

## **The Davis Islands Coliseum**

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A devastating fire gutted the once-venerable Davis Islands Coliseum, formerly located on the corner of Chesapeake and Danube (90 Chesapeake), forty years ago this month. On the evening of January 26, 1967, the dark night skies turned a brilliant orange-red with the out of control blaze. The fire, which started at around 9:30 in the evening on January 26, 1967, occupied most of the Tampa Fire Department's force – fourteen units, twenty-three fire trucks and over one hundred fire fighters battled the blaze from 10:40 until well past midnight. There was little firefighters could do since the building had burned undetected for over an hour. Flames and smoke, which reached “hundreds of feet” into the sky, could be seen as far away as Sulphur Springs to the north and St. Petersburg to the southwest.

The building was only forty-two years old, but it was a full forty two years. Though once a popular facility, with a full social calendar and promising future, the old Coliseum was already considered obsolete before its fiery demise.

The Davis Islands Coliseum, constructed in 1925, embodied the largest project originally planned for the community. Funded through the sale of stock certificates, the Coliseum was instantly considered a landmark for both Davis Islands and the City of Tampa. The massive building – among the largest of its kind in the southeastern United States – housed concerts, auto shows, conventions and many other events. Dances and formal gatherings, including Ye Mystic Krewe of Gasparilla's annual Coronation Ball, were also common during the Coliseum's early years.

Harry J. Warner, who served as the general manager of the Coliseum before World War II, purchased the Coliseum building and installed a skating rink, which operated for over twenty years. Warner sold the building in 1963 for \$100,000 (over \$610,000 in today's dollars), and the rink gave way to a bowling alley and cocktail lounge. The new owners defaulted on their loan from Warner, and he took back the building two years later.

With his resumption of ownership, Warner had a new idea for the old Coliseum – a grocery store. The city, however, refused to change the zoning from residential to commercial. He next offered to sell the building to the city for \$100,000 for use as a city recreation building. The city refused this, as well, and the building sat empty for the next year and a half.

It took only a few hours to erase a structure built on forty-two years of memories. Joe Gomez, the city's fire marshal, ruled that vandals caused the fire. Warner reported that he'd had to repair several acts of vandalism over the past few months. The fire attracted close to a thousand onlookers from all parts of the city. The *Tampa Tribune* reported that, despite the high volume of cars pouring onto the Islands, the new bridge handled all of the traffic without incident.

One problem that did arise, though, was the countless numbers of burning embers that were spread across the neighborhood. Through the valiant efforts of the Tampa Fire Department, aided by residents with garden hoses, no other buildings were lost during the blaze.

The remnants of the burned-out building continued to smolder well into the next night. The memories of the long-lost Davis Islands Coliseum still smolder within Tampa residents to this day.

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