Article published Feb 16, 2006

Summerfield stories

Residents reflect on what was and what will be

Bill and Jaca Mills reminisce over old photos last week at their Summerfield home. BRUCE ACKERMAN/STAR-BANNER

ELIZABETH GUTH, FREE PRESS

SUMMERFIELD - The Summerfield of Bill Mills' childhood is etched in his memory. The Summerfield where farmers took the stronger boys from school to help collect watermelons - since Marion County was the top watermelon-producing county in the nation - and where there were only two telephones.

The Summerfield where he could safely hitchhike the half-mile of dirt roads from his house to town, where the Baptist and Methodist churches could afford a pastor only every other week.

Mills remembers the Summerfield High School Bulldogs' six-man football games played in 15-yard increments. Visitors used to complain about the sandspurs on the football field at the high school, which is now a storage unit for White's Furniture.

"Yet we went around barefoot all the time," he said. "It seemed like we could walk on a sandspur and the soles of our feet were so tough it seemed like the sandspur wouldn't go in."

Longtime Summerfield residents remember their community when there were two country grocery stores, one mail carrier and when church, education and agriculture reigned supreme.

But hundreds of homes have sprung up in the decades since hitchhiking to downtown Summerfield was considered safe. A retirement community sits on land where one man rode his tractor and trapped falcons. Residents say they see more rooftops than open fields and hear more cars than crickets.

And for those residents who have spent decades in this rural, unincorporated community, the changes seemed to have happened almost before their eyes.

Before Del Webb

Lady Lake dentist Michael Whitt's parents owned 1,000 acres of land in the 1950s, property that is now home to Del Webb's Spruce Creek Country Club.

"Summerfield was a little town," he said, adding that the biggest change he's seen over the years is the number of people. "I always wondered why anybody would want to buy way out there in the country."

His parents bought the property for $25 per acre, and the family lived in a small bunkhouse. When they sold the acreage some five years later, each acre sold for $250.

Sinkholes were all over the property, Whitt said, and one was at least 30 feet deep. Cows from their herd often played by the edge and fell in, and when he heard a mother cow crying, Whitt's father (who skipped a day in high school to watch the Ma Barker shootout in Ocklawaha), would come with a rope to haul them out.

Whitt remembers trapping falcons on the property where hundreds of homes now sit, and oak trees so big that two people could reach their arms around the trunks and just barely touch hands.

He and his father rode around the property on a tractor.

"Dad figured he'd gone far enough on the tractor to drive to California and back, and I'd driven halfway there," he said.

Whitt's family lived there before U.S. 441, and he remembers his father worrying that the construction of the road could take some of his property.

Whitt's grandfather helped his mother dig holes for fencing posts around the perimeter. They used cypress, which was considered expensive at 5 to 10 cents per post, Whitt said, but some of those posts still stand today.

And although he can recognize the posts, Whitt said the housing development makes it difficult to tell where pieces of his childhood once stood.

Grocery shopping

Years before frozen food and prepackaged meals, Summerfield had its own grocery stores, Mills Grocery and Nelson's Grocery.

Bill Mills' dad, Thornton "T.B." Mills, owned one, where he also operated the community's post office, near the railroad track.

T.B. Mills earned $1,300 his first year as postmaster, Bill Mills said. The lone mail carrier, Ed Collins, stacked mail and wrapped leather straps around it. He was always done with the 109-mile route by 1:30 p.m. so he could fish, Mills said.

Mills remembers his daily routine of cleaning the Coke box, putting in the drinks and then adding ice. He remembers selling a 6-ounce Coke for 5 cents, though the customer got 2 cents back for returning the bottle.

Mills' dad butchered pork and beef, and the store had a 10-foot showcase with aluminum pans for ground sausage, lunch meats, pork chops, hamburgers, steaks and chicken.

"People came from all around to get meat from Mills," Mills said.

A big hunk of round cheese always sat nearby on a table. During those days, when agriculture reigned, the grocery store owners worked with the farmers.

"The farmers he knew, several of them would go in and buy their weekly groceries and charge them, and when the watermelons came in, they'd go in and pay him off," Mills said.

That all changed in the mid-1950s, Mills said, when frozen food came to the area. His father's best customer, who spent $500 to $600 annually on groceries, came in one day to pay the bill. With tears in his eyes, he said his wife wanted to shop in Ocala for frozen foods. That customer never

returned, Mills said. "It was an emotional time. He and Daddy both had tears in their eyes," he said.

Summerfield resident Sue Wright, who lives just yards from the 480-acre farm where she grew up, said her parents shopped at Nelson's.

"It was literally just like 'Little House on the Prairie.' You know, where you took your list in and the lady behind the counter got everything," she said.

Her dad paid the grocery bill once a year when the crops came in; she remembers that changed to twice a year when he started selling cattle.

"We kids were thrilled when they paid the groceries because we got a store-bought cake (from the owner)," she said. "In those days, a treat was to get a store-bought cake."

'We created things'

Wright still remembers when Nelson's became more like today's supermarkets and shoppers got their own groceries.

Most kids didn't have bicycles.
Mills was one of the lucky ones who did and kept busy with his friends.

"You could go out and have fun, and yet we had nothing to have fun with," he said. "We created things."

They put straw in bags and slid six feet off barn roofs; they made slingshots and used stones from the gravel road. The kids took heavy wire and a metal ring with a hook in it and rolled that up and down the road, pushing the hook.

"No parent worried about their kid, and if you went out and did something, your neighbor would probably spank you and then tell your Daddy and you'd probably get spanked again," Mills said. "Everybody knew each other. I knew every family in town - black or white. There was no animosity. We were buddies. We played together, though we didn't go to school together, and we enjoyed each other."

For eight years, Mills lived half a mile west of the town and often hitchhiked in. Usually, one car would come every 10 to 15 minutes.

"It was always someone you knew, and they stopped to pick you up," he said. "To me today, the greatest thing was the countryness of it, the openness of it, the lack of people. You could just go pretty well anywhere

you wanted to. We didn't worry about pedophiles." The only crime Mills can remember was when someone broke into the post office in the 1940s, took packages and bit off pieces of link sausage before returning the meat to the display.

"We respected our parents, and we respected the law," Mills said. "It was just a different time."

Even though her parents' farmhouse was in the middle of their 480 acres, Sue Wright had her siblings and next-door neighbors to play with, making mud pies or riding a horse.

Her mom brought home the latest toys from the store; when a hula hoop came, Wright said, she felt really "uptown." The fun she and her siblings had, though, wasn't encouraged by television.

"Our parents said that our education, our church and our extracurricular activities were more important," she said.

When Wright got older and earned her driver's license permit, she and her friends found another way to have fun. On some Wednesday nights, her mom let her drive the family's heavy Buick down the road to church.

"The last thing my mother would say to me as I was leaving was, 'Don't go across 301," she said, adding that if she wanted a Coke, she had to park the car and walk across the street.

Sometimes, though, instead of heading to church, Wright and several other friends headed to County Road 475 to go to the McDonald's in Ocala. So her mom wouldn't suspect anything, she drove very fast on that narrow road.

"There were no lights, no people, and I'd be driving my parents' car at almost 100 miles," Wright said. "So you see, times haven't changed. We were just as wild as they are today - just a little bit different."

Wright never got caught.

Keeping the faith

Religion played an important role in rural Summerfield.

"The community revolved around the church," Wright said.

A photo from 1950 shows Postmaster Thornton Mills, Bill Mills' father. SPECIAL TO THE FREE PRESS

First Baptist Church, founded in 1911, and the First United Methodist Church were the two houses of worship in town.

Mills, who attends First Baptist, and his wife, Jaca, have spent time researching the history of their church.

"We could only afford to have a pastor every other week, and (the Methodists) were the same way," he said.

The congregations split a minister, who was paid from the collection plate - usually $1.50 to $2 a day.

The earliest Baptist church baptisms, from 1911-1920, took place at what was known as Summers Pond, where Padua Stables is today. The water was clear then, Mills said, and people picnicked on the south end.

Wright and her children were all baptized in Lake Weir off Sunset Harbor Road.

Jaca Mills said the highway was a mere six steps from the door of First Baptist Church.

"Those trucks sounded like they were coming in the church," she remembered.

Working the land

Wright considers herself fortunate. She was raised with many amenities other residents didn't have.

Because her father was a big-time farmer, he had a crew come and do work. She never had to work in the fields, except to help her mom pick the peas, beans and corn that were planted for the family and neighbors to eat.

"You shared because when your crop came, people came," she said.

And she went to the neighbors' when their crops came in. Nobody charged.

Bill Mills remembers the farmers coming to the school as soon as they could, usually around 1:30 or 2 p.m., to get the bigger boys to help the watermelon farmers. Because of the rural nature of the community, he said, the students in Summerfield began school earlier and got out earlier than the other students in the county.

During the '40s and '50s, trucks from the north came to buy watermelon from the farmers, who sold their crop on the roadsides. His father, the postmaster, took a vacation during watermelon season to sell for farmers.

Rural beauty

Summerfield was always very rural and family-centered, Wright said.

"Most everyone in this area was kin to each other."

Agriculture was everywhere, and then - during the past 20 years as houses came in - it started to disappear.

"It changed almost before my eyes. This literally was the watermelon capital of the world," she said.

Her dad shipped his crop to New York and rented 1,500 acres from the state near the Marjorie Harris Carr Cross Florida Greenway.

"There is nothing better than going into a watermelon field real early in the morning when the night was cool and dropping the melon on the ground and eating the heart in the middle," Wright said, adding they could choose five or six watermelons because there were so many.

In later years, when she took U.S. 441 to visit her sister in Lady Lake, Wright enjoyed the rural beauty.

"There was land everywhere and cattle everywhere. I always thought of the Bible verse, 'cattle on a thousand hills.' Now it's rooftops on a thousand hills," she said.

And although she enjoys the amenities such as the restaurants and stores of The Villages, "you have to pay the price of giving up the rural lifestyle," she said.

Eyeing the future

Brenda and Mike Farrell have lived in their Summerfield home for 25 years - she's lived in the area her entire life. The Farrells have experienced recent frustration with the road construction project between CR 42 and U.S. 301. With the new medians, the Farrells - Mike and his daughter are part of the sheriff's posse - have to drive lengthy distances to get in and out of their driveway with a horse trailer.

Mike Farrell said he almost feels like he doesn't live in Summerfield anymore. The medians on CR 42 were put in, he feels, to divide Summerfield from The Villages, but eventually, he will be absorbed by The Villages. Brenda Farrell has heard rumors that residents near The Villages will have to use their water system, but she figures that doesn't mean she can start enjoying the luxuries the residents have.

"I'm sure we can't take our four-wheeler down to The Villages and ride all over the golf course, but yet we'll have to pay for water," she said. "It's sad because people don't know of the rural communities like Summerfield, Pedro or Oxford until you say they're near The Villages. We still say we're from Summerfield."

Brenda Farrell's father used to farm the land that is now home to the Mulberry Landing community.

"I think all the old farmers in this area have to sit back and think, 'Where have all the farms gone?'" she said. She fears residents will sell to make a quick dollar and leave their native area because of The Villages.

"We lived here 25 years and heard nothing but the crickets," she said.

Elizabeth Guth covers Belleview and Summerfield for the Free Press. She can be reached at 732-5807 or elizabeth.guth@starbanner.com.