



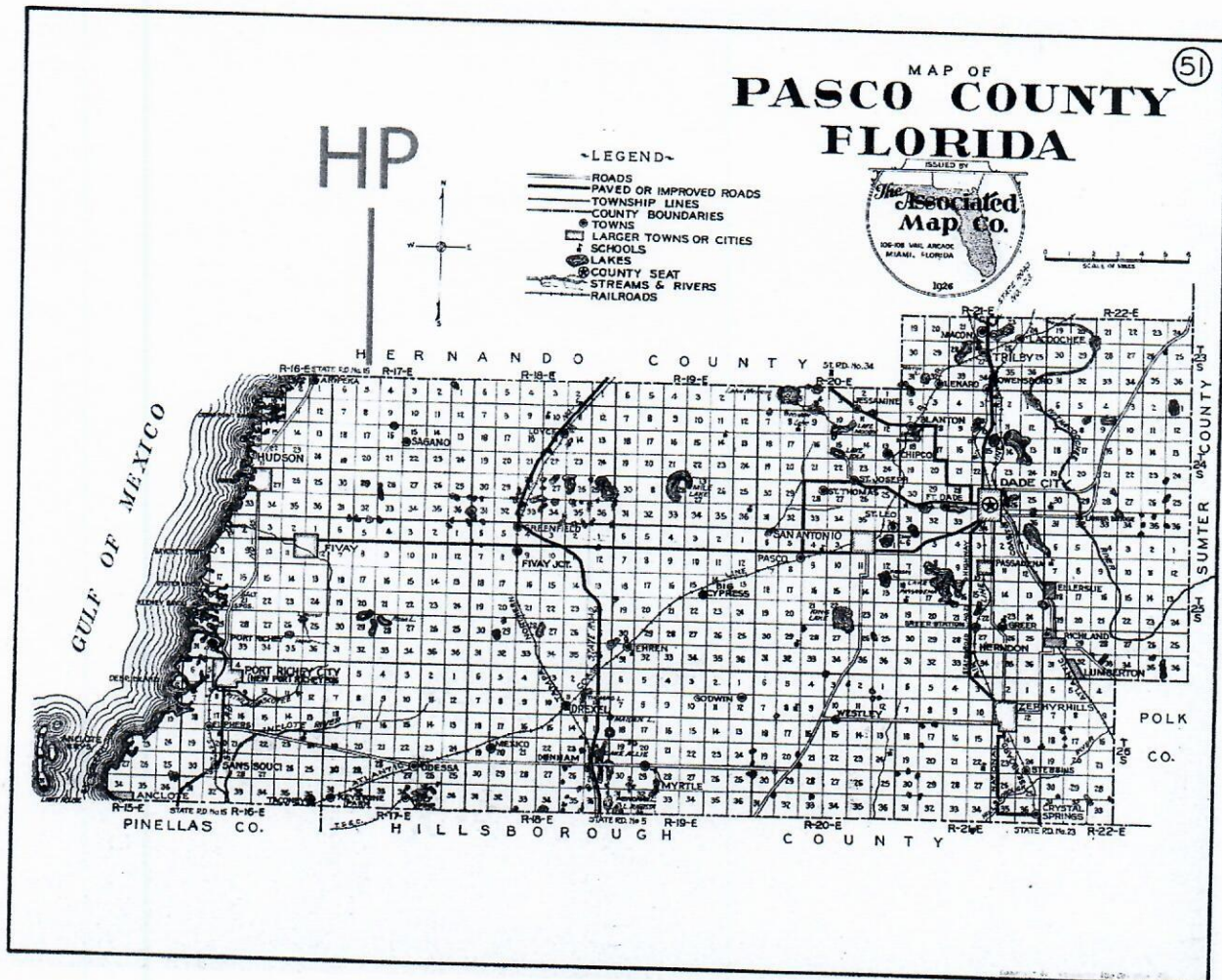
A LAND HISTORY OF HERITAGE PINES COUNTRY CLUB COMMUNITY

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A LAND HISTORY OF HERITAGE PINES COUNTRY CLUB COMMUNITY

In 1997 U.S. Home Corporation purchased a square mile of land in Pasco County, Florida, technically known as Township 24S, Range 17E, Section 5. This tract of land is now known as Heritage Pines Country Club Community. But, it was known by other names and uses in the past. The land upon which Heritage Pines sits can best be described as a thick layer of sugar sand punctuated by several significant, ancient sinkholes and related small bodies of water. Like most of the Florida peninsula the basal rock is a soft, porous limestone connected to a vast aquifer.



1926 Township and Range map showing the location of Heritage Pines, Sec 5, Township 24S, Range 17E in Pasco County, Florida.

In preparing this history, I had the good fortune to interview Mason Ackerman, Jr. He is a local resident, and the son of Mason Ackerman, Sr., who was the superintendent of the Duda Farms, Aripeka Grove. Mason Ackerman, Jr. is locally known as Jr. and he will be referred to by that name in this document.

The Ancient Sinkholes at Heritage Pines and the Paleoindians

There are three ancient sinkholes at Heritage Pines. They have been prominent features of this land for thousands of years. One of these is the Fairway Green Sinkhole, one is the Grand Club Sinkhole, and a third one is the Clearcreek Court Sinkhole. These sinkholes provided the Paleoindians, that lived here in the distant past, with fresh drinking water.

The Fairway Green Sinkhole. The Fairway Green sinkhole is located near the north end of Fairway Green Drive. According to Jr., this sinkhole always had a nice supply of water and was relatively deep. It didn't have the recharge rate of the sinkhole at the Clearcreek Court, but it would suffice for certain purposes. The sinkhole had lots of shiners that the Ackerman's used as fish bait. One time, Mason Ackerman, Sr. caught a 10 pound bass in the lake and decided that he could fatten this fellow up in this sinkhole. Mason didn't count on the fact that the 10 pound bass could eat shiners faster than they could reproduce. When the shiner population was depleted that was the end of his trophy bass.

The Grand Club Sinkhole. A second sinkhole is the Grand Club Sinkhole. It is located not far from the Heritage Pines Club House, at the intersection of Grand Club Road and Scenic Hills Boulevard. According to Jr. there was a road that bisected the Aripeka Grove. It ran from Duda Road, past the sinkhole near the Heritage Pines Club House and out near the main gate. That road paralleled the north-south section of the present Grand Club Road. When Duda Farms sold the Aripeka Grove people discovered that there was no onsite security and began dumping trash along the south end of that road, all the way up to the sinkhole. The trash became controversial and Pasco County made the owners clean it up. Currently, if you look at the bottom of this sinkhole, you can see the old tires that people were dumping there during that era.

Jr. shared a story that reminds us how unstable sink holes can be. Sometime in the late sixties Jr. worked part-time for his dad. One of his duties was discing the lanes between the orange trees to keep them free of weeds. Jr. always admired the pine trees that grew naturally near the top of this sinkhole. They were very useful landmarks when you were at the far end of the grove. One day, as Jr. was driving his tractor near the sinkhole, he noticed that the pine trees had disappeared. He wondered what rascal had cut them down. He had seen them the day before and they were perfectly healthy. When Jr. drove over to the sink hole he realized that the entire area that supported the pines trees had caved into the sinkhole. The trees were still there, but their tops were even with the top of the sinkhole.

This sinkhole never has much water in it and sometimes goes nearly dry during droughts. Currently, it is very shallow, as the visible tires show.

The Clearcreek Court Sinkhole. This is the most significant of the three ancient sinkholes. It is located near the cul-de-sac at the end of Clearcreek Court. It was the

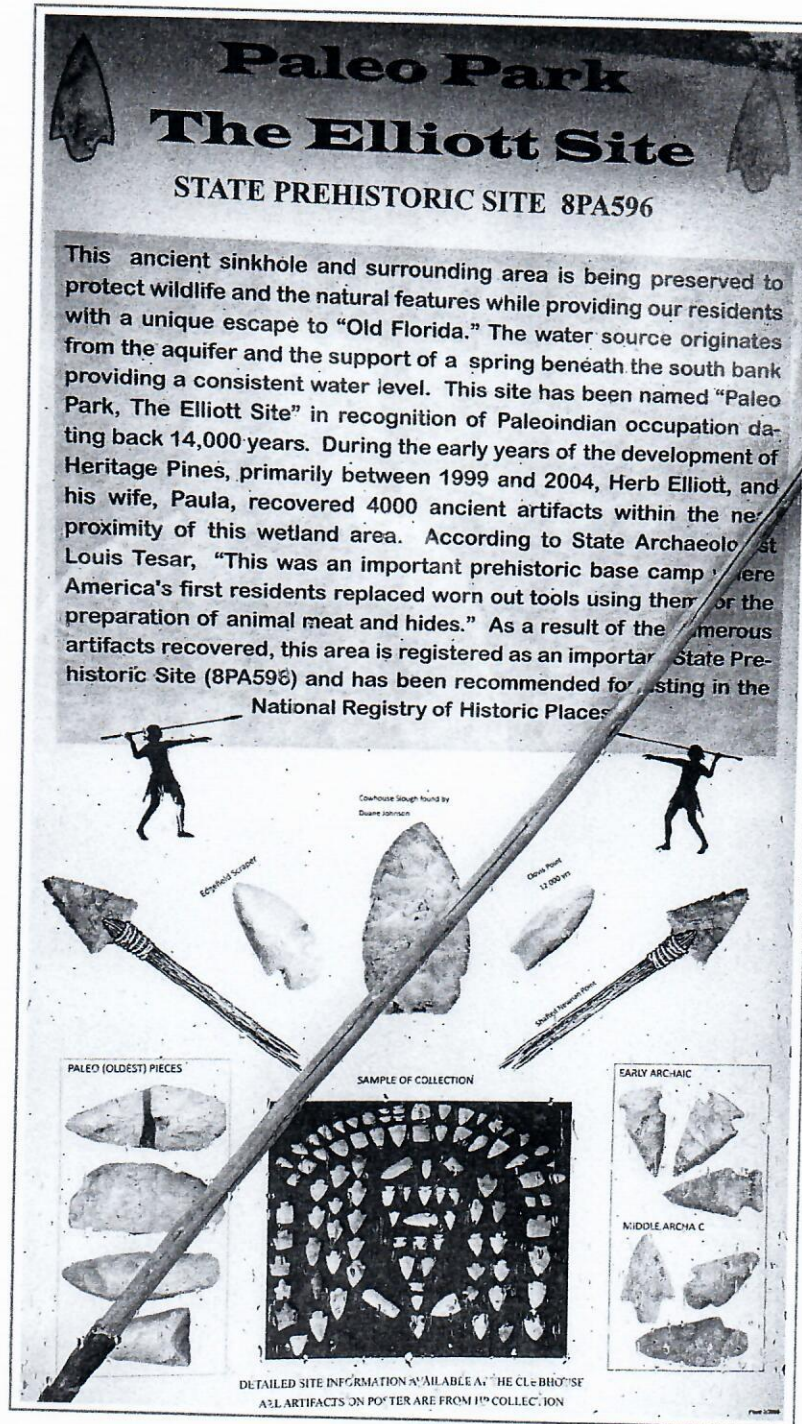
source of water that was used to irrigate the orange trees in the Aripeka Grove. The sinkhole is fed by an artesian spring at the south end of the sinkhole. This artesian spring keeps the water level in the sinkhole at a relatively constant level. Jr. pointed out a platform at water level in this sinkhole. The platform supported a very large agricultural irrigation pump and diesel engine that would irrigate the entire 640 acres of orange trees.



The Clearcreek Court Sinkhole at the Paleo Park, The Elliot Site. Paleoindian artifacts from 14,000 years ago helped define the history of Heritage Pines.

Another significant feature of this sinkhole is its archaeology. Herb Elliott, an archaeologist, and his wife, Paula, moved to Heritage Pines in 1999. Over the last 20+ years they have collected over 4000 Indian artifacts in the area of this sinkhole. Remarkably, these artifacts were from Paleoindian occupation of the area, dating back as far as 14,000 years. The site has been named "Paleo Park, The Elliott Site" in honor

of the Elliotts. Local lore says that the Indians in our area called our area "the little desert." An apt name, indeed. A lot has changed since the Paleoindians occupied this land.



Sign at the entrance to Paleo Park explaining the Paleoindian artifacts found there.

The Swartsel Era and the open range: 1920's- 1955

Around 1914 Joseph F. Swartsel moved to the Elfers area of Pasco County, Florida with his family, including two sons, Howard and Noah Floyd Swartsel. Noah was about 29 years old at the time. Noah became one of the largest orange growers in the Pasco/Pinellas County region. He established Swartsel Growers, Inc. and Swartsel Properties, Inc. At one time Swartsel Growers, Inc. owned over 800 productive acres of citrus groves and managed about 3500 acres for absentee owners. The business eventually expanded to include production from Hudson to North St. Petersburg. By the early 1950's Noah's business included his two sons; Everett Floyd Swartsel and Joseph Dale Swartsel. Noah died after a long illness in 1961 and his sons assumed control of the company. After the devastating freeze of 1962, Eddie and Dale Swartsel phased out of orange production and focused on land development and residential home building. (Tampa Bay Times: 07 April 1979. Pg. 81)

Not surprisingly, during its growth, the Swartsel businesses acquired a section of land in northern Pasco County (T24S, R17E, Sec 5). The land was likely acquired with the intention of establishing an orange grove. But, for whatever reason, an orange grove was never planted there. It was likely leased out for cattle operations, which was common in the area. On August 26, 1955 E.F. Swartsel, and his wife Majel T. and J.D. Swartsel and his wife Mary K. sold this section of land to A. Duda and Sons for \$18,320. (Pasco County OR Book 31 Pg 82)



A 1954 view of Heritage Pines a year before the Duda Farms purchase. Photo courtesy of the Ackerman Family.

The Duda Era and the Aripeka Grove: 1955-1982

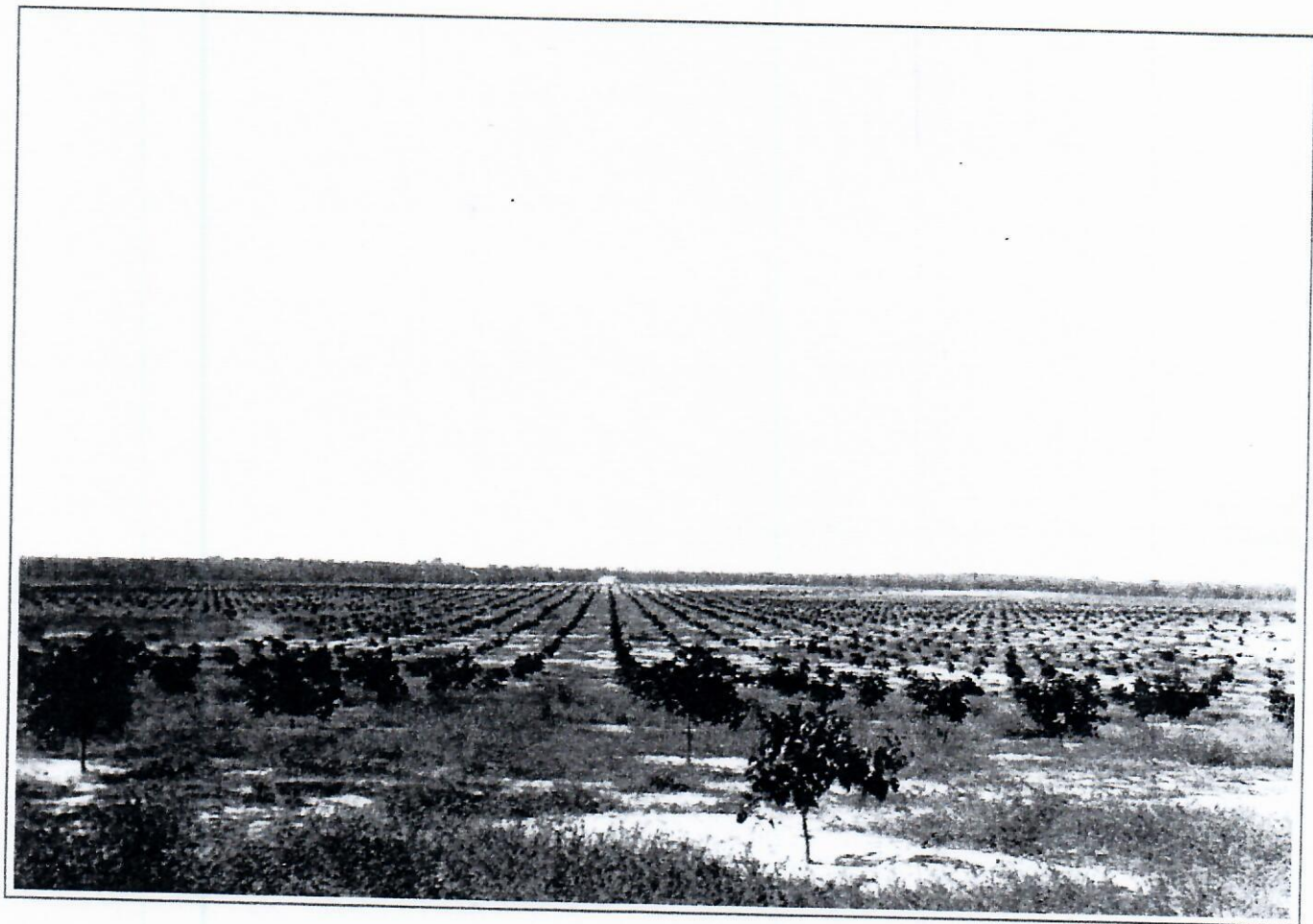
Duda and Sons, Inc. is a wonderful story in itself. A. Duda and Sons is headquartered in Oviedo, Florida. They advertise themselves as the largest producer of fresh produce in the U.S. They are now producing in 7 states. There is a brief history of the company, and it's founder, Andrew Duda, on the company's web page (www.dudafresh.com/about). Andrew Duda immigrated from Czechoslovakia ca. 1915. He purchase land in Florida in the early 1920's and produced his first commercial crop of celery in 1926. From this modest beginning he branched into many areas of agriculture, including beef production and citrus production. You can see a photo of Mason Ackerman tending the Aripeka Grove on the Duda Farms website.

According to Jr., prior to the Duda purchase the owners of a funeral home in Plant City, Florida, leased the section of land that Heritage Pines sits on. The funeral home had a cow-calf operation on this section of land. In 1954 Mason Ackerman was asked by the Swartsels they retained Mason Ackerman to manage a cow/calf operation for them. The calves were transferred to other Duda ranches to be raised into slaughter weight animals.



Planting of the Valencia orange trees at Heritage Pines ca. 1958. Sign on truck reads: A.Duda and Sons. Photo courtesy of the Ackerman family.

Duda Farms built a home on the property to house Mason and his family. The house, and a barn for the farm operation, as well as the well for drinking water, were located in the vicinity of the seventh tee-off area of the present Heritage Pines golf course, just off County Line Road. A few years after the Ackermans moved to the farm the cow/calf operation was converted to an orange grove. It is likely that Mr. Ackerman was hired to oversee the transition from cattle to citrus production, rather than for his abilities to manage a cow/calf operation. The grove was called the Aripeka Grove by Duda Farms. Under Mason Ackerman's supervision Duda Farms planted the entire 640 acres to Valencia oranges. The orange grove was productive over most of the section. In the area of Rolling Hills Loop the orange trees grew to almost 15 feet high, a good size for an orange tree. (Source: Mason Ackerman, Jr.)



A view of the Aripeka Grove a few years after planting. County Line Road can be seen in the background. It was an unpaved road at the time. Photo courtesy of the Ackerman family.

There is a lake in the middle of the Heritage Pines Community. Jr. does not recall that the lake ever had a name. He does, however, have many fond memories of the family fishing and swimming in the lake. The Ackermans would stock the lake with fish, mainly bass, and use it for recreational fishing. The lake was not as large as it is today. It was

confined to an area in the south end of the current lake, just off the current observation deck. The lake was spring fed. Edie Godleski, a Heritage Pines resident since 2002, remembers seeing the lake in its original size shortly after she moved here. Now the spring and storm sewer runoff fill the lake. If you look hard enough from the observation deck you can see the deep area where the spring is. Sometime in the 60's a man was found drowned in the lake. There was always a suspicion that he may have been murdered. No record of this story could be found. There was a landing strip that ran east-to-west on the north end of the current lake. The landing strip allowed Duda Farms managers to fly in and check on farm operations. In the drought years of 2007-08 the lake level went way down and you could see the landing strip and the spring fed area of the lake.

The early 1960's was a period of very heavy rains. 1963 was particularly severe. U.S. Rt. 19 was often under water and the young orange trees at Aripeka Grove came perilously close to drowning. Dikes were constructed to contain the water. The water was continuously pumped out of the orange grove until the rain subsided.



Mason Ackerman inspecting the Valencia oranges at Aripeka Grove ca. 1964. Photo courtesy of the Ackerman family.

Aripeka Grove was a productive orange grove until the early 80's. As is the case with most orange trees, the Aripeka Grove trees reached the end of their productive years about that time. Duda Farms faced a decision. Do you replant? Weather probably had a big influence on that decision. 1981 and 1982 were particularly cold Februarys; replanting was an expensive investment relative to the risk. Whatever the reason, Duda Farms chose to not replant the Aripeka Grove. Instead they planted the entire section to slash pines. Planting the pine trees made the land much more attractive to potential buyers because it qualified the land for an agricultural tax exemption. The last thing that Mason Ackerman did for Duda Farms was to supervise the planting of those pine trees.

The Orsi Era and the slash pine plantation: 1982-1997

Heritage Pines takes its name from the slash pine (*Pinus elliotti*). This was the pine species used in the plantation that was established around 1981. Frank and Vincenza Orsi purchased the 640 acre tract from A. Duda and Sons in 1982 for 1.87 million dollars. The deed transactions for this land involved a transfer from Duda to Beacon Properties, and then from Beacon Properties to Orsi (Pasco Couty Deed Book 1168 Page 381-384). Beacon Properties may have been an affiliate of A. Duda and Sons. It is not unusual for large farm operations to have a real estate division. It appears that the Orsi's were land speculators because they never did anything with the pine plantation,



The slash pine plantation at Heritage Pines planted in 1981

nor did they make any improvements, nor did they harvest the pine trees before they sold the property. What they did do is let the land sit idle for 15 years and let its value skyrocket.

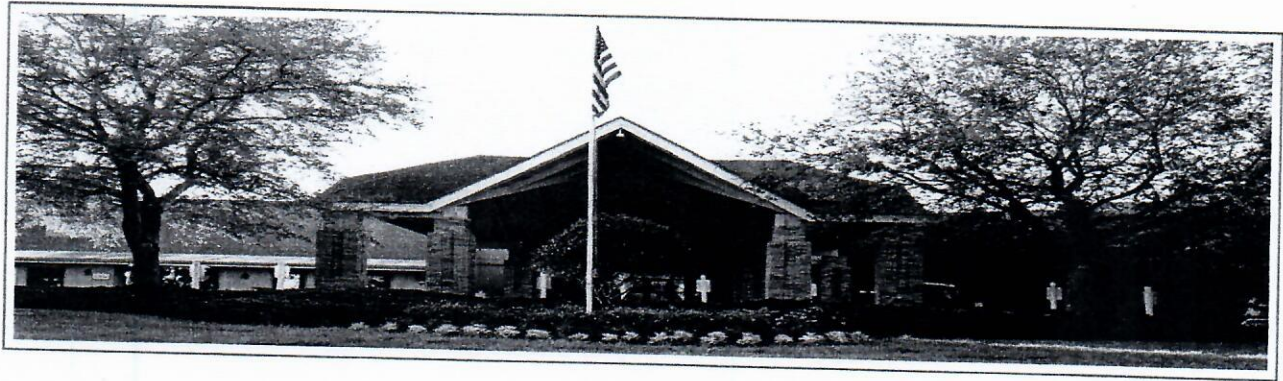
The Heritage Pines Era: 1997 to present

U.S. Home Corporation purchased this section of land from the Orsi family on April 11, 1997 for 13 million dollars (Pasco County OR Bk 3726 Pg 0106-0120). The purchase was the foundation for U.S. Home's development of Heritage Pines Country Club Community. Their development plan called for a gated community for adults 55 years and older, with 1406 residential homes and major amenities to support a community of that size. They wasted no time. The first homes were sold in late 1998 and the last homes were sold in 2008.



The entrance to Heritage Pines early in its development.

There is little evidence left of Heritage Pine's land history. There are no orange trees from the Aripeka Grove. The slash pines are disappearing at an alarming rate. As one Heritage Pines resident commented: "Our community will be renamed 'Heritage Pineless' in a few years." What was once called 'the little desert' is now an oasis for older adults. Pasco County must be very pleased with this oasis. 1406 homes paying about \$2200 per year in real estate taxes nets the county a tidy sum of \$3 million a year, not to mention the annual sales tax revenues from the residents of Heritage Pines.



The Heritage Pines Community Clubhouse. From the Heritage Pines website.

Despite clearing the land to build 1406 homes, Heritage Pines is very fortunate to have an abundance of native plants and animals. Animals, like the venomous eastern diamondback rattlesnake, the pygmy rattlesnake, and the coral snake reside here. Non-venomous snakes, like the red rat snake, the yellow rat snake and the black racer help keep the rodent populations at bay. Alligators and several species of turtles can be seen on the shores of our water feature. Mammals like the river otter, coyotes, rabbits, squirrels, foxes, raccoons, and fruit rats are commonly seen. The bird species are a birdwatchers dream. There is a local bluebird club. The hawks abound. Waterfowl are abundant. In fact, sandhill cranes could adorn our next logo when all the pines are gone. We can thank the numerous retention areas, the golf course, and ample common areas that serve as a refuge for these animals. They are descendants of Heritage Pine's land history. We can also thank our community that values these native species.

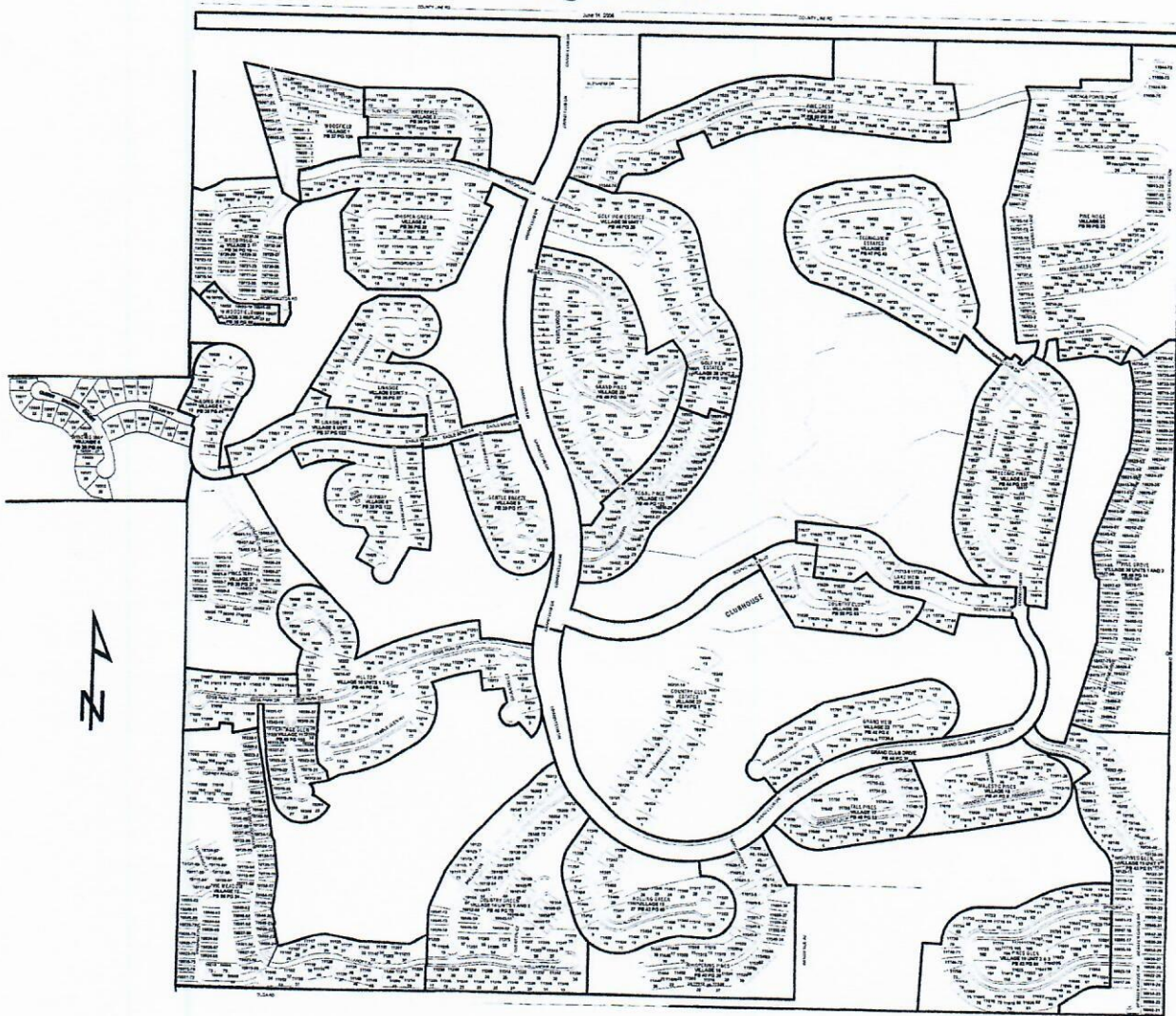


A pre-2005 aerial view of homes and amenities at Heritage Pines looking south from the Heritage Pines Clubhouse.

Heritage Pines was recently named a "Neighborhood for Nature" by Audubon International. This is a very tangible recognition of our communities commitment to the past, present, and future of our environment.

Acknowledgements: Many thanks to Mason Ackerman, Jr. for his recollections of the Aripeka Grove and to the Ackerman family for the wonderful photographs. Without their help I could never have written the Duda section of this history. Many thanks to Herb and Paula Elliot for their incredible research on the Paleoindians that frequented our section of land.

Heritage Pines



Residential street map of Heritage Pines from the Heritage Pines website.