

# History of Harbor Palms Community

By Oldsmar Historian Jerry Beverland

As published in the Oldsmar Community News, Oct. & Nov. 2009

I must admit there are a few Harbor Palms residents that might remember some facts differently than me. I apologize if I've juggled up or forgotten some facts. Part of this information came from my personal involvement and some were taken from the "Oldsmar Eagle", the small newspaper that my beautiful wife and I published from 1972–1975. Thank you to the city's planning department and to some original Harbor Palms residents for their help.

What does a guy named Neil Eckblaw, the Eastlake Oaks subdivision, Ransom E. Olds, a golf course, the Harbor Palms subdivision, Green-Tree Communities, a boat marina, Jack Willy's, Walgreen's and Dunkin Donuts on Tampa Road, and Oldsmar's fire chief Scott McGuff have to do with this article? Each one played a significant role in the history, such as a common thread weaving its way through the past 90 years.

Let's bounce back to 1916, the year Ransom E. Olds made his Florida land acquisition. After he purchased the 35,000 plus acres that included northwest Hillsborough County and the northeast portion of Pinellas County, he chose less than 1,000 acres for his city of the future, Oldsmar. The creator of the Oldsmobile car wanted only the immediate area that surrounded Old Tampa Bay to bear his legacy as a city.

Oldsmar's boundaries would be Old Tampa Bay to the south, Race Track Road to the east, Tampa Road to the north and the future Harbor Palms to the west. Evergreen, Tangerine and Limetree Drives were not included in Oldsmar's original city limits. Neither was the western extension of Peppertree Drive, which was annexed into Oldsmar in 1974 as part of the "Ledantic Tract"; which included the Gull Aire Village land.

In 1970 I was elected to the Oldsmar city council, and Oldsmar had basically stayed the same quiet long forgotten town as it was in 1919. There had been absolutely no growth and none seemed likely for the town's future. The council meetings were long and contentious with very little progress in any meaningful growth pattern discussions. Oldsmar seemed destined to remain a forgotten dot on Tampa Road between Hillsborough and Pinellas Counties.

During a council meeting in the summer of 1970, two well-dressed men requested to be put on the council's agenda for that evening. Back then, the city council didn't have a formal agenda system, and every item discussed was done at the spur of the moment. They wanted to make a presentation about a possible new housing development in Oldsmar. After a brief moment of bickering among the council, they agreed to hear their presentation. The discussion that followed was exciting to me, but Mayor Ward Schrecengost and Councilman Homer Brunson were very leery, because nothing like this had been before the council since the days of R.E. Olds. Their presentation seemed exaggerated for a city that had been lost to the outside world for over 50 years.

The men were Neil Eckblaw (a northern land developer, new to Florida) and Warren Smith, Eckblaw's northern land manager. Some original Harbor Palms residents might have flames searing from their nostrils and smoke from their ears at the mention of their names. Their frustration will become evident later.

What the council learned during that meeting was overwhelming for a struggling small town and some citizens questioned why Oldsmar would be chosen for the type of housing development they were envisioning. The council members wondered why they didn't choose St. Petersburg or Clearwater. After all, Oldsmar was not a sophisticated city in 1970.

Eckblaw told the council that he owned Green-Tree Communities, which developed land and built houses. They were headquartered in Sarasota and he showed us evidence of the large River Isles housing development on the Braden River. He boasted that houses in his Oldsmar development would start at \$19,995, an unimaginable amount which raised the larger question, "Why would anyone pay almost \$20,000 for a house in Oldsmar?"

Eckblaw and Smith were somewhat vague on many answers to council members that night. They asked to be placed on the next meeting and promised to have more definitive answers. At the next meeting, they stunned the council members with the fact that Green-Tree Communities already owned three different parcels of land in Oldsmar. The largest area was nearly 100 acres and was the western boundary of Oldsmar. Today, that area is the Harbor Palms

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and Country Club Living  
in Suburban Oldsmar  
**Harbor Palms**

**BEAUTIFUL LOCALE**

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- Excellent school system
- Central shopping and service facilities
- 18-hole golf course (near new course)
- Lighted athletic courts
- Swimming and tennis courts
- Full program of maintenance activities
- Extensive shopping area (Walgreen's, Dunkin Donuts, etc.)
- City water, sewer, gas and power

**LUXURY FEATURES of Harbor Palms Homes**

- Well finished interiors
- Full kitchen with built-in appliances
- Hardwood floors
- Full program of maintenance activities
- Full program of maintenance activities
- Full program of maintenance activities

**IT'S EASY TO BUY IN HARBOR PALMS**  
Home Plans Available - (Detailed Floor Plans & Measurements)

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A limited time financing offer  
at Harbor Palms  
- 0% down!

**WHILE OPEN HOUSE**

Green-Tree Communities, Inc.  
2802 S. Tarzwell Trail  
Sarasota, Florida 34231

Too good to be true – Advertisement for Harbor Palms as seen in the Oldsmar Eagle in 1970.

subdivision, not including Limetree and Tangerine Drive, and it also included a good portion of the western half of the East Lake Oaks subdivision.

Eckblaw presented a land development design for what he called Harbor Palms. The site plan showed a detailed street design, which still exists today. It also showed an eighteen hole golf course, large club house, community swimming pool, tennis courts and a golf pro shop.

The golf course was to be built on the land just east of Oakleaf Blvd. starting next to Tampa Road and continuing south to Maple Leaf Blvd. Some of today's East Lake Oaks homes were built on Eckblaw's proposed golf course, many are situated on the first nine holes of the golf course that was built in 1971. The second nine holes were never completed. The majority of the present houses on the east side of Oakleaf Blvd. in Harbor Palms were sold as golf course frontage homes.

The second land purchase that Eckblaw announced was another jaw dropper. He told the council that Green-Tree Communities was going to build the grandest boat marina on the shores of Old Tampa Bay. He named the project Green-Tree Marina, and informed the city council that he purchased the marina, boat slips and buildings next to St Petersburg Drive.



High and dry – This ad for the Green Tree Marina appeared in the Oldsmar Eagle, 1970.

In the late 1960s I believe the marina was owned by the Crump family. The property contained a one-story dry dock and large land area for boat storage, a bait house near the water, a small odd shaped building in the front parking lot and about twenty boat slips. This was before the Lake Tarpon out fall canal was dug and the lake's sludge conquered and ruined Oldsmar's beautiful northern part of Old Tampa Bay. In 1970 the boat channels from the bay to the marina were deep, clean and could accommodate many boats. The Oldsmar marina was the most active marina on the upper part of Old Tampa Bay.

Later, the dry dock was torn down and a larger two-story steel building was built. Eventually the bait house was turned into a restaurant and later rebuilt as Jack Willy's. The odd shaped building in front was the Sakura Tea House, which was a small Japanese restaurant owned by Mike and Heidi Donahue. Heidi was a native of Okinawa, Japan. Amazingly, that small building still stands as it did almost forty years ago, but now in sad disrepair.



Tea Time – This building once was the Sakura Tea House.

The third parcel of land Eckblaw bought was a little bigger than a football field and covered with magnificent old oak trees. In 1970, that land could be bought for less than \$20,000. The only thing it had going for it was that it was on a corner, but it wasn't a very busy corner. In 1970 only about one hundred cars passed by it each day. Now, over 85,000 cars drive by that same spot every day.

Before Neil Eckblaw declared bankruptcy in 1976, he owed a lot of money to a lot of people. One person was the managing vice president of Green-Tree Communities. I can't remember his name, but he loaned Eckblaw a lot of money for the Harbor Palms development. Eckblaw gave him the football sized piece of land in lieu of money that he owed. The guy wasn't happy, but he accepted the land because it was better than losing all of his money. Today, Walgreen's, Chick-fil-A, and Dunkin Donuts sit on that land. The Green-Tree guy just didn't hang onto it long enough.

I still have one more answer to give you. "What part does Oldsmar Fire Chief Scott McGuff have to do with this article?"

After the second meeting with Eckblaw, Smith and the city council it became evident that Green-Tree Communities was serious about building an upscale housing development in the city of Oldsmar. For the next couple of months the city council worked diligently with the developer, poring over site plans, city permitting procedures, street construction plans, drainage options and other complex decisions for the development to continue.

In 1970 Oldsmar's government was a weak version of a strong mayor type of government. Oldsmar didn't have a city manager, and the mayor and council ran city hall. The city didn't even have a planning or building department, and only had about ten employees. As I wrote earlier, we ran everything by the seat of our pants.

The city had to contract with an outside site plan engineer to oversee the Harbor Palms development. The engineer oversaw construction of the drainage system and the building of the streets. We eventually hired a building inspector and fired the part time inebriated city attorney. We hired attorney John Hubbard's firm and they are still with us today after almost forty years.

By the end of 1970 the Harbor Palms project was well underway. The developer built model homes, but not on the subdivision site in Oldsmar. These model homes have a strange story all their own, but that is a story for another time. There was a thick cloud of fraud and arson that surrounded them by the late 1970s. Those models were built on the southeast corner of US 19 and Curlew Road. And yes, after a few years they did strangely burn to the ground.

By mid-1971, people began moving into the new homes in Harbor Palms. As Eckblaw promised, a large clubhouse, tennis courts and swimming pool were built. The first nine holes of the small to medium golf course were



built, and while none of the greens were very long, they were enjoyable to play. Arnold Palmer probably could have driven a ball from the first tee all the way to the second hole. Still, the golf course did a fabulous business. The links were busy everyday of the week and really crowded on the weekends. It even had its own P.G.A. golf Pro, a fellow named Vic Nardozzi.

The ownership of the golf course change hands a couple of times in the 1970s. It also had two or three different managers during those same years. One manager was Bill Kniffin, a Harbor Palms resident who was retired military. Bill also served on the Oldsmar city council in the mid 1970s. Bill's wife, Charolette, stills lives in Oldsmar.

Bob McGuff, another Harbor Palms resident, was hired as a part time evening greens keeper in 1973. A couple years later, Bob ran for mayor of Oldsmar. He decided to put his young son to work watering and mowing the greens and fairways in the evenings after school. In 1980 and 1981 Bob's son became the official greens keeper of the golf course. His name is Scott McGuff, Oldsmar's incredible Fire Chief for over twenty years.

After the golf course closed in 1981, it began to look as if it had been engaged in a major battle with nature. By all visual accounts nature's army of weeds, vines, ants, alligators, otters and raccoons had overwhelmingly won the battle. By about 1986 the club house, swimming pool and tennis courts had deteriorated into such deplorable condition they were demolished and bulldozed into history. The land was sold to other land investors and eventually ended up as the western part of the East Lakes Oaks subdivision.

You now have the answers to my initial questions, but maybe there is still one last question I should answer. What happened to cause the 1976 collapse of Green-Tree Communities and the delayed growth of Harbor Palms?

The Harbor Palms development went great guns in 1971 through mid 1973. Over fifty houses had been constructed and sold during the first two years. On the surface, it appeared that the development would be an economic success for everyone involved. But by June 1973, the Green-Tree Communities financial house of cards began to crumble because of bad management and lack of cost control. By the end of 1973 it was evident that the builder was having financial problems. It became harder for the city to get important construction answers from the builder. The residents of Harbor Palms were also having major problems with getting the builder to fulfill promises and commitments.

Eckblaw and his group owed the city of Oldsmar over \$20,000 for a Harbor Palms master water meter delinquent bill. In fact, water to the development was turned off a couple of times leaving the club house, the Villas on Azalea Court and the construction areas without water. Smith had disappeared and Eckblaw was almost impossible to contact. Construction managers for the project were changing every few months.

Just months before the financial troubles became apparent, the builder began construction of three large two-story condominiums on the northeast corner of Oakleaf Blvd. and Hibiscus Circle North. Work came to a screeching halt in early 1974, leaving the buildings only half completed and a hazard to the nearby residents. In 1975, the city condemned the buildings and had them demolished. Houses were later built where the condos once stood.

By 1975 Green-Tree Communities owed hundreds of thousands of dollars to creditors, including the city of Oldsmar. By the start of 1976, Neil Eckblaw and Green-Tree Communities were gone forever. Both the city of Oldsmar and residents of Harbor Palms were left with the problems.



**Golf course turned out to be a bogie** – The success of the Harbor Palms golf course and club house in the 1970's was short-lived.



**Got golf?** – Advertisement for Harbor Palms golf course as seen in the Oldsmar Eagle in 1970.

Because of these problems, the council developed the city's first comprehensive zoning ordinance. The city also established Oldsmar's first citizen's volunteer board. In 1973 the city council formed a planning committee which still exists today as Oldsmar's Planning Board. The first three members of the planning committee were Margaret Rose, Betty Klontz and Loretta Wyandt. The committee met at Harbor Palms and discussed the problems the city was having with the builder.

