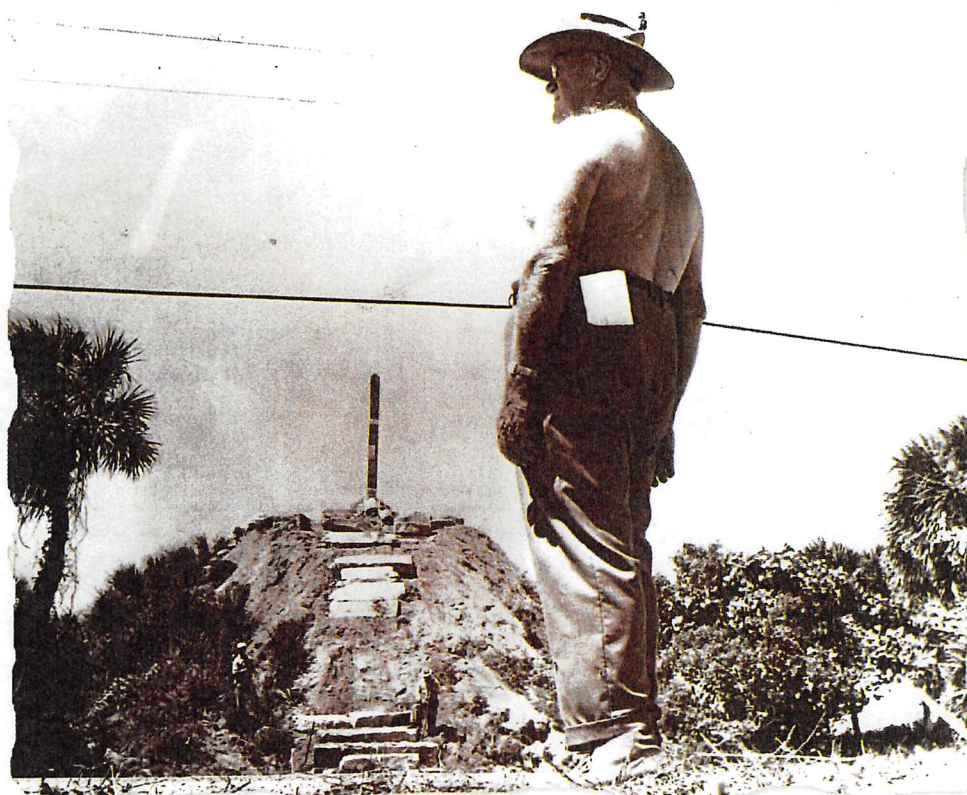


welcome to
**WALDO'S
 WORLD**



Vero Beach pioneer Waldo Sexton (1885-1967) was one of 20th Century Florida's biggest dreamers and doers. The quirky and imaginative Sexton established Vero Beach Dairy and the McKee Sexton Land Company. It was as a developer that he left his greatest mark, building some of the Treasure Coast's most notable landmarks, often using objects from the ruins of Palm Beach mansions.

Sexton's larger than life imprint — some say his sprit — remains indelibly planted on the Driftwood Inn and The Patio, Ocean

Grill, Waldo's and Szechuan Palace restaurants, as well as McKee Botanical Gardens. All survive because of tender care by relatives, tenants and just plain admirers. Even the homestead he built shortly after arriving in Vero around 1912 remains remarkably unchanged.

And surprisingly, all but Waldo's Mountain, above, still stand. To Waldo's spirit and those who've protected it, *Indian River* magazine dedicates this special section. Welcome to the World of Waldo Sexton.

Shabby

Chic

BY RAMON TRIAS
PHOTOS BY PORFIRIO SOLORZANO



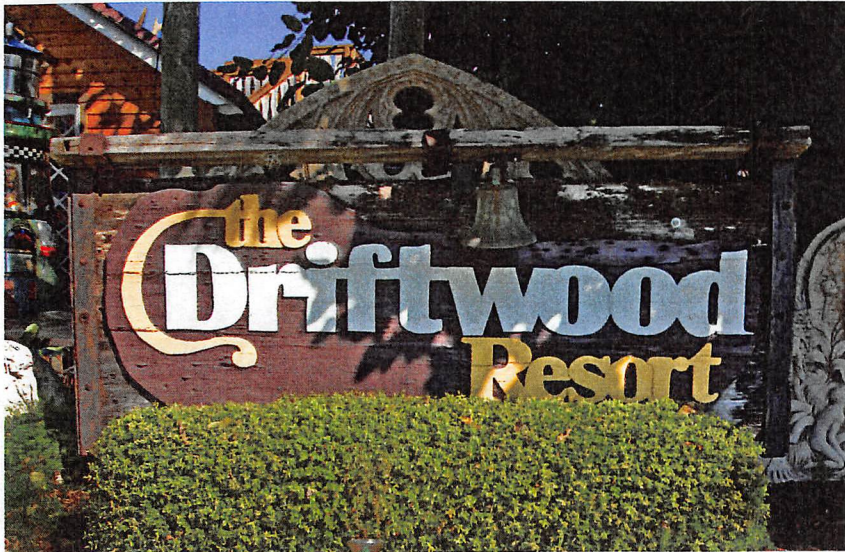
In contrast to its bright sandy white beaches, Vero Beach is fondly known for a few dark interiors. Waldo Sexton built them, one at a time, transforming found objects into art, and infusing them with his own brand of quirkiness. No one has ever done quirky like Sexton.

Against all odds, and in spite of direct hits by two hurricanes during the endless storm season of 2004, Sexton's fragile ensembles of recovered wood and secondhand antiques by the ocean's edge continue to charm. The Driftwood Inn and the Ocean Grill already looked weathered and battered for decades, and still do, thanks to sensitive restorations.

As Addison Mizner is celebrated as the undisputed visionary of The Boom, Sexton could be remembered as the resourceful craftsman of The Bust. After a few profitable years, Mediterranean architecture's reign as the luxurious

standard of good taste came to an end. The Bust was a difficult time and few builders stayed around. Waldo Sexton did stay in Vero Beach until his death in 1967 at age 82. Staying in one place took conviction and vision and a talent for picking up and collecting the pieces after the economy crashed.

Sexton was one of the handful of legendary pioneer entrepreneurs of the Indian River region, smart and ambitious men who had the courage to dream big and knew how to marshal the mechanical and financial resources to create dry land out of wetlands, plant thousands of citrus trees, and



plan and sell subdivisions for millions of future residents, neatly organized in 50-foot lots, with alleys in the back.

By the mid-1920s this frenzy of activity would be known as The Boom, and, after two devastating hurricanes in 1926 and 1928, would definitively end with the Great Depression of 1929. Some of the old paper subdivisions are still empty today, even after decades of explosive growth.

Sexton anticipated the future of Florida, for better or for worse. He built themed restaurants and a boutique hotel decades before the concepts became trendy. In fact, he even perfected the "Florida attraction" with his partner Arthur McKee. McKee Jungle Gardens was a popular destination, dating from the innocent days before Disney standardized the formula for fun. It closed in the 1970s and is now a botanical garden, known for a large and solid

>>



The entrance of the Driftwood today, top left, looks quite different than it did when Sexton built it, left middle. Above, a Madonna sculpture adorns the wall of one of the buildings at the Driftwood Resort. At left, large Renaissance-style sculpted artifacts line the entrance to the inn. Sexton decorated much of the Driftwood with artwork done in similar styles. Opposite page, one of the units at the resort features stained-glass, which Sexton liked to use for decoration.

Angles explores the architecture of the Treasure Coast.

At right, the original part of the Driftwood that was built by Waldo Sexton as it stands today Below, a view of the same building as it looked shortly after it was built. Bottom, a view of some of the units that make up the resort. Waldo's Restaurant & Bar can be seen in the background.



mahogany table, an item acquired by Sexton from the 1904 world's fair in St. Louis.

Sexton's inimitable architectural intuition was well suited for The Bust. He saturated his disheveled buildings with an elegant and shabby sense of historicism, through his choice of materials and shapes. Thus, the artistry was real, and mostly a result of creative display and recomposition. The source: salvaged ornaments, some even from older Mizner buildings, demolished during the Great Depression.

Sexton's flair for crafting memorable drinking and eating establishments out of the remains of The Boom is unmatched. Generations of residents and visitors have relaxed, talked and dined within his work. The view toward the waves from a bar stool at the Ocean Grill is stunning, precarious, irresistible and, frankly, predictable. Everyone has already seen the beach on the way in, or at any arbitrary point of Florida's long coastline. On the other hand, the lounge and the ever-packed dining room will surprise even the most traveled visitor.

A couple of blocks to the south of the Ocean Grill, within comfortable walking distance and also along the ocean, the easy urbanism of the Driftwood Resort, known to Sexton and history as the Driftwood Inn, is not overwhelmed by the funky aesthetic. At the inn one can leave the car curbside, where most cars belong in Vero Beach's exceptionally scaled beachside commercial district. Upon arrival, the bas-reliefs along the sidewalk record some of the myths of early Florida history, images that were all the rage during The Boom, when South Florida was so new that its



Above, one of the long wooden tables that Sexton placed at the Driftwood. At top, a wooden pelican oversees the Driftwood Resort, a shared space between cars and people headed for the beach.

history had to be invented, through art and architecture.

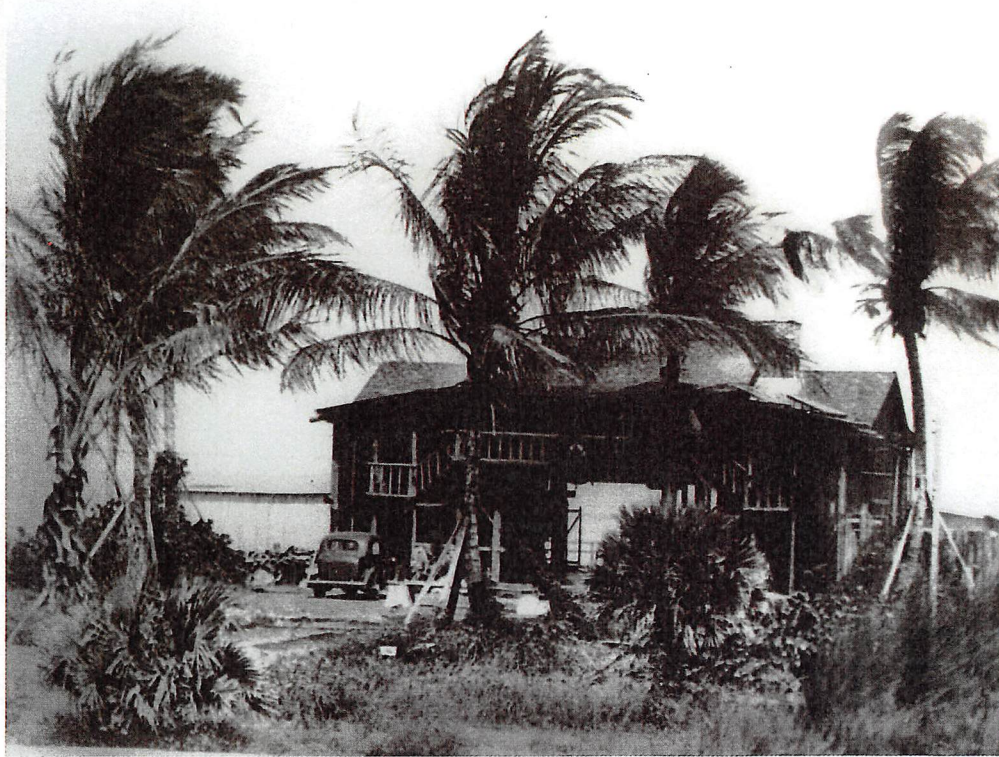
The resort is developed around a parking court, designed to be a pedestrian space, whether vehicles are there or not. Cars and people share this space, on the way to the beach. The many small buildings around the court record the evolution of the complex, from a private beach house to a historic landmark, but they are also Sexton's design choice. The Driftwood Inn was not inspired by the grand manner of the beaux-arts, customary for the New York architectural firms that designed The Biltmore and The Breakers in better times of The Boom. This is a resort for The Bust.

The building on the southern side, following impeccable construction logic, is made of brick on the ground and raw wood on the upper story. Within the brick wall, however, Sexton inserted terracotta angels and Madonnas, done in the effortless and recognizable style of Luca de la Robbia (1400-1482), who set up an efficient workshop in Renaissance Florence to mass produce colored medallions of clay, for the Medici and the Church. In the manner of de la Robbia, Addison Mizner set up his fabled Mizner Industries in West Palm Beach during the 1920s, to make decorations for the wealthy clients of his mansions, and building materials in the Mediterranean style.

There may be many bland poolside restaurants in Florida beach hotels, surrounded by ample parking. On the other

>>

ANGLES



hand, Waldo's is a restaurant and indoor/outdoor bar, which happens to have a pool, a hotel and, almost as an afterthought, a nice Florida beach nearby. The wood outside and inside certainly appears to have drifted to shore. And yet, the solid entrance door demands immediate architectural attention, rewarded once inside by Sexton's craft.

Sexton's distinctive assortments of stained-glass windows and arabesque tile endure as reclaimed ruins. Somehow, as reinterpreted by Sexton, clay, glass and driftwood evoke dreams of a tourist paradise. The incomparable natural setting is almost superfluous. Sexton's subtle and artful second hand interiors prevail over the pull of the sunshine and the sand.

Sexton acquired leftover bits and pieces, and rearranged them in whimsical ways within the walls of the Driftwood, or inside The Patio and the Ocean Grill. Consistent with the long and storied tradition of economic downturns, Sexton recycled ruins, as Michelangelo recycled the Roman bronze statue of Marcus Aurelius during the Renaissance by building a plaza and a pedestal for its proper display. Surprise and delight, respect and humor, and an eminently pragmatic purpose, all exist at the moment of reinvention. Sexton makes no attempt to recreate. He is an original. *RS*



Clockwise from top left, the original building surrounded by nothing but sand and palm trees. A painting of Waldo Sexton hangs in the office at The Driftwood. What seems like a coffin with a glass viewing mask is displayed by the entrance of Waldo's Bar & Restaurant. The main fireplace at Waldo's Restaurant & Bar is adorned with eclectic decor.

When guests walk into one of the Vero Beach restaurants created by Waldo Sexton more than 50 years ago, they're in for more than a dining experience. Some are surprised by the history that surrounds them, but even regulars who think they've seen all there is to see might learn about something they hadn't noticed in earlier visits.



Waldo's restaurant

Casual beachfront dining meets classic kitsch decor

What began in 1937 as a kitchen in the Sexton family's beach house evolved by 1947 into the beachfront restaurant named after Waldo Sexton.

Like other Sexton-built properties, the airy and open Waldo's restaurant is paneled in wormwood and decorated with objects d'architecture — wrought-iron grates and gates, hundreds of sometimes quirky, hand-painted tiles, found objects, collections and bells from ships and other modes of transportation.

"Everything is like his wife told him to clean out the garage and it ended up here," says Lee Olsen, restaurant manager. And it's not messy; it's quaint and welcoming.

"Waldo used to take off with his pickup truck and come back a few days later with it full of architectural pieces he would find all over," says Jean Radlet, manager of The Driftwood Resort, where Waldo's is located.

When the family began renting guest rooms as The Breezeway, the area lacked restaurants. Waldo's wife, Elsebeth, cooked for guests from her family kitchen.

BY SHELLEY OWENS | PHOTOS BY PORFIRIO SOLORZANO



Booths are decorated with memorabilia at Waldo's Restaurant & Bar at the Driftwood Inn. At top, the entrance to the restaurant.



WALDO'S RESTAURANT & BAR

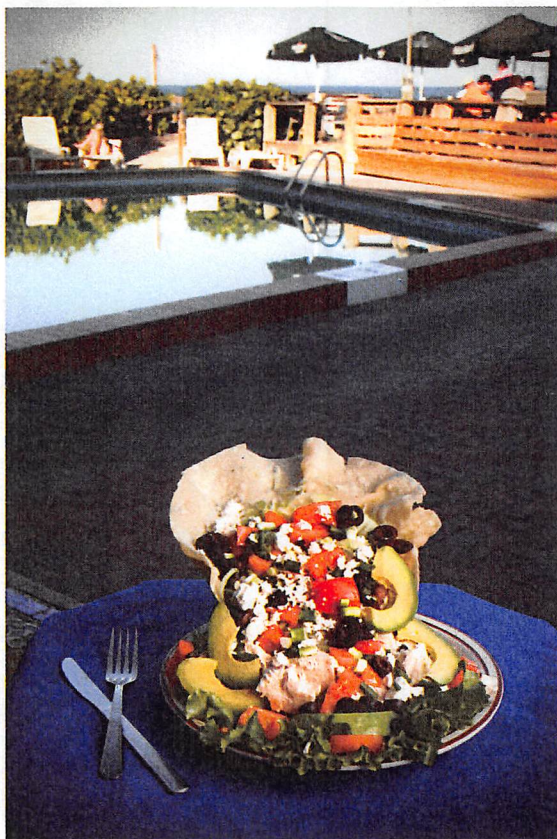
Where: The
Driftwood Resort
3150 Ocean Drive
Vero Beach

Owner: Summit Hotel
Management

Hours: Sunday through
Tuesday, 11 a.m. to
9 p.m.; Wednesday
through Saturday,
11 a.m. to 10 p.m.;
Happy Hour Monday
through Friday,
4 to 6 p.m.;

Specials: Waldo's Sunset
Celebration (\$14.95
dinner specials) daily,
4 to 6 p.m.

Call: 772.231.0550



When the existing restaurant was built in 1947, guests dined together at 25-foot-long tables, reminiscent of roadside inns from the time when the United States was being settled.

If you asked where he got them, even he might not remember, Radlet says. In an old Waldo's menu, the author hinted that you might see the ghosts of Amazon tribesmen or Sir Henry Morgan. But you might certainly see a few celebrities from the era. Pilot Eddie Rickenbacher, conductor Leopold Stokowski, author Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings and fashion icon Gloria Vanderbilt were among the more famous guests.

At the time, *The Two Bells* breakfast would have set them back \$1.85 – including freshly squeezed Florida orange juice. And *The Two Bells* open-faced corned beef sandwich was only 10 cents more.

Today, dishes on the Waldo's menu are named more for the ingredients than for architectural collections. But you can order from the extensive menu including sandwiches from \$6.25, salads from \$9.50 and dinners from \$14.25. *PR*

One of the many fresh salads on the menu is served poolside, left. Above, patrons chat at the bar.