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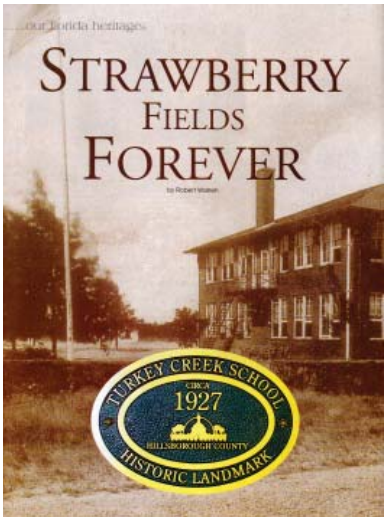
Researched and Written by Robert Warren

"Strawberry Fields Forever", Florida Monthly, January 2005

"The Burgert Legacy", Florida Monthly, February 2005

"The Lasting Treasures Of The New Deal", Florida Monthly, March 2005



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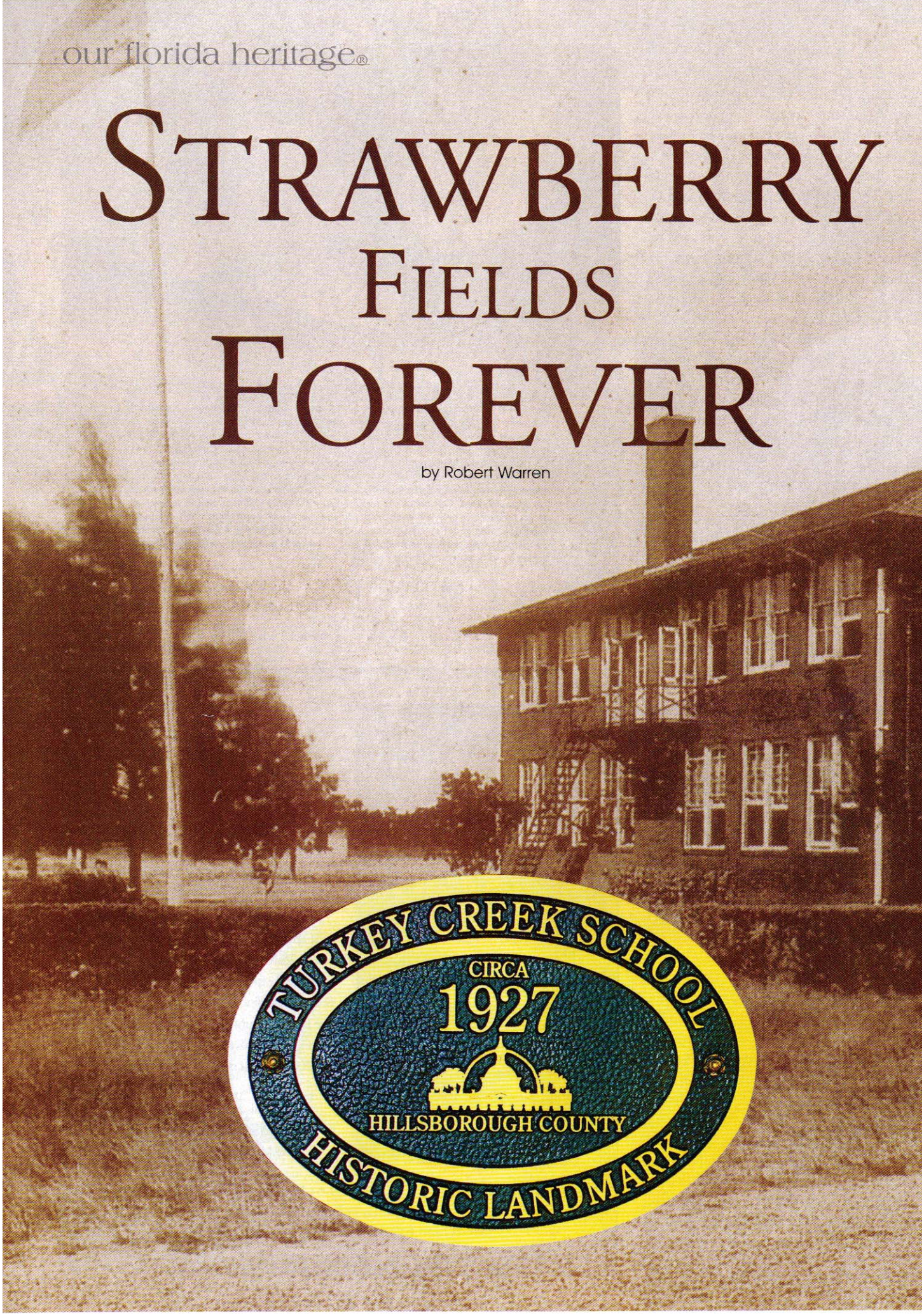
STRAWBERRY FIELDS FOREVER

by Robert Warren



Turkey Creek school

On the north end of east Hillsborough County's Turkey Creek Middle School stands a simple two-story brick building, nestled among Plant City's modern commercialized strawberry fields. The windows are dark, the doors are locked; a brass plaque near the front door identifies the historic landmark as Turkey Creek School.

Turkey Creek was one of Plant City's very first—and very last—"strawberry schools," rural institutions operating on an annual schedule coinciding with the winter strawberry harvest. Strawberry school students, mostly the children of local farmers, attended school March to December, with three months break to help work the fields during the winter strawberry season.

The earliest historical record of Turkey Creek School, mentioned in School Board meeting minutes dated March 1, 1873, reads simply: "The Board confirms the action of the supt. in establishing a school at Turkey Creek Numbered 16, with J. J. E. Frierson as trustee." The school was a simple white wood frame construction, the class size only a few dozen elementary students; six other schools are known to have existed countywide at that time.

Plant City, known in 1873 as a center of cotton shipping, was still decades away from discovering its strawberry future. Local farmers grew cotton, citrus, celery, tobacco, pepper and rice. Like most of America at the time, the area's economy depended on the agricultural production of small family farms. In those early years, students attended Turkey Creek three months of the year and spend the other nine working in the fields.

By 1902, however, Plant City became the largest shipping point for winter-grown strawberries in Florida, exporting large berry crops to northern states unable to grow them during cold months. Planting acreage, planted and harvested mainly by children growing up on Plant City farms, ranged from 150 to 300 acres per season. Turkey Creek was one of 22 schools serving the strawberry farming communities of Hillsborough County. Others were Dover, Cork, Springhead, Hopewell and Trapnell.

At that time in rural Florida education was a much more local affair than it is today. Each school district was governed by three trustees elected by the community to establish standards and practices, free to manage schools according to the needs and requirements of area families. For more than 40 years, the strawberry school districts scheduled the school year around the winter strawberry season, seeking to balance the educational needs of rural children with the labor and economic needs of local strawberry farms.

The practice of separate strawberry school schedules continued until the end of World War II and brought greater focus to industrialization, higher education and rural modernization.

For much of 1946, the *Tampa Morning Tribune* railed against the inequities that existed in Hillsborough County's educational system, noting that children of wealthier urban families received more opportunities than their rural neighbors. Few strawberry students went on to college; far fewer strawberry teachers possessed college degrees themselves. Even with the different school schedule, absenteeism in strawberry schools was significantly higher as parents kept their children home to work the fields—in violation of a 1939 school attendance law.

Tribune Investigative reporter J. A. Murray wrote a series of incisive articles in 1946 attacking the very heart of the strawberry school practice, noting in October, "The day I visited the Turkey Creek school, the principal said 25 percent of his pupils were out planting strawberries." Another piece commented simply, "Did you ever drive through the strawberry lands at dawn and see little children barefoot and shivering around a tiny fire, waiting for enough light to start picking?"

Addressing the issue of absenteeism, Hillsborough County School Superintendent Randolf McLaughlin told the *Tampa Morning Tribune* in late 1946, "We have no desire to cause unnecessary

trouble, but such willful attendance law violations must be stopped if children in Florida's rural areas are to receive the type of education they should have."

The debate reached an angered pitch across the county as many in East Hillsborough viewed the issue as a power struggle between local farm communities and the growing Tampa Bay area.

Growing local opposition, many stemming from parents of strawberry students, predicted that enforcing winter schedule attendance in Plant City would mean the end of rural Hillsborough and its strawberry industry. Jim Robinson, a Plant City member of the County School Board, summed up the dispute by saying: "You know the law allows them out of school to work in an emergency, and berries ripening in the fields is an emergency."

A. P. Cooke, publisher of the *Plant City Courier*, contended at the time that child labor was necessary for berry harvesting. "Picking is not the best kind of work for an adult who is not built close to the ground," he told the *Tribune* in 1946, maintaining that "no one has been able to replace baby fingers in the business of picking."

Spurred in part by Murray's articles, the Webster district in nearby Sumter County closed its remaining strawberry schools in December 1946. In 1947, the Florida State Legislature enacted the Minimum Foundation Program law, a series of educational system reforms that reshaped the distribution of state school money and standardized state-run education. Among other things, the law required all Florida schools to meet certain minimum requirements for educator qualifications and curriculum content. As a result, many teachers at the rural strawberry schools suddenly were no longer qualified to teach and had to earn four-year degrees before being allowed to return to the classroom. It became clear to most that the end of the strawberry school was fast approaching.

By 1950, only a dozen strawberry schools remained in Hillsborough, and most similar schools in other counties had already closed or transitioned to winter schedules. Pinecrest and Springhead schools operated under a dual schedule for a few years; students could attend either strawberry or winter schedules. By April 1955, only four schools remained solely on strawberry schedules: Trapnell, Dover, Cork and Turkey Creek.

The final battle over strawberry schools was waged during the school board elections of 1956. Republican candidates hoped to win over elements of the heavily democratic Hillsborough County by promising a return to berry school schedules. They were soundly defeated. The final strawberry schedules in Hillsborough County, including that of Turkey Creek, concluded in December 1956. Students with a "C" or better grade average advanced on the winter schedule, and all others were required to repeat the current year.

As predicted by local growers, strawberry production in Plant City fell sharply the following year from 1,632 acres in 1950 to 1,450 acres in 1957, and then finally to 650 acres by 1960. Production remained low until a new boom began in the late 1970s, spurred by the introduction of migrant farm workers, new technologies and mass commercialization to strawberry growing.

By 1983, strawberry fields in Hillsborough and Manatee counties spanned more than 4,700 acres, a level not seen since the 1930s. It generally remains at that level today.

Turkey Creek's final high school class graduated in 1972, when the school became Turkey Creek Junior High. The campus became Turkey Creek Middle School in 1995, and today it serves more than 1,600 students. By the mid-1990s, the brick building itself was scheduled for demolition in favor of a parking lot, but community outcry convinced Hillsborough County school officials to instead designate the building a historical landmark in 1997.

The 78-year-old Turkey Creek schoolhouse has since been repaired, repainted and restored. Discussions continue and decisions are still to be made about the building's future use.

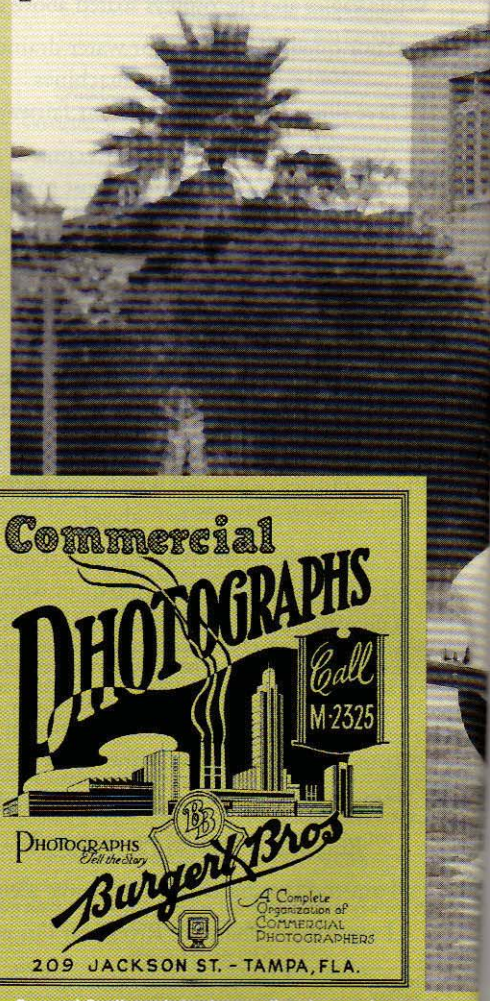
The school itself sits surrounded by a community that remembers well its rural past and takes great pride in that heritage. Today, those strawberry school students look out to the modern fields and can still picture their childhood years, planting and harvesting during the adolescence of Hillsborough County.

Turkey Creek School students and teacher, 1916
Back row: Mollie Barnes-Coker, Vada Barnes-Keene, Alice Weeks-Porter, Annie Crow-Durrance, Alberta Adams, Oleta Clemons-Crow; Second Row: Helen Martin, Florence Brown, Albertha Weeks, Ruth Tidwell-Maley, Mae McDonald-Stewart, Henry Martin; Front Row: Owen Weeks, Phillip Moore, Mack Hall, Willie Tidewell, Eugene Edwards, Olin Baggett

The Burgert Legacy

by Robert Warren

photos courtesy Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library System



Florida historians owe a debt to a family of photographers who never set out to be historians, but whose legacy today provides the richest and most comprehensive look at the early years along Florida's Gulf Coast.

Burgert Brothers telephone directory ad

For nearly a century, three generations of Burgerts advanced the art and science of photography while chronicling West Florida's history with their images. When the first Burgerts settled in the area, Gilded Age Tampa was a small Gulf Coast village with a population of about 7,500. The city called itself "The Queen City of the Gulf," existing both as a growing agricultural center and a popular vacation spot for the wealthy, according to Robert E. Snyder and Jack B. Moore, authors of *Pioneer Commercial Photography: The Burgert Brothers*. "Well-to-do Americans traveled to Florida by coach, steamship, and railroad during the winter to bask in the sun and frolic in the surf at grand resort hotels or to take the cure at mineral spas," according to the 1992 book.

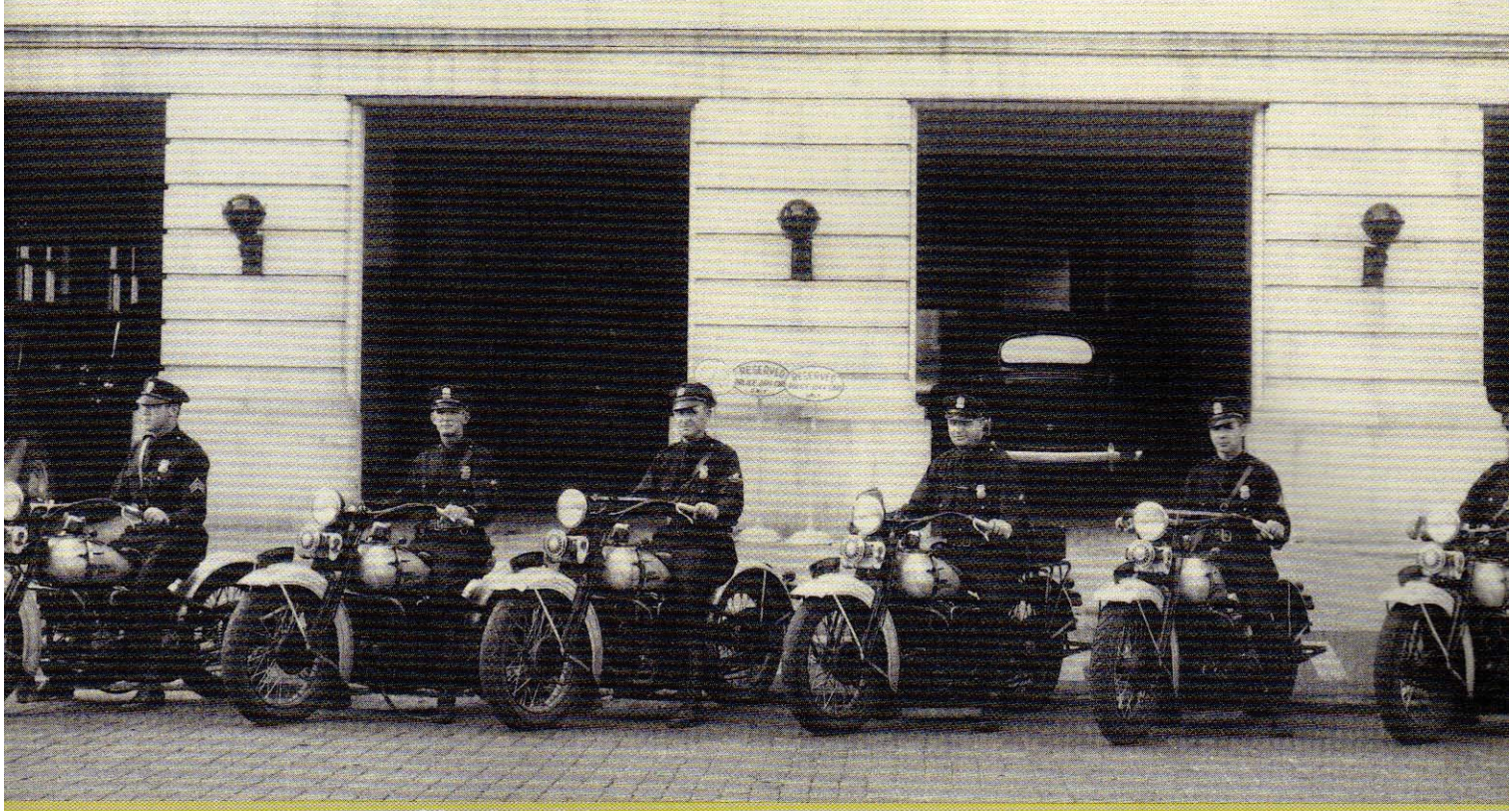
In the early 1890s, an Ohio farmer-turned-traveling-photographer named Samuel P. Burgert moved to Tampa with his wife Adelina and their six sons. Samuel and one of his sons, Willard, opened a photography studio in Tampa's Ybor City in

Burgert Brothers company truck; photos taken July 27, 1945

1899. S. P. Burgert and Son, as it was called, advertised themselves as portraitists and "headquarters for Kodak and photo supplies." Their business catered to the highly competitive photography market that existed in the area at the time, and they did very well.

A few years later, the Burgert sons went on to start photography businesses of their own. Willard Burgert left the business in 1903 to establish the Tampa Photo Supply House on Lafayette Street (today called Kennedy Boulevard), supplying equipment and services to local photographers. Also in that year, his brothers Walter and Jean launched the first Burgert Brothers Photography operation. Ultimately Walter left the operation; Jean established the Burgert Brothers Commercial Photography Studio with brother Alfred in 1918—the same year that saw the death of Samuel Burgert in that year's flu epidemic.

Tampa at the turn of the century was the fastest-growing population center in Florida, doubling in size from 15,839 to 37,782 residents between 1900 and 1920; at the time of the



Officers line up their motorcycles outside the Tampa Police Department in 1935.

1910 federal census, Tampa was surpassed only by Jacksonville as the largest city in the state. The end of the World War I left Tampa as a major shipbuilding center, and the 1920s brought a real estate speculation boom to the area that continued until the start of the Great Depression.

The financial tide rushing into Tampa made the Burgert Brothers Studio very successful, even during the Great Depression. From 1920 until World War II, Al and Jean Burgert operated the Burgert Brothers as a very profitable commercial photography operation, offering their services to a wide variety of clients that included local businesses, advertisers, newspapers and magazines.

Rather than waiting for assignments, the entrepreneurial Burgerts often set out in search of photography subjects. The Burgert Brothers truck became a familiar sight in Tampa during those years, as Jean and Al built their reputations and financial successes with their cameras. For more than 20 years, they scoured Tampa's Gulf Coast for images that captured the unique qualities of the region and its people, and the studio that bears their name ultimately amassed a collection of more than 80,000 photographs.

For today's historian, the Burgerts' work offers a fascinating look at an earlier time, the developing years of modern Florida. The archives document the rural past and 20th century modernization of the Gulf Coast through the Gilded Age, the Great Depression and both World Wars. Burgert pictures commonly appeared in *Life* and *National Geographic* magazines; their photographs cover a wide range of subjects including industrialization, the lives of rural workers, architecture, racial segregation, area landmarks and popular culture.

As a business, however, the brothers did not see their mission as either history or artistry. They were entrepreneurs who specialized in commercial photography, their artistic prowess a result of craft dedication and mastery rather than any staged manipulations. Their work reveals a startling lack of pretense, capturing with clarity the times in which they lived and worked. The men themselves were known within the business for their personality contradictions: Al as a serious businessman and dedicated photographer, Jean as the eccentric but free-spirited traveler and iconoclast. Both were perfectionists.

Hunting Camp, December 23, 1924

The majority of the Burgert photographs were commercial images of businesses, landmarks, people and events. Aiming for clarity and realism in their work, Alfred and Jean Burgert created with their photographs a clear and enduring reflection of the everyday white American middle-class life that was most familiar to them at the time. Ultimately, however, the personality differences between the brothers brought their era to an end.

In the early 1940s, Jean sold his remaining interest in the company to Al, who a few years later retired and sold the business to nephew Thel Burgert and employee Al Severson for $12,000. "He thought he had enough money," recollected Ed Warner, a friend of Alfred, in a 1981 interview. "He was tired of working." Al Burgert died of lung cancer at his home in January 1956; the *Tampa Daily Times* newspaper

Pedestrians crowd Franklin Street sidewalks where it's business as usual in 1922.

Motorboats ride the waves of the XLV Pirate Ship as the Krewe begins festivities on the Hillsborough River for a traditional Gasparilla Celebration in 1958.

Tampa Beach suburb that was planned but failed in real estate bust of 1920

described him as a real estate agent at the time of his death.

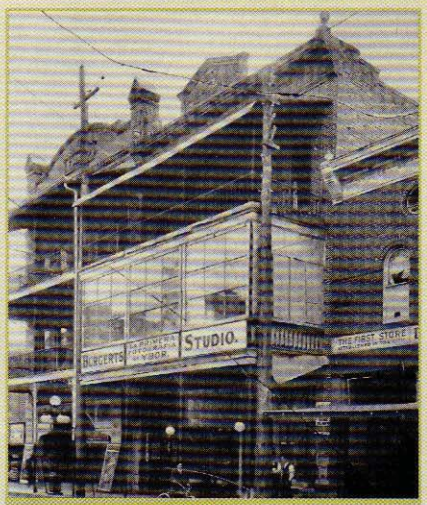
Very little is known about Jean's life after leaving Burgert Brothers. He retired at the age of 75 and lived in a Largo trailer park with his second wife until his death in 1968 at the age of 86. At the request of his wife, there was no mention of his death in local papers.

At some point in the 1950s Thel Burgert departed the company, leaving Severson the sole owner of the business. The studio continued to operate as Burgert Brothers until Severson retired in 1963.

The Burgert photograph collection changed hands several times in the decade after Severson's retirement, finally ending up almost forgotten, stored in Tampa Photo Supply's Palma Ceia warehouse by 1972. In time it came to the attention of local Tampa historian Hampton Dunn, who helped arrange the archive's sale to Hillsborough County's Friends of the Library in 1974 for $2,000. By then, about a quarter of the collection had been lost due to damage caused by poor storage of the nitrated film negatives.

With the goal of restoring and preserving a thousand Burgert negatives every year, the Hillsborough Library History and Genealogy Department set out to save the remainder of the archive. "I guess you could say I've got a lifetime job," cataloging librarian Katharine Emmons told *Tampa Bay Magazine* two years later in 1976.

In the years since the Hillsborough Library acquired the collection, funds from a variety of sources have contributed to preserving more than 15,000 of the remaining 65,000 archive photographs. The nitrate and cellulose acetate film stock is gradually being transferred to modern safety film, and 8.5-by-11-inch prints of the preserved images are currently on file and open to the public at the John F. Germany Hillsborough Public Library in downtown Tampa. The remaining negatives are stored in a climate-controlled room at the library.

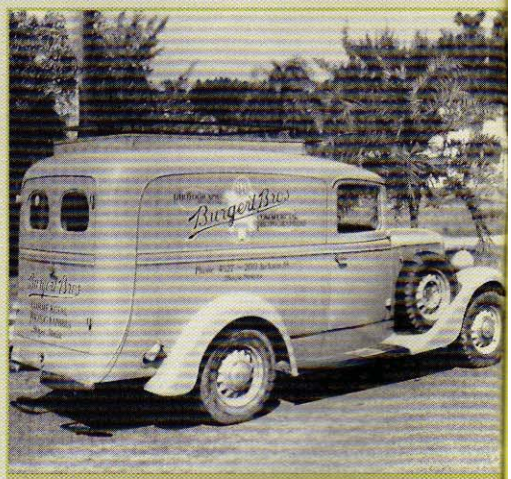


The first Burgert Brothers studio on Seventh Street in Ybor City, 1919

Through grants from the Frank E. Duckwall Foundation, the Hillsborough Library also has in recent years begun digitally scanning the Burgert collection for viewing on the web. Hundreds of photographs every month are added to the online archive, which can be viewed at www.hcplc.org.

As the process is an expensive one, decades may pass before the entire photograph archive is preserved and available to the public. Already, however, the archive serves as an important resource for historians seeking to understand everyday life of early 20th century Florida and the Tampa Bay region.

While years may stand between now and the restoration's completion, there is no doubt that the Burgert legacy is one of tremendous historical significance—a profound insight into Florida heritage, provided by the cameras of skilled and dedicated masters of their craft.☼

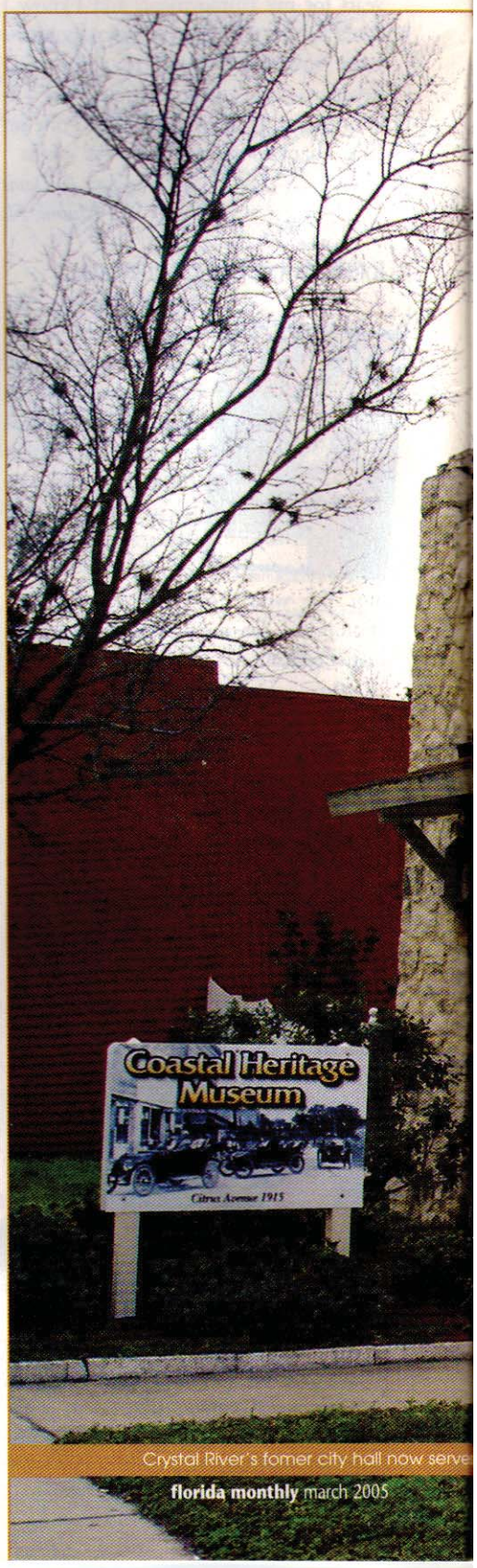


Burgert Brothers company truck; photo taken July 27, 1945

The Lasting Treasu

The economic crash of the late 1920s left Florida—indeed, the entire country—reeling in a state of shock. Over the next several years, banks closed, businesses failed, unemployment soared, and local and state governments skated on the thin edge of bankruptcy.

Florida fell victim to the Great Depression earlier than most of the country. A speculator-driven real estate boom after World War I was followed with its significant crash in 1926, ushering in Florida's Great Depression three years before the famous 1929 stock market crash.



Crystal River's former city hall now serve

res of the New Deal

by Robert Warren

as the area's Coastal Heritage Museum.

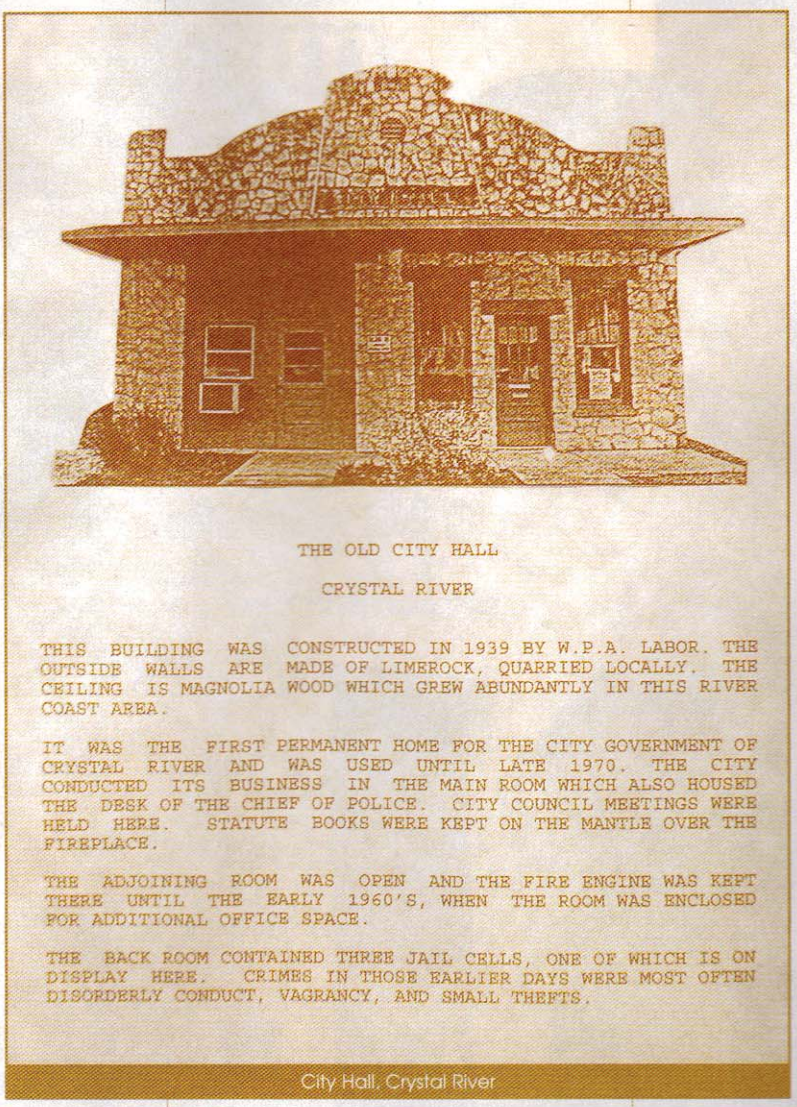
By 1932, with the Depression in full swing nationwide, America had elected a new president based on a promise to use the complete powers of the federal government to fight the Depression. In his acceptance speech for the 1932 Democratic nomination, Franklin D. Roosevelt famously said, "I pledge you—I pledge myself, to a new deal with the American people." The result was a broad period of economic experimentation, namely a long list of government programs aimed at creating local jobs with federal funds, that has no equal in American history.

Few of Roosevelt's programs had broader reach and longer-lasting effects than the Works Progress Administration. Created by Executive Order No. 7034 on May 6, 1935, the WPA was designed to help bolster local economies by using an unprecedented level of federal spending to put the unemployed back to work on public infrastructure projects. The WPA hired unemployed workers to build roads, buildings, landmarks and utility infrastructure across America. While today, some debate remains over WPA's economic effectiveness in combating the Depression, most historians agree that such programs were important in maintaining the social health of the United States during one of the darkest hours in American history.

Today, nearly 70 years later, the influence and lasting legacy of Roosevelt's "New Deal" can still be felt statewide, both in the growth of Floridian society and in artifacts visible to the careful eye.

Roosevelt's programs didn't just boost community morale and support local economies when help was needed the most. They helped to modernize rural Florida by delivering public building funds that were unavailable on either a local or state level and instituting social reforms that could not be done locally.

Small communities felt The Great Depression far differently than cities. Florida towns such as Newberry, just west of Gainesville, didn't suffer significantly from the Florida real estate crash; they were based on agricultural economies that remained steady through much of the 1930s. In Newberry's case, cash crops of tobacco and watermelon kept the local economy intact while vegetable crops kept the town fed.



City Hall, Crystal River

"We never really said to ourselves, 'We're in a Depression'," says local historian William N. Barry, who was a teenager during the New Deal years. "Nobody was starving."

Barry was a senior in high school when the WPA funded construction of the Newberry Municipal Building (25440 W. Newberry Road) in 1938. Designed by noted Gainesville architect Sanford Goin, the Municipal Building was built by hand, the stones chiseled and hand placed. In order to comply with the guidelines set forth by the WPA, the building was constructed with inexpensive local materials—pine and rough limestone, with cut limestone trim—and local labor only.

Originally home to Newberry's city offices, the Municipal Building now is used as a community meeting hall, well regarded among the residents of Newberry as a symbol of civic pride. Visitors seeking it out can find the building preserved in the heart of Newberry's Historical District.

About 60 miles south of Newberry, Crystal River was taking its first steps into the life of a modern city in 1939. A small west coastal fishing community, Crystal River's primary economic tie with the outside world was the local cedar mill, which manufactured wood slats to be made into pencils by the Joseph Dixon Crucible Company of New Jersey.

"(Crystal River) was a rough town, but a good town," says James "Doc" Hudson, who was 18 years old when Crystal River's first city hall was built in 1939. "People worked hard."

From the town's 1903 incorporation until the 1939 arrival of the WPA, there had been no permanent seat of town government; town officials met at their homes or in temporary meeting places.

The Crystal River City Hall (532 Citrus Ave.) was the town government's first permanent home. It housed the town manager, marshal's office and fire department in a single three-room limestone and magnolia

Yeoman's Miller Fish Company ledger on display at the Coastal Heritage Museum

building. City Council meetings were held in the main chamber, and the city statute books were kept on a mantle over the fireplace. Crystal River's jail cells resided in the rear of the building, while the city's fire truck was kept in an adjoining chamber until the room was enclosed in the 1960s for additional office space. The three-room building was used as the city seat until the 1970s.

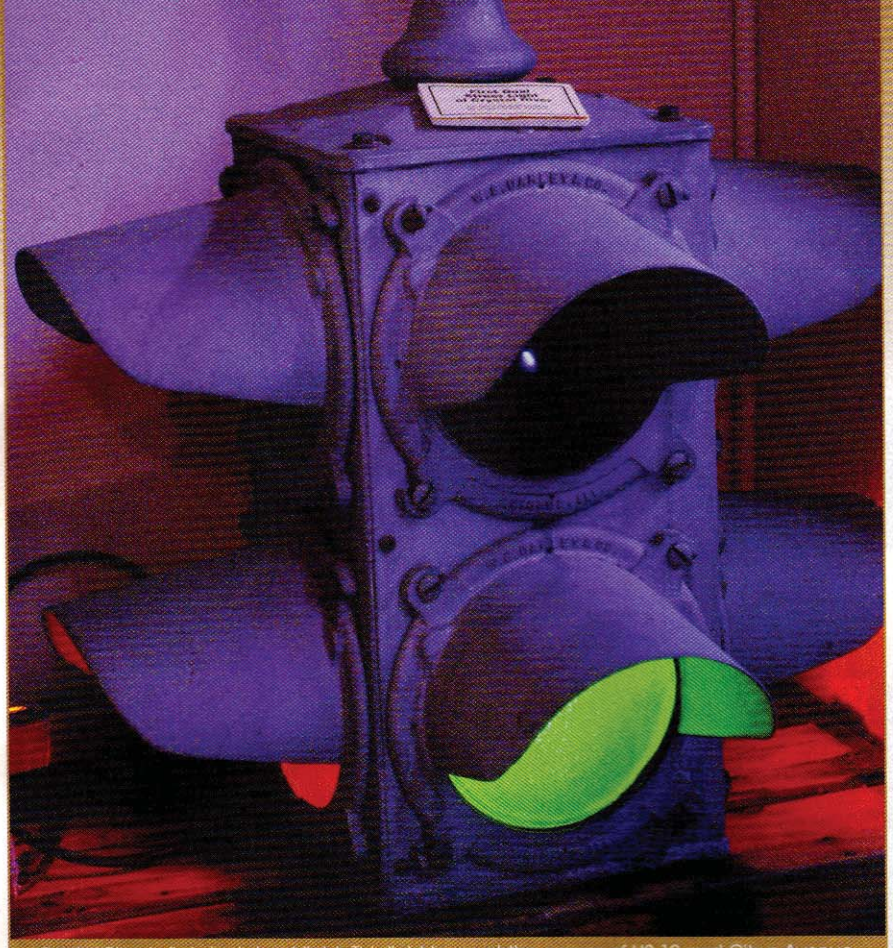

Crystal River's original black iron jail cell

In 1986, the building became home to Crystal River's Coastal Heritage Museum. which was designated a national historical landmark in 1998. Staffed with volunteers and open to the public, the museum displays a wide collection of artifacts from Crystal River's early history, including one of the original black iron jail cells and the town's first traffic light.

The building remains a symbol—not only of community, but of Crystal River's growth into a modern Florida city. "It gave us some central location we didn't have before," Hudson explains. "It helped improve us, gave us some prestige."

While the smaller agricultural communities weathered the Depression in relative peace, cities and industrial centers were struck far harder.

Thanks to tourist trade, the St. Petersburg area barely survived the 1926 real estate crash. The stock market crash three years later had a major negative impact on tourism, driving the area's economy into a five-year nosedive marked by massive unemployment,



Crystal River's first dual street light: This light hung at the corner of US 19 and Citrus Avenue.

hundreds of business failures and mortgage foreclosures. By 1932, it had become clear that a solution would not be found on a local level, but only from Washington, D.C. and Tallahassee.

St. Petersburg City Manager G. V. Leland, inspired by President Roosevelt's "On Economic Conditions" speech to Congress April 14, 1938, instructed St. Petersburg's engineering department to prepare plans for a new City Hall building, with the intention to fund it with help from the WPA.

Federal regulations at the time made it very difficult to receive federal funds for City Hall construction projects, but local leaders and WPA officials eventually found a solution: fund the project using public utilities appropriations, use WPA grants to apply against annual revenues for the city's gas works, and call the new structure the "municipal utility building."

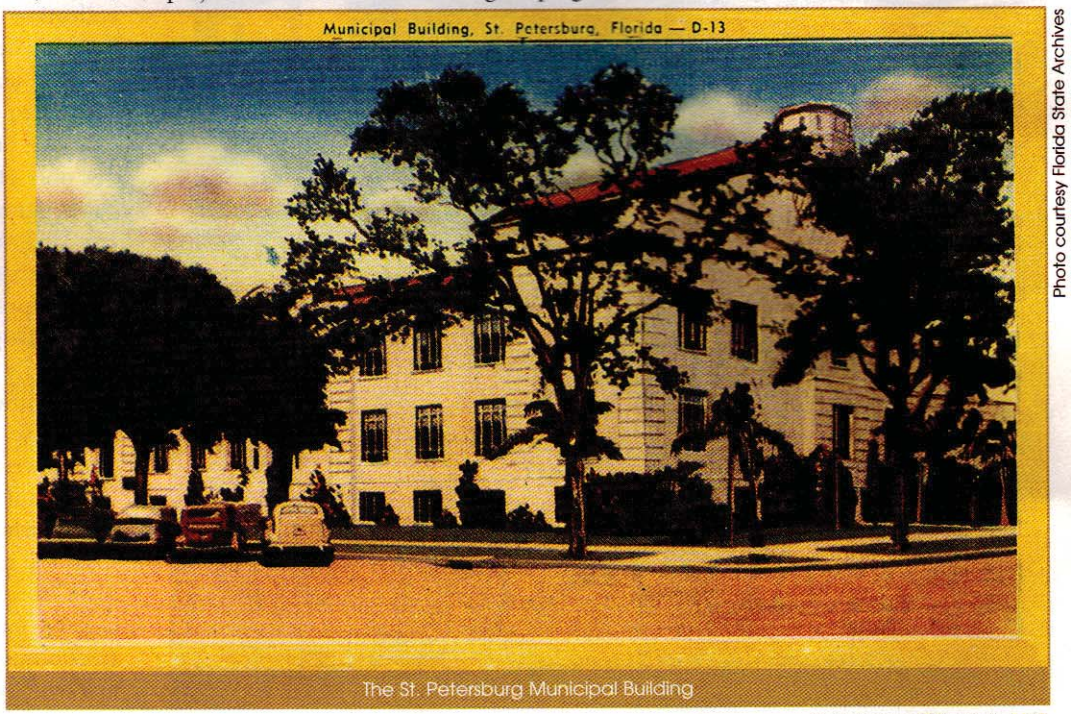
Construction began in December 1938, upon the 1893 site of St. Petersburg's first school. The new City Hall (175 Fifth St. N.) was dedicated in November 1939. Today, it is preserved as a city historic landmark and remains the center of city government.

The City Hall was one of many WPA projects to come to St. Petersburg, helping to maintain the local economy until World War II began. Ultimately, more than $10 million of WPA federal funds on a wide variety of building projects helped St. Petersburg maintain its economy and recover from the Depression.

As World War II began for America in the early 1940s, increasing private sector employment led to drastic cuts in the Works Progress Administration, until it finally officially ended in 1943.

Spending nearly $11 billion during its eight-year lifespan, the Works Progress Administration funded the construction or repair of 651,087 miles of highways, roads and streets; 125,110 public buildings; 124,031 bridges; 8,192 parks; and 853 airport landing fields nationwide. It ultimately employed more than 8.5 million people and would be one of the most significant—and controversial—uses of federal government power ever attempted in the United States.

Whether small town or big city, or somewhere in between, the WPA represented opportunity for many Floridians in a time of diminishing hopes. The treasures of the New Deal—not only the buildings, but the communities that found their voice in the dawn of Florida's modern era—remain preserved to the eyes and ears which seek them out, surrounded by the lives that they impacted most during the Great Depression. ☼



The St. Petersburg Municipal Building

Photo courtesy Florida State Archives