

SANIBEL'S SCHOOLS

BY BARBARA LINSTROM-ARNOLD

Back when Francis and Sam Bailey went to school on Sanibel, times were quite simple.

“We had a one-room schoolhouse with one door, one stove, one closet, one pencil sharpener, and just one teacher,” remembers Francis Bailey. “But we did have two two-hole outhouses.”

The Bailey brothers—famous native sons of Sanibel—have fond and vivid memories of their schoolboy days in the 1930s. From their vantage point, the

\$10 million upgraded Sanibel School that is opening its doors for the first time this fall as a fully revamped kindergarten-through-eighth-grade facility is light-years beyond what they could have imagined on the island.

“Un-be-lievable,” says Sam Bailey, staggering at his summation of the new construction and renovations. “These kids and what they have in this day and age—it’s unbelievable.”

In contrast were the expansion of the

island schoolhouse and some additional recreational equipment the county provided in the late 1930s, he recalls.

“In 1937, we got two teachers,” he remembers. A wing was added to the schoolhouse, where lower grades were taught, and upper grades continued classes in the old one-room schoolhouse. “We also got a basketball and a rim. We had it for two years before we knew it needed a net. We didn’t know; we’d never seen a basketball before. We didn’t have television in



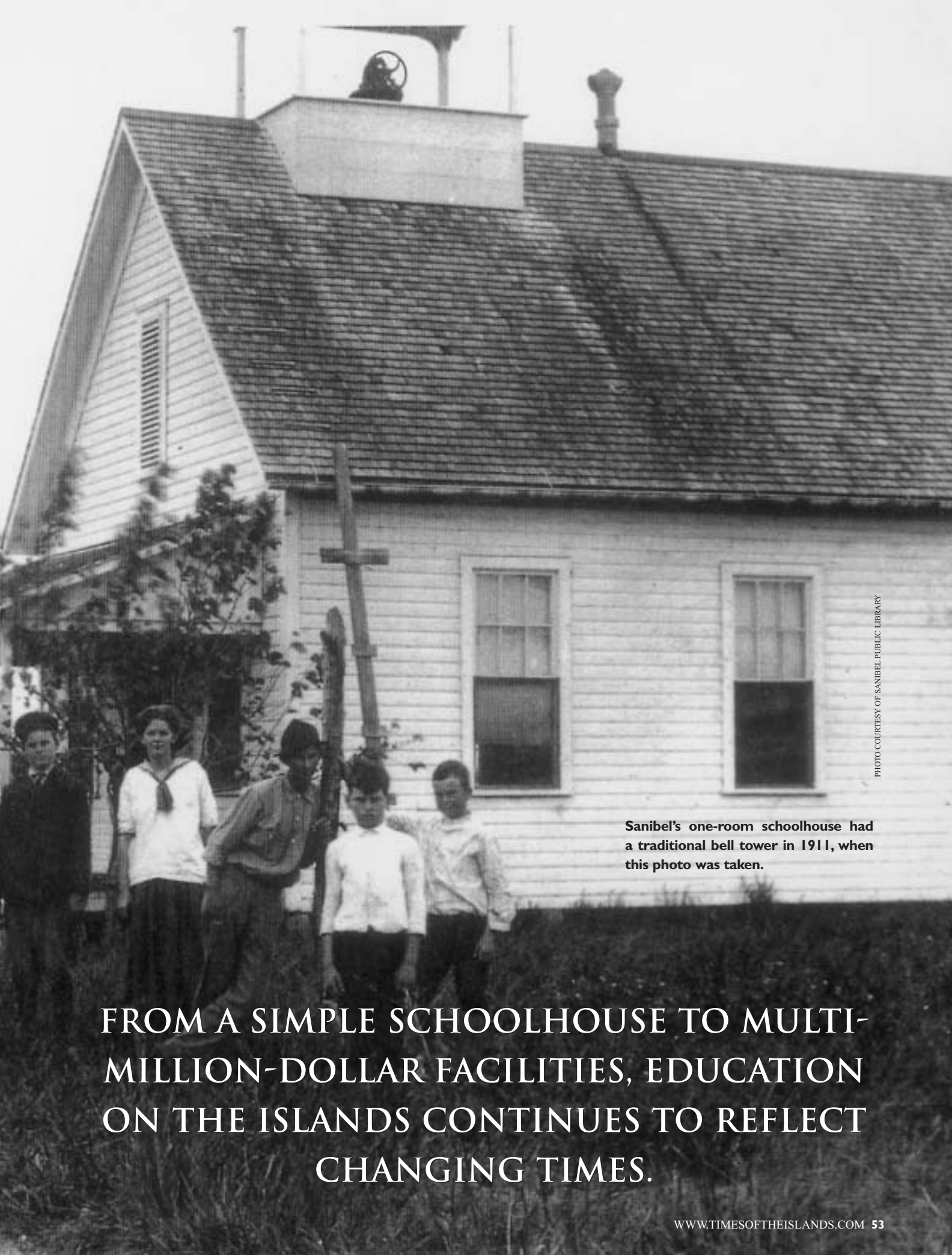


PHOTO COURTESY OF SANIBEL PUBLIC LIBRARY

Sanibel's one-room schoolhouse had a traditional bell tower in 1911, when this photo was taken.

FROM A SIMPLE SCHOOLHOUSE TO MULTI-MILLION-DOLLAR FACILITIES, EDUCATION ON THE ISLANDS CONTINUES TO REFLECT CHANGING TIMES.

those days, you know.”

Currently, The Sanibel School is equipped with state-of-the-art plasma TVs in some classrooms and several perfectly manicured ball fields that boast nighttime lighting as part of the school’s recreational complex.

As the new school launches a brand-new era for island education this fall, the old schoolhouse that the Baileys attended will become an official part of history on the island.

playhouse up Periwinkle Way. The original building will be restored this fall to its original one-room schoolhouse status.

As part of Sanibel’s Historical Village, the schoolhouse will be fixed up to look as it did when Francis and Sam were students there. The Bailey brothers are happy to see its revival as the simple schoolhouse of their boyhood days.

“These kids today may have a lot more than we did, but I don’t think they have a bit more fun than we did,” says Sam Bailey.

Of course, that was when life on the island was much more laid-back in many ways.

“We used to play in the road in summertime, because there were less mosquitoes there. You could play dodgeball for an hour before a car would even come by,” says Sam Bailey.

Shifting Times, Shifting Schools

The first school on the island predates the Bailey brothers’ school days by gener-



PHOTO BY NICK ADAMS

When Francis (left) and Sam Bailey were in school on Sanibel, classes took place in the old schoolhouse, and sports included basketball without a net and football played with a coconut.

After being replaced by a larger facility on Sanibel-Captiva Road in 1964, the little building on Periwinkle Way for many decades served as a playhouse—originally the Pirate Playhouse, and later as the Old Schoolhouse Theater.

Having shut its doors as a theater this past spring, the Old Schoolhouse Theater organization moved to the larger island

“We used to play football at recess with a dried-up coconut. It threw real well, but don’t try kickin’ it, especially if you’re barefoot.”

Curiously, the old schoolhouse rarely kept a teacher for more than a year.

“It was all different teachers for me; except for one year, we had the same one come back,” says Francis Bailey.

ations. According to documents from the Southwest Florida Historical Society, the first school on the island opened in December 1891. Miss Lettie Nutt was employed by the county school board to teach out of her home for the fee of \$2.50 per pupil. Records indicate that three students were taking Latin, one was taking geometry, and three, algebra.

STUDENTS BEGAN CLASSES THIS YEAR IN A
NEW MIDDLE SCHOOL AND RENOVATED
ELEMENTARY SCHOOL, FUNDED BY \$9 MILLION
FROM THE LEE COUNTY SCHOOL DISTRICT.

PHOTO BY KATHLEEN BLASE

By 1892, a “small, but very attractive school” had been built on the east end of the island with a construction budget of \$75. Within two years, that school was blown down by a storm. Although records are sketchy, they indicate that in 1894 another schoolhouse was built at the cost of \$54.50, but that facility didn’t last long either.

In 1896, the county upped its capital outlay by funding a \$539 schoolhouse. Like the others, it was built on the east end of the island, then moved in 1903 to the spot on Periwinkle Way, says island historian Betty Anholt. Some believe it was the same schoolhouse the Bailey brothers attended more than 30 years later, although there is some uncertainty.

“It’s really a big controversy, when that schoolhouse was built,” admits Francis Bailey.

Records also show that the school board determined that Sanibel was large enough to accommodate two schools; thus there were schools at the east end of the island as well as at Wulfert, on the west end.

In 1897, the board moved the west Sanibel school to Buck Key, where about ten pupils attended by boat from Captiva and Sanibel. That school apparently functioned for about six years; reports mention Miss Nannie Nutt as teacher, and end-of-the-year candy pulls.

After 1903, that school was moved to Captiva, where various teachers were employed, including Miss Cordie Nutt.



PHOTO BY KATHLEEN BLASE

Sandy Zahorchak, president of the Sanibel School Fund, says the additional money helps support foreign-language, art, and music programs.

The school on Captiva appears on official record until 1921, when students apparently started attending school on Sanibel.

In 1929, the school board purchased the Baptist Church on Sanibel for \$1,500 “to be used as a colored school.” That building, on the corner of Tarpon Bay Road and the Island Inn Road, had a bell tower, as did the original Sanibel schoolhouse, according to Francis Bailey.

“The schoolhouse originally had a bell tower on it, and so did the building that

is now the Colonial Bank (across from Bailey’s Supermarket) that was originally a Baptist Church, then the colored school,” he says. “It was either the hurricane of ’28 or ’27 that blew off that bell tower and dented the roof. So, the school board decided to take the bell tower off the other schoolhouse and then, to the best of my knowledge, those bells were stored....During World War II, for the war effort, they went in the scrap pile.”

The two schools operated independent-



PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE SANIBEL SCHOOL

The Sanibel School has long been an integral part of the community. Here, students celebrate Flag Day (left) and have fun on “Harry Potter Day.”



PHOTO BY KATHLEEN BLASE

Before the arrival of principal Barbara Von Harten, who has guided the transition, the school served students up through sixth grade.

ly of one another for more than thirty years. In 1964, Sanibel Elementary School opened on Sanibel-Captiva Road, officially shutting down the little two-room schoolhouse and becoming the first integrated school in Lee County.

Growth and Development

With kindergarten through eighth-grade classes, the school gradually took in more students as the island became more populated. Additions over the years included the gymnasium and later the swimming pool at the city's recreation center, but nothing close to the major renovation and new construction of the current school.

The school now also harkens to the days of the Bailey boys, when classes went through eighth grade. In 2002 the school began graduating eighth-grade students.

With the Lee County School District

providing \$9 million of the middle school addition and the renovation of the grade school, the Sanibel School Fund raised an additional \$1 million from private sources over the past two and a half years to provide enhancements.

The end result is a facility with an in-house video production studio, audio enhancement with cordless microphones in the classrooms, and state-of-the-art computer technology.

"I think with the new facility—where our kids are going to come out being able to do their own video productions and PowerPoint presentations—people who are thinking of a private school are going to have to work really, really hard to justify it to themselves," says Sandy Zahorchak, president of the fund. The extra million is also paying for foreign-language instruction, support of the art and music

programs, new playground equipment, shade structures, and landscaping of the courtyards, she adds.

Principal Barbara Von Harten boasts of the school's top test scores, despite its less-than-ideal physical environment during the construction and renovations.

"I've had about sixty percent of my teachers in portables for the last three to four years," she says. Even so, The Sanibel School has topped Lee County across the board on Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test scores, and it's been in the top five percent statewide in every category.

The school accommodates some 425 students, with twenty percent coming from off-island on waivers, because their parents either own a business or work on the island.

"We've really needed the children that attend school on a waiver to enable us to have two classes at each grade level. If I didn't have the children attending school on a waiver, I'd have to do split classes—like a K-first combination, second/third—not pure classes," says Von Harten.

Education Continues

Certainly, public school on Sanibel has come a long way from the school days of the Bailey boys.

"We averaged about thirty students," says Sam, recalling that as quite a challenge for his teachers. "When you had one teacher teaching five subjects to five different grades, she needed some relief. So, when I was in seventh grade, I used to teach fifth-grade math for about forty-five minutes a day. No one believes me, but I did."

As the newly upgraded Sanibel School gets into full swing this fall, Von Harten is eager to see how the technology, improved physical conditions, and corresponding attitudes impact test scores.

"Maybe we'll take it to the next level: one of the best schools in the nation instead of the state," she says.

Meanwhile, the old island schoolhouse—in all its simple glory—should be opening its doors in November, once again as a place of education, at the Historical Village. 🐦

Education is also prominent in Barbara Linstrom-Arnold's life: she is an adjunct instructor of writing at Florida Gulf Coast University.