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“Keeping Our Beaches Bare”

The Way It Was Back Then

South Florida Free Beaches Turns 21

Remembrances of Tom Chittenden

Tom Chittenden is the Founder and first president of SFFB. After a ten year absence from the organization, he is back. This year the Board of Directors voted unanimously to make him President once again.

As a bit of background information, before I left Boston to come down here, I ran a nudist group there.

Several members of Stony Acres Club, in Massachusetts, in order to keep in touch over the long New England winters, began holding nude parties in our homes. We didn't want to upset the camp owner by being in competition with the camp, so we met only while the camps were closed for the winter (which was most of the year, up there). The camp owner nonetheless resented us from the beginning and really wanted us to be nudists only while visiting his, or other nudist camps.

However, we kept the club going; I served as its President for five years until I came down here. We called ourselves the Nood Groop. We once applied for ASA recognition as a travel club, but were denied on the grounds that we seemed “too adult.” (ASA, the American Sunbathing Association – now called AANR, the American Association for Nude Recreation).

Club members at the time would frequently take trips to Truro, on Cape Cod, or other beaches where we would go nude, but with the understanding that if caught we could get arrested. Lee Baxandall, who hadn't yet started his “Naturist” organization, planned a sort of “Nude In” at Truro, and I, along with my wife Kathy and other members of Stony Acres and the Nood Groop attended and took part. There were many Park Rangers there, but no arrests, or even threats of

arrest were made. It was a peaceful, pleasant demonstration. It was there that I met Lee Baxandall.

When my wife and I came to Florida, we lived at Seminole Health Club, the nudist camp in Davie, for six months before buying our townhouse in Hialeah. Lee Baxandall came to Florida on a trip, and stayed with us for a while. While he was there, he asked me if I would be the South Florida contact person for the “free beach” movement. By now he was forming his Naturist Society.

About the only place people could go nude on a beach then was Virginia Key, near Key Biscayne. Everyone there was

blanket and comment on the woman's body or otherwise verbally abuse them. And all the couple could do was sit there and wish it wasn't happening.

I made copies of a handout that I typed up, got a clipboard and pencil and paper, and started talking to people, telling them that we had to get together and put our names on a common mailing list for our own protection. I talked to over a hundred people before anyone refused to give me their name and address.

As soon as we all first came together, the problem with the rowdies stopped, because now we were not just a bunch of individuals there, we were a group, and



Yes, they are nude inside those barrels – King Mango Strut Parade, Mid-80s.

well aware that they were taking their chances, not only with the police, but also with gawkers and rowdies who felt it was fun to harass the nudes. At the time there was no group out there larger than two, and it was not uncommon to see a group of six rowdies surround a couple on their

we stood together and looked out for each other.

Without my being aware of it, there was also a group using another part of Virginia Key. Sometimes they would visit this part, and one of the people I handed out my flyer to was Barbara Khan. She



wrote to me saying she had the names and phone numbers of some thirty nudists from that part of the Key, and invited me to write back. Instead I immediately looked her phone number up in the phone book and called her. I told her I felt we should get together and discuss this. We made arrangements, had our first meeting, and decided to work together and create an organization. She, being a legal secretary, had the office and clerical skills necessary to create such an organization, I had the public speaking and leadership skills.

We called for an organizational meeting in September of that year – 1980 – at the home of one of our group. About thirty people showed up. We assessed everyone five dollars per person, or couple, to cover mailing and copying expenses, and South Florida Free Beaches was born.

I was elected President, though someone else wanted to be.

We continued using both locations on Virginia Key, gaining more members as we became more known.

At the time, we were able to bring vehicles out onto the hard packed sand, and so we used our vehicles to block us from the view of the gawkers, the “tree people,” we called them – sort of like the early settlers putting their wagons in a circle.

We were very much a social club then, with cookouts on the beach, outdoor socials at different peoples’ homes, and visits to other beaches that we began hearing about. During one social, at the home of a member couple, someone opened the front door, walked in, saw all those naked people and said, “Am I in the wrong place? I think I’m in the wrong place. I must be in the wrong place,” and left. I think he was in the wrong place.

We even had nude get-togethers at such places as Tobacco Road and the 1800 club, both near downtown Miami, and Spinnakers, in North Miami Beach. By then, other Free Beach clubs began forming, and we made trips to Playalinda, Sanibel Island, to the Keys, and even an annual bus trip to Key West for Fantasy Fest. We marched, wearing barrels made out of cardboard, in the annual Coconut Grove King Mango Strut, a parody of the Orange Bowl parade.

We began speaking to public officials: to the city, the county, the police, the Parks & Recreation Department, the Tourist & Convention Bureau. We were interviewed by all the local TV anchors, and appeared on many radio talk shows, sometimes in the nude (once, to the total surprise of the talk show host). I even appeared on the Sally Jesse Raphael show, which was taped before a live audience at the Sheridan Bal Harbor hotel. The theme of the show was “exhibitionists,” and I sat there, with three very flamboyant individuals, wearing only a towel, and telling people that we naturists (free beach goers) were not exhibitionists, that we looked for secluded beaches, out of the public eye.

I don’t remember whether police harassment was always present, or whether it began at some point in time.

We were very much a social club then, with cookouts on the beach, outdoor socials at different peoples’ homes, and visits to other beaches that we began hearing about.

But we were harassed many times and some of us arrested. Some of our members pled guilty and paid a fine. I was arrested four times. I fought it each time, first with Bob Korschun, a lawyer who was a member of our club; then – when we had no more money to pay a lawyer – by Yale Freeman, who handled our cases pro bono. I was never convicted of any wrongdoing. I was only in court once – the first time. When the judge asked the officer what I was being charged with the officer replied, “Nude bathing.” “And where was he when he was arrested?” the judge asked. “On the beach,” said the officer. “He was bathing, on the beach?” the judge asked, and immediately threw the case out of court. The other times I was represented by counsel, and the case was either dismissed, I was found not guilty, or, as in one case, the state refused to prosecute

me. I was warned by Yale Freeman, however, that I had been getting sympathetic judges and if I were to keep this up, eventually I would get a “hanging judge” and do some time.

Some of the police were actually sympathetic, saying that if they had their way, they would be out there with us instead of arresting us, but that they were doing their jobs. Once the arresting officer asked me if I was going to show some identification, or should he just copy it from my last arrest. I told him he should just make photocopies of it and save us both a lot of time.

On one occasion, my arrest occurred in front of a TV camera. We were having a small function on the beach and a television crew showed up. There were not many participants and not much happening, but as I was painting “Butterflies are free, why not me?” on a topless JoAn Easton’s back, here came the police on their three-wheel dune buggies. As the cop was issuing me my citation, the TV reporter stuck the microphone in the officer’s face and asked, “Why are you doing this, why are you arresting this man?” The officer didn’t have a good reason.

One time I almost got arrested twice in one day. When I got arrested, I put on a g-string and accompanied the police to their jeep for the paperwork. They wrote me up and gave me the goldenrod copy of my citation, and released me.

As I walked back to the nude area, I took off me g-string and walked back waving my copy of the citation in one hand and my g-string in the other. But the people on the beach were pointing back where I came from and yelling, “Here they come again.” I looked back, saw the police coming, and jumped into the water where I got my g-string back on. The police were asking people, “Where’s Tom?” I stood up and asked if they were looking for me. They said, “Yes, we need to get your date of birth.” “Why?” I asked, “are you going to send me a birthday card?” “We might,” they said. But they never did.

Once we planned a “Reach for the Beach” cookout and party on the beach to publicize our plea for a legalized clothing-optional beach. Again, it was not to be a very large affair; however, the media



picked up on this one, and it was published clear across the country, with some newspapers reporting that 400 naked people were expected to turn out. The Miami police lieutenant in charge of harassing naked people called me at home the night before to ask me to confirm or deny these reports. I told him that we expected maybe 30 or 40 people for our celebration, and definitely not 400. Apparently, however, he did not decide to believe me, because the next day, when we went out to Virginia Key, there was suddenly a twelve-foot high fence erected across the road that wasn't there before. I drove up to the gate and the officer stopped me and asked me what I wanted. I told him that I wanted to go out to the beach for a nude celebration. He told me that I (we) were not going to be allowed to.

So we held our celebration (clothed) on the causeway beside the main road. TV reporters were there, so we donned our cardboard barrels that we used for demonstrations, and again made a frontal assault on the gate, to gain entrance to the beach. We were again turned away. We continued our celebration, peacefully, with the police driving by – but keeping their distance. Towards the end of the day, a cop drove right up into the midst of us and asked if we intended to make any further attempt at getting to the beach. We assured him that, no, we would finish with our festivities and go home. I noticed while he was there that he had, on his collar, in brass, the letters, S.W.A.T. They actually had a SWAT team tucked away in the woods somewhere prepared to deal with “400 naked people.”

We also told our members about the various nudist camps around Florida. We visited them as a group and also encouraged our members to visit the camps individually. However, the nudist camp owners, and in particular, the owners of Seminole Health Club, the closest club to Miami, felt that we were in competition with them, even though we introduced many Free Beachers to the camps that would never have known that the camps exist, let alone know how to get into one.

We applied for ASA recognition as a travel club. The owners of Seminoles were appointed as an “investigating committee,” to interview us and make a

recommendation as to whether we should be granted status as a travel club. Seminoles, however, was deeply involved in holding a Miss Nude Florida pageant at the time, and never performed their investigating duties.

As it happened, we had a trip planned to Cypress Cove nudist camp, the owner of which, Jim Hadley, was also President of the ASA. Our entire Board just happened to have made the trip, and Jim Hadley called us into his office for a meeting. He explained how Seminoles had not investigated us as requested, and then stated he had several options: he could again request that Seminoles perform their duties; he could appoint a different investigating club; or he could grant us provisional status as a travel club, until the next ASA convention. By the way he spoke, I knew what his decision would be, and when we left his office we were a provisional travel club in the ASA.

This set off an uproar in the ESA, the Eastern Sunbathing Association, a sub-organization of the ASA. In particular, three Florida camp owners were determined that South Florida Free Beaches would never be a part of the ESA or ASA. They started a smear campaign against free beachers, saying that some of them had witnessed all manner of perversions on our beaches, and in particular against Tom Chittenden.

It was at about this time that Barbara Khan decided to drop out as an officer of the club and make her long-planned epic journey. Starting from Miami, she traveled across the country and ended up at Lake Associates, the nudist camp outside of Seattle, Washington, where the ASA convention was to be held. She stayed at nudist camps and at the homes of free beach organizers all along the way. She told of the rumblings in the ASA/ESA, and rallied support for us from almost everyone she spoke to. I flew out to Washington to address the convention and request our full ASA charter. There, some members of the Western Sunbathing Association offered to adopt us as a member club of the WSA.

Having pled our case, the vote finally came down to only those three Florida clubs voting against us; we won our charter.

This caused such a ruckus, and dissension, that those three clubs actually

seceded from the ASA, accepting memberships only for the ESA. Those camps eventually lost their ASA charters, for non-remittance of ASA dues, and, after all the furor died down, had to apply for ASA recognition all over again. We should have been the investigating club for Seminoles.

Our club has had its share of ups and downs.

At one of our house parties, I approached Shirley Mason and asked her to accept a position on the Board of Directors. She was reluctant, she said “No,” but I persisted. Shirley, and then Richard also, joined the Board of Directors of South Florida Free Beaches.

Shortly after that, I experienced my “Burn-out.” I dropped out of the club, and the entire Free Beach movement for ten years.

Thus ended the era of Tom Chittenden and Barbara Khan; thus began the era of Shirley and Richard Mason.

Long live South Florida Free Beaches/Florida Naturist Association.

Long live B.E.A.C.H.E.S. ✨