



Photos special to the News-Press

OLD HOMESTEAD: Buck Fernandez, the son of Antonio and Mary Fernandez, stood in the 1940s next to the two-room house on Mound Key where his parents once lived with their nine children.

Fernandez clan spreads from island

By ANDREA STETSON
News-Press staff writer

An island covered with shells and vegetation in the middle of Estero Bay looks like a habitat for nothing more than birds and mosquitoes, but it was home to one of Estero's first families.

Evelyn Horne and Della Smith were born on Mound Key three quarters of a century ago, and although their families moved to the mainland so the children could go to school, they spent much of their summers and weekends scampering up and down mounds of shells left behind by the Calusa Indians.

Horne and Smith were the third generation of the Fernandez family to live on the island. It all began in 1898 when Antonio and Mary Fernandez left their home in Portugal and sailed to the new world with their three daughters.



FIRST FAMILIES

Each Monday this summer, the News-Press will feature stories about Bonita Springs' First Families.



Buck Fernandez, a popular fishing guide, is pictured in the 1940s with one of his boats.

The two were Catholic missionaries who arrived in Key West and were brought to Mound Key by a man named Frank Gomez. The family now believes Gomez was a pirate who took their belongings and abandoned them on the rural island. But the missionaries survived.

They were befriended by a woman known as Grandma Johnson, who taught them how to live in the mostly uninhabited area. Antonio became a fisherman, and he and his wife added to the

island's small population by producing six more children.

Now there are more than one hundred Fernandez descendants scattered throughout Southwest Florida. More than 50 still live in Estero and Bonita Springs.

They go by the last names of Soto, Skinner, McCullers, Smith, Horne, Luettich, Hall and Car-

See FERNANDEZ / 2F

BONITA/NAPLES

FERNANDEZ: Electricity long time in coming to homestead

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ter, but they are all descendants of Antonio and Mary Fernandez and their nine children.

Horne is the daughter of Antonio and Mary's third child, Dora. Della is the daughter of their first child, Anna. The cousins, who are great-grandmothers themselves now, live in Estero where they grew up.

Good old times

"We didn't have toys; we just entertained ourselves," Smith said. The children played tag, catch, jacks, and hide and seek. They ate wild weeds, played with rocks and explored the terrain.

The family was very poor, Horne said, but rich in good times.


Christmas 1932 was special. They went to Fort Myers during the holiday period. Horne was only 10 when Thomas Edison gave her a doll, and Henry Ford presented her with a shiny dime. But Horne said the best Christmas surprise was seeing her first tree all lit up.

"To see those lights was really something," she said.

Lights on the tree were amazing to the children who grew up without electricity. For a while they even grew up without running water. Smith remembers crying as she pumped and pumped to get water from a well.

Eventually their father built a windmill, but electricity came

HORNE PROFILE




■ **NAME:** Evelyn Luettich Horne

■ **AGE:** 72

■ **FAMILY:** Parents: Charles and Dora Luettich; grandparents: Antonio and Mary Fernandez; married to George Horne; children: Charles and Darlene, three grandchildren, five great-grandchildren

■ **ROOTS:** Born 1922 on Mound Key

SMITH PROFILE



■ **NAME:** Della Smith

■ **AGE:** 79

■ **FAMILY:** Parents: Anna and King Alverea; grandparents: Antonio and Mary Fernandez; a widow, was married to Hugh Smith; children: George, Kay and Ray, nine grandchildren, 12 great-grandchildren — and another on the way

■ **ROOTS:** Born 1916 on Mound Key

much later after the cousins were all grown up.

"We got electricity in 1946, and we gave the biggest party to FP&L. It was a fish fry you can't believe," Horne said.

In Estero, Horne and Smith attended school in a one-room schoolhouse on a road that is now Broadway. They had few neighbors out there among the palm-

tos and scrub brush, but they helped bring the tiny community some recognition in New York City. During her high school days, Horne peeled hundreds of mangos for a woman named Edith Trebell, who owned a jelly plant. After the mangos were peeled and packed, they were shipped off to the Waldorf Astoria.

It wasn't just the land that was

different then. The cousins say the Estero River has changed tremendously. Both remember a much wider, deeper waterway navigated by barges loaded with local produce destined for distant markets.

Pioneer stories

Horne and Smith have plenty of stories to pass along to their grandchildren.

Horne remembers the days when Thomas Edison and Henry Ford would visit their home. She recalls her first job at age 17 at the Koreshan Unity, where she still works today.

She also remembers scary times when being a pioneer wasn't much fun.

In 1926 Horne's parents packed their new Model T Ford with their five children and set out to flee a powerful hurricane. "The windows were buttoned in," she began. "We headed south. The wind blew us that way."

When they returned they found their house blown off its foundation.

Smith remembers the house where she was born on Mound Key. The wooden house had three bedrooms and a living room with a separate house for the kitchen. Although Smith was just 2 years old when her family moved to the mainland, she remembers carefree weekends on the island.

The Fernandez family lived off the land. Most of the men

were fishermen, and they needed a big catch to feed their large families. They were also agricultural workers who lived on acres filled with citrus trees, and vegetable gardens. What they couldn't produce themselves they traded for at the Koreshan Unity store.

Family tree

The Fernandez family tree continues to grow.

Antonio and Mary had nine children and 30 grandchildren, including Smith and Horne. Most of the grandchildren have had children of their own, including Elouise Fernandez Skinner, who topped her grandparents by having 10 children. Now there are six generations of Fernandez descendants, with more babies on the way.

It's hard to keep track of everyone, but that's what Marlene

Fernandez has been doing for the past 38 years. She's the wife of Tom Fernandez, the son of Joe Fernandez, the fourth child of Antonio and Mary. She's also the mother of Tim Fernandez and the grandmother of Kaitlin and Zackery Fernandez.

With the family roots firmly planted in the sandy soil of Estero, descendants of the Fernandez family continue to make their mark in Estero and beyond.



FERNANDEZ