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A Naturist History of Haulover Beach – “America’s Riviera”

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Prelude

It’s 1976, the year of the American Bicentennial, 200 years after the pursuit of happiness was first declared an inalienable right. At Truro Beach on Cape Cod in Massachusetts stands a young bearded man wearing a tee shirt that says “Free the Free Beach”. That man is Lee Baxandall. Also there is another naturist of about the same age, Tom Chittenden.

Tom later moved to South Florida, where he discovered Virginia Key, a remote area then being used by skinny-dippers—some twenty years earlier, the only beach legally available to African-Americans in Dade County. (See www.virginiakeybeachpark.net) In 1980, with Barbara Peterson, Tom founded South Florida Free Beaches as a naturist social club—the same year in which Lee founded The Naturist Society. Not only was there then Virginia Key in Miami to enjoy, but two counties north on Singer Island was “Air Force Beach”, where since the 1940s insurance and real estate magnate and philanthropist John D. MacArthur had welcomed fellow skinny-dippers—initially World War II service personnel, hence the nickname. (Snooty Palm-Beachers didn’t always welcome onto their beaches the rude and déclassé soldiers and sailors about to be shipped off to fight and die in Europe or in the Pacific on their behalf.) There were also a number of other beaches in Florida where nude sunbathers weren’t bothered, from the Keys to the Panhandle.

But as the decade advanced came trouble. Within a few years, Virginia Key was closed to naturists, despite the protests of SFFB, and a lawsuit it brought against the City of Miami. Farther north, MacArthur had gifted his beach to the state, and skittish Florida State Park Department officials soon added a state park bathing suit requirement to the Florida Administrative Code.

For seven years SFFB members bided their time, holding pool parties, and skinny-dipping quietly at remote areas, often only accessible by boat. Toward the end of the 1980s, Tom took a hiatus from SFFB for personal reasons, and new leadership stepped forward. Before leaving, Tom had identified Haulover Park as one potential site for a new clothing-optional beach.

Founding

On July 14, 1991, a few dozen members of South Florida Free Beaches arrive at Haulover Beach Park. They park in the central parking lot of the 1-1/4 mile long county park, take the underpass to the beach, and walk about 500 yards north. They cordon off a small area with signs that read “Nude Sunbathing zone – Persons offended by nudity should avoid entering this area.” Looking south, they can see a few scattered bathers in the distance, with a larger contingent barely visible at the extreme south end, where there are lifeguards. Here at the north end, it’s a wasteland: no lifeguards, no trash cans; the main visitors are gang members doing drug deals. The north pedestrian underpass under Collins Avenue is closed with CBS blocks. The North Beach Parking does not exist, but is an undeveloped storage yard.

Over the previous year, SFFB’s new leaders Mallika Sarrow and Richard and Shirley Mason, had visited a number of Dade County officials, explaining naturism, and advocating for top-free and clothing-optional beaches. Reception was largely cordial, but no official offered to take any positive action. After this extensive educational campaign, SFFB decided to act on its own, and chose a day during National Nude Weekend. It never asked for anyone’s permission. That’s why these people are here today.

They look around with excitement and trepidation; after some hesitation, the beach visitors start to undress. Soon the small area is filled with naked bodies, soaking up the sun, splashing in the warm surf. It’s a return to Eden; a new, revitalized beach is born. For the next few months, SFFB Beach Ambassadors arrive at the beach each Saturday and Sunday and set up the signs. SFFB members take bags of garbage out of the dunes.

Usage grows into the hundreds when no arrests are made. At the request largely of hospitality industry workers, Wednesday is added as another “free beach” day, and later Beach Ambassadors are recruited to be on hand seven days a week. In February 1992, an annual tradition is started when several dozen participants from Sunsport Garden’s Midwinter Naturist Festival drive down from Palm Beach for a day at Haulover.

Just one day after came the arrest of five nude sunbathers by Dade Police, charged under Florida Statute 800.03. Was this to be the end? SFFB hired legal counsel, and demonstrated to the county attorney that case law indicated this was an improper charge, unless the exposure was “in a vulgar or indecent manner” (as stated in the statute). The charges were dismissed, and on April 15, 1992, Laurie Collins of the Dade Police Legal Bureau issued legal note 92-4, informing officers that “the mere act of being nude in public is not a violation of Section 800.03...[absent] lewd or lascivious exhibition...” One may additionally note that the statute allows nudity in a place “set aside for that purpose.”

The north parking lot was built only after SFFB/FNA informed the US Army Corps of Engineers that it was required to justify the Corps’ cost of beach renourishment, and the tunnel opening was part of the required access to a public beach after this expenditure of federal dollars.

SFFB/FNA requested that the Park Department install lifeguard towers on the Naturist beach. At first they refused. SFFB/FNA then hired a helicopter and Richard Mason along with a member who was a professional photographer videotaped the length of the coast line from the tip of Key Biscayne to Sunny Isles Beach. This revealed that there was that day an average of 14 persons per lifeguard stand at Haulover south of the naturist beach, and 880 visitors and no lifeguard stands at the naturist area. A copy of the video tape was left at the lifeguard office to be forwarded down to the main office of the Park Department with a request to send it to the department’s lawyer. The implication was obvious. If a person drowned on the naturist beach, the county could be held liable for neglect. In less than a week, the first of what became five lifeguard stands was towed up to the naturist beach on skids. SFFB was later given permission to install permanent signs, which it did in December 1993. Victory!

Growth

The installation of permanent signs marked the second milestone in Haulover’s naturist history. From 1991 to 2004, parking revenue at Haulover increased an astonishing 445%. It’s generally acknowledged that this dramatic increase is largely due to the naturist beach, since in this same time period the increase in parking revenue at Crandon Park, the county’s other oceanfront beach park, was only 51%. No wonder that Sally Heyman, then FL State Representative and now Miami-Dade County Commissioner wrote in 2002, “Haulover Park’s naturist family beach has been good for tourism because of its positive effect on the hospitality and tourist industry.” This was confirmed by a 2004 survey, indicating 50% of naturist beach visitors could be classified as tourists. (See: www.beachesfoundation.org/hauloversurvey.pdf)

As daily usership soon grew into the thousands, a new threat arose, this time from the state. This isn’t the place for details, but from 1994, bills started to be introduced into the Florida legislature seeking to make mere nudity criminal. An early sponsor, FL Rep. Ball, was apparently targeting not Haulover, but the traditional nude use area at Playalinda Beach at Canaveral National Seashore in Brevard County, which he represented. Yet his legislation would have had statewide application. SFFB then started its transformation to largely a political action organization, hiring a professional legislative lobbyist firm that it has retained ever since, and adding Florida Naturist Association to its name to emphasize the new, larger role. Over the years, with the assistance of NAC and others, it has successfully defeated or modified several bills.

Proactively, members of SFFB/FNA’s Government Affairs Committee also attend many meetings each year with local and state legislators and officials, particularly newly elected or appointed ones. It has developed an extensive informational packet on naturism and Haulover Beach for this purpose. Education is the key, because while there may be a minority fundamentally opposed to nude recreation, most are in opposition due to a lack of information, or misinformation, regarding naturism. Often, naturism is not even the target, but bills are crafted so broadly that it is threatened. For example, in 2008, SFFB persuaded the sponsor of HB 801 to modify the wording of this bill addressing sexual activity at public parks and beaches to remove language threatening to non-sexual nude recreation; in this case, SFFB agreed with the legislator’s real intent, and an amicable compromise was reached on the bill text. These activities are funded by contributions to SFFB’s Legal Defense and

Political Action Fund, which also contributes selectively to the campaigns of some candidates for public office, where allowed.

When the Park Department starting drafting a new Haulover Park Master Development Plan, SFFB met with park officials and offered some thirty suggestions, most of which were included. Among these were that a new restroom be built, as the original plan only called for refurbishing the old one, and also access improvements for those physically challenged, thatched beach shelters, showers on the beach, and an expansion of the clothing-optional section. In February 2002, the Miami-Dade County Commission approved the plan, which included specific mention of the naturist beach as a park feature. This may mark the third milestone in official recognition.

Unfortunately, the Master Development Plan was largely a wish list, and funding was not immediately available for all provisions. But in 1999, Shirley Mason had established B.E.A.C.H.E.S. Foundation Institute (Beach Education Advocates for Culture, Health, Environment and Safety), which was granted federal 501 (c) (3) status in 2000. As such, it could apply for grants, and it did, to fund both capital improvements and cultural, health, environmental and safety programs.

Many NGOs apply for grants from a limited funding pool, and B.E.A.C.H.E.S. could not afford a professional grant writer. It did receive funding from a county nonprofit grant program to help pay for electric beach wheelchairs (unfortunately since removed to another county park), thatched chickee huts, and a beach shower.

B.E.A.C.H.E.S. also bid on the Haulover main concession, in partnership with a local restaurateur and an international resort corporation, but was not successful. However, it was granted status as a not-for-profit Park Department Program Partner, which allowed it to set up a mini-concession offering ice cream, fruit, naturist souvenirs, and other select items at the beach. Revenue from this operation goes to further naturist education and fund Haulover Beach improvements. However, revenue from this source has been minimal, and gifts from individuals and corporations—most recently from Castaways Travel and Hidden Beach Resort to replace a stolen trailer—have been essential to keeping the organization viable.

Community

South Florida Free Beaches and B.E.A.C.H.E.S. Foundation have always worked to build a community of naturist beach users, and to integrate the naturist beach into the wider community of South Florida. The organizations are proud that the naturist beach, initially viewed with some doubt and concern, has grown into a great recreational asset for residents, as well as being a major tourist attraction.

Jack Kardys, Miami-Dade Park Department Director, has said of SFFB's turquoise-safari-helmeted Beach Ambassadors that they "are the key to a successful clothing optional beach. They are the eyes and ears for the management and lifeguards and the police and they're daily attentiveness and advocacy to educating the users on the appropriate etiquette at the beach add a valuable level of communication and control--they are great partners with the Parks Department and police in making Haulover's clothing optional beach one of the most popular in the nation."

In 2004, SFFB obtained more than a thousand petitions when the local school board had proposed taking over some county park land for schools, including building a school in Haulover Park. In this effort, SFFB acted in concert with the Parks Department and a number of environmental organizations.

Sunny Isles Resort Association Executive Director William Lone wrote that "...the regional core of naturist beach users: participate in assuring that the beach resources are maintained at the highest quality level; work with the county to initiate safety programs; organize fund raising efforts for needy causes; and effect social functions, which greatly add to the enjoyment of a beach visit."

SFFB and B.E.A.C.H.E.S. have held blood drives and free skin cancer screenings, and have organized park clean-up projects. For its skin cancer awareness and prevention efforts, SFFB was awarded the 2008 Willis Murray Spirit of Hope Award by the Miami-Dade chapter of the American Cancer Society; SFFB would like to thank the American Academy of Dermatologists and a number of member physicians, without whose participation this honor would not have been possible.

Then there are the beach festivals, currently organized by B.E.A.C.H.E.S., which variously include food and drink, music, health workshops, sports and other special activities. They also provide an opportunity for nudist resorts and naturist travel businesses to present new clothes-free recreational opportunities to thousands, in

exchange for a donation to B.E.A.C.H.E.S.' Haulover Improvement Fund. The last festival was held in February, with further ones planned for April, July, October and the New Year's weekend. Those interested may contact Shirley Mason at exdirBEACHES@aol.com; the organization's website is at www.beachesfoundation.org.

Additionally, SFFB publishes *The SunDial*, a 16-page quarterly, with a print run of 10,000 copies. Printing is underwritten by advertising, and the publication is distributed free at Haulover Beach, and also at the American Nudist Research Library, and at nudist resorts and other naturist venues in Florida. The publication attempts a balance of items of interest to card-carrying naturists, to skinny-dippers not yet wholly familiar with naturism and nude recreation opportunities, and to the curious general public, which may have skewed ideas about nude recreation. It also works to encourage a synergistic and mutually beneficial relationship between resort nudism and free beach naturism. You can view an online version at www.sffb.com, where you can also sign up for SFFB's free monthly e-newsletter.

A Beach Visit

Rather than describe the park location, layout, rules and amenities here, it may be best to direct the new visitor to the Haulover page at www.sffb.com.

Water temperature is typically above 80° from around April to October, often approaching 90° in high summer; in the interim months it will gradually fall to around 70° in midwinter and then start rising again. Barring hurricanes and thunderstorms, the beach is useable most of the year. As to air temperature, January is Miami's coldest month, with a 76° average high temperature—though a few atypical weeks of colder temperatures may be expected most years.

Occasional storms will sculpt the sand off- and onshore, but during low tide it's usually possible to walk a hundred yards or so into the water to a sandbar, where you can stand in ankle to waist deep water. At high tide you'll usually be in over your head fifty feet in.

On the shore, interspersed with tourists, you'll find many informal groups of locals that congregate together, especially on weekends. Toby's, the concessionaire, rents chairs and umbrellas, and has food trailers. Be sure to stop by B.E.A.C.H.E.S.' Beach Mall (usually open Friday through Monday) for ice cream, fresh fruit, and Haulover souvenirs, and pick up the current *SunDial* there or at the blue dispensers.

The Future

We've used the term "America's Riviera" in acknowledgement of the many naturist beaches in numerous European countries. It's a startling statistic that tiny Holland has 160 designated naturist beaches, yet Florida has only Haulover as its sole designated naturist beach—and beaches at Canaveral National Seashore, which however have been under periodic threat, and are not officially designated.

SFFB and B.E.A.C.H.E.S. consider Haulover's naturist beach as a demonstration project and exemplar to further the acceptance of naturism in the U.S.A. Haulover proves that a clothing-optional beach can exist, thrive and prosper in a major urban area. Noting that naturist beach users were good local hospitality business patrons, and that some had bought condos in Sunny Isles Beach, that city's former mayor, David Samson, wrote that "The naturist family clothing-optional beach has had no adverse secondary effects on our city or on our citizens who enjoy Haulover Park...Prior to this section of Haulover Beach Park becoming a naturist beach, it was not a safe area. The presence of the naturist families significantly cleaned up and improved the area...The naturist beach visitors have been good stewards of the beach." We're always bemused when some think skinny-dippers pose a threat, in view of the trouble-free nature and acceptance of so many naturist beaches in Europe.

We can't be sure of the future, and we've lost so many clothing-optional use areas in the past 30 years in Florida. Sometimes loss has come through complacency and apathy by local naturists using such beaches. The Florida state park code, mentioned earlier, affected several former naturist use areas, from the Florida Keys to Tampa. We're currently making some inquiries to see if that can be changed to allow a few designated areas in some state parks, especially as Florida is considering closing 16 to 20 state parks—temporarily, it's now said—due to revenue shortfalls. As to Haulover, it may not be immune to a development threat; real estate tax revenues could easily dwarf Haulover's parking revenue, if part of the park were sold off to commercial

developers. It wouldn't be the first time government has favored commercial interests over ordinary citizens. We're keeping on the alert.

SFFB and B.E.A.C.H.E.S. are interested in partnering with committed naturist groups, particularly in Florida, that seek to use the Haulover model to establish other naturist beach areas in their communities. They are currently working with Tampa Area Naturists on such a project. It takes a dedicated core group willing to take the message to local government and business interests to make it happen. Richard Mason spoke at a Palm Beach state legislator meeting last November, and part of his address was quoted in the Palm Beach Post: "It's time for the state of Florida to grow up," Richard remarked. "If you can build golf courses for golfers, why can't you designate beaches for naturists? It's been a successful formula at Haulover for 18 years. Why not give it a try?"