

# Sexton legacy extends far beyond landmarks



CHRISTINA TASCON

Various members of the Sexton family gathered in August for the anniversary of the Szechuan Palace, one of the masterpieces created by family patriarch Waldo Sexton. In the front row are Elsebeth Sexton, Charlotte Tripson, Ellie Sexton, Felicia Sexton, Becky Sexton Metz and friend Brittany Banack. In the back row are Mike Sexton, Sam Tripson and Rob Tripson.

The vast and creative family of the eccentric Vero Beach developer remains one of his most enduring contributions to the Treasure Coast

BY CHRISTINA TASCON

**E**ach sun-bleached beam, wrought iron gate and bell collected from around the world holds the soul of Waldo E. Sexton in Indian River County.

He branded Vero Beach in a way that will live on for generations in places like the Ocean Grill, Driftwood Inn, Patio Restaurant, McKee Botanical Gardens and Szechuan Palace.

His vision and eccentricities have given Vero Beach its special character that no amount of sand, sea or perfect, sunny climate could ever match.

What some may not recognize is that Waldo's legacy is more than over-the-top stories and exotic salvage from around the world.

What came from having such an imaginative and motivated pioneer is what makes this town different from other coastal resort areas filled with chain stores and T-shirt shops.

Perhaps more than any other contribution he made, Waldo's intense life force still lives on within each structure he built, the enterprises he created and every member of his diverse family.

The Sextons, whether following the familial name or the married lineage as a Tripson, Daley, Kloska, Schwey, Graves or Scent, still care deeply about the continuity of the spirit of Waldo.

Waldo left a family that has continued to preserve its history of its past for this community as much as its strong-willed patriarch was a part of creating it.

They all seem to have a sense of the responsibilities they have in being Sextons, but they have chosen to seek out their own niche in the community without trading on Waldo's accomplishments.

"We are living under this enormous umbrella which is Waldo — and all of us are looking to be our own person and not identified just through him," said Mike Sexton, one of Waldo's grandsons.

Waldo gave each of them the ability to ignore normal boundaries by teaching them by example what could be done through hard work, perseverance and sheer determination.

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TRIPSON FAMILY COLLECTION

Waldo Sexton in a rare photo of him in farmer attire. Though he owned a dairy farm, Waldo more often than not was dressed a little less casually especially for posed photos.



Ralph Sexton, seated, with some of his family for his 86th birthday at the Ocean Grill in 2013 with Rob Kloska, Laura Arendas-Stevens, Chris Sexton, Paul Kloska, Hilary Kloska, Mike Sexton, Sean Sexton and Robbie Kloska.

CHRISTINA TASCON

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Waldo Sexton gathered interesting and unusual pieces from around the world to decorate his Vero Beach properties.

## THE PATRIARCH'S LIFE

Dozens of books and documents have been written about the iconic and bigger-than-life Waldo E. Sexton who came to Vero in 1914. He was one of many original settlers, but his mark on Vero was one of the most visually significant.

Waldo said his only big regret was that he had not come sooner. He loved it here that much.

Although the locals were in awe of the man's enterprises and huge personality, he was a handful to those closest to him.

As his oldest son, Ralph, acknowledges, Waldo was not an easy man to live with, and following in his giant footsteps was quite a chore. "He was difficult and as kids we were sort of embarrassed by him," said Ralph at the home he built and shares with his wife, Chris, three dogs, two cats and countless peacocks.

"Dad was actually diagnosed as a manic depressive back when there weren't psychiatrists around. He would go on these major highs and then when a project was complete, become very depressed. Mama even had me take him out to a place called The Menninger Clinic in Topeka, Kan., a few times on the train."

Menninger's was a posh psychiatric hospital/in-house treatment center known for caring for celebrities like Judy Garland, Gene Tierney and Marilyn Monroe. Waldo was about 50 years old the first time he was taken there to "rest."

"The time dad was there was a voluntary commitment so I had to go with him to make sure he got there. He yammered on at me the whole way. I left him and did not know if he would still be there when I came back the next morning. But there he was the next day when I came to visit. He came walking up with this huge caretaker and said in a cheerful booming voice 'This is Otto; he's my keeper.' He stayed there until he got right. Then he would be all right for a while," said Ralph.

For children growing up in a small town where everyone knew each other's business and social chitchat was as constant as the sun, being the child of Waldo Sexton held many challenges.

He was known up and down the coast for wild salvage >>



Waldo E. Sexton was well known around the country for his love for unique salvage including a large collection of Addison Mizner architectural pieces.

# SEXTON FAMILY TREE

## Waldo & Elisabeth

Jacqueline (Daley) m. John E. Daley	Barbara (Tripson) m. John Tripson	Ralph m. Hildegard m. Chris	Randy m. Eleanor Graves m. Audrey Graves
Mike m. Judy Kay Dana Chris m. Maureen Bernstein	Mark m. Hildie David Rob m. Tiffany Anderson Will Isabella	Katie m. Kevin McCall Sarah Brian	Randy Jr. m. Frances Graves Elisabeth Eleanor (Ellie) Margaret (Becky)
Christopher m. Georgette Barton	Sam m. Kristen Femminella Jack Charlotte	Sean & Sharon Julia Mike m. Felicia Andreu	Bobby m. Marygrace Martinelli Lucy Natalie
Bonnie m. Paul Schvey Matthew	Jens m. Melissa Logan m. Nick Geeslin	Jennifer m. Clyde Scent Clyde Jr. Travis Sky	Elisabeth m. Sam Stryker
Barbara m. Phil Harris	Karen m. Brian Rosenthal	Hilary m. Rob Kloska Robbie Paul	Lucy



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Grandma Martens (Elsebeth's mother) holds little Bobby Sexton as some of her large family gather around on her 94th birthday at the Sexton homestead.

trips where he picked up anything that took his fancy to place in one of his beloved projects. The *Miami Herald* labeled him "The Man Who'll Buy Anything."

"Elsebeth would see trucks come into the yard piled high with his 'finds' and exasperatedly ask Waldo what he was going to do with it all," said Hildie Tripson, the wife of Sexton's grandson, Mark Tripson. "He would just look around and say 'I don't know, Elsie; I will find a place.'"

Privately, Elsebeth had more to deal with than sometimes she knew how to handle alone. Once Sexton even had to be forcibly removed from Cuba.

"He was in Cuba with his botanist, Pop Hansen, who was helping gather exotic plants for McKee. Mama got a call from the Cuban president asking her to come and get her husband. I guess he was causing a problem down there. She worried about how she would get him home, and then old Doc Hardee, the family physician, offered to help her bring him back," said Ralph Sexton.

It was at one of the visits to The Menninger Clinic that Waldo was persuaded to let go of the dozens of projects and businesses he had going at the same time.

"He gave me the ranch, Randy the citrus business and sold the Vero Dairy to his son-in-law John Tripson, who owned Tripson's Dairy," said Ralph.

Waldo and Elsebeth had four children. Jacqueline (Jackie) is the oldest and her sister Barbara came one year later. After a 10-year gap Ralph was born and two years after him came Randy. Here's a look at the various branches of the family and their contributions:

## JACQUELINE SEXTON DALEY

Jacqueline, 94, has lived in California for more of her life than she lived in Vero.

Waldo was very progressive in his desire to make sure *all* of his children were well educated so every one of them was sent away to college.

Jackie went to Sweetbriar in Virginia. Waldo paid for her tuition by trading a train load of citrus for it.

"Money may not have been as easy to get ahold of in those days, but a train load of fruit got you pretty much anything," said Ralph.

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SEXTON FAMILY COLLECTION

Three of the four Waldo Sexton children, Jacquelyn (Jackie) Sexton Daley, Ralph Sexton and Randy Sexton, share a laugh about old times as they visit at one of the many gatherings of their large family when Jackie visited from her home in California.

Jackie met and married her husband, John (Jack) Daley, while he was in seminary school. He was ordained an Episcopalian minister and together they lived in Baldwinsville, N.Y., before moving to California in the 1970s.

"When we asked him why he was moving again, he told us 'There's too much sin in New York,'" Ralph Sexton said laughing.

Eventually Jack became the chaplain for the San Francisco

49ers and the two lived and raised their children near San Francisco. Jack and Jackie had four children: Mike, Christopher, Bonnie (Schwey) and Barbara (Harris).

Bonnie knew her grandfather but remembers him as a bit scary.

"He was massive and had a big booming voice," she said, "and he always called me the 'girl with the blue hair' although we never knew why."

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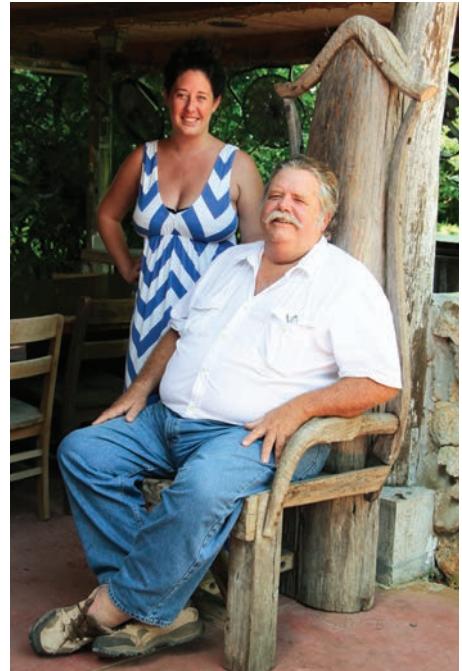
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When her mother was visiting Vero one day she was surprised that people thought of her father as more legend than man.

"My mother and I decided to stop and have lunch at Waldo's," said Bonnie.

Mom was looking at a painting of Waldo and said, 'Oh there's daddy.' The waitress who was standing nearby heard and inquired if that really was her father. When mother said yes, she stood back and said 'You mean that's a real person?' in an incredulous voice.

"Mother was so disbelieving that someone who worked there did not know who Waldo Sexton was. By the end of the meal that waitress knew more than she probably ever wanted to know about Waldo Sexton," Bonnie said with a laugh.



CHRISTINA TASCON  
Charlotte Tripson with her father Mark Tripson in the "King's Chair" in Waldo's Secret Garden on his original homestead.

### BARBARA SEXTON TRIPSON FAMILY

The late Barbara Tripson was very close to her mother and lived in the home next to her parents after she married.

She taught Sunday school for 30 years and was involved with founding the local chapter of American Association of University Women.

She and John had four children: Mark, Jens, Logan and Karen.

John Tripson met Barbara when he was stationed in Fort Pierce. After they were married they lived with Waldo and Elsebeth until John eventually said, "Waldo, a man's got to have his own house."

Waldo had a house built next door and built the Tripson Dairy alongside Waldo's Vero Dairy.

As the current vice president of Sexton Inc., Mark Tripson oversees all of the family's joint rental properties and corporate businesses.

After Mark bought the original homestead, they moved into the main house and the Tripson structure was used mostly for storage.

Both houses are similar in style and personality to all of Waldo's buildings, and they have kept his flair for the artistic and eclectic alive on the property.

Mark's wife, Hildie, president of the Indian River Historical Society, and her daughter Charlotte have an especially strong desire to keep Waldo's legacy alive.

Charlotte is passionate about her family's role in the future of Vero Beach.

Her idea to make the location a popular wedding and event site with her mother — they call it "Waldo's Secret Garden" — has made it financially viable while it allows public

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access. Their goal is to one day make the property a pocket park so visitors can experience its magic.

Mark is one of the only second-generation family members left in Vero who really knew Waldo personally. Waldo died in 1967, when Mark was 18.

"Waldo had a vision and he was always able to bring it to fruition," Mark recalled. "You know a lot of people have ideas but not a lot of them are able to bring them to reality. Waldo brought each one to reality and that's saying something pretty good."

Their other two children, Rob, who owns a grass-cutting business maintaining large groves and Sam, who is an agronomist at Helena Chemical, have a deep love of their heritage but it is Charlotte who has set her future on keeping the Sexton's history alive.

"I have to go out and do all the things I want to do now because once I move back here I plan to not ever leave again," said Charlotte.

### RALPH SEXTON FAMILY

Ralph is Waldo's oldest son and the heir apparent to the Sexton patriarchal title. His children are Katie, Sean, Jennifer and Hilary. All have been given 5-acre homesteads within walking distance of their father's home.

At 86, he still goes to the office to run Sexton Inc. after discussing ranch business with son Sean at the kitchen table in his home on Treasure Hammock Ranch.

His memory is extremely sharp and most will go to him first when trying to recall some detail of family or local lore.

Sean is the most well-known locally. He is an extremely soulful artist who depicts stunning scenes of life on the Flori-



Sean Sexton in his ever present cowboy hat stands with some of his highly desired art pieces illustrating his love for Florida landscape.

da landscape and is a prolific writer who is invited to read his poetry at many events. He is married to Sharon Sexton, who is also an artist.

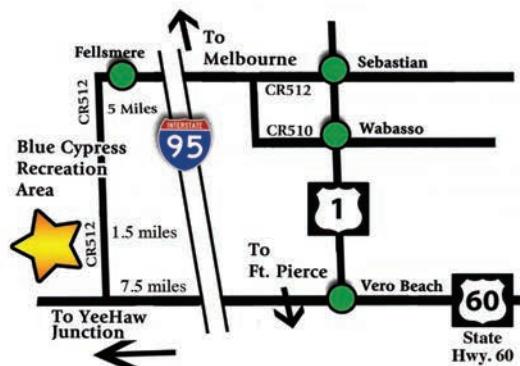
Sean and his son Mike run the daily operations of the ranch, taking Ralph on a weekly tour of their 600-acre, 300-head cattle operation.

Mike has an animal science and agri-business degree, so he can now help manage the ranch. He says he could never be happy at a desk, even though he had been offered a job to work for a large Fortune 500 company.

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CHRISTINA TASCON

Chris Sexton with Pierre, in their home which is reminiscent of Waldo's Driftwood Inn but was designed by Ralph Sexton.

"I thought long and hard about it, but I would rather be here," said Mike, who loves being a cowboy and whose new wife, Felicia, will soon be joining him on the family compound.

Felicia is working toward a large-animal degree at Ross University Veterinarian School in St. Kitts.

"Between all of our animals at each of our homes and the ranch, I imagine she will be pretty busy," said Chris Sexton.

Chris (Ralph's wife of 32 years) is a retired dancer. She instructed dance through the city of Vero Beach, and founded and choreographed the Chrisdale Dancers.

She founded and chaired the dance department at Indian River Charter High School's Visual and Performing Arts Program.

Ralph's family was raised from an early age to support the family businesses with hard work.

When Jennifer (Scent) was in her teens, she worked at the Patio and bussed tables at the Driftwood along with her brother and sister. Sean was the maître d' at the hotel and also worked the front desk.

"I was the salad girl and then grilled steaks at the Patio at only 15," said Hilary (Kloska.)

"We never got any special treatment because we were who we were. In fact, we all had to start at the very bottom." "It was a good lesson, the school of life," said Jennifer.

## RANDY SEXTON FAMILY

Randy, who died in 2004, was a well-liked presence in the community and was acknowledged as the family's financial whiz.

He was married twice, first to Eleanor Graves and then to Audrey Graves. He had four children with Eleanor: Randy Jr., Bobby, Elsebeth and Lucy.

Randy Sexton Jr. owns the Sexton Groves originated by

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Bobby Sexton, pictured with wife Marygrace, is the third generation of Waldo's family carrying on the citrus family tradition.

Waldo in Vero as well as a tree farm that specializes in native palm trees.

His brother Bobby Sexton is the president and operator of the Oslo Citrus Packing House which Waldo originally had formed as the Oslo Citrus Growers Association with other family members.

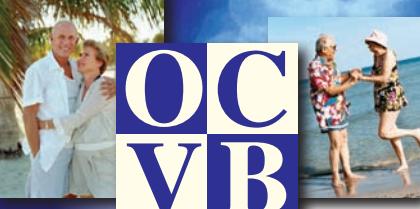
As citrus groves eventually were sold off, Bobby bought the co-op from the rest of the partners to form the packing house.

Bobby and Randy both worked in the groves since they were in their early teens, going to school in the morning and finishing the day "hoeing the trees for a dollar an hour."

Waldo also was one of the founders of Farm Credit, a system of banking that allowed farmers to borrow loans and it continues today with Bobby Sexton on its board of directors.

"Waldo started many businesses and we try to continue on and improve what he did," said Bobby Sexton. "We all just want to support our families although the citrus business is getting harder each year."

Bobby and his wife, Marygrace, opened Natalie's Orchid Island Juice Company. in 1989. It is an internationally known juice distributor, which is just >>

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## TREASURE COAST PERSONALITIES

as popular in France, Japan and Germany as it is in Florida. Natalie's Juice is named for their daughter who was a baby at the time of its inception.

The company came from a desire of Bobby Sexton to produce great fresh squeezed juices but it was Marygrace's determination that made the dream a reality. Now their daughter Natalie is also working as the marketing director in the family business.

"We would have supported her in anything she did but we are happy she chose to come back to work here," said Bobby.

### FAMILY CONTRIBUTIONS

The Sexton hand still touches every aspect of the bedrock business in this community. They made a path in real estate, citrus, cattle, farming and finance.

"We have all worked since we were young and grew up around adults who worked," said Mike Sexton. "Waldo always said 'Success comes off your back or your head.'"

They have also made their mark preserving the agricultural, ecological and artistic heart of Vero Beach.

Mark Tripson is president of the Indian River Farms Water Control District. He was appointed to the board of the Preservation of Beaches and Shores Commission, is on the Marine Resource Council and has been on the Soil Conservation Board for more than 25 years.

Sean Sexton is state director of the Indian River Cattlemen's Association and is on the County Agriculture Council, is a board member of the Sebastian River Improvement District and was appointed to the Florida Beef Council.

The Sextons are as much a part of mainstream Vero today as they were in Waldo's time, but they tend to have more



CREATIONS BY CLYDE/CLYDE SCENT

Sean Sexton and his son Mike branding cattle on Treasure Hammock Ranch.

roles behind the scenes than at the front of the Waldo parade.

Sexton Inc. includes more than 23 business entities and still holds the largest amount of oceanfront land in this county.

"Waldo made sure his family would still be taken care of well into the future," said Ralph.

### WALDO ENDURES

Waldo's family has said on more than one occasion that his constant repetition of one phrase lent itself to many of the stories and impressions left behind: "I would rather be considered a liar than a bore!"

Waldo was constantly looking at the humorous side of any >>

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SEXTON FAMILY COLLECTION

The entire Sexton family came to honor Elsebeth Sexton when she passed away.

situation, another trait he passed down to his family.

Hundreds of stories about him are bandied about over family dinners and impromptu get-togethers where Waldo still seems to have a chair at a table full of laughing guests.

Although his eccentricities were vexing to his family, everyone welcomed Waldo into their circles. "You can be bigger than life and no one will say a word," observed Mark Tripson.

Even today they gather and sit in rapt attention as Ralph, still able to recall each incident, sits and tells the tales of Waldo's antics as one or the other prompts him with "Ralph do you remember the story about..."

Mark also loves sharing the stories he knows, which tend to be the ones that are a bit more "salty" in keeping with Waldo's rowdy spirit.

## WALDO TODAY

Many people believe that Waldo's spirit lives on as an ethereal presence.

"I believe in the power of Waldo, and he does not want to leave Vero quite yet," said Chris.

*Waldo's Safari* a documentary about the life of Waldo E. Sexton by Treasure Coast Television includes many claims by people who say they have seen his ghostly figure. Some of the family believes that Waldo's spirit was too big for mere death, and they, too, have experienced strange occurrences they say may prove he is still around.

When Ralph and Chris Sexton were asked to be interviewed for this story, Chris went into Ralph's study and saw the manuscript for "Waldo's Safari" on his desk.

"I asked Ralph where he got it, and he said he did not know anything about it," said Chris, laughing. "I think Waldo wanted a hand in telling his story too."

Waldo considered himself the "gatekeeper of Vero" and perhaps he does not want to relinquish that role.

With the sheer determination of his dreams, Waldo was one of the many men who put Vero Beach on the map.

His passion for the land and its development was utmost in his heart and he has clearly passed that love on to his heirs.

"There is a real sense of pride in all of them," said Sharon Sexton. "When you have dirt under your fingernails you have a real connection to your roots."

With the instilled guidance of Waldo, the Sexton family continues to follow his vision in the care of a town he loved so much, leaving it the many uniquely beautiful landmarks, which are his gifts to today's Vero. 

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