



“The Delray Affair”

BY ROY M. SIMON

This year, the Delray Beach Chamber of Commerce celebrates the 60th anniversary of the Delray Affair. Since its inception in 1962 as the Gladiola Festival, it has grown to be a much loved annual event celebrating the Arts and our town. Read on for a history of the Delray Affair by one of its founders, Roy Simon.

Over the years, dating back to the late 1940's, events have been held celebrating the farmers of the community and the local agricultural industry which is Delray's heritage and was its economic base.

Because the Delray area was the “Gladiola Capital of the World” in the 1940's and 50's, the Gladiola Festival was created during spring harvest to show off the product of the area. This Exposition was a huge event, drawing thousands to Delray from all over with large, glamorous Orange Bowl floats, bands, and beauty queens. It was a time when the gladiola farms of our area created a beautiful pallet of color as you headed west on Atlantic Avenue. As the gladiola farms became urban developments and vegetable farms, tourism became the focus of the area.

To maintain ties with the agriculture industry and to arouse interest in its contributions to our economic vitality, the Chamber of Commerce introduced the “Agricultural Expo”. Chaired by Roy Simon, the first event was a small stand in the parking lot of First National Bank of Delray Beach (now SunTrust) on East Atlantic Avenue. The stand was furnished by Vic Neal, who helped prepare the display of the many varieties of fruit and vegetables grown in the area, in addition to flowers and nursery items. The Display provided information regarding the products grown and shipped from the area and the economic contributions of the agricultural community to the area and the county.

Because of the enthusiasm of the farmers and the wonderful reception by the community, the second expo was a two-day event, held in the Delray Community Center gymnasium. The displays covered the entire floor of the gym and were filled with produce of every variety and proudly presented by the participating farms. The exhibits included livestock, which were displayed in the lawn between the Community Center and the tennis courts, ranging from hogs and chickens to Santa Gertrudas beef cattle. The variety and extent of the displays and the fact that all was local had many members of the community in a state of surprise and awe.

Times continued to change and farms continued to be lost to more development. At the same time, the City and the area were growing, becoming the home of artists and authors, many of whom were nationally and internationally renowned. President of the Delray Chamber of Commerce, Roy Simon, recommended to the Chamber Board that the expo be expanded to an art festival, similar to the ones held in Winter Park, Florida. The concept was well

received and President-elect John Bordeman volunteered to chair the committee.

The first committee meeting was held at the Arcade Tap Room with members Andy Gent, Ken Ellingsworth, Buddy Merritt, artist Beth Simon, authors Nathaniel and Sylvia Weyl, artist Gay Drake and Chairman John Bordeman. Among the discussions was the naming of the event. Suggestions were “Delray Art Festival”, “Delray Art Affair”, etc. From there Andy Gent or Nathaniel Weyl joked, “Delray Affair”. After a brief discussion, all agreed that this festival of the arts should be named “The Delray Affair”.

As an enhancement and to diversify, it was decided that the festival should include art, literature and music. The concept was to recognize the abundance of talent of the area and to bring in others from around the state and beyond. Events were designed to bring the communities closer together and to inform the public and local residents of the products grown in the area's agricultural fields and of the creative artisans residing in the area.

One feature of the arts festival was the “Literary Tea” held in the Delray Library. Gathered there were the many authors who made Delray their home, such as Theodore Pratt, Nathaniel Weyl and Laura Sinks Britt. This activity was a great success. Unfortunately, it was never repeated.

To enhance the display of art along East Atlantic Avenue, a local grower provided hundreds of pots of mums which were set out like luminaries on both sides creating a half mile of floral color. Before the day was finished, most of the plants disappeared as people picked them up to take home, some in cars and others in pick-up trucks. It was the birth of selling the flowers for charity, instead of trying to display. Hence, the reintroduction of gladiolas as a trademark.

Music and dance volunteers performed on several strategically located “stages”, and musicians strolled along Atlantic Avenue. It was a beautiful scene, well-received by the entire community. It worked and became so popular that the “Thieves Market” and crafts were added. The event became a fixture on the calendar for the first weekend after Easter, hoping to retain the snowbirds and tourists at least one more week. It has grown from a one block display to the current eight blocks-plus event. This new event, THE DELRAY AFFAIR that excited the entire community, has grown to become a **top event** of the Southeastern United States.

May it continue and grow.