

German Submarines Off Boca Raton
By Susan Gillis, 2005

In early 1942, young Peter and Martha Barrett witnessed a fascinating episode in Boca's war-time history. The Barretts resided on Boca Raton's beach, south of Palmetto Park Road at what were then four tourist cottages, the Boca Raton Villas. Their neighbors to the south were the snowbirds Dr. and Mrs. William Sanborn (for whom Sanborn Square is named). The latter lived in a fine sprawling "modern" home surrounded by a decorative concrete wall. In early 1942, the Army Air Corps had leased the nearby Boca Raton Club (now Resort) as headquarters while the extensive Boca Raton Army Air Field was under construction. Meanwhile a "blackout" was in effect for all Florida coastal towns as German submarines prowled off the coast of Florida; several merchant ships were sunk right off the Boca coast during that year.

*Martha and Peter Barrett
during WW II*



One night the Barretts recalled that their family was visited by military policemen accusing the occupants of signaling vessels offshore. The family suggested the Sanborn home, unoccupied at the time, might be the source of the signal lights. No spies were found, but the authorities found signaling equipment, a telescope, and other signs of recent occupancy of the home. This interesting tale has been substantiated by Dr. Sanborn's great nephew Mr. Charles Hutchins, who shared the tale as told to him by his uncle, who was contacted by the FBI following the incident.



Sanborn House on the beach

Today the Sanborn home and the Boca Raton Villas are no more; the Excelsior and Beresford condominiums occupy their former sites on the beach. But a portion of the “Sanborn wall” still exists; it snakes elegantly beside a sidewalk which provides beach access from A1A. In honor of this interesting tale, the city of Boca Raton dedicated a plaque at the A1A side of the wall on a November morning in 2005. In attendance were Dr. Peter Barrett and Martha Barrett Bell as well as Charles Sanborn Hutchins and his wife Ann and Dr. Sanborn’s niece, Georgia Lou Heard. Mayor Abrams dedicated the plaque and an interesting crowd of about twenty guests included Sally Ling, author of a book about the Boca Raton Army Air Field and instigator of the plaque dedication and reunion.

As a side note, the archives at BRHS&M was paid a visit by both the Barrett and Sanborn clans before and after the dedication ceremony, seeking and sharing information. Dr. Barrett, who has resided most of his life in California, generously donated to the BRHS&M a treasure trove of childhood toys including toy tanks, planes, and cannon as well as memorabilia associated with his wartime duties (shared with his family) as official aircraft spotter at the tower on Boca Raton’s beach. One of the most interesting artifacts is a compressed coffee can, one of many found by the Barretts along Boca’s beaches after the 1942 German submarine attacks on merchant ships in the area.



Coffee can recovered by the Barretts on Boca Raton beach during 1942 German sub attacks on merchant shipping

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