

The Rare Bird Farm

The Birth of Kendall – Part 4

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July, 2009

On August 3, 1938, seven acres of Flagler Grove, including the historic Hinson/Rice property, which was the site of the first home in both Kendall and what would later be the Village of Pinecrest, located at the southeast corner of Flagler Boulevard (SW 102nd Street) and US1, were sold to zoo animal broker, Alton V. Freeman for about \$40,000.

Alton Freeman, a veteran of the US State Department and fluent in Spanish, served as a commercial attaché at the US Embassy in Caracas, Venezuela. A self-described “combination of slave trader and riverboat gambler,” Freeman soon discovered a brighter financial future in animal brokerage than as a bureaucrat. He procured and sold wild birds and animals to large metropolitan zoos in the US, Europe and the Far East, as well as to research institutions in the United States, including the National Institute of Health, the University of Wisconsin and the Air Force.

Doing business with a letterhead that read: “For the Protection and Procreation of the World’s Diminishing Wildlife,” Freeman spent years making an annual round of the world’s zoos, keeping up contacts and visiting the animals he helped procure. After years of battling government regulations, quarantine issues, bad weather, unpredictable transportation schedules and the Pidgin English of native shippers, Freeman made the decision to settle down and cash-in on the booming South Florida tourist attraction industry. He collaborated with the owners of two New England bird farms; C.L. Sibley, of the Sunnyfields Bird Farm at Wallingford, Connecticut, and G. Fred Yessler, of the L’Chauwiechen Bird Farm at Great Barrington, Massachusetts, to create the Miami Rare Bird Farm – the largest bird farm in the world.

Yessler specialized in ornamental pheasants, bringing 39 varieties to Miami, including the rare Imperial pheasant, now found only in Vietnam. He offered a complete collection of jungle fowl and more than twenty varieties of quail and partridge to the new attraction. Sibley supplied his world-famous collection of water fowl – ducks, geese, swans and cranes. He additionally brought his collection of beautiful pea-fowl, rare doves and pigeons and even a Cassowary, the largest wild turkey in existence, to Kendall. Freeman built a giant walk-in aviary in the Rare Bird Farm, allowing visitors to feed the colorful toucans, macaws and cockatoos and of course, take pictures to their heart’s content. A dozen ostriches, some nine feet tall, and the largest private collection of flamingos in the US roamed the grounds freely, mingling with the patrons.

Not content with his extensive bird collection, Freeman used his expertise as an animal broker to supply the Rare Bird Farm with a wide variety of wild animals. Always eager to turn a profit, he would often bring in some exotic creature, only to sell it a short time later to a zoo or research institution. A steady flow of zoo animals passed through the farm including anteaters, baboons, monkeys, cheetahs, ocelots, tapirs, llamas, Key deer, jaguars, Bengal tigers, elephants and zebras.

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Freeman took advantage of the existing status of Flagler Grove as an agricultural center, expanding on the citrus grove theme to create a “vast, luxuriant tropical garden.” Some 68 varieties of tropical flora were on display at the Bird Farm, carefully landscaped amongst man-made wading pools for the flamingoes and comfortable benches and chairs for the tourists. Various palms and tropical fruit trees were showcased, including oranges, guavas, papayas, avocados, tamarinds, sapodillas and mangoes.

Alton Freeman and his wife, Frances, built a home in 1953 next door to the farm, just east of the property, with their school-age children. Favorite animals often found their way into the Freeman house, some remaining as family pets. At one point, a pink Amazon freshwater porpoise took up temporary residence in the Freeman swimming pool and occasionally a sick chimpanzee would be nursed back to health by Frances, with the aid of house calls from the family physician.

Dr. John K. Robinson, the former Associate Dean of Student Affairs at the University of Miami Medical School, lived next door to the Freemans and had a front row seat to the spectacle of neighborhood zoo life. He writes in his memoirs of a favorite family pet:

“Timmy, the six weeks old gorilla, who was raised along with the Freeman children. When he arrived, he was a very small animal with muscles as hard as steel underneath silky, soft fur. He was in diapers and a tee shirt and could not yet sit alone. Timmy was bottle fed, but had to be held upright when feeding to keep him from drowning. He thrived in the home, eventually began to sit alone, and it was not until he began to walk that he seemed different from the other kids... he walked on his knuckles! He was given birthday parties and participated in just about all the kid's activities, including holding on to their necks and backs while bike-riding, or sitting in the basket of a bicycle while riding up and down the street. For some unknown reason, he was afraid of bells, and whenever the phone or doorbell rang, he would run to Mrs. Freeman, climb up and hang on to her neck for protection. When he got bigger and she could no longer get herself loose from his grasp, she began to be afraid of getting strangled. Eventually, Timmy was sold to the Memphis Zoo, but trouble began immediately, because he was afraid of the animals! An employee of the Milwaukee Zoo heard about the dilemma, and agreed to take Timmy for a while and introduce him to zoo life gradually. This worked out well, and he was returned to Memphis and later lived in the Bronx Zoo. Mr. Freeman visited with him on numerous occasions, and was always greeted warmly by this great creature, who ended up weighing hundreds of pounds!”

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Because so many of the animals roamed the grounds freely, a series of amusing incidents punctuated life in Flagler Grove in the '40s and '50s. A kangaroo escaped the farm one day and hopped down Flagler Boulevard. Fortunately, it was so fond of Frankie, a farm employee, that Frankie was able to ride down the street in the back of a pickup truck and entice the animal to jump in with him for a ride back home. State troopers knocked on Freeman's door one morning at seven o'clock, informing Alton that his penguins were crossing Dixie Highway and backing up traffic as far south as Perrine. There was some speculation, never proven, that the incident was more likely a publicity stunt than an innocent escape.

A lasting memento of the Rare Bird Farm is the presence of the Red-whiskered Bulbuls in the Kendall area. In 1960, the Freeman children accidentally left the door to an aviary open and a half-dozen or so of the Bulbuls escaped. The birds, originally from Calcutta, India, adapted well to southeastern Florida's similar climate and vegetation and began nesting the following spring in the bushes of neighborhood yards. Although they prefer to nest near to where they hatch, by 1970 the Bulbuls had migrated as far south as Princeton and had reached a population of about 250. A major component of the Red-whiskered Bulbul's diet is the fruit of the Brazilian pepper tree, so although the population of the species has declined in South Florida to about 100, the Bulbul may unfortunately be contributing to the spread of this noxious and invasive plant.

Kendall's Space Pioneers

Perhaps the most noteworthy of the creatures that resided at the Rare Bird farm were a pair of monkeys named Able and Baker and a pair of chimpanzees named Ham and Enos. Able, a seven-pound rhesus monkey from Independence, Kansas and Baker, an 11-ounce squirrel monkey from Peru, were acquired by Freeman, raised at the Rare Bird Farm and sold to the US Space Program. On May 28, 1959, Able and Baker became the first primates to survive spaceflight after they rode in the nosecone of a Jupiter AM-18 missile to an altitude of 360 miles and a distance of 1,700 miles down the Atlantic Missile Range from Cape Canaveral, Florida. They withstood forces 38 times the normal pull of gravity and were weightless for about nine minutes. A top speed of 10,000 mph was reached during their 16 minute flight.

The monkeys survived the flight in good condition, but Able died four days after the flight from a reaction to anesthesia, while undergoing surgery to remove an infected medical electrode. Miss Baker lived another 25 years at the US Space and Rocket Center in Huntsville, Alabama, receiving up to 150 letters a day from fascinated schoolchildren. Baker died from kidney failure in 1984 and her funeral was attended by more than 300 people. Even now, visitors will sometimes leave a banana or two at the gravesite in Huntsville, in memory of one of America's first space pioneers.

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Ham, the chimpanzee, was born in Cameroon in July, 1957 and was immediately brought to the Rare Bird Farm in Kendall. He was sold to the Air Force in 1959 and was sent to Holloman Air Force Base in New Mexico for 18 months of pre-flight training, where he was trained to push levers in response to flashing blue lights. On January 31, 1961, the 37-pound chimp was secured into a Mercury capsule aboard a Redstone rocket and launched into space for a 17-minute, 155-mile suborbital flight. Ham was tested 100 times during the flight, responding to the flashing blue lights successfully 98 times. A post-flight exam showed him to be exhausted and slightly dehydrated but otherwise happy, healthy and hungry. The successful flight paved the way for Alan Shepard to make the first manned suborbital flight only three months later.

On November 19, 1961, after 1250 hours of training, another Rare Bird Farm resident chimp named Enos, aboard the Mercury Atlas 5, lifted off from Cape Canaveral into the first orbital flight. The mission took about three hours, with the capsule splashing down after the second orbit, just south of Bermuda. According to observers, Enos jumped for joy and ran around the deck of the recovery ship enthusiastically shaking the hands of his rescuers. Enos' flight was a full dress rehearsal for the next Mercury launch on February 20, 1962, which would make Lt. Colonel John Glenn the first American to orbit the Earth. Sadly, Enos died of antibiotic-resistant dysentery only a year after his history-making trip. He now rests in a place of honor in front of the International Space Hall of Fame at Alamogordo, New Mexico.

The Grove Grows Up

By 1961, rising land values and the looming construction of the Palmetto Expressway only one block to the north, prompted Freeman to accept an offer from J. Abney Cox, Jack Knowles and Walter Peterson and sell the Rare Bird Farm after some 20 years of operation. The Freemans moved to Spruce Pine, North Carolina, where Alton continued to board and breed exotic creatures at his Zoo Animal Refuge for years, eventually retiring to southwest Florida. Alton Freeman died in Naples in 1982 at the age of 71.

The Rare Bird Farm property was sold in sections and has maintained its character as a mix of commercial and residential acreage. The Freeman home has remained a private residence on the easternmost acre of the original property. Dade Savings, later to become CenTrust, erected a bank building on the southwestern acre in 1963. The bank has remained in steady operation over the decades, transitioning to AmeriFirst in 1979, Great Western Bank in 1992, Washington Mutual in 1997 and most recently, Chase in 2009.

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Robert A. and H. William Prah, of Prah Brothers, Inc. construction company, built a Howard Johnson motel on the eastern three and a half acres (excluding the Freeman home), which opened in early 1962. The Prah brothers and Finlay L. Matheson formed Palmetto Motel, Inc. and leased the northwestern five acres of Flagler Grove, containing both the motel and the adjacent Howard Johnson's restaurant, from Cox, Knowles and Peterson, with an option to purchase the property after five years.

Matheson, and later his three sons, Finlay B., Henry and Michael, operated the motel and restaurant under a lease from Howard Johnson. Palmetto Motel, Inc. exercised their option to buy the five acres in January, 1967. The Mathesons assigned the Howard Johnson lease in 1978 to Palmetto Management, Inc., a corporation controlled by the Prahs, which operated the motel until it was sold. In 1990, the last of the Matheson's property interests in the old Rare Bird Farm acreage were sold to the Palmetto Holding Corporation, controlled by the Prah brothers.

After the northern edge of the eyewall of Hurricane Andrew creased Flagler Grove on August 24, 1992, the sturdy motel quickly reopened in September and found itself the southernmost motel operating in Miami-Dade County. The Howard Johnson motel became a barracks of sort, serving as housing for BellSouth and FP&L personnel for nearly two years of South Dade reconstruction. The motel served the community for over 38 years, becoming the independently run Palmetto Motel for the last few months of its operation, after the Howard Johnson franchise expired in late 1999.

Palmetto Holding Corporation sold the three acres of motel property on July 7, 2000, for \$3 million, which was then developed by the Richard Brandon Company into The Reserve of Pinecrest, a \$23 million gated community of 68 luxury condominiums, which opened in December, 2003.

The historic Hinson Home property on the corner of Dixie Highway and Flagler Boulevard became home to the aforementioned Howard Johnson's restaurant in 1962, serving 28 flavors of ice cream for as many years. A Denny's replaced the Howard Johnson's, opening in October, 1990 and operating until April, 2007. The Prah brothers' Palmetto Holding Corporation sold the two acres of restaurant land to the Dixie/102 Trust in May, 2001 and that land was subsequently sold to Thirteen Pinecrest, LLC in August, 2004. In 2007, the pioneer acreage was developed into the Dixie 102 Plaza shopping center, anchored by the popular South Florida franchise restaurant, Anthony's Coal Fired Pizza. Anthony's opened in May, 2009, once again providing Flagler Grove with a focal point for its small commercial district.

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Just as Henry Flagler was ever vigilant about the careful development of his Kendal Grove, so are the residents of Flagler Grove fiercely protective of their unique and historic neighborhood. Periodically doing battle with zoning boards and commercial developers, community activists such as 42-year resident, Patricia Kyle, strive to insure a fair and esthetic mix of both commercial and residential properties. Kyle successfully led the fight against the proposed construction of the Pinecrest Village Hall in 2000 on Grove acreage at 7551 SW 104th Street. That property is now the home of Flagler Grove Park, a three-acre facility that opened in May, 2008, which includes lighted youth soccer fields, a playground, parking, and restrooms.

Echoes of the working grove remain in the backyards of residents. Pat Kyle, herself a grower and owner of nearby Galloway Farm Nursery, has an organic garden in her backyard and, like many of the homeowners, tends to the several mango and avocado trees which grace the property. Her allegiance to the neighborhood is evident. “I love the privacy,” says Kyle. “It’s just like the country, even though I’m so close to US1. I think the location is fabulous, it was just a wonderful place to raise the kids.”

If Henry Flagler’s mission at Kendal Groves was to impress investors with the value of his showcase property, then surely the subsequent 105 years have proven him successful. As yet, there is no historic marker denoting the pioneer property on the southeast corner of Dixie Highway and Flagler Boulevard. But one can still raise a glass to Alton Freeman, Dick Rice, John Hinson and Henry Flagler at Anthony’s.

Dr. Kenward practices general dentistry in, and is a lifelong resident of the Village of Pinecrest. He may be contacted through his website: www.pinecrestdental.com

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A view of the entrance to the Rare Bird Farm, looking southeast at the corner of Dixie Highway and SW 102nd Street, in what is now the Village of Pinecrest



A 1952 aerial view of the Rare Bird Farm property in Flagler Grove

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Alton Freeman poses with parrots at the entrance to the Rare Bird farm in 1946.

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According to an early 1940s brochure, "One may relax and enjoy the study of rare plant life while some of the most beautiful birds in the world stroll in review, free to roam in this enchanted setting. Truly, beauty irresistible."



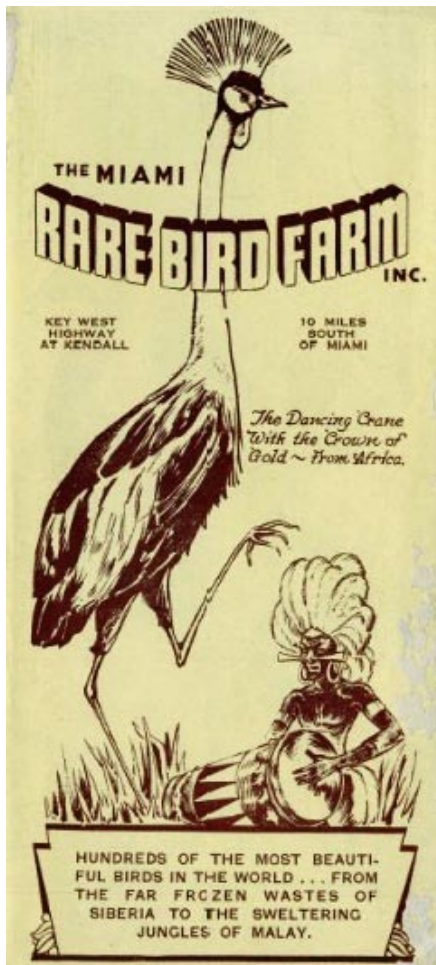
Huge Ostriches wander the Rare Bird Farm.

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Flamingoes and swans cool off in the wading pool.



Early 1940s brochure

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THERE IS ONLY ONE
RARE BIRD FARM

Located in Kendall, 10 miles south of Miami, directly on U. S. Highway No. 1 (enroute to Key West).



For nineteen years one of America's most outstanding attractions. Over seven acres landscaped tropical foliage, where hundreds of the world's most rare colorful and exotic creatures roam free and uncaged. You will see White and Scarlet Ibis, Roseate Spoonbills, Peacocks galore, Toucans (its beak is longer than it is) a goose with the head and feet of a turkey, the bird with a crown of gold, tiny honey creepers no bigger than your finger to giant ostriches 9 feet tall, not to mention three of the four greater apes; Baboons, Monkeys, Ocelots, Tapirs, Llama, Deer and hundreds more too numerous to mention.



**SEE THEM... HOLD THEM
PET THEM... FEED THEM**



Bring your Camera too!
You will get pictures unbelievable.

MIAMI'S
Rare Bird Farm

10 MILES SOUTH OF MIAMI AT KENDALL, FLA.
HUNDREDS OF UNCAGED RARE BIRDS AND ANIMALS ROOM FREE




AMERICA'S MOST UNUSUAL ATTRACTION

Open Daily 9 A.M. to 6 P.M.
Our 19th Year
GUIDED TOURS EVERY HOUR

A 1959 brochure for America's Most Unusual Attraction, Miami's Rare Bird Farm

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Frances Freeman feeds a pheasant on the grounds of the Rare Bird Farm.

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Billy the cockatoo gives Frances Freeman a kiss.



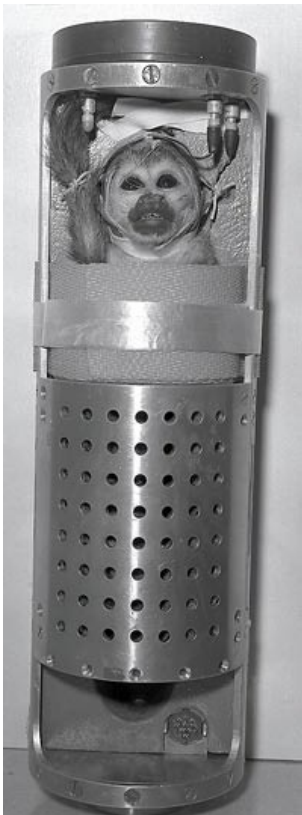
The Red-whiskered Bulbul

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Able, a rhesus monkey and Rare Bird Farm resident, made his historic space flight in May, 1959.



Miss Baker, Able's squirrel monkey crewmate, is secured in her thermos-sized capsule prior to her 1,700 mile, 16 minute mission.

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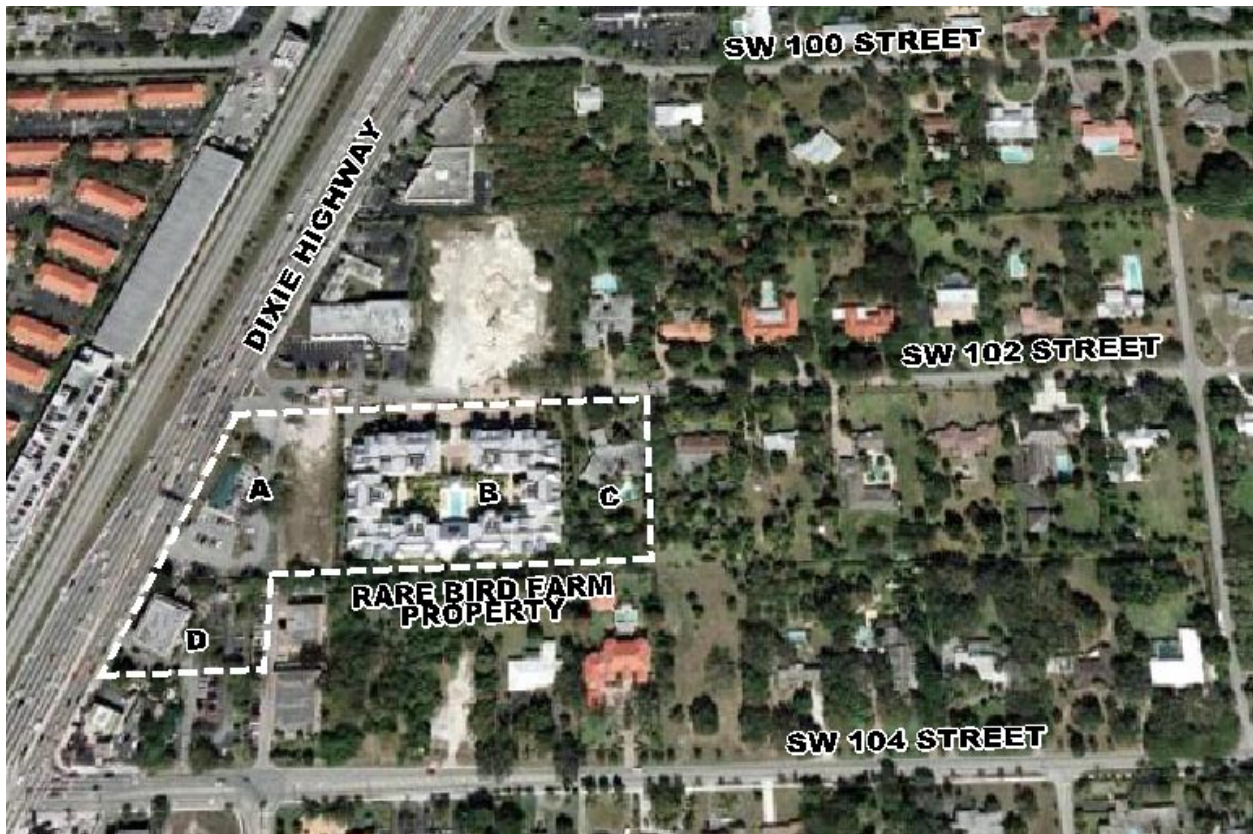
Ham, the first chimpanzee in space, relaxes on board the recovery ship after his successful mission.



Jinx, the ice skating chimp, celebrates Ham's accomplishments.

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This 2005 satellite photograph shows the former Rare Bird Farm property 44 years after its closing. The property is now divided into four sections: A – Denny's, which closed in 2007 and is now the Dixie 102 Plaza, B – The Reserve of Pinecrest, C – Private Residence, D – Washington Mutual (Chase) Bank.

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Flagler Grove Park, a three-acre facility that opened in May, 2008, includes lighted youth soccer fields, covered spectator seating, a playground, parking, and restrooms.

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A 2009 view of the site of the Hinson Home & Rare Bird Farm, now the Dixie 102 Plaza, looking southeast at the corner of Dixie Highway and SW 102nd Street, in the Village of Pinecrest. The Reserve of Pinecrest stands in the background.