

Loxahatchee River Historical Society
Jupiter Inlet Lighthouse & Museum
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For Immediate Release

Trapper Nelson Interpretive Site Files Donated To Loxahatchee River Historical Society

Life of Local Legend and His Historic Camp Become Clearer in Cache of Documents

February 5, 2022 – Jupiter, FL. The Loxahatchee River Historical Society is pleased to announce an important donation of Trapper Nelson Interpretive Site Files from Richard E. “Dick” Roberts and Robert B. “Bob” Schuh. The donated compilation of their personal files forms a unique collection providing rare insights into the legendary ‘Trapper Nelson’, his exotic Zoo and Jungle Garden, and the interpretive site’s operations located at his former camp in Jonathan Dickinson State Park. Both Roberts and Schuh worked for decades at the Trapper Nelson Interpretive Site before retiring.

Roberts worked for the Florida Park Service for 35 years. He was a District Naturalist/Biologist and later Jonathan Dickinson State Park’s Biologist. His duties included developing the park’s interpretive programs at the Interpretive Site. Schuh was a Jonathan Dickinson State Park Ranger for 35 years. Much of his work involved preservation, maintenance, and interpretation at Trapper Nelson’s famous camp along the Loxahatchee River.

About Vince “Trapper” Nelson

Vince “Trapper” Nelson lived on the Loxahatchee River Northwest Fork from 1933 until 1968. His primary business was trapping animals, and in 1938 he opened a little zoo, “Trapper Nelson’s Jungle Zoo Garden.” With the popularity of the 1930-40s Tarzan movies, and because of Nelson’s imposing size, impressive physique, and rugged lifestyle, he promoted himself as a Tarzan-like figure. This exotic appeal combined with the river’s scenery drew many visitors, including the Kennedy family and Gary Cooper, to his camp where he earned his livelihood from admissions and sales. Nelson also dabbled in land speculation. Concerned about liability and annoyed by rowdy teenagers, Nelson closed his camp to the public in 1960. He died in 1968; the death was ruled a suicide, but some still consider it suspicious. Nelson’s property became part of Jonathan Dickinson State Park which in turn made possible the river’s designation as a National Wild & Scenic River. The “Trapper Nelson Zoo Historic District” was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 2006.

The Collection

The Trapper Nelson Interpretive Site Files compilation spans five decades of archival material. Most important are oral history interviews and correspondence with Nelson’s relatives and other people who knew him in life and visited his camp, plus a deputy that was one of the first law enforcement officers to

reach the site of his death. Nelson received almost annual visits by various members of his extended family. These first-hand accounts by repeat visitors provide an inside look into Trapper's unique lifestyle and rugged wilderness camp. Several hand-drawn maps give the layout of the grounds and cabin interior. These interviews were originally audio-recorded or handwritten. Some of these interviews were conducted after the publication of Life and Death on the Loxahatchee by James D. Snyder, to date the only full-length biography of Trapper Nelson. Roberts and Schuh transcribed and typed this material on their own personal time for better access by researchers.

Also included are copies of letters written by Nelson to his relatives that give insights into his activities, concerns, and general mindset. They also show that Trapper was an intelligent, articulate individual with good handwriting despite only having a basic grade school education. The donors also made typed transcriptions of important excerpts from these letters.

Other documents give extensive details about the interpretation, preservation, restoration, maintenance, and management of the Trapper Nelson Interpretive Site by the Florida Park Service.

The Loxahatchee River Historical Society extends its gratitude to Roberts and Schuh for their donation, time, expertise, and their many decades of dedication to local history.

"This collection of beautifully detailed, researched, and organized archival documents are a significant gift of history to the Society. We are honored to accept this remarkable work and to learn more about Vince "Trapper" Nelson" and the impacts of his legendary life that still resonate today," stated Jamie Stuve, president & CEO of the Loxahatchee River Historical Society.

For more information on donating to the Loxahatchee River Historical Society's archives collection, contact Josh Liller, Historian & Collections Manager at the Jupiter Inlet Lighthouse & Museum or visit www.jupiterlighthouse.org.

About the Loxahatchee River Historical Society:

Loxahatchee River Historical Society, Inc., a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization and operates the Jupiter Inlet Lighthouse & Museum and are managing partners in the Jupiter Inlet Lighthouse Outstanding Natural Area, National Conservation Lands. Visit our website for hours of operation and more information www.jupiterlighthouse.org.

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