

Ozona Village Hall – A Historic Narrative

The Ozona Village Hall, 341 Bay Street, is the oldest structure in continual community use, in its original location, in Pinellas County. It is a source of pride that the Ozona Village Hall, constructed by citizen initiative in 1900, has been maintained by a consistent lineage of neighborly involvement. The story of Ozona is reflected in the story of the Village Hall.

Ozona had enough population to receive a post office on July 14, 1888. Over the decades Ozona became known as a place where residents could pursue a life that was fairly sustainable and locally sourced. The residents of Ozona participated in an economy that was intrinsic to the locale and resources of the area. This is an important consideration as we look at the independent community spirit that has characterized Ozona and the Village Hall that was built to serve that community.

The 1890s-1920s is now referenced as “The Progressive Era.” The temperance cause was sweeping the nation. There was considerable proactivity in making improvements to individual health and community life. This national mood became evident in Ozona. Education along with hard labor was valued and families were proud of their heritage. People were empowered by the wealth of natural resources that supported their livelihoods. In 1895 Dr. Susan K., Whitford, working with other high-minded local women, founded the Ozona Ladies Village Improvement Society. As their first project they had a wooden sidewalk built along Bay Street. The streets of Ozona were packed sand, covered with pine straw. Pedestrians walked a path that became muddy or dusty depending on the weather. The wooden sidewalks were a community project, not a government project. Ozona residents had elected not to have local city government. Written accounts show that the women of Ozona were the moving force and implementers of such projects as the wooden sidewalk. Certainly, they must have maintained favorable influence and communication with their husbands, brothers, and sons, because, of course, the effort of the men was much needed as well.

Ozona Ladies Village Improvement Society meetings were held in local homes, hosted by club members in rotation. Soon, the ladies concluded that a meeting hall was necessary to insure room enough for various social and civic activities. They obtained a parcel of land strategically located on Bay Street, then the center of the community. Society members’ organized fundraisers including bake sales, ice cream socials and seafood dinners to gather the

financial resources needed to build the Hall. They received commitments for donated materials. They organized the labor to perform the construction. The lumber used was locally cut “diamond hard” heart of pine, unsurpassed in usefulness, longevity and beauty. Kerosene lamps provided light for evening meetings at the Hall until electricity was brought into Ozona. *(These lamps are still in the Hall collection, among other artifacts from throughout the years.)* In 1900 the wood frame vernacular style Ozona Village Hall was completed.

Also, Articles of Incorporation for the Ozona Village Improvement Society were approved January 4, 1900 and filed with the Clerk of the Court of Hillsborough County, as Pinellas County was not established until 1912. The Articles, among other things, give OVIS authority to own land and manage property. Once the Hall was completed, OVIS was in a position to manage it. The actual incorporation papers do not include the term “ladies” in the title, although the original board was composed of five women. Susan K. Whitford was Founding President.

It is likely that OVIS is one of the longest operating community organizations still active in our County.

The Ozona Village Hall immediately began to serve as a location for all Ozona community functions. Over many years it has been utilized as: polling place, library, meeting room, town hall, dance hall, church. Plays, recitals and other performances have been presented here. Clubs and organizations for every age have depended on its ambience. The Hall lends itself well to any use imaginable *(as a wedding chapel, reception hall or as a haunted house at Halloween)*. It has a charm that is immediately comforting *(except perhaps when it is decorated as a haunted house)*. In December 1909 the ladies acquired a 1908 Bailey piano that significantly augmented the Hall’s functionality for social events. During WWI and WWII there were meetings to wrap bandages and to generate support for the troops. Social gatherings and official meetings continue to be hosted in the Hall. The piano received a complete renovation in 2006 and lends a vintage voice when played.

The Hall withstood the severe hurricanes of 1918 and 1921. Although blown off its piers, it was reseeded. In 1933 a great fire destroyed several buildings on Bay Street, including a church, parsonage, and three homes. Thankfully the Hall was spared. It is said that people in Tarpon Springs and Dunedin could see the fire and came with haste to help fight it. This event triggered the

initiative to establish the Ozona-Palm Harbor-Crystal Beach Volunteer Fire Department.

The original Society managed the Hall until 1936. At that point, the Ozona Recreation Club, created in 1935, had an active and youthful membership. In the interest of maintaining the Hall the deed was transferred to the Recreation Club. Unfortunately, 50 years into their tenure, the Recreation Club chose to sell off the parcel to the east that was part of the original Hall property. This reduction in lot size constricted parking possibilities for functions at the Hall involving people who have need of automobile transportation. When Ozona was designated as a golf cart friendly community many neighbors began to use this mode of transport to attend Hall functions.

By 1981, the Ozona Village Improvement Society was becoming a robust community organization again, this time with active membership by both men and women. Ozona's centennial was celebrated March 27, 1982. The event and festivities were sponsored by OVIS. In the 1990s, the Recreation Club, aging and waning in membership, experienced their turn being concerned about the future care of the Hall.

For four years, 1997-2000, OVIS hosted an annual old timers reunion. Ozona residents were invited to come to the Hall to be recognized and to tell their stories. Octogenarians told of growing up in Ozona when it was a rural area, attending Ozona elementary school, fishing, boating, gathering oysters, and swimming. There was standing room only in the Hall for these reunions.

Around the same time, a nonconforming land use on Orange Street was proposed. A residential lot was going to be rezoned to commercial with a change to the County comprehensive plan. OVIS held a community workshop at the Hall to provide a forum for this issue and the Hall was full again with participants. After much "town hall" discussion it was concluded that the rules should not be subject to change with unintended consequences for the community. OVIS, on behalf of the community, would advocate support for the comprehensive plan, as it was then defined, and advocate that redevelopment be within the confines of the existing zoning. This would give the community stability especially in light of its heritage. This position was conveyed to the Board of County Commissioners who had the actual responsibility for planning and zoning decisions, as Ozona is a part of "unincorporated" Pinellas County.

Following this, the Ozona Recreation Club asked OVIS if they would be willing to again take over responsibility for Hall maintenance. OVIS board members accepted. In 1999 the deed for the hall was transferred back to OVIS where it currently remains. OVIS has continued to operate the Ozona Hall as a location for community functions. Aside from various community events that are held, the Hall can be rented for \$225. For OVIS members the rental is \$175. Gatherings are usually to celebrate a birthday, wedding, graduation, or to accommodate a social or business group in need of a meeting place.

It is helpful that OVIS is an official not-for-profit organization with a 501C(3) status. This enables people to donate funds or services to help with the operation and maintenance of the Ozona Village Hall.

With the beginning of the 21st-century, the Hall turned its century mark and in some ways showing its age. Consequently, in 2005 OVIS submitted for a community development block grant, which received approval, to make needed improvements to the Hall. General refurbishment involved a new roof, selected siding replacement, refinishing the beautiful solid wood floors, general painting, restroom improvements, along with ramps to meet ADA requirements, reinforcement of the foundation pillars, and air conditioning. This project was completed and recognized with a special rededication ceremony on September 23, 2006.

In early 2012, OVIS noted that the Hall exterior was in need of a coat of paint and some related repairs. Therefore, in the tradition of the past, painting became a community event. In February, OVIS provided the basic materials of paint, brushes etc. with ladders, other tools, and labor being provided by a dozen volunteers. The complete project was done on a Saturday!

In summary, the Hall itself is not only a historic structure by definition of its origin in 1900, but it is also a place where the daily history of Ozona community life continues to unfold.

And if the walls could talk there would be more to say!