FLORIDA VETERANS: Bringing war home

HOW FLORIDA BECAME THE STATE TO WATCH IN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS
THE POETRY OF BUGS
A VILLAGE THRIVES IN THE EVERGLADES
UNTIL RECENTLY, THE WAR IN IRAQ was faceless to me. It had a landscape—smoke and rubble, tanks rolling over windswept deserts, Humvees with unknown soldiers mounted behind giant machine guns—lots of images but no familiar faces.

The “Telling Project” changed that. Now I have faces and stories. I hear Taylor Urruela’s chilling description of an IED explosion that killed many of his buddies and cost him his leg. I think about Ryan Simonson speaking to his wife by phone after the birth of their first child—and being interrupted by incoming mortar fire. I see the pride on the face of Tabitha Nichols as she talks about her decision to enlist in the Army, following in the footsteps of her father.

In the past year, we at the Florida Humanities Council worked with The Telling Project, a nonprofit based in Austin, Texas, to develop staged productions of Florida veterans telling the stories of their military service. In their own words, these veterans shared a wide range of experiences and emotions. Their stories tell us about their pride of service, the challenges of basic training, the horrors of war, and the disorientation of returning to civilian life—oftentimes with life-altering injuries and conditions.

Early in 2015, we staged “Telling” performances of six veterans and one military spouse in the Tampa Bay area, hosting capacity crowds in many locations. The Tampa-based WEDU PBS TV chronicled these stage productions in an hour-long documentary, which was aired throughout Florida last year and now is available to public-television stations nationally. Last fall, we created “Telling: Pensacola,” bringing together six Pensacola-area veterans whose service ranged from the Vietnam War to the Iraq War.

The Telling Project is a vivid reminder of the power of stories to help us make sense of the world, to take us to places we have never been, to look at the world through someone else’s eyes. It is also a testimony to the dual nature of storytelling—the telling and the listening. By telling our stories and listening to those of others we deepen our connection to each other and our communities.

We hope to create more Telling Project programs in Florida. Visit our website at www.floridahumanities.org/whatisveterans to learn more.
Bearing Witness

Re-entering the civilian world can be daunting for veterans—especially those who come home with traumatic injuries to their bodies or minds. Meet Florida veterans and hear their stories. Also: Learn more about PTSD, sexual trauma in the military, and where vets can go for help.

Carving out a new life

Veterans in Florida

Hope and humanity, love and loss

By Gary R. Mormino

Humanities Alive

News and Events of the Florida Humanities Council

Lessons from the American presidency

How Florida became the state to watch

By Susan A. MacManus

An oasis in Jim Crow Florida

By Lu Vickers

The poetry of bugs

By Maurice J. O'Sullivan

My Favorite Florida Place

A village thrives in the Everglades

By Marya Repko
YOU’LL MEET SOME INSPIRING PEOPLE in the next pages: Florida veterans who share their personal stories about how and why they served, the injuries they live with, and the difficulties they’ve had reintegrating into civilian life. These are stories most of us don’t hear today, when less than 1 percent of the American population has served in uniform over the past dozen years of war. Unlike previous eras (World War II and Vietnam, for example), relatively few of us have family or friends in the military.

By standing up and telling their stories now, these courageous veterans are helping us see military service as the human endeavor it is. By listening, we bear witness to their struggles to recreate their lives despite sometimes traumatic physical and mental scars. In the process, we gain a deeper understanding of an important part of our national culture. In addition to reading their stories, you can meet some of these veterans online, too, via video interviews on our website (www.FloridaHumanities.org).

Just as we learn more about today’s veterans, historian Gary R. Mormino also provides a longer view with his story about Florida veterans over more than a century.

Also in this issue: Scholar/political pundit Susan A. MacManus offers a perspective for this election year on how Florida grew to become the premier swing state to watch—reflecting the demographics, and usually the voting patterns, of the nation as a whole. Coupled with that, we include an insightful look at presidential leadership, presented in Florida by Pulitzer Prize–winning presidential historian Jon Meacham.

Writer Lu Vickers provides an enlightening feature on Paradise Park, which was a cool, watery oasis for African Americans in the heart of Jim Crow Florida in mid-20th century.

Our award-winning columnist Maurice J. O’Sullivan takes a look at a ubiquitous part of our lush, subtropical peninsula—bugs (and worms, too). Open up to the poetry of those that “creep, crawl, and flutter among us.”

And Marya Repko, local historian, publisher, and resident of Everglades City, takes you on a stroll through this thriving village in America’s unique “river of grass” and recounts its colorful past.

BARBARA O’REILLEY is editor of FORUM.
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But veterans don’t experience this kind of ritualized re-integration into civilian life in modern times. Often, their individual stories aren’t heard, which can leave them feeling isolated and result in a communication gap with the general population. This problem is especially acute now, with less than 1 percent of American society serving in uniform over the last dozen years of war. Relatively few civilians have direct contact with returning veterans and know their problems first-hand.

And those problems can cover a wide range. It can be tough to move from the purpose-driven structure and discipline of military life to the open-ended civilian world. While most veterans over the years have not had major problems, recent surveys indicate that about half of those who served since 9/11 have found readjustment to be difficult. (See story on page 14.)

“We are trained for combat, regardless of the type of work we do in the military,” says John Castro, a Palm Beach County vet who fought in Kuwait and Iraq. “You don’t have to think about what you have to do next. It automatically comes to you. Then, if you don’t have a transition period when you come home, you don’t know which way to turn.”

That was true for Michael Dunlap. When he left the Marines in 1982 after serving six years, he felt he didn’t fit anymore in his hometown. He wound up roaming the country, working different jobs and occasionally living out of his car. He kept searching for a place to connect. “It was difficult making that transition from being in the military to being nobody,” he says. “I was suicidal and didn’t even realize it. You think it’s no big deal. But it is a big deal.”

And for veterans who come home after having suffered severe physical or mental trauma, the hurdles can seem insurmountable. Some talk of spending years self-medicating with drugs and alcohol, hitting bottom, and trying to dig their way out. If they persevere and are lucky, eventually they might find the help they need to move forward with their lives.

“When you start getting sober and thinking clearly is when you begin to understand,” says Patrick McCrary, a Marine who was wounded during heavy combat in Vietnam in 1968. “I could plainly see I was a little bit different. Drop of a dime, I would go off like a rocket, not being able to sleep at night, getting up to go look out the damn windows, just checking, you know, making sure everything’s all right out there, nobody sneaking up on me. I don’t know. I don’t do it quite as much as I used to, but I still do that.”

Michael Dunlap, the Marine at left, on a jungle training operation in Okinawa.
McCrary, Dunlap, and several other Florida veterans who struggled for years in silence are starting to tell their stories publicly through a national program called The Telling Project (www.thetellingproject.org). Brought to Florida in 2015 by the Florida Humanities Council, The Telling Project puts veterans on stage to tell their personal stories in dramatic presentations before community audiences.

Thus far, Florida Humanities has sponsored several performances of veterans in the Tampa Bay area and Pensacola and plans to bring the program to other communities around the state. The veterans have received standing ovations, inspiring audiences with their stories of resilience and survival and offering a message of hope to others at a time when veteran suicide rates are high.

“lf I can achieve what I have achieved with the cards I’ve had stacked against me, then anyone can do it,” says Elliott Smith, an Army veteran who underwent a partial leg amputation after sustaining injuries in Iraq. Smith recounted his long road to recuperation—a journey made even more difficult when the media began questioning the justification for the war. “I started to dissect the hell out of everything that had happened to me,” he says. “I didn’t agree with the war anymore. The one thing that I thought I should feel proud of was a fraud and made me feel disgusted.” That led to addictions. “All I wanted to do was numb myself. I was in and out of treatment. I got into fights, car accidents. I hurt everyone that was ever close to me.”

Veterans Jessica McVay (Marine) and Timothy Jones (Navy) talked about the trauma of being raped while in the military. “The rapes I endured broke my military career,” says McVay. “I lost my identity.”

Army veteran Scott Owens is now on 90-percent disability with Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and other combat injuries suffered during two tours in Iraq. When he left the Army in 2009 after serving nine years, he tried to get help. But only when he reached a crisis point and openly discussed suicide did he get the medical treatment and therapies he needed. After his condition stabilized, Owens went on to help other veterans through support programs.

Participating in The Telling Project has been therapeutic for many. McVay says that in publicly telling her story of being raped, she reconnected with emotional memories she hadn’t been able to access. “When I was on stage, I started getting choked up and emotional. The experience allowed me to attach to those emotions, and when you do that, then you can start working on healing. This project gave me ownership of my story,” she says. “I set out to help other people by telling my story but it wound up coming full circle and I ended up helping myself.”

“Sharing our experiences with others cuts the pain in half,” says Susan Gritz, a psychotherapist and professor at Johnson and Wales University in North Miami. “It’s the concept of ‘We’re all in the same boat.’ We no longer feel that we’re alone.”

Gülay Güner, a psychologist in Tamarac, says that people who learn from their experiences can use pain as a stepping stone to higher ground. “Some people are able to transcend trauma,” she says. “They don’t just survive, they thrive.”

Such sharing also helps members of the community, says Jonathan Wei, founder of The Telling Project. “When we ask [the military] to do something for us, we should absorb that, because it’s our experience as well as theirs,” Wei says. “It allows a community to adapt and to expand its understanding of what we’ve asked these people to do.”

Lisa Powers, a drama therapist and director of Florida Humanities Telling Project performances, adds, “No matter what you think about war, these people have volunteered to go over and sacrifice their lives. We do have a responsibility to them as human beings to listen to their stories and to bear witness to the sacrifices that they’ve made.”

In the next pages:

Want to Bring The Telling Project to Your Community?

We are looking for partners who would like to bring The Telling Project to their local communities. Partners need to help provide outreach to local veterans, program marketing, and venue rental. Interested? Contact Patricia Putman at 727/873-2004 or pputman@flahum.org.

This article includes reporting and writing by Jeffrey Laign.
“And then everything goes black”  
—SCOTT OWENS

His grandfather told war stories about crawling across France on his belly. “I used to think he was joking,” Scott Owens says. “But later I understood what he meant.”

Owens found out during his first tour in Iraq with the Army’s famed 101st Airborne Division—on a day in early spring 2003 when his platoon was on a mission to take over an Iraqi compound. As the radio telephone operator, he ran forward with his lieutenant to scope out the target. They became trapped by sniper fire and low-crawled back and forth along a compound wall, waiting for an opening to return to their platoon.

When the shooting suddenly stopped, they decided to make a run for it. “As we started coming up over the berm, I got a call over the radio: ‘Get down, get down, get the f--- down. There’s incoming, incoming...’” There was a long, high whistling noise “and then BOOM! And then everything goes black. I couldn’t get up. I couldn’t move. I couldn’t feel anything. You could hear the rounds impacting...but you couldn’t get up and do anything. I almost feel that at one point in time I could see myself laying there on the ground. And then it felt like somebody kicked me and kicked the wind back into me...your vision starts to come back. It’s kind of blurry at first and your face is covered with dirt and I started hearing helicopters flying up above us...and I kind of tapped the lieutenant and said ‘Sir, are you ok?’ and he kind of gets that same breath and says he’s ok.” Their platoon thought they were dead. As soon as was possible, an aid team rushed to pick them up. But they were alive.

Owens had suffered a concussion but, because he wasn’t bleeding, he stayed with his platoon. “I was just a little dazed and confused for a while.” Then the migraine headaches started, and “they’d give me ranger candy and say ‘take this for a while.’” He had a hard time choking down the 800-milligram Ibuprofen pills. Later he started noticing memory problems. He’d been assigned as a radio telephone operator in part because he had a photographic memory. He could remember all the different radio frequencies off the top of his head without writing anything down. He could speak multiple languages, some of them self-taught. It just came easy to him. Now for some reason, he started forgetting things. He tried to compensate for this but eventually told his sergeant that he was afraid he’d endanger the platoon if he remained a radio operator, because he just couldn’t remember what he needed to. At his request, he was reassigned to the line as a rifleman.

As the years went on, the problem “got worse and worse and worse.” Then, after he reenlisted and was sent back to Iraq in 2006, his platoon, along with Marines, experienced extended fire fights in Ramadi. “Every time you’d go out, you’d say a prayer, ‘Please don’t let a bullet hit me today.’” The next time he went home he was so “jumpy” he avoided crowds and drove only in early morning or late at night, when other traffic wasn’t on the road.

He recognized he was experiencing Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)—but also was suffering with migraines so severe that at times he had seizures. His memory problems worsened. He figured he had Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), too.

A military doctor kept telling him it was just PTSD. “I said, ‘Dude, I’m not depressed. I just can’t remember stuff.’ It became a nonstop argument.” Extremely frustrated, he left the Army in 2009 and moved his family...
to Largo, Florida. His wife Shannon became pregnant with their second child. He tried for months to get a job, but despite sending out hundreds of resumés, he received no callbacks. “I got to a point where I felt absolutely worthless,” he said. “I was ready to end my life.”

“He wanted help,” Shannon Owens says, “but he couldn’t figure out how to get it, because no matter which way he turned it was a dead end. Like being in a maze that has no piece of cheese at the end.”

This frustration reached a crisis point one day when Scott told Shannon, “I would be better off to this family if I was just dead. The life insurance…should be enough money for you to buy a small house and take care of the kids.” Shannon frantically called a veterans’ crisis hotline. A sheriff’s deputy who was a former Marine arrived at their home and said, “Let’s talk.” Owens went with him and talked, and then agreed to get into an ambulance, which took him to a Veterans Administration hospital.

Over the next two years, Owens received medical help, counseling, and therapies, and his condition began to stabilize. He was referred to the Abilities Foundation, which helps people with disabilities find employment. He impressed people there and, at their request, began to speak publicly and advocate for unemployed veterans. He also got jobs administering employment contracts for disabled vets and working at a VA program for homeless vets. In 2013, he received a Tampa Bay Lightning Community Hero Award and directed the $50,000 grant prize to the Abilities Foundation. In 2015, the Building Homes for Heroes program and Chase Bank awarded Owens a mortgage-free home in Winter Haven, where he and his wife and three children now live. He is currently a fulltime college student studying political science.

“I kind of look at my disabilities as a tool now,” Owens says. “Just because I’m not able to do this doesn’t mean I’m not able to do that. So disability doesn’t mean inability. I had to learn that.”

“We’re on the start of year 10 being married,” Shannon Owens says, “and it’s still like year one. We have three kids. They’re fun, they keep us busy. As far as dealing with his issues, we have really good phones now [that keep track of schedules and send reminders] and they do most of our thinking…We have each other and that’s more than what most people have at all.”

“It’s not holding me back anymore”
—Tabitha Nichols

“We would always say a prayer before we went out on missions. ‘Dear Lord, while I’m out, I might forget you. Please don’t forget me.’ You can’t think about God when pointing a gun at somebody, or when they’re pointing one at you.”

Despite her prayers, Tabitha Nichols was injured in a rocket-propelled grenade attack in Iraq, where she served one tour during her eight years in the Army National Guard (2003–2011). She suffers with four herniated discs, has “a rib that pops out every now and then,” and struggles with PTSD.

Continued
Nichols now is a stay-at-home mother and home-schools their 6-year-old daughter. She has done some modeling and uses this as a way to reach out to female veterans, Wounded Warriors, and veterans who deal with PTSD.

“When I got out, it was like cutting loose a ball and chain. I’m going to keep that ball and chain, but it’s not holding me back anymore. I just put it on a shelf, look at it sometimes, maybe polish it now and then.

“I was too young to see that sh--. Why did we even have to be over there in the first place? I don’t know. I don’t know. I think it would have been a lot easier if I did know. We just got to tell ourselves something to deal with it. We’re keeping the peace. We’re getting the bad guys. We’re leaving everyone else alone. I don’t fuss with it anymore. I’ve let it go now.”

“Look, I’m crazy as hell. I’ve been to Iraq. I’m going through some sh--, so deal with me or there’s the door.’

“I explained PTSD to him and, God bless him, he researched it himself. He’s always been supportive. He was like, ‘Okay. No problem. Whatever. You’re crazy. So am I. Aren’t we all?’ I was like ‘Really, you don’t care?’”

Estimates by the VA National PTSD Center indicate that in a given year, this condition affects from 11 to 20 percent of those who served in Operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom and 12 percent of those in the Gulf War. Also up to 30 percent of Vietnam War veterans were affected during their lifetime.

Sufferers might become depressed, numb memories with alcohol or drugs, be hyper-vigilant, develop insomnia, or have other problems.

Support groups have long been instrumental in helping vets to overcome physical and emotional trauma sustained on the battlefield. In more recent years, some medications have been helpful, along with newer counseling techniques. Learn more at the PTSD Center’s web site, www.ptsd.va.gov.

Living with trauma

In years past, veterans who experienced Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) were said to be “shell shocked” or suffering from “battle fatigue.” Today, this condition is better understood and treated.

It is defined as “a mental health condition that’s triggered by a terrifying event—either experiencing it or witnessing it,” according to the Mayo Clinic. “Symptoms may include flashbacks, nightmares and severe anxiety, as well as uncontrollable thoughts about the event.” Veterans who have fought in combat and individuals who have experienced such traumas as sexual assault, childhood abuse, or even such events as traffic accidents and natural disasters may feel these effects.

Tabitha Nichols holds an Iraqi child.

Nichols with children (left) and on the road in Iraq. She was injured in a rocket-propelled grenade attack.

Photos courtesy of Tabitha Nichols.
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“I see them looking down on me”

—ELLIOTT SMITH

ELLIOTT SMITH struggled to rebuild his life when he left the Army in 2006 after being injured in Iraq. He was a machine gunner on convoys, but his injury occurred during checkpoint duty, when he was run over by a heavy-equipment truck. He lost his right leg below the knee, followed by 18 months of treatment and therapy. While trying to deal with this trauma, he began questioning the justification for the war and started self-medicating with pain pills.

But in 2010 he met a PTSD specialist, “and she was the first person to break the ice with me, but she only scratched the surface. I was still doing everything besides drugs and alcohol to avoid what was going on inside.”

“And then I met Robert, a veteran. He suggested I learn meditation. I said ‘I’m not a tree hugger.’ He would say ‘You’re in control of you.’ He questioned every skewed and fractured perception, ‘It may be that way, but it could be this way.’ He slowly began to dismantle all the constructs that kept me in my box. Robert waited for me to be ready. Finally, I asked if I could go with him to the Buddhist Temple. The meditation helped me to just sit still.

“I had the perspective that you had to bash through any problem you had like a bull. And once you fix it, it’s over. You never have to face it again. Instead, I learned that happiness and balance requires that I do daily things, that I remain vigilant with my behaviors, my motives, because PTSD makes you fragile. If you’re not vigilant, you do things that aren’t supportive of recovery and reintegration.”

Now Smith is a marathon runner, studying to become a prosthetics provider. “I am stronger than I’ve ever been,” the Pensacola resident says. “Since 2010, I’ve run several 5k and 10k races, two half-marathons, and I’m going to run my first full marathon to raise awareness of veteran suicides. I’ve rebuilt relationships with family, friends, and relatives.

“I attribute much of my recovery to volunteering and helping others. For my healing to be truly meaningful, I have to share what I’ve learned. I’ve traveled to nine different countries since 2010 helping facilitate meditation retreats.

“I see my survival as a chance to live for those men and women who did not come back home. I see them looking down on me. I have hope today. I’m not sure where I’ll end up but I’m looking forward to finding out.”

Vet Centers offer help

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs is working to reorganize programs hobbled by bureaucracy and agency mismanagement. But many vets say they still have trouble accessing the benefits to which they are entitled. That’s where VA Vet Centers come in.

Located in communities across the country (including 24 Florida cities), the centers are designed to cut through red tape and speed up referrals to appropriate agencies.

“In my experience these centers help,” says John Castro, who runs a support group for fellow Palm Beach County veterans. “The problem is that many vets don’t realize these centers are available.”

That’s surprising when you consider that Vet Centers have been around since 1979, when Congress established them to help the staggering number of Vietnam-era vets who were experiencing readjustment problems. Since then, Vet Centers have extended eligibility to all combat veterans and their families.

Vet Centers offer individual and group counseling for veterans and their families, including those mourning the loss of someone in combat or suffering from military sexual trauma. Other services include providing outreach and education; screening and referral for substance abuse, depression, and PTSD; and help with finding employment.

“I try to get the word out that’s there’s lots of support within the community,” Castro says. “Vet Centers make it easier for vets to move forward.”

Information is available at www.vetcenter.va.gov.
**“I don’t know what the answers are”**

—PATRICK MCCRARY

Patrick McCrary, a Marine rifleman in Vietnam, was wounded in heavy combat in 1968. When he left the Corps in 1973 after six years, he battled addiction. “That’s when my alcohol abuse got really serious,” McCrary says. “It was about to kill me. I had to find a way to stop drinking.” He did, and the Pensacola resident subsequently attended college before embarking on a long career with the U.S. Postal Service.

“I started playing the guitar just after I left the Marines. There’s something about an acoustic guitar. I love the vibrations. A lot of guitarists, they do sweet fingerpicking. I like to strum the damn thing. I don’t know if I like the sound of explosions and gunfire, but sh—, I want some noise.

“I go to the rifle range sometimes to burn some ammunition, to smell the cordite. I think, why in the hell do you love that? It was the worse damn year of my life and I love that smell. I don’t know what the answers are, but you’ve got to find a way to get in touch with that, to live with it. Accept things, you know?”

**We were only 19**

Song by Patrick McCrary

Daddy can you tell me, when you saw me off to war
Why the stories that you’d told me, never seemed to be quite real,
This picture, from the paper, showed me young and strong and clean
God help me, I was only 18

Doctor can you tell me why I still don’t sleep at night?
Why the sound of a chopper chills me to my feet?
These tears that come and go, can you tell me what it means?
God help me, we were only 19

With an Agent Orange sunset shining through the shrubs,
And the sounds in the distance of a barking M-16
When someone hollered AMBUSH!! There was a God almighty roar,
God help me, we were only 19

Sanford kicked a mine, the year mankind kicked the moon,
I still hear Sonny moaning, till the morphine eased his pain,
Vince took the lead, and nearly gave his life away,
God help me, we were only 19

Doctor can you tell me why I still don’t sleep at night?
Why the sound of a chopper chills me to my feet?
These tears that come and go, can you tell me what it means?
God help me, we were only 19

“I don’t know what the answers are”

—PATRICK MCCRARY

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“I started playing the guitar just after I left the
“Being a part of something greater than yourself”
—Jessica McVay

Jessica McVay says she loved being a Marine and wanted to stay in. “I was really feeling fulfilled, being in the Marines. I love the routine, the discipline. I love everything about it, the camaraderie, the feeling of being a part of something greater than yourself,” she says.

But after she reported being brutally raped on base in Japan, her fellow Marines ostracized her. “That was just humiliating. The talk, the friends circle was null at that point. There was no one.” In 2010, after five years of service, she took medical retirement.

She suffers now with PTSD and has a service dog. “I have a fear of men, fear of confined spaces, fear of this, fear of that. I try not to put myself in situations [where] something may happen. Hyper-vigilance is definitely there. Night terrors are there. Everything is still there. It’s just learning to live with it.”

The Palmetto resident’s top priority now is motherhood, but she sees the Marines as an ongoing part of her life; she has been adjutant and commandant for the Marine Corps League, Desoto Detachment #588 and does service work with veterans.

“I still have my GI Bill. I’d like to go back to school. Having been there and done that, I would like to be able to help people.”

McVay with her service dog, Radar.

“My story doesn’t belong to me”
—Timothy Jones

When he finished Navy boot camp in 1998, Timothy Jones felt he was continuing a family tradition of military service. “I was so proud. Until that point, I didn’t feel like I belonged. Now, I was in the company of my grand-daddy, my aunt, my uncle. I had a family now. It felt so good.”

But while stationed on a base in Japan, he was raped. He not only had to deal with the trauma of that experience, but the stigma it carried in a hostile military environment. When he decided to leave the service two years later, he found it tough to transition to civilian life in Pensacola and tried to blunt the pain of his memories with alcohol and drugs. Eventually he got into treatment and got his life back on track.

“My goal became transforming my life. I had to own my past. I had to face up to my pain. I had to live a structured life. I said ’How am I going to do that?’ Higher education.

“And it’s not easy. I don’t want to live without a roommate. I still check that the door is locked at all times. I’m getting better in crowds. But I don’t want to escape anymore. I try to feel the situations I’m in.”

Jones now is a senior at the University of West Florida and has begun a career as an inspirational speaker. He also works as an advocate for veterans’ initiatives and recently was recognized as a candidate for the John C. Maxwell Leadership Award.

“My plan now is to be the first me. My story doesn’t belong to me. It belongs to the world. And there are many others who have gone through rape, homelessness, drug and alcohol abuse. A mistake is just a mistake. We’ve got to see people for their hearts. It doesn’t matter your service. It doesn’t matter if you’re civilian or veteran. It matters who we are as people.

“I know there’s somebody out there that needs to hear my story. Because at the end of the day, that’s what my story is. It’s hope.”

Sexual trauma in the military

The VA’s national screening program of veterans reports that about one in four women and one in 100 men respond that they experienced military sexual trauma. This is a survey of those seeking VA health care and not all individuals serving in the military.

More information can be found at the VA’s National PTSD Center: www.ptsd.va.gov
“And then you move forward”
—RYAN SIMONSON

RYAN SIMONSON, who served multiple tours in Iraq and was commissioned an Army second lieutenant in the armor branch, left the service in 2011 so that he could spend time with his young children. “I really believed in what we were doing, I loved what I was doing. I loved the people I was with,” he says of his 13 years in the Army. “The main reason that I decided to transition out was that my kids literally didn’t know who I was. It was time.”

He credits the military with doing “an amazing job of making you aware of what your strengths are and what your weaknesses are. And your weaknesses aren’t something to be ashamed of.”

“I’ve fought back”
—TAYLOR URRUELA

TAYLOR URRUELA credits his Army training with giving him discipline, strength, and motivation. “Because of the strength derived from it, I could at this point go through anything. I’ve scraped bottom and I’ve fought back.”

As an Army infantryman (2004–2011), Urruella was wounded by two roadside bombs in Iraq, resulting in the loss of a leg below the knee. After multiple surgeries and four years of rehabilitation, he transitioned into civilian life and encountered issues with veterans’ health care and PTSD.

The difficulties began after he left the military hospital, where he was being treated on a daily basis by numerous support people, and went out on his own where he didn’t know any combat veterans, let alone any with disabilities.

“When the PTSD starts creeping in, you do whatever you can, drugs, alcohol, you name it. You try to just treat it yourself. You don’t know where to go or what to do,” he says.

Urruela, now a Tampa resident, eventually found a way to move forward. With two other combat-wounded veterans, he co-founded the nonprofit Vet Sports organization to encourage injured veterans to participate in sports. “It really does well to integrate civilians back with the military.” Thus far, they have established five clubs—in the District of Columbia, Jacksonville, Tampa, and two in Michigan—and are getting a club started in Tennessee. “We’ve served over 1,500 veterans, with about 500 that do it on a week-to-week basis,” he says.

Urruela has also begun a career as a personal trainer and model, and is writing a novel.

About losses suffered in the military, he says, “You wish that it wouldn’t be this way, you commiserate, you empathize, you cry on each other’s shoulders about the things that we’ve all lost. And then you move forward.”

A Florida native, Simonson joined the Army at age 17 by accepting a nomination to the United States Military Academy at West Point. He lives with his wife, also an Army officer, and three children in Sarasota, where he teaches at Sarasota Military Academy Prep.
Carving out a new life

BY JEFFREY LAIGN

About 27 percent of veterans from all years of service report difficulties readjusting to civilian life, but that number jumps to 44 percent for vets serving since 2001, according to a 2011 Pew Research Center survey. And it rises to 50 percent in a 2013 Washington Post/Kaiser Family Foundation survey.

Those who struggled the most were scarred by traumatic events, suffered injuries, saw combat, knew someone who was injured or killed, or tried to sustain a marriage during their service, according to the Pew survey. Those who fared the best held college degrees, returned with a clear understanding of the roles they were asked to play in wartime missions, or left as commissioned officers.

Authorities say the consequences of wartime traumas may not surface immediately. “It’s been my experience that it’s usually the first three to four years after a veteran gets out of service where they really start having problems and going into this downward spiral,” says retired Col. Len Loving, who runs the Five Star Veterans Center in Jacksonville.

That’s why the U.S. Veterans Administration has revamped its Transition Assistance Program. Now mandatory for most outgoing members of the armed forces, the program helps vets to acquire the transitional skills they need to make it in civilian life. “This is a cultural change,” says Susan Kelly, Ph.D., who heads up the program. “We’re asking now that military members meet civilian career-readiness standards before they separate.”

About 70 percent of returning veterans say finding a job is their biggest hurdle, according to a 2012 survey by Prudential Financial. Other major problems include trying to navigate the system of veterans’ benefits and figuring out what’s next for their lives.

But the traits veterans were required to hone in the service—discipline, commitment, focus—can serve them well as they reintegrate into the civilian world. The U.S. Small Business Administration reports that veterans are 45 percent more likely than civilian counterparts to become successful entrepreneurs. That’s the story in Florida, says Jeff Atwater, the state’s chief financial officer.

“Florida ranks third nationally for the greatest number of veteran-owned businesses,” Atwater says, “and these provide more than $61 billion in revenues annually and employ more than 310,000 Floridians.”

Some returning veterans, like Patrick Sargent, who served as an Army lieutenant during a peace-keeping mission in Bosnia, have an easier time carving out challenging careers and resuming stable lives. Sargent, a South Florida corporate executive, says, “I was very fortunate when I transitioned out. But a lot aren’t so fortunate. For many, it’s a very difficult transition. That’s something I hope the public understands.”

Jose Coll, director of veteran student services at St. Leo University, north of Tampa, says helping vets to readjust is more than a social obligation. “It’s a moral duty, a duty to serve those who have served our country.”

JEFFREY LAIGN is an author, editor, and freelance writer who lives in Fort Lauderdale.

Resources for veterans

- The Florida VA department, www.Floridavets.org, provides a comprehensive guide to benefits and services, contact information and locations for Vet Centers around Florida, and many other contacts and resources.
- Mental health support for returning veterans, plus links to other health care support: www.mentalhealth.va.gov.
- Employ Florida Marketplace: www.employflorida.com, which includes information for veterans’ services and employment.
- Florida Department of Economic Opportunity for Veterans: www.floridajobs.org (see veterans employment programs).
- The 24-hour National Veterans Crisis Line is 800-273-8255

Talking Service

In Talking Service, a program of the Great Books Foundation, small groups of veterans get together and, under the guidance of skilled facilitators, reflect on short, powerful writings about military service by some of the world’s greatest authors. The Florida Humanities Council has brought this program to our state. If you’re interested in hosting a Talking Service series in your community, contact Alex Buell at 727-873-2001 or abuell@flahum.org.
Veterans in Florida

Florida has the third-largest population of veterans in the nation, after California and Texas. Of Florida’s 1.6 million veterans, 1.3 million have served during wartime, including nearly a half million in Afghanistan and Iraq. According to the Florida Department of Veterans’ Affairs, Florida has more than 249,000 disabled veterans.
Hope and humanity, love and loss

By Gary R. Mormino

As a young child growing up in early 20th-century Tallahassee, LeRoy Collins remembered the reverence surrounding Confederate Memorial Day. Students paid homage to the “Cradle and Grave” defenders who saved Florida’s Capitol from Yankee invaders. One white-haired veteran drew a circle with a stick, chanting, “This is where I stood. This is where I stood.”

When Collins returned home from WWII, a grateful public never forgot the sacrifices of America’s 12 million veterans. Collins always considered the GI Bill, which allowed millions of WWII veterans to attend college, one of America’s most enlightened pieces of social legislation. Collins reminded an audience in 1967, “We are living in an age when more people should be willing to put their stick down and say, ‘This is where I stood.’”

In 1967, when young men returned from Vietnam, they received a chilly, if not often hostile reception. “No one cheered them,” observed the Orlando Sentinel in a 1991 retrospective, “No one organized parades or gave them free coupons for vacations.” In Vietnam Shadows, writes Arnold R. Isaacs, veterans from Korea and Vietnam returned ‘to a country torn and full of doubt about why those wars were fought and whether they had been worthwhile.”

As we consider where we stand today—especially when confronted with the issues of veteran homelessness, GI suicides, and mental health facilities for those who stood at Khe Sahn and Anwar Province—it’s instructive to look at the past to gain some perspective. The reception for veterans in Florida has ranged widely over the past two centuries.

Floridians who fought in the Civil War returned to a shattered state, a world turned upside down, with plantations in shambles and former slaves turned freedmen. And many of the veterans were shattered too, emotionally and physically, from what they had experienced. In 1885, the State of Florida granted its first Confederate pensions, a sum of $5 per month. Later, legislators introduced bills to make widows eligible for pensions.

Civil War veterans from both the North and South found refuge in Florida. Beginning in DeFuniak Springs in 1871 with the Ladies Memorial Association of Walton County, seemingly every town in the Sunshine State erected a monument to the Lost Cause. Florida, to the horror of its southern neighbors, welcomed Union veterans.

The United States entered the Great War in 1917, and by late 1918 over four million Americans had served in the First World War. Upon returning, veterans sought compensation for the lost wages they would have earned on the home front. Congress agreed to pay veterans for time spent abroad and in the service. “Adjusted compensation”

To listen to author Gary Mormino discuss the transformation of Florida after World War II, go to Digital FORUM at www.FloridaHumanities.org.
was to be paid veterans, beginning in 1945. The issue as to whether veterans should be paid “bonuses” became a political issue. “Patriotism which is bought and paid for is not patriotism,” argued President Calvin Coolidge in 1924. “Silent Cal” vetoed the bonus bill, but Congress overrode the president’s veto.

In 1932, amid the suffering of the Great Depression, veterans demanded early payment. A “Bonus Expeditionary Force” composed of veterans and their families marched on Washington. The protesters encamped at Anacostia Flats; Army Chief of Staff Douglas MacArthur, convinced of a communist plot, burned the camp sites.

President Franklin Roosevelt encouraged his New Deal agencies to hire veterans. One massive Florida project involved the construction of the Overseas Highway, replacing Flagler’s railroad from Miami to Key West. In 1935, hundreds of WWI veterans worked on the new highway, living in three Civilian Conservation Corps Camps along the Florida Keys. But in 1935, a powerful Labor Day hurricane killed 259 veterans, many washed out to sea. Ernest Hemingway visited the site and wrote an unsparing essay for New Masses, titled, “Who Killed the Vets?”

Pearl Harbor galvanized America and Americans who had been deeply divided about military preparedness and intervention. Historians have called the conflict “the good war,” a sardonic if true reference to the conflict’s clarity and the fact that it brought prosperity to the home front. Millions of Americans volunteered to roll bandages, grow vegetables, and serve coffee to and for “our boys.”

In 1944, when the question was not if but when the U.S. would win the war, lawmakers began to consider the implications of 12 million servicemen and women suddenly flooding the labor market. They remembered when the Doughboys returned from France in 1919 and the economy went into a tailspin.

Congress passed the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act in 1944. Popularly known as the G.I. Bill of Rights, the legislation included low-cost mortgages as well as medical and educational benefits. The G.I. Bill transformed American higher education. Over two million veterans attended American colleges and universities. Prior to the war, college was still considered a privileged sanctuary for elites. Only 160,000 students received college degrees in 1940; by 1950, that number had surpassed a half million. In addition, veterans could attend vocational schools.

Absorbed today over questions of income inequality and the one percenters, how do we explain the relative economic equality of the 1940s and 1950s? Perhaps because 12 million veterans poured into the workforce, perhaps because the war—from its victory gardens, obligatory rationing, and victory bonds—underscored the meaning of shared sacrifice, or perhaps because the war witnessed a titanic struggle between democracies and dictatorships, the economic boom that followed marked a period of prosperity and optimism that greatly benefited the middle and working classes for three decades.

Since 1973, when the unpopular draft ended, the U.S. military has relied upon an all-voluntary force. Military service offers opportunity, and increasing numbers of Hispanics, immigrants, African Americans, and women constitute the new armed forces. Since 9/11, as Americans entered a new Age of Terror, we view the solitary soldier as our buckle and shield. The United States now spends more on defense than all other nations’ defense budgets combined.

What connects veterans of Falujah and Pork Chop Hill is the ritual and reality of coming home. Many post-9/11 veterans confront a bewildering postwar landscape, from dysfunctional governmental agencies and high unemployment to broken families and scarred memories. The Washington Post reported on a startling survey of veterans: “Nearly 90 percent performed actions in Iraq or Afghanistan that made them feel proud, yet only 35 percent believe both wars were worth fighting.”

Compared to previous wars, fewer and fewer Americans are joining the fight. A 2015 Kaiser Family Foundation poll indicated that 32 percent of American adults had “hardly any or no” friends who have served in the military. In 1945, almost every American adult greeted a relative coming home from war. This makes the homecoming for America’s warriors much different today than it was then and perhaps even further tests the power of hope and humanity, love and loss.

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.

To listen to women who served in Vietnam discuss their untold stories of service, go to Digital FORUM at www.FloridaHumanities.org.
Four new members join Florida Humanities Board

We welcome four new members to the Florida Humanities Council Board: Brian Dassler of Tallahassee and Thomas Lang of Orlando, both appointed by Gov. Rick Scott; and Linda Landman Gonzalez of Orlando and Robert Thompson of Winter Park, who were elected by the board. In addition, board members Sue Kim of Ormond Beach and Glenda Walters of Lynn Haven received gubernatorial reappointments, and the board re-elected Casey Fletcher of Bartow and Penny Taylor of Naples.

Brian Dassler is the deputy chancellor for educator quality with the Florida Department of Education. A former Broward County teacher of the year and a founder of the Urban Teacher Academy Program, Dassler has bachelor’s and master’s degrees from the University of Florida, where he was named an outstanding young alumnus twice and is currently a doctoral candidate.

Linda Landman Gonzalez, vice president of philanthropy and multicultural insights for the Orlando Magic National Basketball Association, serves as president of the Orlando Magic Youth Foundation. She previously was director of diversity of community relations for Darden Restaurants and served as Barnett Bank of Central Florida vice president of Hispanic sales and marketing.

Thomas Lang has practiced law for 30 years in Central Florida, both in private practice and as general counsel to several government agencies. He served as director of the Kissimmee Convention and Visitors Bureau from 2008 to 2011. He also was an assistant dean of men at the University of Pennsylvania and an aide in the Florida House of Representatives. He is a Navy veteran.

Robert Thompson is a former high school history teacher who is an advocate of strong humanities programs in the state school system. He has bachelor’s and master’s degrees in history from the University of Central Florida, where he focused on Florida civil rights history. He was executive producer for The Groveland Four, a documentary about an infamous, racially charged case in Lake County.

Writer David Kirby receives 2016 Florida Lifetime Achievement Award

Poet, essayist, and children’s book author David Kirby has been named winner of the Florida Lifetime Achievement Award for Writing, sponsored by the Florida Humanities Council. A panel of independent judges chose Kirby from among 19 nominees, calling the Florida State University creative writing professor “one of Florida’s literary treasures,” and saying that his poems and essays “show how craft, humor, and insight can create enduring works of art.” The award presentation is scheduled for April 8 at a special luncheon in the Governor’s Mansion.

FORUM wins six awards in 2015 magazine competition

FORUM received top awards for excellence in 2015 from the Florida Magazine Association:

First place awards went to “Reflections on Florida Poetry” by Maurice J. O’Sullivan for Best Column; and to our issue, “Florida’s Grand Canyon: Hidden World of Our Precious Springs,” honored for both Best Cover and Best Special Theme or Show Issue

Our annual issue celebrating winners of the Florida Book Awards won second place for Best Special Theme or Show Issue

And third place honors went to “St. Augustine: Life with History and Tourism” for Best Special Theme or Show Issue; and to a montage of art, poetry, photography, and literature, “Flying Underwater,” for Best Feature Design.

Congratulations to winners of Poetry Out Loud contest

Jarod Atchley, senior at Ocala West Port High School, won our statewide Poetry Out Loud recitation contest in April and will represent Florida in the national contest in Washington, D.C., in May. Other winners: (second) Tatiana Saleh, Douglas Anderson School for the Arts, Jacksonville; (third) Jillian Miley, Spruce Creek High School, Port Orange. The national Poetry Out Loud program, created to raise students’ appreciation of literature, annually awards $100,000 in prizes to high school students and their schools.
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/calendar

**BROOKSVILLE**
**MAY 5** at 6:30 p.m.
Brooksville City Hall
Steve Noll discusses Florida’s dramatic changes after World War II, exploring economics, tourism, agriculture, and interstate highways.

**APALACHICOLA**
**AUG. 13** at 1 p.m.
Apalachicola Center for History, Culture, and Art
Historical and archaeological insights into the 19th-century maroon communities along the Apalachicola River.

Create a legacy in Florida

Planned giving allows donors to maintain access to income during their lifetimes, provides estate and tax-planning tools, and builds permanent wealth for Florida’s nonprofit organizations and charities.

Through a planned gift to the Florida Humanities Council, you can assure that your legacy continues to rejuvenate Florida educators, connect families with reading programs, support vital cultural institutions, and encourage community conversations about pressing issues.

Leave a legacy and make a commitment to Florida’s future through a planned gift to the Florida Humanities Council.

Please contact Brenda Clark at 727-873-2009 or bclark@flahum.org to discuss further.

GRANT DEADLINES

We offer grants to fund public humanities projects in communities around the state. The next deadline is:

**JUNE 1**
Applications are due for mini-grants of up to $5,000
To browse our funded grant programs and to apply, go to FloridaHumanities.org/grants

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.

*The Forgotten Coast: Florida Wildlife Corridor*  
*Glades to Gulf Expedition*  
Mallory Lykes Dimmitt, Joseph M. Guthrie and Carlton Ward Jr.  
Softcover, 250 pages  
LINC Press, 2015

Just use the form and return envelope inside the magazine centerfold to make your contribution today.

For more information visit www.floridahumanities.org/membership

Images printed with permission of the Florida Wildlife Corridor.
The bare-knuckled approach in politics, so evident in the 2016 presidential primary campaigns, is nothing new, says prominent presidential historian Jon Meacham. “We’ve had rough moments before,” as far back as 1790 when Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton had a bitter feud about directions our early Republic should take.

“Our system is built on the idea that people can disagree,” Meacham said in presentations in Miami and Tallahassee earlier this year. “It’s why we came across seas and mountains and created the world’s oldest functioning democracy with checks and balances. We were going to have differences of opinion. The problem lies when I begin to oppose your opinion just because you’re the one who has it. If I don’t judge it on its facts and merits, but only by the source, then the Republic is in danger.”

How did past presidents lead the nation out of such gridlock? Meacham delved into that and other questions in “The Art of Leadership: Lessons from the American Presidency.” The Florida Humanities Council brought Meacham to the state as this election year got underway to help Floridians explore the role of the presidency and how it has evolved.

His appearances were part of the Pulitzer Prize Centennial Campfires Initiative, a joint venture of the Pulitzer Board and the Federation of State Humanities Councils, in celebration of the 100th anniversary of the Pulitzer Prizes. Meacham, author of several presidential biographies, won a Pulitzer for American Lion: Andrew Jackson in the White House. His most recent book, a bestseller, is The American Odyssey of George Herbert Walker Bush.

Effective presidents, Meacham said, have been in tune with the culture and intellectual currents of their time, masters of their era’s dominant means of communication, and adept at learning on the job and compromising. He cited numerous examples.

Jefferson, steeped in the ideas of the Enlightenment, embraced the notion that society was no longer “vertical” (organized from royalty or religious leaders on down) but had shifted to a “horizontal” paradigm, in which all were born with innate rights. Abraham Lincoln discerned another cultural shift: the flow of anti-slavery sentiment and the growing force of abolition.

Both Jefferson and Lincoln were rapid, facile writers, employing the key means of communication of their day. Franklin Delano Roosevelt was able to use radio broadcasts to bolster America during the Depression and World War II. Barack Obama understood the power of the Internet during his campaigns. “The next great leader will be the one who masters digital communication,” Meacham said.

John F. Kennedy demonstrated the capacity to learn on the job. After agreeing to the disastrous Bay of Pigs invasion shortly after he was elected, he learned to bide his time and listen to numerous opinions before taking action on the Cuban missile crisis. “Kennedy was willing to appear deliberative and uncertain to the generals who had intimidated him when he first came in,” Meacham said.

George H.W. Bush learned to cultivate compromise. “He believed in sound governance,” Meacham said. “He was willing to change his mind when contrary facts emerged.”

“The middle way is not always the right way,” Meacham said. “I’m not arguing that. But if you don’t know how to manage the constitutional order then you’re going to get less done. And that’s the essential lesson.”

To listen to New York Times reporter Max Frankel discuss Florida during the Cuban Missile Crisis, go to Digital FORUM at www.FloridaHumanities.org.
Florida's political evolution began with explosive population growth, sparked after World War II and continuing for decades. This boom transformed what was a mostly rural, white, poor population of less than 2 million into the nation's third-largest state—a cultural mosaic of 20 million people who mirror the racial, ethnic, religious, age, and geographic makeup of the nation.

As people moved to Florida from the Northeast, Midwest, other parts of the South, Latin America, and the Caribbean, they altered the political landscape. A state that had been dominated by the Panhandle's “pork choppers”—white, segregationist, conservative Democrats—grew into a demographic and political microcosm of the country. With voters now split among Democrats, Republicans, and independents, Florida has more Electoral College votes up for grabs than any other large state (29 EC votes in 2016, compared to eight a half-century ago). This has transformed Florida into the nation's largest swing state, a political powerhouse.

It's not surprising that Florida has voted for the winning presidential candidate in all but one year since 1964. And it's not surprising that when political pundits are attempting to read the tea leaves, they look to Florida for clues.

Growth Leads to Transformation

Florida attracted newcomers for a variety of reasons. Some wanted to escape cold weather (retirees). Others, primarily from abroad, came in search of political freedom or economic opportunity. Investors saw profits to be had from Florida’s appeal to tourists and its new residents. And young people saw jobs.

Many who had been registered Republicans elsewhere began showing up at the Florida polls. The national emergence of a new Republican Party, with its emphasis on smaller government and lower taxes, won a strong following among Florida voters. In the 1980s, Ronald Reagan persuaded many conservative Democrats to move to his camp, although some were slow to actually change their party registration. A number of young voters, too, found his optimism appealing.

By 1996, Republicans controlled both houses of the Florida Legislature and made up a majority of the state’s congressional delegation. The 1998 election of Republican Jeb Bush as governor made Florida the first state in the South with Republican control of both the executive and legislative branches of state government.

As 2016 began, Republicans made up 35 percent of the state’s registered voters, and Democrats, 38 percent. The remaining voters were independent, registered as either No Party Affiliation (24 percent) or a minor party (3 percent). While the major parties were nearly at parity, Democrats still outnumbered Republicans.

How Florida became the state to watch

Over the past half century, Florida has changed from solidly Democratic to a two-party state that media, candidates, and analysts watch closely to see which way the nation’s political winds will blow. How did this happen? Why, going into the 2016 election year, does Florida qualify as a premier swing state?

...it’s not surprising that when political pundits are attempting to read the tea leaves, they look to Florida for clues.

By Susan A. MacManus
Over the past decade, however, both major parties’ share of registrants has been shrinking. Increasingly, Florida voters (many young, Hispanic, and Asian) are registering as independent, a pattern found across the nation.

Between 1964 and 2012, Florida’s population growth doubled its number of Electoral College votes (which determine who wins the presidency). In 2016, Florida’s EC votes are far more up for grabs than those of New York, California, or Texas (each more one-party dominant) and more plentiful than in other key swing (“purple”) states like Ohio, Colorado, Nevada, and Virginia.

Adding to Florida’s political importance is big money. Floridians contribute millions to candidates, political parties, political action committees (PACs), Super PACs, and the independent soft-money groups known as 527s. In previous elections, only California, New York, the District of Columbia, and Texas routinely ranked ahead of Florida in total campaign contributions.

But to better understand Florida’s transformation, we need to look at two elements that characterize a swing state: the habit of picking the winning president; and a diverse electorate, particularly with regard to race/ethnicity and age.

Since 1964, Florida has voted for the winning presidential candidate in every election except 1992 when Democrat Bill Clinton defeated incumbent Republican President George H. W. Bush. In that election, the state’s voters narrowly picked Bush (41 percent) over Clinton (39 percent).

### Presidential Election Results in Florida’s 10 Media Markets

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<td>54</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miami/Fort Lauderdale</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Compiled from Florida Division of Elections data

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**Florida’s Racial and Ethnic Composition: A Comparison with the U.S. Population (2015)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Florida 2015 (%)</th>
<th>U.S. 2015 (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>78.1</td>
<td>77.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Hispanic White</td>
<td>56.4</td>
<td>62.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic/Latino</td>
<td>23.6</td>
<td>17.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>13.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>5.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native American</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pacific Islander</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two or more races</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


In the 21st century, legislative contests aside, Democrats have won statewide contests (U.S. Senate, and the Cabinet’s Chief Financial Officer) and have come really close in others (Governor). Heading into the 2016 contest, it is important to recall that Democrat Barack Obama bested Republican Mitt Romney by a mere 0.9 percent in 2012—the closest race in the country.

Florida’s racial/ethnic makeup mirrors that of the United States more than any other swing state. But population percentages alone do not perfectly translate into a group’s share of the electorate. Specifically, the percentages of minorities in the population do not match their voter-registration percentages. For example: While nearly 24 percent of Floridians are Hispanic, only 15 percent of registered voters are Hispanic; and African Americans comprise nearly 17 percent of the population, but only 14 percent of registered voters. These disparities are due in part to a higher number of ineligible voters in those groups, which include more people under age 18, more non-citizens, and more incarcerated persons. Looking at it a different way: It’s estimated that just 48 percent of the state’s Latino population and 64 percent of its black population are eligible to vote.

Another interesting fact revealed by the statistics: A person’s religious beliefs may be a stronger voting cue than his or her political party affiliation. The religious affiliations of Floridians mirror those of the nation: 70 percent Christian (Catholic 21 percent); 6 percent are of non-Christian faiths (Jewish 3 percent; Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, and others each less than 1 percent); and 24 percent claim no religious affiliation.
White evangelical Christians (24 percent of Florida voters in both 2008 and 2012) are the most solidly Republican. Protestants and Catholics (more recently) lean Republican. Jewish voters and those who identify themselves as secular or “other” heavily favor Democrats.

The numbers also undercut the popularly held perception that seniors are Florida’s dominant voting group. By 2012, this stereotype was no longer true: Voters were almost equally divided between those over age 50 and those younger than 50. As aging (and politically divided) Baby Boomers replace older, more Democratic-voting voters, the state’s senior vote is trending Republican.

Florida’s largest age cohort are those between ages 30 and 49. This group is increasingly registering as independents, although many vote Democratic. Younger voters are likely to be racially/ethnically diverse, single, college-educated, secular, and residents of heavily urbanized areas.

In addition, Millennials (between ages 18 and 34) now outnumber Baby Boomers—a fact not lost on 2016 presidential candidates. We can expect both major parties to court college students and promote voter-registration. Millennials are under-registered relative to their proportion of Florida’s population—a pattern found across the nation.

Florida’s geographical population concentrations—important in Get-Out-The Vote efforts—show a similarity to the rural/urban/suburban picture nationally. Among Floridians who voted in the 2012 presidential election, 13 percent were from rural areas, 27 percent urban, and 60 percent suburban. For the nation, it was 21 percent rural, 32 percent urban, and 47 percent suburban.

The key Florida swing vote came from suburbs in large metropolitan areas. Many of these key suburban areas are in the I-4 corridor—a major thoroughfare cutting across the state from the Tampa–St. Petersburg area east to the Orlando–Daytona area. More than 44 percent of all Florida’s registered voters live in the Tampa and Orlando media markets. The area is nearly evenly divided between Democrats and Republicans, with heavy concentrations of suburban and independent voters. It’s considered the swing part of the swing state, or “the highway to heaven,” for candidates running statewide.

So how will Florida’s swing-state status affect its residents in 2016? If the 2012 presidential election is any indication of what’s to come, it will mean they can expect more of everything—visits by candidates and their surrogates, television ads, mailers, robo calls, and knocks-on-the-door from neighbors and party activists.

Florida voters should expect to be under a microscope when candidates, parties, and pundits try to analyze the nation’s political landscape—and influence results. Florida’s diversity makes it the best state in which to study slices of the electorate (race/ethnicity, religion, age, geography, and party affiliation). Candidates know that micro-targeting these groups is essential to delivering political messaging and forming Get-Out-The-Vote strategies. Turnout—the hardest thing to predict—is critical to victory.

As both parties hustle to keep up with the rapidly changing demographics, politics, and media habits of Florida voters, it will be fascinating to see whether in November we can say once again “as Florida goes, so goes the nation.” One thing is for sure: The state’s status as a key swing state in presidential politics remains intact. Florida offers the nation a front row seat for observing the impact of a much more diverse electorate.

“Florida’s racial/ethnic makeup mirrors that of the United States more than any other swing state.”

**Florida Presidential Election Voter Turnout, 1960–2012**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Presidential Preference Primary</th>
<th>First Primary</th>
<th>General Election</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td>77%</td>
<td>74%</td>
<td>79%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1964</td>
<td>74%</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>74%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1968</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1972</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>73%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1976</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1984</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

No first primary held in 1984. No presidential preference primaries prior to 1972.

—Florida Division of Elections data.

SUSAN A. MacMANUS, Distinguished University Professor at the University of South Florida in Tampa and a respected Florida political analyst for state and national media, is the author of Young v Old: Generational Combat in the 21st Century and Targeting Senior Voters, and co-author of Politics in Florida (4th ed), Politics in States and Communities (15th ed.), Florida Politics: Ten Media Markets, One Powerful State, and several local history books about the Lutz and Land O’ Lakes areas where generations of her family have lived.
African Americans across the country still remember visiting Paradise Park, a cool watery oasis for body and soul in the heart of Jim Crow Florida. They remember the glass-bottom boat rides upriver to Silver Springs to watch catfish play football with lumps of bread dough and to enjoy the jukebox that never seemed to stop playing, the picnics shared with family on blankets spread beneath tall pines, the beauty contests, the wade-in-the-water baptisms, and the swims on sweltering days.

From 1949 to 1969, during the last days of de jure segregation, Paradise Park was one of a handful of outdoor recreation areas for African Americans in Florida—and the only one opened by white owners. Carl Ray and Shorty Davidson, the owners of Silver Springs, one of the most popular tourist attractions in the country at the time, opened Paradise as a parallel park for African Americans.

Of course, many of Florida’s biggest white-only tourist attractions employed African Americans—to drive horse-drawn carriages and handle alligators (in St. Augustine), wait tables (at Cypress Gardens), and pilot boats (at Wakulla, Rainbow, and Silver Springs). But they were not allowed to enjoy the sites as visitors. African Americans did wander into Silver Springs occasionally before Paradise Park opened—the grounds were open to the public—but the minute they tried to get on a glass-bottom boat or enjoy any of the other amenities, they would be asked to leave.

Why did Ray and Davidson open Paradise Park?

The African Americans piloting glass-bottom boats had something to do with it. “Paradise Park was a necessity to cut down on people wanting to go to Silver Springs, including the family and friends of African-American boat drivers,” said former park employee Henry Jones. His uncle, Eddie Leroy Vereen was one of those Silver Springs boat drivers who forced the issue.

Vereen was born in the town of Silver Springs on Christmas Eve in 1897, grew up there, and worked on paddle boats as a young man. His grandfather owned land that would later be part of the Silver Springs attraction. For 23 years, Vereen worked as a mechanic at the local Buick garage and also taught courses in auto mechanics at three different colleges including Bethune-Cookman. Later he was hired as a boat captain at Silver Springs. Because of segregation policies, if he wanted to take his family out on the river he called home, he had to sneak them aboard. “They would start from the second...
part [of the tour],” said Jones, “and Uncle Eddie would load them onto the boat. They had to be really quiet.”

Things got so complicated that Silver Springs’s owners Ray and Davidson opened Paradise Park and, because of his stature in the community, asked Vereen to manage it. Paradise had its debut on Emancipation Day, May 20th 1949. A small notice in the Daytona Morning Journal announced its grand opening: “Now! Colored Folks Can See Florida’s Silver Springs from Exclusive Paradise Park.”

Days after Paradise Park opened, Martin Andersen, publisher of the Orlando Sentinel, told a crowd of Marion County officials that Silver Springs was the key to developing Ocala into a metropolis like St. Petersburg. He said he’d recently spoken to President Harry Truman, and both times they’d talked about the springs. After Andersen left the event, Davidson, Silver Springs’s co-owner, took the floor. “I am sorry that Martin Andersen isn’t here, because I want to tell him to tell Harry we now have a place to take care of his Negroes.” He was alluding to Truman’s position on race; his Executive Order 8801 enforced the desegregation of the nation’s armed forces.

Paradise Park was located south of Silver Springs, on the right bank of the Silver River. It had a beautiful white sand beach and a dock where the glass-bottom boats, shared with Silver Springs, would pick people up. Often the white-only and black-only boats would pass each other on the river.

Paradise Park had a gift shop and soda fountain with an adjoining bath house. And best of all, Vereen furnished an open-air pavilion with a jukebox crammed with 45s—(excluding the hit “Annie Get Your Dog,” a song the devout Vereen couldn’t stand). He didn’t tolerate cursing either. Tampa Bay Times columnist Bill Maxwell said he heard about Vereen all the way down at Crescent City where he lived with his grandfather, a preacher who often took groups up to Paradise Park for baptisms. “I remember Paradise Park being really crowded the times I went there,” said Maxwell, “but I had some of the best times I ever had. It was immaculate, one of the cleanest places I ever
went. My group was always pretty polite. We were always told, don’t go over there cutting up or you will get kicked out.”

Paradise Park was an immediate success. Vereen sent letters to churches, schools, and business associations inviting them to come experience the attraction “without equal anywhere in America.” He traveled around the Southeast with a big Paradise Park sign atop his car and sometimes parked the car outside of the entrance of Silver Springs, in case any African-American tourists happened to stop by. On Christmas, Santa Claus arrived at Paradise Park via glass-bottom boat. On Easter, Vereen and his family hid hundreds of eggs for the children. He worked with the segregated American Legion Post in Marion County to sponsor the Miss Paradise Park contest each Labor Day, and thousands of people came from all over the state to see the pretty women competing for the crown.

The late Alfronia Johnson participated in the very first contest and, later, both her daughters, Carrie Parker-Warren and Gloria Johnson Pasteur did as well. “My participation in the Paradise Park pageant laid the foundation for an extraordinary life,” said Gloria. “The experience prepared me to take on a sometimes ruthless world that at times did not honor the value of womanhood. I would not have traded the opportunity for anything.”

Paradise Park had a run of 20 years. In 1962, Ray and Davidson sold Silver Springs to the American Broadcasting Company. Vereen retired in 1967. The civil rights movement had gained momentum in Ocala, and local activists, including Rev. Frank Pinkston, found their lives threatened. The national protests culminated in violent showdowns in St. Augustine that led President Lyndon Johnson to sign the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Attendance at Paradise fell off, and finally with the passage of civil rights legislation, it was quietly closed.

People in the community felt betrayed because they had no say. Many felt it should have remained in operation—and opened to everyone, both white and black. Instead, it was literally erased from history. The buildings, once the site of so much joy, were bulldozed. Today, soda bottles, broken crockery, and chunks of concrete picnic tables are strewn across the grounds. But people’s experiences and memories cannot be erased. Those live on.

These days the State of Florida owns Silver Springs, and the hope is that the history of Paradise Park—if not the place itself—will finally be resurrected as it should be. For in the Jim Crow era—wracked with riots and church bombings, black-only balcony seats in movie houses, backdoors at restaurants, and white-only service at ice cream parlors—Vereen built a safe place. Paradise Park offered African Americans the best seats in the house, all the ice cream cones a kid could eat, and copious amounts of love.

LU VICKERS is the author of Remembering Paradise Park: Tourism and Segregation at Silver Springs (with Cynthia Wilson-Graham); Weeki Wachee: City of Mermaids; Cypress Gardens: America’s Tropical Wonderland (with Bonnie Georgiadis); Weeki Wachee Mermaids: Thirty Years of Underwater Photography; and the novel Breathing Underwater.

Before Paradise Park offered fun at a spring, three beach attractions were open to African Americans. In 1927, Frank Butler, an African American businessman, began buying property on Anastasia Island near St. Augustine that would become Butler Beach; in 1935, the owners of the Afro-American Life Insurance Company created American Beach on Amelia Island; and in the 1940s, Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune worked with a group of investors to create Bethune-Volusia Beach just south of New Smyrna.

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WE ARE NOT ALONE. While those four simple words have become a message of hope from NASA visionaries and a warning of doom from conspiracy theorists, they are also a simple statement of fact for those of us who live in Florida. After all, we share the Sunshine State with billions of other creatures great and small, lovable and loathsome, many of whom settled here long before the first humans wandered into this southeastern tip of the United States.

Most of us love our mockingbirds and roseate spoonbills, manatees and key deer. And we often enjoy surprising our Northern friends with tales about the state’s elusive panthers, primeval gators, and increasingly restless suburban black bears. But what about those billions of insects that occasionally fascinate and amuse but more often plague us?

Even Hollywood’s attempt to create unconventional but lovable insect heroes in films like A Bug’s Life (1998) and Ant Man (2015) has done little to counter the instinctive dread that most people experience in the presence of this curious branch of the animal family that creeps, crawls and flutters among us. Don Blanding’s Floridays (1941), a rollicking tribute to his adopted state, shares the common view. Among the most entomophobic of our poets, Blanding offers a simple solution to one of our peskiest and most ubiquitous anthropods in his couplet “Veto”: “There’s a law of nature I’d like to veto/.It’s the life and love of the (blank) mosquito.”

Not all poets share Blanding’s loathing. For many, our invertebrate neighbors offer a wonderful opportunity to explore both their Lilliputian universe and our own darker sides. The Pulitzer Prize winner and U.S. Poet Laureate Elizabeth Bishop, for example, found herself intrigued by that universe in her classic poem “Florida,” when she attempted to define a world radically different and far more complicated than her native New England. In her ambivalent view of life in Florida, the “state with the prettiest name” but one that “floats in brackish water,” Bishop finds herself drawn to the creatures Blanding would veto as they engage in a compelling melodic mayhem: “The mosquitoes/go hunting to the tune of their ferocious obbligatos.”

The music of insects also marks the childhood memories of Lynda Hull, a wonderfully talented poet who died far too young. Her “Insect Life of Florida” begins with a child’s sense of the way sound shapes our understanding of the world: “In those days I thought their endless thrum/ was the great wheel that turned the days, the nights.” As she reflects on the myths that define childhood—“mosquitoes/whose bite would make you sleep a thousand years”—she eventually turns to her most prized memory:

Father’s face floating over mine
In the black changing sound
Of night, the enormous Florida night
Metallic with cicadas, musical
And dangerous as the human heart.
For Peter M. Gordon, whose *Two Car Garage* (2012) burrows deeply into suburban life, bees prove less mythic than symbolic of a predetermined, repetitive life. The speaker in “Drone” sees himself buzzing around his home all day, waiting, like his namesake, for the queen to arrive so he can fulfill his primary duty. The short lines suggest how limited his purely physical responsibilities—and possibilities—are. Drones, after all, gather neither nectar nor pollen and live only to fertilize the queen and then die.

All day
I buzz
Around
Drink nectar, nectar
And beer
Wash dishes
Sweep floors
Arrange roses.
When she
Comes home
We feed.
Rub legs.
I enter her.
Purpose fulfilled,
I die.
I hope
She liked
The flowers.

With a bit more curiosity and wonder, Lois Lenski, perhaps best known for *Strawberry Girl* (1945), her Newbery Award winning novel about the challenges of growing up in rural Florida, describes her own insect encounter in the deceptively simple “A Little Bug”:

I met a little bug
Walking through the grass;
He never even knew me,
He went on walking fast.
I picked him up and held him,
I looked at him until—
He never even noticed,
He just sat there so still.
All at once he started
To go and get some food
I jerked my hand so quickly—
But he was gone for good.

Like most of us, Lenski’s unnamed bug inhabits its own tiny universe, with little awareness of an outside world as it goes about its own business. Why should it worry about her curiosity?
A Central Florida poet, Louise Witzenburg, finds even more wonder in a spider’s beautifully engineered “Backyard Art”:

While I slept, a spider spun its universe.
Harnessing fast between the trunks of two live oaks,
precisely woven strands of silken
form bridges, ladders, hub, and spokes,
foundation lines and traps.

That deadly art’s “ribbons, spirals, arcs, and beads”
do their work by bewitching insects and allowing the architect to “greet its guest with vicious kiss/that took its breath away.”

Death need not necessarily end our relationship with this alternative world, as the Pulitzer Prize–winning poet Wallace Stevens suggests in one of his favorite poems, “The Worms at Heaven’s Gate.” (Entomologists, annelidologists, and oligochaetologists will, of course, argue that worms are not technically insects. But try explaining that to most of my neighbors.)

Early in his career this New England insurance executive, whose experiences in Key West transformed him into one of the century’s greatest poets, received some crucial advice from the legendary founder and editor of Poetry magazine, Harriet Monroe. In a 1915 letter, Monroe, who understood the value of alliteration when writing to young poets, told Stevens to “chase his mystically mirthful and mournful muse out of the nether darkness.”

“Worms,” written the same year, turns what could easily have been a macabre reflection on death into a celebration of beauty and metamorphosis. Using the kind of stately, unrhymed pentameter that Shakespeare and Milton loved, the worms carefully and reverently absorb Badroulbadour and bear her away from the grave in a triumphal procession:

Out of the tomb, we bring Badroulbadour,
Within our bellies, we her chariot.
Here is an eye. And here are, one by one,
The lashes of that eye and its white lid.
Here is the cheek on which that lid declined,
And, finger after finger, here, the hand,
The genius of that cheek. Here are the lips,
The bundle of the body and the feet.
Out of the tomb we bring Badroulbadour

By identifying each specific feature of her beauty, these admirers treasure her the way lovers would in sonnets. Each of those features, now separated, becomes a source of wonder and adoration. As the worms lovingly invoke her elegantly polysyllabic name in their simple world of one- and two-syllable words, the poet reveals how transformative she has become and how far he has moved out of the nether darkness. With a name that in Arabic means the fullest of moons, Badroulbadour, the exotic princess whom Aladdin married, allows Stevens to reflect on how interconnected we are with even the tiniest, most apparently insignificant creatures in our world.

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.
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WHY IS THERE A STARTLING neo-classical building at the center of a tiny town in the midst of the swamp? I had to find out! I had discovered Everglades City in the winter of 1990 when I detoured off US-41 driving from Miami to Sanibel. It is about halfway and seemed to be a good place to stop for lunch, but I was so enthralled that I spent the weekend.

It took 10 years before I retired here in 2000. The first thing I did was volunteer as a docent at the Museum of the Everglades. I was welcomed by other Friends of the Museum, not at all a snobby or exclusive group. Former teachers, nurses, company executives, wives of fishermen—they are just ordinary people with multiple talents and a love of this area.

Although incorporated as a city in 1953, this is really a small town with about 500 permanent residents, located some 30 miles from urban areas. The nearby settlements of Chokoloskee and Plantation Island are politically separate but add another 500 to 600 people to the greater community. As Mayor Sammy Hamilton, who grew up in Chokoloskee, says, “we’re all working together to make this a pleasant place to live.”

Where did we all come from? Some are descendants of families who settled in the late 1800s and follow the traditional occupation of fishing or have switched to tourism. Others are children of skilled workers brought in to develop the city in the 1920s. Another group includes workers who keep our hotels clean and lawns mowed. And then there are the newcomers like myself, who moved from all over America and the world for the peace and quiet of the unique Everglades environment that surrounds us.

As I write, an osprey glides across the sky, squawking a message. During the summer rainy season, roseate spoonbills graze among the ibis in flooded empty lots, unperturbed by passing cars. Some of our human “snowbirds” have also been visiting for many years, drawn during the winter months not only by the warm climate but the excellent fishing. If they become active in the community, they are welcomed each fall when they return, bringing fresh ideas to contribute.

What is life like in Everglades City? The answer is “friendly” and “neighborly.” We wave at oncoming cars and chat in the post office when we pick up our mail each day (there is no door-to-door delivery). This reminds me of the tiny rural village in Connecticut where I grew up, where old codgers huddled around the pot-bellied stove waiting for
Left: Everglades City’s city hall was built as the Collier County seat in 1928. Right: Boathouses such as this one add to Everglades City’s charm.

This old Everglades Inn, a relic of the boom years, was built in 1924 but was consumed by fire in 1987.

FLORIDA HUMANITIES COUNCIL FORUM

the mail to be put up. Instead, we spend our time in the air-conditioned building chatting with each other.

We have a small grocery store, several gas stations with convenience shops, a well-stocked hardware store, a branch of the county library, and a charity thrift shop that recycles everything from clothing to books to kitchen utensils. Our fire department and EMS station cope with urgent medical needs.

It is a caring community; when someone is suffering from illness or has lost a loved one, everyone rallys around. All generations come out to celebrate local events: the Blessing of the Stone Crab Fleet, Halloween, the lighting of the Christmas tree in front of City Hall. If we are driving the long trek into Naples with a list of errands, we ask friends what they need to save them a trip.

I joined local groups and learned that in such a small community, volunteers are always needed. Much of the work falls on the same people; we organize arts-and-crafts fairs, arrange the parade and fireworks on Independence Day, publish the biweekly newspaper The Mullet Rapper, and help out wherever we can.

There is a great love of the children. They all go to the same school, perhaps the only one left in Florida that caters to pre-kindergarten through 12th grade on one campus. The art teacher has been here over 35 years and taught the grandparents and parents of his current pupils. The total student population is only about 200, but we will not give up our school and make children travel to larger educational institutions where they would not know anyone and have no brothers or sisters to comfort them.

To satisfy my curiosity about the place I now call home, I started digging into its history. As I learned more and showed a genuine interest in and knowledge of the city’s background, old-timers shared their memories.

My research revealed that men in business suits and a feisty little Episcopal missionary mixed with the barefoot fishermen and farmers who settled this place. The city first took shape when bog land was filled in by dredging. The developer was Barron Gift Collier, who bought about a million acres from the profits of his lucrative New York streetcar advertising company and had a dream of creating a paradise in the sun.

However, there were no roads across southern Florida back in the early 1920s so Collier promised the state that he would complete the Tamiami Trail (from Tampa to Miami) across the Everglades if the legislature created a county for him. Thus, Collier County was established in 1923, and the little settlement of Everglades became the county seat. It was designed as a miniature city with a grid of streets and a circle in the center, the location of the majestic courthouse.

An original village had been established there after the Civil War, because there was fertile land for growing cash crops along the broad river, named after William Smith Allen whose home became the city’s famous Rod & Gun Club. The river was renamed “Barron” after its new owner had dredged and deepened it to transport supplies needed for the building of the Trail.

But my corner of southwest Florida stretches back much further. Friends in neighboring Chokoloskee have dug up evidence of ancient Calusa Indian shell mounds, which shape the hilly landscape there and on some of the Ten Thousand Islands. In 1521, the Spanish arrived further up the coast and brought European diseases that eventually wiped out the natives.

The Seminole Wars, which ended in 1857, caused different tribes to move south from Georgia and the Carolinas as they tried to avoid being banished to Oklahoma by the U.S. Army. A scattering of these Indians built camps deep in the Everglades and are now settled on reservations or in picturesque villages along the Trail. They were helped from 1933 to 1960 by an Episcopal missionary, Deaconess Harriet Bedell, a quirky, kind character remembered fondly by older local residents. She encouraged tribal
members to perfect their patchwork crafts, which she sold for them in large urban department stores. It is not unusual even now to see Seminoles and Miccosukees dressed in colorful clothing in Everglades City as they visit the post office and grocery store.

Collier died in 1939 and his dream flickered out with him. When northerners flocked to Florida after World War II, they looked for pristine beaches rather than mangrove islands and selected Naples instead of Everglades City for their seaside home sites. By the early 1950s there were grumblings about having to drive over 30 miles into the wilderness to Everglades City for county business; in 1959 it was decided by referendum to move the seat to East Naples. Businesses also moved; the Collier County News (founded in 1923) became the Naples Daily News, the Bank of Everglades was transferred to Immokalee, and Collier’s own corporate interests shifted headquarters away from his city.

There was some tourism in the area. President Harry Truman opened Everglades National Park in 1947. In 1953 Everglades City became the Western Gateway to the park, bringing tourists from all over the world for boat rides through the Ten Thousand Islands. The shallow backcountry waters also attracted anglers who stayed in the new motel or the Rod & Gun Club to go out with local guides. The other major industry now is stone crabbing which became profitable in the 1980s. The season runs from October 15 to May 15, and the boats head out early in the morning to harvest these delicious delicacies, many of which are sold to the big cities.

Perhaps it was fortunate that development passed us by. Most of the buildings are over 75 years old, constructed by Collier for workers on the Trail and for the county when it was a company town. They survived Hurricane Donna in 1960 as did many of the old trees that line our broad streets and avenues. There are a few empty lots, but our growth potential is limited because we are surrounded by conserved land: Everglades National Park, Big Cypress National Preserve, and Fakahatchee Strand Preserve State Park. The City has its own planning department and can restrict the height of our structures to keep our historical profile intact; currently nothing is taller than 35 feet. Buildings are re-used: The commercial laundry became a museum, the bank is a bed-and-breakfast, the railway depot served as a restaurant after the trains stopped running, and the old neo-classical courthouse was taken over as our City Hall.

We are proud to have so many sites on the National Register of Historic Places and have put information signs on front of many public edifices and smaller signs on older houses. When Hurricane Wilma damaged City Hall in 2005, FEMA suggested they just knock it down and build a nice modern office. Our mayor, whose family settled in the islands in the 1880s, said, “Over my dead body!” and persuaded them to grant enough money to completely restore the beautiful building, the centerpiece of the city.

I am always amazed, during my historical talks in nearby urban areas, when people ask “Where is Everglades City? How do we get there?” They have no idea that we were the first county seat, that there is a rural and close-to-nature place just down the road from their manicured gated communities. Of course, we welcome them to come and visit…but not to change us!

MARYA REPKO, local historian and president of the Everglades Society for Historic Preservation, is the author of a series of Brief History books about Everglades City, the Fakahatchees, Sanibel, Marjory Stoneman Douglas, and Deaconess Harriet Bedell. Her latest title is Women in the Everglades. She grew up in Connecticut but spent most of her adult life in Europe as a software engineer before retiring to Florida and founding ECity-Publishing.
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The Government House, 48 King Street, will be hosting the free exhibit, “Dugout Canoes, Paddling Through the Americas,” open to the public October 2016 to January 2017. The building also makes a beautiful setting for events. For information please contact Billy Triay, triay@ufl.edu, 904 825 5034

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