

14. Lourdes of Ice: The Royal Palm Ice Factory

Miami Herald reporter, the late Geoffrey Tomb, recalled for NPR the scene at the Royal Palm Ice Factory in Coconut Grove after Hurricane Andrew landed ashore on August 23, 1992 bringing devastation and agonizing weeks of sweltering airless weather to Miami: “Survivors stood in lines 5 blocks long waiting 4 hours in 93 degree heat for a shiver of its crystalline salvation. For much of Miami, it was a true oasis, the Lourdes of ice among the ruins.”

By 1996, the non-descript, but historic building and its life-saving freezers located at 3655 S. Dixie Highway had been sold for \$1,575,000 to make way for a new Walgreen’s. And then it was gone, but not entirely forgotten. We asked Grovite orthopedic surgeon Dr. John Nordt, who was born and raised in the Grove over seven decades before, what he could recall of the Royal Palm Ice Factory.



Here’s what Dr. Nordt had to say:

As a kid growing up on St. Gauden’s Road, my Dad would stop at the loading dock and take our cooler in to fill it with ice on the way down to the Keys. It was the only place back then to get block ice. There weren’t any 7/11’s, no ice machines in grocery stores, and only ice cubes in trays in your Frigidaire.



But my most distinct memory is talking in the late ‘50’s with an 80ish black patient of mine who said he was from Coconut Grove and used to work at the Royal Palm. He said he drove a horse drawn wagon “delivering ice to the white folks in the Grove.” That struck a note with me because I know the Barnacle still has an antique ice box in the kitchen, and that had to be one of the old man’s delivery stops.

So this would have been back in the 20’s or ‘30s. He told me if you looked at the north side of the ice factory building you could see the big doors to the stables where they kept the horses for the wagons. He said it was a busy, busy place in the summer.



Just so you know, back then it was not unusual to see horse-drawn wagons in the Grove. Dr. Eleanor Galt Simmons, who I think might have been the first female doctor in the Grove or maybe even the first doc, period, used to make her rounds on such a wagon around 1915. She lived where the Kampong is now, after she sold her property to Dr. David Fairchild.

Anyway, back to the Royal Palm, I stayed in my house during Andrew and was one of the many who picked up ice there in the weeks after the hurricane, since the power in most of the Grove was out for over two weeks. Man, was it hot!

Like most everything else from those days, it’s gone and isn’t coming back. Even though it was somewhat of an eyesore, in August 1992 it was the savior of the community. For me, it allowed me to have some ice in my Scotch, which I needed badly after some very long days. Doctoring didn’t stop back then just because of a hurricane.

Photos Courtesy of Florida Memory