

FORT MYERS FLORIDA WEEKLY®

IN THE KNOW. IN THE NOW.

WEEK OF JANUARY 11-17, 2017

www.FloridaWeekly.com

Vol. X, No. 40 • FREE

Sugar town remains a segregated black community, its residents isolated by history, geography and economic challenges



MIKE KINIRY / SPECIAL TO FLORIDA WEEKLY



▲ Top: Souse Bowl Cafe on Harlem Academy Avenue, the community's main street.

▲ The sun rises over the U.S. Sugar Corp.'s mill and refinery on the eastern edge of Harlem.

BY EVAN WILLIAMS
ewilliams@floridaweekly.com

EACH YEAR IN MAY, PEOPLE WHO GREW UP in Harlem then left come from all over the United States to the community's Brown Sugar Festival. But for many drivers passing by on U.S. 27, midway between Fort Myers and West Palm Beach, Harlem is nowhere.

Just before crossing the railroad tracks into Clewiston there is a small green and white sign announcing its presence that is mainly acknowledged by locals, delivery drivers or people on business, those who have close family or friends here, or someone who got lost. Turn off at Lewis Boulevard and you'll enter Harlem a mile down the road. At the entrance is a small

"We're a lonely world out here."

— Eddie Redd, 51, Harlem, resident and founder of the Harlem Young Men's Club

SEE HARLEM, A14 ►

Taxpayer cost for legislators' health care premiums increases

BY ROGER WILLIAMS
rwilliams@floridaweekly.com

On March 7, 160 men and women elected from districts representing 67 Florida counties and 20.7 million residents will begin the 2017 legislative session at the capitol in Tallahassee. And they will be well paid for it, both in salary and benefits.

In the eyes of many it's a fabulous part-time gig. State law requires senators (40) and state representatives (120) to work only 60 consecutive days a year beginning the first Tuesday after the first Monday

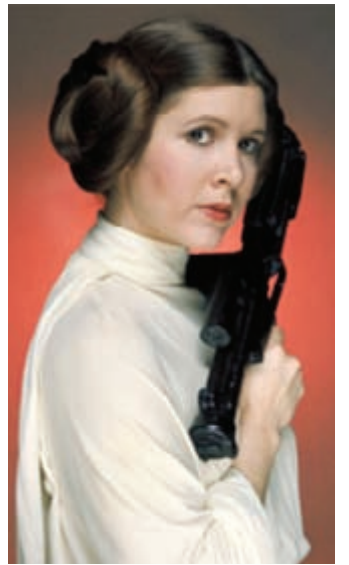
of March. They may also have to work 20 additional days if an extended or special session is required — not typically the case.

Thus, Florida's elected leaders normally toil on behalf of citizens 60 out of a given 365 days before they're through for the next 305 days. But many begin work on and for their committees starting in mid-January — Republican Rep. Matt Caldwell from District 78 on the southwest coast, for instance, who is in Tallahassee this

SEE HEALTH CARE, A22 ►



INSIDE



Legendary losses

Exceptional artists, entertainers we lost in 2016. **C1** ►



Face time

Despite booming social media, networking experts say the road to success is in actually meeting people. **A33** ►



Behind the wheel

BMW X5: Don't mess with a winning formula. **A39** ►

Download our **FREE App** today

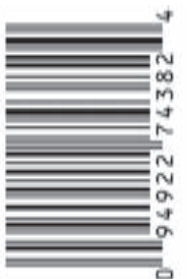
Available on the iTunes and Android App Store.



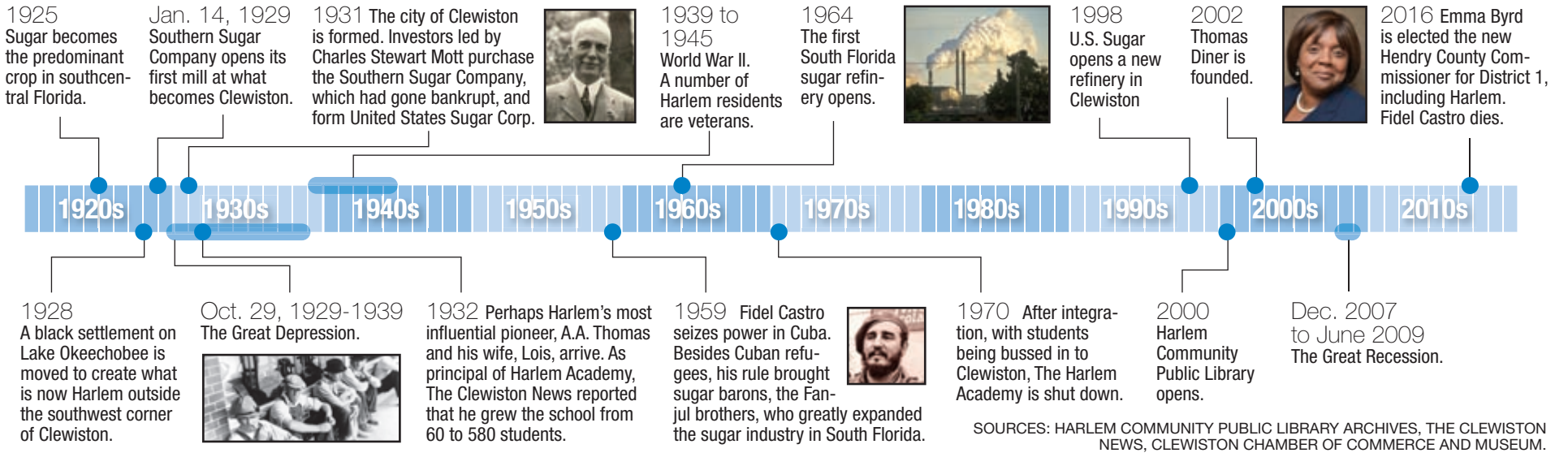
PSRT STD
U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
FORT MYERS, FL
PERMIT NO. 715

OPINION	A4	INVESTING	A34	PUZZLES	C14
COLLECTING	A10	BEHIND THE WHEEL	A39	MOVIE REVIEW	C17
HEALTHY LIVING	A28	REAL ESTATE	B1	SOCIETY	C29
BUSINESS	A33	ARTS	C1	CUISINE	C31

COUNT ON



Harlem Timeline



HARLEM

From page 1

church and a large cemetery, Washington Memorial, the grass dotted with tiny pale violet flowers and uneven rows of tombstones.

Down the street and around the corner on a main street that has seen better days sits Thomas Diner, known for having the best breakfast in town, and for its burgers and wings. Founded in 2002 by the late Louis "Cookie" McKenzie, the family business grew out of the need for chicken wings and fries during a Brown Sugar Festival, survived the Great Recession, and continues to endure. Business has been spotty, and recently the family has been grieving. Mr. McKenzie's son Thomas Horace, for whom the diner was named, lost his sister late last year to leukemia.

Thomas Horace, 36, a big, soft-spoken man, developed a love for foie gras when he attended Lincoln Culinary Institute in West Palm, although you won't find the dish here due to the need to keep prices as low as possible for customers. Now he helps his mom and family run the kitchen and hopes to carry on his father's legacy. He wondered if Food Network star Guy Fieri, known for appreciating comfort food in out-of-the-way locales, might discover the diner one day.

"I love food," said Mr. Horace with a golden grin. "I love to eat."



IF YOU ASK SOMEONE WHO LIVES IN Harlem where she's from, she will likely tell you Clewiston, and the two are often spoken of as one and the same. That's how Mr. Horace thinks of it, but friends disagree.

"I always thought it was one, but I was in a group and everybody was talking about it," he said. "Apparently, I was wrong."

For people who have never heard of Harlem, their most common reference point is the traditionally black Manhattan neighborhood, which is about as apt as comparing Staten Island to Sanibel Island. It is not officially a city or part of one, although Harlem and Clewiston residents have developed close ties since the school system was integrated in the late 1960s.

Mr. Horace's mom, Mary McKenzie, a special ed teacher who retired last year, recalled her high school years when students from the old Harlem Academy were bussed uptown to Clewiston.

"And guess what?" she said. "Soon as we got integrated, my first boyfriend was a white boy."

She had escaped with family to Florida in 1960 at age 9 after Klansmen tried to burn their house down.



Eddie Redd makes his usual morning stop at Thomas Diner.



MIKE KINIRY / SPECIAL TO FLORIDA WEEKLY

Top: Mount Calvary Missionary Baptist Church. A news page with President Obama's image hangs in Thoms Diner.

Officially, Harlem is a U.S. Census "designated place" under Hendry County's jurisdiction, about one square mile that is home to 2,350 residents with neat lawns, abundant churches and families of all ages. Along a main street, Harlem Academy Avenue, there are a few restaurants, stores and bars, residences and boarded-up buildings. Down the street sits Harlem Academy, now a day care and pre-school. Nearby are a public library, swimming pool, full-size basketball gymnasium and a small park with a baseball field.

The community is invisible to drivers passing by on U.S. 27, set back a mile from the main road and hemmed in by

railroad tracks and the Clewiston Golf Course to the north, a half-mile buffer between Harlem and uptown. To the east, the smokestacks of U.S. Sugar Corp.'s goliath mill and refinery are its most visible landmarks, along with the vast sugar cane fields that abut its southwestern borders.

The community sits at the edge of what is now some 440,000 acres of cane in the Everglades Agricultural Area farmed by U.S.S.C., Florida Crystals and others. Clewiston, Harlem and towns near the southern shore of Lake Okeechobee were borne into existence starting in the 1920s as sugar farming and America's growing sweet tooth

began to outpace other forms of agriculture.

Like parts of cities across the U.S., Harlem remains in many ways a segregated black community, its residents isolated by history, geography and economic challenges.

U.S. Census figures show that close to 38 percent of residents here live in poverty, more than twice that of Clewiston and Florida as a whole. The median household income, less than \$20,000, is more than twice as low.

For people who grew up here, especially those who recall Harlem's post-World War II heyday, it is a distinct community with an identity all its own. It originated in the 1920s as a camp for black sugar workers, and many homes here were built by the hands of its own residents under a federal grant program in the 1970s.

Generations of children have grown up here. Now there are more than 700 residents age 18 or younger living here,



Thomas Horace and his sister cook breakfast at Thomas Diner.

MIKE KINIRY / SPECIAL TO FLORIDA WEEKLY

many of them elementary school age. At day's end, along streets that end where sugar cane fields begin, neighborhood kids came out to play, a few of them rolling down the road on hoverboards. One buzzed along in a 4-wheeler.

The trajectory for many, as they get older, includes plans to leave town and find jobs elsewhere. That's the case for two young friends, resident Dura Hunter and Darius Gilkes, who was visiting over the holidays. They had fun growing up here riding dirt bikes or playing sports, and have family roots that may bring them back on Christmas, but both plan to answer the call of life outside Clewiston and Harlem.

"There's nothing here," explained Mr. Hunter, an 18-year-old senior at Clewiston High School and a linebacker for the Tigers who plans to play college football.

Other residents echoed that assessment, including Eddie Redd.

"We're a lonely world out here," he said over coffee at the diner one morning.

There are too few youth programs, good jobs or cultural opportunities for young people in Harlem, said Mr. Redd, who is 51. To help, he started the Harlem Young Men's Club, organizing events at the library, basketball games and car washes. He coaches them on how to prepare for interviews and tries to ensure they get to church on Sunday.

When he was growing up, Harlem had a movie theater where he watched karate and gangster films. Older residents recall that in the 1960s and '70s, as the sugar industry grew, Harlem had a red light, theater, gas station, laundromat, post office and other shops and amenities that have disappeared.

"This town used to be bangin', you know?" said Ms. McKenzie, who is 65. "But it just went down. A lot of the good people passed away, the business evaporated."

With weak job prospects, Mr. Redd



sees a cycle in which some kids grow up and drift into crime and drug dealing to support children of their own. Some hang out in the afternoons or evenings along parts of Harlem Academy Avenue, where people can get a drink or some drugs.

"Whatever ruffles your feathers," Mr. Redd said. "Whatever you like to do, this is where you get it."

A few become "real thugs."

"You don't mess with that kid," Mr. Redd said. "That kid is hungry. That kid'll eat you up."



FIRST AND ALWAYS, THERE IS THE sugar company. United States Sugar Corp. towers over Clewiston and Harlem literally and economically.

Residents have mixed feelings about the company. It has provided jobs and dipped into its hefty pocketbook to fund civic projects throughout Harlem history, including churches, a civic center, low-income apartments and a pool, but as such its power looms large.

"We call it a big plantation," said one resident who declined to give his name.



COURTESY OF THE HARLEM LIBRARY ARCHIVES

Starting in the 1920s in South Florida, black laborers and their families lived in sugar company-owned camps such as Harlem in small railroad car-style shacks.

"That's what it is. They control everything."

Mr. Redd said it's hard to speak badly of a company that has provided so much assistance; at the same time, he feels they could do more.

"Without U.S. Sugar I think this town

couldn't function," he said. "But they don't do nearly enough to help people in this community."

The Clewiston News reported that blacks started moving to the area in

SEE HARLEM, A16 ►

HARLEM

From page 15

small numbers in the 1920s, first living near the shore of Lake Okeechobee. By the middle of the decade, sugar had become the predominant crop among other forms of agriculture, and huge swaths of the Everglades were being drained to plant cane.

In 1928, black laborers moved to an area that eventually became Harlem. Many lived in what was then called Townsite, housed in railroad-car style barracks, which became part of the growing community.

In 1929, the Southern Sugar Company opened its first mill.

In 1931, as the Great Depression started to eviscerate the economy, Southern Sugar was bought out by U.S.S.C.

Seasonal migrant workers from Jamaica started arriving in the early 1940s to work in the growing industry. They also came from the Bahamas and elsewhere, residents recalled.

Although the sugar-owned housing had been made for single workers with no closets, small front porches, and community showers and bathrooms, they soon became family homes.

The parents of Lovvorn Dixon, a long-time middle school teacher who retired in 2015, were among Harlem's early residents. Born and raised here in the '50s and '60s, she earned a degree from Florida A&M University and came back to be a teacher.

As a girl, her family of seven siblings shared a three-room shack. Her dad was a barber, and worked for the city of Clewiston, and her mom was a dietician



Outside Thomas Diner on Harlem Academy Avenue, a quiet morning during the week between Christmas and the New Year.

MIKE KINIRY / SPECIAL TO FLORIDA WEEKLY

at the hospital. Though they had little money, they didn't consider themselves poor. They had a pasture with cows, grew their own food, and were raised in the church.

"We had a lot of love in that little shack," she said.

Later, in the early 1970s, a federal



A church on the corner.

"self-help housing" program improved cramped living situations, although residents still had to share community bathroom facilities. It provided funding that allowed the people of Harlem to build their own single-family homes, where many still live today.

Until the ninth grade, Ms. Dixon attended Harlem Academy, an elementary and high school that at one time had 580 students. A year later, schools were integrated. She and her classmates were bused uptown to Clewiston High School, where she graduated in 1971.

"Some of us did ask, 'why can't they come out here to our school?'" Ms. Dixon said. "But that was the law and we had to abide by the law."

After integration, the old Harlem Academy was shut down in 1970, a major loss to the community. Its principal, Amos Alvord Thomas, later became

assistant superintendent in Hendry County.

Considered one of Harlem's most influential pioneer residents, A.A. Thomas and his wife, Lois, arrived in 1932. A Florida native who attended school at Florida A&M, he later earned a master's degree from Columbia University in New York, located on the edge of Manhattan's Harlem.

The Clewiston News reported that he was largely responsible for building up the Academy, and spent 46 years serving families in the school system. After the school closed he started a day-care center.

He was a strict but beloved principal. Professor Thomas, as he was called, didn't go easy on students who failed to return to campus from lunch by 1 p.m. One former student recalled, "If you wasn't on that campus he'd be sitting there to put that paddle on you." ■

Biggest Savings Event

IN OUR HISTORY!

Plantation Shutters For Every Room!



EXCLUSIVE ALUMACORE PLANTATION SHUTTERS ON SALE & MORE!
SAVE UP TO \$500*
ON OUR ALUMACORE SHUTTERS

*MINIMUM 100 SQ. FT. ORDER. STANDARD SHUTTERS ONLY. MENTION OFFER AT TIME OF PURCHASE.

~ BEST GUARANTEE IN THE INDUSTRY ~

Guaranteed Never To Warp, Crack, Fade, Chip, Peel or Discolor Regardless of Extreme Heat or Moisture.

MANUFACTURED IN SOUTH FLORIDA FOR SOUTH FLORIDA!



PLANTATION SHUTTER EXPERTS

THE STRONGEST AND MOST ENERGY EFFICIENT SHUTTER ON EARTH!

Schedule Your Free In Home Consultation Today!

239.529.4766
shutterup.com

Visit our Showroom
 1460 Golden Gate Pkwy.,
 Naples, FL 33105



ALUMACORE SHUTTERS HunterDouglas