

I'm not exactly sure when my Mom and Dad both moved to the Beach but I would assume it was in the Post war years. My mother loved to fish and I think my father moved here for the work and weather. I have two older sisters who were also born on the beach, one in 1952 and one in 1948. I was born in 1956, being the youngest and the only son I had privileges.

My first memories of the beach are at 220 Meridian Avenue. Where I went to, from St. Francis Where I was born. It was a large wood frame house with a huge yard and garden. I spent a lot of my youth on the old South Beach Pier where my mother caught and sold live fishing bait (pilchards). My dad worked for the city of Miami Beach driving trucks. While on the Pier I was exposed to quite a few of the Beaches characters. The Beach at the time had its own newspaper and I was photographed and written up more times than I can tell. My mom loved seeing me in the newspaper so she could clip the articles and send them home to the folks.

Fishing, Swimming, surfing and general hanging out on south beach was a wonderful experience. There used to be a pool hall on the south end of ocean Drive where Minnesota Fats would come to play. There were also the usual gangsters and tough guys. Jackie Gleason came there to play pool too. I remember the betting with large wads of cash, the cursing. It was after all a pool hall. I could brush the tables and sweep up cigarette butts for a Coke. The owner Cocomo Joe had a dog named Brownie who became part mine.

At night, after working on the Pier all day, my mom would take bets from the bars and restaurants to the dog track on the end of the street and buy the tickets. She would be paid a tip if the ticket won. Very industrious woman she was. The hard work, drinking and nightlife took its toll on my parent's marriage. I remember hearing the arguments. My father died suddenly when I was very young and my mother was left to raise us on her own. She did the best she could with what she had to work with.

South Beach was a wonderland for a child in the sixties and seventies to grow up in. There was some of the best fishing in the world. Diving and swimming at the world famous beaches. Even Johnnie Weissmuller came there to swim. Esther Williams swam there too. Celebrities stayed mostly to the north end but did venture south for a little R&R. We had the jetty, the fishing Pier as well as a dozen public parks to play in. Every restaurant knew you as well as every little mom and pop corner store. I remember going to the back door of Picciolo's restaurant for all the free bread sticks you could carry on the way to Washington park. The police department was small and friendly. Everyone knew who you were. You could not get away with anything. You could venture north on Washington avenue to explore

hundreds of shops that sold anything you could imagine , there were the bakeries, grocery stores, butchers, fruit markets and then on to Lincoln road for the movie theatres or just to walk the mall. Woolworths, Saks 5<sup>th</sup> avenue, Burdines, Austin Burke and so many more. I remember the tourist stores that sold live baby alligators and turtles and all those awful cards and trinkets from "MIAMI BEACH".

The schools and churches were also an integral part of the South Beach experience. I went to South Beach Elementary, St. Patrick's, Fisher Jr. High and then Beach High. Desi Arnez went to St. Pats and Andy Garcia went to Beach High in my years 72-74. Larry King's son was also in my class. The privileged and underprivileged attended side by side. We just missed out on the summer of love in '69. Being in 7<sup>th</sup> grade didn't cut it. The Viet-Nam war was starting to wind down by the time I started high school. Hippies and tolerance were becoming acceptable. Recreational drugs were all the rage. Being stoned in school was cool. We all discovered ourselves and our cliques. We formed our friendships that last even today.

I thought I would never leave the utopia I knew as the Beach, but it was changing. I left Joe's Stone Crab after working there for 15 years. I moved to a Hialeah Gardens ranch and went to work driving a bulldozer. Redevelopment of the south end was in full swing. They were trying to condemn anything they could at the time so the developers could buy it up for a song. It was crumbling and sad to see. No one was allowed to maintain their property. I still visited quite often just to see what was happening to my beloved South Beach. I even worked for a few years as the "Social Director" in my friends bar on Alton road called The Irish House at night and my Uncles snack bar under the Seagull Hotel on 21<sup>st</sup> street beach during the day. When the old Pier, The Dog Track and the Army Corps of engineer's reservation were all gone I think that is when it really felt changed. All of my childhood comforts were gone. Even Lincoln road, Washington Avenue and Ocean Drive were changed. Still today I can drive the streets of Miami Beach and get the feeling that I belong there. I guess it's in my blood and always will be. It's my home town and I'm proud of that. It made me who I am today.

Robert Bowman