

The Historian

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January 2009

The Sebring Historical Society

*Shining a light on our community's people and
Institutions of achievement*

Fire Chief Batz, McClain to Address Luncheon Meeting Jan. 24

By Carole Goad

Chief Brad Batz, of the Sebring Fire Department, and Richard McClain, Sr., of the Sebring Firemen's Association, will speak at the January 24 meeting Saturday, 12:00 noon, at the Sebring Civic Center at Lake Jackson. Chief Batz will discuss current history of the Department, the restoration of the Central Fire Station built in 1927, and future plans for the Department. McClain will speak about the historic role that the Firemen's Association has played in the community.

The Sebring Firemen are legend in the community for a great variety of accomplishments, including the 1926 Moore Haven Hurricane rescue, the building of Firemen's Field athletic facility, the County Fair facilities, continued support of Sebring High School's athletic programs, and other good deeds far too numerous to mention!

Chief Batz was born in North Miami in 1969 and moved to Highlands County in 1983 to



Chief Bradley Batz

care for his grandmother after his grandfather had passed away. He graduated from Sebring High School in 1988. Prior to graduation, he had attended South Florida Community College and had become a State licensed Emergency Medical Technician. He then attended Ridge Vocational Tech for fire standards and became a State certified firefighter.

Batz began working with the Sebring Fire Department in 1990 as a firefighter/EMT, was promoted in 1997 to lieutenant, and became Fire Chief in 2006. He holds an Associates Degree in Fire Science from Pikes

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THIS ISSUE:

Fire Department, Batz & McClain
Somebody Special, Robert Walker

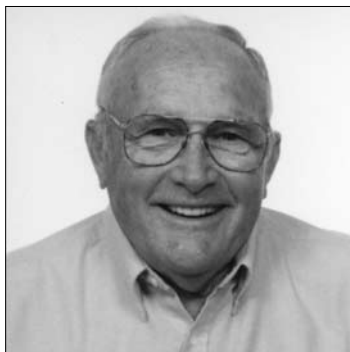
Ray Moeller, SHS Class of 1945

Little Africa, Ray Moeller

Arthur J. Wright, Poet

A Father's Dream, Arthur J. Wright

(Fire Chief Batz cont'd from page 1)



Richard McClain

Peak Community College and a Bachelors Degree in Occupational Safety and Health from Columbia Southern University, Fire Officer 1 and 2 certifications, Instructor 3 certification

with the State of Florida and 4400 hours of specialty training.

Batz and his wife Denese, married since 1995, have two sons, Jonathan and Bradley. His parents, Charles and Peggy, live here in Highlands County. His hobbies include hunting and fishing, motorcycling, auto racing and fabricating motorcycles, classic cars and off-road vehicles.

Richard McClain was born in Center Hill, Florida, and moved to Sebring when he was 12 years old. He entered military service in May of 1951, and received his high school diploma through the University of Maryland in the mid 1950s. His 20 year military career included service in Germany, Greenland and Vietnam.

After retiring from the military, McClain re-

turned to Sebring and became involved with the Sebring High School Athletic Association. He subsequently returned to school in 1986 and became qualified to serve on the Sebring Police Department for about nine years, then with the Highlands County Sheriff's Office for nine years. He became President of Sebring Firemen, Inc. in 1987, an organization known for helping the youth of the County. He served with the Highlands County Fair Board for 23 years, beginning in 1985. His management skills enabled him to accomplish many improvements for the County Fair, including the planning and construction of new buildings at the Fairgrounds.

McClain is a life member of the Florida Federation of Fairs, an organization that he has actively served since 1996. He was inducted into the Florida Federation of Fairs and Livestock Shows Hall of Fame in April of 2006.

McClain is the father of two grown children, Richard, Jr. and Deborah Bianchi. Richard, Jr., Deborah, and her husband, Michael Bianchi, are all Sebring High School graduates. In addition, McClain and his wife, Bette, have nine grandchildren.

MEMORIAL CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

have been received from October 2008 through December 2008 in honor and memory of our friends and family members as follow:

In Memory of Carol Merwin, from Robert W. & Virginia Merwin; Tom & Nancy Mitchell; Carol H. Heffner; Bob & Jean Mosier; Joseph T. Harper

In Memory of Mary B. Bryant, from Bob & Jean Mosier; Ernie & Charlotte Breed

In Memory of Deloris "Pete" Carson, from Charles Lairsey; Ted & Janice Shoemaker; Charles & Susan Rucks; Charles Schumacher; Jack & Kitty Ingle; Verna Hall; Haywood & Betty Taylor; David & Jane Watford; Verna M. Garrett; Delton & Julie Lynch; Travis & Kaye Wise; Dan & Virginia Stokes; Marvin & Else Kahn; Michael & Alice Taylor; Wanda Whitehouse; Earl & Lisa Crutchfield, Jr.; Ned & Tammy Hancock; Elfriede T. Fields; Walter & Robbie Harshman

In Memory of Marion "Vic" Vickers, from Wanda Whitehouse

In Memory of Joseph & Anna Georgia; Beatrice Dante, & Theodore Georgia, from Lillian Georgia Barnes

***The Sebring Historical Society gratefully accepts memorial gifts, which may be sent to:
Wanda Whitehouse, Memorial Chairman, 9230 Spring Valley Lane, Sebring, FL 33875-5977***

Somebody Special

By Robert J. Walker

I was as excited as my grandchildren about the football game, the "Classic", on Saturday, November 22, 2003. It was the big game between Bethune Cookman College and Florida A&M University. I hadn't slept all night long, tossing and turning, wondering if the alarm clock would ring. I had set the radio clock to turn on at 5:45 AM, but thank God I awakened at 6:00 AM automatically: That clock radio contraption didn't make a sound!

I had a meeting with the children who were going with me to the game the night before (my three grandchildren and their five cousins). They were going to meet me out in front of my house at 7:30 AM. The bus was scheduled to leave at 8:00 AM to travel to South Florida Community College in Avon Park where we would meet three other buses and then the four buses would travel to Frostproof, Florida and meet four more buses. I was excited and looking forward to the game, the band contest and the bus ride.

The bus arrived on time and people started arriving, parents and children and then came policemen. There were sheriff's officers, highway patrol officers, and even Alvin Walter from the Highlands County Sheriff's Office was present. And we all knew they were "dressed down" in their blue, green and black pants, black boots, and white or green shirts. They were not there to arrest anyone, but to escort the buses to Orlando. Imagine that!

Mr. Robert Saffold, the organizer and chairman of the Florida Sportsman Asso-



Special students lined up ready to board buses.

ciation, also had a group of ladies to help prepare a hearty lunch for a picnic, which the children and parents would enjoy prior to the game in Orlando. Therefore, at 8:15 AM, we left to go get the prepared lunch and put everything on the bus. At 8:30 AM, the bus left the parking lot on our way to go to South Florida Community College to join up with the three other buses from Arcadia, Wauchula, Lake Placid and Avon Park.

At 9:00 AM, approximately 210 youth and adults joined hands in a circle at South Florida Community College and were led in prayer by Bishop Timothy McGahee and myself, Minister Robert Walker. What a sight to see. All of these young people in colorful outfits holding hands with heads bowed in prayer. Afterwards, we loaded up the buses for the trip to Frostproof where we were to meet up with the buses from Frostproof, Bartow, Arcadia, Winter Haven, Lake Wales and Lakeland, giving us a final count of eight buses and four patrol cars. Now that made a very impressive scene, traveling down Highway 27 early Saturday morning November 22, 2003!

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(Somebody Special cont'd from page 3)

I was traveling on bus #806 and David was the bus driver. He said, "Minister Walker, I didn't expect all this. I was told to pick up a few kids and take them to a football game, but never did I imagine that there would be so many young people, nor did I realize the importance of this game." Then I explained to him the significance of the 'Black Florida Classic' and the football rivalry between Florida A&M and Bethune Cookman College.

Pretty soon we were all loaded up and on our way to Orlando with our bus #806 being the last in line. We had an overview scene of the line of buses in front. David got on the phone and called his wife, "Honey, you won't believe this, we have eight buses driving down Highway 27 with highway patrols and police escorts, and all the traffic is stopping for us!" He was just as excited as I was.

I turned around in my seat to watch the faces of the children riding in my bus as they stared out the windows watching traffic stopping and cars pulling over to the side of the road in order for our bus to pass. I saw the smiles and heard the surprise laughter as they saw the patrol cars with lights flashing, riding alongside and racing ahead to intersections to stop traffic. "Look! Look



Bus Caravan to Orlando to the big football game!

at that! Wow! That's right man, pull over and let us through", a little girl said with glee. "I'm somebody special today; people get to step aside for me!"

I was happy to be a part of this momentous occasion in history. Then I realized that many children on this trip would never forget this day, the bus ride, or that day's big event. Coming into the City of Orlando, people really began to take notice of our caravan. I imagined some folks thought that the President of the United States was in town. Finally, we arrived at Eola Park around 12:00 noon for the picnic and talent shows. The talent shows consisted of participants from each city that were riding on the buses. Choirs, praise teams, step teams, quartets, solos, testimonies, instrumental solos, with ministers praying, and hand clapping, having a hallelujah good time Gospel service! The show was enjoyed by all. People all over the park were coming to see, hear and enjoy the program. Finally, at 2:00 PM, it was time to load up the buses and start toward the stadium for the 4:00 PM kick-off for the Florida Classic football game between F.A.M.U. and B.C.C.



One of Sheriff's escort officers and bus driver.

On behalf of my grandchildren, myself, and the hundreds of children and parents throughout Highlands, Hardee and Polk Counties, I wish to

(cont'd on page 5)

(Somebody Special cont'd from page 4)

express our sincere gratitude to Mr. Robert Saffold and the Florida Sportsman Golf Association for sponsoring these bus trips each year to the Florida Classic.

The 2003 trip was the most awesome and as Mrs. Pauline Massaline stated and I agree with wholeheartedly, "For once in our lives,

we were 'somebody special'". As our buses passed cars on the highway, that was a sight to see. That's the way things are today, in 2003.

Ray Moeller, SHS Class of 1945

By Carole Goad

Ray has recently been in touch with the Historical Society and provided us with written accounts of memories of his life and school days in Sebring. His memories are vivid, and the quality of his writing is excellent, so we are happy to provide our readers with one of his stories in this issue, entitled "Little Africa"; and another regarding his local World War II memories of Hendricks Field happenings, which will be published in April.



*Ray Moeller
Sebring High School
Class of 1945*

Ray was born in Tampa, Florida, in 1927 to Ruth G. (Conway) and Leonard J. Moeller. Ray's father had played violin with an orchestra in the 1920s; and his mother, a pianist, had played piano for square dances held in Kuhlman from 1914-1916. In 1931, the family moved to Sebring where Ray began first grade in 1933. In 1936, the family moved to Lake Charlotte, where his father built the family home on their 176 acres of land. An honor student, Ray graduated from Sebring High School in 1945 and

was awarded the coveted Bailey Medal for outstanding scholarship and citizenship.

It should be noted that Ray's grandfather was Thomas V. Conway, prominent early settler in Highlands, who was a leader in several vital aspects of County development, including the division of the County in 1921; member of the Highlands County School Board for 25 years during the 1920s to the 1940s, serving as its

Chairman for five years; Sebring postmaster; Executive Director of the Housing Authority of the City of Sebring, Rotary Club, Masonic Lodge and Episcopal Church.

After graduation from high school, Ray enrolled at Stetson University during the summer of 1945, and joined the Navy in 1946. After his boot training, he attended the Navy School of Music in Washington, D.C. He subsequently became a member of the United States Naval Academy Band as their only oboist. An obviously

(cont'd on page 6)

(Ray Moeller cont'd from page 5)

accomplished musician, Ray played in more than 700 professional level concerts, 68 Mutual Broadcasting System radio programs and about 20 music ensembles at the Mansion of the Commandant of Midshipmen for the President of the United States prior to the spring of 1948, at which time he enrolled at Florida Southern College in Lakeland. In the fall of 1948, he returned to Stetson University, where he subsequently earned his masters degree in 1957.

By the summer of 1950, Ray had played oboe with the Daytona Beach Municipal Band and the Florida Symphony Orchestra of Orlando. He married Jean Margaret Cochran of Daytona Beach in 1951. Jean was also an accomplished musician, playing organ and piano. They both had successful careers in music education and played with several professional orchestras in Florida. Following their divorce in 1976, Jean be-

came choral director and organist at several churches until a few years ago, when she suffered a severe stroke, from which her recovery is ongoing at this writing.

Ray and Jean raised two children, a son, Greg, now 46; and a daughter, Julie, now 42. Julie has a masters degree from the University of Miami and works at a large insurance conglomerate in Miami. She also is caregiver for her mother. Son Greg graduated from a small college in Nebraska and is a computer consultant. He lives near Des Moines, Iowa, is married and has three children.

Ray retired from the Miami-Dade County Public School System in July of 1983, and still lives in Miami.

Little Africa

By Ray Moeller

Robert Rich Ingle and I, both members of the old original Sebring High School Graduating Class of 1945, were classmates from first grade with Miss Clara Nolen, clear through our twelfth grade senior year with Mrs. Madge Coker as our home room teacher. Bobby Ingle lived with his parents and older brother, Jack, Class of 1939, during that period of time. They lived in a spacious home on the lakeside of Southeast Lakeview Drive. Since Jack was a graduating senior when Bobby and I were in sixth grade, I hardly got to know him at all. I knew nothing about Jack's interest in an old diving bell he and some of his peers used to explore among

sunken items in Lake Jackson. However, I did know of some interests that intrigued his little brother Bobby, one being the vacant and overgrown tract of land adjacent to and just south of the Ingle residence.

Bobby, who I shall refer to as Bob, as his name evolved with maturity, called this favorite play area of his, "Little Africa", due to the dense foliage and a number of banana trees on the uncleared property. He and others had managed to develop little trails that remained somewhat primitive, due to the rich soil and abundant water supply that made it possible for plants to refill any

(Little Africa, cont'd from page 6)

open areas quickly in their attempt to seek more sunlight. Little Africa contained mysteries that created high interest for the young boys who explored its approximately two or three acres of land with tall grasses, even denser bushes, plus a stretch of shoreline along Lake Jackson. There were much denser swamp areas near where I lived on Lake Charlotte. But out there, I had no playmates, only two dogs as companions.

Since I had to wait at my grandmother's house, just a couple of blocks north and on the other side of South Lakeview Drive each weekday afternoon for my father to get off work at 5:00 pm, it was mighty nice to have a friend like Bob, who would allow me to play with other neighborhood boys and him, most often in Little Africa.

John Percy, Class of 1946, a tall youngster with a powerful voice even as a young boy, was a regular playmate, with a number of other neighborhood kids showing up from time to time. One quite regular member was Gerald Luther, Class of 1945, who we often referred to as "Jeep". Gerald was particularly fond of an old aluminum kayak that seemed to be abandoned or forgotten by its owner. The mid-seat was still in good shape, and the single wood paddle had sturdy aluminum fins at both ends. Gerald found he could use the paddle to skim that old kayak through the water quite skillfully, since there were only minor leaks in the aluminum hull. In no time, Jeep was gliding through the water with considerable maneuverability, such that it wasn't long before he began taunting those of us on shore, daring us to try and hit him with chunks of sod from along the shoreline.

It soon became apparent that Jeep didn't really want to actually be hit bodily with a

half-pound chunk of grass and attached roots holding yucky black muck and sand we had just dug up with our bare hands and hurled at his passing kayak. What he really wanted us to do was provide him with the thrill of "near misses". So for us on shore, the name of the game was to aim close to where we estimated Jeep and his kayak would be when our sod missile reached him, only NEVER-EVER make the mistake of actually hitting the smiling Jeep as he glided by us in his derelict kayak. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out what eventually took place. Someone's aim was a little too accurate. One of those big chunks of sod would slam into Gerald's ribcage or elsewhere, which no doubt smarts to say the least. Immediately, Gerald Luther would stop paddling and start climbing out of his one-person kayak. Those of us on shore would run in the opposite direction and hide behind the relative safety of some of the bushes along the shoreline. Without ever reaching shore, Jeep would begin counseling us in a stern voice. By watching his carotid arteries bulge with nearly every word he uttered, I had a pretty good idea our kayak lover didn't like being hit with mud and sod at all. And, if need be, he'd do something about it.

In a little while, Gerald would return to the kayak, lift it over his head in order to drain away all of the accumulated water inside, then laboriously climb back in. A sober period of time would elapse before the normal rhythm of the game would resume. Soon though, normal fun was being enjoyed by all, that is, until someone made another direct hit, causing everyone on shore to seek refuge behind the bushes of Little Africa.

News From Your Board of Directors

The Board has purchased a copy of “The Lost Cord”, by Barbara E. Taylor. This is the story of the history of the electric car, including Sebring’s Vanguard Comuta Car that was developed and built by Bob Beaumont in the early 1980s.

We are very interested in obtaining historical artifacts regarding the Sebring Fire Department so that we can make a display about the Department’s history. If anyone has something they could donate (i.e. a hat, uniform, etc.) we certainly would appreciate it.

The Board is discussing the possibility of having a “Pioneer of the Year” honored

each year. Wanda Whitehouse is researching this project.

We recently received a call from the publisher of the very popular 1993 book by Stephen A. Olausen, “Sebring, City on the Circle”, which is about the history of the city and its historic buildings. The publisher, William Adams, of St. Augustine, stated that he was closing his business and that he had several copies of these books and asked if we were interested. The Board promptly voted “yes” and we now have 17 copies available for sale (\$15.00 minimum donation) and may receive a few more.

In Loving Memory of

Poppa and Momma

Joseph and Anna Georgia

and Siblings – Beatrice, Dante and Theodore Georgia

With Love,

Lillian Georgia Barnes

2009 Luncheon Meeting Dates

Put these on your calendar!!

All at 12:00 noon at Sebring Civic Center

Saturday, January 24 • Saturday, April 25

Saturday, July 18 • Saturday, October 24

I would like to contribute a financial gift to the Sebring Historical Society to be used as follows:

_____ *To support Needy Student Scholarships*

_____ *General Operating Fund*

Mail to: Sebring Historical Society

321 W. Center Avenue

Sebring, FL 33870

Your Name & Address: _____

2009

Arthur J. Wright, Poet

By Carole Goad

Sebring is fortunate to be home to poet, artist and businessman, Arthur J. Wright. If any of you are regular Sebring Library patrons, you may have noticed the unique display of beautiful hand-carved walking canes that have graced the library on two occasions in the past two years. Those canes were meticulously hand-carved by Arthur, in his words, “to teach me patience”!

Arthur is not only a brilliant craftsman, but he is a prolific writer and poet, many of his works born of his life experiences, which were extremely difficult through much of his childhood, having lost his mother at the age of seven. He was born in Alabama and lived most of his young life in Syracuse and Albany, New York. He served in the United States Army from 1979 until 1983, most of the time being stationed in Alaska, a place which he calls “incredibly beautiful”. He is the father of two grown children, a son and daughter. He has lived in Sebring since 1992, and is the owner of Wright’s Construction, Demolition and Towing Service.

Arthur graduated from South Florida Community College in 2003 with an Associates Degree in Architecture and Design. During that year, Arthur states that he “gave my life to God”. When you meet him, you quickly realize that this is a person who has a gentle and kind manner, being quite soft-spoken, and simultaneously a man who is strong in spirit and resolve. It has been this writer’s privilege to meet Arthur and to be able to publish in *The Historian* some of his works.

The poem, “A Father’s Dream”, was written at the birth of his son on December 30, 1981.

(See poem page 10)

SEBRING HISTORICAL SOCIETY BOARD MEMBERSHIP 2009

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A Father's Dream

By Arthur J. Wright



Arthur Wright commissioned Sebring Artist, Ron Keyes, to paint this work to commemorate the birth of Wright's son in 1981.

If by chance you walk the same streets,
Kick the identical stones,
Yes, my son,
If once you should endure the pain and
Beauty I did, ask not why,
But how you may correct your preplanned
destiny.

Times may be hard and sometimes misleading,
Your heart will be hurt,
All pleasure may not come at once,
But please, my son,
Keep your head to the skies.
And reach for that one opportunity.

For, I'll not mislead you in your journey,
Nor give direction,
For life is yours to adventure,
And when explained by others my misdeeds
incurred,
Just smile, but don't copy,
For all I've done was to follow my own
feelings,
My own path.

I love you more than flowers love the rain.
My affection reaches far beyond the farthest
stars,
Hoping and wishing that one day,
You will accomplish all you set out to become.

And as your smile flashes vividly across your
tiny face,
My thoughts dance with glee
To know that one second, days, or years,
You must,
And if just by a chance...

Wanting to be a poet
By A.J.W.
December 30, 1981

Books Available for Purchase at Sebring Historical Society Archives **2008-2009**

Sebring. A pictorial history of Sebring from its beginnings in 1911 through the 1960s. By Susan Priest MacDonald, 1976 Sebring High School graduate. Published by Arcadia Press in South Carolina, one of their "Images of America" series. Soft cover, minimum donation of \$20.00.

DeVane's Early Florida History, Vol. I & II. A compilation of the notes and interviews by brothers Albert & Park DeVane, edited by Allen Altvater, Sr., giving a comprehensive look at the land and early settlers of Florida and an excellent insight into the lives and lore of the Seminole Indians. Soft cover set minimum donation \$77.00; individual book \$40.00. (Published by Evansville Bindery, Inc., Evansville, Indiana)

Note: The following books were assembled and published by Allen C. Altvater, Sr. and the Sebring Historical Society during the 1970s and 1980s:

Newcomb & Baker Collections. Diarist John Newcomb's detailed description of early life in Sebring and development of the town from 1911 to 1916, illustrated with photographs by Milton Baker, first general store operator in Sebring. Soft cover minimum donation \$2.00; hard cover \$16.00.

Hall of Fame. History of Sebring city government from 1913 to 1987. Includes lists of those who held civic offices during these years, with photographs, brief biographies (where available), specific data and "remembrances" associated with various positions within the City of Sebring government. Soft cover minimum donation \$2.00; hard cover \$16.00.

Heartland Heritage. Sketches of how the Indian Streets were named; trials of pioneer residents, their progress and entertainment; and the location of the first known African-American settlement in the Sebring area. Soft cover minimum donation \$2.00.

Twice Told Tales. Stories of hardship, tragedy, events of historical significance and creative recreation. Relates stories of hurricanes, pageants, Highlands Hammock and the first fifty years of Sebring. Soft cover minimum donation \$2.00.

The Seventy-Five Years of Sebring, 1912-1987. Official program of Sebring's 75th Diamond Jubilee Celebration, October 10-18, 1987. Includes history and information on the founders, business, government, education, religion, clubs and civic groups, landmarks, agriculture, sports, etc. in Sebring. Soft cover minimum donation \$2.00.



S O C I E T Y

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**You are invited to join us at the Sebring Historical Society's
Quarterly Luncheon Meeting on
Saturday, January 24, 2009, at 12:00 noon at the
Sebring Civic Center at Lake Jackson.**

**Just bring a dish to share, and \$1.50 each for beverage,
table service and rent of the building.**

**We are pleased to welcome Chief Brad Batz, of the Sebring Fire
Department; and Mr. Richard McClain, of the Sebring Firemen's
Association, who will be our guest speakers.**

(See story on page 1.)