

# From humble beginnings, Meadowlawn sees growth

What started as a 100-house development has expanded to 2,200 homes, businesses and offices and a school.

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ST. PETERSBURG - As he looked over his land in 1953, developer John Thea Haynsworth Jr. was struck first with a feeling, then an idea.

"The land was peaceful," said Haynsworth Jr., now 94. "The name Meadowlawn just came out of my head."

Meadowlawn blueprints laid out 100 homes on land from 10th to 12th streets N, between 70th and 73rd avenues. Shopping centers were charted, as were a lake and a park. Some homes sold directly from the plans. Fifteen months after Meadowlawn's opening, 250 homes were completed.

"A fast growing city," the *St. Petersburg Times* called Meadowlawn.

Five decades later, the neighborhood has better than 5,500 residents, more than 2,200 homes, numerous businesses and offices and a school. The boundaries are Dr. Martin Luther Jr. Street North to Interstate 275, from 62nd to 77th avenues N. In the 1950s, it ranked among the largest residential developments in Florida Gulf Coast history.

"It's a blend of working and retired people," said Beatrice Griswold, 71, a 38-year Meadowlawn resident and City Council member from 1992 to 2001.

At the outset of the 20th century, a conflict raged between Hood's Dairy and the Florida Milk Company on the land that would become Meadowlawn.

"If Cowboy Moody could herd (Hood's) strays to a compound on Fourth Street, the city could charge a fee ... for their release," reads a Meadowlawn history. "Mrs. (Elizabeth) Hood, who could ride as well as Moody, would try to keep him from herding cows away."

Decades later, the land still featured cows, said Emmett Hood, 87, a former owner of Hood's Dairy, and "woods, palmetto patches and water holes to swim in."

Haynsworth was called "the boy from Mulberry." He had owned a movie theater at age 17. He later sold it to pay for his engineering degree. After building some 2,000 houses around St. Petersburg, he established Florida Builders in 1948.

In the early 1950s, Rube Wells, Manch Watson and Bill Arnold sold 40 acres to Haynsworth, in his early 40s at the time.

In March 1953, Haynsworth bought 320 additional acres for \$280,000, initiating the city's grandest land improvement since the 1920s.

Many believed that "nobody would live that far out of St. Petersburg," said attorney R. Don Mastry, whose father Johnny Mastry (Sunshine Builders) contributed to Meadowlawn's development.

On June 22, 1953, Meadowlawn opened with two-thirds of its lots already sold. Down payments on the \$7,300 homes were \$650; monthly payments were \$57. Among the development's first residents was Col. Willis S. Johns, in whose honor the King Street recreation center was named.

After a 1954 carpenters strike, 10 homes were started each week and Meadowlawn's population grew to 1,000. "Many of the oak and pine trees came from Webb's City," said Dolores Singleton, a 40-year Meadowlawn resident.

In June 1955, the start of Grandway Shopping Center (Rutland Plaza) was announced. A expansion westward increased Meadowlawn from 500 to 1,800 sites. National magazines, including *American Builder*, touted the community's size and the speed of its construction.

To ease persistent flooding, landfill was acquired by creating six lakes: Viking, Lynch, Laguna, Mastry and Meadowlawn lakes number 2 and 3. In the mid-1950s, Haynsworth donated Meadowlawn Park and Viking Lake to the city.

By 1959, buyers could own a three-bedroom, two-bath, patio-pool home for \$16,950.

One year later, Meadowlawn mothers spirited a drive to raise \$1,400 for sidewalks to front George M. Lynch Elementary School.

According to the 2000 census, the neighborhood's median age is 36.2 years. There are 1,577 families.

Haynsworth's wife, Carolyn, said: "Meadowlawn is John's personal achievement."

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