

Downtown Daytona began as a charming, picturesque place to live

Eileen Zaffiro-Kean | The Daytona Beach News-Journal | 5:30 am EDT September 13, 2020



In 1901, Daytona Beach's Ridgewood Avenue was a peaceful unpaved path flanked by homes and hotels. Photo provided by the Halifax Historical Society Museum

DAYTONA BEACH — For decades, the stretch of Ridgewood Avenue that meandered through the downtown was a tranquil, two-lane thoroughfare canopied by towering oak trees and lined with huge estate homes and elegant hotels built in the late 1890s.

Beach Street, where the city was born in the 1870s, was long the place to buy a new dress, watch a parade or wander into Riverfront Park to walk a garden path or feed the goldfish in a chain of ponds.



This rendering shows a soldiers memorial that in the early 1900s stood in Riverfront Park along Beach Street in downtown Daytona Beach. Part of the memorial has since been moved to Tusawilla Park on the Orange Avenue side of the park.

Rendering provided by the Halifax Historical Society Museum

In the 1950s, teenagers packed a small Bay Street soda shop next to the original Mainland High School to sip 10-cent Cokes, play pinball and listen to rock and doo-wop on the jukebox. At night people would walk Beach Street and window shop, never feeling unsafe.

"It was the exciting place to go," recalled 79-year-old Ormond Beach resident Kris Daugherty.

The closest the riverfront came to a homeless presence was Brownie The Town Dog, a stray canine who showed up on Beach Street in 1940, dined on steak and ice cream from local merchants and hung around downtown cab drivers who built him a dog house.

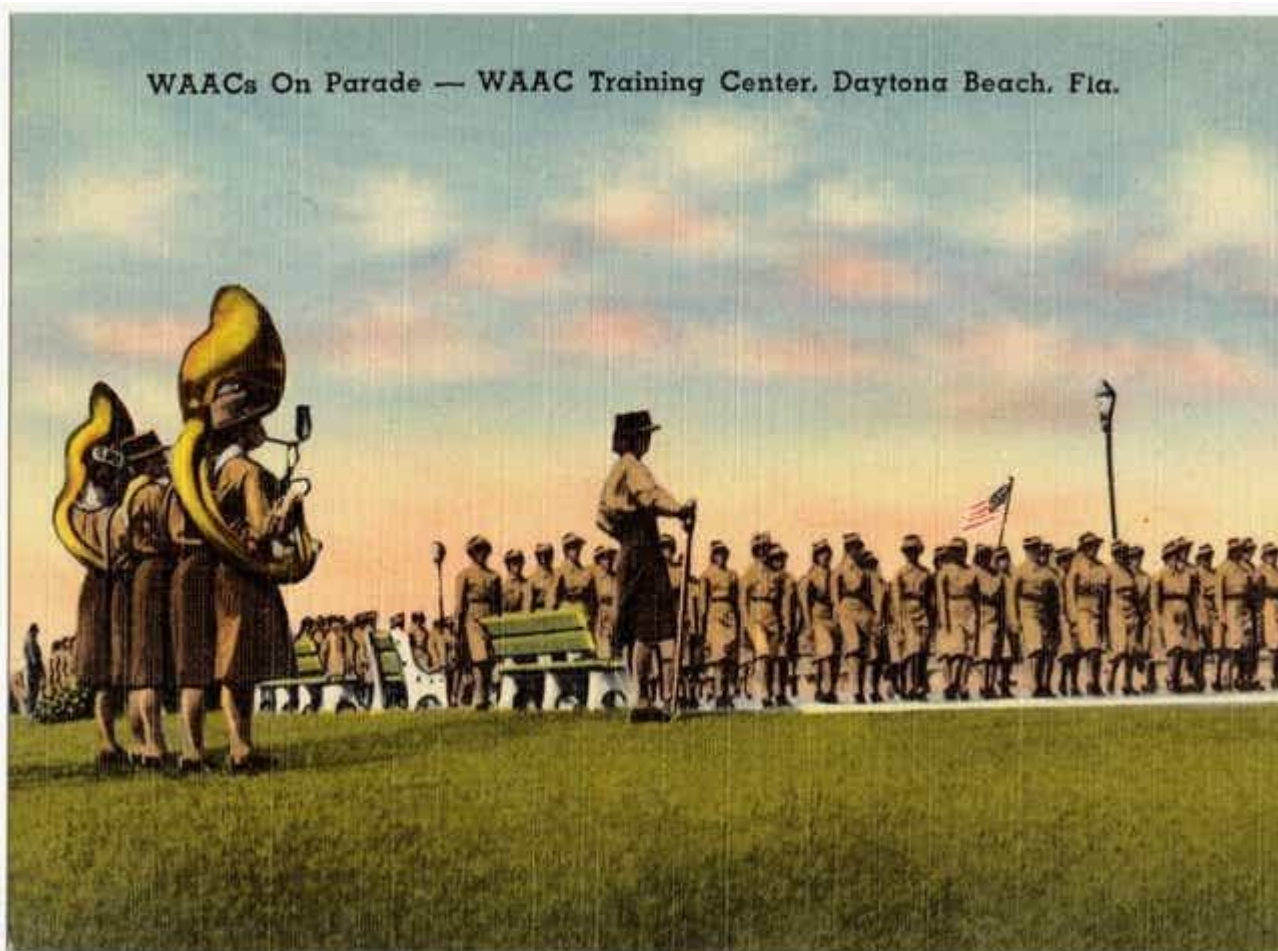
While downtown Daytona Beach's Mayberry-esque past has long been cherished, the city's urban center took a bad turn in the 1970s and its future looked depressingly gloomy for decades.

But the clouds are parting now with the recent promise of at least a few hundred million dollars of investment being pursued for the blocks between Ridgewood Avenue, Beach Street, Main Street and Orange Avenue.

As the downtown catapults into its future with everything from a dramatically improved Riverfront Park to new apartments and offices that will bring hundreds of employees to Beach Street, memories of its past will remain priceless for those who lived early chapters of their lives there.

Batista, elephants and WAACs

The family roots of Bonnie Decker Tippetts run deep in the city's historic core. Her maternal grandmother was born in 1884 on an island just north of the Main Street bridge where her great-grandfather, a Union soldier from Ohio, had built a large sawmill.



During World War II, the southern Daytona Beach riverfront became the site of a large tent city that was built next to the Halifax for the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps. Daytona Beach was a training site for thousands of WAACs, who were lodged throughout the city. Training was carried out on the beach, in Riverfront Park and on City Island.

Rendering provided by the Halifax Historical Society Museum

In the early 1900s, her grandmother was an operator for Daytona Beach's first telephone exchange, which was located in a small frame building on the northeast corner of Beach Street and Orange Avenue near the town hall and train station. Tippetts' grandmother had just 100 customers.

In 1922, her father's family left New York City and purchased a grand Queen Anne-style hotel on Ridgewood Avenue built in the late 1890s called The Oaks. It was a place opulent enough to have counted Winston Churchill among its guests.

Her grandfather also purchased the house next to the four-story hotel, and that home on the northwest corner at Bay Street is where Tippetts grew up.



The Oaks Hotel stood on the northwest corner of Ridgewood Avenue and Bay Street from the 1890s to the 1960s. The hotel was one of many upscale places along Ridgewood Avenue that drew northerners looking to get out of the cold in the winter.

Photo provided by Bonnie Decker Tippetts

The 79-year-old Tippetts, who lives in Texas now, said some of her happiest memories are of the parades on Beach Street.

"Several times a year — Christmas, Fourth of July, high school homecomings and any other special occasion — could bring a big parade with all the local marching bands, including the Bethune-Cookman band, which was wonderful," she said.

Tippets also recalls one very unique parade.

"I remember a parade in the mid-1950s in honor of the Cuban dictator, Fulgencio Batista, who owned a home on the peninsula," she said. "When he had to flee Cuba in 1959 because of Fidel Castro, his wife landed at the Daytona airport in a plane full of bullet holes."

She also recalls a big parade when the circus came to Daytona Beach. The tents set up on Bethune Point at the southern end of Beach Street.

"It was very exciting to see the elephants and all the other animals," she said.

During World War II, Bethune Point became the site of a large tent city that was built next to the river for the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps. Daytona Beach was a training site for thousands of WAACs, who were scattered around the city.

Some of the women stayed in the Tippets family's hotel, The Oaks.

"Meals were provided at a cafeteria on Beach Street, close to the WAAC's headquarters," said Tippets, who was too young to understand what was happening at the time but later heard stories from her mother. "Every morning the girls would march up Bay Street to get their breakfasts. Eventually, training was carried out on the beach, in Riverfront Park and on City Island."

Also during World War II, when German submarines were attacking merchant ships along the Florida coast, the Daytona Boat Works on South Beach Street was contracted by the Navy to build submarine chasers.

"My grandfather came out of retirement to help build the wooden cabinets that went inside the boats," Tippets said.

Shining shoes and catching crabs

Her family's hotel stood on the west side of Ridgewood Avenue just north of Bay Street, and the property extended back to Segrave Street. West of Segrave was the area of town where most Black residents lived, went to school, worshiped and shopped.

Black residents were allowed on Beach Street in the days of segregation, but with some different rules imposed on them.

At the age of 87, Harold Lucas can remember what it was like to be a Black child in downtown Daytona Beach in the 1930s and 1940s. He shined shoes, but he could only do that on Beach Street if he stayed well south of Orange Avenue.

"From the fire station north to Second Avenue, they only let white kids shine shoes," recalled Lucas, who still lives in the Midtown neighborhood just west of downtown.

He said he was able to go into Beach Street stores, but he wasn't allowed to sit at the lunch counter in Woolworth's until the 1960s. Nonetheless, Woolworth's hired him to stock shelves.

He was also able to get two other jobs on Beach Street. He cleaned inside a bank, and he was a typist at a Beach Street employment office while he majored in business at what is now Bethune-Cookman University.

Lucas also remembers Ridgewood Avenue when it was flanked by upscale homes, family-owned hotels, gas stations and mighty oaks. Like Tippets, he remembers seeing "fleabag motels" starting to pop up on Ridgewood Avenue in the early 1960s.

Lucas has happy memories of Riverfront Park, where he used to admire the stately war memorial that overlooked a reflection pond and catch crabs on the seawall of the Halifax River with a net.

He remembers wandering past the castle-like Burgoyne mansion encircled in a fence of native rock, an estate that once covered much of the Beach Street block north of what is now International Speedway Boulevard.

'Downtown wasn't downtown anymore'

As director of the Halifax Historical Society Museum, Fayn LeVeille has downtown knowledge that extends 70 years farther back than Lucas' memory.

LeVeille can explain how Daytona Beach's earliest businesses and homes sprouted along Beach Street south of Orange Avenue, and lots in the 1870s sold for \$25. There were woods north of Orange Avenue, and a cabin was nestled in the trees where the Angell & Phelps Chocolate Factory now stands, she said.



*In the late 1800s, the Palmetto House on the west bank of the Halifax River on South Beach Street was a place to stay for people who had moved to the area and were in the process of building a home.
Photo provided by the Halifax Historical Society Museum*

At 80 years old, LeVeille has plenty of firsthand memories, too. She recalls shopping on Beach Street with her mother from the time she was about 5 years old.

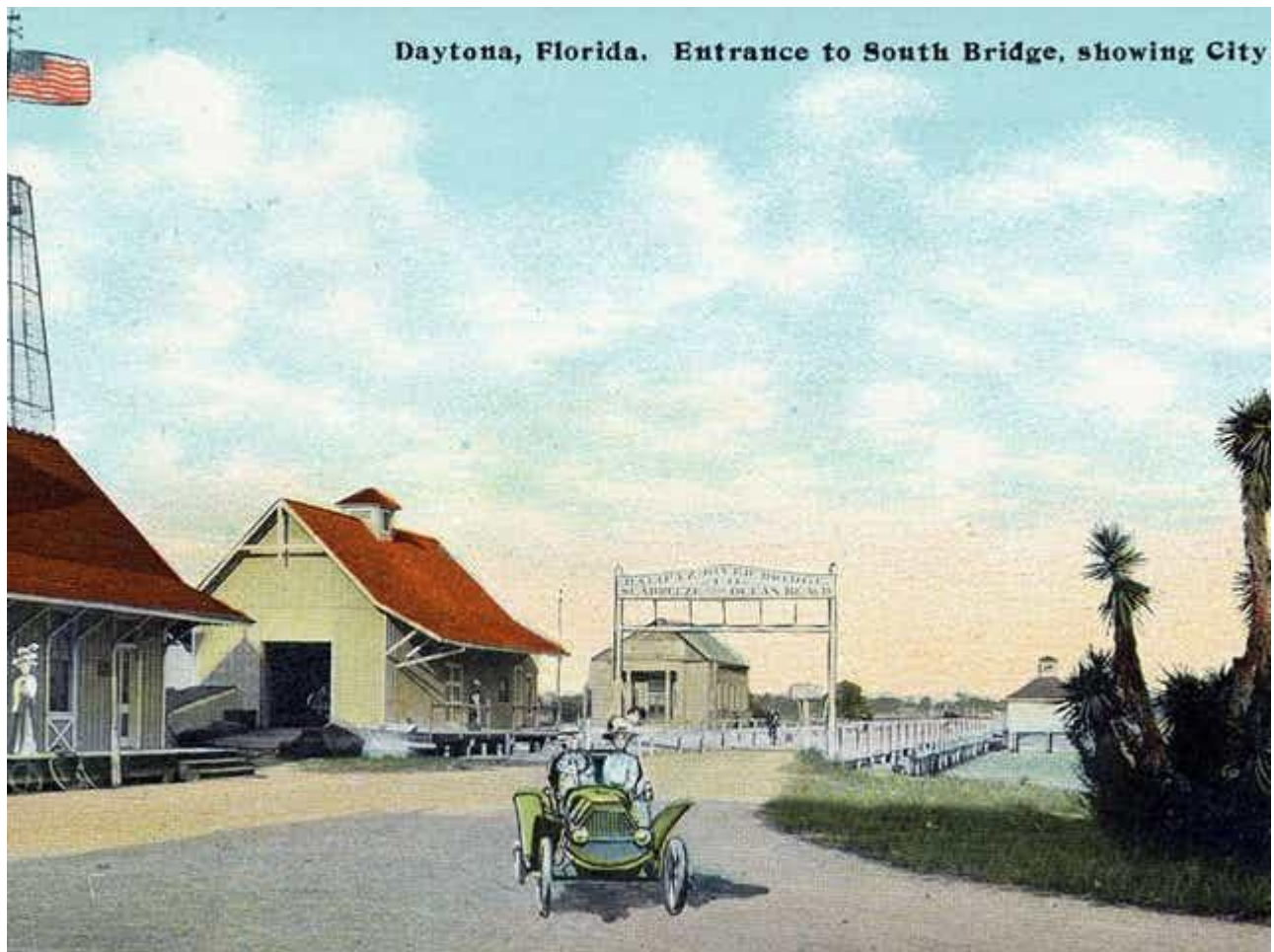
"It was the place to go shopping," said LeVeille, whose museum is in a 1910 building that was once Merchants Bank. "I remember Ivey's where the Tic Toc shop is now. It was a big department store."

LeVeille also remembers the sinking disappointment when Volusia Mall ended up gutting Beach Street.

"Downtown wasn't downtown anymore," she said. "Beach Street died quite fast."

Other things that made downtown special, like the war memorial in Riverfront Park, disappeared and chipped away at what the area had been, she said.

Part of Beach Street's demise also came with people from other places who started businesses without understanding the rhythms of a Florida tourist town and a road that only draws certain visitors, LeVeille said.



*This rendering shows what part of the Daytona riverfront looked like in its earliest days. Pictured is a railway station on the left and an early city hall building on the right located near the bridge straddling the Halifax River. Rendering provided by the Halifax Historical Society Museum
Rendering provided by the Halifax Historical Society Museum*

Downtown Daytona Beach had a good 100-year run from about 1876 to 1976, and then slid into something locals never expected to see.

Tippets watched Ridgewood Avenue devolve after her family's hotel was leased to someone who turned it into a boarding house that welcomed less than desirable guests. Attorneys transformed another hotel into law offices.

"You began to see a lot of changes in the late 1950s, and it got very rundown," Tippets said. "It just broke your heart."

Interstate 95 became the new north-south route for Florida travelers in the 1960s. And in the 1970s Volusia Mall opened and pulled stores and shoppers off Beach Street, part of the

same westward migration that led to homeowners, grocery stores and schools leaving the downtown, too.

"In the early 1980s it was devastated. It was just languishing," said Al Brewer, who has run Evans & Son Jewelers on Beach Street for 37 years.

Tippets left Florida in 1959 to go to college in Denver and her parents moved to Ponce Inlet. The last time she drove past the property where her family's hotel and house once stood, it was a Dollar Store and parking lot. She purposely avoids the area now when she visits because it's too hard to look at what it's become.

But she hasn't lost hope. She's seen what the downtown can be. People used to come by the trainload to a station that was on the west end of Magnolia Avenue.

Tippets has an unending fountain of good memories, from watching movies in a Beach Street theater that was one of the city's first air conditioned buildings to working as a teenage copy girl at The News-Journal when it was located on Orange Avenue.

"There was so much going on, and it was just a lovely, lovely area," she said.

Tippets said she's heartened and grateful to see the new efforts to revive downtown Daytona Beach.

"I'm hoping and praying when they make changes on Beach Street they can bring back some of it," she said.



*In the 1870s, people started to move to Daytona and build homes on the banks of the Halifax River.
Photo provided by the Halifax Historical Society Museum*



In the early 1880s, this log cabin was the home of Black residents who were among the first settlers of Daytona Beach. The home was located in a wooded area that is now Beach Street between International Speedway Boulevard and Magnolia Avenue. The cabin sat on the site of what is now the Angell & Phelps candy store.

Photo provided by the Halifax Historical Society Museum



*A little girl is pictured sitting on the western bank of the Halifax River in Riverfront Park in Daytona Beach in 1936. The girl was a member of the Decker family that owned The Oaks Hotel on the corner of Ridgewood Avenue and Bay Street.
Photo provided by Bonnie Decker Tippets*



In the early 1900s, a canal ran along Bay Street from Nova Road to the Halifax River to drain water. In the mid-1900s the city filled in the canal and added drainage pipes. Photo provided by Bonnie Decker Tippets

Photo provided by Bonnie Decker Tippets