The Prehistory and History of Siesta Key: America’s Best Beach

(based on*: An Illustrated History of Siesta Key-The Story of America’s Best Beach*

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**Background on the book**

A family project initiated because of a longstanding interest in Florida’s barrier islands and beach focus.

Curiosity about Sarasota County began at 15 y/o in 1958 with a family visit to the Ringling Museum etc.

During the 1960s and throughout the next decades, there were many more visits to South Florida.

Alice and I “discovered” Siesta Key in 2005 during a conference of medical school deans while exploring.

This was followed by annual visits to Siesta Key (Coquille) after my sabbatical with CDC in 2007-08.

Next: biking on the island and reading *Barrier Islands of the Florida Gulf Coast Peninsula* (Richard Davis).

During 2016-18, there was time available, deep curiosity about SK history, and two talented grandchildren.

**Learning while biking— from the Preface**

*I’ve enjoyed riding my bicycle almost daily on 10-15 mile routes. These rides raised many questions...*

*Why is SK’s most prominent road named Midnight Pass when there is no Midnight Pass on any of the maps?*

*Why is Ocean Blvd so named even though it is not along the ocean?*

*Who was the Roberts of Roberts Point Road and Higel of Higel Avenue?*

*How did Siesta/Crescent Beach become “America’s Best” and how is it expanding?*

**What every Floridian should know, especially those who appreciate Siesta Key!**

The Florida peninsula’s origin is unique. It migrated here from NW Africa ~700 million years ago.

The Florida “platform” originally extended 100 miles west when sea levels were much lower.

The source of sand is the Appalachian Mountains through erosions during 100-40 million years ago.

America’s indigenous people arrived in Florida at least 14,550 years ago as hunters/fishers and gatherers.

Siesta Key arose from the Gulf about 3,000 years ago with its unique, increasingly significant Point of Rocks.

The influence/impact of Spanish “invaders” was quite significant, despite their very limited presence.

The Gulf Stream, “discovered” in 1513 by Juan Ponce de León, warms us and remains a “Maker of History.”

( El Cabo de Corrientes averages: 100 km wide, 1000 meters deep, and moves 4B feet3/second at up to 5.6 mph)

The impact of climate change should not be ignored because it threatens the future of Florida and everywhere.

Most Florida beaches are eroding and eventually will not be “saved” by sediment re-nourishment projects.

Without reduction in global warming, coastal communities will also erode and eliminate precious settlements.

**Siesta Beach history: people, opportunities, & favorable morphodynamics.**

**Captain Lewis Roberts: Siesta Key fisherman, pioneer, and entrepreneur**

Fished Sarasota Bay annually after 1870 but was “hooked” in 1878

Married Ocean Deep Hansen in 1881 and settled on homesteaded land (Roberts Point)

Established Roberts Hotel in 1906 and later changed the name to Siesta Hotel

Became famous for seafood, especially fish and clam chowder

Partnered with Harry Higel in forming the Siesta Land Company

Established a casino/dance hall in the roaring 1920s at Ocean Blvd and Beach Road

**Harry Lee Higel: Sarasota Mayor from 1911-14 and 1916-17**

Entrepreneur, real estate developer, politician, and Siesta Key pioneer

Acquired 160 acres of Siesta Key through marriage

Formed the Siesta Land Company and named Siesta Key, establishing a post office here

Built the Higelhurst Hotel, which burned down after only 2 years of operations

Responsible for the North (Higel) Bridge that launched tourism in 1917

Was brutally murdered on January 6, 1921 while strolling on Beach Road

**Becoming “America’s Best Beach” by opportunity and acquisitions**

1950-52: Siesta Key Association lobbied for $250,000 bond to acquire a public beach

Sarasota County condemned/seized for $80,000 Harry Allen Gregg’s property (1,100 feet)

Siebert Pavilion built in 1960— a tribute to the Sarasota School of Architecture!

The remaining Gregg 35 acres was bought in 1970 for $1.8 million after prolonged negotiations.

Leadership of Walter Rothenbach, SC Parks and Recreation Director, 1966-1998

The size and quality have led to numerous national/international awards since 1987

**Key factors in SK beach formation, its resiliency, and recent expansion**

Point of Rocks (unique rock formation on the Florida’s Gulf Coast that retards erosion)

Big Sarasota Pass tidal inlet effect (captures sand for “downstream” distribution)

Mixed energy morphodynamics (acquiring sand from swash bar formation and delivery)

Drumstick morphology (shape that favors capturing sand along the western shore)

Longshore transport processes (Longboat/Lido beach nourishments contribute sand)