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APRIL 2016

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Northwest Edition

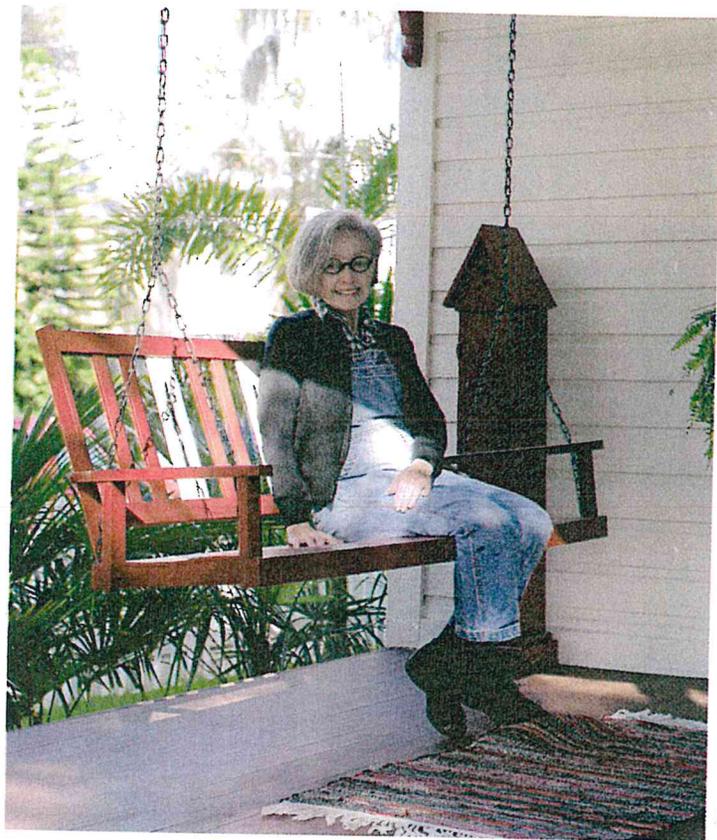
COMMUNITY

Where we live & play

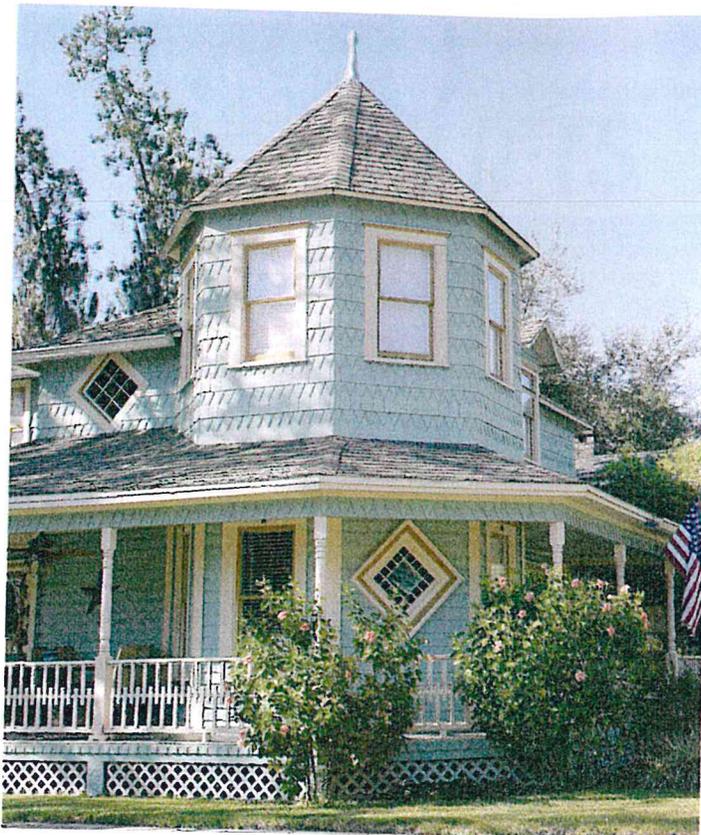


NEIGHBORHOOD PRIDE

Historic Sanford homeowners show their pride by posting signs on the front lawns of their well-kept homes that say: “I live in Sanford, I work in Sanford, I play in Sanford, I ♥ Sanford.” A renaissance of sorts has put this Seminole County town on the map of both visitors who come to stroll its charming, and now hip, downtown and residents who seek out its cozy small-town lifestyle.



The porch swing, an old-fashioned favorite, adds a touch of nostalgia to Sanford's historic neighborhood.



Well-kept historic homes line oak-shaded streets and are walking distance from the shops and restaurants in downtown Sanford.

Sanford's Next Act

Curtains up and this time the quaint town in Seminole County is giving a star performance

Story by Steven Lemongello
Photography by Phelan M. Ebenhack

When owner John Washburn asked Mike Smith several years ago to run his Imperial bar tucked in Sanford, Smith decided to visit the downtown one Friday night and check out the scene.

"I found a quaint town, a town that was right in the middle of a huge inferiority complex, whose sidewalks rolled up at 9 p.m.," Smith said. He saw a challenge and decided, "I just had to take the job."

For years, Sanford was one of the more overlooked towns in Central Florida, considered by many "a gem of a town that is located just inconvenient enough to decide not to visit," Smith said. "A town that has it all, but seemingly not enough to warrant the drive."

But in the last few years, its once sleepy downtown of antique shops has slowly

been transforming into a vibrant district of outdoor cafes and art galleries. And local business owners who took the risks are wowed by how things have changed.

"Sanford seems to be on a roll and reaching a critical mass with new restaurants, bars and breweries opening almost monthly," Washburn said.

The growth has been astounding. In 2004, local businesspeople started the first "Alive after Five" street party to bring people downtown during construction along 1st Street.

"I remember being excited because 300 people showed up," said Theo Hollerbach, owner of Hollerbach's Willow Tree Cafe, which opened in downtown Sanford in 2001. "For our Oktoberfest 'Alive after Five' in 2015, over 9,000 people attended."

Now in 2016 there's a whole new excitement percolating. "Our sidewalks are bustling with people enjoying our art and entertainment scene every day and night.

We have street closures for events ranging from foodie events, car shows, 5Ks and art festivals almost every weekend," said Hollerbach with a grin.

It's a big change for a town that had always seemed a little lost in the shuffle in Central Florida.

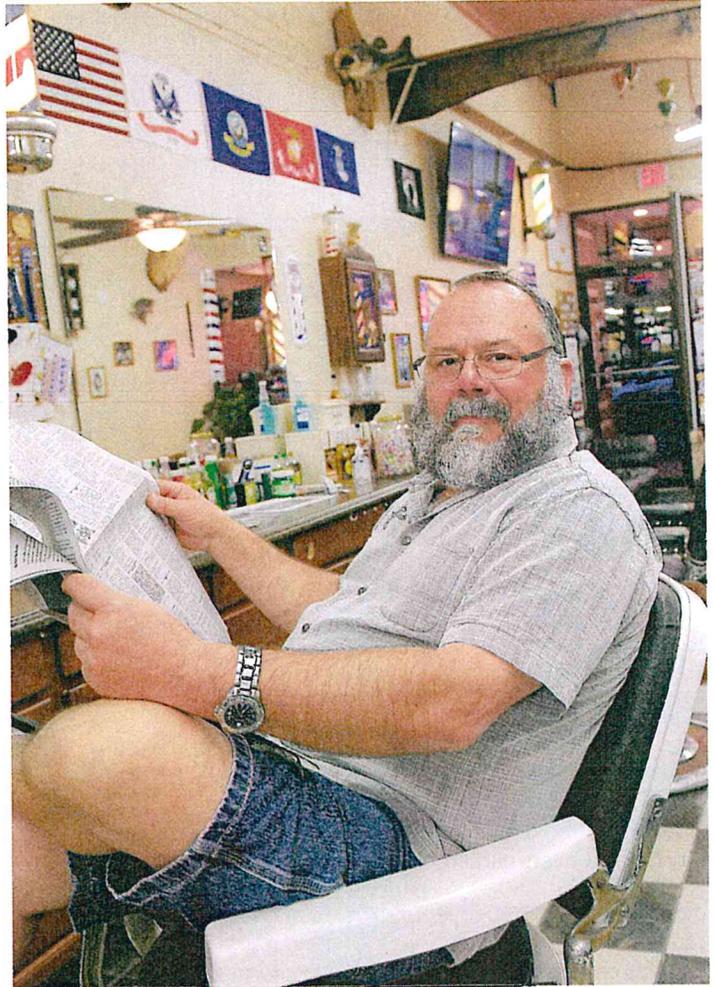
Once a bustling steamboat port on the shores of Lake Monroe in the mid-1800s, Sanford lost an election to become the county seat of Orange County thanks to some chicanery. Orlando invited local soldiers into town for a free picnic — on Election Day.

The rivalry between Sanford and Orlando was so fierce, there was no road connecting them until the 1920s, well after Sanford led the push for the creation of Seminole County in 1913.

Today visitors from Orlando can drive into town along the scenic Seminole Boulevard, which skirts Lake Monroe, often dotted with sails and motorboats.



The good German food and beers at Hollerbach's Willow Tree Cafe have earned the restaurant a loyal clientele since opening in 2001.



Barber Jim Moriarty takes a break at the Sanford Barber Shop.



Wop's Hops Brewing



The wall at Gallery on First

The most iconic scene on this route is the entrance to the Central Florida Zoo and Botanical Gardens, marked by statues of a giant elephant, stalking leopard and toothy alligator. It's one of the largest zoos in the state and home to more than 500 animals.

High-rise luxury apartment complexes are popping up along the lakefront to take advantage of the watery views and a convenient proximity to the RiverWalk, one of Central Florida's most attractive trails and a mecca for runners and walkers.

HIP & HISTORIC DOWNTOWN

But the heart of Sanford is in the classic buildings and neighborhoods, hidden gems that have survived through the quiet decades of the 20th century.

"The downtown area of Sanford is wonderful and has so much going for it," Smith said. "[But] dig a little deeper and you'll find a residential historic district immediately to the south of downtown that

boasts over 140 homes, on a grid of brick streets canopied in beautiful oaks."

The main stretch along 1st Street still resembles a turn-of-the-century town, with picturesque storefronts and brick-lined streets. Standing out among the buildings is one boasting a found-objects wall of unexpected treasures — a clock, an old photo, a cellphone, dog tags, a judge's gavel, a compass and other oddities. "The street artist Mr. Imagination invited people to come up and bring little mementoes," said Jeanine Taylor, director of Gallery on First, about the items embedded in her outer wall. "I thought, 'People are going to run me out of town, or they're going to love it!'"

An iced-tea spoon is "a symbol of the Old South," she said, while a watch holds a special significance: It belonged to her husband, who died when they were both 25 years old.

"It was in a drawer for 40 years," Taylor said. "We put it in cement, and I came back

a couple days later and it stopped running. I got goose bumps. I felt, 'It was time to let that go.'"

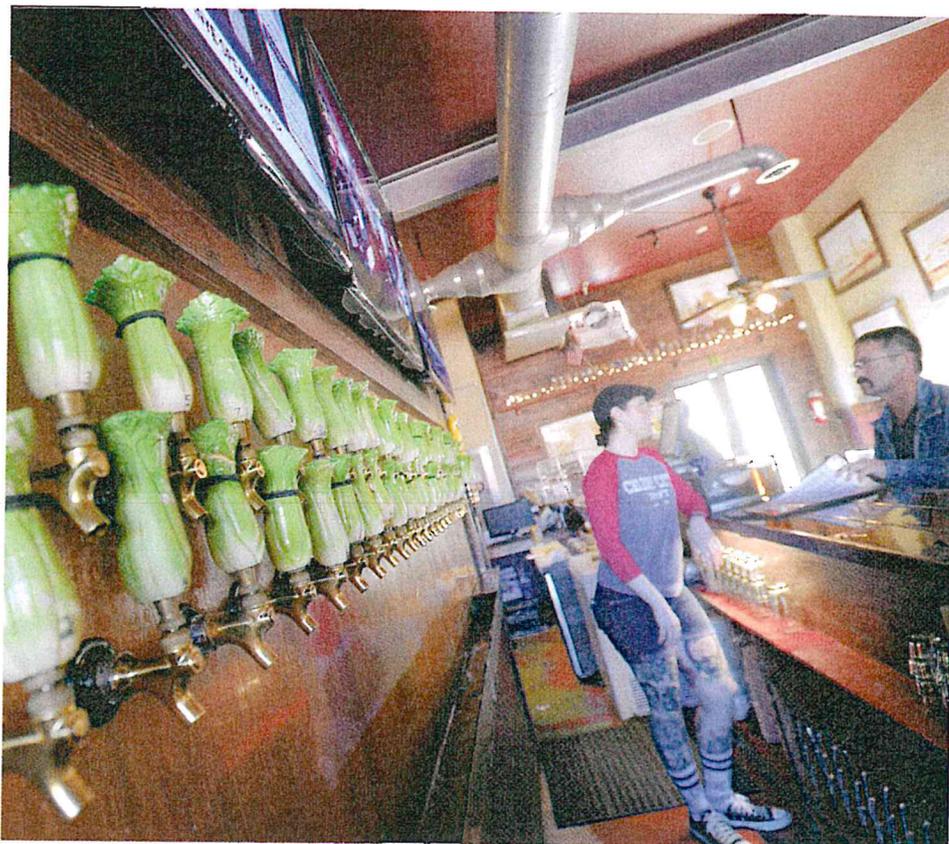
Taylor, who moved her gallery here from Winter Park in 2005, became so confident in Sanford's success that she sold her home in Winter Park and moved to Sanford.

"It's been up and down, up and down, up and down," Taylor said. "But it really feels like we've got something going now."

At the weekly Magnolia marketplace on Saturday, shoppers pick up sweets and meats. Kenny Hallam sets up shop to sharpen knife blades, and "Grower Jim" Ford sells tropical arrowroots, chaya leaves, nopales paddles and yacon roots.

"All my stuff I grow myself," said Ford, "It's stuff you can't buy in grocery stores. And it's all chemical-free."

At Lily's Vintage, one of a number of vintage shops including Nifty Thrifty and Something Special, Tami Nelson of Oviedo crowed about the full-length coat she



Details on Sanford's historic buildings



Making jewelry at Hollerbach's Art Haus

City Celery boasts handles for its tap that resemble the vegetable the bar is named after.

picked up — “For \$50!” she said. “You can’t beat it.”

“This is where I spend all my money every week,” she joked. “This and Maya’s bookstore.”

Musicians played outdoors at The Breezeway, while marshmallow fans perused offerings at the Wondermade marshmallow store and book lovers searched the floor-to-ceiling shelves at Maya Books & Music, stocked with more mysteries, novels and paperbacks than anyone can ever read.

“It is blooming spectacularly,” said owner Yvette Comeau. “I started this business because of the walkability of the historic district, and it’s gotten exponentially better. ... Central Florida’s just waiting to discover it. It’s on the verge of just ... kaboom!”

Imperial at Washburn Imports, a Sanford branch of the popular Orlando bar where patrons can sip wine, beer and craft cocktails amid exotic furniture — also for sale — has sponsored or been closely involved with several downtown Sanford events, including: Love Your Shorts Film Festival; Alive After Five;

Pints and Paws, a pet-friendly craft beer festival; Sofas and Suds, a couch-racing and beer-tasting event; and Sanford’s New Year’s Eve Street Bash and Ball Drop.

“Before we opened, there weren’t many bars dedicated to craft beers and classic cocktails,” Smith said. “We [Sanford] now boast four craft beer bars, three breweries, two bars specializing in classic cocktails, several new restaurants ... The nightlife has grown immensely in the three-and-a-half years we’ve been open, and it is only poised to continue to do so.”

In the center of the growth, though, is Hollerbach’s Willow Tree Cafe, which led the charge starting back in 2001.

The German community of Central Florida and Sanford were both underserved in regards to restaurants, Theo Hollerbach pointed out.

With a menu so large it’s printed in its own newspaper, the celebration of all things German trumpets “The Best of the Wurst,” giant mugs of iced-cold beer, and an atmosphere that feels more Stuttgart than Seminole.

“We never imagined how much the local community would support our

growth,” Hollerbach said. “Where do I think we will go? I’m hoping to convince our city officials to allow us to create an open container district ... so we can provide a destination for our local residents to enjoy the best local hospitality, entertainment and arts in all of Central Florida.

“It is fun to hang out with tourists sometimes,” Hollerbach said of Orlando’s attractions area. “But I think Sanford can become the place where locals can go to have a respite from the push and shove of the tourist venues.”

Smith was a little more circumspect. But in the end? He was all in.

“Talk to the old-timers here, and they will warn you to be cautious about getting carried away with any thoughts of Sanford’s return to prominence,” Smith said. “I gladly listen to their experiences, but I couldn’t be more confident in Sanford’s future. It has everything that a whole bunch of people are seeking out. This town is on the verge of its next renaissance — and I don’t think anything will stop it this time.”

Find out more about Sanford at: sanfordwelcomecenter.com. 