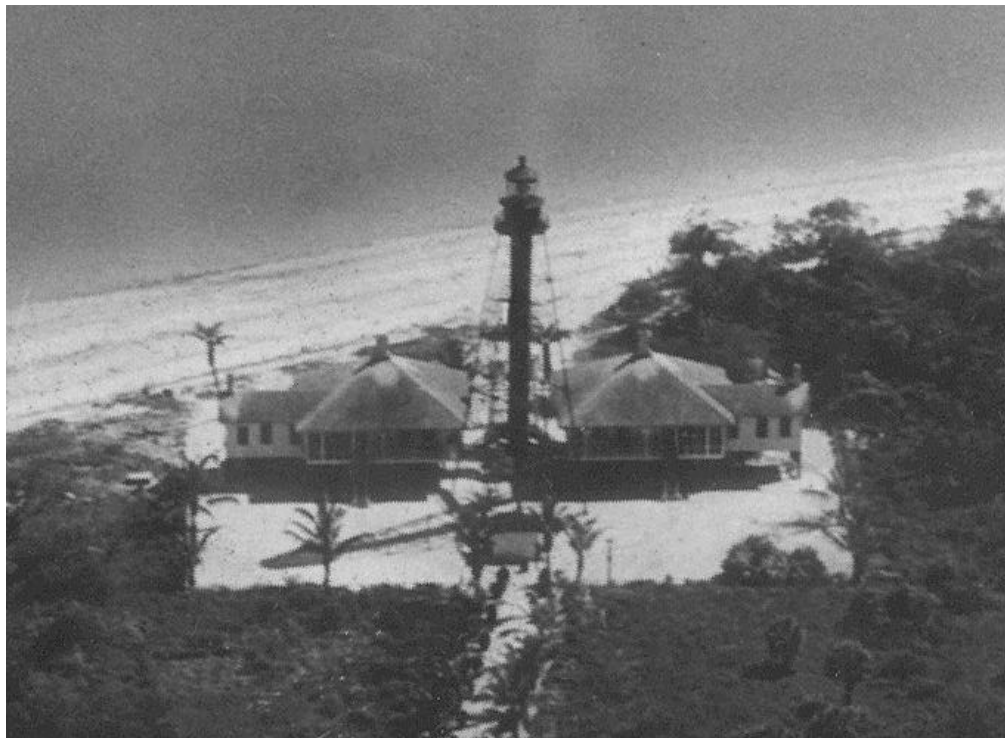


## Volume I, Number 3

### SANIBEL'S LIGHTHOUSE – THE DECLINE of a PUBLIC TREASURE

RECENTLY, MY WIFE JEAN AND I took her niece and her husband, Debra and John Cigal, to Sanibel for the day. The couple lives in Westfield, Massachusetts. Foremost, we wanted to take them to the lighthouse where Debra temporarily lived with us 44 years ago. Later that day, we would take her to visit the old Sanibel schoolhouse she attended during second grade.

We parked in the wide cul de sac beside the lighthouse for a few moments to reminisce about the days when my family resided in the easternmost building, Lighthouse Quarters 2, which was originally the assistant light keeper's residence. I explained to Debra and John how the original well-maintained compound of the Sanibel Island Light Station, the open space that she and my children once used as a playground, had started to decline into its present state of mismanagement, in 1972. For over three decades now, this historically significant piece of public land has been grossly mismanaged by the agencies that are, or were over time, responsible for its care after 1972. This conversation opened an old wound.



**The Sanibel Island Light Station, circa 1933. The Gulf-front entrance road is visible between the trees in the upper right hand corner. The white sand and shell surface of the maintained compound is clearly visible. Ground cover plants were not allowed to become established, however, coconut palms were used for landscaping, but at the very outer edges of the compound. The compound measured approximately 150- x 190-feet. The site was manicured primarily for fire prevention and suppression but it had an important secondary purpose, too. Breezes and stronger winds could drift across the clearing and blow away the almost ever-present mosquitoes and sand flies that were associated with a more primitive Sanibel Island. In the days before air conditioning, natural air flow beneath the quarters also helped cool them in the summertime. In the foreground the small trimmed Australian pines are visible. They once lined the concrete walkway which led to the station's dock on San Carlos Bay. These trees continued to grow untrimmed after 1949. They were taken out by high winds during Hurricane Charley, in 2004, or intentionally removed by work crews in the aftermath cleanup. Removal of these and other exotic species of trees from Point Ybel by the City of Sanibel was their most positive land management action at the lighthouse — but restoration must go further.**

The owner of Sanibel's Point Ybel, where the Sanibel Island Light Station is located, is the U.S. Coast Guard. They transferred their responsibility for management, other than operation and maintenance of the light tower and the oil house, to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, in 1949. If my memory serves me correctly, more recently the Coast Guard reclaimed their exclusive use to include control of a 50- by 50-foot piece of ground where the light tower and present oil house have rested since 1884 and 1894 respectively.

The first two refuge managers assigned to the Sanibel refuge by the Service continued proper and traditional landscape maintenance of the compound grounds, a fire prevention/suppression technique that had been in place since 1884. Shortly, after the third manager reported for duty, plans to relocate the refuge headquarters were firmed up and the decision was made to stop the labor-intensive practice of grounds keeping at the lighthouse. In 1982, management responsibilities for Point Ybel flowed to the City of Sanibel when the Service moved to its present refuge headquarters on Sanibel-Captiva Road. The integrity of the light station compound continued its decline.

At every opportunity, since 1990, I've spoken out publicly about this issue. I'll continue to do this until — if I live long enough to see it happen — that joyful day arrives and the lighthouse compound is restored and the facility becomes the first class educational and historical site it should be. To accomplish this without a combative approach will take community unity and the support of the newcomers who now serve as policymakers for most of Sanibel Island — the city council members. They must become aware and educated to recognize the deplorable condition of the historic site. One among the five should offer, and the council should unanimously pass, a resolution of intent that will challenge the status quo, direct the city manager to act, and ultimately lead to the correction of the problem. A call on the interpretive and restoration strengths of the Sanibel Historical Committee to begin the task of implementing restorative and interpretive measures seems a logical pathway. This committee has done a commendable

job on the management and interpretation of the old island buildings that have been moved to the Sanibel Historical Village on Dunlop Road, not far from City Hall. But, far too much emphasis has been placed on the Village while the lighthouse compound was left to decay. That dedicated group should be charged with the responsibility of forming a lighthouse subcommittee who can develop a comprehensive plan, rally public support, and through city-generated grant applications seek and obtain necessary funding to restore the Sanibel Lighthouse grounds — as a starting point for generalized protection and interpretation. Funding could, and probably should, include a cut of the lucrative parking fees that are being collected at Point Ybel. I'm sure the Florida Lighthouse Association (FLA) would be happy to lend their helping hand and expertise.

Incidentally, someone should be appointed by the city to represent Sanibel and sit on the FLA Board to represent the Sanibel Lighthouse, a position I held until I resigned in 2004.

One lightning strike or a cigarette butt tossed into the encroaching vegetation and in minutes both historic lighthouse keepers quarters will be gone — lost to posterity. To prevent such a disaster, the city must immediately restore the lighthouse compound to its historic configuration and remove all the vegetation growing within that zone to protect the site! The garage at Quarters 2 should go also. As a former long-time resident of Sanibel Island, I'm ashamed of what managers have allowed to continue at the Sanibel Island Light Station. I urge the current land stewards to step up and fix it, now!



**A composite photograph of some areas of the grounds at the Sanibel Lighthouse. These two photos were taken on Saturday, April 14th. In the left-hand image part of the oil house is visible to the left. Despite the date given on the sign attached to this building this structure was constructed in 1894, not a decade earlier. The base of the light tower is pictured with most of the ground overgrown with highly flammable, almost explosive, cabbage palms. A post-mounted metal plaque is visible and this is the only element of real interpretation that exists on site. A long abandoned sea turtle information panel is nearby but has been overlooked being revitalized as a point of information about the lighthouse. The right-hand photo shows the unmaintained condition of the ground between the two living quarters. The issue is not to provide vegetative screening and a sense of privacy for the city employees who rent and live in these old structures, nor is another issue naive**

**protection of native vegetation, the issues are facility protection and proper interpretation of an invaluable historic site.**

Much of the area included in the above photos is within the 50-by 50-foot square plot under Coast Guard control. Although the above ground section of the light tower is periodically sandblasted and repainted, this vegetation indicates that the wrought iron pads which support and connect the tower to its concrete footer have not been uncovered, inspected, cleaned and repainted since 1949. It's doubtful the pads have actually been maintained since the work was last done in 1923 — 84 years ago! Their present condition is unknown, but it would be a wise move to tear out all the vegetation and clear the sand from around the pads for long overdue maintenance. When the light tower was erected, in 1884, the pads were at ground level. Sand, pushed up over them by storms and wind drift, has been completely covering the pads since 1945. They have also been flooded often by corrosive salt water. It makes me concerned over the future stability of the structure.

If the City of Sanibel is lazy and does not meet its responsibility to protect this registered historic site, then I suggest that perhaps the time has come for the creation of a non-profit locally based entity that will take on the task. Such an organization could easily muster national support and petition Coast Guard officials to begin the process of having the city's permit that grants them use and responsibility for the keepers quarters and the immediate compound grounds nullified. The new non-profit organization would then negotiate another permit with the Coast Guard for management and interpretation of the historic lighthouse compound.

Lest we forget, some of Sanibel's citizenry rose to unsuccessfully challenge construction of the new high-span bridge. Why not now channel that energy and financial base and reap much broader public support for a much higher goal? Now is the time for Sanibel to unite as a community and work toward saving the Sanibel Lighthouse complex. Such an organization would be chartered to properly maintain, manage, protect, and interpret this very important regional historical site in perpetuity.

If all else fails, the next time the City of Sanibel's permit from the Coast Guard nears expiration it may be time for the Lee County Board of County Commissioners to intervene in any permit renegotiations and take control to another level. The county government could jump into the process and seriously bid to acquire the permit to manage, or even receive title to Point Ybel, when the U.S. Coast Guard decides to fully relinquish ownership. The latter has been under consideration. Perhaps Lee County would take a more serious approach to management of the land, the beaches, and the lighthouse compound than the City of Sanibel has in the 25 years they've controlled it. Sanibel Island, through her city government, has recently reaped the financial rewards generated from parking fees and tourism grants, but she has been given little back for her history.

Charles LeBuff  
May 2, 2007

**POSTED COMMENTS/FEEDBACK ON THIS ARTICLE**

Emilie Alfino of the Island Reporter followed-up on the above commentary with an article about the lighthouse and my management criticisms in the Reporter's issue of May 11th. The following is used with permission of the Island Reporter.

## **Long-time keeper calls for repairs, improvements at Sanibel Lighthouse**

By EMILIE ALFINO, [ealfino@breezenewspapers.com](mailto:ealfino@breezenewspapers.com)

Walking around the grounds of the Sanibel Lighthouse Tuesday, its keeper for 22 years, Charles LeBuff, complained, "It just looks like hell. I have a lot of blood, sweat and tears in this place. It was a great way of life for me."

LeBuff's claims the keeper's quarters and surrounding land under the city's care are poorly maintained, the grounds neglected, and fire protection less than ideal. "It wouldn't take much to at least get started cleaning up this mess. Here the city is spending all this money at the Historical Village, and in 25 years they haven't spent anything to restore these buildings."

But the city has been spending money on maintenance, replacing braces, the storage building roof and both cottages' air handlers in 2005 (\$15,600); making \$4,000 work of repairs to the east cottage in 2004; and painting both cottages four years ago at a cost of more than \$39,000. Both cottage roofs were replaced that year (\$19,800), and about \$9,600 was spent on other repairs.

"We've done a lot of work there," Public Works Director Gates Castle said. "To say we haven't done any maintenance is not true at all. I don't know what he expects or how he maintained it when he lived there. My guys take pride in what they do."

"We have made a number of improvements at the lighthouse property, and within our existing resources and budget we are maintaining it to the best of our ability," City Manager Judie Zimomra said.

LeBuff said the vegetation in the confines of the original compound should be removed, especially vegetation between the buildings. "When this was built, all the vegetation was non-existent because of the threat of fire. That should all be removed except for the gumbo limbo. Sanibel has a hang-up about native vegetation; they shouldn't even consider that in this. This needs to be cleared out," LeBuff charged. "The cabbage palm between the cottages — if a fire started between those buildings, it would explode, and those old pine and cypress cottages would go down in a matter of minutes. I don't know if the city cares that much about it."

Upon learning of LeBuff's claims, city officials immediately directed Sanibel Fire & Rescue to inspect the property for potential fire hazards. "We'll clear out whatever they declare to be a fire hazard," Castle said. But Sanibel Fire & Rescue Chief Danny Duncan reported no fire hazards on the site, to the extent they have jurisdiction to look. "We don't go in private homes and inspect residences," Duncan explained. "For the most part, we do recommend people cut brush around their homes way back. But I just can't imagine a brush fire at that end of the island."

Members of the city's Historical Preservation Committee for years have wanted more work to be done on the keeper's quarters — now the oldest remaining buildings on Sanibel Island — but said they think LeBuff's claims are exaggerated.

"I think [LeBuff's comments] may be somewhat exaggerated but they're definitely true," Jody Brown said.

"Let's hope we can get something done." Sam Bailey, long-time chairman of the Historical Preservation Committee called the lighthouse a "monumental part of not only Sanibel but the entire west coast of Florida.

It may not be as bad as Charles brings up, but it's good that he is bringing it up, because there's no question it needs care."

LeBuff wants other improvements made as well. "Take out the chain link fences and put a fence around the entire perimeter of the original compound to protect it," he suggested. He pointed to rusted pilings under the buildings. "They haven't painted these pilings in 25 years, and they're starting to rust again." The asbestos siding on the cottages is not original and cannot be replaced because of environmental issues, but LeBuff said it needs a power washing.

Where would the money come from? "The city is always getting grants from somebody to do something," LeBuff claimed.

But "you can't get grants for land you don't own," Zimomra explained," and the land on which the lighthouse compound sits is owned by the Federal Bureau of Land Management. The city has a longstanding request to purchase the property from the federal government. "We want to own the land," Zimomra added. "It's our long-term goal, and we have in the past negotiated with the federal government because we do want to make some permanent improvements."

LeBuff said his "main gripe is that in the 25 years the city has managed [the lighthouse], they haven't done anything to interpret its historic value. With management comes the responsibility to restore it to the way it was when it was the Sanibel Island Light Station."

Like members of the city's Historical Preservation Committee, LeBuff would like to see a museum in the lighthouse keeper's quarters someday.

In the most recent edition of his online newsletter, LeBuff called on city council to "become proactively responsible and rush to the aid of this registered historical site."

In his newsletter, LeBuff recounted some of the Sanibel Light's history: "The facility was built in 1884 and the light tower, still under U.S. Coast Guard control, remains an active aid to navigation. The city took over management of the popular lighthouse point in 1982 after the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service relocated its Sanibel headquarters to Sanibel-Captiva Road." LeBuff explained the Coast Guard is responsible for the care of the tower and 50 x 50 square-foot area surrounding it, including the 1884 oil house.

LeBuff believes a museum would make the best use of the historical lighthouse compound. "One building could be a caretaker's quarters or residence, and the other could be interpreted for the history of the light station. Any other city, county or community that has a lighthouse is taking an active role to revitalize it. This is on the National Register of Historic Sites. As its managers, the city has a responsibility to take it to the next level."

"We would like that, too." Bailey said of transforming the keeper's quarters into a museum. "We're not really pressing, but I would like to see that very much. There's a world of stuff that could go in there that goes back to way before when they had to go light the gas lights. That was when I was a kid.

"The lighthouse is by far the biggest and most outstanding structure on the island. It's a very important part of our history," Bailed said, adding that its picture is on his grocery store's bags. Brown said the Historical Preservation Committee decided some time ago that any time a building became available for employee housing, they would request somebody be relocated from the keeper's quarters "so the keeper's quarters could be restored to its early 20th century look to be used as a museum."

The tenants in the lighthouse buildings are Public Works employees there as part of the below-market-rate housing program under Community Housing and Resources. As part of their lease agreement, they have to work a certain number of hours performing maintenance chores consisting mostly of picking up litter, grading the roadway, and caring for the cottages' interiors. Castle said recent interior work has included cleaning of ducts and air conditioning maintenance. "Beach maintenance people take care of vegetation and painting," Castle explained.

The Historical Preservation Committee has been working to form a nonprofit, 501(c)(3) corporation to take over the Sanibel Historical Village and Museum. If that effort succeeds, could the lighthouse buildings somehow become an off-site annex to the museum and fall under the umbrella of that nonprofit?

Alex Werner said that might be a possibility but, "like everything else around here, it needs a lot of study and planning." And housing for the tenants remains an obstacle in any event. "You can't just throw a family out because you want a museum," Werner said. "If Mr. LeBuff has these concerns, he should come before the Historical Preservation Committee's next meeting."

LeBuff liked the idea of the lighthouse properties someday being able to become part of the village's nonprofit corporation, if that's possible. "I think that's the way to go. Somebody needs to do something. It's time."

I felt compelled to respond to the above article to better explain what I feel the course for restoration at Sanibel Light should be. The following letter was submitted to the Island Reporter and it is published here as an addendum.

To the Editor, Island Reporter,

I read Emilie Alfino's Sanibel lighthouse story in last week's Island Reporter and enjoyed it. My initial reaction was that for starters a clarification is needed. I was never an official Coast Guard (CG) light keeper at Sanibel Light; however, I was the last resident federal employee to be given job-related assignments which required me to frequently work as an assistant light keeper with the offsite CG Aids to Navigation Team that operated and maintained the light.

The comments from the city administrators and historical committee people were interesting, however, I wonder how many of them really completely read and fully understood my Newsletter commentary? Did they read the photo captions? I think some of them misinterpreted my concerns and criticisms.

Monies spent on normal maintenance to the wooden structures at the Sanibel Island Light Station were never a consideration of my outline, but the ongoing overall degradation of the Station's COMPOUND is. In the body of my commentary I present an accurate history of ground management and potential threats to the facility and I call for restoration of the light station compound and historical interpretation of the site — by

any means. I don't think I've ever professed a "kick out the tenants now" approach (where did that inaccurate interpretation come from?), but I'd endorse a more orderly staged transition as I outline below.

During my interview, Emilie asked me what I thought should be done at the lighthouse to restore it. Knowing I wouldn't be empowered to oversee a transition, unless I was hired as a consultant or rubbed my magic lamp and I can't seem to find my magic wand, so I hesitantly made a few suggestions that were quoted in her article. Now that that door has been opened, here's a more detailed outline of what, in my opinion, should occur:

1. The next time city employees bid for the opportunity to live at the Light Station, Quarters 1 should be excluded from the city housing program.
2. Sanibel's Historical Preservation Committee should then begin work to restore vacated Quarters 1 to an earlier condition. I'll pick 1923, because actual remodeling drawings are available for that year. After renovation, Quarters 1 will become a Visitor Center/Museum with a modest entrance fee that is pledged to educational interpretation and maintenance at the Light Station. Required work at this stage would include re-pointing the brick cistern base and oil house, reinstalling a wooden cistern, and re-roofing the oil house with period corrugated metal. The latter will require CG approval. Reinstallation of the former screened section of porch and stairways from each quarter's deck to the light tower landing should be seriously considered. In the future, budgets should include costs of having the asbestos shingle siding removed in stages and the original wooden siding hidden beneath it painted with modern paints. The iron pilings, which support the quarters, should be assessed for their structural integrity. Can these be replaced systematically; scheduled over time, with pre-stressed concrete pilings that duplicate them in appearance and can be painted to match the original color (they weren't white!)? It seems the supports have about reached their maximum life expectancy — they are, after all, 123 years old. Lighthouse artifacts now housed at the Historical Village would move to the Quarters 1 Museum.
3. Have engineers from Sanibel's Public Works Department survey and stake the extremities of the historic compound plus an additional predetermined distance beyond the perimeter of that survey. A Public Works crew then moves in with equipment and removes every piece of vegetation that is now growing inside the compound and transplants any candidate plants worthy of relocation to the outside. At this time all the existing chain link fencing is also removed. Remove, or relocate elsewhere outside the compound, the garage at Quarters 2 (this was built in 1976). Grade the entire compound site down to its original flat construction level (1884). This would reexpose the pads of the light tower for periodic maintenance. Install a well-aligned new chain link security fence with appropriate gates around the site, just outside a replica of the compound's 1923 boundary single-rail, decorative fence. The compound's ground surface would then continue to be managed as a vegetation-free zone.

4. At the expiration of the quarter's rental cycle, the city should hire a Sanibel Island Light Station Curator/Caretaker and offer Quarters 2 as a residence for that employee and his or her family. Then begin the restoration of the exterior of Quarters 2. This would include tearing out the cubicle office that I enclosed on the Gulf side porch in 1976, and now in my opinion negatively impacts the structure's integrity. When financing becomes available, build a replica cistern and base in the proper location next to this structure, and install period gutters and downspouts on both quarters.
5. Plant a few lethal yellowing tolerant coconut palms just inside the compound's rail fence and presto, we've stepped back in time — without calling on a genie inside a magic lamp.

If Sanibel officials are really serious that they wish to acquire title to the federal lighthouse property maybe it's time they start developing a Master Plan outlining their vision for the future of the land and it's historical structures. Such a document might go a long way in convincing the CG and the Bureau of Land Management that the City of Sanibel should be conveyed/transferred title.

And, in closing, I find it unusual that no one Emilie interviewed on Sanibel commented on some of the other safety issues I raised. For example, just how damaged are the light tower's foundation pads from 84 years of rust? The Fire District's comments about fire hazards at the lighthouse are a joke! I can remember at least two serious wildfires at Point Ybel.

Charles LeBuff

May 18,2007

Editor's note — Bob England served as the last resident Officer-in-Charge (lighthouse keeper), at the U.S. Coast Guard's Sanibel Island Light Station. His tour of duty was from 1946 until the station was designated automated and unmanned in 1949.

## **"GIANT" GOPHER TORTOISES**

**A** TURTLE IS A TURTLE, IS A TERRAPIN, IS A TORTOISE, IS A SLIDER, AND IS A COOTER — they are known collectively as Chelonians. For common American usage all are turtles, but those we have grown to call the true tortoises live free of any dependence on their submersion in water. Most recent books on turtles present the maximum size of America's gopher tortoise as either 14.5- or 15-inches. To be correctly measured, the carapace — the top shell — must be spanned with calipers at its extremities. Measurements taken along the curve are not acceptable. Then the measurement must be verified by a competent herpetologist and published in a peer-reviewed scientific journal.

On 4 May, the News-Press featured a front-page story about a Fort Myers gopher tortoise that "measured 16.41 inches from front to back . . ." but the article did not state if the measurement was taken correctly. Hopefully, the shell of this "giant" will be measured by a qualified biologist and if it does exceed the 15-inch record, the documentation will then be properly published in the scientific literature.

Lee County is indeed the home of "giant" gopher tortoises and an earlier record for this turtle's maximum length also originated in Lee County. The average adult size for a gopher tortoise is 12 inches, but 13-inch long specimens aren't unusual. In the 50s and 60s my late friend, naturalist Jim Kenefick of Connecticut, was a regular winter visitor to Bonita Springs. One day, circa 1951, Jim happened to notice a stack of discarded sun-bleached gopher shells next to a black man's hut on the east side of U.S. 41. This was south of Bonita Springs and just south of the railroad tracks. Jim stopped and asked the occupant if he could look through the shells and he was granted permission. He selected the largest shell among the pile and was told the tortoise had been caught within walking distance of the cabin. Jim bought the white shell for 50-cents. The typical brown scutes or plates, which cover a live gopher's shell, had loosened, fallen away, and been lost. Jim would later measure the skeletal carapace of this specimen and find it to be 14.5-inches in straight-line length. He published his findings in the journal *Herpetologica*. So was recorded Lee County's first giant gopher — and its decades long citation in Roger Conant's classic book, *Reptiles and Amphibians of Eastern/Central North America*. In life it would have been larger had the scutes and body fluids been present. For years, this specimen remained the world's record gopher tortoise, but apparently more recently Jim's record was broken by a 15-incher. I'm unsure just where the larger specimen was collected or where in the literature it is first documented. Or, did someone extrapolate an estimated live measurement from Jim's bony shell?

Gopher tortoises are in serious trouble throughout their range. Threats to their survival come mostly because of roads and human development and destruction of the turtle's upland habitat. Regionally, in recent years a mysterious upper respiratory disease was said to be impacting the gopher tortoises of Sanibel Island. In a recent communication to me one of Florida's leading gopher tortoise biologists informed me that episode was a "hoax." I've asked him to contribute an article to this Newsletter on that subject. Several non-profit organizations specialize in seeing to it that this unique native turtle survives in Florida. I was rather surprised when I read this "giant" animal was injured in Fort Myers, and wasn't taken to the CROW facility on Sanibel for care. Their staff has a good track record when it comes to treating serious injuries to gopher tortoises.

Charles LeBuff  
May 4, 2007