

Good Day to all! The 30th Freedom Swim went off without a hitch. A few of us did swim last year on the QT. The first was in 1992, so even though this year is the 29th anniversary, it is the 30th time the swim has taken place. Happy to say I have made them all! Best conditions in years, beautiful day!

Did you know tarpon were not considered “game fish” until 1885? The mighty Atlantic tarpon (*Megalops atlanticus*), one of just two species, although plentiful in Charlotte Harbor waters and occasionally caught in a seine net before then, had previously been landed only by accident due to its great strength, size, and agility. However, that was about to change.

W. H. Wood of New York City, determined to demonstrate the feasibility of landing tarpon by rod and reel, did so in March 1885. Utilizing cut mullet as bait, a sturdy five-foot bamboo rod, an ungeared reel made of rubber and metal, and 1,200 feet of twenty-one thread line, he hooked one from a skiff not far off some mangroves. After a 26-minute fight, six leaps, and a “run” of about half a mile, the 5 feet, 9-inch, 117-pound tarpon was landed.

The feat, apparently a big deal at the time, was widely reported by the London Observer and Scientific American, quickly making the tarpon king of all game fish. Once the railroad came to Punta Gorda on August 1, 1886, the waters of Charlotte Harbor became easily accessible. Leading sportsmen of the United States, Canada, and England, including Sir Bache Cunard, grandson of Sir Samuel Cunard, the Canadian born British shipping magnate, made their way here hoping to test their skill against the mighty silver king tarpon. It wasn’t long before Charlotte Harbor became the world’s most famous tarpon fishing grounds and Punta Gorda, “Home of the Silver King Tarpon”.

The “Silver King” became so commercialized, folks could have their picture taken next to a recent catch for a fee. In fact, I have a photograph of my grandad in his mid-20’s with a good-sized tarpon, which he didn’t catch, soon after he came to town in 1925. It cost him 10 cents. And now you know why Charlotte High School’s mascot is the tarpon. Don’t you wish you could be a fish?

Florida currently holds 29 tarpon world records, with all major fly-fishing records caught off the west coast near Homosassa. The state record for fly fishing is 202 pounds, 8 ounces, on 20-pound tippet, set in May 2001. The state record for conventional tackle is 243 pounds, caught on just 20-pound test off Key West, in 1975. The all-tackle world record, caught off Guinea-Bissau in West Africa March 20, 2003, is 286 pounds, 9 ounces, a “monster” over seven and a half feet long. With longevity of around 80 years, that one had to be pretty close.

Several estimated to be over 300 pounds, based on unofficial measurements, have been caught since then, the most recent in May of this year off Columbia. However, for one reason or another, they did not make the record book.

Photographs of tarpon fishing on Charlotte Harbor can be viewed by visiting Charlotte County online library resources. Select “Library Catalog”, click on “Physical Items”, then “Archive

Search”. Enter the subject of your search on the “Search” line. Visit the same site and select “History Exhibits” to find out what history related programs and videos are available. Photos are also available on the Punta Gorda History Center’s website.

Also, check out History Services’ yearlong project, “Telling Your Stories: History in the Parks”, that began in January with placement of the first interpretive sign “Charlotte Harbor Spa” at South County Regional Park. The second, featuring portions of a General Development Corporation brochure promoting Port Charlotte is at Port Charlotte Beach. The third is at Englewood Beach, featuring the Chadwick Beach pavilion. The fourth is at Tringali Park, featuring Buchan’s Landing in Englewood. The fifth is at Carmalita Softball Park’s playground, featuring the Punta Gorda Baseball Field, circa 1933, then on West Virginia Avenue between Gill and McGregor Streets, where the First Baptist Church campus is located today. The next will be dedicated at Randy Spence Park in El Jobean on July 28 featuring “Filming Tarzan”. All dedicated signs can be viewed at online library resources. Select “Programs and Services”, then “History Services” and “Virtual Programs”.

“Did You Know” appears, typically, every other Wednesday, courtesy of this newspaper and the Charlotte County Historical Center Society. The Society’s mission is to help promote and preserve Charlotte County’s rich history. A family membership is only \$35.00 and provides complimentary access to over 300 museums and technical centers nationwide. We are also always looking for volunteers and interested individuals to serve as board members. If you believe our area’s history is as important as we do, please visit Charlotte County Historical Center Society on-line, or call (941) 613-3228 for more information.

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