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THE CRUSADERS *An occasional series*

'Broward and Dade are more or less gone, built out. Palm Beach County is lost and doesn't know it,' says environmentalist and long-time county commissioner Maggy Hurchalla. And now, she says, her beloved Martin County is at risk.



DAVID LANE/Staff Photographer

Maggy Hurchalla, a former Martin County commissioner, relaxes at home in Port Salerno. Maggy is Janet Reno's younger sister. The kayaks in the background attest to her love of the outdoors.

Maggy Hurchalla has no objection to Republicans. "I sleep with one every night," she says, laughing. She means her husband, Jim Hurchalla, a former engineer for Pratt & Whitney.

The couple managed to weather hurricanes Frances and Jeanne in the big, wooden, Florida-style house they built in 1968 for \$25,000 on a \$5,000 lot beside the Indian River in Port Salerno. "Nobody wanted to live here. It was out in the boondocks and had all these mosquitoes," she said, looking like the cat that swallowed the goldfish.

During the storms, the river overflowed and lapped against the foundations of the place, but the water never quite made it indoors.

Today, Hurchalla sees development sloshing up against the southern border

of Martin County as the Scripps biomedical research facility searches for a place to locate in northern Palm Beach County. She fears Scripps will pry open the door and touch off a flash-flood of concrete up and down the Interstate 95 corridor and far out into the undeveloped western reaches of both counties.

If that happens, everything Maggy Hurchalla fought for during 20 years as a county commissioner will be in jeopardy.

"It's so sad, what's going on now," she says. "We're being taken over by a bunch of people who are irrational, stubborn, wicked and devious. We were so close! So close! Just when we found that slow growth actually worked, we're abandoning the whole idea. I think it's a very scary time."

See MAGGY, 6D ▶

Maggy's Developing FEARS

By MICHAEL BROWNING ■ Palm Beach Post Staff Writer

Maggy's Developing FEARS

► **MAGGY** from 1D

Then she laughs again. Hurchalla is an irrepressible laugher. She can be describing the end of the world as we know it, and she'll let out a hoot, and cap it with a piece of slashing sarcasm.

"Broward and Dade are more or less gone, built out. Palm Beach County is lost and doesn't know it," she says. "But in a way, they laid down their lives for the rest of us. The land mines they stepped on and the battles they fought helped educate us."

"You can never let down your guard. One vote, one Tuesday evening, can wipe you out for 20 years. And being good for 20 years still can't save you. The politicians who have served Florida all these years did not mean to make it an unbearable place to live in. It just happened, little by little."

A strong environmentalist, a vivid, funny and unabashed liberal, a 20-year veteran of the Martin County Commission and, incidentally, the baby sister of former U.S. Attorney General Janet Reno, Hurchalla is now retired. On a recent wintry day, a fire smoldered in the fireplace, and the book-rich, wooden-floored living room was filled with a cozy, cypress warmth. Hurchalla was barefoot, relaxed and a little rumpled. She has long, elegant feet and toes.

Outside, beyond the white sand banks, breezes blew the St. Lucie River into little gray-blue wavelets. Hurchalla's wooden, screened-in, front porch is strewn with turtle shells, animal and reptile skulls, and marine exoskeletons. She donated an Indian mound, located on their property, to the state. A white-sand corner lot, shaded by sea-grape trees, on a cul-de-sac, overlooking the water, all for \$30,000.

Getting in on the ground floor in Florida doesn't get any sweeter than this.

A house built by hand

Martin County, population 126,731 (according to the 2000 census), was founded in 1925 and covers 555 square miles. It is strongly Republican and has the highest per-capita income in the state, followed by Palm Beach County. It resembles an enormous, flat, rectangular fortress, protected to the south by Jonathan Dickinson State Park, to the east by the Atlantic Ocean, to the north by undeveloped orange groves and to the west by wide open spaces. Strictly zoned for one unit every 20 acres, the cypress domes with coppery needles seem to float like islands in vast distances.

But what protects Martin more than anything else is one of the most stringent comprehensive plans in Florida, a plan Hurchalla helped hammer out after

she was elected to the county commission in 1974, and which she defends tooth-and-nail today, though she left office in 1994.

She jokes that she didn't dare go to the bathroom during a commission meeting in those years, for fear developers would seize on her absence and push a subdivision through.

"I got used to pushing rocks uphill and having them roll down on me. Every now and then, I got one up to the top that is still there."

Now, a 3-2 pro-growth majority on the county commission menaces all that. It's the old story: Developers always attend meetings. Citizens seldom do.

For Hurchalla, who grew up in South Florida in the 1940s and remembers vividly what it was like, the drift of current events is not encouraging.

"What we are seeing now is the whole Gold Coast, oozing north," she said. "It could all very easily become Fort Lauderdale. I hope we can take it back."

She was born 64 years ago in Coconut Grove. Her father, Henry Olaf Reno, was the son of Danish immigrants to Wisconsin who changed their name from Rasmussen to Reno because it was easier to pronounce. They chose the name at random, off a map of Nevada.

The family was drawn to Florida by the giddy land boom of the mid-1920s. Henry, a would-be farmer, ended up growing roses and gardenias, and working as a police reporter for *The Miami Herald* for 43 years, dividing his time between blooms and homicides. He enjoyed listening to Mahler and reading Russian novels.

"Christmas was kind of a funny time of year for us," Hurchalla recalled. "Because of daddy's job, we knew Christmas was when people kill each other."

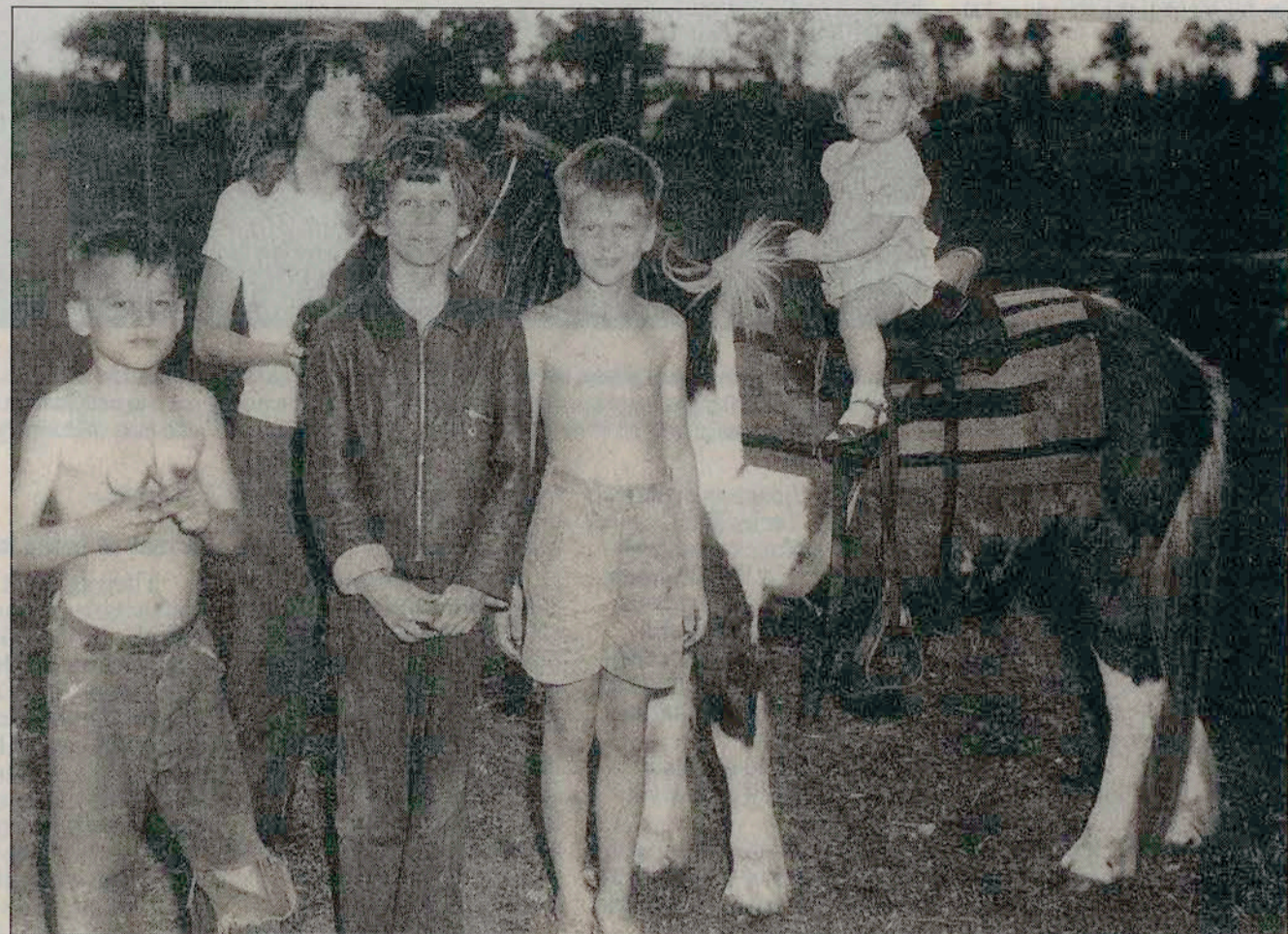
Hurchalla's mother, Jane Wood Reno, was an astounding, self-possessed woman, a true original who built the family's house in south Miami from the oolite foundation up, with her own hands and a \$25 set of plans. Janet Reno still lives in it.

Jane, too, worked for *The Miami Herald*, as a feature writer. She was on Miami Beach during the great hurricane of 1926 and found it exhilarating.

Hurchalla is the third of four children, whose nicknames for each other all end in "y": Janny, Bobby, Maggy, Marky.

"We are, in a sense, an anachronistic family," she says. "We remember the horse-and-buggy days, when we aren't really old enough to remember the horse-and-buggy days. In South Miami, we were on 20 acres with an old barn with a milk cow named Suzy, a pony named Tony, two donkeys, pigs, chickens, turkeys and a goat."

"We bathed every school



Family photo/From 'The Hell With Politics - The Life and Writings of Jane Wood Reno,' edited by George Hurchalla

The Reno children — (from left) Mark, Janet, Maggy and Robert — with cousin Nora Denslow in 1948. They lived an unconventional, rural existence in Dade County. After college, Maggy moved to Martin County, becoming one of its first environmentalists. Janet went on to become U.S. Attorney General, Robert a political columnist for *Newsday*, and Mark a boat captain in Africa.

night, but we didn't have any hot water. We had to heat water on the stove. We couldn't afford a telephone, because phone companies charged by the mile. But when my dad went to work for *The Miami Herald*, they paid for a phone so they could keep in touch with him."

During World War II, with gas and tires unavailable because of rationing, the children would take Tony the pony, and walk with their father to the bus stop, a mile and a half up U.S. 1.

"Then he'd get on the bus, and we'd ride the pony back home, right down the middle of Dixie Highway."

"It was child's heaven," Hurchalla recalled. "You'd find cow skulls under palmetto bushes. You'd find neat, old pieces of farm equipment. There's nothing that tastes as good as the cream at the top of a bucket of fresh milk, nothing like reaching under the warm feathers of a hen for fresh-laid eggs."

It was a life regularly punctuated by hurricanes. Hurchalla takes storms in stride, having seen so many of them. Her first came along when she was only 7. She lights up, describing it as if it were a visit to Disney World.

"I remember in the 1947 hurricane, it rained something like 105 inches. For adults, hurricanes are a real disaster, but for children, with no responsibilities, they're fun. If you're 7 years old, you can build rafts and use inner tubes and catch tadpoles."

"The Coral Gables golf course was a wonderful place to go swimming. Half of Dade County had to get typhoid shots because the septic tanks were under water."

"We were having an absolutely wonderful time with the flooding, when the greatest tragedy of our young lives struck. Liza, our dog, was a black-haired mongrel with a white streak and a white streak to her tail. Liza was one of those really smart mutts that remind you why you don't go to nerdy breeding. She got bitten by a rattlesnake and died on the way home. Janny cried and gave her a funeral. Janny is the most sentimental of all of us."

"Janny" is Janet Reno, Hurchalla's older sister, who became the U.S. Attorney General under President Bill Clinton.

What was it like, being the younger sister of the girl who would grow up to be the top law-enforcement officer of the United States?

"She was very fair. When Bobby and Marky and I fought, she would just sit on us," Hurchalla laughed again. "I'm extremely proud of her."

"Janny was the responsible one. I'm the middle kid, so I didn't have to be responsible. I could always say, 'Let's go a little further!' when we got on a muddy road. . . . Janny had to dig us out, so she had to figure out whether we should or shouldn't go a little further. If daddy couldn't make it home, Janny milked the cow."

She and her siblings went to South Miami Elementary School, and then Ponce de Leon Junior High School and Coral Gables High School. "I remember being the only person in my third grade who supported Truman," she said wryly.

Hurchalla attended Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania,

'How many people can live in Florida? An infinite number. But not happily.'

MAGGY HURCHALLA, former Martin County commissioner

where she majored in psychology, and minored in biology and philosophy. There, she met Jim Hurchalla, and the couple were married in her junior year. Jim got a job with Pratt & Whitney, and they moved first to Jupiter, and then in 1968, Stuart. They have four children — Jimmy, Bobby, Jane and George — and two grandchildren.

Return of the native

It didn't take long for her to get into politics. She was elected to the Martin County Commission in 1974 and spent the next two decades trying to preserve the place from the bonfire of development that was raging on both of Florida's southern coasts.

When she was a girl, her mother had rigged up a makeshift camper out of an old horse trailer, and dragged it up and down the state. Using U.S. Geological Survey maps, the family located springs, and went swimming and canoeing in them. They hiked through pine forests, canoed on rivers and got lost in the Everglades many times. Both Maggy and Janet are avid kayakers today.

Seeing Florida as it was in those days made Hurchalla eager to preserve as much of it as possible. She came to understand the state, not as a scattered collection of parks and preserves, but as an enormous continuum of wetlands, coastal marshes, sandy uplands, lakes, springs, pine forests and oak scrub. It can't be subdivided into quarter-acre lots, golf courses and theme parks indefinitely, and not be degraded.

Florida's population stands at upwards of 15 million now and rapidly counting. Each day in 2004, the place saw a net gain of nearly 800 new residents.

"How many people can live in Florida?" Hurchalla asks rhetorically. "An infinite number. But not happily."

Besides helping craft the 1982 comprehensive land-use plan, she worked to preserve wetlands, the Indian River Lagoon, coastal savannas near Jensen Beach and on other environmental projects. The result is that Martin County is one of the most enviable places in the state to live — a place of natural greens and blues, rather than pink stucco, red brick, black asphalt and white concrete.

In 1994, her political career suddenly crashed in ruins. She lost her seat on the county commission to Elmira Gainey, a high school assistant principal who was heavily backed by developers and businessmen in and out of Martin County.

While Hurchalla refused to accept contributions of more than \$100, Gainey raised \$64,201, half from business interests, one fifth of the total from out-of-county developers.

"Ding dong, the witch is dead!" some of the exultant Gainey supporters reportedly sang. Hurchalla lost by a wide margin of more than 3,600 votes, taking only eight of 34 precincts. It was a stunning loss.

"Everybody says they can't stand negative campaigns; then they vote for the negative campaigners," a bemused Hurchalla said at the time.

But her achievements are still recognized, and have outlasted her defeat a decade ago. Ironical-

ly, part of the reason so many people want to build in, and live in, Martin County is because Hurchalla and the other "slow-growth" commissioners managed to keep it so green for so long.

"Maggy Hurchalla was imaginative and tough in bringing Martin County to the front early in environmental sensitivity," says Al Burt, a veteran correspondent who covered the state for more than two decades for *The Miami Herald*.

"She had the respect of leaders around the state. She was good with news folk because the business was bred into her family. She could have written the stories as well as most of the reporters covering the scene."

Together with the election loss, she fell prey to a pesky illness that same year, a malady that's affecting her immune system. She still isn't over it, still has to take gamma globulin shots once a month to boost her antibodies. She needs a nap every day.

But she's able to see the humor, even in this.

"I think Kurt Vonnegut wrote that God was really interested in the germs," Hurchalla wisecracked. "He only put humans in the world to give the germs something to practice on."

She serves on the state board of the Nature Conservancy, still kayaks on the Loxahatchee River and recently went hiking in New Mexico with her husband.

Over the years, she has accumulated enough plaques and awards to fill several walls, including the 2001 Everglades Coalition's George M. Morley Conservationist of the Year award, the 2002 National Wildlife Federation's Conservation Achievement award and the 2003 Environmental Law Center's National Wetlands Award.

But Jim Hurchalla jests that Maggy is proudest of the one commemorating her third place in the December 1994 "Kiss a Pig Contest" in Indiantown.

"I wonder what you would have had to do to win first place?" he needles her.

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ALAN DIAZ/2002 Associated Press file photo

Maggy (left) leaves a Bal Harbour hotel with her sister, Janet Reno, and Reno's aide Josh D'Alemberte, during Reno's campaign for governor in 2002. Political novice Bill McBride captured the Democratic nomination, but lost to Republican Jeb Bush.