

THE WAY WE WERE

Stories enchanted in a tree: The history of Constitution Green

By Aleksandra Ciecielag, PhD

How many of us have a special place in our lives that, while insignificant for everybody else, means so much to us? Our cities are full of such places. Places that become silent witnesses of our happy, sad or even most memorable moments. Places that outlive those who care for them and often carry their stories for generations.

Constitution Green is one such place. It is a less than 2-acre green park in downtown Orlando, located at the corner of Summerlin Avenue and East South Street. Its hallmark is a beautiful sprawling oak tree with branches forming an almost magical aura in this small space of peace in the middle of the hustle and bustle of the city. The oak tree, which is listed on an Orlando City official Significant Trees Map, most likely remembers the first settlers who came to the area as its age is estimated to be between 125 and 175 years old.

What it definitely remembers, though, is when an Italian immigrant, Philip Caruso, moved to Florida from New York in 1926, purchasing land and starting what would later become a Central Florida citrus empire. The Caruso family owned close to 6,000 acres, including Constitution Green, and the successful Southern Fruit Distributors Inc., makers of Bluebird brand orange juice.

Eventually, the freezes of the 1980s forced the Caruso family to close the juice plant on Michigan Street and Orange

Avenue, and they invested in real estate instead. Constitution Green became the only remaining green space in the area, and the family agreed to lease it to the City of Orlando for a symbolic \$1 a year.

In 2015, news broke of the Carusos selling the land that we know now as Constitution Green to developers. While many individuals protested the sale, one of the people very involved in a campaign to save the park-like area was Eric Rollings, then Orange County's soil and water supervisor. At first, Rollings had no idea how much this nearly-two-centuries-old oak tree meant to Orlandoans.

In an oral history with the Orange County Regional History Center, Rollings said: "So this woman, who was about 93 years old, saw me on TV and she gave me a couple of pictures. It turned out she was married underneath that tree in 1931! And she had a couple of other ones, like their 25th anniversary picture underneath there. ... This other lady came up to me and



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A recent view of the beautiful sprawling tree at Constitution Green.

said, 'Can I tell you how important this tree is to me?'"

And the stories just kept coming, and people who had memories with the old oak tree got together and eventually convinced the Caruso family not to sell. The site was purchased by the City of Orlando in 2016 and is now officially a park area including a designated space for dogs.

As Rollings remembered: "Those were the happy stories that I want to take with me to my grave. Because I know as long as I am alive, every time I pass by there I was like: I hope that somebody remembers all the work and the amazing ex-

periences that came out of the tree."

Thanks to the community's efforts, the oak tree will stay in downtown Orlando to continue as a silent witness to the stories that will hopefully be shared for generations to come.

If you have interesting stories about Orlando and Central Florida to share, we would love to hear from you! Please contact Oral History Archivist Aleksandra Ciecielag at aleksandra.ciecielag@ocfl.net.

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A Bluebird Brand Citrus pulp bag from Southern Fruit Distributors Inc., which, like Constitution Green, was owned by the Caruso family.