

Death of last resident of Elliott Key ends era

By GEOFFREY TOMB
Herald Staff Writer

Imagine having all to yourself a seven-mile long, subtropical island, surrounded by buried treasure, sugar-white sands, coral reefs, gin-clear waters and soulfully sea breeze.

So lived Virginia Lambert Tannehill, the last permanent resident of Elliott Key in Biscayne Bay. Tannehill died this week at a nursing home in Orange Park near Jacksonville. She was 79.

"She was totally an outside person, roaming the beaches," said Coconut Grove resident Betty Townsend, Tannehill's sister. "She lived her entire life exactly as she wanted to."

Her death brings to an end the saga of rugged hermit life for the few hardy souls who since the late 1800s have called Dade's out-islands home. South of Key Biscayne and north of Key Largo, the area is today Biscayne

Tannehill was one of two who remained when Hurricane Andrew hit in 1992.

National Park.

Only a few permanent residents were allowed to stay on after the federal government began buying property — paying \$6,600 an acre — for the park in the 1970s. Only two, Tannehill and her Porgy Key neighbor, fishing guide Lancelot Jones, remained when Hurricane Andrew swept away their homes in 1992.

The storm destroyed The Four Winds, the two-story home Tannehill and her late husband, Hall,

PLEASE SEE TANNERHILL, 4B

Dear John,

I thought you would appreciate the history of Islandia which is attached.

It was given to me by Virginia Tannehill about 2 yrs before she died. It appears to have been intended as a Christmas card letter. It is interesting history.

Also, I am still trying to discover the origin of the name "windley Key". Do you know anything about it.

I remember asking you the question at the Lake Key Sanctuary Celebration. I will call.

Gene Shuman

TANNERHILL, FROM 1B

built by hand on northern Elliott in the 1960s. Gone, too, were priceless contents of the home, salvage and artifacts from wrecked galleons, such as an oak statue of a monk from the mid-1700s uncovered in 1964.

The home was famous for its long dock and covered boathouse. A recovered canoe and old sea anchor were placed in the salt water under the boathouse, waiting for visitors to discover them.

A 1949 estimate claimed there was \$6 million in sunken treasure and buried loot in and around the waters of Elliott Key. Black Caesar, a legendary pirate from the early 1800s, reportedly kept captured women imprisoned on the island, their cries frightening all who came near.

One who was not frightened was Virginia Tannehill.

After her husband died in 1981, she

remained in the luxury of independence, walking the island and beachcombing with her favorite dachshunds and Dobermans.

During the years she befriended boaters, helped vessels in distress, tipped off the Coast Guard and took in many Cuban and Haitian rafters whose first landfall in America was "her" island. An expert diver before the sport became popular, she was intimate with the reefs.

"Lots of people say, 'Gee, I'm going to do that some day.' Well, she did it," said her nephew, Dick Townsend, a professor at Miami-Dade Community College.

Born in Staunton, Va., on April 15, 1917, Tannehill and her family moved to Miami in 1926, arriving before the killer hurricane that September. They stayed and she graduated from Ponce de Leon Senior High in 1936.

Her husband was a mechanic for Eastern Airlines, but the couple's life was on the water, according to members of her family.

Fleeing her island home as Andrew bore down, Tannehill and her dogs headed for what she believed was safety on the "main land." Her choice: Homestead, one of Dade's hardest hit zones.

The home where she sought shelter was destroyed, forcing her into a bathroom with her dogs, Townsend said.

With only the clothing on her back, her dogs and her spirit, she survived Andrew.

Tannehill quickly returned to the solitude of island life, living in a boat in Broad Creek. Falling ill last December, she left for the last time.

"She was the best friend I ever had in my life," said Lancelot Jones, now 97, when told of Tannehill's death this week. He, too, lived on the mainland.

In addition to Townsend, Tannehill is survived by another sister, Sarah Abrisch of Orange Park.

Not surprisingly, the family has decided to scatter her remains at sea.

SOME EARLY HISTORY OF ISLANDIA

Christmas 1963

from Jane and John Nordt

What is Islandia? Some friends say that our city is a beautiful chain of 33 tropical islands. Islandia has been recently granted a municipal charter in Dade County. This little complex of coral islands in south Biscayne Bay is bordered on the east by Hawk Channel on the western edge of the Gulf Stream. By some compelling influence of tides and currents, the keys of Islandia conform to the general direction of the mainland shore.

Because we love these Florida keys and the clear green water of the bay, we've looked into records of historians and cartographers to learn a little more about the picturesque past. We've found former place names and a few records of the first settlers who lived here before we did.

Our islands are rich in history and lore. Strange and dangerous events have taken place here. Spectacular villains and courageous pioneers have challenged the offshore reefs, explored and used the hidden channels, dug in the land for treasures and graves, cultivated