

FORT MYERS FLORIDA WEEKLY®

IN THE KNOW. IN THE NOW.

WEEK OF JANUARY 8-14, 2020

www.FloridaWeekly.com

Vol. XIII, No. 40 • FREE

INSIDE



Lettuce ware legacy

Dodie Thayer descended from Jupiter pioneers and created pottery collected by first ladies and queens. **C1** ▶



Networking

The Colonnade of Estero hosts luncheon for residents-to-be. **A35** ▶



Business

When Nissan is on its back, it's often the time the company does its best work. **A30** ▶



Real estate

Waterfront luxury in Cape Coral. **B1** ▶

Download our FREE App today



Available on the iTunes and Android App Store.

THEY LIVES THEY LIVES

A look back at some we lost this year

By Evan Williams

The four tributes in this annual edition of Florida Weekly suggest the way these people, these loved ones, known and unknown, stay with us after they have died. One danced in Harlem and then across the world stage. Another drifted in to homelessness.

SEE LIVES, A12 ▶



How high will Florida's population go?

BY JIM TURNER

The News Service of Florida

With three months until "Census Day," Florida has an outside chance to do better than previously analyzed.

With 21.48 million Floridians estimated by the U.S. Census Bureau, the Sunshine State is already expected to see an increase in federal funding and political clout in the coming years because of its growing population. Florida jumped New York several years ago to become the third most-populous state and appears safely in line to see its U.S. House delegation get bumped from 27 members to 29 members after the 2020 Census.

SEE POPULATION, A4 ▶



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



BROTHERS
Lighting & Fan Gallery
www.BrothersLighting.net
239-277-0333
4030 Colonial Blvd • Fort Myers



LIVES

From page 1

But all were cared about and loved, all have a story to tell and they were our friends and neighbors in Southwest Florida. In these pages we bring them along with us in to a new decade, the lives they led still very much a part of the ones we are compelled to go on living, now and hopefully for a long time to come.

“we are so both and one/ful/ night cannot be so sky/ sky cannot be so sunful/ i am through you so i”

— e.e. cummings

“Now that you are gone, you are everywhere”

— J.D. McClatchy



Martha Graves Gibson

January 4, 1931 – October 2, 2019

A News-Press proofreader in the days of hot type and a Lee County school bus driver, Martha Gibson was also the matriarch of a family of nine children, and embraced an ever widening circle of relatives, friends and co-workers with an enduring energy and spirit of generosity that seemed to know no bounds.

The crowded, bustling house where they lived on Braman Avenue in Fort Myers was a three bedroom with a converted garage as a fourth and a Florida room. The boys had the garage with bunk beds while the girls took up two other rooms. The youngest had a crib in the parents' room.

In 1961, Ms. Gibson began working at the News-Press when the pages were printed with a Linotype hot metal typesetting machine, run by her husband Romulus “Hoot” Gibson. The News-Press at the time was in the process of moving its headquarters from the old Collier Arcade to its location up until this year, a few block away on Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard. In 1971, Gannett corporation bought the paper. She continued to work there for 32 years, proofing stories and ads.

Her contribution went beyond that, however.

Pat Varn was a 20-something year old News-Press city reporter in the late 1960s, banging out stories on deadline, as she recalls, which her editor would sometimes rip right off her typewriter. Her husband, Richard Varn, said he also worked there as a printer and later a purchasing agent.

The daily deadlines of the newspaper business often produced a high-tension atmosphere in which Mr. Varn says Ms. Gibson was “a point of harmony.”

“She was always calm about it,” he said. “And if they needed someone to hang around a little longer, a late coming story or something, Martha was always there to take care of that too. She and her husband, they were sort of the bedrock of the newspaper when we were there... Yeah, she was a sweetheart.”

Ms. Varn and her mother, who was also a close friend, both knew they could confide in Ms. Gibson.

“She was a good listener as well as a friend,” Ms. Varn said. “She also was I would say very wise. Of course, raising nine children, she had had a lot of experience with young people coming up. She came and she talked with my mother when I was going through difficult times as a teenager.”

Ken Picking was a 21-year-old sportswriter when he moved to Fort Myers from Ohio to work at the News-Press in the 1970s, then a “destination for young journalists starting their careers,” Mr. Picking



wrote in an email. “Quickly I discovered the Back Shop Couple of Hoot and Martha Gibson embraced us all as extended family and were always there for information, advice and hugs if needed.”

“Martha’s warmth and willingness to help all us Wild, Ambitious Transplants established her as the Matriarch of the News-Press. The Gibsons, many of whom worked in various capacities at the N-P, created the Family Atmosphere that remains embedded in the hearts of all of us who were fortunate enough to be part of that Golden Era of our beloved News-Press.”

Many members of the Gibson family ended up working at the News-Press in different capacities. For people there and others who knew her, Ms. Gibson was like a “second mother.”

Ruth Mahn. “That was one of our chores along with doing the dishes at night. And there was many a time we would leave our homework for her to review when she got home from the News-Press at night.”

Neighborhood kids often came over to play, sometimes on their trampoline or in the school buses parked by the house. When she had a chance to go on vacation, the family visited a cottage near Fort Myers Beach. Ms. Gibson also enjoyed cooking almost as much as she liked sharing the food with family or friends. Her noted recipes include chocolate cake, chocolate chip cookies, macaroni salad, banana bread, chili and fried chicken.

“She was the most loving and caring mother in the whole wide world and she is truly missed,” wrote her daughter Martha Whitten.

Martha Graves Gibson grew up on Lebanon Avenue in Campbellsville, Ky., near where she was born. The home is now a bed and breakfast, but then it was home to Ms. Gibson, her parents Leslie and Blanche Graves, and two much older siblings. Her father had a wholesale business while her mother was a homemaker.

“She was quite spoiled is what she always says,” her daughter Ms. Mahn said. “Apparently her parents were well to do so with her being younger she was just very spoiled and well taken care of.”

Her soon-to-be husband, Hoot, lived around the corner. Three years older, he was a basketball player and worked at a soda shop, where Ms. Gibson would sometimes visit, riding her pet pony into downtown.

At home, Ms. Gibson would sit on the porch and knew Hoot was on his way over because he’d be whistling from down the block.

“She said she was so excited when she heard that whistle,” her daughter Mary Sharp said.

One night the couple told their parents they were going to a football game. Instead, along with another couple, they took her father’s car and eloped to Georgia. They returned home not only married but having scratched up the car on a narrow bridge. But her parents soon forgave her. A year later the couple had their first child.

Ms. Gibson never graduated from high school but in 1984, after all nine of her children had graduated from Fort Myers High, earned a GED.

Mr. Gibson ran a printing business in Kentucky, but his business partner turned out to be unscrupulous, the family says. And since Ms. Gibson’s parents also were no longer living, they headed for Fort Myers where he found a job as a Linotype operator at the News-Press.

They arrived in town on Halloween, Oct. 31, 1959, staying at the Dean Hotel downtown before finding their home and surprising the neighbors as one kid after another after another (seven at the time), as well as a dog, came piling out of their station wagon.

The family had its struggles. In 1991, two years before she retired from the News-Press, she lost her husband. She was also preceded in death by three of her sons, Robert, John and Tom Gibson. She is survived by her son Joseph and daughters Susan Stone, Martha Whitten, Mary Sharp, Ruth Mahn, and Jane Lloyd.

In a card to her daughter Mary Sharp she once wrote, “Somehow we survive between joy, pain, happy and sad. I guess this is what we call life.”

Ms. Gibson remained as much a part of her family’s life as ever, the center of their life, and helped raise her grandchildren.

A member of Wesley Memorial United Methodist Church, Ms. Gibson had a habit of praying each night for any member of her family or friends who needed it.

“We used to tease that God would go, ‘It’s Martha again I better get a cup of coffee,’” her daughter said. “Now we tease that she’s up there in heaven with her Steno pad going over the list.”

She loved to read, especially Lee Child’s

COURTESY PHOTOS

Martha Gibson worked as a proofreader at the News-Press and a Lee County bus driver, pictured above with other family photos from her life, including later in life at the beach and as a young newlywed with her husband Romulus “Hoot” Gibson.

“She will always be my Florida Momma & was truly generous of spirit,” wrote Ms. Gibson’s niece in Indiana, Shirley Knecht. “Aunt Martha had a soothing voice, contagious laugh & during very long conversations helped me walk through difficult times & celebrate joys with her insight & honesty.”

Ms. Gibson started at the paper working days and then moved to nights, getting home around 2 a.m. The next day she would get up early to drive a school bus, a job she held for 20 years. Her husband drove one, too. For a while she also held a third part-time job on the weekends for an answering service.

“Between her jobs she probably did five or six loads of laundry a day that we had to fold and put up,” said her daughter,

Jack Reacher novels, James Patterson, Randy Wayne White, and the newspaper. But by the 2000s her eyesight was starting to fail due to macular degeneration and eventually she would become blind, able to see only light and shapes.

Politically, she was a Democrat, though kept the peace with family members who were Republican.

If she didn't agree, she was respectful about it, her granddaughter said.

During her later years she moved in with her daughter in Fort Myers, and in her final months lived with another daughter in St. Augustine. She died there surrounded by family from symptoms linked to Parkinson's disease, though doctors differed on her diagnosis.

"One of the things I miss is her hands," said her daughter Ms. Mahn. "She had the softest, warmest hands."

Gloria Seaman Allen

June 21, 1938 – November 16, 2019

Gloria Allen's careful study of young women's production of textiles in and around the Chesapeake Bay region during the 19th and 20th centuries shed light on a little known facet of early American life.

From her dissertation on enslaved women who produced cloth on plantations to her meticulously researched books about young women who stitched intricate needlework called "samplers," Ms. Allen's work makes her one of the nation's premier textile historians, writing and lecturing about their creation extensively.

She lived in Bonita Springs later in her life and died in Naples in November not long after publishing her final work.

"Anyone with a scholarly interest in needlework, and especially samplers, is grateful for her careful research, detailed explanations, and logical conclusions about textiles," wrote Cindy Steinhoff, a sampler expert and collector, and director of the Anne Arundel Community College library in Maryland who worked closely with Ms. Allen on several projects.

Ms. Allen's most significant contribution to the field are four publications which address samplers and the girls who created them in Maryland, the District of Columbia, a small part of northern Virginia, and Delaware beginning with "A Maryland Sampling" published in 2007. It was followed by "Columbia's Daughters" and "Wrought With Careful Hand."

The last of the four, "Delaware Discoveries: Girlhood Embroidery, 1750-1850," was co-authored by Ms. Steinhoff as Ms. Allen's health was failing and published in 2019. It proved a success, disproving the common wisdom that there were not many samplers produced in Delaware, Ms. Steinhoff said. About 250 samplers from the area are addressed in the book.

Once they discovered similar samplers produced in one area, they were often able to track down a school or teacher in the area. It was common for girls often age 5 to 16 or older from families of means at the time to be taught the skill, using silk, cotton and sometimes wool, giving them sewing skills they might use later in life as well as produce ornate, purely decorative works.

To track down the samplers, Ms. Allen approached museums and historical societies across Delaware, holding "ID days" to encourage local people with samplers in private collections to come forward.

"We were thrilled when we could confirm the family history of a particular sampler maker and learn those details about her life that made us feel as though we knew her and her family," Ms. Steinhoff wrote. "Learning of a school that taught needlework or a previously unknown needlework teacher brought us joy."

Gloria Seaman Allen was born June 21, 1938, in Cleveland, Ohio, and the family lived in the suburb of Lakewood. Her



COURTESY PHOTOS
Gloria Allen with her family during the years that she lived in Bonita Springs, where she completed some of her best known work on 19th and 20th century textile production.



father Clarence Seaman ran a type metal company and was an avid outdoorsman. The family spent time each summer at Lake Temagami in northern Ontario, which remained a destination throughout her life.

Her mother Frances died when Ms. Allen was young. She had an older sister and a brother who died as a child before Ms. Allen was born.

She graduated from Smith College in Massachusetts before earning her M.A. and Ph.D. in American Studies from George Washington University.

She married Charles Allen, a graduate of Yale University and Harvard Law, in 1965. They lived in a small apartment on the upper east side of New York City in the mid 1960s while he worked as a lawyer for a Wall Street firm.

With three sons and looking for more room for their family, they moved to a Washington suburb and later to a home in Bethesda, Maryland.

Ms. Allen loved animals, especially cats. "Usually on average growing up we had at least 5 cats," said her son, Ted Allen. "And for many years they were all Siamese cats, so she was very fond of them."

The cats all had S names: Samantha, Sebastian, Saki, Shadow and Shale among them.

With her artistic sensibility, Ms. Allen

er, her family, and her environment," Ms. Steinhoff said.



Norma Adele Miller

December 2, 1919 – May 5, 2019

Norma Miller was born in to the Harlem Renaissance, the thriving 1920s black culture of the neighborhood located in uptown Manhattan in New York City. A precocious dancer and later a comedian, singer and writer, as a girl she could see the famous Savoy Ballroom, which took up a full city block, from the back window of the apartment where she lived with her mother and sister.

At the Savoy, a new swinging dance was just being born even if it had yet to be named the Lindy Hop, of which Ms. Miller became a leading practitioner as it swept the world. Dressed in her Easter Sunday best in 1932, at age 12, Norma was dancing outside her home on the sidewalk when the noted swing dancer Twist Mouth George Galloway, who appreciated her moves, whisked her inside to dance.

"It was the greatest night in the world and I had nobody to share it with, I was scared to tell my mother," said Ms. Miller this year at age 99, in an unreleased two-hour long interview filmed in Fort Myers by John Biffar, a long-time family friend who made the 2006 documentary about her life, "Queen of Swing."

His interview with Ms. Miller opens with him asking her how she feels at age 99.

"I feel old as hell," she tells him, wearing big black sunglasses, her long fingernails painted bright pink and holding a mimosa, her favorite drink. "I'm not afraid of it."

As she talks, Ms. Miller reveals how tough, opinionated and gloriously profane she could sometimes be. She was a "walking history book" as one friend called her, recounting in her gravelly voice her life as an independent performing artist.

She talked about her friendships with people like Sammy Davis Jr. (who she considers the greatest entertainer of all time) Louis Armstrong (who once told her, "Don't cry about a show closing, there's always going to be another one"), Ella Fitzgerald, Richard Pryor, Debbie Allen, and many others legends of stage and screen.

It all started at the Savoy, which opened in 1926 and closed in 1958.

The first generation of swing dancers who kicked off the Jazz Age there in the '20s soon gave way to a group of teenagers of which Ms. Miller was considered one of the best dancers along with Frankie Manning and others. Ms. Miller is the last surviving member of the group. They made up wild high-flying moves, "air steps" inspired by their older counterparts such as flipping their dance partners over their back.

"(They) risked their bodies and lives making up dozens of crazy air-steps," wrote Bobby White, a swing dance instructor, on his blog, *Swungover*.

The Savoy attracted people from all over the city and beyond who wanted to see the dancing or take part in it. The Lindy Hop named for aviator Charles Lindbergh was becoming a craze with a daring new generation of teenage dancers.

"Everybody wanted to learn how to do the swing dance but we had no classes, no teachers," Ms. Miller said. "You learned because you came into the ballroom and saw what they (the first generation of Lindy Hop dancers) did and that's what you did. That's how it started."

The Savoy had a "no discrimination" policy unlike most other clubs at the time.

"White dancers came there to dance," she said. "Black dancers came there to dance. There was never an issue about

SEE LIVES, A14 ►

admired artists including Picasso and the American sculptor and printmaker Leonard Baskin. Socially, she could be reserved.

"She was not that outgoing meeting somebody she didn't really know that well or meeting for the first time," her son Mr. Allen said. "She obviously was much warmer when you got to know her. She was not somebody who really was that talkative."

Ms. Allen found work as an interior designer before serving as curator and then director of Daughters of the American Revolution Museum in Washington, DC, which as a collection of historic textiles. She began to publish magazine articles as well as her first book on quilt-making.

In 1996, her husband died suddenly of a heart attack. It was a difficult time, but several years later she started to regain her footing after reconnecting with an old friend, Vincent Hovanec. He remained her companion until her death, though they never married. Mr. Hovanec died this year just five days after Ms. Allen.

Her careful work delving into the little known lives of young women remains a unique contribution to American history.

"I liked the emphasis that Gloria placed on thoroughly researching samplers to learn as much as possible about the stitch-

LIVES

From page 13

that. And side by side that's what we did."

After Ms. Miller was part of a winning dance contest that earned her a week's worth of performances at Harlem's famous Apollo theatre, the Savoy former bouncer and manager named Herbert White took notice. He was known as a street smart if somewhat shady figure with a white streak in his hair, nicknamed "Whitey." Recognizing the business potential of the new Lindy Hop craze and the cheap labor the young dancers would supply, he formed Whitey's Lindy Hoppers, recruiting Ms. Miller and others to go on tour.

In 1935, the dance troupe left for Europe, an extraordinary opportunity. Her parents were immigrants from Barbados, but her father died before she was born. Her mother reportedly worked as a charwoman. But she was surrounded by a vibrant, rich culture.

In some ways shielded and nurtured within Harlem, Ms. Miller had yet to experience the overtly racist world outside it, the warped notions about black communities across the United States.

"It allowed a little girl to grow up feeling her whole full self," said Mickey Davidson, a close friend of Ms. Miller, age 68, and a dancer, teacher and choreographer who lives in New York City.

Ms. Miller said that Whitey who "could charm the white out of rice" convinced her mother to let her go dance with Whitey's Lindy Hoppers dance troupe on a tour in Europe.

Ms. Miller checked out of school at 3 p.m. on a Friday and by midnight the 15-year-old was aboard a boat to England with the troupe. Picking up on America's fresh new sound of Harlem, Europe was just starting to swing. The troupe visited dance halls in England, France and Switzerland, but not Germany with its incoming Nazism. Over the next few years, back in the United States, the troupe toured the U.S. including Los Angeles.

The troupe appeared in the 1941 movie "Hellzapoppin'," executing high-flying moves at breakneck speeds with Ms. Miller playing a dancing cook. Later the group on tour in South America was stuck in Rio de Janeiro for months after the attack on Pearl Harbor.

Although Ms. Miller never married or had children of her own, she fell in love with an actor named Roy Glenn around this time. He had a "great voice," Ms. Miller said, taught her how to play pool, and came to watch her dance. Her wrote her love letters as she traveled back to New York but later they broke up. It took her "a long time to get over it," she said.

Ms. Miller finally left the troupe due to "accounting differences" with Whitey. The group finally fell apart as the young male dancers went to fight in World War II. In the 1950s and '60s, Ms. Miller toured with her own groups, Norma Miller Dancers and Norma Miller and Her Jazzmen. And in the mid 1950s in Miami, Ms. Miller expanded her performance skills to comedy shows. She admired comedians Richard Pryor and George Carlin and her own comedy routines could be as earthy and profane as theirs.

In Las Vegas in the '60s and '70s she performed with Redd Foxx and Sammy Davis Jr. In the early 1970s, she got an offer to perform her stand-up comedy routine in Vietnam for 10 months for \$10,000. Always looking for the next gig, she hopped on a plane and "played every base in Vietnam up to the DMZ (Demilitarized zone)."

These are just some of Ms. Miller's exploits and accomplishments as she appeared in dozens of documentaries, movies and stages over the years. She returned to New York for a while and later moved to Las Vegas.



COURTESY PHOTOS

Norma Miller with her Italian band; with John Biffar preparing for Barack Obama's inauguration; at the Apollo theatre in Harlem; and at the Fort Myers Film Festival with Eric Raddatz.

While there, the choreographer and director Debbie Allen recruited her to come to Los Angeles for Ms. Allen's 1992 film "Stompin' at the Savoy." Ms. Miller taught the younger dancers how to do the authentic Lindy Hop moves she was so famous for such as over the shoulder, upside down over the back, and the snatch.

"I'll never forget her saying, child I was waiting for this call for ever," Ms. Allen said. "She had been a fan of mine and what I was doing and it was just like the lights went on when I called her."

Ms. Allen described the Lindy Hop and music that inspired it as a "unifying force" in America.

"It's like hip-hop culture today," she said. "It is as big a phenomenon in any white community as it is where it came from in urban cities of America."

But Ms. Miller's proximity to fame and her own star power, the many stages and silver screens that she had graced, did not always equal financial security. Hanging on to the life of an independent performing artist meant hustling and a surviving.

When Mr. Biffar discovered her in Las Vegas and cast her in one of his movies, he recalls, she was in her 70s, living in a low-rent apartment with several cats and looking for her next gig. The next phase of her life was just beginning.

She started visiting Mr. Biffar and his family in Fort Myers over the holidays and finally one year she just decided to stay, he said, also helping raise his three sons.

As a stand-up comedian, Ms. Miller's act remained tack sharp with impeccable timing. At the Fort Myers Film Festival's TGIM night, just a few years ago, she had the audience in stitches.

This year, Mr. Biffar plans to release a new comedy special he recorded with her called "Norma Miller Unplugged" which he described as "very naughty."

Mr. Biffar recalled one of her jokes: "When you ain't got a horse, ride a cow."

"That was a metaphor for everything in her life because she may not have any money, but she always figured out a way to do what she wanted to do," he said.

"And that was really a great life lesson learned from her is you can do anything with the right attitude."

And attitude she had, in spades.

Russell Palen

July 3, 1962 – September 4, 2019

The Lee County Homeless Coalition held its annual vigil on a rainy night in downtown Fort Myers, Dec. 21. Umbrellas assembled by the steps of the old county courthouse to pay tribute to at least 27 homeless people who died this year, each signified by a candlelit white paper bag with their name printed on the front.

One read, "Russell Palen." He was found dead at 57 on Sept. 4 of natural causes, the Lee County Sheriff's Office said, at his tent in the woods in North Fort Myers. Like many of those who become homeless, Mr. Palen was estranged from his family. He was also considered an alcoholic, preferring beer, though unlike many addicts that did not extend to harder drugs, said Jan Frick, a medical homeless outreach worker with Family Health Centers who helped him over the years. During the last several years of his life he also quit drinking on his own. But in the end, she found that Mr. Palen didn't want to return to society.

"He had his own ideas about things," she said. Sometimes scruffy with an auburn beard and hair, his pale skin darkened from living outdoors, he was known by his nickname "Can Man" because he collected cans at different venues in North Fort Myers and carried them on his bicycle across the Old 41 bridge to cash them in at a recycling center.

"He wouldn't come in off of the streets because then he would have to obey the rules and he liked his own little practice collecting cans," Ms. Frick said. "And even though he quit drinking, he still would do his cans. That's just who he was and I think it would always be. He had his tent out in the woods, his tent and his little

setup and he didn't bother anybody and nobody bothered him."

She adds, "His personality was really nice. Everybody loved him... Even when he was drinking, he was a nice drunk, he wasn't like one of those mean drunks or anything."

Mr. Palen was born on July 3, 1962, in Morristown, N.J. He has a brother and sister-in-law who live out of state. They couldn't be reached to talk about him. None of the agencies that worked with Mr. Palen had a picture of him except the Sheriff's Office, when he was occasionally arrested for minor crimes such as having an open container of alcohol.

Mr. Palen regularly attended the long-running Wednesday homeless outreach program at All Souls Episcopal Church in North Fort Myers. Volunteers there said they were familiar with Mr. Palen from his presence over the years, though weren't familiar with his background.

"We all knew him but we didn't know him, you know what I'm saying?" said volunteer JoAnn Sandy.

The Rev. Sandra Johnson, who people know as Deacon Sandy, has known him through the outreach program for 15 years. When she first met him, he had just been hit by a car on his bicycle. That happened at least a few times.

The church held a service for Mr. Palen, whose ashes were placed in the Memorial Garden in front of the thrift store there.

Deacon Sandy said last year Mr. Palen started attending church regularly on Sunday.

"He not always but most of the time had a good attitude and was basically a happy person," she said. "I think coming to All Soul's every week he found a peace he'd never known before."

He also started feeding his racoon neighbors in the woods even though they got in to his food and things.

"He had a lot of friends but not very many close friends," Deacon Sandy said. "I loved him. I thought he was a sweet person and he was one of my favorites." ■