was basically retired at the time. He'd sit in his garage and sand and paint things. When it's your grandfather, you know he loves you and you don't have any sense of what other people know about him."

Geeslin said Waldo was more than a next-door neighbor. During her senior year of high school, she remembered being surprised when she received an acceptance letter from Macalester College in Minnesota, even though she had never applied. "I had never heard of Macalester and how all my stuff had been submitted," she said. It turned out her grandfather had submitted the application, including the entrance essay.

While Mark Tripson loved and admired his grandfather, he also saw Waldo's darker side and believes some of his issues were related to drinking. "He expected people to be 'Johnny on the Spot' and do what he wanted and sometimes he could be mean. He wanted you to succeed like he did. He'd get you up in the morning at 3 o'clock and say, 'Don't let the sun catch you sleeping in bed.' He was rough and ready. He was frontier."

Mark Tripson and wife, Hildie, ended up buying Waldo's home in 1980. Advocates for historic preservation, the two have made few changes to both houses, with both appearing as they might in the days of Waldo. In true Waldo entre-



TRIPSON FAMILY

Waldo's original homestead is now part of an events venue called Waldo's Secret Garden. In the background is the house Waldo built for the family of his daughter Barbara Tripson.

preneurial fashion, the Tripsons today run the property — known as Waldo's Secret Garden — as a venue for weddings and other large events.

Across State Road 60, Mark's cousin, Sean, continues to oversee the cattle ranch founded by Waldo and taken over by Ralph. Sean runs Treasure Hammock Ranch along with son, Mike.

Randy's son, Randy Jr., has transitioned the family's grove business into a palm nursery while youngest son, Bobby, is a founder of Natalie's Orchid Island Juice Company.

NEW DISCOVERIES

Waldo had his hand in so many enterprises that his various projects still pop up today, surprising his heirs. >>



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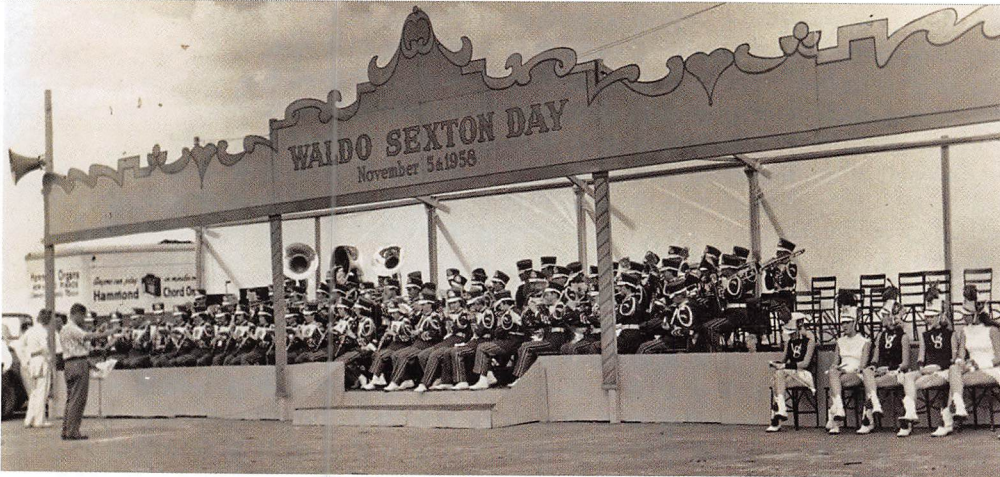
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To honor its most loved citizen, Vero Beach declared Nov. 5, 1958, as Waldo Sexton Day, which featured marching bands and a parade with various Sexton-themed floats, the dedication of Sexton Plaza and a barbecue for 2,000. A proclamation thanked the “stem-winding, spellbinding, idea-hatching, miracle-working, money-making mogul” for devoting his “brain brawn and brass to the community of his choice” and for creating “gardens out of jungles, jungles out of deserts ... fruits out of seeds, hotels out of driftwood [and] order out of chaos.”

Mark Tripson recalled that when Crosby Lumber Company off Old Dixie Highway in Vero Beach was being sold in 1986, it turned out that a Waldo corporation owned the land beneath the building.

When Ralph Sexton’s widow, Chris, was cleaning out his office at Oslo Packinghouse after Ralph’s death in 2014, she discovered pages of correspondence between Waldo and the celebrated writer Zora Neale Hurston from the Harlem Renaissance as well as an unpublished manuscript by Hurston.

Sexton and Hurston had struck up a friendship through their mutual friend, writer Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings.

Most recently, in September, photographer and amateur historian Jim Wilson acquired a sketch book of Waldo’s sold at an auction years ago that contains rudimentary sketches thought to be related to the Szechuan Palace, Waldo’s Mountain and the Driftwood.

Despite Waldo’s vision for grandiose ideas, he had trouble executing because of limited drawing skills. Often, landscape artist A.E. Backus would work with him to develop sketches for his various projects, and Waldo would use them instead of architectural drawings, according to a 1981 interview with Backus.

WALDO’S STRUGGLE

Despite all his accomplishments, Waldo suffered from mental illness that manifested itself during the development of McKee Jungle Gardens in the 1930s.

“He would get depressed, but it was always over money,” said grandson Mark Tripson. “They opened McKee Jungle Gardens and the [Great] Depression started, so how are you going to pay for it now? When that opened it sent him into a downward spiral, and he liked to drink.”

He was eventually diagnosed with manic depression, now known >>



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Elsabeth and Waldo Sexton sit at the reviewing stand on Waldo Sexton day in 1958.



as bipolar disorder, and was hospitalized repeatedly with the depressive episodes often occurring after the completion of a highly creative project.

One episode occurred in Cuba, and Elsebeth had to travel there to retrieve her husband. By 1947, he was being treated in Jacksonville and then later the Menninger Clinic in Topeka, Kansas, and Jackson Memorial in Miami, often with sons Randy or Ralph delivering him or picking him up.

LAST DAYS

As Waldo approached his 80s, city and community leaders declared Nov. 5, 1958, as Waldo Sexton Day to celebrate the life and accomplishments of their favorite son. Sexton Plaza on the beach was dedicated in his honor while bands played and speeches were made. A parade was held featuring floats with themes from various Sexton enterprises. At the reviewing stand where Sexton sat, a chest full of silver dollars sat at his feet.

"The whole town turned out for the parade," said Geeslin. "Papa threw silver dollars at people."

Sadly, it marked the beginning of Waldo's long good-bye to Vero Beach. His health would continue its decline over the next nine years, and he would spend his last five years at the Royal Palm Nursing Home.

He died Dec. 28, 1967, at the age of 82 and was buried in Vero's Crestlawn Cemetery.

"My only regret," he once said, "is that I had not come to Vero Beach sooner." *W*

Reporting for this article is based on Sexton family interviews and archives, 'Tales of Waldo E. Sexton' by George W. Gross, the photo glossary from Sean Sexton's 'Waldo's Mountain' and the research and archives of historian and genealogist Pam Cooper.

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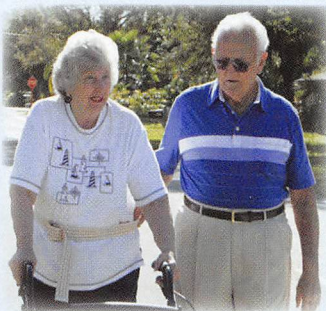
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