

# 15 MINUTES

## Ben Brockington worked there before it was Edison Mall

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Ben Brockington claims to have never once caught a really big fish, even though fishing is his favorite pastime, and he's 90 years old. Now he might have time to go after that elusive big one.

Last week by doctor's orders, Mr. Brockington retired from the job he'd held maintaining the grounds of the Edison Mall in Fort Myers — cleaning the fountains, picking up the parking lot, mowing the grass, and countless other tasks — since the year it was built: 1965. He worked right there long before that, driving a John Deere tractor through a once-upon-a-time field of strawberries somewhere near where Sears or JcPenny or Starbucks or Macy's stands now. His old boss was George Sanders, the man who owned the farmland there and later developed the mall. He hired Mr. Brockington sometime in the mid-1940s.

"I was a tractor man," he said at a retirement luncheon, complete with an ice cream cake, that his co-workers and supervisors attended last week at the mall. If he'd had it his way, Mr. Brockington laughed, he would "probably drop dead out there on the job."

And when the doctor told him he had to retire, he said, "What are you talking about? I ain't got no pain nowhere. I never have hurt nowhere."

Someone asked, "Did you ever meet Thomas Edison?"

He said he hadn't, but later enjoyed vis-

iting the Edison & Ford Winter Estates.

Mr. Brockington had grown accustomed to farm work back in the 1950s and '60s, but when developer Mr. Sanders asked him to start working at the mall, he did. "After he asked me to stay, I fell in love with it," he said.

He remembers Mr. Sanders telling him, "You go up there tomorrow and help them guys clean up and make it look good." And the next day he said, "You go out there to the mall and stay there."

His latest boss, mall manager Robert Edelen, only half joked, "We had 20- and 30-year-olds that couldn't keep up with Ben."

"Yes, sir," Mr. Brockington said proudly.

He remembers the day the mall caught on fire, and cleaning up the mess from the sprinkler system, using big mops to push water away.

"Hooo...weee!" he grinned, also recalling some of the parties he enjoyed at the Edison Mall, long before it was owned by Simon Property Group. Apparently, he liked to dance.

"I had good times right here at the mall, yes sir," he told the group, obliging their curiosity although he's known for being shy. "They used to throw parties right here, down in the food court."

"There's been some times here, taking care of this place. Many nights out there cleaning that lot, picking up papers and bottles and everything else. Had to do a lot of work to keep this place clean."



EVAN WILLIAMS / FLORIDA WEEKLY  
**Ben Brockington**

The luncheon party was a rare look back at the past for Mr. Brockington, who says he doesn't often think about it. He seems more apt to just enjoy the moment. "When I'm working, I'm working. When I'm fishing, I'm fishing," he said.

"And when you're dancing, you're dancing, right Ben?" someone added.

But Mr. Brockington did recall a few pieces of the last 50 or 60 decades, including the 40-something years he lived in a house on French Street in Fort Myers with his wife. They raised three children there and were married 47 years before she died in 1987.

His wife wasn't able to work after her early 30s because she was sick. But, "I was able to take care (of our family)," Mr. Brockington said. "I wasn't no drinker. I wasn't no smoker. I had everything going for myself."

He has outlived all but one son, a semi-truck driver. He also has a grandson who lives up north and a brother in St. Petersburg.

Born in Gainesville, the oldest sibling in his family, Mr. Brockington moved to Fort Myers in the early 1940s with his wife. His father died when he was about 15 years old. His mother died before that, before he can remember.

Pamela Pickett, a local leasing representative for the Edison Mall, worked in the food court at a place called the Orange Bowl when she was in high school. Twenty years later, she came back and started working for the Edison Mall in 2000.

"Ben was still here in the mall when I came back," she said. "He was cleaning the fountain out. It was just like it was in the old days."

Mr. Brockington doesn't have any plans for his retirement. He often falls asleep in his favorite chair, watching preachers on television.

"Nine times out of 10, I'll be sitting there asleep — TV lookin' at me," he said.

But he does plan to visit the mall occasionally, and make some fishing trips soon, to the Caloosahatchee River or Lake Okeechobee or some other favorite spot.

"I haven't caught any big ones yet," he said, although the truth is, he's not too worried about what he catches out there. "The line breaks or something." ■

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