

Swimming pool planned for downtown

By David Cook
Columnist

Published: Sunday, June 13, 2010 at 6:30 a.m.

A public swimming pool in downtown Ocala?

Well, one was proposed adjacent to the old spring that used to gush water at the intersection of South Main Street with Southwest Third Street in mid-summer 1885, only it wasn't described as a "swimming pool." Rather, it was called "a bathing establishment."

The scheme came about as a result of the construction of Ocala Steam Laundry, fronting on South Main Street south of Third Street, which also was going to make use of the adjacent spring.

Runoff from the spring, which had been a major factor in locating the site of Ocala back in 1846, followed a downhill path running northwest across the town and ending up in a pond that was located where the Judicial Center parking garage now stands.

The north-south street that once ran through the western portion of the west wing of the courthouse was appropriately called "Pond Street."

It originally wasn't a bad neighborhood, despite the pond, because several churches were located there.

A.B. Rogers was the primary figure in building the steam laundry, and also the architect of the plan for a public swimming pool on South Main Street - complete with plans to heat the cold spring water.

Rogers told the Ocala Banner in 1885 that he intended to make a beauty spot of the old spring, which also included an unsightly pond around it. He saw the spring and the overgrown pond holding back the growth of the south part of town.

He said he would raise the spring by four or five feet. He could clean out the muck and encircle the area with a wall. There would be a bath house and other facilities for the public.

But that was only the beginning. Rogers also had plans to build what he called "a starch factory," and claimed he already had made arrangements with several local farmers to supply the raw materials (cassava and arrow root) for making starch. Apparently he was thinking of using large amounts of starch in clothing that went



File

The Ocala Steam Laundry at Main and Southeast Third streets, built in 1885, was owned and operated by George C. Pasteur in 1925 when this photo was made. Much changed - the building currently houses a law office, with a dry cleaning establishment facing Magnolia.

through his laundry, as well as sales to others.

The Banner editor, Frank Harris, urged Marion County farmers to plant cassava and arrow root and "push it forward as rapidly as possible" as a money crop. He also was partial to planting ginger for the market.

He even had advice to newcomers to these crops on how to harvest them and, in the case of arrow root, how to grate and pulp it. He urged planters to avoid Bermuda arrow root.

The editor, who had no known experience in farming, was always making suggestions to local farmers. Following the Civil War, when he founded the Banner in 1866, he began promoting the planting of orange groves. The idea was slow to catch on, but when it did, Marion County became the foundation of the state's citrus industry.

The steam laundry, the swimming pool and starch factory did not complete Rogers' plans for development south of Third Street in 1885. He also owned property on the east side of Main, and on top of the highest point, he said he would build his home.

Much of this area, including the site of the spring, is part of the Lincoln-Mercury auto dealership. The brick building that housed the steam laundry has undergone extensive renovation, and currently houses a law office, with a dry cleaning establishment on the east side.

The park that surrounded the old spring is now under pavement, part of a parking lot for the Lincoln-Mercury auto dealership. There is no evidence so far that Rogers ever built his planned swimming pool or starch factory, but he did complete the steam laundry. Within a few years, it became one of Ocala's major success stories.

There is no greater illustration of Ocala's general lack of interest in its historic past than the fate of the spring park. At one point it was deeded to the city government by the Clyatt family to be maintained as a public park.

The park was sold by the city to the Lincoln-Mercury dealership, an apparent violation of the deed, but to get away from that slippery slope, the city created a new Clyatt Park on 17th Street that for years was little more than a utility station.

All of that may have been perfectly legal, but it demonstrates a callous indifference to the historic perspective - the spring was one of the prime reasons for Ocala's location.

But perhaps it is no more indifferent than the city's insistence on calling Main Street Northeast/Southeast First Avenue after the city council agreed with local citizens - on adoption of the quadrant system of naming streets - that it would continue to be designated as "Main Street." (I know; I was there when it was voted.).

The Main Street sign stayed up for years - until somebody at the city got an itch.

An avid Marion County historian, David Cook is a retired editor of the Star-Banner. He may be contacted at 237-2535.

Copyright © 2010 Ocala.com — All rights reserved. Restricted use only.