

after hours

DINING 2B
CRUISE GUIDE 7B
ARTS CALENDAR . . . 6B
FILM 4B
ARTS 3B
REALITY CHICK 9B
BOOK REVIEW 4B
SOCIAL NOTES 5B

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Park the car and take a swig?

RACHEL BROWN HACKNEY
Island Beat



Without a quorum, no votes could be taken – they're expected next month – but

the Siesta Key Association board members present for the Sept. 6 meeting asked quite a few questions about the potential for the county to impose parking fees and initiate alcohol sales at the beaches.

The people answering those questions were John McCarthy, director of parks and recreation for the county, and Kristin Steffen, revenue specialist in the county's Community Services office.

In trying to figure out how to make up for the loss of property tax revenue, the county commission this summer threw out the ideas of the beach parking fees and alcohol sales.

"All we have really done is research" on the parking prospect, McCarthy said, because the commission wouldn't let his staff pursue requests for proposals from firms that handle such work.

The research has indicated two primary ways of handling the parking fees, he said: installing a ticket booth with a human being to take money or look for decals on vehicles of those who have parking passes; or establishing a "multi-meter" system for every 20-25 cars.

Steffen explained to me later that the multi-meter system can work two ways: A person may park his or her car in a numbered space then walk up to the pay station, put in the money and the space number and walk on over to the beach; the other method involves parking the car, walking up to the meter and paying, getting a receipt to put in the car window, then going on to the beach.

Multi-meters also could be used at other beach accesses in the county, McCarthy said.

Most of the parking firms his staff had contacted, McCarthy said, had indicated they would do the work for a 50-50 split, with an estimated \$3 million coming into county coffers each year.

As long as he had been working in parks and rec, McCarthy said, he had heard tales of people fighting over spaces at the Siesta Public Beach during season. Having someone monitoring parking and preventing people from coming into the lot when

SEE ISLAND BEAT, PAGE 8B

Taking the roads less traveled

BY RACHEL BROWN HACKNEY

Mention "world travel," and the average person might think of jaunts to Geneva or driving the scenic byways of Britain.

To 80-year-old Dorothy Conlon, however, "world travel" means heading off to Bolivia, because more and more people are going to Peru these days – or building a brick schoolhouse in Tanzania with other members of a Global

Volunteers group.

Although she has called Sarasota home for more than 27 years, Conlon admits to wanderlust. "I'm a bit of a missionary, actually," she says, "because I just think everybody should travel overseas ... I think until you have been in another country, you don't see your own country as clearly."

Born in Japan, Conlon didn't even set foot in the United States until she was 7, when her father, a Universalist Church missionary, returned with his wife and three girls to New England. Even then, because of Conlon's father's work, she says, the family traveled.

Not surprisingly, after she

(Clockwise from upper right) Dorothy Conlon prepares to choose a melon in Antigua, Guatemala, in 2005; Conlon's book; Conlon greets a native on a visit to India; and Conlon's family when they returned to the U.S. from Japan – Dorothy is in front between her parents, Margaret and Clifford Stetson; her sister, Ruth, is in the back (l.) with sister Jean.



graduated from college in Maine, she chose the Foreign Service as a career.

As it turned out, Conlon married another Foreign Service officer, Edward J. "Ned" Conlon. Because the rules then forbid couples from working in tandem in the service, Dorothy resigned.

"I didn't really have any illusions about this as a career," she says. "It was just a way to be overseas."

After Ned died in 1989, Dorothy decided to explore new opportunities in travel. Along the way, she kept journals and took lots of pictures. However, it wasn't until two years ago, when she was in Nicaragua, that she first began thinking seriously of translating her vast and varied experiences into book form. An editor, Sarah Seidman, with whom she had found herself taking morning walks, encouraged her to take on the book project

and offered to help in any way. With Seidman's encouragement and guidance, Conlon completed "At Home in the World: Memoirs of a Traveling Woman." It took her a little over a year.

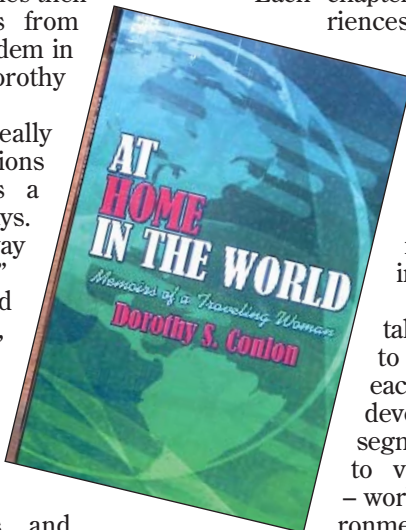
Each chapter is about experiences from a different country.

"I tried to emphasize the volunteer projects," she says, "because I find people are really interested in those."

Conlon typically takes off for three to four months each winter, and she devotes at least one segment of every trip to volunteer efforts – working for the environmental organization Earthwatch Institute, for example, or teaching English.

Asked about some of her favorite anecdotes, Conlon refers to a "near miss" in Bolivia, which she recounts in the book. She was on a budget tour with mostly young

SEE CONLON, PAGE 7B



Old Florida art from a new Florida artist

STORY AND PHOTOS BY KAREN MAMONE

Siesta Key used to cherish its reputation as a slightly funky, artsy little enclave. And if that image is in the process of being replaced by loftier and slicker ambitions, you can't blame residents like Shell Beach denizen Rhonda Kitchens.

Kitchens, who is often known as RhondaK, is an iconoclast whose blonde and brown dreadlocks twist and turn as smartly as her twin careers.

From 7:30 a.m. weekdays, she's a professional librarian at Ringling College of Art and Design, a cataloger with a master's degree in library science and 15 years' experience.

Weekends, evenings and vacations, she lets down her sassy mane to take up her avocation as a folk artist, painting signs and pictures on old pieces of wood

she finds on the beach or discarded by the side of the road.

Sometimes, she'll turn up at arts events such as the Cortez Fish Festival and set up her patio table with the blue tiki-grass umbrella and paint and sell her signs, which range from \$5-\$75.

She doesn't care for the "white tent" shows; they're a little too stuffy for her, and they might not welcome her sales assistant and sidekick, Sadie, a "very intuitive" pug whom Kitchens rescued several months ago.

At 43, the Tampa area native with Choctaw heritage has long followed an adventurer's path. She wanted to experience New York, and so moved to Manhattan for five years. She worked at the New York Public Library until two years ago, when she quit her job. Then she lived on a boat for a year, half of it on her own, despite no previous sailing ability.

It was during that solitary marine hiatus that she began painting what she now recognizes as bits of her family's Old Florida past – when farmers and fishermen tacked up freestyle signs that told folks that they could pick strawberries, buy a goat or pick up dinner.

"I'm one generation removed from the farm," she said, the first of her family to go to college.

One of her relations was known as "the mullet man" in Cortez, she said, because he sold the popular fish at the dock and around town.

To that home-grown model, she has added her own homage to the tiki bars of her youth, with all of their laid-back island style – "all of the fun places I've hung out."

Her favorite sign, she says,

SEE RHONDAK, PAGE 3B



Examples of RhondaK's art are posted in her yard.