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Diana Harris Historic Englewood column

Minnie Pearson chasing a panther in her nightie

Minnie Pearson moved to Manasota Key in the 1930s. She had fascinating stories to tell that reflected the lifestyle of those earlier years in Englewood, a lifestyle very different from what we now know:

"When we first came to Englewood," said Minnie Pearson, "it was 1935. We found a place down toward Stump Pass we liked the looks of. We just backed our trailer in toward the bay and we were there for about two years."

Eventually, Minnie and her husband Jack bought property farther north on Manasota Key quite near to where the Gulf to Bay Mobile Home Park is today.

Minnie remembered from those early years on the Key a couple of chance meetings she had with some interesting wildlife.

"There was nobody north of us, there was just woods, palm trees and sea grapes, very thick. We had some white Peking ducks, they were so beautiful, and I also had chickens, Rhode Island Reds. They were good layers and of course we liked the eggs.

"One night I heard an awful racket in the henhouse. I went out to see what it was. It was a wildcat, you know, a panther! And he had taken my best chicken! I wasn't going to let him get away with that, so I chased him through the woods. Can you imagine? Me in my nightgown going after that panther!

"I was hollering at the top of my voice and making so much noise going through all the palmettos, I guess I scared him. He dropped my rooster he had in his mouth and he just kept going. I picked up the chicken and took him home, and your know, he lived.

"Later, when it was light, we could see the paw prints where the cat had walked. It was a panther all right, the prints were huge."

It was not unusual for the handful of people living on the key in those days to see, besides panthers, bobcats, raccoons, possums, armadillos, endless varieties of birds, loggerhead and gopher turtles and several species of snakes. But a 20-foot snake?

Minnie recalled one night she was driving along the beach road opposite where our public beach is located today.

"There was a great big snake laid all across the road. It was so big I couldn't see either end of it! I was so surprised, and I was coming up on it pretty fast so I couldn't stop, I just went over it. I tell you it was a big one! I guess, 20-feet long!

"I never did know if I was the one who killed it. The story was in the Sarasota or Punta Gorda paper later. For a long time, there was a trailer camp for circus and carnival people there on the key, where Englewood Villas is now. Somebody in the camp had the snake but the snake got loose. The carnival man who owned it would put it around people's necks and take their photos, and they would pay him of course.

"Since it was that tame, it couldn't have been really bad. The snake was probably in the constrictor family. I always felt bad about that.

Diana's new book on the history of Englewood, "Englewood Lives" can be purchased at Stefano's Restaurant and the Country Hound Cafe.