

PRESERVATION AND REDEVELOPMENT OF MCKEE GARDENS¹

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Abstract: One of Florida's original tourist attractions in Vero Beach, Florida, has been purchased for redevelopment into a Botanical Garden. McKee Jungle Gardens was opened to the public in 1932 when a coastal hammock was interplanted with tropical ornamentals. The original landscape was designed by William Lyman Phillips five years before he prepared the master plan for Fairchild Tropical Gardens. A notable collection of orchids assembled by Dr. David Fairburn was located on site. Declining traffic caused closure in 1976. Inventory of the site revealed five Florida Champion Trees. A five year community effort resulted in privately raised funds for the purchase, redevelopment and endowment of the Gardens. A new master plan for 18 acres of McKee has been developed based on original documents. The preservation program used by the Indian River Land Trust is suggested as an approach to preserve other local horticultural resources for the future.

How does one raise \$2.5 million dollars in 10 weeks? This was the original question that some concerned citizens in Indian River County wrestled with in the early days of 1989. The McKee Jungle Garden Preservation Society, formed in February 1988 to save the site of a former botanical garden. This tourist attraction, located south of Vero Beach, was going to be developed into a shopping center. In 1995 the preservation effort was redefined by a \$1.7 million price tag, with a 3 month deadline, in order to keep this site from being developed.

Highlights of McKee Jungle Gardens

What was this garden that raised such passion? In its prime, McKee Jungle Gardens was one of the most popular attractions in the state of Florida. Any Florida map from the 1930's or 1940's shows McKee Gardens printed under the town of Vero Beach. McKee opened in 1932, just 7 years after Indian River County was formed. The land was purchased by Arthur G. McKee, a Cleveland Industrialist in steel and petroleum, and Waldo Sexton, a pioneer settler, rancher and entrepreneur. They bought the land originally for a citrus grove, but soon realized it was a beautiful Florida hammock filled with magnificent oaks, pines and maples. Instead of planting citrus, they hired landscape designer William Lyman Phillips of the prestigious firm of Frederic Law Olmsted to create a botanical garden. Plants were brought to the site from such exotic places as Ceylon, Java and India, and were interplanted with native species. Dr. Ludwig Diels of the Berlin Botanical Gardens told McKee and Sexton that he found it necessary to travel over 25,000 miles to see all the botanical specimens that were found in their jungle garden (Jungle in Florida). It was stated "Nature and man's handiwork have combined to produce a spot of tropical beauty." (Palm Beach Post, 1932).

One of Mr. McKee's main hobbies was the growing and development of orchids. He established an orchidarium in the garden, a special display greenhouse landscaped to create a true tropical paradise. McKee then lured

Orchidologist Dr. David Fairburn from Missouri Botanical Gardens to take care of the collection in 1946. Under Dr. Fairburn's expert guidance, it became one of the finest in the country. During World War II, a collection of tropical orchids, especially 4 *Odontoglossom* sp., were brought from France and England for their protection. To provide proper summer temperatures, Fairburn designed and built the country's first mechanically air conditioned greenhouse.

Water lilies were another of the garden's special collections. Herold reported 150 varieties of these plants and was the country's largest group of tropical water lilies at the time. Cultivation of the *Victoria Regia* (*Nymphaeae* sp.), native of the Amazon, with leaves large enough to support a child, was one of the triumphs of McKee botanist and garden superintendent Jens Hansen, who also created several varieties of water lilies through cross pollination. (Jungle in Florida).

Another outstanding feature of the garden was the Cathedral of Palms, a grove of over 300 Royal Palms (*Roystonea regia*), planted equidistant from each other in a block. They gave the feeling of standing in a gothic church; in fact, many weddings took place in this beautiful spot.

The garden was also a place for plant introduction and experimentation. The U.S. Tropical Plant Introduction Center in Miami and Dr. David Fairchild gave McKee many species of tropical ornamentals and fruit species to examine under Central Florida growing conditions. Truesdale reported forty varieties of latex producing plants (i.e. *Ficus* spp.) were growing in Vero Beach in 1939. Many of these plant introductions unknown in Florida in the 30's have now become common in the homes and parks of the area.

The decline of this jungle paradise was the result of the construction of new highways built in the 1960's. With the opening of Interstate-95 and the Florida Turnpike, tourists no longer traveled to south Florida on U.S. #1. New attractions such as Disney World and Sea World became more popular. McKee tried to compete by adding a camp ground and animals but attendance did not improve. On May 2, 1976 the garden closed.

Public Financed Purchase Efforts

The county briefly considered purchasing the gardens for \$1 million. A local group developed enough support for a bond issue to presented to the electorate, but public support was insufficient for its approval. In March of 1978 Vista Properties purchased the land and condominiums and golf course were built on all but 20 acres. (Long).

In the summer of 1987 a site plan application proposing the Boulevard Shops, a 300,000 square foot retail shopping center with 875 parking spaces was submitted to the Indian River County Planning and Zoning Board. This was the first step in the proposed sale of the remaining acres of the garden to Leonard Farber Inc. of Ft. Lauderdale. The proposal drew immediate opposition from the Vista Civic Association.

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These homeowners were concerned about the additional traffic impact the development would have on the residents of Vista Gardens and Vista Royale whose condominiums were already built on the McKee property.

In February 1988, the McKee Jungle Garden Preservation Society was formed for the express purpose of raising the money to buy the gardens from Vista Properties owner, Mr. Ron Ewing. Contact with Mr. Ewing was made and he informed the Society that the property was under contract to Mr. Farber; until that contract was terminated or expired, negotiations for purchase must wait. The Preservation Society utilized the time by obtaining their non-profit corporation status and established a solid grass roots membership base, with membership quickly growing to 1800 members. The Society planned to raise \$300,000, negotiate a contract with Mr. Ewing and purchase the property in six months. These six months would also be used to clean up the garden with volunteer labor, to invite the county residents to see the value of the preservation effort and to raise the remaining funds.

In March of 1989, Mr. Farber's contract to purchase expired. The Society's offer to Mr. Ewing was rejected, but a counter proposal for purchase was offered back to the Society for \$2.4 million cash. This offer was only valid for 30 days, as plans and permits were ready for developing the property had been approved.

With time running out, the Preservation Society approached the Indian River County Commissioners for their assistance. They were interested in assisting the preservation efforts, and after county staff review and two outside appraisals were offered, the Commission ordered the county staff to negotiate a purchase contract with Mr. Ewing contingent on the results of a referendum to be held in November 1989. Indian River County residents were asked to approve a one year bond, payable in the 1990-91 budget to purchase the 18.5 acre core of McKee Jungle Gardens and 80 acres of wetland which Mr. Ewing had added to the deal. There would be a one time tax of .075 mills per \$1,000 of net property assessment or approximately \$37.50 for each \$50,000 worth of property. The bond was to be repaid by the Society so the property would be managed by private means. However, a local taxpayer's association organized their opposition to increased taxation and the referendum failed by 600 votes. Even after the failure of a second referendum for purchase in 12 years, many members of the Society vowed to lie down in front of the bulldozers if developers attempted to destroy this beautiful garden once called the "World's fair of nature".

The Society next contacted the Trust For Public Land, an organization which works closely with groups to acquire and preserve land for future generations. The Trust agreed to assist the Preservation Society in acquiring the McKee property and also help establish a land trust for Indian River County. They felt that this was a desirable way for the public to protect critical, natural, historic or recreational lands. On February 27, 1990, the McKee Jungle Garden Preservation Society became the Indian River Land Trust and took on a broader role, that of building a more effective organization for the preservation of environmental and historically valuable lands.

For the next year the Land Trust spent time involving itself in other conservation projects and raising support for a county referendum to buy land that would come before the voters the following November. This referendum was in response to the state created program which enabled counties to purchase and preserve important environmental lands with local matching funds. A land acquisition advisory committee (LAAC) with broad representation in the county was formed with the Indian River Land Trust as one of the original members.

Vista Properties continued to negotiate with the state office of the Trust for Public Lands. The bought a purchase option on the McKee property and reduced the purchase price to \$1.7 million. In December of 1991, the Land

Trust and Dale Allen of Trust for Public Land gave a talk to the John's Island Garden Club to describe properties that Trust for Public Land had helped to save and enlist support for the upcoming environmental land bond referendum. A talk on McKee was also presented to this group. There was so much interest, a tour was arranged for January 1992. A week before the tour was to take place, a clean-up squad of Land Trust members and friends cleared debris and opened trails that had been over grown. The tour successfully introduced McKee to residents of John's Island. John's Island is an upscale beach front community that was initially developed in 1969. It is noted that most of the negative votes in the McKee referendum came from the beach communities, which were not in existence when McKee was in its prime. It was not realized until later that this rediscovery event was instrumental in the final preservation efforts; this garden club later became the nucleus of our very successful fund raising team.

An initial list of properties to be preserved, McKee among them, was announced. However, as the list was reviewed according to LAAC guidelines, McKee was dropped from purchase consideration. However, due to the Land Trust's effort and the help of the Nature Conservancy, a \$ 26 Million bond issue was passed in Indian River County in November of 1992.

Early in 1993, a McKee committee was formed within the Land Trust. Suzan Phillips became it's chairman. The main purpose of the Indian River Land Trust was now to investigate other ways to save McKee. Saturday tours were started to acquaint people with what was there. Many people expressed the perception that McKee was totally destroyed by previous development. An ad in the local paper invited visitors with the expectation of a limited response of a dozen visitors. An overwhelming turnout of over 200 visitors showed up. The tours continue, and to date, around 10,000 people have toured the McKee site. Many persons have come back several times with friends to monitor the progress of fund raising and cleanup efforts. It was obvious there was still interest: one woman commented after touring that if she had only known how special McKee was, she never would have voted against it in the referendum.

In May 1993 a new application to the LAAC committee again presented. Arguments were presented that the garden occupied a natural Florida hammock containing native trees, including a 500 year old Live Oak tree and some endangered plants. A comprehensive list of flora and fauna was prepared by botanists and Audubon Society members. The application was again rejected because the site contained many introduced plants, and as such we could not fit the LAAC criteria.

Privately financed purchase efforts

With this avenue finally closed, the Indian River Land Trust pursued the development of a major fund raising campaign for private purchase of the McKee site. Vista renewed the purchase option for another six months but were getting anxious to proceed with their plans for building. Cash had been short for the developer, but they had finally acquired the needed capital and site plan approval and were ready to go. (Tasker) The pressure for development was on again.

A McKee campaign committee was formed in the summer of 1993, the Trust for Public Lands helped pay for an Administrative Coordinator and in the fall a preliminary campaign was launched to test public support. Although \$250,000 was raised by the end of the year, the Land Trust realized that the kind of money we needed required the help of a professional fund raiser. The Campaign Committee contacted a firm which had completed a very successful campaign for another local organization. Their enthusiasm about McKee was evident after several meetings, and this firm was hired to develop a situational analysis and later a preliminary case study in early 1994. (Indian River Land Trust).

The purchase option expired in October 1993 and Vista did not want to renew the option. With the help of the Florida Trust for Public Lands, agreement was given to one

final year's purchase option with a payment of \$30,000 on signing and another \$30,000 payable in monthly installments all of which would be deductible from the purchase price. This agreement was finally signed on January 29, 1994, a year to the day from the forming of the McKee Committee.

While the case study and a campaign feasibility study were being completed as suggested by our fund raiser, fund raising campaign materials were developed. Additional volunteers were recruited and attended campaign worker seminars. While many volunteers were uncomfortable with asking for money, they learned the basic rules of the system. Also started were awareness parties in the garden. For fund raising purposes, the town had been divided into areas of giving based on residential areas or business clusters. Breakfasts or cocktail tours were organized at the site, knowing that the best selling point was the garden itself.

Serious garden cleanups had begun in January 1994. Visitors could now begin to see some of William Lyman Phillip's famous vistas. The Park of the Stone Bridge was quite recognizable, particularly when a heavy rain filled the ponds. Also discovered were five Florida Champion Trees, the largest example of a species in the state, as documented by the Indian River Extension Service. To assist in interpreting the features of the garden, volunteers were trained and provided with a Docent's Guide (Haegar, Phillips & Culbert).

Fund raising events in the spring of 1994 produced operating expenses for the year and helped to pay for a preliminary site plan. After interviewing several firms, Wallace, Roberts and Todd of Coral Gables was chosen for this work. As they had worked on Fairchild Gardens after the destruction of Hurricane Andrew, they were already familiar with the style of William Lyman Phillips' work. They found the original plans for McKee Gardens and correspondence in the University of Miami library. This information was also used to apply for National Historic Site status.

By late spring of 1994, cash and pledges began to come in, but the campaign was not progressing as it was hoped. In areas where most of the targeted large donors lived, people were leaving for the summer. Another impediment was that a General Campaign Chairman had not been located. The campaign divisions were in place and ready to go, but without a leader we could only announce future plans.

In mid December, 1994 a General Campaign Chairman was located and accepted this important volunteer position. With less than a month until the option expired, the campaign raised approximately \$500,000. The projected campaign total was \$3.5 million, with \$1.7 million for purchase, \$1.5 million for restoration and the remainder for an endowment. The Land Trust realized they could not raise \$1.7 million by January 29th, so a request for an extension of the purchase option was requested, which was initially rejected.

Another meeting with Vista, Trust for Public Lands and the Campaign committee was arranged and finally after several days, Vista agreed to a purchase and sale agreement with the down payment to be made by March 1995. The terms specified that if the funds were not raised, the all previous money paid would be forfeited to Vista. With this agreement in hand, in a few weeks the Campaign Chairman and two hard working team captains had the money coming in steadily. All through February and March, more private tours were held to get people into the garden because once they saw, they gave. After a tour on a Saturday given by the McKee committee co-chairs, on Monday a check came to the Land Trust office for \$350,000.

A list of sponsorship possibilities was developed and one by one the ponds, special trees, bridges and waterfalls were assigned donors names. A very successful fashion show and lunch combined with an ad campaign blitz helped raise the awareness. By 3 April 1995, the Campaign raised \$1.6 million with a month before the first payment was due.

On May 3, 1995 the amount had risen to \$2.185 million. At a ceremony in the garden that day, a little girl named Morgan Arnold who had sent a letter enclosing her 25 cent allowance to help save the trees, gave Mr. Ron Ewing of Vista Properties a check for the down payment. The emotion at this ceremony was so high that a Vista Executive even wept for joy. On 1 December 1995 the final payment for the site was made and McKee Botanical Gardens was preserved at last.

Master Plan

The Master Plan for McKee Botanical Gardens (Phillips, 1994) views this facility as a focal point for a variety of educational and recreational activities for the east-central region of Florida. The focus will be to preserve, restore, and recreate the original Garden experience, emphasizing the original botanical aspects. Restored ponds and streams will provide ideal habitats for aquatic ornamentals. The Royal Palm Grove will be replanted on the site. Other plans are to develop a world class collection of water lilies, orchids, or other groups of plants that can be a resource to both amateur and professional horticulturalists. The presence of a strong volunteer staff, including Florida Master Gardeners, will be supported by paid professional staff. Historic structures will be complemented by new facilities such as an Urban Horticulture Center. Demonstration gardens will be used to teach homeowners and professionals how to manage landscapes for locally adapted conditions. Using private resources and volunteers, McKee Botanical Gardens can become, once again, a unique horticultural learning center for the east central Florida area.

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