

Margaret Hames

Conservationist and Mentor

Interview by Kim Zarillo, Conradina Chapter



Margaret Hames

Margaret Hames was born in 1921 in Washington, Georgia, to a family that raised their daughter to appreciate nature through example. The family sent Margaret to Agnes Scott College to become a medical doctor; she graduated with a B.A. in chemistry and zoology. While a student at Agnes Scott, Margaret was interviewed by a military general for a position with the Manhattan Project. She says it was only because the men were at war and anyone with a course in radioactivity could have been selected. As luck would have it, Margaret rejected the job offer because she had promised to marry Bill Hames, who later brought Margaret and their two children to Florida.

In 1966, Margaret, at the urging of a friend, applied for a teaching position at a junior high school and was promptly hired. In those days, new teachers were assigned the lower phase students (who might not be able to read and write). Margaret's classroom was alive with animals and activities to help make science interesting to her students. Today, grown-up students greet her fondly. After eleven years of teaching, she retired from the school system to begin a life-long career teaching conservation.

Margaret had one college botany class, which she classified as "boring." In the 1970s, she shadowed botanist Erna Nixon, who lived in Melbourne Village. Erna always made her extensive botanical library available to her "students," but she did not practice spoon-fed

instruction. Margaret learned how to use a taxonomic key from fellow plant enthusiast Bonnie Arbuckle, who brought books from the Fairchild Tropical Garden. Margaret fondly remembers the first book they used in the field by Mary Francis Baker.

Erna Nixon shared her love for Florida's natural communities and taught her students to share their knowledge of nature's wonders. She was especially partial to the mesic-hydric hammock that straddles Melbourne Village and West Melbourne. On the West Melbourne side, the hammock was slated for development. Margaret was part of a committee formed by the American Homesteading Foundation of Melbourne Village to find a way to save the hammock from development. Tours were given for city and county officials and the public to show off the site's diversity. One day, Margaret received a card from a friend suggesting that The Nature Conservancy (TNC) might help acquire the property. TNC took an option on the land while the county and the state prepared a funding package to purchase it.

Now called Erna Nixon Park, this was the first land acquisition of many more to come that Margaret and friends would work to achieve. Margaret shies from taking credit for the successful outcome of projects because she rightfully gives credit to the many people and groups involved. She learned from experience that success comes from a community approach of enlisting experts and interested individuals and groups to work together for a solution. She is a visionary leader and a team player who has won the respect of many foes by applying this method. Margaret's inspirational leadership has won her state and local recognition (including an award from the Governor and a mentor's award from FNPS).

Lori Wilson Park, another successful land acquisition located on the barrier island, is now a small, isolated remnant of long-gone continuous coastal strand and maritime hammock. Brevard County had designed a park with a road cut through the center of eight acres of maritime hammock to connect two parking lots. The hammock harbored tropicals restricted to Brevard County barrier islands and a canopy of red bay, live oak, and an unusual maritime variant of *Quercus virginiana*. The county had been advised that if a road was needed, it was better to put it through the hammock than to open a place for Brazilian Pepper trees.

The park design met with opposition from the local Conradina Chapter of FNPS, local garden clubs, Indian River Audubon Society, the Space Coast League of Women Voters, scout groups, and various community leaders. The county received its advice from Dr. Dan Austin, so Margaret enlisted technical help from another well-known botanist, Dr. Dan Ward. When the county sent the bulldozer operator to clear the road, he told Margaret: "I have to do my job or I'll be fired." Margaret asked him if they sat in front of the bulldozer would he do his job. She and Betsy Woods sat down in front of the bulldozer, the operator's boss directed him to stop work, and the park design was subsequently amended to keep the hammock intact. During the Lori Wilson Park controversy, some FNPS board members let it be known that they did not want FNPS members participating in such activities. However, little heed was paid to this and conservation activities continued, with Margaret leading the way.

Developers often say, "buy the land if you don't want me to develop it." Margaret has taken them at their word. In 1990, she helped to organize and campaign for Preservation Brevard, a political action committee that campaigned for a countywide referendum of land acquisition. The Brevard County Environmentally Endangered Lands referendum passed by 60% in 1990. Margaret served on the county land selection committee with other well-known scientists. She walked most of the properties considered for acquisition, typing her flora taxa lists on an old fashioned typewriter. Although she considers herself an amateur botanist, she could take a group in the field and have them exhausted with the number of species and her extensive field key tips.

Margaret is also a member of Audubon but laments that she never could learn the "dicky birds." Margaret had read about the U.S. Department of Interior's process of developing Habitat Conservation Plans (HCP), a unique method of bringing interested parties together to resolve the conflict of development and habitat loss. The Brevard County scrub jay population was showing signs of trouble, so Margaret, Indian River Audubon Society, and the Space Coast League of Women Voters thought an HCP might be a solution to protect scrub plants and animals. Margaret was instrumental in having a Scrub HCP Committee formed of interested parties chosen by their own groups. Unfortunately, two to three years into the process, "property rights" groups became a political force in Florida and essentially killed the Scrub Conservation and Development Plan in Brevard. Disappointed with the political fate of the SCDP, Margaret does not give up hope that land acquisition remains an answer to conservation.

When you hear that buttery Georgia accent on the phone, be ready for a conservation adventure. As Margaret says, "If you don't try to do it, then you would not have done your part." The Margaret Hames Nature Center at the Turkey Creek Sanctuary is a great testament to Margaret's legacy; rated as a number one spot to visit by Florida Living magazine, it receives 20,000 to 25,000 visitors every year from around the world.

Margaret has taught us much not only about the real Florida, but the very important practice of working together for conservation. She will forever be an inspiration to those of us in Brevard County, as well as environmentalists around the state.

Bill Partington

Founder of FNPS

Personal statement

I am a semi-retired environmentalist who still gives courses for Elderhostel six or more weeks a year. I also lecture for groups on a number of natural history topics using such hopefully impressive titles as "Biodiversity" (for that I can use almost any of my thousands of disorganized slides) or "Common Florida Natural Areas," using our handsome brochure created by Jeff Parker with photos by Jim Valentine. I've photographed wildlife in Kenya, India, Trinidad, Costa Rica, Galapagos Islands, Amazon, Puerto Rico, and especially