

REAL ESTATE

Laurel and Oak Residents Look to a Positive Future

Boosters of Close-In Neighborhood See a New Interest in Their Location

By DOROTHY STOCKBRIDGE
Staff Writer

One of Sarasota's oldest neighborhoods is struggling to retain its identity. Morrill, Laurel and Oak streets, between Orange and Osprey avenues, was a popular place to live in Sarasota's booming 1920s. Not only was it close to downtown and the bayfront but it had its own neighborhood shopping area at Little Five Points (Herald Square).

Several apartment buildings offered housing. Comfortable cottages and a few spacious homes joined the Morrill Street home that Scottish pioneer J. Hamilton Gillespie prepared for his bride (his second wife, Blanche) in 1905. Developers destroyed that historic house, which had been the Prew School building for many years, in 1984 to make way for multi-family units that were never started. Except for a few old oaks, the land has been leveled in preparation for blacktopping a GTE/Florida parking lot on the site.

Laurel and Oak streets have fared better. "Laurel is really a nice street. Several properties have been bought and remodeled. We feel the neighborhood is on the upswing," said Pam Clements.

She and her architect-husband, Craig, have been doing some work on their two-story 1923 Mediterranean house, which



NEIGHBORHOODS

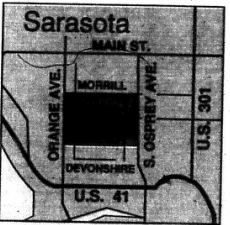
they believe was built by Owen Burns. They moved in 3½ years ago and weren't sure they'd stay until they saw positive signs that problem properties were starting to be fixed up.

"We love the neighborhood, except for a few negative properties. We're in the center of Sarasota in an area with lots of old trees," she said. "We both love older styles and this house is extremely solid. We still need to refinish the wood floors and change some of the spaces." The house boasts four bedrooms, a fireplace and interesting exterior detailing.

Newcomer Brian McInnis said the trees and the "nice little neighborhood" attracted him and his wife to Laurel Street.

"The neighborhood is one of the few in Sarasota with real character," he said. "Most of the houses in here do have problems from neglect and termites but we're fortunate to be surrounded by houses that are well-maintained."

McInnis found that fixing up his house was a major project because some termite-



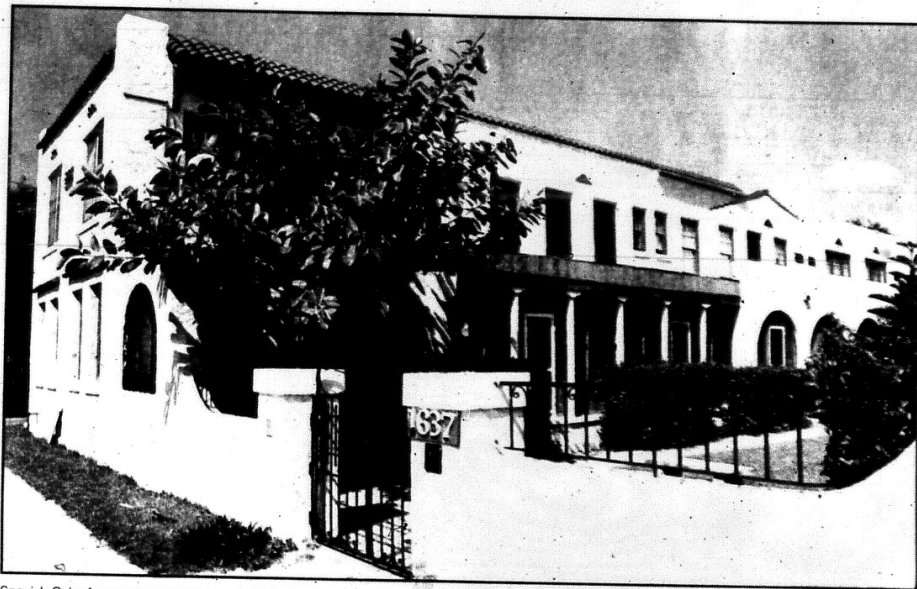
damaged framing had to be replaced. The stucco-over-frame house was moved to the area in the 1920s from east of Sarasota. McInnis replaced some windows with a series of French doors and has tried to duplicate older Spanish detailing.

Jeff Harris is another young person attracted to the area by its location, affordability and mature trees.

"There were mostly elderly people in the neighborhood 12 years ago. That's changing slowly," Harris said. "I see a feeling of community - the older residents cheering on our renovation work."

Harris and his sister, Susan, bought two run-down Oak Street houses that needed a complete rehabilitation from foundation to roof. One of the houses had been condemned and the roof was about to cave in. With his building skills and the help of several friends, Harris has returned some charm to the two-bedroom, 1,000-square-foot houses.

To give his house more light, Harris tore out the ceiling and now has a cathedral ceiling with rafters and a new skylight. He enlarged one window and replaced another with a bay-window breakfast area. The larger bedroom got a skylight and French doors opening to a private deck. He added a dormer window to the kitchen and replaced all the cabinetry. The house got new wiring, plumbing, windows and roof. The side yard has become part of the living area with the addition of a wood deck with a bricked area and lots of



Spanish Oaks Apartments have been refurbished and are listed with Merrill Lynch for \$850,000.



Craig, Pam Clements are working on their 1923 Mediterranean-style home.

landscaping. There's no grass now but the yard has a jungle look, which Harris' wife, Kelly, says attracts birds and squirrels.

"Everything we need is five minutes away: downtown. We like the local business people," Harris said. "The guys at Adams and Houser (hardware store on State Street) helped with the renovation problems."

Five years ago, when the neighborhood seemed threatened by plans for high-density, six-story apartments, Harris and some neighbors formed the Morrill-Mound Neighborhood Association. He has been president since the start.

"Luckily, the economy was such that the plans ran into problems before any of the existing homes had been destroyed,"

said Harris, who has found city government supportive. "Neighborhoods that border downtown are an asset. If they are destroyed, everyone suffers."

Again, with support from the city, the association recently squelched the idea of turning Oak Street into a main east-west artery. Two association members have worked to insure park-like beautification for the parking lot that is going in where the Prew School stood. Morrill Street, standing on the edge of commercial development, continues to be a problem, Harris said, because landlords are holding property for possible future development, rather than improving the existing housing.

Harris believes there are people who would invest in improving the housing along Morrill if zoning decisions supported continued residential use. Harris is en-



Jeff and Kelly Harris like the community feeling.



Sarasota Counseling Center has won two renovation awards.

couraged by the transition to professional offices on Osprey, especially the renovation of an exorcise house by architect Al Ramphal. The Sarasota Magazine office at Oak Street and Osprey is new, too, and he also likes the colorful Herald Square renovation.

Neighbors turned out with their favorite dishes for a block party last Sunday afternoon on Ohio Place, between Cherry Lane and Oak Street.

"It was great. We say, 'Hi,' but everyone's so busy that we need to take time to really get to know each other," Harris said.

Kelly Harris, a nurse by profession, says she'd like the neighborhood association to become a support system that people can rely on.

"We want to survey the needs of our elderly, our single-parent families and others who might need help in an emergency," she said. "The association is trying to focus on the good things about the neighborhood - the charm and community feeling, rather than the buildings we have lost."

Dr. Livingston Otis has won two awards for his renovation of a 1926 Oak Street cottage into the Sarasota Counseling Center. He bought the house in 1981 and his project was one of the first to apply for variances available to older, historic buildings. Otis said the house probably cost \$1,000 to build from \$5 Sears Roebuck plans, but he learned that renovating can be expensive.

"It's such a pleasant neighborhood. With some very nice renovations now happening, the neighborhood is really improv-

ing. It's one of the few areas where you feel safe walking at night," Otis noted.

The Spanish Oaks Apartments at 1637 Oak St. opened in 1925 as the Katabadin Court Apartments and have now been refurbished and listed with Merrill Lynch Realty for \$850,000, including a couple of extra buildings. Logan and Curran built the two Mediterranean Revival buildings of 12 townhouses, each with a courtyard between. The buildings are stucco over hollow clay tile. Tiles trim the parapets of the flat roof. Entry facades on the courtyard were framed by exposed pecky cypress and stuccoed columns with flat Moorish capitals. Thomas Reed Martin, a renowned early Sarasota architect, is believed to have designed the building. Martin's son and many other well-known Sarasotans lived at the Katabadin Court in the early '20s, but by 1925, when the Florida boom had burst, the apartments were being advertised for \$50 a month for the November-to-May season.

Besides Logan and Curran, some well-known partners on the project were Charlie-Pickett, Clarence Hitchings and Alice Ross, who all had ties then with the Bank of Sarasota. The city planning department's new associate planner and historic specialist, Albert Gonzalez, said it was only natural to look in this early Sarasota neighborhood for a place to live. He moved into a 1925 apartment building, the eight-unit El Dorado on Ohio Place, which boasts large rooms.

"I liked this area when I was driving through it. It was close to the water and to

Laurel, Oak Residents See Positive Future

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Selby Gardens, a 10-minute walk to Sarasota Bay or to work," Gonzalez said. "I feel safe walking in the area at night."

Gonzalez also likes the neighborhood renovations, including the new Mediterranean face the Quick Stop project.

Elsaine and Walton Taylor have lived 48 years in the neighborhood, gradually enlarging their frame house at the corner of Ohio Place and Cherry Lane. Today, their biggest problems are the cars parked all day in front of their house by Postal Service and GTE employees. Elsaine Taylor can still name neighbors from 40 years past.

"It was a grand neighborhood. Our children had a good time growing up here," she said. "Later, there was a rough element in some of the rentals but today we're getting some good young folks with families. We're seeing a lot of nice improvements."

The Taylors have taken an active part in neighborhood affairs, turning out at commission and planning board meetings that affect their area. They've encouraged neighbors and the association to support an aged community Thanksgiving meal program. They turned out for the block party and they think the neighborhood will support the new Pinapple Parfait shop at Herald Square, an updated version of the old day in store soda fountain that occupied the same location in the 1920s.

Katherine Blackshear has even more seniority in the neighborhood than the Taylors. Her father bought the house she lives in in 1931, three years after she came to Sarasota. The house and one next door were built in 1923 and still share a common driveway.

Sarasota County Property Transfers

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First Communities Corp. to Alexander N. and Frances Adair, Unit 21, Model C. Center Gate Estates Village, Section V, \$119,900.
George Hayes and Patricia Urbech to Barbara L. Herms, Lot 2, Block A. Longmeadow, \$249,900.
How Group Inc. to Howard A. and Marjorie C. Patten, 1211, 1213, 1215, M. Summer Green, Section 3, \$76,900.
Dennis E. and Jeanne M. Rahnbar to Frank E. and Barbara A. Mang, Lot 11, Blue Estates, \$132,000.
Douglas Robert Malley, Donald George LaGasse, William L. Milligan and Richard Crocker to Thomas Michael Thaxier, Connie M. Mitchell, Lot 1332, Colonial Oaks Unit 24, \$124,000.
Gerald and Nancy Baber to James A. Georgette, Unit D-1, The Rainbow Club II, \$50,000.
Lee R. Hopkins to Jaime L. Wallace, Lot 2, Unit 1, Sarasota Sands, \$156,000.
Ronald R. and Myrtle A.M. Traversi to Robert L. and Grace M. Winnings, Lot 1234, Ridgewood Estates, Addition 20, \$75,900.
Robert L. and Grace M. Winnings to Joseph Edna Marie Ecker, Lot 1234, Ridgewood Estates, Addition 20, \$75,900.
Arvida JMB Partnership to RMS Technology Inc., Unit 524, Building 5, Parkway Bay II, \$231,700.
Doris L. and Eric J. Wagh to Kathleen F. Day, Lot 466, Sarasota Springs, Unit A, \$55,000.

"It has always been a convenient location. I was five minutes from work and close to my church (First United Methodist) and to downtown," said Blackshear, who also has been an active supporter of the neighborhood association. "I attend and add what I can, but I have to leave the work to the young people."

A member of the younger generation, Lisa Mirabelli counts herself as an old-timer in the neighborhood. She has lived for eight years in the Young Apartments on Morris. They were built by the parents of Ruth Wright, a longtime Sarasota schoolteacher and Mirabelli's landlord until she died recently.

"The neighborhood houses are charming and there's some green space that's a getaway from the stress of downtown," said Mirabelli, who works in the city planning office. "I feel a small-community ambience here like my hometown, Woodstock, N.Y., had when its population was 2,000."

Marion Bradley lives in a handsome two-story frame house her father built in 1941 on the corner of Laurel and Ohio. When she first came to Sarasota in 1927, she lived a few doors away in the Louise Apartments, enlarged in recent years to become Senior Meadows.

It has been a convenient location for Bradley and she has had many of the same neighbors for years. She's glad neighborhood association meetings are being held again at the Laurel Square, Grace Fellowship. Several 1940s houses next to the church have been renovated and colorfully painted as the Key West Villas rental units.

"The neighborhood is a fitting heritage. Most people keep their places real nice and some of the others are getting fixed up," Bradley said. "But I was sickened when we lost the Gillespie house. Developers couldn't wait to tear it down. At least the association is seeing that it will be well-planned."



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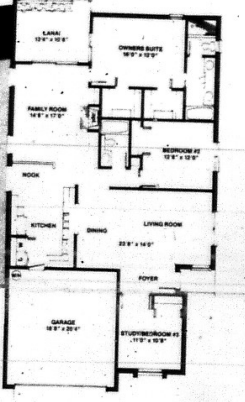
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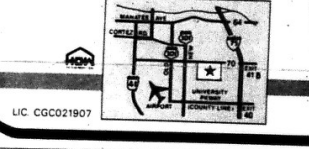
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