

LOCAL HISTORY

SUNDAY  
PLUS

Hurricanes and the legend of Sara de Sota

Warriors of Okobee protect grave, Sarasota



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Another year, another hurricane. Time and again the state has been pounded by major storms. Some have been devastating; taking lives and leaving mass destruction in their wake. Their names: Irma, Charley, Michael, Maria, Andrew, and others have become a part of Florida history. Before hurricanes were named, the big blow of 1926 changed the course of Florida's history by killing the great real estate boom when it slammed through Miami with such terrible force.

And the latest name: Ian. Severe flooding caused great anguish in Venice and North Port, but farther south, the devastation is much more extreme. Sarasota County has once again been spared the worst.

Some may attribute this to the Legend of Sara de Sota.

The Indigenous-inspired tale was first published by George Chapline, son of Judge Jacob B. Chapline Sr., who arrived in Sarasota in 1906 and immediately saw the area's potential.

The judge and his other son, Jacob B. Chapline Jr., published a comprehensive booklet extolling the virtues of the Sarasota Bay region "to induce people to come to the healthiest and most beautiful portion of Florida - Sarasota, on the west coast."

Chapline Sr. was the mayor of Sarasota and sold area real estate. In explaining the derivation of the lovely and alliterative name "Sarasota" to his readers, another of the judge's sons, George Chapline, penned the legend.



The first Sara de Soto pageant took place in 1916. Genevieve Higel, daughter of Harry Higel, was crowned queen. J.B. Chapline played the role of Chichi-Okobee. PROVIDED BY JEFF LAHURD

For some, it also serves as the reason that Sarasota has been protected from the worst wrath of hurricanes.

Chapline titled the legend "Sarasota, The Beautiful," and it grew to become the basis of an annual weeklong celebration, the Sara de Sota pageant.

The tragic love story was first enacted in 1916, when Sarasota was a very small city, still dependent on fishing, farming and cattle raising for its chief sources of revenue.

Genevieve Higel, daughter of early Siesta Key developer Harry Higel, played the love-struck Sara, and J.B. Chaplin played the lustrous-eyed Chichi.

As the story is told, upon seeing Hernando DeSoto and his men, Chichi-Okobee, "The fleet and strong, heir by the blood and physical prowess to the thousand teepees and stalwart warriors of Black Heron's Seminoles," wanted no war. He was quoted, "Peace, I surrender to the warriors of the great White Chief."

But Chichi was taken hostage and bound by the soldiers of Hernando who commanded, "Hold him until our passage is safe."

Chichi was taken with the landing party into the Everglades. "No murmur, no word of complaint escapes the captive's stoical yet princely lips."

During this journey Chichi "beheld the lovely daughter of the white chieftain, Sara, lovelier than all the princess maidens of the Seminole camp."

He willingly bore the "humiliation of bonds that he might occasionally feast his own lustrous eyes on the orbs of the princess of the house of DeSoto."

The travails associated with his captivity caused Chichi to fall ill. "The confinement, the lack of the food of his fathers, the want of his body for the long stride of the chase, the absence of the medicine man," all contributed to his sickness.

Sara, who was evidently just as smitten by the buff Chichi, begged her father to allow her to nurse him back to health. "Her ministrations wrought a marvel."

Continued on next page



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Continued from previous page

Soon the great warrior was as ripped as ever, and ready to go. With a Shakespearean twist, Sara then took terribly ill, and no amount of the white man's medicine could revive her.

Chichi sought permission to bring Ahiti, the Seminole medicine man "who knew the secrets of the spirits of the Everglades who, though a man be dead, yet had been known that Ahiti's skill had brought back the throb to the heart."

But alas and alack, no matter the various treatments of Ahiti, "the Great Spirit had called her."

A grief-stricken Chichi poured his heart out to DeSoto, professing his undying love for the deceased princess. He begged the bereaved father to allow him to find the perfect resting place for Sara.

"DeSoto, struck with the earnestness of the young Seminole, and melting under the carressing melody of his rich voice ... gave consent."

The chosen location?

"The loveliest spot along the Gulf-kissed shores of Florida [was] where he wished to bury the matchless Sara.

"Chichi and his braves, all bedecked in full war paint, all bore the solemn mien of their young chieftain, every quiver bristled with its complement of stone-tipped arrows ...

"Chichi's war bonnet swept the earth as he strode ... In three large canoes, bedecked with the mosses of the forest swept up the beach propelled by the swift strong strokes of six solemn Indians.

"With the white bay flowers in her blue-black hair, and the feather from the wing of the Heron in her hand, the remains of Sara DeSoto were lowered into the deep."

In the end, DeSoto and his companions watched as Chichi commanded his men to sink their canoes.

"A moment of ripples, a moment of bubbles and all was still ... Chichi-Okobee and his hundred companions at

arms – they had gone to guard the resting place of their young chieftain's love. ...

"The elders of the Seminoles repeat the legend to the children and say that the spirits of Chichi-Okobee and his warriors are in eternal combat with the spirits of evil.

"It is said that the sullen roar of the Gulf as it breaks upon the outer beaches is the noise of conflict, and the greatest white caps which chase each other and break and tumble across the pass are but wraiths of the warriors of Okobee and the children of the sea tossing their spirit arms and meeting in never ending contest for possession of the bay. This is the legend of the lovely Sara, and Chichi the fleet and strong. It is peaceful, it is beautiful."

The premiere event drew several thousand out-of-townners to the small community making it a rousing success. Thereafter the Sara de Sota pageant was scheduled only sporadically, until 1935

when the Junior Chamber of Commerce took it over.

With that guidance, the event achieved national recognition and rivaled any festival in the South.

The next time you are near the passes where the Gulf meets the bay, look at the whitecaps. Legend has it that they are the warriors of Okobee, protecting the resting place of Sara DeSoto, and by extension, keeping Sarasota free from hurricanes.

Perhaps the Seminoles and Chichi have once again guarded not only Sara, but also Sarasota.

Jeff LaHurd was raised in Sarasota and is an award-winning historian.

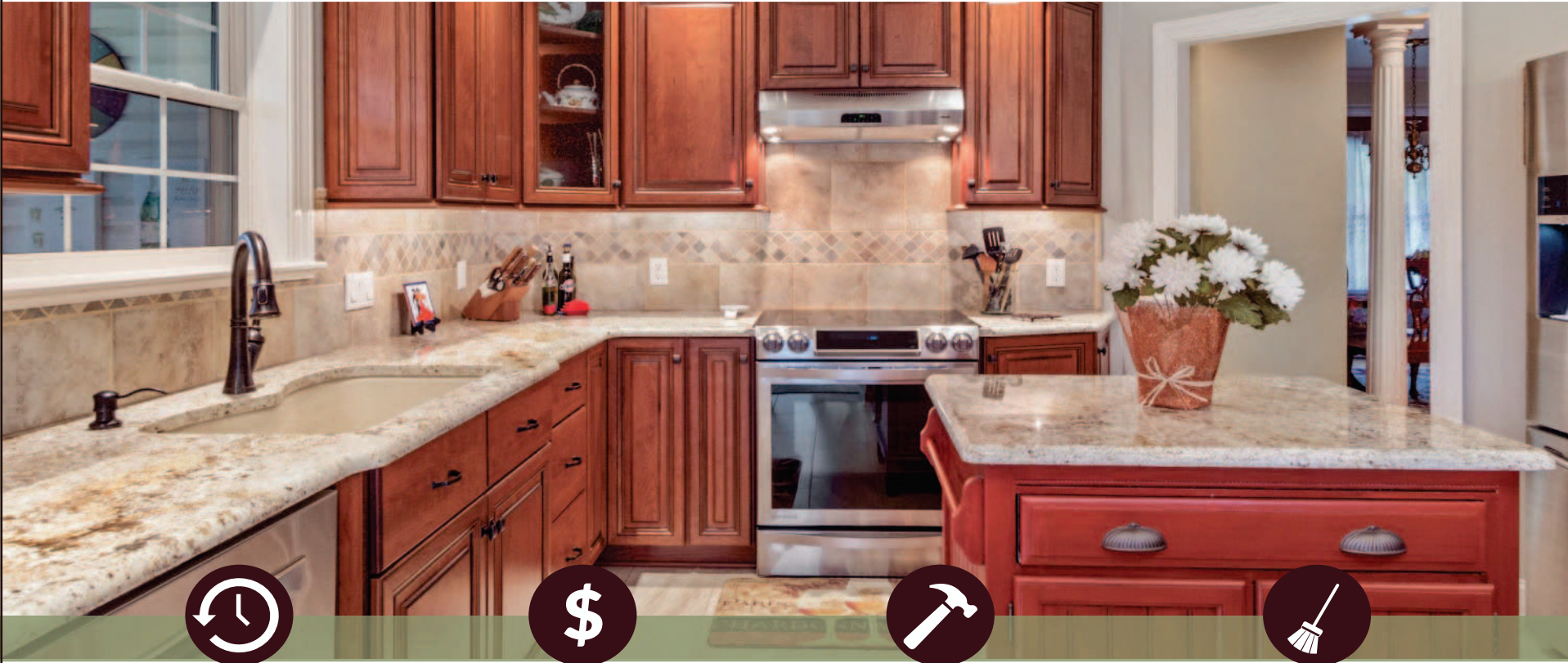


John Ringling (center) and friends decked out for the Sara de Sota Pageant. PROVIDED BY JEFF LAHURD

Out of a legend, a nationally known pageant was born. PROVIDED BY JEFF LAHURD



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