



# Estero Historical Society

P.O. Box 1314 • Estero Florida 33928

Estero Historical  
Society

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## President's Report

Hello everyone,

The Historical Society never sleeps. We've been busy all summer. We've made our third batch of Chutney and again, it's flying off our shelves. I've mailed Chutney to Connecticut and also to Captiva. Thanks to Amy Williams' article in Tropicalia, we've had wonderful publicity. If you haven't purchased your Chutney yet, do so as soon as possible before it's all gone.

Our historic architect Linda Stevenson presented us with a draft of our Preservation Plan for the two historic houses. After very carefully reading and re-reading, the Plan was brought before the Lee County Preservation Board. After many pros and cons, the Plan was unanimously passed by the Board 10-0. We're definitely pleased.

The next steps will be to have a budget prepared and a Construction plan drafted. Finally, it looks as though we'll be moving the houses S O O N.

This past summer, we had our annual reading of the Declaration of Independence at the Koreshan State Historic Site. About 55 people showed up on July 5th and read with us. Among our guests were State Senator Burt Saunders and his family.

Billy Simpson provided the Hot dogs and burgers at reasonable prices and every one had an enjoyable afternoon.

We've booked the Embassy Suites for our Annual Tea for Monday, March 23rd, 2009.

We're going to have our Christmas Luncheon on December 10th, 2008 in the Garden Room at the Villages at Country Creek. The price including the gratuity is \$20.00 per person. As soon as I get the contract approved by the Board, I'll have the menu for you.

Don't forget to pay your dues by December 31st for 2009 year.

See you at the Meeting on October 9th, 2008 at South Regional Library at 6:30pm. Our speaker is Tom Smoot from Fort Myers. He will present a slide presentation on Thomas Edison.

Sincerely,

Mary Ann

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President Weenen at the July Historical Society reading of the Declaration of Independence at the Koreshan Historic Site..



## Highlands Avenue Landmark Threatened

By Georgia Nelson and J. F. "Jeff" McCullers

The following is an excerpt from a letter written by J. F. "Jeff" McCullers in response to the recent developer request to demolish the Alvarez-Smith packing house. The request has been withdrawn and the structure stabilized until a preservation plan for the entire project can be completed and approved by the Lee County Historic Preservation Board, but three other structures at the Highlands Ave. site including the old fruit stand were demolished. It has been the dream of some of us that the developer JED might find a way to incorporate this bit of Estero history intact into Estero on the River as a memorial to a vanished way of life. The partial demolition makes that dream shine a little less brightly. Online pictures with captions of the Alvarez-Smith Place over the years are available at <http://picasaweb.google.com/jmccullers/AlvarezSmithPlace>

"I am writing to you to express my heartfelt concern regarding the Historical Preservation plan for Estero on the River, and the proposed demolition of what has come to be known as the Alvarez Packing House on Highlands Avenue in Old Estero.

"My grandfather built that packing house and worked it for more than 40 years. It represented the heart of the very last commercial-scale citrus operation in Estero.

"The Fernandez family, of which I am a proud descendant, settled in Estero in 1892, and for over a century some member of my family worked Estero's groves or fished Estero Bay. When my grandmother died our family was faced with the awful decision to sell an ancestral home.

"For generations, Estero's vast citrus groves and exotic fruit orchards yielded a sweet, delicious bounty to Florida and to the world. The Estero Historical Society has done a superb job of collecting the scant fragments of that history together, and they have honored me on several occasions by inviting me to talk about my family's citrus and fishing legacy.

"My fervent hope would be that one day my own children and all of our new Estero neighbors will be able to see this packing house and all the other properties the way I once saw them. I can remember many cold winter nights, when every single person in my family from the oldest to the youngest worked in that open-air packing house far into the night, washing and sorting fruit that had been hastily picked to save it from an impending freeze. Only a few bare light bulbs illuminated the ancient fruit washer, the red narrow-profile Case tractor, and all the people busily sorting and packing fruit into hand-built wooden crates.

"My brother and I, as the youngest of the family, worked the last bin where the smallest fruit were collected. We

would pack the crates until they were too heavy for either of us to carry alone, but together we would stack them higher than our heads awaiting the throngs of eager customers who would always show up at dawn. If we got too boisterous, a quick look from my mother usually squelched it. She would be smiling at us, gentle and indulgent and loving, but that "Mama" look was unmistakable in its meaning.

"The roar of the washer was deafening, and no conversation was possible: we communicated with gestures when necessary, and worked without comment in the rhythm of the group and in the solace of our own private thoughts. The air was so cold that we could see our breath, and our thin Florida-weight flannel shirts did little to keep our sore arms and backs warm. The sugary, sunny citrus smell was intensely strong, so startlingly powerful that the scent remained in our hair for days afterward.

"We loved these nights, and my brother and I were so proud to be lined up next to my mother, father, and uncle each doing their part. Sometimes cousins and friends would pitch in as well. Through the glow, we could all see my grandfather in his perch high in the washer, supervising the scrubbing and polishing assemblies, and culling out any pieces of fruit that had even the slightest imperfections. My grandmother would bring steaming coffee and cocoa to keep us stoked, and overhead a billion glittering stars shone down through the indigo night on the old tin roof. Life was good, and life was like that for a very long time in Estero.

"As beautiful as the modern-day Estero seems to be to its newcomers, surely there is still a place in its heart to remember the bitterly hard but honorable work of the generations that came before. That packing house, along with the old school and homes that surround it, are the last remnants of the last hundred years or so of the Estero that once was. I would hope that any newcomer would want to enjoy a moment considering the old days, and understanding how our new day had grown out of them.

Sincerely,

J.F. "Jeff" McCullers



1980's view of the front of the Alvarez-Smith main house



Della&HughSmithInsidePackingHouseIn1970's. Fruit Washer & Sorting Bins On Left With Fruit Baskets & Field Crates Used For Display.



Smith's Highland Ave. Fruit Stand In1971. Display Bins in Front.



The Hugh Smith Family in front of the packing house in 1946 Ray Kay Hugh George & Della..



July reading of the Declaration of Independence





Estero Historical Society

**MEMBERSHIP**

*If you'd like to join, make checks payable to:*

**ESTERO HISTORICAL SOCIETY  
P.O. BOX 1314  
ESTERO, FL 33928**

*Information: call (239) 992-4431 or 495-9761  
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**Active Individual:           \$20\_\_\_\_**  
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**Lifetime:                       \$1,000\_\_\_\_**

**Building Fund Donation:    \$\_\_\_\_**

*We are a non-profit organization*

**Total Amount enclosed:    \$\_\_\_\_**

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