

Nobody's laughing at Bithlo any more

High tech growth near UCF, availability of land and a new sewer plant have set off a scramble for property in east Orange.

by Randy Noles

Out amid the teeming auto salvage yards, trailer parks and television transmission towers of Bithlo sits the modest office of Robert Carrigan Jr., Realtor. Mr. Carrigan—a jovial, bearded figure with an affinity for comfortable Levis—has deep roots in this much-maligned unincorporated community.

So he is, of course, accustomed to the Bithlo jokes. The barbs from local disc jockeys. The digs from smart-aleck columnists. The sneers from anyone looking for a cheap laugh at someone else's expense.

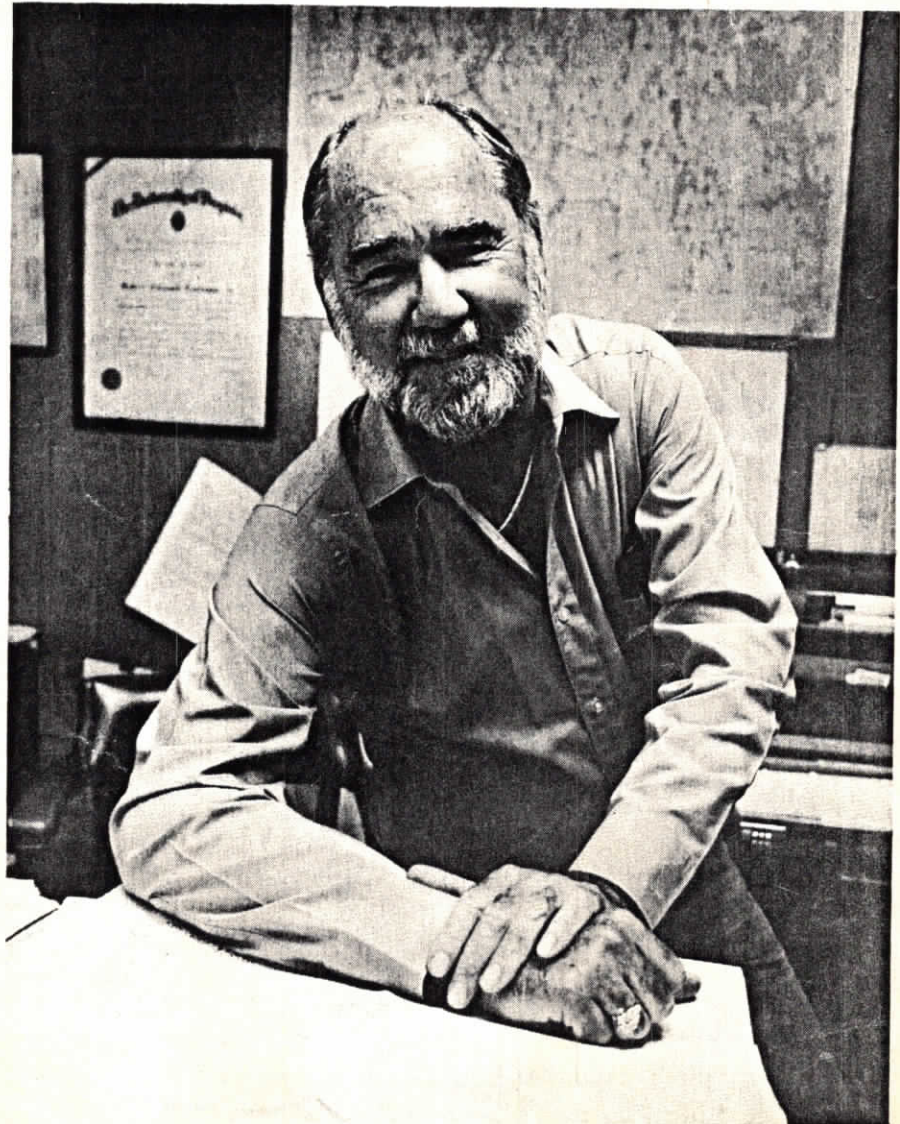
And he has endured the quizzical looks from friends and associates who wonder why in hell a seemingly intelligent businessman would waste his time in that God-forsaken wilderness.

Bithlo. Orlando's black sheep community. Home of the Speed World Raceway, where for a \$10 fee you may pilot your vehicle through a 300-foot-long mud pit. Not a real class place, this ill-defined little town that clings to S.R. 50 as it knifes through the farthest reaches of east Orange County.

Chuckle if you will. But Robert Carrigan Jr. is going to have the last laugh. Bithlo is becoming respectable, like a long-lost country cousin who takes a bath, cuts his hair, and moves to the big city.

"Things are changing out here," Mr. Carrigan says. "My dad always said that large cities grow toward their nearest port—and in Orlando, that port would be Port Canaveral to

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Robert Carrigan Jr. doesn't care what you may think about Bithlo. He and others who had faith in east Orange are now reaping the rewards of growth along what had been a remote stretch of S.R. 50. Mr. Carrigan's father was a pioneer developer in Bithlo and Union Park in the 1950s.

the east. We're right in the path of that growth."

A bit "closer in" is Union Park, another unincorporated east Orange community which straddles S.R. 50. Not long ago, Union Park's business district consisted largely of aging strip shopping centers, small motels and hostile-looking beer joints.

But a jaunt through Union Park today reveals attractive new retail centers and comfortable residential developments aimed at the yuppie market. Just ask Lillian Metz of Metz Realty how rapidly Union Park is blossoming.

"Things are humming all over the place," she told me. "Some tracts out here I've sold 10 different times to investors. But the people buying property now aren't investors—they're end users."

"Most builders are now regarding Union Park as 'the area.'"

FRANKLY, I WAS somewhat skeptical about these optimistic predictions of a Bithlo renaissance and a Union Park revitalization. I didn't doubt the sincerity of Mrs. Metz or Mr. Carrigan—but community boosterism *has* been known to hinder objectivity.

On closer examination, however, it became painfully apparent that any lack of objectivity was my own. Nealy 20 years of negative conditioning had convinced me that Union Park and Bithlo would forever remain the slightly shabby blue-collar bastions they had always been.

And yet, it *should* have been so obvious. All the elements were there for a full-scale boom:

- **Land.** Undeveloped property abounds in Union Park and Bithlo—and land is a hot commodity in growth-happy Central Florida.

- **Jobs.** The Central Florida Research Park and new Martin-Marietta and Westinghouse facilities near the University of Central Florida are creating a ready-made, relatively affluent market for nearby housing.

- **Access.** A proposed extension of the East-West Expressway will bring once-remote east Orange right into the midst of things—no more seemingly endless trecks down S.R. 50 or University Boulevard.

- **Sewer.** Orange County's new eastern subregional sewer plant, which recently came on line, made



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—Lillian Metz

large-scale development in the outer reaches of east Orange possible.

Put it all together, and you can convert the proverbial sow's ear (Bithlo and Union Park) into the proverbial silk purse.

A prime mover and shaker in the area's commercial growth appears to be B.P. Development Corporation. B.P. built Tower Place, a 31,000-sq.-ft. shopping center at the corner of Culver Road and S.R. 50 in Union Park. Tower Place has DeLocha's as the anchor tenant.

The firm is also building a 175,000-sq.-ft. shopping center at S.R. 50 and Murdoch Road. The center, dubbed Alamo Shopping Village, will feature Thriftway.

B.P.'s Gary Martin said his company came to Union Park "because there were just a tone of people out here without services."

Tower Place, which is now complete and almost fully-leased, is indicative of the type of commercial growth sprouting up along the eastern reaches of S.R. 50. It's well-designed, neatly landscaped, and would fit in just as nicely in Winter

Park as it does in Union Park.

"We wanted to come out here with something nice—something a cut above everyone else," Mr. Martin said.

Actually, B.P. didn't need to do much market research to determine that additional grocery/retail development would do well in Union Park. All they really needed to do was look at the volume generated by the Union Park Winn Dixie, built in the 1960s. That Winn Dixie—for years the only major grocery outlet in Union Park proper—has consistently been one of the chain's highest-grossing stores.

Fast food restaurants and convenience stores are also beginning to proliferate. Burger King and Mrs. Winner's Chicken and Biscuits have recently established stores on S.R. 50 in Union Park. Two 7-11s—one in Bithlo and one in Union Park—are under construction, and an American Motor Inn is under way on S.R. 50 and Crescent Avenue.

Tim Haase, assistant manager of the newly opened Union Park Fat Boy's Bar-B-Q, said the restaurant is doing "fantastic" business so far.

"As time goes on, this area will be even nicer," Mr. Haase said. He added that the restaurant gets most of its business from locals.

One of the primary beneficiaries of this commercial growth is Mrs. Metz, who is listing dozens of S.R. 50 tracts for sale.

"Five years ago," she points out, "you could have bought a 5-acre tract in Union Park—with highway frontage—for \$8,000 to \$10,000. Today, that same piece of property runs \$30,000."

Residential growth in the Union Park area is also soaring. Among the biggest projects:

- **Huckleberry,** by Lennar Homes. A massive PUD at the corner of S.R. 50 and Alafaya Trail, which will contain 6,800 mid-priced units.

- **High Point,** by Calton Homes of Florida. Another PUD just north of the new Martin facility, which will contain 2,207 units. Calton is also a joint venture partner in Eastbourne, a soon-to-come 1,100-acre PUD east of Huckleberry.

These developments join Sussex Place (R.C.A. Homes), Easton (Mason Homes), The Club (K. Hovnanian of Florida), and other proj-

ects popping up along S.R. 50 in what had been a residential no-man's-land.

One person who wouldn't have been surprised by Union Park and Bithlo's resurgence was Robert Carrigan Sr.—father of the Mr. Carrigan quoted earlier. The elder Carrigan, who died in 1973, built some of Union Park's first housing developments in the early 1950s—small FHA homes that could be had for \$7,000 or less.

He always contended that Orlando's growth would eventually come east, toward Port Canaveral. And he predicted that Union Park and even Bithlo would be strong growth areas as a result.

Although his dad didn't live to see that theory proven true in Orlando, Robert Carrigan Jr. has been able to watch it all come to pass. He envisions continued residential growth in Union Park and out toward Bithlo—mostly in the middle price ranges, but with some pockets of luxury housing in the pastures and forests of the Bithlo-Chuluota area.

In addition to residential and commercial growth, medical services are set to expand around Union Park. Two hospitals—Brookwood and Winter Park Memorial—are vying for the nod to build a facility to serve east Orange. The Brookwood site is east of Alafaya Trail on the north side of S.R. 50, and the Winter Park site is at University and Rouse Road.

Whichever group wins, Union Park and Bithlo residents will have the benefit of improved medical care. Many private physicians will almost certainly locate offices in east Orange when the new hospital is built.

All this activity warms the heart of Mike Baumann, president of the East Orange Chamber of Commerce. Mr. Baumann, service manager for Ronlee Mobile Homes, told me the chamber is gearing up to deal with the growth by forming standing committees for finance, advertising, better business and government review.

"By presenting a more unified appearance to the officials governing allocation of funds and services within the county," he says, "we hope to influence their decisions, so our long-neglected area receives the



Tower Place is one of several attractive new retail centers springing up along S.R. 50 in Union Park. For years, the area had been served by one Winn Dixie—but it has consistently been one of the top grossing Winn Dixies in the state. Clearly, there's plenty of business to be had in east Orange.

assistance it needs to survive our growth."

Even the chamber is getting into the building act. The group is constructing a new headquarters on a 1.5-acre site near Lake Downey—and the complex will also contain rental office space.

Dr. Fred Raffa, professor of economics at UCF, is another believer in the potential of Union Park and Bithlo. He recently completed a study of the east Orange area which was used during certificate of need hearings related to the proposed hospital. And the results confirm the impression that Union Park and Bithlo are in the midst of a boom area.

The study encompassed the area bounded by S.R. 436 on the east, and north to south to the county lines. Among its findings:

- Population growth in east Orange has been an average of 8.8 percent per year from 1970-1980—more than twice the growth rate of the rest of Orange County during the same time period.

- 16.2 percent of all the building permits pulled in Orange County over the past year were for developments in east Orange. There are currently 33,000 residential building units platted on the east side—the vast majority of which are yet to be built.

Dr. Raffa's study also showed that east Orange residents have more

children (2.82 per family) than the count as a whole. And—perhaps surprisingly—east Orange residents are a bit better off financially than their counterparts in the rest of the county: 7.81 percent live below the poverty line, compared to 10 percent in the rest of the county.

"East Orange County has had some false starts in the past, but this time it looks as though the growth will be sustained," Dr. Raffa told me.

"The area is becoming more cosmopolitan. It will never be quite urban, but it will certainly be less 'frontier' than it is now. I'd say the retail areas will eventually look like north Orange and south Seminole counties."

Union Park looking like Longwood? Bithlo looking like Maitland?

If that's a joke, nobody's laughing any more. **1**

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