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OPINION - SEMINOLE'S PAST

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The heritage of the south Seminole community of East Altamonte is as old as Altamonte Springs and the economics and politics of segregation.

Alcee Hastings, a U.S. Congressman from South Florida and former federal judge, was born in the community when it was know as Winwood. Recalling the racism of his youth, he told a reporter a few years ago: "A cross was burned in front of a black-owned [drugstore](#), and some people came and extinguished it and moved it to a white-owned store and relit it. That was the end of cross-burning in Altamonte Springs."

Hastings's uncle paid for the education that allowed him to get away.

His uncle was Condor Merritt, one of Central Florida's most powerful African-Americans. Merritt developed Winwood after [World War II](#). Merritt, who died in 1973, parlayed a fruit picker's salary and legalized gambling just after World War II into nightclubs and country stores and a real estate empire in Orange and Seminole counties. His family still owns rental property in the neighborhood.

Johnnie E. Griffin, who owns a Groveland sign [business](#), remembers when Merritt owned the Club Eaton in Eatonville, one of the hottest night clubs for black entertainers. Griffin spent years traveling the world as a drummer.

"I was a drummer in high school," Griffin recalled in a recent interview. "I played in clubs in Orlando and Club Eaton in Eatonville up until 1965. Then I got drafted. Half of the musicians around were drafted."

Merritt's club and Elijah and Lutrell Bing's nearby Rainbow Club Bar provided entertainment for those barred from patronizing white clubs.

Writer, folklorist and anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston collected some of her stories in these and other "juke joints."

The Club Eaton (called Mr. B's after E.L. Bing bought it and now Heroes Nightclub) and the Rainbow stood at opposite ends of Kennedy Boulevard for more than 30 years. Merritt built the Club Eaton in 1950. Later owner and musician Billy Bozeman of Orlando helped make it a landmark, booking acts such as James Brown, Sam Cooke, B.B. King, Ray Charles, Chuck Willis, the Drifters and the Platters.

“It didn't have the mystique of the Cotton Club, but it was a Class A place,” pianist, bassist and vocalist Bernie Lee told a reporter. “Before integration, that was the spot in the area. Entertainers spread the word, and it was known all over the country.”

Barred from white hotels, black entertainers liked the Club Eaton because it had rooms upstairs where they could stay.

“Let's face it, the big-name acts could afford hotels, but at that time black entertainers couldn't stay in white hotels,” said Lee. “They stayed at the Club Eaton because they didn't have to get off the bandstand at two in the morning and try to find a halfway decent black motel.”

The Bing family kept the Club Eaton's tradition of a strict dress code.

“You hardly ever get a fight out of a black guy who's dressed up,” F.M. Otey, a longtime resident who is compiling a history of Eatonville, told a reporter.

Desegregation cut into the club's draw. It stopped booking big-name acts when the integrated clubs lured away its clientele.

Restoration is under way that will return a part of Central Florida's jazz era. The boarded-up Wellsbilt Hotel - the last of its kind from Orlando's 1920s through the 1960s - is about to undergo a \$600,000 jazzing up. It was reopened as a museum devoted to the contributions made by African-American musicians. The plans include moving the residence of the doctor who built the hotel onto the vacant lot next door where once stood the South Street Casino, a legendary nightspot. The Wellsbilt and the house will provide performing arts opportunities for young people.

Black physician William Monroe Wells, one of the first black doctors to practice in Orlando, invested in the old hotel's construction in the 1930s. None of the white hotels were open to black entertainers coming through town.

The Wellsbilt Hotel on South Street just west of Division Avenue was made popular by the South Street Casino. The jazz nightclub, which burned and was demolished in 1987, was right next door. Ella Fitzgerald, Duke Ellington and Count Basie stayed at the Wellsbilt.

The hotel property is owned by the Trust for Public Land, a national nonprofit group, which has worked with the Association to Preserve African-American Society, History and Tradition. Major contributors include grants through the city of Orlando and the Orlando Magic Youth Foundation.

Association president Geraldine Thompson said the museum could open by next fall.