

# Melrose 2000

By Al Burt

Greetings from Melrose in the millennium year 2000. We think it is a time and a place worth remembering.

Lakes, forests and graceful sandhills dominate our landscape. This is the quiet side of Florida, away from the crowds and concrete strips along the coasts and the interstates. Tall pines give us our only high-rises. Our most visited buildings -- the Melrose Elementary School, the Melrose Library and the churches -- explain where our heart lies. Places like this dwindle as the Florida population (now 16 million) keeps growing.

Giant live oak trees, draped with Spanish moss, shade our streets. Azaleas and camelias decorate our lawns and seasonal wildflowers brighten our roadsides. Scavenging deer munch shrubs in outlying fields, egrets stroll our lake shores, armadillos root in the yards, and a few sandhill cranes patrol our pastures and pecan groves year-round (other sandhill cranes migrate here from the north during winter). Bream, black bass and catfish inhabit the lakes, along with alligators and turtles and occasional otters. Ancient cypress trees grace Melrose Bay where it opens into Lake Santa Fe. Interior streets remain unpaved, and three of them -- Park, Pine and Centre -- have grassy, tree-lined medians.

In this setting, even without a calendar we are aware of the seasons and their influences. When the lightning bugs begin blinking, and the pecan trees begin greening, and the chuck-will's-widow begins to whistle at night, we know it is spring. Rains and heat and humidity tell us it is summer. When the yellow school buses start rolling and the dogwoods and maples turn yellow and red, and when the air thins out cool and dry, we know it is fall. Occasional freezes and local headlines gloating about the snow and the ice up north, tell us it is winter

Melrose, founded on abandoned cotton fields in 1877, has brought the past and the present together in a pleasing, comfortable way. The Historic District (placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1990) gives us both heritage and function. Its late 19<sup>th</sup> century homes – all of them with porches, and most of them gabled, two-story frame buildings with brick chimneys – surround Melrose Bay and anchor Bellamy Road (completed as Florida's first federal highway in 1826, paved through Melrose as State Road 26 in 1926).

History is part of our daily lives. Some highlights: The original McKendrie Lamb home (called Bay View, built 1878), on the bay at the foot of Quail Street, serves as a bed-and-breakfast, the closest thing Melrose has to a motel. The Cracker-style, Robert Cason House (1900) at the corner of Bellamy and Lexington Avenue is the home of Susan and Tom Lucas. The M & S Bank building once was the Tolles House (1893). The Baldwin store, built by L. Memory Baldwin in 1899 and restored this year after it had been partially destroyed by fire, becomes an ophthalmology office each Friday as owner Dr. W. H. Marshall, Jr. (known to us as Terry) brings his Gainesville practice to Melrose. The Melrose Art Gallery holds exhibitions in an adjoining building. The Melrose Homemakers' Club was built in 1879 as the Vogelbach Pharmacy. The 1876 Bonney Mount, a bayside residence and our oldest existing structure, also is owned by Dr. Marshall. The old Hilton House (1860's) stands vacant after having been used as a restaurant and a produce market. Trinity Episcopal Church (1886) still holds services in its original 1886 Carpenter Gothic, board and batten building. Lowry's Antiques (Anne and Charles Lowry) does business in what once was a 1920's non-denominational church building.

The community has been fortunate with historical records. Joe Daurer, a World War II combat photographer, who later worked in advertising and promotion for companies in Illinois and Tennessee, moved here in 1961 as southeastern regional sales manager for the Baldwin Piano Co. His wife, Rosemary, became a teacher at the P. K. Yonge school in Gainesville. They lived on Melrose Bay and became interested in collecting, recording, preserving, and copying the history of Melrose.

They were involved in the founding of Historic Melrose, Inc. (1988), and Rosemary became the resident expert on local history. Joe Daurer died in 1998 and was buried at the Melrose Cemetery (founded 1859, a half-mile south of the crossroads on SR21). A collection of the Daurer historical pictures is housed in a building on the grounds of the M & S Bank. In addition, many of the Daurer pictures and much of Rosemary's expertise is reflected in the two local history books written and privately published by Zonira Tolles, also a retired local teacher (the books: Shadows on the Sand, and Bonnie Melrose).

Melrose clusters around the crossroads of State Roads 26 and 21, its traffic regulated by our lone traffic signal, which was put up in 1987. The family-run Chiappini's general store and service station, founded by Papa Joe Chiappini in 1935, anchors the northwest corner. At Chiappini's, known jocularly as the Capitol of Melrose, you can buy anything from live worms for fishing bait to champagne.

Diagonally across the intersection sits the Melrose Elementary School (a high school from 1925 to 1968, before school consolidation), which had an enrollment this year of 375 students attending classes pre-Kindergarten through the fifth grade. The school annually holds a number of community events, including an arts and craft festival. Separate from the school but complementary, Teacher Laurie Alsobrook and the Melrose Youth Sports Association supervise organized athletics for boys and girls in leagues that operate virtually year-round. With a state grant, local donations and local volunteers, MYSA is building its own athletic facilities adjacent to the Melrose school grounds. About five miles south on SR21, the Ochwilla Elementary School has an enrollment of about 540.

The community, divided by the boundaries of Putnam, Alachua, Bradford and Clay counties, feels itself something of a legal stepchild. Since it is not incorporated (Melrose had been incorporated from 1902 to 1910, but changed its mind and gave up its charter) and therefore has no town limits, the number of residents can only be estimated. The population scatters out among the dozens of lakes that surround us. Further confusing, many of the lakeside houses are used as second homes, or for

weekend holidays and summer vacations. Within a five-mile radius, using Post Office and Clay Electric Cooperative guesses, a liberal estimate of 18,000 can be argued.

Nearby are Camp Shands, the 800-acre Boy Scout camp on Baden-Powell Road, and the 9,266-acre Katherine Ordway Preserve established in 1980 for environmental research by the University of Florida (UF Professor Mel Sunquist supervises it). Among its subjects of interest is the gopher tortoise, an endangered species.

Many Melrosians are older folk and retired. The younger, working ones find employment in the small businesses of the area, or in the schools, at the Clay Electric Cooperative, Inc., Alltel Telephone Company, the St. Johns River Water Management District at Palatka, or by commuting to the nearby cities. Afternoons and mornings, SR 26 becomes a two-lane raceway as commuters make their way to and from jobs in Gainesville. The closest incorporated communities are Keystone Heights, Interlachen (where our children are bused to high school), Hawthorne, Waldo, Starke, and Palatka. The bigger cities are Ocala and Jacksonville, in addition to Gainesville. Seasonal agricultural employment is available at our grape vineyards, blueberry and vegetable farms, and landscape nurseries.

In transient, urban Florida, we are blessedly different. Though without local government, our people work to retain a sense of community. Since 1982, for example, the Melrose Water Association, Inc., locally owned water cooperative run by a local board of directors, has served as a water utility, pumping and distributing water to about 500 residential customers who live roughly within the old town limits. Most homes in the area are served by septic tanks, and outlying houses use private wells for water. Police protection is provided by the counties, principally by a Putnam County deputy sheriff assigned here. Jeff Smith, D. D.S. offers dental care and Daniel Cox, M.D., offers general practice medical care. Fire protection and rescue service come from the Melrose Volunteer Fire Department (Pat Warren, president), which has 16 firefighters and one tanker among its eight trucks. Melrose V. F. D. is supported by Alachua and Putnam counties, and through annual local membership donations. The

fire house, at the northwest corner of SR26 and Cypress St., also serves as a voting precinct. During 2000, the MVFD lost one of its principal supporters with the death of former chief Rudolph Dampier.

The Melrose Business and Community Association (Bart Adams, MBCA president) also substitutes for local government in many ways. It carried out a variety of community projects this year, including one this year headed by Ron Haase and Tom Lucas to beautify Bellamy Road with sabal palms and flowering ground covers. Another project succeeded in getting the county to provide new sidewalks north of the crossroads on the west side of SR 21.

Most years Historic Melrose, Inc., sponsors historic home tours under the guidance of Rosemary Daurer and Jean Marshall. The tour this December was put together by Tom Lucas. For the fifth consecutive Labor Day, Stacey Chiappini directed the annual Grape Festival, sponsored by the MBCA and supported by the Florida Grape Growers Association and local growers Felicity Trueblood of Meadowmere Farms and Jim Dennis of Hilltop Vineyards. Jeannette Berk of the MBCA originated a Merrie Melrose Christmas parade in 1989 and still shepherds it in early December each year. Bands march and nearly all Melrose participates. On the Fourth of July, a flag-waving boat parade circles Lake Santa Fe, and picnics follow. At these events, and more, local photographer Cornelius Clayton preserved it all in pictures.

Kathi Warren and the Melrose Library Association volunteers, with the professional guidance of librarian Stella Brown, help raise money for library needs (including a successful effort to accumulate some \$75,000 in matching funds to persuade the state and county to build a new children's wing on the library, being prepared for opening as the year 2000 started). At regular intervals, Anna Elliott, retired teacher and former Peace Corps Volunteer, holds children's programs at the library. The Lake Area Singers, directed by Margaret Rice, perform at an annual Madrigal dinner and schedule other musical events, including Gilbert & Sullivan operettas. The Melrose Woman's Club (Marilyn Morrow, president) holds bake sales and other events to sponsor scholarships for local students. Trinity Episcopal Church's

Thrift Shop provides an outlet for distributing used goods and clothing.

One new home, built in the Historic District this year by Kathi and Pat Warren on the bay at the corner of Wynwood St. and Seminole Ridge Rd., provided a personal link to the original development here. Pat is a great-great-grandson of Elijah Wall, identified in the Tolles books as the first settler in the area between Melrose and Putnam Hall. Elijah and his family, from South Carolina, came to Florida in a covered wagon in 1850 and acquired 160 acres of federal land through a bounty land warrant. The land was located in what is now the Ordway Preserve. Kathi, his wife, was the grand-daughter of Flora Sipprell, for whom the nearby community of Florahome was named. George L. (a dentist) and Flora Sipprell came to the area from Canada on their wedding trip in 1885. Both are buried at the Paran Cemetery.

In our best moments, with only mild exaggeration, we like to say that around Melrose, we tend to enjoy mostly quiet surprises and small pleasures. We remain rural, but nearby are the conveniences of the cities, including Gainesville and Jacksonville. Life centers around the home, the yard, the neighbors. We meet at places like the library and the Post Office, or at Williamson's Grocery Store (its existence in this day of chain supermarkets a testimony to Romey Williamson and his sons, Brian and Bruce). When we dine out locally, we have the choice of Blue Water Bay for dinner and lunch, the Melrose Café for breakfast and lunch, Betty's Pizza and Fryer's for lunch and dinner (Fryer's featuring, yes, fried chicken).

Most of the things we worry about, though certainly not all, involve fear of losing what we have. We have tried, and failed so far, to get a state grant to establish a park on the open lot across Bellamy Road from Trinity Episcopal Church. It would help preserve the Melrose ambience. There is discussion about incorporating Melrose again to achieve more local control of the future. Some think this would only mean more taxes. We worry because the year 2000 has been unusually dry, and many of the lake levels have fallen. A few in the area, like Lake Brooklyn at Keystone Heights, and Orange Lake at Cross Creek, threaten to become prairies. We worry about illegal drug use and crime, though most of our lives are touched only by occasional petty

crime, like break-ins and thefts. We want to grow and prosper but we worry that Florida's never-ending population boom might swamp us with development that would wipe out the special nature of our community and squeeze out locally owned businesses.

Even so, we count ourselves lucky. One hundred years earlier, in 1900, Melrose nearly lost its identity. In the year 1900, five years after devastating freezes killed the citrus industry and almost made this a ghost town, Melrose had not been so sure. In the years since, despite wars and Depressions and changing public tastes, the community found its way back to a recognition that its future was rooted in the past. In the year 2000, Melrose had a sense that its identity centered around the lakes, the rural environment and history kept alive by the Historic District.

(Al Burt, a resident of Melrose, authored four books on Florida: *Al Burt's Florida* and *The Tropic of Cracker*, both published by the University Press of Florida; *Becalmed in the Mullet Latitudes*, published by Florida Classics Library; and *Florida A Place in The Sun*, published by Burda of Germany).

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