

"Those were the years that were"

The first show sponsored by the "Art Spirit" Venice-Nokomis Art Association was held at the Venice-Nokomis Women's Club March 20, 1960. Everyone who attended and donated one-dollar received a card making them Charter Members of the newly formed Art Association.

But this was not the first exhibit sponsored by the group, which was to become the "Art Spirit". The first art exhibit held in Venice was in 1956. Mrs. James Kalec was at that time Chairman of Ways and Means for the Women's Club, as she was very interested in Art she felt an exhibition would be a good fund-raising event for the Women's Club. It was met with enthusiastic support. Some twenty-seven artists exhibited over one-hundred sixty works, more than two hundred-fifty people attended the two day affair.

A second exhibit was scheduled by the Women's Club for 1958, it was during this exhibit that Dornthea Wilson approached Vee Kalec with the idea of forming an Art Association in the area. It was obvious to her that the Venice area had many interested artists and others interested in art. From this loosely formed organization grew what was to become "The Art Spirit" Venice-Nokomis Art Association. Their original Charter reads "The general character and object shall be for education and cultural purposes and to aid in whatever may tend to stimulate and encourage the appreciation of art"

The first Board Meeting of the Association was held March 27, 1960 at the Venezia Hotel. Since the first exhibit was a benefit the Board sent a gift of one-hundred dollars to the Women's Club for their library. Member of that first Board of Directors were- Mrs. Arch Wilson, President, Mildred Kuzulka, Second Vice-President, Mrs. Hays Watlington, Secretary, Mrs. James Kalec, Treasurer, Mrs. Vincent Dixon, Mrs. John Bradish, Wally Devlin, Louis Suter, Normand Patton, Mrs. Henry Mundy and Evelyn Wacker.

Following the first show sponsored by this organization many exciting events occurred- 1960 seems to have been a year when Venice was waking up to its potential. Under the leadership of Dr. E. Robert Chable a committee was formed of public spirited citizens representing many interested organizations to plan for what was envisioned as a huge cultural center in Venice. A dream began to emerge of a Library, a Museum or Art Gallery and a five-hundred Auditorium for plays, concerts and other events. Daring plans for a community, which at that time had a population of only 3,600 and the entire area's population was 21,500

Earlier, several people who were interested in studying art had petitioned the County Adult Education Program for an Art Instructor for the Venice Area. By 1960 the interest had grown to the point that two Art Instructors had regular schedules in Venice. April 29 and 30th these two instructors Elise Chapman and Wally Devlin, each of whom was to play an important role in the growth of the "Art Spirit", held student's exhibit at the Gulf Breeze Hotel. The Hotel stood on the site of what is now the Venice Post Office.

In November the late Smythe Brohard, Mayor of Venice, proclaimed the week of November 28, as Art Association Week. Paintings were displayed in downtown stores thru-out the week, which culminated in the first side-walk art show in Venice. More than four-hundred people attended that exhibit of which Normand Patton was the Chairman. Artists sketched, exhibited paintings, free coffee and cookies donated by Louis Suter and crowds came.

Venice area citizens must really have enjoyed that Art Show, because the following year headlined in the Gondolier quote "Record breaking crowd of 2,000 sees one-hundred exhibit and sell. Ted Howell was the Chairman of that exhibit. The early side-walk art shows sponsored by the organization were held in the old Arcade.

This is not the only record that we were to break. The second Annual Members Show, which was held in the new Venice Branch of the Sarasota Federal Savings and Loan more than 600 persons viewed an exhibit which included seventy entrants.

March 11, 1961, was the first Beaux Arts Ball, Co-chaired by Louis Suter then President of the Association and Don Dickerman. The ball was a huge success. The theme was "Living Pictures" - a stage was built and some forty "Living Pictures" were posed in a big gold frame ranging from the Old Masters to humorous poses. Judges awarded some thirty prizes.

The first Annual Dinner was held at the Italian Village, a gala affair, Chaired by Mrs. Robert Wilcox, Rocky Bullard was the Master of Ceremonie's. By 1962 the Association had reached the point of having a Juried Show. Mrs. Robert Matthews, Rockwood Bullard and Garald Stryker were appointed in charge of the Receiving Committee. The show was held January 20, 1963. The winners were Sue Grauer, first, Mildred Kuzulka, second and Burton Bartlett, third.

Wally Devlin was President of the Association and a series of one-man shows to be held at the Italian Villa was initiated. By this time several demonstrations were being held each year at the Venice Civic Center. The demonstrators included such artists as Robert Chase,

Hilton Leech, Robert Mc Farland, Elden Rowland, Herb Stoddard, Loran Wilford and many other artists of note. Demonstrations were considered part of the Educational Program but there were also work shops in which the audience might participate. The group was also interested in the Art Education of the School System. A new Board Member, Robert E. Lee was the first Art Teacher employed for that purpose in the Venice Schools. Upon learning from him that insufficient funds had been appropriated for art materials, Rockwood Bullard was appointed chairman of a committee to raise funds for that purpose. As a result of this drive, \$220.00 for art materials was raised and donated to the schools.

It was under the Administration of Dr. Stryker that the organization began to seriously consider raising funds to build an Art Gallery. The succeeding President, Ed. Gerberich, appointed Dr. Stryker Chairman of a Building Fund Committee. Serving on this Committee were: Ed Gerberich, Lois La Motte, Dorothy Meadows, Charles Mink, Ethel Morrison, Leila Watlington and Bill Way. The committee discussed various means of raising money and what type of building would be required. Charles Mink was a retired architect with the experience in gallery design, he had been one of the architect's for the National Gallery in Washington, D.C. His plans were made into a scale model by Ed. Gerberich. It was in January of 1966, when Bill Way was President, that the committee felt the plans for the building and their feasibility were at the stage where they might be presented to the City Council. Later that year the Council gave informal approval to the Association's plans for the Art League, including a lease for the Southeast Corner of Blalock Park.

In March, 1967, then President, Arthur E. Odegard announced that three \$10,000.00 gifts had put the organization at the half-way mark toward a building fund. The gifts came from Mr and Mrs Louis H. La Motte, the late Mrs. Carl Hamilton and Mrs Charlotte Lampe, in memory of her brother, Albert Huenefeld. With this impetus the drive for funds got into full swing. Mrs. D.V. Mahoney later gave another gallery in memory of her husband and Mrs. Esther B. Nicholl gave funds for the office in memory of Clarice Shaffer, who had for many years given the Association dedicated service. George Youngberg Sr. was appointed Chairman of the Building Committee and Garold Stryker Chairman of the Fund Drive. The pace was furious- in April the City gave final approval to the lease- in May, Mr. Mink, now with the office of Edward J. Seibert, AIA of Sarasota, was drawing up the final plans.

Ed Gerberich had been re-elected President, but due to illness, Dorothy Meadows, then First Vice-President, assumed the mantle. In April of 1967 the architect was chosen, construction contract was awarded in September, ground breaking ceremony September 25, corner stone was laid in October. Special lighting was designed by Bill Way. While almost every member of the league was involved in raising funds, particular note should be made of Dr. Stryker, Rockwood Bullard, Herbert Elam, Dorothy Meadows, George Youngberg, Arthur Odegard and Bill Way.

The Venice-Nokomis Art Association had now become Venice Area Art Center. While the efforts of most were bent toward the raising of funds Tatiana Mc Kinney, who had been appointed Program Director, was scheduling the events which would take place after the building was opened. Instructors were contacted, plans were laid for classes, demonstrations and art exhibits.

The building was ready for opening in March. A previous showing held for members, contributors to the building fund and invited guests was held March 27. March 29, Sunday, the building was dedicated. Dr. Chabl Minister of the Venice United Church of Christ, gave the Invocation. Dorothy Meadow, President of the League, introduced Mayor Smythe Brohara who cut the ribbon and the building was officially opened to the public.

Tatiana Mc Kinney was General Chairman of the opening program. Mrs. Herbert Elam and Mrs. D. V. Mahoney were in charge of hostesses for the reception, Elden Rowland headed the Hanging Committee. More than one-hundred fifty paintings and other works of Art were displayed. On Friday, the last day of receiving, the Hanging Committee was still nailing strips to the wall from which the paintings were to hang. This was truly an exciting event... The culmination of what was a dream in 1960. This new Art Gallery represented the collective effort of many. Members of the League, Businessmen of the Venice Area, Residents of the whole area all had been generous of time, effort and money. Without their tremendous help the successful completion of our fine building would not have been possible.

So began the Art League's new adventure. A building of our own in which to conduct classes hold demonstrations, and art exhibits. By the end of the opening exhibit there had been a change of officers. Ed. Gerberich was now President. He announced at one of the early meetings that Wednesday would be Art League Day. With Tatiana Mc Kinney as Program Director an event was scheduled for every Wednesday for the following year, critiques, paint-ins, demonstrations. Almost every aspect of the creative arts was covered including pottery, weaving, gem-craft and photography as well. In total, from March to March, there were fourteen exhibitions, as painting and sculpture. Four special parties and twenty-eight Wednesday events (critiques, demonstrations, etc.).

The Center was kept open every day that year, with the summer sales show being replaced with our first Young People's Art Exhibit, which opened September 1, 1968. While this show was open to any young person who took out a Student Membership with the League, the majority of the exhibitors were from the very successful Young People's Art classes which had been taught during the summer by Tatiana Mc Kinney and Mabel Kreemer.

It was a strenuous year but an exciting one. The entire program had to be run on a shoestring. All of the judges and all of the demonstrators donated their efforts in a generous gesture to this youthful but enthusiastic organization. However, so much of the money coming in had been pledged toward retiring the debt of the building that such money as was received from dues and commissions barely saw us through the drought of the off-season months.

As the year progressed and the season began some of the financial pressure eased off. The Board was able to take note of the criticism being leveled at the League due to the state of the grounds. Although the Womens Garden Club had landscaped the patio and members had donated some plantings, the lawn was in a greivous state. Mr. Elam then launched a drive to obtain funds for a sprinkling system and sod for the lawn. By May, 1969, with Herbert Elam, now President, the last bill for this work was paid.

As the size of the League's debt was whittled down to a reasonable level, Dorothy Meadows was able to report that thanks to the generosity of the League's friends all pledges had been honored one-hundred per-cent.

The second year in the Center continued much as the first with the Wednesday still being Art League Day and the number of exhibitions, thirteen. The parties at the League were building in popularity since they never fail to be fun and exciting. The number of students attending classes was growing, as well as the number of sales. League Newsletters were being printed and mailed out by the Sunshine Press. A group which had jumped from five demonstrations a year to twenty-eight, from two exhibitions and two side-walk art shows to fourteen was learning to accept its new responsibility as committed to the area and to the members who had dreamed the dream.

William Baker became President of the League in 1970, he instituted new bookkeeping systems, purchased improved office equipment and employed Mary Schram as a part-time secretary, which provided continuity in the office. He also appointed our present President, Thomas Ellis, Chairman of the Job Analysis Committee. The committee provided job descriptions for all officers and committee chairmen. Their recommendations resulted in the establishment of two much needed committees: the Volunteer Committee and the Telephone Committee.

In the past year under Dr. Ellis's leadership the league has followed the pattern of those who have served before. Carrying out the program of activities, noting the continuing growth of this organization and planning for its future expansion. Expansion is very much on the immediate horizon as we see the sell-out crowds at our functions, the number of students attending classes, and the increasing number of visitors.

As this history was begun by quoting from the original charter it will end with a quotation from Robert Henri, noted artist, instructor and inspiration to the League's founder Dorthea Wilson and author of the book "Art Spirit" which was the original name of the League.

"Art when really understood, is the province of every human being. It is simply a question of doing things, anything, well. It is not an outside, extra thing. When the artist is alive in any person, whatever his kind of work may be, he becomes an inventive, searching, daring, self-expressed creature. He becomes interesting to other people. He disturbs, upsets, enlightens and opens ways for better understanding. When those who are not artists are trying to close the book, he opens it, shows there are still more pages possible."

There are still many more pages possible for the Venice Area Art League.

Author's Note: There are so many people that have given so much to the Art League it was impossible to mention them all. I have limited this story to the "firsts": the first board, the first show chairman, etc, not because of any desire to leave anyone out, but because it was evident that to tell the complete story of the sacrifice, time and energy of the literally hundreds of friends who have worked so hard to make this organization a success would rival the encyclopedia in size

Cissy ~~Wilson~~