

Manatee County Historical Society
Highlights of Sarasota County History
Edward W. Cummer
Introduction by Rev. Milton Wyatt
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I'm happy to present as our speaker today one who lives here in Bradenton for six years. This is a rather interesting job I've had here arranging programs. Names would be turned over to me of people I didn't know and really never heard of, but fortunately most of these I've been able to get on our program for the year who either live here in Bradenton or Sarasota. So I started out by just picking up the phone and calling folks like Mr. Cummer and asking them if they would speak to our Manatee County Historical Society for one of our programs. Then maybe later on I'd receive a reply and get a picture—I always ask for a picture. I look at the picture and try to visualize what the person looks like. When Mr. Cummer was going to come I had just a small picture of him from here on up, so I was a little surprised when he walked in and I found he was a big six-footer athletic-type person.

Mr. Cummer is a lawyer in Sarasota. He's a member of the Florida Bar and the Ohio Bar. He received his law degree at Western Reserve in Cleveland. He's married and has two children, a son 13 and a daughter 22. He did his undergraduate work at Yale University and is president of the Yale Club, and he is also chairman of the Yale Alumni Representatives of Sarasota and Manatee counties. He's an active member of the Episcopal Church, a lay reader, a director of the Brotherhood of St. Andrews, and an adult education teacher. He has some hobbies: one of them is making a study of the lives of the presidents of the United States, and he gives lectures on them; another hobby is the study of the history of Sarasota County; and I understand another hobby is fishing. I present now to you Edward W. Cummer, our speaker for today.

Thank you Reverend Wyatt. When I get through this speech I'll probably go back to fishing. Sometimes in the past few years I've been introduced as a historian. I don't know whether I can claim that term or not. I'll tell you in just a few words why I'm here today and how I got into this. I have lived in Sarasota since 1918, since the age of 1--somebody said I was a Yankee because I was born in New York. As Reverend Wyatt said, over many years I've for made a hobby of the presidents' lives and have given talks all over the State of Florida on those. And when everybody heard those and got tired of them someone said well, you've lived in Sarasota all your life, why don't you start to give some talks on Sarasota and some of your reminiscences and what you remember about the early days of Sarasota? So I started out doing that and the next thing I know one of the local radio stations in Sarasota called me and wanted me to go out once a week for fifteen minutes on the radio, and I've been doing that for about a year now—I guess that makes me a historian.

I feel as if I don't know what to say today because we have so many people here that know so much more about the history of this area than I do. When I talked to Reverend Wyatt, a descendant of the Wyatts that married the Whittakers; and then Harrisons way back in the 1830's and 40's; I talked to Mrs. Hampton who told me her family had been here since 1860; and many other people who are here today who either they or their families have been here for many more years than I have. I feel that I've got to watch my stuff and not say something wrong—the Judge said he won't hold me in contempt whatever I do here, so I guess that's all right. In Sarasota we have so many new people --they're coming all the time—and when I talk to them I generally find that most of the people haven't been there much more than three or four years, so I can lie all I want to and nobody can catch me up on it. But I'm afraid I can't do that here today.

I've been asked to talk--the subject I was given was "Highlights of Sarasota County History." I took that literally--I hope that's what was meant--and really I'm going to talk about Sarasota County, which of course didn't start until 1921. I don't know how many of you realize this, but we're having our 50th anniversary of Sarasota County down there this year. In fact, I understand that all of us who have lived there before 1921 are going to be admitted to the fair free on Friday and given a badge that we're pioneers or something--I don't know if that really makes you a pioneer, but at least we're going to get into the fair free Friday, so we get something out of having lived down there. '

I'm a probably rather peculiar breed in the fact that I've lived in Sarasota practically all of my life, but I did live here in Palma Sola for a couple of years, and I did practice law here for six years; and to top it all off--you heard what I do in the church--I go to church in Palmetto. So, county lines don't mean much to me.

I really feel that county lines should mean less to all of us as the years go by. Talking to some of the people here before as to what really made the rivalry between Sarasota and Manatee County, most of us agree that it really went back to the old football rivalry in our early days, probably sprung a good extent from that. I feel as we're growing, as the State is growing, as the counties are growing, there are less and less differences between us. I don't know if all of you would agree with me on that, but I feel that way. I certainly feel that I'm a part of this whole area. I don't necessarily feel that I'm in Sarasota and a different breed of cats lives in Manatee County, and I hope that the people in Manatee County are beginning to see that we're not all "arty" or something that I've heard people say about the people in Sarasota. And I think that the more we get together, the more we join together, the better off we're going to be--because whether we like it or not, we're getting a pretty solid population all the way down here and we're going to have to learn to live together.

Sarasota County came into being in 1921. It had been a part of Manatee County since the foundation of Manatee County, and it came into being primarily because of some of the things we still do--this goes back to what I was just talking about. It came into being because the people in Sarasota County sort of thought they were getting cheated by the people in Manatee County. Two of the things that really upset the people down in Sarasota County back in the late teens and the early twenties--a lot of people thought that the Manatee County was getting all the good roads and Sarasota wasn't, and the county commissioners were sort of neglecting them. They also felt that the schools weren't quite as good in Sarasota and they weren't getting as much money and support for the schools as they should get. All these things, probably not a hundred percent justified, but this is the way people were talking back in those days. And a lot of people down south didn't like having to come up north to the county seat--it was a long drive with the cars that they had and the sand roads in those days. I remember my father telling me and some of his friends telling me about blowing several tires out on trips up to Manatee. Colonel Dye, Sr. was my father's attorney and he used to come up here quite often and see Colonel Dye, and about one out of every three or four times he would blow a tire and have to stop and change the tire. So folks in Sarasota wanted a county seat closer to home.

So this separation movement gained strength down there in Sarasota County, and back in June of 1920 a mass meeting was held in the office of the Palmer interests on North Pineapple Avenue. About 35 citizens from all parts of the county came to this meeting, a call for which was sent out by our then mayor, Mr. A.B. Edwards, who probably most of you knew or know about, called for many years "Mr. Sarasota" and died here in his nineties just a year or two

ago. Speeches were made—and they were fiery speeches—by people (a lot of these names may ring a bell) such as John Burkett, who was one of the early attorneys in Sarasota; A.L. Joyner, Owen Burns, Joseph Halton, and many others who were prominent in Sarasota in those days. They all (I've got to say this because I'm supposed to tell the truth) harped on the same thing—Sarasota had been neglected by Manatee County. They felt that the improvements that were needed in Sarasota County could only be brought about by creating a county of their own. So they organized a committee and went out to try to form a county government.

I think the man that should probably get the lion's share of there being a Sarasota County is a gentleman by the name of Frank A. Walpole, who some of you also probably know. Mr. Walpole was born in Mississippi, was sort of nursed on printer's ink, and when he became knee-high to a grasshopper started a newspaper business. He worked his way up from a copy boy to cub reporter, and then finally became owner and editor of a paper known in those days as the Tampa Herald. He got this paper well-established and sold it and started two more papers, one in Palmetto and one in the village of Manatee called the Manatee Record, which was long one of the influential papers in this county. He was known throughout the State as that "fiery, red-headed editor." He branched out from the newspaper business and entered the drugstore business, and in 1912 bought a drugstore in Manatee. Soon afterwards, he bought the old night drugstore down in Sarasota. In 1916 he moved from Manatee to Sarasota with his family, and of course there is still a Walpole drugstore down there that some of his descendants run near Sarasota Hospital; and one of his descendants, Charlie Walpole, is partner in the Ludwig-Walpole Insurance Agency in Sarasota.

Mr. Walpole was the one who really pushed the breakaway of Sarasota from Manatee. When the legislature met in 1921, efforts were made to get the Sarasota County bill introduced; of course, the representatives from Manatee County opposed it. There was quite a to-do in the legislature, but it was finally passed. You know in politics there's always some trade-offs, and the Sarasota boys got together with some of the Northern Florida legislators and said "we'll vote for something that you want if you'll vote for this separation bill," and that way they got enough votes for the bill to go through. The Governor signed the bill on May 14; an election was called in June to ratify or reject it. They submitted it to the people, and it was approved by a vote of 518 to 154; and that's how Sarasota County came about.

Sarasota County, and Sarasota itself, I think, owes a great debt for its growth to two families, one who of course was a little before my time; and one who I knew quite well. The first influential family was of course the Palmer family. Mrs. Potter Palmer came here just before World War I. We had enterprising people in the advertising business even in those days, and Mrs. Palmer got interested by a brochure that had been sent up to Chicago by some people down in Sarasota who were trying to boom Sarasota. On a cold, wintry day up in Chicago she read this, and it sounded like paradise to her. Of course, it was a little puffed up like some real estate brochures can be; but she came down here, and got with Mr. Edwards and sailed up and down Sarasota Bay, all the way from the present downtown location down towards Osprey and Venice. I talked to Mr. Edwards about this some years ago and he said she just looked like a queen--she just sat back in the boat with her parasol and her hat and they went down the coast; and when she saw a piece of land that she liked, she said "pull in here," and they'd pull in and sometimes she'd get out and look around and sometimes she wouldn't, and she'd say "buy that for me." Mrs. Palmer bought a great deal of land, both on the water and inland towards the Fruitville area, where the Palmer celery farms were for many years. So Mrs. Palmer was really the first one to boom Sarasota land, but I

think the man that probably did more for Sarasota than anyone else—and I don't think Sarasota appreciates it—was a man named John Ringling.

John Ringling certainly did more for Sarasota and Sarasota County than anyone I can think of. He came from Berryville, Wisconsin from the Ringling Circus family, bought up a great deal of land, practically all of Lido and St. Armand's and Longboat Keys. In later years he built a great museum and willed it to the State. This man was vitally interested in Sarasota. He entered into the civic life of Sarasota, was a director of several banks and so forth down there. My father had the honor to work very closely with Mr. Ringling in several of the things he did. People ask me what sort of person was he. Well John Ringling was one of the late Diamond Jim Brady and 1890 types—a great spender and high liver and so forth. I'll never forget going to dinner as a very small boy at Mr. Ringling's home with my family. It was the first time I had ever been in anything so luxurious as Ca D'zan: liveried butlers and footmen, uniformed maids, silver and gold-plated dinnerware. Of course the great thing that John Ringling did down there, which shows you what young boys think about—John loved to served terrapin, which of course is like a turtle, and he had his own terrapin pit out there; and he'd take you to pick out your own terrapin, like you do lobsters in Maine. When he took me out to pick out the terrapin I wanted to eat, all I wanted to do was see the creatures run around—I didn't want to eat any of them!

John Ringling lived high on the hog; he had the money—at one time he was reputed to be the sixth wealthiest man in the United States. He bought up all the circuses in sight and combined them under Ringling Brothers & Barnum & Bailey Circus; and bought, as I said, a great deal of land. When the boom became bust and the Depression later came on, he lost a great deal of money. I can remember him in the early days driving around Sarasota in his Rolls Royce with a chauffeur and a footman. In his later years—I talked with Mr. Roger Flory, a real estate man in Sarasota—he told me this story which I'd never heard about John Ringling. He said after he lost his money and became a sick man, he still managed to hang on to his Rolls Royce, but he had to let his chauffeur and footman go. Mr. Ringling had a nurse around the clock, and she would drive the car and he would sit in back. One day they were driving along and he was out of cigarettes; so he asked his nurse to pull into a gas station to buy a pack of cigarettes. Mr. Ringling had probably spent thousands and thousands of dollars in his heyday at this one gas station, so when he picked up a pack of Lucky Strikes and asked the attendant to put them on his bill, the attendant said "I'm sorry, Mr. Ringling, your credit's not good anymore," and took the cigarettes away. So Mr. Ringling was down to where he couldn't get a 15-cent pack of cigarettes on credit. When he died he was still very much in debt, but as the property appreciated and the family took over, it eventually came to be a very wealthy estate. The State of Florida is very lucky, and all of us in this area, to have the museum and the home and the other things that were willed by him to us.

I think one of the great things that I remember about Ringling myself —this gentleman here was talking to me about the Miramar Hotel and Miramar Auditorium down there in the early days of Sarasota—The Miramar was our hotel, on Palm Avenue overlooking the bay, and back of it was the Miramar Auditorium. That was about the only auditorium around. It was where we had our school dances, and lectures were held there. Well, John Ringling brought an awful lot of people—when I look back to the years that I can remember, say from 1926–30—he brought such people down as Will Rogers and Eddie Cantor. We're talking about Sarasota when it was a town of just a few thousand people in those days, and it was quite something to have these prominent people come down. As a young boy, I met other prominent people—I remember he had Al Smith down here one year, right after he lost the election to Mr. Hoover, which would have been in 1928. There was a famous story told that when the

train pulled into Sarasota (1928 was the first year since Reconstruction that Florida went Republican, many people think on the wet/dry issue) Mr. Smith got off and this lady rushed up to him and said "Mr. Smith, I want you to know I voted for you," to which Mr. Smith replied "I wondered where that one vote from Florida came from!"

So John Ringling started Sarasota on the idea of the cultural image, and yet the people on the other side of the coin didn't appreciate it. Circus was a nasty word, and I've always been mad at Sarasota about that and I'm mad to this day, and I don't mind saying it to people in Sarasota or anyplace else I speak. We drove the circus out of Sarasota—we drove it down to Venice. The circus meant a lot to us. There are a lot of very fine people living in Sarasota today who are retired circus people. They brought a lot of money into Sarasota, and yet for some reason people thought of them as roustabouts.

I'll tell you a story. My mother founded the first Sarasota garden club--the founders' circle of the Sarasota Garden Club met right on our front porch. My mother made the suggestion at this meeting that Mabel Ringling, who was one of God's gracious people, the first wife of John Ringling, should be elected as the first president, because my mother thought of her as Sarasota's leading woman citizen. And boy, if the place didn't erupt! "A circus woman as the first president of the garden club?" And the noses went up in the air. My mother said "either you'll elect her or I'm out." They did elect her, and she made a very gracious president. But that was just the feeling toward the circus, but I never could see it.

I thought one thing that you might be interested in--most of you probably know this (I'm not trying to make a formal speech, I'm just highlighting some of the things that I remember). I spent about a half a day up here in your courthouse listening to the testimony on the suits that are bringing brought by the residents of Whitfield Estates against the airport for damages brought by noise and other things. Just to show you how I don't know everything about Sarasota, I wondered where the first airport was in Sarasota. I remember this one out here was originally built with WPA money back in the thirties. To show you the values, the first tract of land for that airport was bought in 1938 by the newly acquired airport authority. They bought 160 acres and paid the great sum of \$32,000. I don't know what it's worth now, but that's what they paid for it in 1938. Well, I wondered if we had an airport before that and didn't really know--I just sort of dimly remembered when I was little that there were planes coming in here. So I went and looked it up in the historical archives of Sarasota and this is what I found: The first airport was built in 1929, right opposite where the entrance to the old Ringling Brothers winter quarters used to be, out by the Bobby Jones golf course. It was sixteen acres, and that sixteen acres was donated by two gentleman named Mr. Ralph Caples, who was a very good friend of Mr. Ringling, and by a gentleman named A. E. Cummer, who happened to be my father. I didn't even know about this so I guess I'm not as much of a historian as I should be.

I could tell lots of interesting stories about Sarasota, but I think most of you know the highlights--a great many of you have been here for much longer than I have. We've seen Sarasota grow, we've seen Bradenton grow, we've seen Manatee County grow. Some of the growing has been good and some of it has been bad. I'm a great preacher on the fact that we're going to have to control our density and ecological processes and keep this the place we love to be, but that's not what I'm talking about today.

I'll tell you a couple more stories and then I'll close. My family came here in 1918 and bought a home on Gulfstream Avenue, where we lived until 1960 when I moved to Bradenton. That home was taken away from us in the sixties by the high-rise apartments that are now being built there, well, about five

years after my family came to Sarasota, my grandfather retired from the New York Central Railroad and came down here to live; so my father built him a house right next door to him on Gulfstream. My grandfather, like so many retired people, was here about a year doing nothing and finally said "I've got to have something to do--I'm only 65 and I'm going crazy down here." So my father said to him "Well, you used to be a farmer--how would you like a little farm just to fool with?" My grandfather said fine, so my father went out and bought him a hundred acres and put a few cows and chickens on it (that hundred acres is now a subdivision in Sarasota called Harbor Acres). Anyway, the story I was going to tell you was that my grandfather read in the newspaper somewhere about Muscovy ducks, and thought he'd like to raise them. They were supposed to be very tasty, sort of a blend between a wild duck and a tame one. So he ordered about two hundred Muscovy ducks, and I was there out at the farm when they arrived. Nobody had told him that they were pretty wild and that you're supposed to clip their wings before you take them out of the cage, so he just opened all these boxes and ducks took off all over the place. In about two minutes there weren't any ducks around. So he put an ad in the paper: "Lost-200 Muscovy Ducks. Please call." Well, in those days people helped each other in paying taxes and they also helped each other in finding ducks, I guess, because over four or five weeks he got most of the ducks back. Three of them were found roosting in the top of the Palmer bank building. They were found all over Sarasota--I don't know if any of them got up as far as Manatee County, but I wouldn't be a bit surprised.

As all of you know, who lived either in Sarasota or Manatee County, it was pretty wild country in those days in the twenties. There are a lot of places that now spout apartments or beautiful subdivisions which before was nothing more than wilderness. My boy just joined the scouts and he was asking me what I know about scouting, and I thought about this story. We used to scout out on Siesta Key--that's where we went out for all our hikes and overnight camping. I don't know how many of you are familiar where the Gulf to Bay Club is, down where Midnight Pass Road divides. Right in there used to be a big stretch of wilderness and then the beach beyond. The boy scouts used to go in there to camp. I was telling by boy that one time when we went out there to camp, we set up our pup tents and then went down to the campfire and roasted marshmallows and hot dogs. We were telling stories as scouts do and I got sleepy and went back to my tent and as I went in, there was a pair of eyes looking at me. So I went and got the counselor and got a flashlight, and we discovered a little wildcat sitting in the tent. But he got more scared than we did, and ran out. But that's what you ran into in those days. I know many of you can talk more about this than I can.

Another story, then I'll close. I think that this is a very interesting story about a particular time, and I think it could be told about Manatee County as easily as Sarasota. As I said, we lived on Gulfstream Avenue, and as you come down Gulfstream Avenue past the city marina and make the turn to go back up towards 41, many of you know that on the right-hand side as you make the turn on what is called Street, there is a beautiful white brick house with a white wall around it. It was built by Mr. Christie Payne, who was the retired secretary of Standard Oil of New Jersey. Back in the early days, that used to be the best place to play--it had big pine trees, but not too close, and we went in there to play cops and robbers, or pirates, or whatever we wanted, because it went right down to the water and it had a little bit of beach of its own. Well, back in in the twenties we had something called Prohibition, and around 1927 when I was about 10 or 11, five of us boys decided to go down there and play pirates. So we wrapped bandannas around our heads and hid behind the trees, and like all boys will do, dusk came on and we knew we should be getting home but we didn't. And all at once we looked out on the water and here coming in was a light. We thought maybe these were real pirates, so we hid behind trees and palmetto clumps. And this boat came in

and docked on the shore, and five or six rather rough-looking characters got out with shovels. We were sure they were pirates then! They dug this big hole, went back to the boat and brought some stuff out and put it in the hole and covered it up, and then got in their boat and went away. We thought boy oh boy, we've found the big treasure now! So five boys took off in five different directions to go home and get shovels and come back. We dug the treasure up and it was five cases of imported Scotch liquor. Well, we didn't get punished by our father that night, because each of us took one case home with us. I always wondered what those pirates thought when they came back!

But that's how Sarasota was, and I'm sure that's how Manatee County was in the twenties. These are the memories I have and the things that I've enjoyed about Sarasota.

I've enjoyed being with you, and I think you have a wonderful organization. When I see how many people you have here at this meeting, I wish we could get this many for a Sarasota County Historical Society meeting. I belong down there and have done a lot of work with them on various things, doing the same kinds of things that you're trying to do--collecting old pictures and saving the memories of old Sarasota. I told Reverend Wyatt I'm going to be very glad to see the treasurer afterwards and join your society, and would like to be back with you, because as I said I feel that the more we can do to eliminate the county lines the better. We still have our old prejudices, our old feelings, but we're all living together and we have a common history. We're descended from you, and I'm very happy to be here. Thank you very much.