



Painting the Town

Punta Gorda pictures the past through its citywide mural program

by Beth Luberecki

Take a walk through downtown Punta Gorda and you just might find yourself face-to-face with railroad magnate Henry Plant, or directly in the path of a Wild West worthy cattle drive. Those are just two of the subjects depicted in larger-than-life fashion on the walls of downtown buildings thanks to the Punta Gorda Historic Mural Society (PGHMS).

The society was founded in 1994 by Dr. Robert Andrews, who was inspired by mural programs in other cities like Lake Placid, Florida. Looking to illustrate the history of Punta Gorda through murals, he enlisted the help of the Punta Gorda Business Alliance to get the citywide art project up and running. A blank wall on the south side of the Punta Gorda Mall was chosen as the site for the first mural,

which featured the Hotel Charlotte Harbor and was dedicated in October 1995.

Over the next nine years, twenty murals were painted in downtown Punta Gorda, spotlighting everything from the area's natural beauty to its founding fathers. But when Hurricane Charley swept through in 2004, it struck a devastating blow to the society, destroying ten of the city's murals. "After Charley, we not only lost ten murals but we lost an awful lot of walls to paint them on," says Bob Armstrong, PGHMS president. "We're kind of in catch-up mode trying to get back [to where things were] before Charley."

PGHMS plans to re-create those lost murals while still adding new scenes to the downtown. Since Charley, three new murals have been unveiled, and four recreations have been dedicated, most



Michael Vires's mural (top) shows a turn-of-the-twentieth-century cattle drive down West Marion Avenue. (Bottom) The Black History Mural destroyed by Hurricane Charley was re-created at the Baker Center by artist Fran Hines.

recently the black history-themed mural by artist Fran Hines once painted on the Clement Building and now at the Baker

TOP AND BOTTOM PHOTOS BY BETH LUBERECKI





“Fishing Tales” by Jack Reto (above) highlights the importance of fishing to the area. (Below) A father and daughter study “Nature’s Harmony” by Liz Hutchinson at Lashley Park Municipal Marina.

Center, Charlotte County’s pre-kindergarten education center.

The new home for the mural is an appropriate one, as Baker Center namesake Benjamin Baker is one of the historical figures pictured. “It’s a celebration of the heroes of this community,” said Lee Swift, chairman of the School Board of Charlotte County, of the mural during its dedication. “They made contributions that changed lives, changed attitudes, and laid the foundation for what Punta Gorda has become.”

The kind of community support lent by the school board is vital to the non-profit, volunteer-run society, whose work would not be possible without the aid of local businesses and art lovers. Property owners graciously provide sites for the murals, while organizations like the Punta Gorda Rotary Club and Florida International Air Show have sponsored



PHOTOS BY BETH LUBERBECKI

MEPHISTO M

WORLD'S FINEST FOOTWEAR

Comfort at its best

MEPHISTO

MEPHISTO

Island Soles

Footwear Designed for Comfort

1750 Estero Boulevard • Fort Myers Beach • 239-463-3038
Monday-Friday 9am-9pm • Sunday 10am-5pm

Coffee • Internet • Desserts • Smoothies

SOLE CAFE

Located Next Door to Islands Soles • 239-463-7653
1740 Estero Boulevard • Fort Myers Beach



Punta Gorda murals include (left to right) “Postcards in Time,” by Jack Reto; “Lest We Forget,” by Liz Hutchinson; “End of the Line,” by Richard Currier; and six panels by Charles Peck documenting the evolution of county medicine. (Below) Peck’s mural of Punta Gorda’s first city council is based on an 1889 photo.

the artworks, helping to pay for supplies and artist commissions. In 2007, the Charlotte Community Foundation granted \$7,500 to the society to help it re-create the murals destroyed by Charley.

One of the most unusual recent shows of support came from Ron Thomas, executive director of Enterprise Punta Gorda, who journeyed across Charlotte County by foot, bicycle, rollerblades, kayak, and unicycle to raise money for the Baker Center mural. Thomas received pledges as small as \$10 and as high as \$1,000 for his efforts, ultimately raising almost \$4,700. “I was just looking for a different way for people to find the connection from a fund-raising perspective,” he says. “I thought this was sort of fun, sort of interesting, and a little offbeat.”

Local artist Charles Peck has painted four murals for PGHMS, memorializing the evolution of medicine in Charlotte County, the members of the first city council, the importance of fishing in the region, and the work of volunteers at the Cooper Street Recreation Center. He believes the murals can help serve as inspiration for both budding artists and art collectors.

“I grew up without having anybody in the family who was an artist or who knew diddly-squat about it,” says Peck. “I lived in a small town and didn’t have access to museums. Having pictures on the walls outside gives kids who’d be similar to what I was when I was young something to look at, and it makes art a bigger part of their life. [It also] gets adults thinking about art, and when they think about art, they might actually buy some.”

For Peck and the others involved with creating the murals, the process takes some time. First PGHMS must secure a

site, choose a theme, and find sponsors to help with funding. Then a call is put out to area artists, who submit sketches of their interpretations of the theme. Once an artist is selected, the city needs to approve the plan, and then the work begins, which can take several months.

“The first mural was a real bear; we didn’t know what we were doing,” says Armstrong. “It took nine months. It was like giving birth to a child. Now we have it down a little better.”

Those interested in seeing the fruits of the society’s labors can download a walking tour guide of downtown mural sites



from the PGHMS Web site at www.puntagordamurals.com. The two-mile tour travels past about a dozen murals, such as Jack Reto’s “Fishing Tales” on the SW Regional Imaging Building and Liz Hutchinson’s “Nature’s Harmony” at Laishley Marina. “This is a great visual way to learn about our community,” says Enterprise Punta Gorda’s

Thomas, who helped create the guide. “It tells a story in a nontraditional way, and I think that’s intriguing.”

One of the most recent artists to join the PGHMS ranks is Michael Vires, whose “Cattle Drive Down Marion Avenue” mural on the west side of the Rooney Building was dedicated in June 2007. A longtime muralist, Vires used his experience of living in the western United States to create the scene that pays tribute to “Cracker” cattle and cow hunters.

In December 2007, he started work on his second mural for PGHMS, a re-creation of a Charley–destroyed piece depicting flora and fauna found in the area. He’s happy to play his part in both bringing art to downtown Punta Gorda and sharing the city’s history with residents and visitors.

“I hear from people all the time about the murals and about how much they enjoy having them,” says Vires. “I think they’re a great source of visual pleasure for everybody. Plus I really like the idea of what the mural society is doing, because it’s a visual link to the roots and the past of this area and it connects all of us now. When you go down to Marion Avenue and go shopping or have lunch, you don’t really stop and think about [how] it wasn’t that long ago that the biggest form of entertainment there was when they would have a cattle drive. Every time you drive by and look at one [of the murals], it definitely keeps you connected to the past, and I just think that’s a real important thing.”

Beth Luberecki is a Venice, Florida–based freelance writer and the features editor of Times of the Islands.