

# FLORIDA WEEKLY

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PALM BEACH EDITION

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**OCEAN OASIS:**  
A fully reimagined Jupiter estate blends luxury and seclusion. | **A15**



**AMERICAN HUMANE:** A night to celebrate courage, companionship, and canine heroes. | **A27**



**PERFECT PIE:**  
A crisp, prosciutto-topped favorite that defines Palm Beach pizza. | **A31**



## FOUNDATIONAL FAMILIES



COURTESY PHOTO

For nearly a century, the Lesser family has practiced law in West Palm Beach.

Descendants carry on the legacies of early community figures

**BY GARRY OVERBEY**  
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**T**HE HISTORY OF a place isn't always found in museums and monuments, or in old photos and books – sometimes it lives in families.

In the decades following the Civil War, Florida was still rugged and untamed – a frontier of swamps, forests and isolated coastal towns, where cheap land and new railways beckoned to pioneers willing to gamble on an uncertain future.

During those trailblazing years, families became founda-

tional to new communities – not just early arrivals, but people who helped create the identity of places over generations. Many remain, rooted in local soil.

William Faulkner wrote, “The past is never dead. It's not even past.”

SEE FAMILIES, A8 ►

## Love will find a way

Friendship turns to love inside a senior living community

**BY KELLY HENRY**

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Love is patient, love is kind, and love shows up in the most unexpected places!

At La Posada, two residents discovered that even in their late 80s and early 90s, the heart can still find its way to something new.

Richard, 89, and Joan, 91, fell for each other while living just four doors apart at the Kisco Senior Living community in Palm Beach Gardens.

Richard arrived at La Posada in 2021 with his wife, Alma, as she battled cancer. For years, he devoted himself to caring for her, navigating the difficult final chapter of a marriage built on decades of love and partnership.

“The last four years of Alma's life were the most difficult years of our marriage,” says Dick. “I was her caregiver and did everything for her. It was exhausting and overwhelming. Eventually, I had to get help. When she passed, I went through a very deep period of grief.”

When Alma died in March 2022, Richard found himself full of grief. For a while, he struggled to imagine what life could look like without the person who had been

SEE LOVE, A10 ►



COURTESY PHOTO

Joan, 91, and Richard, 89, fell for each other while living just four doors apart at La Posada in Palm Beach Gardens.

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# FAMILIES

From page 1

These families are a window into South Florida's history.

## The Lesser family: A legal legacy

For nearly a century, the Lesser family has practiced law in West Palm Beach — a legacy about to span four generations.

Gary Lesser still sees the community where he grew up — despite its population topping 125,000 — as a “big small town.”

“While West Palm Beach has grown a lot, there's definitely a great degree of connectivity,” Lesser said. “If you meet someone, you'll find out you have two or three degrees of separation.”

Lesser, 58, is the managing partner at Lesser, Landy, Smith & Siegel, PLLC, a firm his grandfather founded in 1927.

Joseph “Joe” Lesser was a lawyer in Rome, Georgia, when a friend told him about a real estate boom in West Palm Beach: “Everyone's becoming a millionaire.” But as soon as Lesser moved his family to the burgeoning city in 1926, the boom went bust. So he opened a legal practice the following year.

“He was an old country lawyer, and he would help anyone who walked in the door,” Gary Lesser said.

If he believed a client couldn't pay his fee, he'd ask for a fraction of it. Farmers sometimes paid him in corn.

He was Palm Beach County's first Jewish attorney. The community's Jewish population then was very small — about 200 or so.

“Jewish people just kind of found each other,” Gary Lesser said. “And initially they would gather and pray in people's houses.”

Joseph Lesser was a founder and first president of Temple Beth El, the first Conservative Jewish congregation in Palm Beach County. This year is the synagogue's 100th anniversary. Lesser also helped establish the local chapter of B'nai B'rith, a Jewish service organization.

With bright blue eyes and a deep Southern drawl, many people didn't realize Lesser was Jewish unless he told them. Nonetheless, he encountered prejudice.

“He didn't really believe he faced hatred,” Gary Lesser said. “He thought he faced ignorance.”

He served as counsel for the Salvation Army and president of the Lions Club, and remained dedicated to the community throughout his life.

“He thought it was our obligation to help people,” Gary Lesser said. “When I was a little kid, I saw him as a superhero. I said, ‘I want to be just like grandpa.’”

Gary Lesser was 14 when his grandfather died in 1982. The funeral was a “packed house.”

“He really loved being a lawyer and helping people,” he said. “My father used to say to me, ‘Damn it, son, you're just like my father.’ But he meant that as the highest praise.”

Shepard P. “Shep” Lesser joined the firm in 1960 and brought with him modern touches like air conditioning and electric typewriters. He also held leadership roles in several local nonprofit and community organizations, including Boy Scouts, the Family Services Agency and various Jewish groups. He died in 2020.

Gary Lesser followed into the firm in 1992. It now has branch offices in Stuart, Boca Raton and Wellington.

From 2022-2023, he was president of The Florida Bar, and currently serves on the Board of Trustees of the Florida Supreme Court Historical Society.

Most recently, he founded the Jewish Lawyers Association of Palm Beach County in response to the attacks on Is-



Gary Lesser, on right, with his dad Shepard, is the managing partner at Lesser, Landy, Smith & Siegel, PLLC, a firm his grandfather founded in 1927.



Attorney Joseph Lesser was also the president of Temple Beth El, the first Conservative Jewish congregation in Palm Beach County.

rael on Oct. 7, 2023.

With the firm celebrating its centennial next year, Gary Lesser looks to the future. The oldest of his three daughters, Lillian Lesser — awaiting her Florida Bar exam results — is poised to become the fourth generation of Lessers practicing law in Palm Beach County.

“To have four generations of continui-

ty — as a father, it's the best thing ever,” he said. “I know how my dad must have felt.”

## The Smallwood family: Still standing in the Everglades (on stilts)

Lynn Smallwood McMillin knew Hurricane Irma was heading toward the Everglades and her lifelong home on Chokoloskee Island. The Smallwood family store — built by her grandfather 100 years before — was in trouble.

“I knew it was going to kick our ass,” she said of the 2017 storm. “And so that was the first time anybody had ever taken anything out of the store — because I was worried we might not have one anymore.”

While securing the store, she went looking for a hatchet.

The Smallwood family had known the Everglades' Indigenous tribes since her grandfather arrived, and McMillin was a longtime friend of James Billie, former leader of the Seminole Tribe of Florida.

Years before, as a tropical depression approached, Billie tied a hatchet to a chickee hut he'd built at McMillin's home to, in his words, “split the storm and go around.”

With Irma looming, she called him and said, “I can't find a hatchet. What can I do?” Billie told her to find “the biggest knife you can” and tie it to a dock piling.

She did, just before the Category 4 storm swept through.

“Well, whenever it was done, that was the piling still left,” she said.

For more than a century, the Smallwood family has remained standing much the same way.

McMillin's grandfather, Charles Sherod “Ted” Smallwood, came to the Everglades around 1895. He had lived an itinerant life since running away from home in Georgia, with his older brother, while in the third grade.

He worked for a farmer on the Turner River, traveled to Cuba and the Bahamas, and then married the farmer's daughter. They settled on Chokoloskee Island, which sits on the inside edge of the Ten Thousand Islands — the last stop before the marshes give way to coastal mangrove islands and open Gulf waters.

Smallwood bought half the island. By 1900, he'd made enough money farming to buy the other half.

Anyone traveling between the mainland settlements and the islands would often pass through Chokoloskee. Smallwood opened a trading post in 1906, providing supplies, food and tools for daily life on the remote coast.

In 1917, to better serve customers coming by boat, Smallwood built a new trading post in its current spot at the water's edge. The store became a lifeline for the small maritime community built on commercial fishing, boating, trading, farming and hunting. The store also was the island post office, with Smallwood as postmaster.

Smallwood built the store with sturdy Dade County pine, a dense South Florida timber prized by early builders for its resistance to rot, insects and humid weather. When Hurricane Irma struck in 2017, it may have wiped out the dock, but the store survived with minor roof and structural damage — which McMil-



The Smallwood Store, now a museum and store, was established in 1906 by Ted Smallwood and served as a trading post with tribes and U.S. Post Office in Chokoloskee, located in Eastern Collier County. INSET ABOVE: Art honoring Susie Billie, a Seminole medicine woman of the Panther Clan, at the Smallwood Store in Chokoloskee shows the integral lives of the Smallwoods and the area tribes, including the Seminole and Miccosukee.

KELLY J FARRELL / COURTESY PHOTOS

lin attributes to “that Dade County pine.”

To protect against flooding, Smallwood raised the store with 4-foot railroad jacks but realized quickly that wasn't enough. By 1926, he finally had the store up on pilings about 7 feet off the ground – where it remains.

Smallwood befriended members of the local Seminole and Miccosukee tribes, who had lived in the Everglades since the Seminole Wars of the 1800s. In fact, McMillin said they were one of the reasons her grandfather moved the store.

“My grandfather made it to keep the peace,” she said, telling of how white men would sell moonshine to the natives and then rob them when they passed out. “The Seminoles traded a lot here. They even came from the East Coast, because my grandfather was very good to them, and he tried to help them.”

When McMillin reopened the store around 1989, she was told by some older tribal members that her grandfather was the first white man they'd seen. He was also one of the few they trusted.

McMillin, now 70, a grandmother of seven and a great-grandmother of two, still runs the family store, now a museum and gift shop that also offers boat tours.

Since the establishment of Everglades National Park in 1947, there aren't a lot of ways left to make a living among the Ten Thousand Islands. While the park protected the ecosystem, it also brought new federal regulations limiting fishing, hunting, land use and development.

“They took our livelihoods away from us,” McMillin said, adding the government seized land through eminent domain. “They took a lot from us to form the park, and they wanted this island, but they couldn't have it because there was a post office here. If you look at the map, it goes all the way around (the island).”

Life in the area hasn't changed much in recent decades. McMillin graduated high school in 1974 as one of 28 students – a record, she thinks. She doubts her granddaughter's senior class is more than 15 to 20.

Yet some things are different. For instance, “the big glow in the sky at night” is no longer Miami – it's “Alligator Alcatraz,” the detention center for undocumented migrants the state erected last year.

But, just like the dock piling that Irma couldn't topple, the Smallwood family is still standing.

These days, McMillin can be found at the store that is her family's legacy, chatting with locals and greeting tourists who want to experience wild Florida.

And they know where to go: From the shore, boaters can enter the maze of tidal creeks, bays and mangrove islands that make up the Ten Thousand Islands.

“A lot of them, they've done their research,” McMillin said. “They know we have the best location in the park because we were here first.”

### The Hendry family: The cattle king of Fort Myers

When Francis A. “F.A.” Hendry died in 1917, according to legend, Josie Billie – the most powerful of all Seminole medicine men, who was said to be able to call lightning down upon his enemies – walked 80 miles from the Everglades to attend his funeral.

Decades earlier, Hendry let Billie's father – Billie Conapatchee, or “Billy Corn Patch” – live with his family while the



DAVID WISHTISCHIN / FLORIDA WEEKLY

### Francis Asbury Hendry, a founding father of Lee County, built a cattle empire out of Fort Myers.

young man learned to read and write.

As both the region's largest cattle rancher and a state lawmaker, Hendry was a friend to the Seminole people, even after serving in the Seminole Wars of decades earlier.

Harry Hendry, 73, grew up hearing this and other stories about his legendary ancestor, Francis Asbury Hendry – a founding father of Lee County, who built a cattle empire out of Fort Myers and left his family's brand on Southwest Florida.

Today, the Hendry family tree spreads so far throughout Florida that Harry Hendry can barely begin to trace its branches.

“One thing that I'm finding interesting in my old age is just this whole spider web of family relationships all over the state,” said the great-great-grandson of F.A. Hendry. “We'd have a family reunion and 150 people would be there.”

A retired attorney, he once looked up how many kin worked in the legal profession: “It was enough to start our own bar association.”

He's related to just about every cattle family in Florida, and he's met Hendrys as far away as Tennessee.

Their Florida heritage began around 1850, with about 3,000 head of cattle and a long trail drive.

“We basically moved west across Georgia, staying ahead of civilization until we got to Thomasville, and then the decision was made to go down into Florida,” Harry Hendry said. “Basically, nobody was in Florida then.”

They settled on the Alafia River, 22 miles east of Tampa. In 1852, when his father died while settling affairs in Georgia, 19-year-old F.A. Hendry, nicknamed “Berry,” decided the family would stay. He married, moved to Fort Meade and started a cattle ranch.

He served in the Third Seminole War and in the Confederate Army during the Civil War. As the Union Army tried to control the state's beef supply, Hendry joined the “Cow Cavalry” that attacked

the Fort Myers army post on Feb. 2, 1865. The Battle of Fort Myers, the southernmost land battle of the Civil War, ended with a Union victory.

“I don't think they were die-hard Confederates,” Harry Hendry said of the Cow Cavalry. “Their real intention was to keep the cattle herds together until the war was over.”

After the war, F.A. Hendry brought his extended family and 12,000 head of cattle to the now-abandoned Fort Myers. Harry Hendry thinks they were the third family in the settlement.

From Fort Myers, Hendry soon became one of the state's most successful cattle ranchers. He helped spearhead the lucrative Cuban cattle trade, widely credited with rebuilding Florida's economy after the Civil War, when Confederate currency became worthless.

Between 1868 and 1878, more than 1.6 million head of cattle were shipped from Punta Rassa to Havana. F.A. Hendry sent 10,000 to 15,000 cattle a year, Harry Hendry estimated.

“The Spanish cattle buyers paid in gold, and so all of these early cattlemen became immensely wealthy and started paving the streets in Fort Myers and putting up brick buildings and becoming storekeepers and hotel operators,” he said.

By 1876, his herd had grown to 50,000, spread among 25,000 acres of fenced-in range land. Beef was now Florida's primary crop.

“I once read an article he wrote about the benefits of being a cattle person, because the cows made money all year round, in the sense of having calves that you could sell,” Harry Hendry said. “They didn't need a lot of attention. That gave him plenty of time to engage in local politics.”

Hendry chaired the meeting in 1885 where residents voted to incorporate the city of Fort Myers.

Fort Myers was then part of Monroe County, which covered all of Southwest Florida from Charlotte Harbor to the Florida Keys. Residents wanted to change that.

“You had to take a schooner to Key West to see your county commissioners back then,” Harry Hendry said.

The last straw: Commissioners blamed locals for a schoolhouse fire and refused to rebuild it.

Lee County – named for Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee – was established in 1887, with Hendry as one of its first commissioners.

Other relatives followed into politics and business, such as opening Lee County's first banks. One of F.A.'s sons expanded the old family home into a hotel.

“They just had their finger in everything that was going on,” Harry Hendry said.

Hendry advocated for the region in Tallahassee, serving multiple terms in both the Florida Senate and House of Representatives.

The family's wealth helped to transform Fort Myers from a rural outpost to a growing town. The Hendrys were among the first families in the area to drive cars and enjoy many new conveniences.

Occasionally, Harry Hendry is asked to speak to community groups about his family and their history – in many ways, also the history of Fort Myers.

When looking at a street or building, he'll recall some bit of family lore. Streets lined with royal palms, for instance, conjure stories of his great-grandfather, James Hendry, a nursery owner who first transported the regal trees from Cuba on a schooner.

“Well, I sometimes feel like I've got a protective interest in it,” he said of the community that is still his home.

He felt that protective ache in 2022 while watching, from his mother's farm in Ohio, as Hurricane Ian devastated Lee County.

“We still haven't recovered,” he said.

Hurricanes can flood streets and rip apart buildings, but they can't erase the Hendry legacy in Southwest Florida.

In the 1890s, F.A. Hendry platted land for a new city. Combining the names of his daughters, Laura and Belle, LaBelle is now the county seat of Hendry County – which the state named in his honor in 1923.

Hendry's former home in LaBelle was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1998.

Berry Hendry, the name of a branch of the Peace River, flows near where he had a cabin and land – an epitaph written in water. ■



COURTESY PHOTO

At La Posada, Joan and Richard's presence has become a small but meaningful reminder to others at the senior living facility, that companionship and love can bloom at any age.

## LOVE

From page 1

at his side for so long.

"Even in that grief, I felt there was something still ahead for me, though I didn't know what," says Dick. "One morning, after being in a very dark place, I had what I describe as an epiphany. I felt Alma say to me, 'Let me go.' I spoke with my pastor... and he agreed it was time for me to move forward. That moment truly changed me."

Gradually, Richard began stepping back into the rhythms of community life.

Not far away, just four doors down, lived Joan, who had also experienced the loss of a spouse. Like many residents, she carried a lifetime of memories, stories and experiences.

"I was born and raised in Sugar Grove, Virginia. After graduating from high school, I moved to Knoxville, Tennessee to attend business school," says Joan. "I later worked as a secretary for International Latex Corporation. I ordered the raw materials used to make bras, and it was a very uplifting job. I truly enjoyed the work and the people."

Richard's own life had been shaped by travel and a long professional career. "I was born in La Crosse, Wisconsin. I was a military brat — my father served overseas under General MacArthur, and I didn't meet him until 1945," says Dick. "I was born in 1936 and grew up moving frequently. We eventually settled in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, then moved to Washington, D.C., and later I lived in Virginia and Maryland."

"I graduated with a degree in economics and spent many years in the restaurant and food service industry, including time with Marriott Corporation," says Dick. "Later, I became a business manager and spent over 20 years in education, including 16 wonderful years at St. Timothy's School in Stevenson, Maryland. It was a glorious and fulfilling chapter of my life."

Their paths might never have crossed if not for a neighbor who introduced them. What began as casual visits soon became something more.

"It felt like a natural next step. Dick was so open to love and companionship. I remember seeing him in the dining room one day, and when I went over to say hello, he kissed my hand," says Joan. "That truly



COURTESY PHOTO

Joan and Richard love taking walks, listening to music, and singing along to their favorite songs.

ly won me over. We began having dinner together, and he would leave flowers for me. I have a small table outside my door, and he would place flowers there — just sweet, thoughtful gestures. It felt easy and genuine."

Flowers became Richard's quiet ritual.

If Joan's blinds were open, he would knock and hand them to her personally. If they were closed, he would gently place them outside her door.

Then one day, that small routine became something more. Three years ago, Richard arrived with flowers as usual.

When Joan didn't answer the door, he went in to check on her. She was having a medical emergency.

After the scare, their bond grew deeper. Today, their relationship, while not married, is rooted in daily companionship, mutual care and shared gratitude for time together.

"We feel married in every way that matters," says Joan. "It would be complicated to go through the legal process at this stage, but our commitment to each other is very strong."

"At this point in life, our families are supportive, and our lives are established," says Dick. "We don't feel the need to marry legally. We love, honor, and cherish each other fully — and that is what matters."

"I think this love is deeper, probably because we are more experienced and appreciate each day more," says Joan.

"To me, it feels no different in terms of commitment," says Dick. "When you say 'I do,' you promise to love, honor, and cherish. I have that same commitment to Joan until my parting breath."

Life together now is filled with simple joys. "We love taking walks, having lunch or dinner together, listening to music, and singing along to our favorite songs," says Joan. "We also enjoy watching shows together. And yes, we enjoy shopping, which Dick calls my favorite sport! He has wonderful taste and helps me choose outfits. I try them on, and he gives his approval."

"We also really enjoy singing together in the La Posada chorus, and being in the community shows," says Dick.

Friends and neighbors often see them walking the halls together, laughing over dinner or planning their next outing. Their presence has become a small but meaningful reminder to others that companionship can bloom at any age.

Their story is not about replacing the love that came before. Both carry deep respect and memory for the spouses they lost. Instead, it is about allowing life to continue unfolding, even after heartbreak.

"You must realize there are always opportunities for love," says Dick. "It's never too late — but you have to open your heart and your mind to it."

"Keep your heart open," says Joan. "It is never too late. Love later in life can be even more wonderful than before." ■