

Hidden In Plain Sight:

*The Story of Coffeen Nature Preserve*



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**T**ucked just out of view off Highway 98 between Topsil Resort and Topsail Hill State Park, you'll find the entrance to a veritable wonderland of nature and wildlife. It's a rarity to see so much "green" in an area that has become not just one of the fastest-growing counties in Florida but in the United States. And, that's just how its creators intended it.

Coffeen Nature Preserve comprises 230 acres of natural forests with sand pines, live oaks, southern magnolias and pignut hickory trees, but its hidden treasures don't stop there. A 40-acre freshwater lake as well as swamps, bogs and wetlands await along with a variety of wildlife including deer, fox, bobcats, armadillos, wild turkeys, various birds and yes, even alligators. The area is also home to Four Mile Village, an exclusive — and private — development of residential homes.

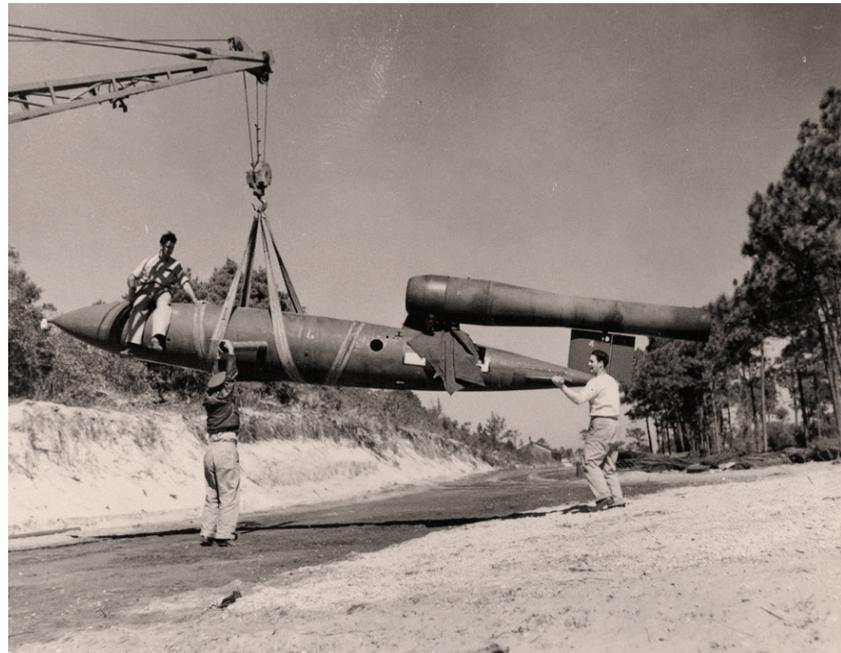
"It is a place where nature can take precedence over the superficial, and where those who can appreciate nature in her various moods and forms can find a haven," those were the words of Dorothy Coffeen, who along with her husband, John, are the namesakes of the nature preserve.

The Coffeens discovered the undeveloped wilderness in the early 1940s and sought to protect it as such, donating nearly 200 acres of the then-named Coffeen Nature Preserve to the Sierra Club Foundation in 1976. By 2004, ownership of the preserve was transferred to the Coffeen Land Trust, a local non-profit organization whose work continues today under the watchful eyes of Bruce and Susan Paladini.

But, the "dash" between the land's discovery in the 1940s and where things stand today is sizable, spanning eight decades, and a lot has happened. The most notable being its place in military history.

"So, the Germans have captured France and Hitler's got his sights set on Britain, and they'd developed these pilotless motorized missiles that the Brits dubbed 'the buzz bomb,' because of the sound the engine made," Susan Paladini said. "So, the allies captured a couple that hadn't exploded and shipped them back to Wright Field in Dayton, Ohio."

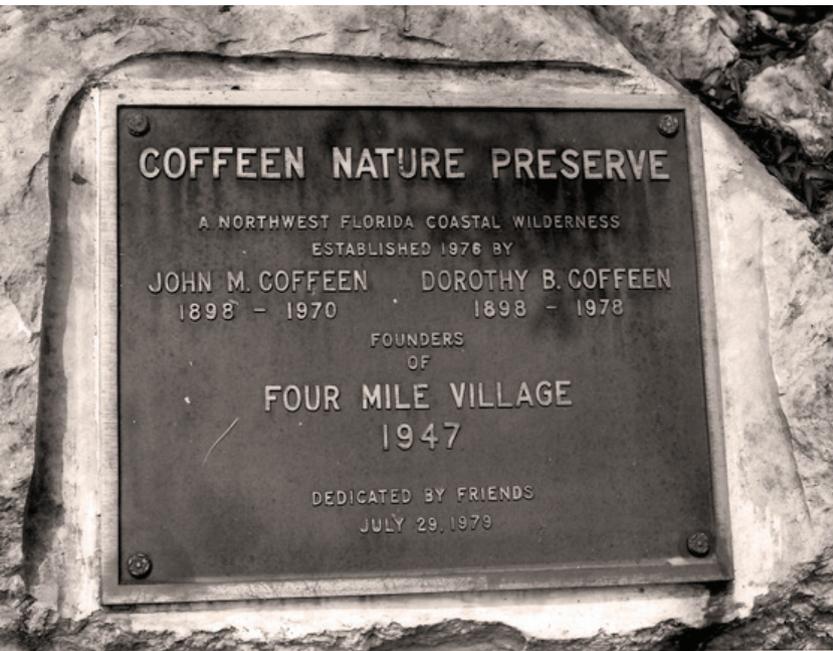
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Once the bombs had been replicated, they were shipped to Florida — to the site where the Coffeen Nature Preserve sits — for testing. Two missile-launching ramps, each more than 100 years long, and observation bunkers used during testing are still visible at the preserve today. The best preserved bunker is situated near the dock at Lake Fuller while the other two are located on Sand Pine Military Trail. The preserved launch ramp is best seen along Topsail Bluff Trail. The U.S. military occupied the property throughout 1944 and 1945, testing more than 600 unarmed missiles test-launched from the property into the Gulf of Mexico. It was the humble beginnings of the country's strategic missile program.



After the military left the land, the Coffeen family moved into the preserve, with part of the family setting up residence on the bay side and part building on the gulf side. After Dorothy's husband died, she made plans for the future of the land.

"She could have gone two ways," Paladini said. "She could have set it up as a conservation easement and had the property in here pay for the maintenance through their dues. But, she kind of saw the writing on the wall that this could potentially become a rich man's playground and she did not want the public to lose the ability to come in and enjoy it.

"She saw this land as a gift from God so she took steps to preserve it," Paladini continued. "That's what her gift was all about — all the public quiet enjoyment of nature. And, that was a wonderful gift."

Coffeen Nature Preserve is open to the public for tours by reservation only. The tour includes four hiking trails and a military history presentation, as well as an opportunity to explore the intact bunkers. ■



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