



Martin G. Gundersen

Martin Gerald Gundersen was born October 13, 1923, in Flost, Norway, and immigrated to America with his mother and two siblings in 1929 on the S.S. Stavangerfjord, joining his father in New York. They lived, initially, in Brooklyn, New York, but Martin's father's occupation – he was a dredging engineer and was involved in the construction of the Intracoastal Waterway – meant that the family moved often.

Martin knew since he was a young boy in elementary school in Brooklyn that he wanted to be an architect when he grew up. And, indeed, he graduated as an architect (along with his friend, Edgar A. Wilson) from the University of Florida in 1949. His thesis was on the Fort Myers Yacht Basin and preserving the landscape – he was concerned with the future development along the waterfront.

Martin's university studies were interrupted by war service. He was drafted in 1942, and rose to the rank of Tec5, US Army.

Immediately after the war, on January 9, 1946, he married Pearl Carlsen, a resident of East Fort Myers. They had met years before this in Alva, where Pearl had lived, while Martin's father was engaged in dredging the local section of the Intracoastal Waterway, and had remained in contact. Martin returned to university on the GI Bill, and the newlyweds lived in veteran's housing. While at the University of Florida, Martin was President of the Gargoyle Architecture Honor Society, an academically elite group of architecture students and faculty whose membership is by invitation only.

Upon graduation, Martin worked for a brief time with the Corps of Engineers in Jacksonville. Then, after a short stint in St. Petersburg, he moved to Fort Myers and opened an office on First Street, downtown. His first project on his own was a drive-in on South U.S. 41 in Fort Myers; it had sides that opened up like those on the 1952 Walker Guesthouse on Sanibel. Then, working for the government, as private contracts were, at that time, very hard to come by, he designed schools – the 1950s "finger schools" were built for maximum cross ventilation because they were not air-conditioned.

After Edgar Wilson returned from Austria in 1954, Martin and Edgar joined forces to form Gundersen & Wilson, Architects. Although they were in partnership, they tended to operate separately, each catering to the types of buildings that interested them. For example, while Edgar designed many Catholic churches, Martin concentrated more on private homes and commercial buildings, although he did build a few Methodist churches. In 1958, Martin designed and built their own house at 185 Fairview Avenue in East Fort Myers, where Pearl still lives.

Following on from his university thesis, Martin was particularly concerned about the possibility of high-rise development along the Fort Myers city waterfront. He actually sued the city to prevent such development around the yacht basin, and won. Although this was not a generally popular stand at the time, he had the behind-the-scenes support of many people, including some who backed him financially but wished to remain anonymous.

The Gundersen-Wilson partnership ended amicably in 1978, but the close friendship between the two men continued. Edgar stayed on at their office at 2037 West First Street, and Martin moved to a one-story building about a block and a half away. Martin had cancer, but he chose to work right to the end; he closed his office in January 1984. He died on February 7, 1984, in Fort Myers, and is buried in Alva Cemetery, with his parents.

* * * * *

Martin married Pearl Julia Carlsen on January 9, 1946, in Fort Myers. Pearl was born on June 26, 1924. They had three children: son Martin Gerald, born in 1947; son Harry Fredrik, born in 1950; and daughter Julie Susanne, born in 1959.

Martin Jr. is Associate Professor, School of Architecture, University of Florida, Gainesville. He married Barbara Maria Sekella in December 1969, and they have sons Garth and Nils.

Harry is a practicing architect – his company is Gundersen Associates, located in Salem, Massachusetts. He married Ellen Mahala Mattson in 1974, and they have sons Nevin and Anders.

Julie works as a nurse, and has a daughter, Erica Kristen.



Pearl (Carlsen) Gundersen

Martin's parents were Halvor "Harry" Emil Gundersen, born in 1892 in Norway, and Magdalena N. Gundersen, born in 1900 in Flosta, Norway. They married about 1922 and had three children – a daughter Susie G. and twins Henry Martin and Martin Gerald, all born in Flosta, Norway. Harry emigrated from Norway to New York in 1923 on the S.S. Frederik VIII, which sailed from Christiania on May 7, 1923, and arrived in New York a week later. Magdalena and the three children followed him in 1929 on the S.S. Stavangerfjord, which sailed from Oslo on June 21, 1929, and arrived in New York on July 2, 1929. The family settled in Brooklyn, but Harry's occupation as a dredging engineer with United Dredging Company meant moving house as dredging locations changed, and by 1942 the family was living in Gainesville, Florida. Magdalena died in 1980, in Collier County, Florida. Harry died in 1984, in Duval County, Florida. Martin's twin brother, Henry, died in 1997, in Orange Park, Clay County, Florida. His sister Susie currently lives in Kansas City, Kansas.

Pearl's parents were Frederik "Fred" Carlsen, born in 1879 in Norway, and Nellie Carlsen, born in 1888, also in Norway. Fred emigrated from Norway in 1908; Nellie emigrated in 1921 with her son Lewis. Fred and Nellie married about 1922, and Pearl and her twin brother Edgar were born in 1924. Pearl's younger brother Frederick was born a year later. In 1930, the family was living in Alva, and Fred was working as a general crop farmer. Fred died in 1932, and Nellie died in 1984. They are both buried in the Alva Cemetery.

* * * * *

The Gundersen-Wilson partnership was responsible for many buildings in South Florida, particularly in the Fort Myers area. Some of their projects include:

- St. Cecilia Catholic Church, Fort Myers
- Church of the Resurrection of Our Lord, Cypress Lake Blvd., Fort Myers
- St. Leo Catholic Church of Bonita Springs
- Cypress Lake Country Club, Fort Myers

American Department Store, U.S. 41, Fort Myers
Al's Appliance Store, North Fort Myers
Lee County Courthouse Annex (now Lee County Administration Building), Fort Myers
Boardwalk Caper Condominiums, south Fort Myers
John Scanlon Fort Myers Lincoln-Mercury Dealership, south Fort Myers
Fowler Street Shopping Center, Fort Myers
Key Estero Shopping Center, Fort Myers Beach
Lee County Juvenile Detention Home, Fort Myers
Myerlee Manor Condominiums, Fort Myers
Pewett Center, south Fort Myers
Sanibel Island School
Surfside Motel, Fort Myers Beach
Tropic Isles Elementary School, North Fort Myers
U.S. Post Office Building, Fort Myers Beach
Coopers and Lybrand Building, West First Street, Fort Myers
Inter-County Telephone & Telegraph Building, Lee Street, Fort Myers
Numerous local churches
Numerous local schools
Numerous high-rise condominium buildings, Fort Myers Beach
Numerous single-family homes, many on Grove Avenue, Fort Myers

Martin Gundersen and Edgar Wilson tended to work both as a team and on separate projects. The following are descriptions of some of the buildings which either were Martin's alone or which, as Gundersen-Wilson projects, bear his stamp:



(Photo: Martin Gundersen Sr.)

Colcord Residence, 1957

Built on the south bank of the Orange River at 3970 Ellis Road, Fort Myers, it was designed for J. Gordon and Clara L. "Dolly" Colcord.

It has 1 story, 1 bedroom, 2 ½ bathrooms, a screened porch, and a garage. The main part of the house is 116 ft. x 20 ft., which encompasses the interior rooms (1260 sq. ft.) and the screened porch (837 sq. ft.).

The Colcords sold the property on March 30, 1970, to Helen Allen of Fort Myers, and on Dec. 18, 1980, she sold it to Ernest H. and Mary L. Cluett of Fort Myers.



Gundersen Residence, 1958

Built at 185 Fairview Avenue, East Fort Myers, on property purchased from Gerald C. and Muriel K. Hudson, it became Martin's and Pearl's family home.



Tice United Methodist Church, 1959 and 1973

The educational building, at 4555 Tice Street, Fort Myers, was built in 1959, and the church itself was built in 1973.

The 2-story educational building has 7,936 sq. ft. and the 1-story church has 4,124 sq. ft.

According to Martin Gundersen Jr., this church is the most untouched of all of his father's church designs.



Lee County Administration Building, 1960

The Courthouse Annex, at 2115 Second Street, Fort Myers, was Martin's favorite design, according to his widow, Pearl. It is a curtain-wall building, originally constructed with 4 stories, with 2 later added.

At the time of its construction, it was a cutting-edge design, and many people used to more conventional architecture disliked it, some referring to the very necessary shades on the south-facing façade as "pigeon roosts"! But it has since been recognized as one of the finest buildings in the area.

It is notable for good circulation, light, and natural ventilation, and is an exemplary addition to an historic building.



Inter-County Telephone & Telegraph Company Building, 1961

The building, at 1520 Lee Street, Fort Myers, is now missing some of the telephone-themed façade decoration. It has 5 stories and 151,070 sq. ft.



Edgewood United Methodist Church, 1967

Now Grace Ministries, this building, at 930 Freemont Street, Fort Myers, has 3,040 sq. ft.



Office of Taylor, Edenfield, Gilliam & Wiltshire, CPA, 1973

This building, at 2075 West First Street, Fort Myers, has 21,571 sq. ft., 3 stories, and 3 passenger elevators.

The design won a merit award from the Florida Southwest Chapter of the AIA, the jury commenting that the overall composition was good, and it had a certain dignity.



Koreshan Unity Educational & Religious Center, 1979

The building, at 8661 Corkscrew Road, Estero, Florida, is on land sold to Koreshan Unity, Inc. on August 25, 1977, by the Pioneer Educational Foundation, Inc. (Hedwig Michel, President, and Martin G. Gundersen, Secretary). It has two stories, and 7,897 sq. ft.



The building has a spiral shape, best seen from the air. The roof spirals down from the narrower two-story part, sweeping out over the one-story assembly room.

* * * * *

Credits:

Ancestry, <http://ancestry.com>

Florida Architect, November/December 1974, p. 18

Florida Architect, Winter 1984, <http://ufdc.ufl.edu/UF00073793/00230/1>

Fort Myers City Directories

Google Earth

Lee County Clerk of Court, <http://leeclerk.org>

Lee County Property Appraiser, <http://leepa.org>

Martin Gundersen, Jr.

Pearl Gundersen

Joyce Owens AIA

Tice United Methodist Church, http://ticeumc.faithweb.com/index_1.html

Written by Thomas J. and Donna A. McQuade

Photos of Martin Gunderson and the Colcord Residence courtesy of Martin Gunderson Jr.

Research by Donna A. McQuade, phone 347-274-9903, email donna@mcquades.net