

## **The Gainesville Servicemen's Center/Thelma Boltin Center**

### **Side One**

The City of Gainesville purchased the Servicemen's Center lot on December 7<sup>th</sup> 1942. The Federal Works Agency constructed a \$37,000 building with a ballroom, stage, dressing rooms, second floor reading room, three showers, three telephone booths for long distance calls, a coat check room, a 20-foot-long long snack bar, and a kitchen with a ten-burner stove. The FWA provided sofas and easy chairs, a baby grand piano, a fiddle, trombone, radio, juke box, and a victrola. The city paid for kitchen equipment, flowered drapes, the mantle mirror, ping pong and snooker tables. They also paved NE 2<sup>nd</sup> Ave and laid sidewalks. The Garden Club supplied and installed plants. Senator Claude Pepper dedicated the building on July 23<sup>rd</sup> 1943. Servicemen from Camp Blanding, the Alachua Army Air Base, the Officer Candidate School and the 62<sup>nd</sup> College Training Detachment attended events organized by program director Thelma Boltin (1904-1992) seven days a week from 10:00 AM to 11:00 PM that included dances, plays, variety shows, sing alongs, chess, pinochle and bingo. Outdoor activities included badminton, barbeque and shuffleboard. Civic clubs provided funds and hostesses for meals including 400 dinners on Thanksgiving.

### **Side Two**

The city bought the building for \$12,500 in 1946 and retained Miss Boltin as Director. A 1928 graduate of Emerson College, she returned to Gainesville after teaching in Polk County 1930-32 and taught English, Speech and directed plays at Gainesville High School. The School Board employed her until 1956 when she moved to White Springs to direct the Florida Folk Festival. She was a founder, actor and director at the Gainesville Little Theater (Community Playhouse), chair of the Florida and National Federation of Music Clubs, received an award from the American Assoc. for State and Local History, was WGGG Radio's "Story Hour Lady," artist in residence at schools, and assisted folklife programs in Dade City, Apopka, Cocoa, and Fernandina. She was known as "Cousin Thelma," and "Queen of Florida Folklore." In 1943 she organized the teen club at the "Rec Center" which continued through the 1960s. Local bands with Stephen Stills, Don Felder and Bernie Leadon played at Friday night dances which Tom Petty attended. All four are now in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. The building became a senior center in the 1970s and is also used for dances, wedding receptions and civic events. A \$420,000 renovation took place in 2000.

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