Gene Zapf: Jacksonville Beach Hospitality Man

The George Zapfs moved from Germany to Florida in the 19th century, settling in Sanford, marrying on February 26, 1893, and producing their son, Eugene George Zapf, on November 11, 1894. Between 1900 and 1910, the three moved to Pablo Beach, Florida where they would spend the rest of their lives. That the family moved to the Jacksonville area is no surprise. The St. Johns River was a connector between Sanford and Jacksonville. The most prominent beaches' hotelier W. H. Adams, Sr. lived in Sanford before moving to the Jacksonville area. The Zapfs and the Adams were both in the bar and hotels business at the beaches and knew each other. George had a saloon; his widow Christina would own and operate a rooming or boarding house, and Gene, as he was known, made his mark in Pablo/Jacksonville Beach as a saloon keeper, hotel owner/manager, and civic leader.

As many homeowners in Pablo Beach in 1910, George owned a retail business and rented to lodgers in his private home. His saloon, presumably on the main street of the tiny burg, Pablo Avenue, was busiest during the four month tourist season. In his home lived two boarders, A. M Gallett (age 55), a carpenter, and Walter L. Anderson (age 22) a house painter from Illinois, the three Zapfs, and an African American cook, Essie Drayton (age 22). He had been born in Germany on August 19, 1859 and moved to the United States in 1889 where he became a citizen as did his wife. When the United States joined World War I against Germany and its allies on April 6, 1917, Gene enlisted in Navy on July 7, 1917 at Jacksonville Recruiting Station. He was 22 years and 8 months old. He was an American by birth and his parents were naturalized Americans but he had to wonder if he would be fighting German relatives.
He never did. He served at the Naval Rifle Range, in Mt. Pleasant, South Carolina (next to Charleston) from November 16, 1917 until April 22, 1918. Then he joined the crew of the USS Granite State on April 22, 1918 as a Seaman and stayed until June 12th. Then the Navy sent him to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania from June 12-June 28, 1918 as a Machinist Mate 2nd Class. He finally got to Europe, to Plymouth in, Devon, England on June 28, staying until his 24th birthday, November 11, 1918. He was a Machinist Mate 1st Class, the rank at which he was discharged on September 15, 1919. 4
The Zapfs built their own building on Pablo Avenue, one that had a tower as seen in the photograph above. At various times, it would contain Zapf’s bar (the name would change), his wife’s beauty parlor, Vinagene’s, a Bennett’s Drug Store, and a home. When Jacksonville Beach redeveloped the business district and turned Pablo Avenue between Third Street North and the ocean into a city-owned public area, the Zapf Building was destroyed.

His parents made the trip home to Germany a few years after the war. George was 62, Christina 52. They arrived in New York on the SS George Washington on December 3, 1921. It had sailed from Bremen, Germany. As it turned out, George lived a little more than a year afterwards, dying on December 26, 1922. Gene took over his father’s saloon, the Zapf Palm Garden.\(^5\)

In 1924, Zapf was one of the prominent men who formed a partnership to start construction of the Casa Marina Hotel. Mayor Joe Bussey owned of the Pablo Motel. Leonard Usina was president of the State Bank of Pablo and vice president of the Bank of South Jacksonville. Henry Bethune Phillips, after whom Phillips Highway would be named, chaired the Florida State Road Board. He also served as county judge. F.C. Sharp, owned the Forsyth Bowling Alley in Jacksonville and ran who ran the Pablo drug store. Zapf was vice president of the State Bank of Pablo, the owner of the popular Zapf Palm Court, a seasoned city councilman, and active in promoting Pablo Beach.\(^6\) The hotel with its two
stories and 60 rooms opened on June 6, 1925. It was the first fire proof hotel in Northeast Florida.

At age thirty, Gene was a leader of the Pablo Beach business community as chairman of the Board of Trade [Chamber of Commerce in modern parlance] in 1925 when the 885-person town became Jacksonville Beach. The vote in favor of the change from Pablo Beach to Jacksonville Beach was a landslide. The mayor, Joe Bussey, the town council chair, Neal Finklestein, and, from Jacksonville, Mayor, John T. Alsop, Jr. with City Councilmen Chick Acosta and Thomas Imeson lent their gravitas to the effort. All expected that the town by the sea would grow and prosper as a result.7

As with many families, the Zapfs took in lodgers to earn extra income. There was not enough affordable housing for workers in Pablo Beach so this was also a public service. In 1930, Gene and his wife Alsina M. Zapf rented to three lodgers: Hodge T Dickinson (age 67) and born in Alabama, Bruce J Kingston (age 24) and born in Ohio, and James M Gilmore (age 28) born in Florida.

Pablo/Jacksonville Beach had been founded by a railroad company to be a resort town and the depot was a few short blocks from Pablo Avenue but the Florida East Coast Railway stopped its route to the beach. Visitors and commuters could drive to Pablo Beach via the beach boulevard8 to Atlantic
Beach and then turning south and traveling a few more miles to the amusement area in Jacksonville Beach. The boardwalk, as locals called it, had carnival rides, food and drink emporiums, games of chance, and such. A very big draw was the pier built in 1922 where one could dance, often to big name orchestras. In daylight, people fished from it.

1922 Shad's Pier

Courtesy of Beaches Museum

In 1928, a large wooden roller coaster opened. Its cars would reach 50 miles per hour as they sped along their way.
Jacksonville Beach needed direct access to Jacksonville in order to prosper and to grow; the FEC right of way turned into a highway would solve the problem. Zapf, chairman of the Jacksonville Beach city commission, led the delegation of Jacksonville Beach businessmen to meet with the Southside Business Men’s Club in February, 1933 to form a united front to get the highway built. Jacksonville Beach Mayor W. E. Montgomery spoke against building the road to Mineral City (Ponte Vedra Beach) since that would not help the more areas such as his town. Discussions continued in November led by the delegation of Ben McCormick, Gene Zapf, and W. E. Montgomery with the Southside club. Zapf saw the acquisition of the right of way in 1945 but not the completion of the highway in 1949.9

Zapf’s life changed in the next few years. He switched from being the manager and principal owner of the Casa Marina; it was sold in 1944 to the Hillyer and Lovan Company of Jacksonville.10 He focused on his Dutch Tavern with the Bamboo Bar. His marriage to Alsina ended in 1940 and she and their eleven year old daughter moved to West 16th Street in Jacksonville; Alsina had three female lodgers. Gene also had lodgers in 1940, a young man from South Dakota, and an elderly father and his early middle aged son. They lived at 223 Pablo Avenue a few doors down from his Dutch Tavern.
By 1945, he would be married to Vina Watwood Zapf and they would run the tavern together while living in Neptune Beach near the Intracoastal Waterway.

Ocean Beach Reporter, October 15, 1937
Life ended for Eugene George Zapf on July 15, 1948 at age 53. He suffered a fatal heart attack at his ranch. Because of recent illness, he had leased the Bamboo Bar to R. T. Gillis. His wife Vina and his mother Christina survived him.
Vina owned the Vinagene Beauty Salon and lived in their home on Kings Road in Neptune Beach until she swapped it for the Dr. Robert’s home at 1204 North First Street. She felt isolated living in the heavily wooded area west of Penman Road and bordering the Intracoastal Waterway. Gene, her husband, had called his twenty acre property Dunroven.\textsuperscript{12} She would die on December 16, 1952.
His widowed mother, Kresenzia (Christina), had run a rooming/boarding house, the Beach View Inn on the ocean front at 423 North First Street until her own death on November 3, 1952.
The Zapfs are buried in Warren Smith Cemetery in Jacksonville Beach, Florida. A large headstone marks the family plot.
Gene Zapf was a leading figure in the history of Jacksonville Beach, a member of the beach elite in his day, but he has largely been forgotten. He shouldn’t be. After serving his country in World War I as a sailor, he made his living in the local hospitality and tourist industry. He sold beverages, managed the ultra-modern Casa Marina Hotel, which he helped create, then owned and operated the Dutch Tavern as known as the Bamboo Bar. It was also a package store and night club. He headed the Board of Trade (Chamber of Commerce) for a time. He helped get Beach Boulevard for Jacksonville Beach. His civic mindedness made Jacksonville Beach and its neighbors a better place.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Without the archival collection of the Beaches Museum and History Park, this and other historical works could not be done. It has the only collection of newspapers of the Jacksonville beaches and an extensive collection of
photographs. Former archivist Taryn Rodríguez-Boette is a consummate professional as well as creative and amiable person. Sarah Jackson, her successor, promises to be the same.

Paul and Midge Marino were helpful in dating photographs.

Familysearch.org is a very valuable searchable database. I used it to learn more about the people in this story and, sometimes, found legal documents.

The United State Decennial Census and the Florida State Census (1935 and 1945) were invaluable.

Paula, my lovely wife, put up with me.

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1 They are listed in the "Florida Marriages Index, 1837-1974" as being "Of Sanford" and marrying each other on February 26, 1893 in Orlando, Florida. Their son, Eugene George, was born on November 11, 1894, presumably in Sanford.

2 Kresenzia Schoepf Zapf (1868 – 1952) was her German married name. Anglicization turned it into Christina.

3 My "Pablo Beach, Florida 1910" describes the people of the tiny settlement.

4 See "WWI Veterans: Jacksonville Beaches & Mayport, Florida," for Zapf and other beaches veterans.

5 Bill Foley, “Casa Marina set tone for Beaches in ’20s,” Jacksonville.com, April 26, 1997


8 Eventually called Atlantic Boulevard. Beach Boulevard, opened in late 1949, was called New Beach Boulevard for many years.


10 “Casa Marina Hotel Sold," The Beaches Outlook, Summer. 1944.

11 Ocean Beach Reporter, July 16, 1948. Presumably his daughter Alsina survived him as well.
12 Keith Roberts to Don Mabry, email message, July 18, 2014. Keith was raised on the property.