



## *The Driftwood Inn and Resort*

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### *A Brief History of Waldo E. Sexton (1885-1967)*

An important personality in the vitality and growth of Vero Beach was Waldo Sexton. Waldo was born in Shelbyville, IN. He graduated from Purdue University's School of Agriculture in 1911 and obtained a position as a salesman of tilling machines. During a 1914 sales trip to Florida, he decided to stay and work for Indian River Farms Company. By 1917 he was an independent citrus farmer, setting out 10,000 orange trees his first year. The following year he married Elsebeth Martens, the couple had four children. Waldo became a civic leader and was instrumental in furthering the citrus, cattle and tourism industries in Indian River County.

Waldo operated Indian River Products Company, a grove maintenance service; owned several citrus groves; was president of the Oslo Citrus Growers Association, a co-operative packing house; helped organize the Indian River Citrus League; was one of the first exhibitors of Indian River Citrus at the Tampa State Fair; and developed three varieties of avocados, one of which was named "Sexton" by the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

In 1924 Waldo established the Vero Beach Dairy, the first dairy in Indian River County. He was a pioneer in crossing the Guinea bull with Brahman cows, attempting to produce an animal that required little in feed and that would be able to withstand Florida's heat and insects. During the depression years he was one of the members of the Florida Production Credit Association. This organization made short-term loans to farmers to enable them to plant their crops.

Tourism and land development were also important facets of Waldo's accomplishments. He became one of Indian River County's biggest developers and an enthusiastic supporter of Vero Beach. Waldo established the Vero Beach Realty Company in 1914. In 1923 Waldo was one of the organizers of the Vero Beach Real Estate Board and served as its president for a number of years. He was a partner in McKee Sexton Land Company and the Royal Park Company. Waldo selected the vistas for the first nine holes of the Royal Park Golf Course. He also served as president of the Vero National Farm Loan Association, a local group that processed loans for the Langwick Land Company Corporation, owners of a Vero Beach subdivision. He was a partner with Arthur McKee in "McKee's Jungle Garden" and was reportedly the "idea man" for the early 1930s tourist attraction. In the late 1930s he opened the Driftwood Inn for guests and in 1947 added a restaurant, now known as Waldo's. The Driftwood Inn and restaurant were the keystones which transformed the small oceanside community of Vero Beach into a tourist mecca. By 1991 the Driftwood Resort was generating well over \$2 million annually for the local economy.

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Waldo was honored as “one of Indian River County’s outstanding citizens” in 1958 with a “Waldo Sexton Day” in Vero Beach. Events of the day included a parade in his honor, an organ concert, a band concert, a free barbecue dinner for the 5,000 in attendance, a street dance, and dedication of Sexton Plaza. A more recent recognition of Waldo’s contribution to Vero Beach was the presentation by the Indian River Chapter of American Institute of Architects *1992-1993 Ambiance Award*, honoring Waldo’s Breezeway, Ocean Grill Restaurant, Patio Restaurant and Turf Club as making Vero Beach what it is today.

No account of Waldo’s life lacks an attempt at describing the personality of the man. He has variously been called “one of the most colorful persons that Florida has ever known”, an “imaginative entrepreneur”, an “outrageous, old-time eccentric”, and an “irresponsible screw-ball.” Not surprisingly, anecdotal stories of spirits and ghosts inhabiting the Driftwood Resort are common local lore. Waldo died in 1967 at the age of 82.

Other buildings in Vero Beach are associated with Waldo Sexton, but they have been altered. The Patio Restaurant, on 21st Street close to the downtown area, was built in the 1930s and was leased as one of the original Howard Johnson’s ice cream parlors. Later it was used as a gift shop/fruit stand and as the location of Waldo’s real estate office. In 1941 Waldo built the Ocean Grill, at 1050 Sexton Plaza. Waldo also built the Turf Club on 43rd Avenue in the late 1950s. The only other property associated with Waldo that might have national landmark eligibility is McKee’s Jungle Gardens, a popular tourist attraction of the 1930s, which closed in the 1970’s. Its integrity is currently not known, though tours are available on Saturday mornings. Thus, the Driftwood Inn and Restaurant are the best known, most representative, and least altered examples of Waldo Sexton’s Vero Beach enterprises.

### **The Driftwood Inn and Waldo’s Restaurant**

The Driftwood Inn was originally a private beachhouse called the “Breezeway” by the Sextons because of the opening in the central portion of the first floor. Construction of the house began in 1935 and was completed in 1937. Two rooms originally flanked the first floor. A kitchen was located on the second floor over the breezeway. A balcony extended across the second floor. Brick chimneys also flanked the breezeway. According to family members, a coiled pipe “solar unit” was contained within the chimneys to provide heated water.

The original beach house was expanded in 1937 by the additions of a wing on the north; the south wing was added in 1939. The original portion of the building is now the central section.

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The building is distinguished by board and batten exterior walls, wood-shingled gable ends with decorative truss work and rustic balcony railings. The courtyard is marked by two stone walls, into which are embedded two rusty, ancient cannons. Ceramic tiles decorate the courtyard floor. A breezeway at the east end of the courtyard is flanked by stairs leading to the second floor. The hallway at the north end features a small mural of a Spanish explorer landing in the New World. The breezeway walls feature graffiti from visitors, applied ornaments and portions of a wood mantel.

Though originally built as a family home, within a short time it was being operated by Mrs. Waldo Sexton as a small resort hotel; since there was no restaurant in the vicinity of the Driftwood Inn, Mrs. Sexton began to cook breakfast for the guests in the family kitchen. This success led to the eventual founding of Waldo's, the adjacent restaurant constructed in 1947. The main entrance to the restaurant is recessed and located adjacent to the Breezeway building. The doors have multiple panels, insets and decorative ceramic tiles. Ornate metal grills also decorate the entrance area. The balcony is railed with turned spindles, part of the original design. Three immense "outrigger" type wood timbers decorate the south end of the building. The restaurant interior still retains some original features, such as wood-paneled walls and ceramic tile insets in the floor.

Both the Breezeway and Waldo's Restaurant maintain their basic integrity, their unusual workmanship and materials and their original design features. They are a unique example of vernacular architecture in which Waldo was able to express his exuberant personality. Waldo was a world traveler and a passionate collector. His accumulation included antiques, cannons, mosaics, paintings, bells, furniture and relief sculpture. He incorporated into the buildings and grounds of the inn and restaurant hundreds of artifacts that he obtained from various trips. The visual display of these items was the exuberant Waldo's way of sharing his collection of the beautiful and unusual. Part of the timber used to build the Driftwood was salvaged by Waldo from a barn blown down in a hurricane. Waldo was especially fond of bells and amassed a collection of 250 of various types and sizes, collecting them from churches, trains, ships and schools. They decorate the exterior of the buildings and have always been a special part of the Driftwood Inn tradition. They were used to welcome guests on their arrival and to ring out a farewell on their departure.

Waldo continued to expand the Driftwood complex after erecting the inn and restaurant. A small office was built in 1949. In that year he also moved in a row of fishing shacks that were used for guest rooms and later, for small shops. They were converted back to guest rooms in 1986. In 1963 a 15-unit apartment building was added, just west of the original Breezeway building. Waldo's son, Ralph, erected the four-story building to the south in 1965, providing more apartment units. Two more apartment buildings are now part of the Driftwood Resort, which was converted to interval ownership in 1979.

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The Driftwood Resort and Waldo's Restaurant feature a rustic "beachcomber" ambience. While structures of similar style are found elsewhere in Florida, few are comparable in scale or complexity of detail. The two buildings are unique in the Vero Beach area and continue to serve their historic function of providing accommodations and amenities for tourists. Both were conceived and operated by . . . Waldo Sexton.

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