

# Marathon mourns loss of pioneer

BY ROB BUSWEILER  
Free Press Staff

The man who built the Sea Dell Motel — mostly block by block with his own hands, according to local historian Dan Gallagher — passed away two weeks ago.

Delbert Chaplin brought his family to Marathon in the early 1950s and was part of a group of pioneers who saw the community grow from its early railroad building and commercial fishing days in the early parts of the 20th century to the city that exists today.

The Sea Dell motel still exists with the same name today — although it's no longer owned by the Chaplin family — though the name was something of a misunderstanding to begin with according to Chaplin's daughter Diane Chaplin-Colvard.

"They wanted to name it C-Del," Chaplin-Colvard said, noting that the "C" was to stand for Del's wife Cecelia, who passed away in 1996. "The artist brought it back with Sea Dell and they liked it."

*Delbert Chaplin was part of a group of pioneers in the '50s who saw the Marathon community grow from its early railroad building and commercial fishing days to the city that exists today.*

Chaplin-Colvard said many people considered the location for the Sea Dell, near 50th Street, to be on the outskirts of town, since most of the developments at that time were on the west end of Vaca Key. Chaplin did have an idea of what the future would hold for the Middle Keys, however, telling his children at time that Marathon was a "sleeping giant."

In Gallagher's book "Marathon 1906-1960," he notes the first guests at the motel paid \$5 for the room. Chaplin-Colvard said the family would often hold parties at



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Delbert Chaplin was an avid fishermen and spent 40 years chartering fishing boats.

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Delbert Chaplin was part of a group of Marathon residents that flew to visit Cuba prior to Fidel Castro coming into power.



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The Sea Dell Motel still exists today, albeit with a slightly different look.

## Chaplin

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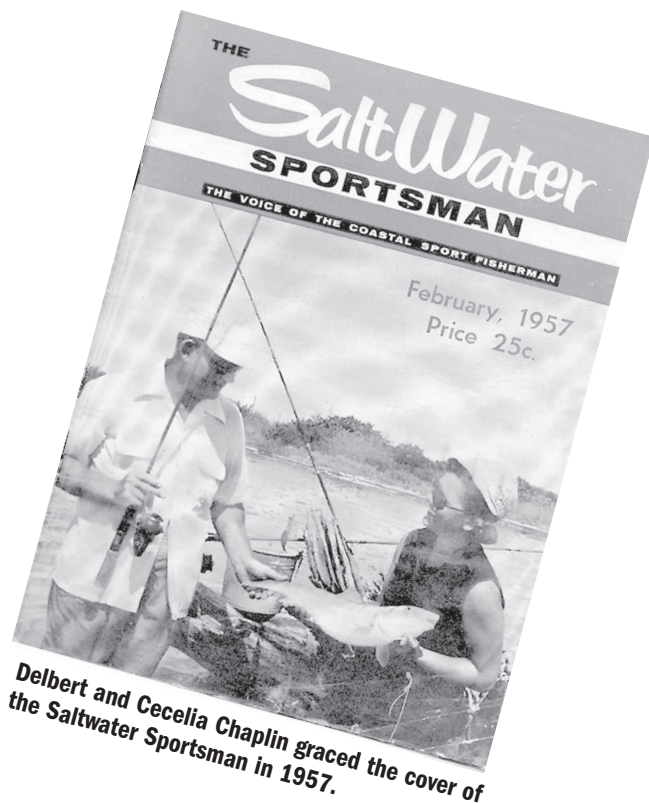
the motel every Friday night. She joked that you could eat and drink more on a Friday night than the cost of the room for the week.

The Chaplin name is expected to adorn another fixture in Marathon in the coming month's as Diane's brother Jim is about to start work on Chappy's restaurant, to be located on Knights Key.

"My brother and [father] talked about [the restaurant] a lot," Chaplin-Colvard said. "[Delbert] was always very supportive of us."

Chaplin-Colvard said her father was friends with the other families that descended upon Marathon in the middle of the 20th century, including the Sadowskis, Switliks, Branters and Schmitts. In addition to building the motel and several other duplexes around town, Chaplin was a licensed boat captain.

"[Del] did fishing charters, but mostly for his friends," Chaplin-Colvard said.



Delbert and Cecelia Chaplin graced the cover of the Saltwater Sportsman in 1957.

A veteran of World War II, Chaplin was awarded the Bronze Star for his work in the 1st Calvary Division. After the war, when he moved his family to the Keys, Chaplin-Colvard said her mother cried for a week, but eventually grew

to love the Keys.

Chaplin passed away on June 9 in the home on Sombrero Boulevard that he built himself so many years ago.

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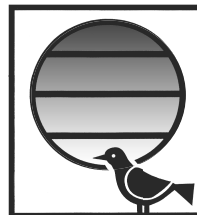
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An undated photo of Cecelia and Delbert Chaplin in the home he built on Sombrero Boulevard.

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