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BRADENTONHERALD.COM

Thursday, Jul 10, 2

Posted on Sun, Jul. 06, 2008

Cortez fishing village drew a crowd for a reunion of its founders' descendants

By GEORGIA BROWN
Special to the Herald

CORTEZ

The same week Cortez matriarch Mary Fulford Green turned 83 years young, she attended the Fulford and Cortez Family Reunion held over the Fourth of July weekend in the historic fishing village.

"I saw people I haven't seen in 30 years," she said.

"All of mother's brothers and sisters are here. About 140 people," said her son, Mark Green, who lives near Memphis, Tenn., and did the genealogy research for the event.

The oldest family member who attended is Fulford Green's aunt Frieda Wilson, of Homassassa Springs, who turns 91 today.

"Some of the out-of-towners are staying in the house that my great-grandfather built in 1905. It belongs to one of our cousins who wasn't able to make it, but she offered us the use of the house," Mark Green said.

On the Fourth, after dinner and some fireworks, Anna Dean Fulford Riddick's grandchildren taught their "city" cousins from Birmingham, Ala., how to fish from the dock.

On Saturday, at the restored 1912 Cortez School House, now the Cortez Maritime Museum, Mark Green had his computer out and was busy looking up people by their parents' names. Then he'd hail somebody and introduce them to relatives they didn't know they had.

After the first reunion his mother organized in 2005, which marked the 40-year anniversary of the death of Mark's father, Benjamin, word spread throughout the family.

"Some people didn't hear about it and it was so successful, we decided to have another," he said.

Sam Bell retired to the village and volunteers many hours a month at the museum.

"I always knew I'd come back. I love the history," he said "They pick my brain to identify people in the photographs."

Cortez families are a tightly knit group who all know each other. At first, the family names he came across puzzled Roger Allen when he began his job as curator of the Cortez Maritime Museum six years ago.

Some of the fishing families, Fulford, Taylor, Lewis, Guthrie, Foreman, Bell and Chadwick, were the same surnames names he'd found at his previous position at the North Carolina Maritime Museum in Beaufort.

He discovered the families that migrated to Cortez in the 1880s were members of the same clans that date back to pre-Revolutionary times.

"They were very smart people. They left an area that is a hotbed of hurricanes on the East Coast. They chose this location because Anna Maria Island acts as a sea wall to protect the village and hurricanes seldom hit the area. It's near deep water, a pass to the Gulf and Tampa Bay. It also has two rivers, the Manatee and the Braden, estuary environments that are ideal for different types of commercial fishing," he said.

Some also took boat rides on a replica of the same fishing boat the fishermen brought with them from North Carolina. Called a skip jack, it is a 21-foot sailboat that carried two mullet fishermen and their nets.

"The boat has only a six-inch draft, ideal for mullet fishing in shallow water. They could see the mullet swimming in schools below them because the water is so clear. It was light enough to easily use a shove oar, a type of push-pull tool to help spread the net."

After looking up their relatives in the genealogy book and looking through the gallery filled with photographs and hand-carved models of various types of boats, visitors could take a tour of homes.

"Some people can walk around here today and say, 'My grandfather built that house.' Not many people can do that," said Mark Green.

At noon, he was rushing to pick up 100 pounds of mullet donated by the Bell Fish Company to feed the crowd Saturday night.

"I'm in charge of cooking tonight. I've never fried that much before, but my Uncle Tom "Blue" Fulford will be supervising," he said.

Mark Green's daughter, Kristen Green Wiewora of Philadelphia, came the longest distance. She entered the cheese grits

contest Saturday. "It's based on a recipe I got from a chef in Savannah," she said. Her grandmother reported that Kristen had her corn meal ground by the Amish in Sarasota.

"The residents of Cortez have a strong sense of community and place. People identify themselves with the village because of the fishing heritage. That's kept the community together," Roger Allen said.

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