

## "Wild" Characters in SWFLA history.

[Register with us in one easy step!](#)

They were men known as Wild Bill, Frog and Nature Boy.

SW Fla.'s characters are quite a collection

A century and a quarter of unique personalities

By GLENN MILLER [gmler@news-press.com](mailto:gmler@news-press.com)

They were men known as Wild Bill, Frog and Nature Boy.

Southwest Florida's history includes, if you believe everything you read, a 122-year-old man who died mullet fishing and a 132-year-old woman who had an 8-year-old great-great-great-great granddaughter.

And there's more: A Whiskey Creek moonshiner. Cecil Clemons, who reportedly had 1,500 alligators and crocs in his 16-acre backyard and so many - 12 - wives in his past that he couldn't recall all their names.

There was a hermit named Henry who lived on an island in Estero Bay and a man named Herman who lost a hunting dog and chickens to an alligator along Yellow Fever Creek in North Fort Myers. He retaliated with dynamite.

Henry the Estero Bay hermit should not, of course, be confused with Nature Boy Kama, a hermit from Hungary who lived in Estero.

As part of its 125th anniversary celebration, The News-Press each day has been profiling an influential person in Southwest Florida history. Today, the celebration is the offbeat.

### Men named Bill

Wild Bill Belvin exiled himself without clothes, money or food in 1930 into the vastness of what would one day be Cape Coral. All he had were eyeglasses and false teeth.

He vowed to show it was possible to live off the land in Southwest Florida. Belvin, 48, was described as a former boilermaker and preacher.

Upon his return in 1931, wearing only a skirt and shirt made of grass, he was charged with stealing pelican eggs from a rookery. The arrest, like the year of exile in the woods, was a publicity stunt. The night after his arrest, Belvin gave talks at the Arcade Theater.

He said a rattlesnake once slept beside him.

"But as he didn't snore," Belvin said, "he didn't wake me up. He was just a few feet away from me, all curled up, when I awoke. But he didn't live long after that. A hefty pine knot did the work."

Bill Clay had a very popular still. When Lee County voted 117-67 to go dry in 1887, it closed down Taff Langford's Golden Palace, according to an account in historian Karl Grismer's "The Story of Fort Myers."

The vote provided opportunity, a still on Whiskey Creek.

"Old Bill Clay, moonshiner extraordinary, soon moved back into town," Grismer wrote. "He rented a small shack behind Nancy Allen's livery stable and on the door he hung the skin of a wild cat. Where the cat's eyes had been there were two round holes. That was Bill Clay's way of informing the community that Fort Myers' first Blind Tiger had been opened for business."

Lore has it Clay was once arrested and his still destroyed. Legend has it upon his return, he had a new still, courtesy of grateful customers.

Bill "Nature Boy" Kama was 79 when he died in 1968. He had a long beard and often walked barefoot from his Estero home to downtown Fort Myers. He reportedly lived on 40 acres and was a vegetarian; no milk, butter or eggs.

Kama had no formal schooling but said he read hundred of books on botany.

His 1968 obituary noted his wife had died years earlier and he carried on correspondence with prospective wives around the country. He never married again.

"He insisted that a prospective bride first sign away any rights to his property," The News-Press obit noted. "Explaining his matrimonial problems, he once said, 'the trouble is finding a wife who is a vegetarian.'"

## Cecil, Henry, Herman

Cecil Clemons was 59 when profiled in The News-Press in 1979. The Okeechobee native and former gator poacher ran a tourist attraction called Gatorama. He had 1,500 gators and crocs in his backyard. He also had been married 12 times.

"The purtiest wife I ever had looked exactly like Elly May, you know, that girl on the 'Beverly Hillbillies' TV show," Clemons told The News-Press. "People would walk down the street and say, 'Hey, aren't you Elly May?' But, she had a temper. Whew, let me tell you what. The reason we broke up was that because everywhere we went that damn woman acted like Jethro."

Clemons told of meeting a 19-year-old gypsy in a Massachusetts bar.

"I could tell right away she was in love with me so I asked her to go live in Florida," Clemons said. "She said sure, but before we got to Maryland I found out her gypsy family had filed a charge of white slavery against me. Those people don't let their women go cheap and they wanted money."

North Fort Myers resident Herman Hingson had an alligator history. As detailed in Prudy Taylor Board's "Lee

County, A Pictorial History," Hingson was upset a gator killed one of his hunting dogs and chickens.

Hingson tried shooting. Bullets bounced off the beast's thick skull. Hingson then traced the gator's cave back from Yellow Fever Creek, which is now known as Hancock Creek.

Hingson dug down and dropped dynamite with a lighted fuse in the hole. End of gator problem.

Henry Hagy was an 89-year-old Estero Bay hermit who was profiled by columnist Joe Workman in 1985. Hagy lived on a houseboat with a pet rat. Hagy had no lights, electricity, lanterns.

"When God turns the big light off, I sleep," Hagy told Workman. "When he turns the big light back on, I get up." At that time, Hagy had been a hermit for 20 years.

"I'm going to do just what I've been doing the last 20 years," Hagy said. "Stay here and mind my own business and leave other people's business alone. And beat the hell out of the first person that messes with me."

Seven months later, Hagy died. His ashes were spread over Estero Bay.

## A man named Frog

His name was Ernest Archer Smith but he was known as Frog.

He wrote for The News-Press for more than 50 years. He was featured on Charles Kuralt's CBS "On the Road" series. Smith was a folklorist, columnist, painter and harmonica player.

He had worked in sawmills, power plants, sugar mills and ice houses and moved to Lee County in 1942. Smith wrote about the barefoot mailman from Arcadia who worked in the 1860s: "Mr. James Mitchell Johnson used to walk 65 miles a day with the mail on one shoulder and his shoes on the other."

Johnson quit the post office because officials wouldn't allow him to carry passengers on a chair strapped to his back.

In 1987, when he was 90, Frog wrote about how times had changed.

"I think we're living too fast," Smith wrote. "I'd rather see the old days, back when we went to work at 3:30 every mornin', took another 30 minutes for breakfast at 6:30, took 45 minutes at noon, and run until 6 that night. And I still wasn't too tired to take a shotgun and get another squirrel for the next day's dinner."

## Living beyond 100

His name was John Gomez. He was, according to Grismer, born in Portugal in 1778 and moved to France as a young man and met Napoleon. He was a cabin boy in a ship that sailed for Charleston, S.C., and around 1840 moved to the Ten Thousand Islands in Collier County.

"A short heavy-set man with a mop of curly hair which had once been black," Grismer wrote. "Often came to Fort Myers and regaled everyone who would listen to his tales."

Those tales included a time when Napoleon patted him on the back and predicted he would become a good

soldier.

Gomez, according to Grismer, died July 12, 1900, at the age of 122. He was fishing for mullet off Panther Key in the Ten Thousand Islands and a foot got stuck in an anchor as he threw it overboard.

Toni Cypress, according to an obit in the News-Press in 1968, was 132 when she died as "one of the oldest Seminole Indians in South Florida."

The story said she had more than 100 direct descendants, including a great-great-great-great grandchild. At time of her death, Toni Cypress resided in Copeland in Collier County.

Published on Sep. 20 2009

The original page is located at

[http://free.naplesplus.us/articles/view.php/52155/wild-characters-in-swfla-history.](http://free.naplesplus.us/articles/view.php/52155/wild-characters-in-swfla-history)