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Florida Humanities Council.

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WHERE MERMAIDS MEET MOVIE-MAKERS

HOW DOES AN ARTIST FLY UNDERWATER?

HAVE SOME POETRY AND PIE
WE HAVE DRAINED IT AND RATIONED IT, pumped it and preserved it, promoted, protected, and polluted it. Our state’s relationship with water is long and complicated.

Water has shaped culture from the moment people occupied this peninsula we now call Florida. The earliest archaeological evidence of human life in our state includes dugout canoes and shell middens. For the next 12,000 years water would define how we lived, worked, traveled, and ate. It would inspire our finest poets, painters, and photographers—from the vibrant Technicolor beachscapes of the Florida Highwaymen to Clyde Butcher’s dramatic black-and-white Everglades landscapes.

In modern times water has sustained the most vital economic drivers of our state, tourism and agriculture.

In the coming year, the Florida Humanities Council will launch a statewide initiative that asks Floridians to examine how water has defined our past and how it will shape our future. How has our relationship to water changed over time? What are the ethics that inform our water policies, attitudes, and usage?

Our plans are to explore such questions through public programs, teacher workshops, exhibits, and a request for grant proposals. Our goal is to prompt thoughtful civic discourse that may help shape public policy in regard to this most precious of our resources.

We would like to acknowledge the generous support of the National Endowment for the Humanities and the State of Florida, Department of State, Division of Cultural Affairs and the Florida Council on Arts and Culture.
Ready for an adventure?

Splashing and laughing in the springs—and working together to save them
By Cynthia Barnett

Enter another world
Where waters, once worshipped, are now threatened
By Bill Belleville

Bowls of liquid light
Map of Florida springs
Excerpt: Marjory Stoneman Douglas

Where early people sought sustenance
By Bill Belleville

Can Wakulla recapture its luster?
By Jon Wilson

Remembering a once-magical place
By Johnny Bullard

Springs were mecca for tourists—and movie-makers
By Gary R. Mormino

Humanities Alive!
News and Events of the Florida Humanities Council

Flying Underwater
By Margaret Ross Tolbert

Painting the fluid
Excerpt: William Bartram

Celebrating the legacy of Florida’s Highwaymen
By Jon Wilson

What did teachers do on their summer vacation?

My Favorite Florida Place
Finding the deeper conversation in Old Key West
By Steven P. Locklin

Poetry and Pie
By Maurice J. O’Sullivan
The writers, artists, photographers, and explorers featured in this issue give you a glimpse of the underground world of jeweled light, vast caverns, and labyrinthine tunnels that hold Florida’s springs. This mostly unknown and unseen place is described by cave diver Eric Hutcheson (pictured on the cover) as like “the Grand Canyon with a lid on it.” Artist Margaret Ross Tolbert calls it “another planet imbedded within our own, with its own rocks, light, and atmosphere.”

Many have said that if our springs were more visible, they’d be listed among the wonders of the world. They point out that Florida has more freshwater springs than any other place on the planet.

But this source of wonder has begun to give cause for worry. To learn more, read on, starting with the introduction by Cynthia Barnett, a Florida-based journalist who covers water issues here at home and around the world. We hope you delve into this singular Florida topic—and dive into a spring sometime soon.

Also in this issue, get to know a quieter side of Key West, one of our country’s top tourist destinations. Writer Steven Locklin, winner this year of a Florida Book Award, engages you in a deeper conversation about this famous and historic place.

Be sure to sample the words of our state’s foodie poets (which may whet your appetite for some pie, later). Our poetry columnist Maurice J. O’Sullivan takes his own “culinary romp” through the works of some Florida bards, including a few you’d never guess (think Jack Kerouac and Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings).

And check out our special reports on a couple of Florida Humanities Council programs—a grant project celebrating the Florida Highwaymen artists in Fort Pierce and professional-development seminars that took Florida teachers all over the state (and across the ocean).

BARBARA O’REILLEY is editor of FORUM.
EVERY MOTHER has her favorite baby pictures, and my son’s come from a summer afternoon at Manatee Springs. Bobbing in a baby float, the wispy-haired eight-month-old is having a laugh attack as he splashes his chubby hands in the cool blue water, source of not only life but, apparently, hilarity.

I thought of those baby splashes on another summer afternoon, when photographer John Moran and I hiked into a dry spring bed in Polk County with a group of elderly Floridians. The August sun was brutal. The weeds were so tall we had to hack through with a machete. Scant water pooled in a couple of stagnant puddles.

It had been more than 60 years since these elders splashed and laughed in Kissengen Spring. When they saw its desiccated basin, their memories returned as clear as the water that once bubbled up at the rate of 20 million gallons a day. They described running leaps from a long dock, plunges down Kissengen’s steep slide, and swan dives from a high platform, all into water so refreshingly cold that one woman shivered with the memory.

As Bill Belleville, literary emissary for Florida’s waters and wilds, describes in the pages that follow, humans have always tamped paths to the springs. This is true in Florida and around the world, where springs for most of history were known as fountains. Aristotle called those bubbling from the Greek archipelago the “cements of society,” because young people gathered at them in the evenings to draw water, sing, and dance. Predating Florida thousands of years, myths of sacred waters, healing, and the Fountain of Youth evolved from certain truths: Thought to be the cleanest waters, springs became the first wells. Their fresh flow kept people healthy and communities vital. If they became dry or poisoned, people became sick. Community was lost.

In much the same way, Florida’s spring waters are windows to the health of all our water. Their decline in flow and creep of slimy algae signal groundwater depletion and pollution that harms ecosystems and people. The historic causes are twofold: We pump too much water and we use too many pollutants. The “we” is collective. Farms and homes, mines and golf courses all pump groundwater, and lots of it. Our fertilizers, chemicals, and wastes make their way to the aquifer, the source of not only the springs, but most residents’ drinking water.

The solutions are collective, too. They hinge on a shared ethic to use less and pollute less. In the springs region and beyond, Florida’s water ethic is taking hold. Floridians and our farmers use less water overall than we did a decade ago despite increases in population and agricultural production. Greater awareness of water quality has spurred communities to curtail wastes flowing to springs such as Wakulla, the subject of Jon Wilson’s promising report on page 13. Awareness is the first step. If you’ve never plunged into a spring, check out the map in this issue and enjoy a day of awe and rejuvenation at one of Florida’s original spas.

Second only to the water itself, our state’s nature writers and photographers, artists and historians can also immerse us in the wonder—from Gary Mormino’s account of steamboat tourists to painter Margaret Ross Tolbert’s dreamlike Sirena swimming in high heels. By taking us beneath the surface, these artists and scholars are helping to preserve not only the photographs and memories, but the splashes and the laughter.

CYNTHIA BARNETT is an award-winning Florida journalist who has reported on water from the Suwannee River to Singapore. She is the author of Mirage: Florida and the Vanishing Water of the Eastern U.S. and Blue Revolution: Unmaking America’s Water Crisis. Her new book, Rain: A Natural and Cultural History, will be published in April.
ENTER ANOTHER WORLD
Where waters, once worshipped, are now threatened

By Bill Belleville
I am deep inside a tight, dark cave. Just ahead, my light beam illuminates a chasm that splits off into two smaller tunnels, each boring back into the clay-colored limestone. I am in Rock Springs, enveloped by walls that were sculpted by a powerful water flow over thousands of years. While the clear, sweet water of our aquifer still flows through its deeper tunnels, this upper tunnel is bone dry. And I’m not diving in it, but crawling through its passageways in jeans and boots.

When I look closely at the walls around me, I see the secret language of our ancient Florida geology. Embedded here are the muted marine fossils of sand dollars and sea biscuits and tiny aquatic animals, a clue to the distant past when our peninsula was still accruing from the sea—and a graphic reminder of the water that once sculpted its way through these rocky fissures and bedding planes.

Being inside a spring-cave bereft of the potent liquid force that created it is an experience far beyond intellectual rhetoric. The truth is that the water level inside the underground rocky sponge we know as the Floridan Aquifer—the source of our springs as well as most of our drinking water—is on a marked decline. Some of our springs no longer flow: White and Kissengen, major...
springs and centers of community life in Hamilton and Polk counties, were the first to go dry. More will soon follow. The implications—ecologically, aesthetically, and economically—are brutal, difficult to fully process.

There’s no getting around it: I feel a sense of loss that reaches deep down inside me. After all, this spring is a natural dynamic that was once so grand and mystical it was worshipped by Native Americans as a magic divined by their gods.

A few years ago, I explored a dry first-magnitude spring called Briar Cave in Marion County in much the same way. Briar is a far larger version of Rock, and the enormous flow it took to create it astounded me. Although its caverns stretch under the north Florida terrain for thousands of feet, Briar no longer flows at all. A few miles away from Briar, the outflow of Silver Springs has diminished by half since its heyday as one of Florida’s major tourist attractions in the 1950s. Scientists say if the trend continues, in another 20 years, Silver Springs will no longer flow at all.

Our aquifer—despite spikes from rainy seasons—has been steadily declining in volume since 1935. Scientist John Kunkel Small was one of the first to recognize that energetic draining and pumping during the “boom” of the 1920s was changing the historic water-driven landscape of Florida. Nonetheless, his insightful book, *Eden to Sahara: Florida’s Tragedy* (1929), was largely ignored. More recently, the Florida Conservation Foundation declared in 1981 that “groundwater is our most neglected and abused renewable resource” and warned there would be “water shortages ahead” for the entire state.

Advocates like the cave-diving explorer and photographer Wes Skiles, who saw the damage first hand, began alerting others that excess pumping as well as pollution from agricultural runoff, septic tanks, and lawn fertilizers had a very real effect on a spring’s health. He emphasized the importance of springsheds, the ground near springs where rainfall seeps into the aquifer to recharge the flow.

The “hidden” dynamic of a spring as it flows through the forever-dark rock under our feet is at once fascinating and challenging. In the winter of 1856, anthropologist Daniel G. Brinton visited Silver Springs and came away in awe at the “perfectly diaphanous” liquid flowing from the earth. Brinton compared “The Silver Spring” to Niagara Falls and the Mississippi River in its natural grandeur. It was, he said, one of the “grand hydrographical features of the North American continent.”

More recently, the iconic Silver has been described as a veritable “Grand Canyon” because of the enormous underground chambers that funnel its water to the surface. Springs-cave explorer and cartographer Eric Hutcheson, who has mapped over 2,000 feet of passageways there, acknowledges that designation—but with a twist. Most people, says Hutcheson, are unaware of the ecology that nurtures Silver because it is underground and can’t easily be seen. “It’s out of sight, out of mind,” he said. “It’s like the Grand Canyon with a lid on it.”

In some ways, it may be this “lid” mentality that has kept Floridians from fully acknowledging the dire threats to the
springs. Beyond the loss of flow, the most obvious affliction is the presence of filamentous algae. On days when algae blooms murk the once-pure water of the deep Wakulla Springs, the famed glass-bottom boats don’t even bother to run. At Weeki Wachee, another beloved Old Florida attraction, the “mermaids” perform inside an underwater theater where the rocks are coated with slimy green and brown algae that sometimes floats around in large clumps.

The reality is shocking: The singular natural features that have enriched our Florida landscape and culture for thousands of years are imperiled. And the media has taken note: Investigative reports have appeared in Florida newspapers, including the Tampa Bay Times (“Florida’s Vanishing Springs”); the Ocala Star-Banner/Gainesville Sun (“Fragile Springs,” a series that received the 2014 top honor from the Florida Society of News Editors for “Community Leadership”); and the Sarasota Herald-Tribune (“Crisis Mode on Florida Environment”). An online report by students in the University of Florida’s College of Journalism & Communications was headlined, “Fountains of Life: A Look at Florida Springs from Sacred Waters to Green Slime.”

Florida nature photographer John Moran, who has painfully watched the degradation, offers his own frank assessment: “If a foreign power had invaded Florida and done to our springs what we’ve managed to do all by ourselves, we’d be up in arms to defend our precious waters.”

Despite relatively “new” information about the science of our springs, insight into our Floridan Aquifer was divined by early naturalists years ago. After visiting a number of springs here in the 1760s, John Bartram figured most were created by rain seeping into the uplands of the central ridge that spines the peninsula. His son, William, correctly guessed there were underground limestone channels linking these springs. Before the term “aquifer” was ever used, “Billy”
Bartram described these channels as “secret rocky avenues.” Anthropologist Brinton explained the geology of the aquifer in even greater detail, describing it as “porous Tertiary limestone, formed from 1.6 million to 65 million years ago. And, he elaborated, “the lower strata of the limestone formation of the peninsula have been hollowed out by the action of water into vast subterranean reservoirs, into enormous caverns that intersect and ramify...through whose sunless corridors roll nameless rivers.”

Florida, underpinned with a relatively young geology veined with secret rocky avenues, is blessed with more springs than any other place in the world—even though keeping track of them is an ongoing process. Scientists recorded 300 springs in 1977—a number that has grown to over 700 today. Savvy naturalists say well over 1,000 are scattered across the landscape, even if they all have not been properly measured and named.

Clearly, we are still learning about our springs, including the existence of animals endemic to the respective systems, such as crayfish and snails. (One study of the albino cave crayfish revealed it can live to be 200 years old.) “Managing” a natural phenomenon in which new information is constantly being revealed—this Grand-Canyon-with-a-lid—requires constant vigilance. Allowing excessive groundwater pumping without considering the impacts is not unlike writing checks on a bank account without knowing the balance.

Our springs have been woven into the natural—and cultural—tapestry of Florida since the last Ice Age ended and the invigorated hydrological cycle raised the sea and fueled

“Our springs were clearly mystical, akin to a natural miracle.”
the rainfall. Early Paleo Indians were already roaming the massive peninsula. But when the springs became abundant and full of life, the culture of the nomadic early Floridians became more complex. Beyond the benefit of cool, potable water, the springs also enhanced the biological diversity of plants and animals in their rivers, creeks, and basins.

With a virtual supermarket at their doorstep, these aborigines had time to grow crops, to invent pottery and create myth, to inscribe the symbols of their beliefs into clay, bone, wood. Indeed, nature and her artesian gifts animated the spiritual cosmos of these early Floridians. Those living around Silver Springs believed their “Water Gods” existed inside the luminous waters there, and did all they could to protect them from the earliest Spanish explorers.

When European colonists begin arriving, they often lived atop the same shell mounds, taking advantage of high-and-dry land in an otherwise soggy, pre-dredged peninsula. Like Florida’s Native Americans, they used the spring runs and rivers as aquatic highways, eventually building missions and villages around them. Soon, artists learning of the singular light and landscape of the place traveled to Florida to inscribe their own images, just as the Native Americans had before them.

Inside the dry cave of Rock Springs, I can’t help but reflect on this. As I do, I think of the pure wonder and joy Bartram felt on first seeing our springs. In 1791, he wrote they were “the blue ether of another world...a crystal flood...almost as transparent as the air we breathe.”

Our springs were clearly mystical, akin to a natural miracle. Bartram’s profound sense of awe wasn’t lost on the Romantic poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge who was inspired by the naturalist’s descriptions to write in his poem “Kubla Khan”: where “Alph the Sacred River ran/Through caverns measureless to man/Down to a sunless sea.”

Undoubtedly our springs are a rich natural legacy that has blessed Florida and its people over time—one of aesthetics and mysticism, sustenance and light. Certainly, this is a vital force that deserves to be honored as fully as any sacred gift.

BILL BELLEVILLE is an award-winning Florida writer specializing in nature and “sense of place.” He has authored seven books and over 1,000 magazine essays and articles. As a filmmaker, he has coproduced and scripted documentaries for PBS, including the upcoming “Hidden Secrets of Florida Springs.” His latest book is The Peace of Blue: Water Journeys.
Florida has more freshwater springs than any other place in the world.

Marjory Stoneman Douglas, revered Florida environmentalist, described them this way in her 1967 book, *Florida: The Long Frontier*:

[Florida] burst and bubbled in multitudes of clear springs... Basins of rock and sand held them like bowls of liquid light. Fresh water rises and falls mysteriously in grassy or rocky sinkholes. The springs spill over into swamps and rivers; the Wakulla from the great Wakulla Springs south of Tallahassee, the Oklawaha that flows into the St. Johns from the great clear boiling basin of Silver Springs. The Aucilla, the Steinbachee, the north-flowing Withlacoochee all flow westward from spring-fed swamps.

Most strange and beautiful of all, the seeping water has worked grottoes and hidden caverns in the limestone, like those at Marianna, stained soft rose color by the constant dripping of fresh water through red surface soil. It makes long hanging stalactites and upward-growing spurs and fantastic spines of stalagmites among the basins and runlets in a constant dripping, dropping, of pure, sterile water. In a sudden flash of light all this rock and water glitters in rose and crystal in the lifeless darkness of the earth.

The springs of fresh water have made more than three thousand lakes and ponds, blue and crystal, innumerable mirrors flashing everywhere to the sky, down all the central ridge of Florida.

This map shows the locations of only a fraction of Florida’s more than 700 springs. The darker colors illustrate “springsheds,” upland areas where rainfall seeps through the ground and recharges the flow of water in springs.
TWELVE THOUSAND YEARS AGO, the nomadic Paleo-Indians who ranged inland over the broad and arid peninsula of what would one day be Florida were drawn to places where cool, fresh water was flowing. One of those places was a limestone sink that would become the powerful Wakulla Springs on the Panhandle.

Sites like that not only provided water—they attracted animals that could also be a source of food. At the cusp of the last Ice Age, large Pleistocene animals like mastodons and giant sloths would gather in such places. As they did, the early Floridians hunted them with spears.

Explorers diving in Wakulla Springs in 1931 not only discovered animal fossils deep inside the cave, they also found stone tools and charcoal from a possible fire hearth dating to 12,000 years ago. Clearly, sea level fluctuations predating the last Ice Age have affected earlier spring-cave systems—which helps explain why the bones of Ice Age animals are found not just on the floor of the springs pools, but deeper inside. And the walls of the cavern, formed over 50 million years ago by the residue of prehistoric marine life, function as a gallery illustrating the composition of the platform that would one day arise from the seas as a peninsula.

Today, Wakulla is a virtual museum where the earliest history of Florida can be traced by studying the fossils and artifacts left behind. Not only have remains of mastodons, saber-toothed tigers, and other Ice Age animals been found here, archaeologists have also recovered ancient stone blades, spear points, ivory pins, flint scrapers, and more from this deep spring. Indeed, early visitors to Florida were fascinated by Wakulla because they could actually look through crystal clear water to see the remains of mastodon bones inside of it.

But while Wakulla is our deepest spring, it was certainly not the only one that attracted these ancient animals and the earliest people. In fact, many springs in Florida served as campsites and then villages for those who would follow in the wake of the earliest Paleos. The bounty of those upwellings gave the roaming Indians a reason to stay in one place where cultural identities, languages, stylized tools, and pottery would be shaped. As a result, our newly flowing springs and the mythology they inspired entered the consciousness of Florida’s inhabitants from the very first.

By Bill Belleville
A CALMING OASIS, international tourist destination, and economic engine since the 1930s, Wakulla Springs, south of Tallahassee, remains captivating. Three-mile “jungle tours” on the Wakulla River are considered a world-class wildlife viewing opportunity. But the underwater view has lost some of its luster. Stained, murky water and algae blooms, caused by a variety of natural and human activity, have reduced the springs’ sparkling clarity. Glass-bottom boat tours, which entranced passengers with views of mastodon remains, glistening aquatic life, and such creatures as Henry the Pole-Vaulting Fish, are now the exception rather than the rule. The views are not what they used to be.

Watchdog groups began working in the 1990s to recover the see-through character of the springs and the Wakulla River that surges from it. Scientists proved a connection between Wakulla’s water quality and Tallahassee’s sewage treatment system. There was a lawsuit, and the City of Tallahassee agreed in 2006 to spend $160-million over six years to upgrade its wastewater treatment to an advanced level.

As a result, the volume of household sewage contaminants flowing into Wakulla water has been reduced, “but it is too soon to determine if the spring is healing,” said biologist Jim Stevenson, who was chief naturalist of Florida’s state parks for 20 years. Stevenson, also former coordinator of the Wakulla Springs Basin Working Group and former chairman of the Florida Springs Task Force, said that a lesson exists in Tallahassee’s efforts to improve water quality. “This is definitely a teaching moment for other state and local agencies. They need to voluntarily take action when the science is in hand. It is always better publicity to do the right thing,” he said. “Those of us that have worked for the past two decades...are very pleased with the city’s progress, and I boast about their good work during my monthly ‘Saving Wakulla Springs’ tours.”

JON WILSON, a longtime Florida journalist, frequently writes for FORUM.
FROM COOL TO HOT: First, the feeling of the cool dampness of the concrete walk under your feet and then the heat of the old boardwalk as you took the steps down to the springhouse at White Springs. Today a similar walk leads to the old springs; but there’s nothing much there, nothing but a great, gaping hole slightly filled with Suwannee River water. There’s nothing to remind you of the days, not more than 40 years ago, when the springs gushed with the same vigor they had since time immemorial. The amber-colored “healing” waters had a sulfur odor, kind of like rotten eggs. When you entered the top floor of the springhouse, a cool spray hit your face and invited you to jump in. A swirling vortex of waters pulsed up from the heart of the spring—thousands of gallons per minute—and flowed into the Suwannee River.

The Victorian springhouse that once surrounded the large substantial cement wall always reminded me of a white wedding cake. It had a shingled roof, a pointed cupola on the front, and banisters on each of the three floors that separated the many “bathers” from the edge of the wall. The top floor was significantly above the water’s level; the bottom floor served as a step into the icy waters.

Every year around the second week of April, the owner of the springs would pay teenage boys to take scrub brushes and brooms and clean the wooden floors and the walls and make everything “spick and span” for the large numbers of individuals who would come there for recreation. It was the place to be during my childhood and early adolescence for a good five months out of the year.

People entered through the gift shop and paid a fee to swim for the entire day... We boys would stay so long in the water that our hands and feet got all crinkled. We’d leave only occasionally, just long enough to grab a snack.

Looking back on those halcyon days of youth, I now know why the Miccosukee Creek Indians who lived in our part of the world believed that the springs and the area around them were sacred. The waters did, indeed, have healing properties. They lifted the spirit and the soul during the hottest months of the year and, all the time leading up to those months, we lived in worshipful anticipation of when we could take our first dip.

Today it saddens me when I look at the remnants of what once was a bustling place filled with life, because today’s youth won’t have the same memories of such a wonderful, magical place. Then I think back on that time and my spirit lifts and I can feel the icy waters where scores of young people in our area swam and socialized.

JOHNNY BULLARD, a member of the Hamilton County school board and a retired educator, is a native of White Springs and a seventh-generation Floridian. This article is excerpted from the Fall 2010 issue of FORUM.
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FLORIDA'S SPRINGS are among the planet’s great natural wonders. For thousands of years, humans have marveled at their sheer physical majesty and serenity and have sought out their refreshing and, some claimed, healing waters.

When the 20th century dawned, one of them—Silver Springs—became Florida’s most famous place. Generations have viewed it as a symbol of transcendent nature and American exceptionalism, a triumph of technology and victim of crass commercialism, a backwater tourist attraction and environmental battleground.

From the wreckage of the Civil War, Florida emerged as a tropical paradise—and Silver Springs became a tourist mecca. Bustling Jacksonville became a major point of embarkation for the stern-wheel steamboats that took travelers via the St. Johns and Ocklawaha Rivers to the Springs.

When Harriet Beecher Stowe first gazed at Silver Springs, she proclaimed, “There is nothing on earth comparable to it.” In *Palmetto Leaves* (1873), Stowe gushed that even for travelers who had witnessed the treasures of Europe, “never, but never have they in their lives seen aught so entrancing as this.”

Silver Springs’s proprietors began to promote the attraction to the masses in the early decades of the 20th century. The famed glass-bottom boats and the obligatory postcard became a signature part of the tourist experience. Millions of Americans saw firsthand the Bridal Chamber, the deepest of the attraction’s wellsprings.

By 1916, a smooth, crushed-limestone road welcomed the first motorists. A new generation of Tin Can tourists headed there in their Ford flivvers after WWI. As traffic increased, so did the park’s amenities and oddities.

Driven from the Springs in the 1820s, Seminole Indians returned a century later in new roles as curiosities. The Seminole Village became a popular tourist attraction.

Not even the Great Depression could keep crowds away. A 1935 headline in the *Tampa Tribune* announced what a half-million Americans already knew: “Silver Springs Wins Claim as No. 1 Lure.”

While gasoline shortages during WWII posed new obstacles to tourists, 200,000 GIs stationed at nearby military bases managed to hitch rides or hop on buses to enjoy the attraction’s peaceful pleasures.

During the postwar tourist boom, Silver Springs offered customers jungle cruise and submarine rides. On Emancipation Day 1949, Paradise Park opened, offering African Americans the same (albeit segregated) experiences as whites.

The opening of Walt Disney World in 1971 forever changed tourism in Florida. To earlier generations, nature was enough. But one by one, some of Florida’s classic attractions closed their doors, victims of new tourist economies and tastes.

As the 21st century dawned, the future of Silver Springs stood in limbo. A series of new owners failed to attract new tourists or make a profit. More ominously, the health of the springs declined.

In 2013, Florida took over Silver Springs as a state park.

GARY R. MORMINO, Scholar in Residence for the Florida Humanities Council, is the Frank E. Duckwall professor emeritus of history at the University of South Florida St. Petersburg.
Filmmakers used the exotic, singular nature of the springs to conjure up all manner of melodrama. Silver Springs, relatively shallow (about 30 feet deep) and more accessible, provided the stage for a 1916 silent movie, “The Seven Swans,” as well as some of the earliest Tarzan movies, the film adaptation of “The Yearling,” episodes of the popular “Sea Hunt” television series (1958–1962) starring Lloyd Bridges, and more. The deeper Wakulla (about 185 feet deep) hosted “Tarzan’s New World Adventures” starring Olympic swimmer Johnny Weissmuller in 1938, along with films like “Airport ’77” (1967) in which a giant mockup of a 747 was lowered into the spring. Other Tarzan films found the exotic, tropical settings needed at both Florida springs, as did “The Creature from the Black Lagoon” (1954).

—Bill Belleville

If there is a quintessential Florida spring, it has to be Weeki Wachee, at once a primordial pool and kitschy tourist attraction. This shimmering spring of blue light has attracted flightless cranes, mastodons, ancient Indians, Spanish conquistadors, and glass-bottomed boat hucksters. And those are just run-of-the-mill visitors, typical for Florida. Weeki Wachee upped the ante for surrealism in the late 1940s when two water-crazed entrepreneurs who descended on the spring decided the local flora and fauna weren’t exotic enough for the kind of roadside attraction they had in mind. The result was a startling collision of kitsch and nature... live mermaids eating bananas and drinking soda, their hair billowing around their heads like strands of silk, proof that life in the Sunshine State is still surreal and probably always will be.

—From Weeki Wachee City of Mermaids, by Lu Vickers and Sara Dionne, 2007

This promotional poster shows scenes from the 1954 horror movie, “Creature from the Black Lagoon,” filmed at both Wakulla and Silver springs.

Ed and Whitey McMahan carry actress Ann Blyth to the underwater set during filming of “Mr. Peabody and the Mermaid,” a 1948 movie filmed at Weeki Wachee Springs.

MERMAIDS

If there is a quintessential Florida spring, it has to be Weeki Wachee, at once a primordial pool and kitschy tourist attraction. This shimmering spring of blue light has attracted flightless cranes, mastodons, ancient Indians, Spanish conquistadors, and glass-bottomed boat hucksters. And those are just run-of-the-mill visitors, typical for Florida. Weeki Wachee upped the ante for surrealism in the late 1940s when two water-crazed entrepreneurs who descended on the spring decided the local flora and fauna weren’t exotic enough for the kind of roadside attraction they had in mind... The result was a startling collision of kitsch and nature... live mermaids eating bananas and drinking soda, their hair billowing around their heads like strands of silk, proof that life in the Sunshine State is still surreal and probably always will be.

—From Weeki Wachee City of Mermaids, by Lu Vickers and Sara Dionne, 2007

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Lassie, the famed collie, awaits her cues at Alexander Springs for the filming of a 1965 episode in the “Lassie” television series.
FORUM wins five awards for magazine excellence

FORUM won first place for "Best Overall Writing" and second place for "Best Overall Magazine" in its category this year from the Florida Magazine Association, the nation’s largest state magazine association. FORUM also won a second place for design excellence and two third-place honors:

Gary R. Mormino, our scholar in residence, received a writing award for his feature in the Spring 2014 issue, “Can Florida Save the Orange?” Our annual summer focus on Florida Book Award–winning authors and books won for “Best Special Theme” issue.

Calling Florida’s Best Writers!

The deadlines are approaching to apply for two of Florida’s prestigious literary awards:
Florida Book Awards—nomination deadline is December 1.
Florida Lifetime Achievement Award for Writing—nomination deadline is Dec. 15.

To access more information, go to Digital FORUM at FloridaHumanities.org.

New Smithsonian exhibit now touring Florida towns

Don’t miss this world-class exhibit, “The Way We Worked,” now appearing in small towns in Florida. We are now touring this Smithsonian Institution exploration of how work became such a central element in American culture over the past 150 years. This compelling story is told with items from the rich collections of the National Archives. Each host community is also offering a variety of related local events. Here’s where you can see the exhibit:

- Cedar Key Historical Society—now through Oct. 25, 2014
- Palm Harbor Museum—Nov. 1 to Dec 13, 2014
- New Smyrna Beach Museum of History—Feb. 7 to March 21, 2015
- Marco Island Historical Museum—April 4 to May 16, 2015
- Museum of the Glades—May 23 to July 4, 2015

For details, go to FloridaHumanities.org

Adventure off the beaten path

Don’t miss our upcoming Gatherings—cultural tours to distinctive places that are not on the typical tourist agenda. Join our explorations in the sweetest and oldest towns in Florida:

Clewiston, February, 2015—Visit our agricultural heartland to learn about sugar growing and refining, cattle ranching, and citrus growing—and even visit a Seminole Reservation.

St. Augustine, April, 2015—Step into history as we peruse the storied streets of our nation’s oldest city during its 450th anniversary.

For more information, go to FloridaHumanities.org.

GRANT DEADLINES

Declarations for Community Project Grants

MAJOR GRANTS (UP TO $15,000):

JAN. 15, 2015—Letter of Intent
MARCH 11, 2015—Final application

MINI GRANTS (UP TO $5,000):

Applications due:
DECEMBER 1, 2014; MARCH 2, JUNE 1, AND SEPT. 1, 2015

To learn about our grants, which fund community-generated humanities projects, go to our website, FloridaHumanities.org.

Let’s stay in touch!

Update your contact information on our website, FloridaHumanities.org.
Calendar: FloridaHumanities.org

Here are some highlights of the hundreds of free public events we sponsor around the state. Dates and times are subject to change, and new events are continually added. For complete, up-to-date listings, go to FloridaHumanities.org.

**Palm Harbor**
**NOV. 1–DEC. 13 at 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.**
Palm Harbor Historical Museum
The traveling Smithsonian exhibit, “The Way We Worked,” tells about the people who helped build a nation.

**Fort Lauderdale**
**NOV. 19 at 6 p.m.**
Broward County Library
“Dreamers and Schemers, An Evening with Great Floridians,” presents trained stage actors portraying Osceola, Francisco Menéndez, and Mary McLeod Bethune.

**Naples**
**JAN. 6 at 12 noon**
Rookery Bay Environmental Learning Center
Storyteller Caren Neile relates tales about the characters and memorable events of old Florida.

**Ormond Beach**
**JAN. 24 at 10 a.m.**
Anderson-Price Memorial Building
University of Florida Professor Steve Noll presents Florida’s history through the lens of transportation and its changes through nearly two centuries.

*A Special Offer for Florida Humanities Council members*

For a limited time, all new and renewing members at the $125 level and higher can choose to receive a great premium.

**Field to Feast – Recipes Celebrating Florida Farmers, Chefs, and Artisans**
Pam Brandon, Katie Farmand, and Heather McPherson
Hardcover, 312 pages
University Press of Florida, 2012

Just use the form and return envelope inside the magazine centerfold to make your contribution today.
For more information visit [www.floridahumanities.org/membership](http://www.floridahumanities.org/membership)
There’s an easy mechanism for flying underwater, across the valley of rainbow hue:
Your body is already the vessel—a ship, or a sail, or wings to fly you across the space.
Maybe you’d like it if your eyes get a viewing chamber, with a lens in front:
a mask.
Your feet help steer when you strap on fins.
When you walk in the water, you activate
Chromatic wands,
that radiate out from you and transform each form;
as the water shifts, they leap into color.
I put one foot in the water—it’s like nothing happened.
Or did it?
Ripples pass from here to eternity, messengers of my entry.
I am suddenly connected, like an electric current, to all the waters of the aquifer, in all its labyrinthine passageways.
Step deeper into the water, farther still, down into the shallows; a chill moves up my legs.
Below my new water line, it thrills and prickles—soft wrap of velvet water.

(continued on page 22)
I am water—yet another water being, ready to soar into the water homeland.

Put your face in the water.
Everything comes together in the entry.
When you go underwater,
it all happens very fast.
Dizzying view of rocks and pebbles
sharpening into focus, as you
shoot into the visual slipstream of the springs.
A regal structure of rocks and caves stretches out in a long valley,
a theater for
a wild and soundless storm

Pebbles, bark and sticks, fly out in waves and plumes, sand-like jets of steam, furling forth from under rock edges.
The fierce flow has loosened stones, their sides blown clean and white.
In this Jules Verne world, turtles are sitting in the jets of water and matter, detritus, facing into it, backed into it, getting blasted—sand pours and piles on their shells, their heads.
Turtles beware: step in too close
And be blown aloft in this invisible force.

The minute you enter, you forget the other world entirely. This is the one that makes sense. You are a projectile. You are a spaceship.
Only a tiny shiver of chill reminds you of the cool waters, a feeling of who you used to be.
Majestic cliffs, in tones of grisaille, dripping globs of sand from the force of the springs vents.
Like a stately bust of George Washington, hit with a custard pie.

Above, the icy blue horizon leads to an infinite vista.
Look up at the silver underside of the water’s surface;
your new sky reflects back at you in a mirrored universe.

From far below, you decide it’s time to go up for a breath.
Flow up with tracer bullets of bubbles.
Look up at the molten silver sky simmering with light; dimly viewed trees with
flame-tipped edges, in a cramped and warped landscape.
When you see the sun through the lens, a feeling of great benevolence.

Break the surface and see the great waters of blue and purple, roiling and shifting inches below, and
Dive back down to return again.
PAINTING THE FLUID
An excerpt from Travels (1791) By William Bartram

BEHOLD, for instance, a vast circular expanse before you, the waters of which are so extremely clear as to be absolutely diaphanous or transparent as the ether...

AT the same instant innumerable bands of fish are seen, some clothed in the most brilliant colours...whole armies descending into an abyss, into the mouth of the bubbling fountain, they disappear! are they gone forever? is it real? I raise my eyes with terror and astonishment; I look down again to the fountain with anxiety, when behold them as it were emerging from the blue ether of another world, apparently at a vast distance, at their first appearance, no bigger than flies or minnows, now gradually enlarging, their brilliant colours begin to paint the fluid.

Now they come forward rapidly, and instantly emerge, with the elastic expanding column of chrysaline waters, into the circular basin or funnel, see now how gently they rise, some upright, others obliquely, or seem to lay as it were on their sides, suffering themselves to be gently lifted or born up, by the expanding fluid towards the surface, sailing or floating like butterflies in the cerulean ether: then again they as gently descend, diverge and move off; when they rally, form again and rejoin their kindred tribes.

THIS amazing and delightful scene, though real, appears at first but as a piece of excellent painting; there seems no medium, you imagine the picture to be within a few inches of your eyes, and that you may without the least difficulty touch any one of the fish... when it really is twenty or thirty feet under water.

SWEETWATER
Artist Jean Blackburn, a third-generation Florida native who grew up on Anna Maria Island, has painted a series of water images. Blackburn, who is also certified as a master gardener and naturalist, has taught art at the State College of Florida, Manatee, and at the Ringling College of Art and Design.

At right: Sweetwater Springs 5 , 30 x 40 inches, oil on panel, by Jean Blackburn
THE CITY OF FORT PIERCE is expanding its magical tour celebrating the Florida Highwaymen, a group of self-taught African-American landscape artists who captured the essence of the state on their canvases beginning in the 1950s.

Enhancements to the Fort Pierce Highwaymen Heritage Trail and its HighwaymenTrail.com website are slated for completion by the end of this year. They tell the story of 25 men and one woman who painted colorful depictions of a nostalgic, even mythical Florida that they sold door-to-door and out of the trunks of their cars along Highway A1A and U.S.1—enabling them to make a living despite the racial and cultural barriers of that time.

The 2012 creation of the heritage trail and website—and their ongoing expansion—were funded with the help of $30,000 in grants from the Florida Humanities Council. Fort Pierce currently is installing more interpretive trail markers to the self-guided walking tour, adding scholarly material on the website, and creating promotional materials, as well as making other improvements to these free public resources, said Libby Woodruff, the city’s grants administrator. A linear park will connect several Highwaymen-related landmarks in Fort Pierce, home to most of the Highwaymen artists.

The website, TheHighwaymenTrail.com, furnishes an in-depth perspective examining the artists’ legacy. Included are biographies of each artist, video interviews with several of them, and thumbnail descriptions about each stop on the city’s walking-tour trail. For those who want more, a bibliography provides a detailed reading list about the artists and their work.
Congdon said. "I am now more convinced than ever that the story has more complexity than any of us could imagine. It is truly a remarkable part of Florida’s history."

The Highwaymen’s origins are widely known in Florida. Young black men began painting in Fort Pierce to find opportunity, make a living outside of manual labor, and develop a sense of personal identity. This took place during the 1950s and 1960s when segregation’s barriers had yet to be broken and it was difficult—sometimes dangerous—for African Americans to move in milieus viewed as being for whites only. With most art galleries off limits, the young men sold their art, the oil paint often still wet, from their cars. They are said to have produced, sometimes in assembly-line fashion, about 200,000 paintings.

The group’s spiritual leader, Albert Hair, was killed in 1970. His death smothered the artists’ creative energy and their work began to drift toward obscurity until an art historian began unearthing their old paintings in the 1990s and dubbed them the Florida Highwaymen. Over recent decades, their paintings have become sought-after collector’s items that sell for hundreds of dollars. The Highwaymen artists were inducted into the Florida Artists Hall of Fame in 2004.

JON WILSON, a longtime Florida journalist, frequently writes for FORUM.

The content for this project was created by Kristin Congdon, a University of Central Florida professor emerita of philosophy, and Patricia Borns, a former Miami Herald reporter who now works in Virginia.

“When I joined this project I believed that the story of these remarkable artists had not yet been fully explored,”

Albert Hair depicted classic Florida in palm trees, clouds, and water.

Robert L. Lewis also became an illustrator for the Boeing Company and later, an art teacher.

Robert L. Lewis illustrated old-time grove work in this painting.

Albert Hair, charismatic and ambitious, was considered the Highwaymen’s spiritual leader. He was killed at age 29.

Mary Ann Carroll is the only woman of the 26 Highwaymen. All are now in the Florida Artists Hall of Fame.

JON WILSON, a longtime Florida journalist, frequently writes for FORUM.

The Highwaymen Heritage Trail is one of many projects supported by grants from the Florida Humanities Council.

Since 1971, the Council has awarded more than $8 million to nonprofit organizations around the state to support the development and presentation of cultural resources and programs for the Florida public. In awarding grants, the Council’s mission is to help preserve Florida’s rich history and heritage, promote civic engagement and community dialogue, and provide opportunities for reflecting on the future of our growing state. To learn more, and to apply for grants, go to FloridaHumanities.org.
What did teachers do on their summer vacation?

**THEY VISITED WHITEWASHED SLAVE CABINS** on the Kingsley Plantation in Jacksonville and learned about the lives of the people who once lived there.

**THEY SAT BY A CAMPFIRE** on a Seminole Indian reservation in the Everglades and listened while a tribal storyteller wove tales about his culture.

**THEY STOOD ON THE WINDBLOWN SHORE** in northern Spain where explorers set out across the churning ocean five centuries ago and discovered Florida.

**THESE WERE JUST A FEW** of the things some Florida teachers did last summer during weeklong seminars sponsored by the Florida Humanities Council. More than 220 teachers from all over the state participated in five scholar-led seminars designed to immerse them in explorations of Florida history and culture that renew their love of learning while providing rich content to bring back to their classrooms.

The summer seminars explored the Civil War in Florida, Seminole Tribal Traditions in a Modern World, Finding Florida in Spain, the Florida Civil Rights Movement, and a Study of Florida Civics.

Another 140 teachers participated in four additional seminars last spring, delving into Colonial Spanish St. Augustine; the rivers and maritime heritage of Apalachicola; the sugar industry, farming, and cattle ranches near Clewiston; and the phosphate mining and citrus growing near Bartow.

“It was a once-in-a-lifetime experience for which I am incredibly grateful,” said Lynn Peate, a Tampa teacher who participated in the Spain seminar. “We spent time in archives, museums, royal palaces, and lectures, but we also spent time in the communities we visited.”

Shorter seminars continue to be offered throughout the year—including one coming up in November on Spanish Colonial St. Augustine. More information is available at [FloridaHumanities.org](http://FloridaHumanities.org).
SECRET WAYS BRINGS DIFFERENT IMAGES and emotions to those who have visited this city at the Southernmost Point in the mainland United States. Ask a random person up north about the city, and the first impression will probably be Duval Street, with its bars, restaurants, and partying nightlife. This dominant part of Old Town, the original settled area on the island’s west end, is where the cruise-ship passengers swarm, where the “partying at the end of the world” mentality meets good old-fashioned American capitalism.

I first visited Duval Street back in 1989 when I lived in Fort Myers. And while it was fun, what drew me back for my honeymoon two years later and for countless visits in the years since was the more authentic Florida just a block or two away. There, after you enjoy the front-porch greeting of Duval, you find a deeper conversation with people and their history.

Most of the time I stay at a hotel on Fleming Street where the streets are narrower, giving the houses a more intimate association. Neighbors can converse while across the street from one another with barely a raised voice, trading movie recommendations while walking their dogs.

I took a walk on this street on a sultry, still Sunday afternoon last July, when there was not even a breath of wind and all that could be heard was the low hum of air-conditioners, an occasional car, and the intermittent crowing of a rooster—one of Key West’s permanent residents announcing his presence. The houses, some built in a New England style reflecting the heritage of residents from the Northeast who moved here in the mid-to late-1800s, wear a coat of light-colored paint, often with white trim. The roofs are usually metal and peaked as if in preparation for heavy snow. Sometimes three-fourths of a house is hidden behind lush foliage—flowering or fruit-bearing trees mixed with palms and other plants. The whole effect is subtropical, a soothing contrast that draws those from the lands of unending snows and numbing cold.

Mixed in with the private homes are houses that have been converted into small businesses. Not the edgy T-shirt and bathing-suit clichés along Duval, but businesses you’d find along the streets of any small town in America—a real estate firm, a dentist’s office, a tuxedo shop, a convenience store, a small church, a corner restaurant, a bookstore. One, a former gas station, has been a Laundromat, a sandwich shop, and an organic food shop in the 22 years I’ve visited here. Some houses have been converted into boutique hotels for those who want a tranquil Key West experience. My favorite has an original main house, now expanded with other buildings to form a sheltered mini-paradise that is conducive for creativity, especially the
written form. Some of the work on my first novel, my present project, and this very piece were done sitting next to a modest waterfall tumbling into a pool surrounded by palm trees and plants.

Key West’s literary history is well documented, with Tennessee Williams and Ernest Hemingway its most famous author residents. Hemingway is my favorite, and occasionally I’ve visited the 150-year-old house on Whitehead Street where he lived from 1931 through the end of that decade. It was there that he wrote my two favorite short stories of his, “The Snows of Kilimanjaro” and “The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber,” and wrote the novels To Have and Have Not and For Whom the Bell Tolls. He finished A Farewell to Arms during his first visit to Key West in 1928.

The city is saturated with history. Its importance as a port drifts back as long as ships have sailed in these waters and continues today, with about 330 cruise-ship visits scheduled in 2014. Before tourism took over, its economic vitality came from an array of industries, including sponge-diving, shipwreck salvaging, fishing, shrimping, and cigar manufacturing. For a time in the mid-to-late-1800s, Key West was Florida’s largest and wealthiest city.

During the Civil War, Fort Zachary Taylor was a Union outpost at the very southern tip of the Confederacy, and the residents often flew Confederate flags from their homes to remind the soldiers just where the town’s loyalties lay. The U.S. Navy has had a presence in Key West since the 1820s, undergoing a swift buildup during World War II that included development of a submarine base. The Key West Naval Air Station remains active today.

The country’s Chief Executives visited a number of times. Harry Truman had a winter residence here during his presidency; and Franklin Roosevelt, Dwight Eisenhower, John Kennedy, and Jimmy Carter paid visits.

A few blocks southeast of Fleming lies the highest area of land on the island, and for that reason, the location of one of my favorite places to visit. The Key West Cemetery was established there in 1847 after a hurricane the previous October washed away the former cemetery close to the shore—depositing bodies throughout the nearby woods and even into the branches of the trees. The current location has fared far better and provides a visitor with a poignant view of Florida history.
the city’s past life, some of it significant to Florida’s history.

During my Sunday walk in July, I return to the cemetery’s most prominently featured area—the U.S.S. Maine Monument. This is surrounded by the graves of two dozen of the 261 sailors and Marines who died from injuries suffered when the ship exploded in Havana Harbor on Feb. 15, 1898, helping to trigger the Spanish-American War. The Maine had been stationed in Key West but was sent to Havana as a show of strength to protect American interests during the Cuban uprising against Spain. Buried near the Maine casualties are Civil War soldiers and other veterans.

I always start there but after a time, with walking-tour brochure in hand, I wander about the grounds, sometimes alone, sometimes sharing the walk with a half-dozen iguanas scurrying among the headstones and the one-, two- and three-story crypts. The cemetery isn’t pristine; some family plots have damaged stones, some are weathered and unreadable. Some have white picket fences around their plots, others have iron fences for a bit more permanence, and a few have wooden shelters.

The cemetery guidebook tells many stories: Over there is the marker for a married couple who died in a murder-suicide in 1907; nearby is the grave of a Cuban patriot who raised funds to help the revolutionary efforts of José Martí; further on is the resting place of a man who was so strongly protective of his status as a free man in the early 1800s that he mutilated his own body so as to render himself useless as a slave.

A few sections away I see the graves of two doctors: Frederick Weedon, who attended Chief Osceola after the Seminole leader was captured and fell ill in prison in early 1838, and Daniel Whitehurst, who worked alongside Dr. Samuel Mudd at Fort Jefferson in the Dry Tortugas during a yellow fever epidemic. Mudd was incarcerated at the fort, 70 miles west of Key West, in the years following his conviction in the conspiracy to assassinate Abraham Lincoln. He had set John Wilkes Booth’s broken leg in the early morning hours of April 15, 1865. He was pardoned four years later.

I don’t stay as long as I like on this visit, the humid sun burning off the edge of my resolve. I make my way back to my hotel, where the pool awaits. My stay in Key West is short this time, but I will return. I will always return, because I enjoy learning about a place’s history, and this island has a bountiful amount; because I like visiting the edge and testing the waters; because of Hemingway, the sunsets, restaurants, and bars; because of the weird, wonderful people you can meet; because of their stories.

There are many stories here in Old Town at the edge of Florida. They tell of a formerly rough outpost at the edge of the Caribbean—now part paradise, part gaudy attraction. But if you go beyond that front-porch greeting and search for a deeper conversation, you’ll find a history that is Florida’s alone.

STEVEN P. LOCKLIN is a free-lance editor in Miami. His debut novel, Beneath Hallowed Ground, was the 2013 Florida Book Awards bronze medal winner in the general fiction category. Locklin was a writer and editor for 28 years with six newspapers in five states.
REFLECTIONS FROM ZORA!
N.Y. Nathiri                                  $19.95
Maya Angelou, Ruby Dee, Alice Walker and dozens more celebrate the legacy of writer, folklorist and anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston.

WALKIN’ LAWTON
John Dos Passos Coggin                $24.95
The definitive biography of populist U.S. Senator and progressive Florida Governor Lawton Chiles.

REPARATION
Ruth Rodgers                                   $19.95
Racial injustices of the past catch up to the present in this exciting and suspenseful novel set in rural north Florida. After abandoning her childhood friend when she was needed most, can Kate earn Delia’s forgiveness decades later?

THE TROUBLE WITH PANTHERS
William Culyer Hall                                 $19.95
After raising cattle for more than a century, a divided family attempts to adapt from Florida’s past to an inevitable future, as contemporary dangers threaten them. Winner of the Florida Book Award for Best Popular Fiction.

FRENCH FLORIDA
Benjamin DiBiase  8.5”x11”       $39.95
The first English translation of Charles de La Roncière’s 1928 work commemorates the 450th anniversary of the French in Florida. Includes reproductions of hand-colored images by Theodore deBry.

SEARCHING SAND & SURF
Rachel K. Wentz                           $24.95
The first “official” publication of the Florida Historical Society Archaeological Institute (FHSAI) with more than a century of research from the Florida Historical Quarterly. Introduction by Kathleen Deagan.

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LIKE MANY OF US, poets find food endlessly fascinating. Homer recognized not only its necessity—“Hunger is the most miserable way to die”—but also its seductive and symbolic power, its ability to help us distinguish listless lotus eaters and insatiable suitors from generous hosts and grateful guests. Three quarters of a millennium later, the Roman poet Horace believed that the simple food and drink he found at his Sabine farm inspired him to understand the nature of goodness at its highest level (natura boni summumque quid eius). While Shakespeare’s plays constantly celebrate both food and the culinary arts, with over 2,000 references to everything from apples and cakes to salads and zucchini, the more judgmental Dante condemned gluttons to the third circle of his hell, one rung below lust but one above greed.

It would be easy to imagine a classic foodie poet like Geoffrey Chaucer leading his eclectic company of merry pilgrims on a culinary romp through the Sunshine State, beginning with Apalachicola oysters from Joe Patti’s in Pensacola, and progressing to cooter at The Yearling near Cross Creek, ropa vieja at the Columbia in Ybor City, and stone crab at Joe’s in Miami, before ending their esculent pilgrimage at the state’s secular shrine to all things breakfast, Pepe’s Café in Key West. Just think of the tales they would tell.

Florida’s writers love the connection between food and poetry for many reasons. In “Supermarket” from his 1981 book Trying to Surprise God, St. Petersburg’s Poet Laureate Peter Meinke finds that his favorite store regularly evokes meditations on everything from manners to deception, lust to aesthetic nutrition: “Sonnets have more vitamins than villanelles.”

For the subversively madcap songwriter/cartoonist/poet Shel Silverstein, who spent his last years in Key West, “Italian Food,” a poem in Everything on It, has an even simpler, more practical value:

Oh, how I love Italian food
I eat it all the time
Not just ‘cause how good it tastes
But ‘cause how good it rhymes.

As much as they admire all aspects of food, our state’s poets seem especially enthralled by desserts. In one of his uncollected haikus, Jack Kerouac, who wrote The Dharma Bums, his sequel to On the Road, in Orlando and who died in St. Pete, connected his favorite sweet with symbols of the ideas that permeate all his work: immortality and love, cycles and nature.

I made raspberry fruit jello
the color of rubies
in the setting sun.

By associating the humble gelatin sweet with exotic gems and a highly traditional poetic image in this uncollected haiku from his 2012 Collected Poems, edited by Marlene Phipps-Kettlewell, the writer who identified the term beat with beatitude, suggests the romantic impulse underlying his unending quests.

As popular as Jello may once have been, pies are clearly our poets’ sweet of choice. Denise Duhamel, whose playful collection Kinky shows some of Barbie’s unexpected talents, reveals a far more personal side when describing in rich detail the ways our friends and neighbors respond to tragedy in the prose-poem “Healing Pies” from Ka-Ching!

After my parents’ accident, the pies kept coming: chicken pot pies (sized for one person), blueberry pies, ice cream pies, peach cobblers, lemon meringues, pecan pies, pies that were still warm in their tins, apple pies, another chicken pot pie (a big square one), pies with chocolate pudding inside, rhubarb pies, cherry pies, pies with crisscross slats of crust on top. Pies from the church, pies from my mother’s quilting group, pies from the neighbors, pies from the aunts. Pies lined the kitchen counter, pies packed the freezer. Holy pies, pies with painkiller filling, herbal pies, prayer pies, pies that kept vigil, pies brimming with novenas, pies full of secrets that even doctors don’t know, magic spell pies, smooth soothing pies overflowing with the music of rainforests, pies made from circles of light, pies with halos.
Pies need not always be so serious. Before Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings declared her cracker sympathies by publishing *The Yearling*, *Cross Creek* and, especially, her *Cross Creek Cookery*, with its recipes for gopher stew, alligator-tail steak, and blackbird pie, she wrote a popular newspaper column under the unassuming title *Songs of a Housewife*, which were collected and edited in 1997 by Rodger Tarr in the *Poems by Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings*. One of those songs, “Ancestral Pies,” written in deceptively simple and good-humored tetrameter quatrains, manages both to honor a family tradition and question it.

Great-grandma bakes such cherry pies
That Lafayette, a guest one night,
Took one to bed in pleased surprise
And ate it in the dead of night.

Grandma baked them for the Grange,
Apple her best, tho’ some said mince.
So, trained from youth, it isn’t strange
That I’ve made pastry ever since.

They gather round my floury board,
Shades of ancestral cooks, to see
If I betray the art they stored
In cook-books handed down to me.

And oh! The times I’ve stood dismayed
With pie crust or meringue forlorn,
And moaned these ancestors and prayed
They’d been wild Indians—fed on corn!

If pies are the royalty of Floridian desserts, their queen is certainly the key lime. Our magnificently tart key limes, which botanists call *citrus aurantiifolia* (and who doesn’t love that feisty doubled “i”?), are the perfect fruit for the Sunshine State’s richly diverse and constantly migratory population. A native of Southeast Asia, the restless key lime showed its prickly independence and separated itself from its Persian cousins by developing thorns while wandering through the Middle East to North Africa, drifting across the Mediterranean to Sicily, rambling up to Andalucía, and finally sailing the Atlantic with the earliest European explorers before settling comfortably in the West Indies and Florida Keys. In his fine 2002 collection *Florida Poems*, Campbell McGrath perfectly catches the fruit’s explosive taste in “The Key Lime”:

Curiously yellow hand-grenade
of flavor, Molotov cocktail
for a revolution against the bland.

No one has captured the cult of the key lime pie, the curious devotion they inspire, like the vagabond poet Don Blanding in his spirited 1941 book *Floridays*. A life-long wanderer who, had he lived in an earlier time, would have happily sailed the wine-dark Mediterranean with Odysseus or rambled the lowland fields of Southeast England, trading verses with Chaucer, Blanding once summarized himself as an “artist by nature, actor by instinct, poet by accident, vagabond by choice.”
One of Blanding’s many gifts is his ability to hide a prodigious metrical skill beneath a strong narrative, distinctive voice, uncomplicated diction, and simple but memorable images. Just as a skilled Chef de Cuisine can call on color, taste, texture, flavor, and shape to control the pace and pleasure of a well-planned meal, the beautifully organized couplets in “Lime Pie” offer a master class in how a talented poet can shift rhythms to lead us from awe and anticipation through a growing culinary and aesthetic appreciation into a feeding frenzy that slowly softens in his final couplets into an almost melancholic mood of wistful gratification.

Here Blanding’s gently nostalgic reflection captures not only the appeal of the pies but the diverse community and ardent fellowship they create, much as Chaucer recognized how much the hospitality of the Tabard Inn allowed his sundry band to join together and shape their individual restlessness into a shared feast of storytelling. Just as they have always been, food and stories will always be inseparable.

MAURICE J. O’SULLIVAN, an award-winning teacher, writer, and filmmaker, is professor of English and Kenneth Curry Chair of Literature at Rollins College in Winter Park.

O’Sullivan dedicates this column to Professor Jane Anderson Jones, “as she prepares to retire after introducing generations of students and teachers at what is now the State College of Florida at Manatee and Sarasota to the banquet that is Florida literature. An inspiring teacher and gifted scholar, Jane has generously—and joyfully—shared her passion for the state’s writers in a constantly evolving Florida bibliography.” To access this online Florida bibliography, go to Digital FORUM at FloridaHumanities.org.

Key lime—the queen of Florida pies.

We are grateful to the publishers of these works for their continuing commitment to poetry: the University Press of Florida for “Ancestral Pies,” the University of Pittsburgh for both “Supermarket” and “Healing Pies,” HarperCollins for “The Key Lime,” and Penguin for Kerouac’s Book of Haikus.
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For a complete list of events and programs, please visit www.museumoffloridahistory.com

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