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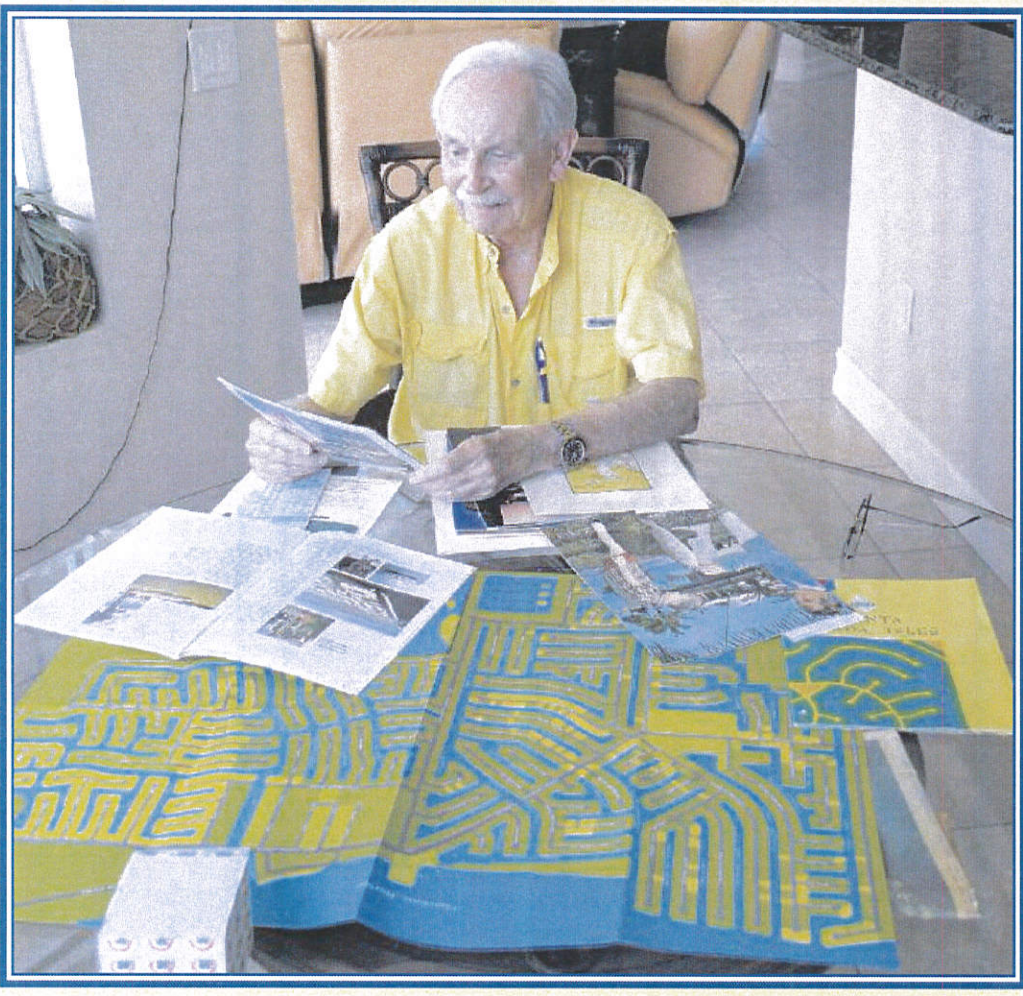
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Isles' canals



HOW A CITY WAS TRANSFORMED

By GORDON BOWER, PGH CORRESPONDENT

A strong argument can be made that nothing has had a bigger impact on the social, economic and political fabric — not to mention the appearance — of Punta Gorda than the construction of the canals that are the dominant feature of the local landscape.

Fly over the city, and what stands out are the 57.5 miles of canals that were

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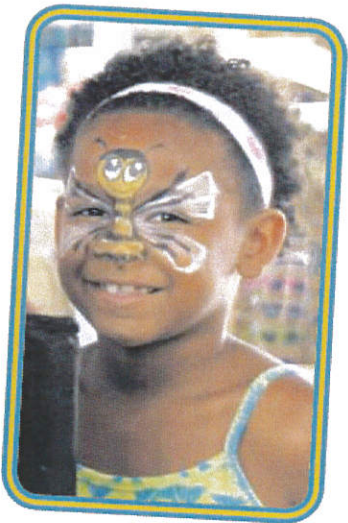
Serving Punta Gorda and Burnt Store • A section of the SUN • 16 pages

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Patriotic fun in Punta Gorda

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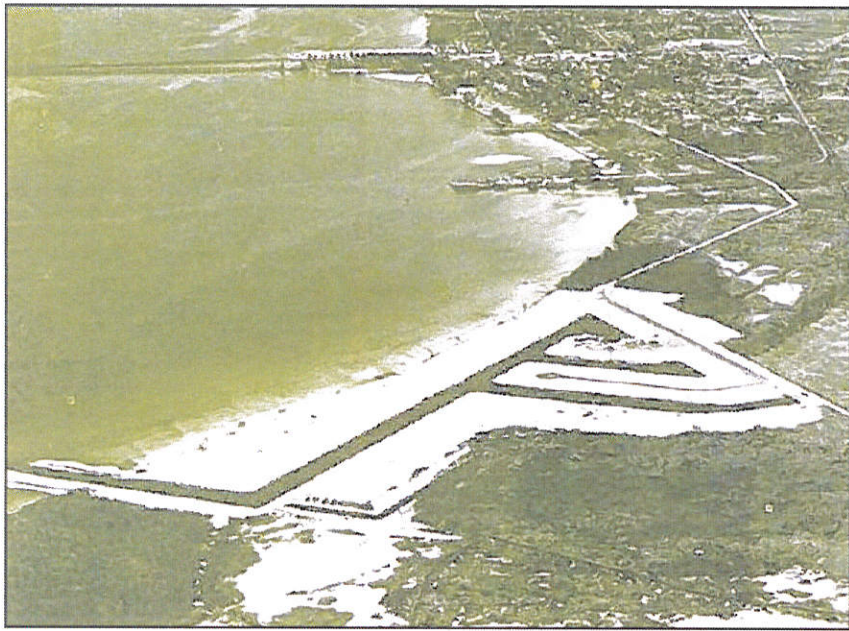


PHOTO COURTESY PGI, INC., 1969-70 ANNUAL REPORT

The first dredging and canal building started around the intersection of West Marion Avenue and Bal Harbor Boulevard.



PHOTO COURTESY PGI, INC., 1975 ANNUAL REPORT

Circa 1975, an aerial view of the extreme southwest corner of Punta Gorda Isles after the canals were completed and before the streets were built.



PHOTO COURTESY PGI, INC., 1978 ANNUAL REPORT

An aerial view of Punta Gorda Isles in the 1978 annual report. The southwest section, bottom, and the bird section, far right, are still under construction with no houses visible.

CANALS

FROM PAGE 1

carved out of a mangrove swamp. Although half the population of the city turns over every eight years or so, most residents have at least heard stories about how Punta Gorda Isles and Burnt Store Isles came into being through the efforts of three ex-CIA employees — Al Johns, Bud Cole and Sam Burchers. They were aided by Bob Barbee, a friend of Johns who used other peoples' money to buy a first tract of 550 acres on Punta Gorda Point in 1957.

Together, they formed Punta Gorda Isles, Inc., and set about turning their initial purchase and thousands of more acres purchased later into two prestigious waterfront communities. Attracting people from all over the United States and, indeed, the world, these men forever changed the sleepy little town of about 3,000 into a magnet for retirees.

Drawn by the water

People born and raised in the city recall those heady days, as do those who worked for PGI, Inc. One such person is Gene Hamilton, who moved here from Minneapolis in 1979 and went to work for PGI, Inc., as a broker selling lots and homes. Hamilton, who saw the growth from the inside, not only has his memories but also many documents and newspaper stories he saved from his four years of service to the company.

"I've been here 34 years; I've seen a lot," he said. "It was just second nature to keep things about the place that made this area what it is today."

Small towns with good weather abound in Florida, and Hamilton has no doubt the water in those canals is what made Punta Gorda stand out to buyers from colder climes looking for a warm place to retire. He should know, for he, too, was drawn here by all those reasonably priced waterfront properties.

"In 1976, I was the president of Minnesota's state principals association and went to Miami for a convention at the Fountainebleau," he said. "We left in a blizzard. When we landed in Tampa, I said to the guys I was with,



Gordon Bower
Punta Gordy

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'What's wrong with this picture?' There were guys in shorts unloading the baggage. I told them I was going to be in Florida in four years."

Several years later, he was traveling in Southwest Florida looking for a warm weather port of call. His experience on encountering Punta Gorda says much about the ability of PGI, Inc., to market its product.

"Naples was nice, but too pricey," he said. "Cape Coral was OK. I told my wife, 'Let's go to Venice.' We got right into Punta Gorda and saw this huge sign put up on (U.S.) 41 by Al Johns. It said, 'Set sail from your own back yard.'"

Hamilton continued, "We turned and started following the street in. Downtown was a joke with buildings all boarded up. Leaving downtown, there were royal palms along the street, and I said, 'This is just what we're looking for.'"

The deal was sealed when he saw the canals.

"The canals were the biggest drawing card; 90 percent of the lots were on the water," he said. "Canals dredged to the depths (15-17 feet) of these are no longer available in the state of Florida. The last dredging stopped in 1978."

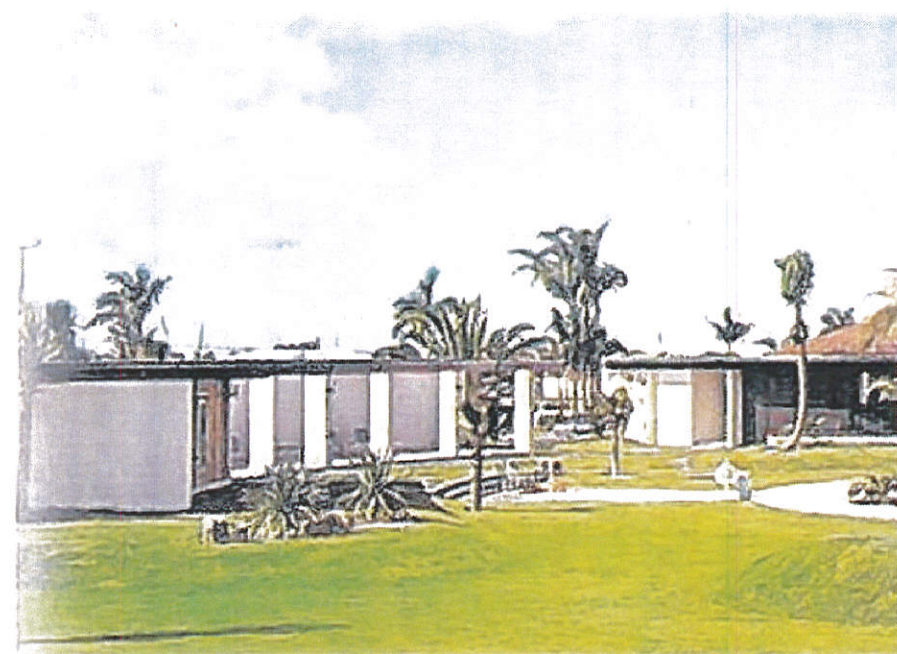
Selling a way of life

Hamilton met his four-year goal and bought an existing home on Sabal Court, close to the harbor that gave him first-hand experience with PGI's watery lifestyle and served him well in his new real estate job with the company.

He said, "I would tell people, 'If my motor is running, I'm in the harbor in 30 seconds.'"

In the '60s and '70s, the streets around the intersection of Bal Harbor Boulevard and West Marion Avenue were the nexus of PGI, Inc., activity, containing sales offices, the first models and the first homes.

By the time Hamilton started selling in 1980, PGI, Inc., had moved much of this activity, including sales and model



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FROM THE COVER

HERALD PHOTO BY GORDON BOWER

MAIN: Former Punta Gorda Isles, Inc., realtor Gene Hamilton peruses some of the old documents and maps saved from his days with the legendary company that built Punta Gorda Isles.

PHOTO COURTESY PGI, INC., 1969-70 ANNUAL REPORT

INSET: A dragline capable of scooping up 8 tons of dirt works on one of Punta Gorda Isles' early canals.

homes, to the newer Burnt Store Isles section of PGI, between Monaco Drive and Madrid Boulevard on U.S. 41. He sold both lots and homes, nearly all waterfront, to customers who didn't know a whole lot about waterfront property.

He said, "A good percentage walked in responding to signs they had seen about waterfront property. They had an interest in boating up north and wanted to retire on the water. It took a lot of education. Most had no idea what prices were, how the lots were priced based on sailboat or non-sailboat access, time to the harbor and amount of seawall. I also sold the view. The look down the canal is always the best."

Hamilton remembers PGI being about half occupied back then with few of the better lots left, and a lot of the sales action was in the new bird section (at the south end of PGI, so called because streets are named after birds) and BSI.

"The bird section looked like no man's land," he said. "In 1980, it was pretty much unoccupied, with maybe 12 to 14 houses under construction. There wasn't a single house; I can remember thinking, 'What's this going to look like some day?'"

As for BSI, which looked much the same, he recalls it getting off to a very slow start after sales began in 1979.

"They didn't like the noise (from U.S. 41)," he said. "PGI had a lot of palm trees. They couldn't visualize it, especially the women. Now you drive out there, and it's beautiful. My wife said, 'This is so much more lush than PGI.'" Nevertheless, he sold many lots there. "It was because of the value. In PGI, it was difficult to find a view and top lots with a lot of seawall."

Another advantage was nearness to



golf.

Although many people don't realize it, the building now housing Twin Isles Country Club, was the first structure built in BSI by PGI, Inc., and it was advertised as PGI's golf club. Called at the time the Burnt Store Golf and Racquet Club, Hamilton's documents indicate its construction was announced in 1968 and the first nine holes completed in late 1969 or early 1970, with the other nine added later in the decade. A color photo of the clubhouse was published in the company's 1969-70 annual report.

Hamilton joked, "They built the golf course before the streets and canals. When the course opened, they were playing in the mud."

A quality company

Hamilton also speaks highly of the company itself. Canals were the draw, but the marketing and sales strategies of the company paired nicely with the quality of the development and the homes PGI's construction division built. These factors helped close the deals.

Johns, the company's main driving force and chairman of the board, has been described by local old timers as a master salesman. Hamilton, who by dint of his job, has first-hand experience with Johns and agrees his boss knew how to move his product.

"He was a good salesman," Hamilton said. "He put overseas offices in Germany, Italy and England and others. He had sales offices in Boston and New York City in places like train stations... He was thinking globally. The majority of the sales people were very professional and believed in the company."

Hamilton had plenty of practical knowledge of the way Johns wanted things done. He cited his boss' love of fly-ins of customers from the frigid north for a weekend and the dinner parties, always featuring Johns' favorite canoe full of jumbo shrimp on ice and solicitous attention from the sales staff.

Hamilton had a card for the car wash to keep his work auto spotless and for the golf club's dining room, all part of a program to pamper potential buyers while they were here. And he still reminisces about his own first trip to PGI, when he enjoyed free orange juice and a pontoon boat ride through PGI from the company's harborside hotel.

In contrast to a lot of companies selling a piece of Florida sunshine, PGI wasn't just about sales and showmanship. PGI, Inc., also was known for offering a quality product and standing behind it.

Hamilton said, "Everything they did, engineering, construction, sea walls, houses, streets, utilities, the buildable lots, they did it right, at least for the time. It was a first-class company; everything they did was first class."

Chance encounter

It's hard to imagine what the Punta Gorda area would be like today without the addition of the canal-based Isles and other developments the company or Johns later built in and around the city. The city's good fortune largely dates back to the first meeting of the two principals — Cole and Johns — on a little island off the coast of China in 1950, when both were working for the CIA.

One of Hamilton's prized possessions is a pamphlet Cole published circa 1981 titled "How It All Started," in which he described the occasion:

"For myself, Punta Gorda Isles is not a thing, but an experience, the bare beginning of which, I suppose, stretches back to a day in the summer of 1950. It was hot, and I was flying as a passenger in a gooney bird (C-47/DC-3 transport plane) that was just setting down on a little island in sight of the China coast. We taxied to a stop on the dirt runway, and I alighted to be greeted by a cloud of red dust. The center of this red tornado, it soon appeared, was occupied by an extremely disreputable, mustached, native Chinese pirate. I piled into the Jeep and discovered on the ride to our quarters that under the layers of grime, behind the wild eyes, and past the inscrutable countenance an ugly American was lurking whose name, it turned out, was Al Johns."

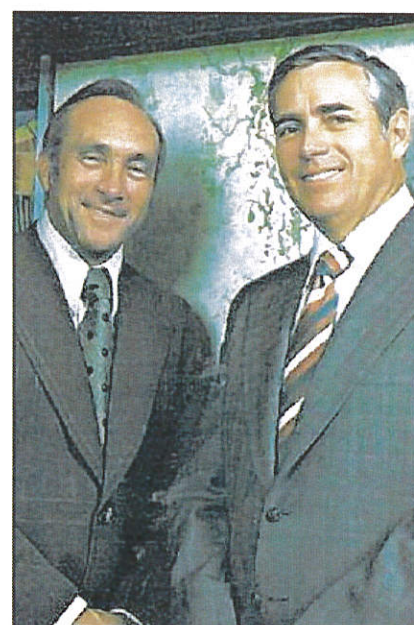


PHOTO COURTESY PGI, INC., 1975 ANNUAL REPORT

This photo is of Punta Gorda Isles' founders Al Johns and Bud Cole, taken circa 1975.

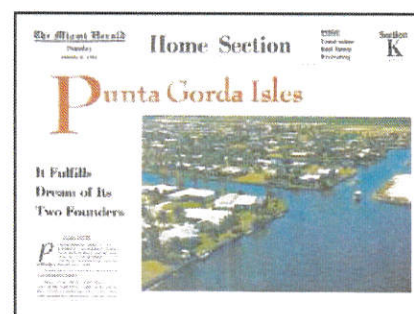


PHOTO FROM MIAMI HERALD REPRINT, JAN. 3, 1971

Punta Gorda Isles was well known as a boating destination from its earliest days. This 1971 aerial photo from the Miami Herald Home Section accompanied a laudatory story about life in the waterfront community.



PHOTO COURTESY PGI, INC., 1969-70 ANNUAL REPORT

PHOTO COURTESY PGI ANCHOR LINE 25TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION

LEFT: This photo of the Burnt Store Golf and Racquet Club, now Twin Isles Country Club, was printed in the 1969-70 annual report. At the time, the course had only nine holes, and no houses had been built in Burnt Store Isles.

ABOVE: By May 1983, Punta Gorda Isles was beginning to fill in, and the Ponce de Leon Channel (bottom) was open, drastically shortening the trip to the harbor for many residents.

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