

The Island House: 'Throwback' Gulf hotel still going at 60

By **DEBBIE FLESSNER**
SUN CORRESPONDENT

In 1960, a dentist from Illinois named Fred "Doc" Kroner closed up his practice for a couple of weeks and, at the urging of his friends, decided to take a vacation trip to Florida. When he returned home, he had a surprise for them — he had bought a little motel on Casey Key.

For more than 10 years afterwards, he would shut down his dental practice and head down to Florida to stay in the motel and escape the harsh mid-western winters. He called it the Island House, and today, it still remains a home away from home for regular visitors from all over the country.

After Doc passed away in 1971, his daughter Carol Turner and her husband Don continued to oversee the property, with the help of some valued long-term resident managers. For a few months of the year, they would come down with their children to stay at the motel and give the managers some vacation time of their own.

Their youngest daughter Jeni (Means) would tag along, attending school in Venice when they were here and in Illinois when they went back home.

Jeni said traveling with her parents and living at the Gulf-front paradise made for an idyllic childhood.

"Back in Illinois, my dad was a farmer, and my mom had started a campground there — she was quite the entrepreneur," she said. "At the campground, I would work in the general store, and you just meet such nice people there. Campers, like the customers we get here at the Island House, are such great people."

In those days, a typical stay at Island House would last two to three months, and customers quickly became like family to the Turners. The property is situated directly on the Gulf of Mexico beach, so evening time was (and still is) a sociable, sunset-watching cocktail hour.

Holiday dinners were held on long tables set along the beachfront walkway, as families blended together and created lifelong friendships.

Some of those families who grew close to the Turners during that time still come to visit today. Charles and Mary Richardson ended up staying at the Island House quite by accident the first time 34 years ago, but it resulted in them becoming annual visitors.

"His (Charles's) sister had a reservation at



SUN PHOTO BY DEBBIE FLESSNER

You can't get any more beachfront than the Island House, on Casey Key.



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Charles and Mary Richardson have been traveling from Indiana to stay for weeks at a time at Casey Key's Island House motel with their family for 34 years.



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Sunset viewing by Island House guests is a nightly occurrence.

another motel, but when they arrived, that place was being renovated, so they landed here," Mary said. "They told us about it, so we came the next year, and we've been here every year since."

The couple found they had a lot in common with the Turners, since the Richardsons were from Indiana and the Turners from Illinois. Every evening during the six-week stay, the families would sit outside and visit together, and they became very close.

To their surprise, the Richardsons' younger family members were more than happy to spend

their Thanksgivings and Christmases at the Island House, too.

"We started out coming with just the two of us," Charles said. "Then we thought the grandkids wouldn't want to come, but they now come here and have their own apartments. In high school, they even brought their girlfriends. This has really drawn us closer together as a family."

The Island House has 14 units and a house across the street, the top floor of which is rented out on Airbnb. Of the 14 units, eight are efficiencies, which have a Murphy bed, and open directly onto the



PHOTO PROVIDED

Fred "Doc" Kroner bought the Island House motel on Casey Key in 1960, the year after it was built.



SUN PHOTO BY DEBBIE FLESSNER

The Island House motel has been in Jeni Means' family since 1960.



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beach, two are one-bedroom apartments that also include a fold-out sofa bed and four are motel rooms, and are located right above the office.

Jeni's mother passed away in 2014 and her father, not wishing to visit the Island House without her, asked Jeni to handle the property. She has a wonderful manager, Staci Anderson, who has been with her for 10 years and fits right in with the longtime guests who still regularly come to visit.

Though the property

has undergone some exterior and interior renovations, it still appears to be a throwback, especially given these days of high-rise condos. Jeni's mother was also a graphic artist and the geometric design and sailboat in the Island House logo can be attributed to her work from almost 50 years ago.

And the sandy "backyard" of the motel includes hammocks and high tops and tables just made for socializing with friends and family. Jeni said that she

and her regular guests wouldn't want it any other way.

"It can never be more than it is, because of the zoning," she said. "But my mom liked the idea of having a place where people could come and enjoy the water — and they didn't have to be a millionaire to do it."

The Island House is located at 205 Casey Key Road, just a couple of properties north of Nokomis Public Beach. For more information, call 941-488-1719 or visit: www.islandhouse.org.