

Thistle Lodge

BEACHFRONT RESTAURANT



The Sanibel Lighthouse had been operating three years before the island was open to homesteading by the government. The entire end of Sanibel from Point Ybel to what is now Bailey's Road, from Carlos Bay to the Gulf, was Lighthouse property. Homesteaders settled along the Gulf shore for pleasure, along the Bay for transportation, and other places later for farming.

Some of the first homesteaders were George Barnes and his wife, who became known later as "Mama Barnes." Starting out from Louisville, Kentucky, George and his wife had been members of various religious denominations. As a mountain evangelist, George had served as a missionary in India for years. George believed that God would take care of him, and somehow God did. The missionary carried a small melodeon as well as a Bible and his family roamed from Calcutta to Bombay as they tried to elevate the "heathen."

When George Barnes decided he could no longer preach in foreign lands (about 1882), he wandered into Florida. Eventually, Barnes reached Punta Gorda and heard of the homestead opportunity on Sanibel. Without further ado, he fetched his family and headed southward. Along with his wife, son and two daughters, Barnes homesteaded nearly 500 acres, built a home and Sanibel's first church.

For his first two daughters, Barnes built "The Sisters," a charming cottage that eventually evolved into the first inn on Sanibel. In the 1890s, Rev. Barnes' daughter, Georgia, married a resort guest from Kentucky named Edward Duncan. They built a grand Victorian home on the waterfront. Named Thistle Lodge, it quickly became the favored gathering spot for celebrities and statesmen seeking their escape. Thomas Edison and Henry Ford were among those who made their way to this bit of civilized hospitality in the wilds of unsettled Florida.

Meanwhile, Georgia and Edward Duncan renamed The Sisters "Casa Ybel Hotel," which became a full-service resort by the 1920s. Guests entertained themselves with fishing, hunting, collecting seashells and strolling in full finery down the stretch of beach then known as the Grand Boulevard. Time took its toll on Thistle Lodge and in 1979 new owners faithfully recreated the showpiece Thistle Lodge not far from its original site. It immediately became a convivial social setting for islanders and visitors alike. Through the years, Thistle Lodge has maintained its status as the heart of the island community.

Today, the dedicated staff continues the Casa Ybel tradition of genteel hospitality and reverence toward nature. Under their directions, the resort has won awards that place it among the top places in the nation.