

Pieces and parts

They make whole known as Waldotecture

BY ELLIOTT JONES
Press Journal Features Writer

It was as if the ocean beach suddenly got a mind and hands.

Enough weathered timbers — from the ocean and his farm — finally washed up into Waldo Sexton's shore: his storage sheds.

He was always squirreling away pieces of this and that that intrigued him. He never threw away. He put away — until finally his mind saw a way for assembling the pieces into something.

This time it was a family beach house in Vero Beach that drew curiosity seekers from the day it was built in 1935. Sexton evolved the plans as carpenters sawed and nailed the structure together.

Finally, he opened it as a motel — that today is the famed Driftwood Resort on Ocean Drive. It started as a four-room home.

Today it is a complex of time-share units, old and new, that attracts 20,000 people from around the world each year.

All that began as a distinctive organic structure that he decorated with scraps of art, cannons from ship wrecks and even discarded factory boiler parts. Next to the dining room's doorway is a child's metal coffin with a small glass window.

There are bells from cathedrals, ships and trains. And historic European tiles Sexton hauled off from an old mansion being de-

molished in Palm Beach.

According to his family legends, milk deliveries in Vero Beach were halted one day because Sexton diverted all his dairy trucks to the task of hauling off big heaps of tile he got at a bargain price.

In one resort room is a highly ornate chair hand-carved chair from 16th century Europe.

Solid bronze boiler heads came from an old sugar mill in Fellsmere. Stained glass was salvaged from Palm Beach's Royal Poinciana Hotel and Bradley Casino when they were torn down during the Depression.

"Waldo was eclectic, sometime eccentric, and enthusiastic," said architect John Dean, of Vero Beach, who has spent months documenting what the Driftwood Resort is made of.

The construction and decoration style is so unique Dean dubbed it Waldotecture: a less rigid, less angular rustic style made of old parts that didn't come in uniform pieces from assembly lines.

Waldotecture also can be seen in Sexton's other landmark structures around Vero Beach: the Ocean Grill and the rustic, tribal-like Hall of Giants at the McKee Botanical Garden. There is the Patio restaurant on 21st Street and the Sechnan Palace on 43rd Avenue.

When decorating the Driftwood Resort, Sexton had local ar-

chitect Dave Robinson sort through a pile of odds and ends to find what would look good on the building. When Robinson finished stacking up things that stylistically fit together, Sexton picked what Robinson hadn't selected.

Sexton liked juxtapositions of odd things assembled in a rustic, barn-like style.

Sexton's own home in Vero Beach was conventional. His enterprises were agrarian. He was an Indiana farm boy, with a degree from Purdue University, who started out managing a dairy for millionaire O.C. Barber, said his grandson Randy Sexton Jr.

The Hoosier ate in the Barber mansion, where he also got a taste for antique furnishings. Eventually he decided "he wanted to be more than a millionaire's lap dog," the grandson said.

Sexton went into selling farm tilling equipment that he brought to fledgling Vero Beach in 1914.

The equipment broke down and a snow storm up north delayed delivery of replacement parts by train. The delay gave him time to get intrigued by the tiny frontier community that, to him, seemed like fertile ground for an independent can-do guy.

He stayed. He invested in land and prices boomed. He went into dairy farming, cattle ranching and citrus growing.

But there was always the unconventional in his conventions.

Once a woman was so intrigued by her tour of the Driftwood Inn, she went on the second one with Sexton as the tour guide.

She pulled Sexton aside to tell him he changed his story about a unique antique chair. His reply: "I'd rather be a liar than a bore."

He was a story teller prone to flamboyance.

And he had "a real fantasy with the art culture," free expression, Dean said. At times Sexton soared to heights of exuberance — as when he built the Driftwood.

Other times he crashed. In building the Driftwood, "He was just having fun. He wasn't making long-range plans."

Behind the scenes was his wife Elisebeth that Dean said "was the glue that held things together. She was a strong element."

Occasionally Sexton would go off to Cuba and stay until his wife or another family member brought him home and got him back on track.

One of the latest additions to the Driftwood is a large rock commemorating her role in the Sexton legend.

Dean was hired by the current Driftwood management to record the 300 decorations on the building's exterior and to add 200 pieces of similar old stuff to the newer buildings.

To conform with Sexton's style, "I had to stay eclectic, spontaneous," Dean said. "I had to be

organic and let things happen rather than make it happen."

Part of the work includes restoration of weather-worn metals and wood. By the end of the year, two large bells near the restaurant will be hung so they can be rung again, said Jeanne Radlet, resort manager.

The original structure is southeast of the resort's dining room. The restaurant, known as Waldo's, was added in 1942. Both buildings were put on the National Register of Historic Places in 1994.

Collectively, all the pieces add up to a "wonderful outdoor museum," Dean said. The building and its decoration collectively "challenges us to relate to the past, present and future," he said. "You cross time and culture."

Pieces of the building come from Spain, Holland and even Africa.

Resort guests are given a 15-item treasure map to search out intriguing things. Eventually the resort plans to prepare a written guidebook to all the stuff.

"I've been here 15 years and I still find things I didn't know about," Radlet said.

"We are genuine old Florida. We expect to keep being here barring a devastating hurricane.

"Waldo made a statement that the Driftwood came from the seas and one day it would go back," she said. "But we are trying to prevent that from happening as long as possible."