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TOPICAL

## Brothers left lasting legacy

By Larry Humes For The Gondolier

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Joe Spadaro purchased 196 acres of land in Venice in 1947 that would eventually become the Golden Beach project was a 40-unit apartment complex called Venice Villas and an adjacent Venice Villas Hotel. The hotel with the MacArthur Beach and Racquet Club. The apartments are still operational today.

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Aside from a street that still bears their name, the Spadaro brothers are likely not

familiar to most Suncoast residents.

And yet, these two self-made millionaires who emigrated to America from Sicily made their mark on the development of 20th century South Florida.

“These brothers made a significant contribution to life along the Gulf Coast. And I think it’s more than just a few of the small homes they built that still survive,” local historian Peg Kapustiak said. “They had this concept of hurricane prevention before the times really thought about those things. They had interesting ideas and concepts and were willing to risk acting on those ideas. Their ventures were about more than just making a profit; they saw them as long-term investment.”

Joseph Spadaro was born Feb. 2, 1883 in the Italian city of Messina. He reportedly worked the docks in Naples before moving to New York City in 1900 and going to work for the city’s street department. He started his own construction business eight years later.

“He patented a method of laying large drain and sewer pipe, and also railroad and subway rail tracks using steam shovels,” Kapustiak said. “His company drilled tunnels, including those under the Hudson River, for the subway railroads. His company removed the rock, crushed it and then reused it (reselling it back to New York City) to build roads and sidewalks.”

A volunteer at the Cousins-Laning Archives & Research Center, Kapustiak said she initially became interested in the Spadaros when her brother- and sister-in-law purchased a home Joseph had built in the early 1950s at 436 Spadaro Drive.

Spadaro built the home for his New York City-based physician, who was treating him for cancer. Spadaro died, however, before the house was completed. The residence was then sold to Dr. Samuel Kaplan, who was one of the first physicians to practice in Venice and one of the founders of Venice Hospital.

Kapustiak said Spadaro built one of the first ready-mix concrete plants in the United States. He varied the mixture of the concrete depending on how the material was to be used.

His concrete was designed to last and to withstand harsh elements like hurricanes, she said. He also began building solid, red-brick-lined homes in White Plains, New York, where he lived.

By the mid-1920s, as travel along Florida's Gulf Coast became easier, Spadaro began wintering in the state. He also brought with him many of his company workers.

"Joe was very interested in getting other people down to Florida," Kapustiak said. "He was interested in people coming to see what a beautiful place this was."

In addition to being a concrete contractor, Spadaro also was a land developer. Kapustiak said he purchased property all over the peninsula, from St. Petersburg and Tampa, to Fort Myers, Boca Grande, and Sarasota, as well as in Venice and Nokomis.

While visiting Boca Grande, Spadaro and his wife were refused entry to the Gasparilla Inn because of his casual clothes and darkened skin from working outside. It was suggested they could apply for jobs via the kitchen.

Instead, Spadaro purchased in 1926 some 40% of U.S. Military Reserve land on the island for \$89,250. Two years later, he purchased the rest of the property for \$52,800. And there he built his elaborate, three-story Boca Grande Hotel.

Constructed of poured concrete and reinforced with iron rods, the hotel featured a four-story octagonal lobby connecting each of four wings containing a total of 150 rooms. The resort also offered a nine-hole golf course, a riding stable, an airplane landing strip, tennis courts, boat docks on the harbor side of the property—

and a beach pavilion overlooking the Gulf of Mexico.

The hotel formally opened in 1929 and remained a favorite spot of sun-seekers for decades.

Kapustiak said that at least three attempts to demolish the hotel with dynamite in 1975 failed because the concrete walls were indestructible. It took six months to eventually bring down the resort with fire and wrecking ball, she said, because it had been constructed with Spadaro's unique methods to withstand the worst storms.

In September 1928, one of the deadliest hurricanes in the state's history swept across South Florida, killing an estimated 2,500 people and destroying many of the small farming communities along the southern shore of Lake Okeechobee.

During the 1930s, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers awarded contracts to construct 67.8 miles of levees along the south end of the lake and another 15.7 miles along the north shore. Spadaro's company performed much of the work.

Spadaro purchased the old American National Bank building in downtown Sarasota in 1936 and obtained a building permit for \$70,000 to convert the office building into a 125-room hotel to be named the Orange Blossom Hotel. He sold the building 10 years later to a group of Miami-based hotel operators for \$225,000.

In 1942, Spadaro was spending a good deal of time in Fort Myers, constructing the city's first sewer system. On one occasion, he was refused entry to the Morgan Hotel by the manager. As a result, he purchased the hotel and fired the manager. He sold the hotel eight years later.

How did Spadaro eventually come to Venice? Kapustiak said one story is that while traveling north on the Tamiami Trail, he met Finn Caspersen, who encouraged the developer to buy some of his property south of town. On Dec. 19,

1947, Spadaro's Boca Grande Inn Company purchased 196 acres of land from Caspersen for what eventually would become known as the Golden Beach subdivision.

“Joe Spadaro's first project in Venice was a 40-unit rental complex called the Villas Apartments, built in four ‘U’-shaped, one-story solid concrete-walled buildings faced with red brick, as well as a rental office building,” Kapustiak wrote in an article about the brothers. “The units were completed in 1950 and included a yacht basin on the north side of the property.”

That same year, construction began on the Villas Hotel adjacent to the apartment complex and overlooking the beach. An article in the Jan. 27, 1950, edition of the *Gondolier* described the project as a four-story structure offering 102 rooms, of Spanish type architecture, that “will be laid out in the form of a giant cross.”

Spadaro added that work on the air-conditioned, fireproof complex would continue through the winter and summer so that the hotel would be ready for occupancy for the next tourist season. The hotel was later scaled back to a two-story building offering only 51 rooms.

Unfortunately, the Villas Hotel was not financially successful and eventually was replaced by the MacArthur Beach Hotel, which was replaced with the current MacArthur Beach and Racquet Club.

The nearby Villas still exist, and Villas Drive would become the northernmost boundary of the Golden Beach subdivision. The community is bounded on the south and west by Golden Beach Boulevard and by Harbor Drive South to the east.

Following a year of illness and cancer, Joe Spadaro died Oct. 25, 1952, at his beloved Boca Grande Hotel. Last rites were held at Venice's Catholic Church of the Epiphany, with burial next to his wife at the Myrtle Hill Cemetery in Tampa.

Pallbearers for his funeral included Robert S. Baynard, president of the Venice-Nokomis Bank; J.T. Blalock, vice president of the bank and the first elected mayor of Venice; and local cattleman Albert Blackburn.

Because Joseph and his wife had no children, their estate was received by his younger brother, Anthony.

That same year, Tony and Robert Baynard, operating as the Florida Bridge Company, were given permission by the state of Florida to build a bridge from the mainland of Placida to the north end of Gasparilla Island.

By 1958, most of the work of building the bridge was complete, making it possible to drive onto the island without need of traveling by ferry.

Following his older brother's death, Tony continued many of the company's projects.

He finished five homes on Spadaro Drive, all built on solid concrete bases, raised above ground with solid concrete interior and exterior walls, faced in red brick as Joe had designed them.

Tony also began new construction projects, including a car wash at the intersection of U.S. 41 and San Marco Drive. He also built the gas station and diner located across the street just north of the car wash. All of these businesses are still there and in operation today.

Kapustiak said that in 1954, Tony and business partners Edward Darling, Robert Baynard and Orlando Mahon formed the AERO Corporation, the letters of their first names forming the company's name.

The Villas subdivision was renamed Golden Beach in February 1954 when a new subdivision plat was filed with Sarasota County. Four streets in the new

subdivision were named for the AERO officers.

That company's founding also marked the end of buildings constructed to withstand the worst hurricanes. Many of the original homes were eventually replaced with larger, more modern homes.

Tony Spadaro died in New York in 1992. Like his brother, he and his wife had no children, so the estate was left to seven nieces and nephews, two in the United States and five in Italy.

Content for this column was largely taken from an article by Kapustiak that appeared in the 2015 edition of "Venice Area Old Timers Stories," a copy of which is available for viewing in the Cousins-Laning Archives and Research Center.

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