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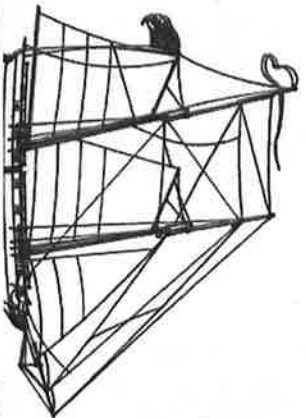
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The Lakes Passage Stilt Houses, Fishing Shacks, and Shelters

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President Theodore Roosevelt established The Key West National Wildlife Refuge in 1908 as a preserve and breeding ground for native birds and other wildlife. This preserve was one of the earliest Federal refuges in the United States and is located in the Gulf of Mexico beginning a few miles west of Key West. The refuge encompasses more than 200,000 acres with only 2,000 acres of land. The area is home to more than 250 species of birds and is important for sea turtle nesting. The islands are predominately mangrove with a few beaches and salt ponds. The Lakes Passage region is part of the Refuge.

The first stilt houses were built in the early 1960's approximately seven miles west of Key West in the Gulf of Mexico in the shallow waters of a portion of the Refuge known to Key Westers as the Lakes Passage, or simply the Lakes. There were seventeen stilt houses in total, and seven were situated in the Boca Grande section (also known as Bo' Grande) of the Lakes. Three existed off Ballast Key, and four were built around Man Key. The



The Nora and John Koenig Stilt House off Man Key. Photo credit: Koenig Family.

others were scattered throughout. This tranquil region is protected by Man, Woman, Crawfish and Ballast Keys on the south, and the shoals and rock jetties of the Northwest Channel to the north. The waters in the Lakes area are relatively calm save during the most violent storms. The average depth of the sea water in the navigable areas is five feet. Extensive local knowledge is required to safely make way in this pristine preserve as the salt water can shallow-up very quickly on the sides of the winding natural channels.

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