

Finding Florida

The Guide to the Southernmost State, Revisited

by

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Forward

Florida, the southernmost State, is frequently referred to as the last American frontier. Four centuries of varying culture under five flags may be noted as one is guided, through the pages of this book, from quaint old St. Augustine to metropolitan Miami, or from the exclusiveness of ante bellum Tallahassee to the exclusiveness of modern Palm Beach. For the many Floridians who may wish to read a comprehensive story of their land, as well as the million or more visitors who come to us each year, the Florida Guide will be a source of pleasurable information.

-John J. Tigert, President University of Florida, 1939¹

*Every tourist knows the way to Florida: when you hit the East coast, turn south. [...]
Just where does Florida belong?*

-Dr. Gary Mormino, 2005²

Abstract

In the 1930s the Works Progress Administration's Federal Writers Project hired unemployed writers to create driving tours of each state.

Florida chose Zora Neale Hurston and Stetson Kennedy.

They crisscrossed the state separately – Jim Crow would not allow black Zora to travel with white Stetson – carving out the routes immortalized in the *Guide to the Southernmost State*.

Over seventy years later, I decided I wanted to go, too. I broke out my shiny, red Florida *Gazetteer* and tried to reconstruct twenty-two tours, studying towns and researching old route numbers. Often I could only recreate the Depression-era routes by jumping from city to city, sort of a geographic connect-the-dots.

Roads are living things, and for one to assume that she can look for a road where someone else put it down almost 80 years ago, well, sir, you would be foolish to think that road would stay where you left it. Especially in Florida, a land kept eternally young through constant change. The roads, it seem, breathe and grow and twist and turn and pulse with Florida's fervor in much the same way her people and land does. They are malleable. Florida doesn't have much that won't bend and stretch – and sometimes break. Just as often, though, it yields, bending until it simply can no longer, and then it stretches and bends back and we are the ones who must yield or break.

In September I climbed into a camper van with my better half, Barry, and my other better half, Calypso. We spent the month recreating those original tours, guided by a dog-eared, broken-spined, 1950s-era version of the *Guide*, a now-tattered, *Florida Gazetteer*, and (on Barry's part) endless patience.

We logged almost 5,000 miles in on my quest for Florida. I hoped to see the state through Stetson and Zora's eyes. I looked for what they saw. I searched for scraps of Florida abandoned along her backroads.

Out of those miles grew these tours: the ultimate Florida road trip.

These tours share much with the *Guide*, but they differ, too. I followed Stetson and Zora, yes, seeking their voices in the burble of every spring and searching for visions of them in every blazing-hot, pink and amber sunset, but I also recreated, one more time, Florida's story – and mine.

This tour is the best thing I have ever done.

Prologue

My grandfather's sun-honed face twisted and paled as we turned off I-10 and entered the final leg of our southwest journey, down US 301. As we passed bleached wood, cracker houses and dingy brown cedar sheds, his tanned forehead furrowed, drawing his coarse eyebrows tighter and tighter until the bushy lines above his dark eyes seemed a thin ridge of curly dark hair.

Up on stilts they sat, no shutters or covering save grime and webs. Underneath and along side, rusted tri-colored pickup trucks with dented fenders colored to match the decay of the vehicles. Jon boats shared weed patches with the trucks, the only difference their marginally better maintenance and the occasional trailer elevating the vessels. Washing machines, derelict farm equipment, and a mise-en-scene of auto parts awaited us anew as we passed each home.

My grandfather sucked in air, his silence crowding our 1976 maroon Buick Regal. "This," I can only imagine him thinking, "*is worse than what I left in Italy. This is what I have worked my whole life to give my son? A slum in the South?*"

"This" referred to Florida, the interior parts of the state detailed along US 301, the parts of the Sunshine State not photographed by the Florida Tourism Board. "They" referred to my father (his son), my mother, and me, a seven-year-old whose greatest field trip in life, prior to the three-day journey to Florida from New York, was a dead heat

between the Bronx Zoo (where a goat ate my coat) and seeing Peter Pan on Broadway (my mom and I rode the train into the city and I ate a pretzel from a street vendor).

In a chain of events too complex for a young brain to comprehend, my parents decided to leave Westchester County, New York and move to Pinellas County, Florida. While they knew the drive's end result – a small two bedroom just miles from then-pristine Clearwater Beach – my grandfather, who had come along to help, did not.

Eventually we turned our cruise-ship sized car onto Interstate 275, where the landscape grew noticeably tidier and steadily more sanitized. Our orange-striped Jar-Tran moving truck dutifully followed the car as we made our way to Clearwater.

I had visited before – our new home was my other grandparents' vacation home – but the moment I saw the sparkling teal water of Tampa Bay, it eclipsed every other memory in my as-of-yet fully formed brain. The aquamarine-studded water of Tampa Bay bounced the sparkling sun into our car and the salt formed diamond crystals on my grubby, sweaty cheeks.

“Look at that, Cath,” my dad said, his voice reverent. “Look at how clear it is, not like Staten Island at all.” My father still made the sign of the cross on himself when we passed Catholic churches, but not until this moment had I heard that hushed worship in his voice.

I nodded and peered out the window, feeling something new and familiar in the sandy landscape offering itself to me. I recognized this later – much later – as that I had come to where I needed to be.

I fell in love with the water that day, but as I got older I felt the inexorable pull of the other parts of Florida, too. I love SCUBA diving, low tide is a sacred time, and, most surprisingly, I have fallen hopelessly in love with the weathered corners of Florida.

These corners don't fit with the Convention and Visitor's Bureau's image: they are our skeletons. The chambers and tourism boards want quite keenly to present a fresh and clean land of white beaches and sparkling waters. In turn we have convinced ourselves that we need to make sure our guests never see that side of Florida – that schmaltzy, chintzy, broken-down, rusted-out Florida.

But I love that Florida just as much as I love the one where crabs scurry around the intertidal zone, where skimming my fingers just beneath the sand yields handfuls of sand dollars. My parents, New York natives both, didn't behave as the typical "carpetbaggers," as my grandfather later referred to everyone who came to Florida after us. My parents didn't travel 1,300 miles to turn a fast buck or recreate a slice of Little Italy or Whatever County, Michigan. They moved here because of what Florida offered them, not what they thought they could get her to surrender.

I, like my parents before more and countless other settlers, have not tried to claim Florida. Instead I have let her claim me. Almost thirty years later I travel Florida still, looking for parts I may have missed, seeking them out before they fade away under the heavy blight of strip malls and jet skis.

Today I seek Florida on roads that parallel the Interstates, rattling along with the same excitement I felt at age seven. My beaches have changed and the strip malls may one day win, but as I troll the back roads, I remain forever in search of that secret,

schmaltzy, backwoods, state, where the sun-bleached roadside shacks remain constant. I feel the quickening inside me as a sense of the familiar envelops me. It is the same sense of simultaneous longing and recognition I first felt as the salt water opened itself before me.

It is the feeling of coming home.

Tour 1: Georgia State Line (Waycross) to Key West

“US 1, and its extension State 4A south of Miami, the longest and most heavily traveled route in the State, enters north Florida over the St. Marys River, runs along the coast, and goes to sea to reach Key West, Florida's southernmost coral island, only 90 miles from Cuba. For most of its length it runs close to a chain of salt lagoons, separated from the ocean by lowlying islands and narrow reefs. These lagoons, connected by canals, form a section of the Intracoastal Waterway, a popular yacht and motorboat route to and from southern Florida waters.

“With each mile, as the route proceeds southward, the vegetation becomes more tropical. Birds and marine life not found in other parts of the United States inhabit marshes and rivers. Almost every side road leads to a sandy bathing beach or to a resort with fishing and sailing facilities. And with each mile southward the temperature rises; the winter visitor, topcoated on entering the State, is often in shirt sleeves on reaching Miami.³

“Almost every Florida town along US 1 is a winter resort; boom towns of the logo's stand between settlements that flourished in the 1700's; night clubs are within ear-shot of crumbling ruins built when Florida was a part of the Spanish Empire. Smoky pine woods, dense cypress hammocks, marshes, and glittering sand dunes relieve the flatness of the coastal region.”

Years ago, I had this great-grandfather. I called him Pop, and he died when I was little, so I don't remember much about him, except that Pop loved road trips. He lived in New York, and he loved the drive to Florida.

He would take the Boston Post Road, which was US 1, out of New York and follow it south all the way to the Sunshine State. This started before Eisenhower created the Interstate system, but long after the Interstate lay a dotted ribbon of black asphalt from Maine to Key West, Pop still traveled south on US 1. He loved the road.

I suspect he would cry if he saw his beloved road today.

US 1 announces itself as Florida's first road. It takes travelers from the northern South, still echoing of the antebellum and also drawing from the ocean for its history and its livelihood, to the over-the-top glitz of Miami. Along the way we may find some tolerable stretches, but Pop's road disappeared long ago.

Guide writer Stetson Kennedy called US 1 the "longest and most heavily traveled route in the State," and although this may no longer hold true, parts of the route merit retracing, although none so much as the side trips described in the 1939 *Guide*. For most of the length, the road, it tells us, "runs close to a chain of salt lagoons, separated from the ocean by low-lying islands and narrow reefs. These lagoons, connected by canals, form a section of the Intercoastal Waterway" – today we call it, simply, the ICW – "a popular yacht and motorboat route to and from southern Florida waters."

Certainly we would be more enlivened and entranced today were we to travel the ICW instead of US 1, and A1A grants us this indulgence. The original *Guide* writers had

no such road to tempt them toward the sand and salt; instead, they peppered this tour with a seemingly infinite number of side trips across mangrove islands and barely-paved roads. These side trips delivered us to the beach; fortunately, we can travel A1A and never see US 1, because, unfortunately, US 1 has morphed from a low-lying road showcasing tidal pools and the splendor in the sand to a haven for homogenization, symbolized most greatly by the repeated presence of franchised surf shops and Dollar General stores.

Some things remain unchanged: US 1 still brings you into Florida by crossing the St. Mary's River. Very little else remains the same. The *Guide* tells us of dairies and poultry farms. These have long since vanished.

Picture the very first of twenty-two tours of an unknown state. This *Guide* came before the whole of the country dreamed of owning a piece of the Florida dream; only later did the Sunshine State hold "the promise of dignified endings and new beginnings."⁴

For this new beginning, consider US 1 as we see it today entering the state: two two-lane bridges spanning the tea-colored St. Mary's River as you leave Georgia for a state that still looks a whole lot like Georgia.

This is not the Florida you expect; it is not the Florida promised you by the state tourism board or the hotel brochures. There is no sandy beach in sight; even the river appears dirty, as many exclaim upon gazing with horror into the blackwater river.

Tannins from decaying leaves, not toxins, stain the river a watery black dahlia. According to the St. John's River Water Management District, the state agency charged with "managing" the St. John's River and its associated waterways (of which the St.

Mary's is one), "Though black, the river contains little suspended sediment. Because of its extensive bottomland swamps and marshes, relative lack of urban development and few pollution discharge points, the St. Mary's is considered to have excellent water quality by the Florida and Georgia agencies responsible for monitoring and managing water resources."⁵

The agency – more on those later – gets one thing wrong: where the river divides Florida from the rest of the union, it is not black. It is red, like Georgia clay.

You will forgive me, after seeing the commercialization and homogenization of US 1, for instead choosing to travel A1A, perhaps the last true Florida road. It is a prettier picture, I assure you. I believe Pop would approve.

Begging the ghost of Mr. Kennedy's forgiveness, I head south.

While the beach portion of A1A starts in Fernandina Beach, the road itself begins in Yulee, a far cry from tourist brochures and Visit Florida web sites. If the tourist can brave the backwoods glory, the road ultimately dumps them out in a thriving, working waterfront.

If you've only seen A1A through Daytona, Cocoa or, heaven forbid, south Florida, the northern end gives you a quiet and wonderful surprise that begins at Fernandina.

Here high, coastal dunes sink into creamy, fawn sand that meets blue over and over again. A1A cuts a thin strip through the gnarled oaks and lazy pines and twisting through beach houses and flats. I grab in sights of sand dunes and beach homes, broken apart occasionally by long, weathered boardwalks stretching out to meet the cool blue Atlantic.

A1A connects the outlying eastern islands of the Sunshine State with a series of bridges, and we start at the top and work our way down through a series of small towns, each with its own tourist dream. In virtually every case, those dreams are not deferred. Thanks to A1A, they are very much realized.

As you leave Fernandina the beach homes and sand dunes surrender to a beach forest. Trees close in on the road, allowing the ocean a chance to peek in on you only every now and then. If you peek hard enough you can find American Beach. A simple sign marks the area. If you're speeding, you will miss it.

American Beach was the state's first – and for quite a time, only – beach for black people, although the *Guide* calls them “Negroes.”

*“In the use of Florida's improved beaches the Negroes are definitely handicapped; few cities have provided bathing facilities for them. At Fernandina, near Jacksonville, the employees of the Afro-American Life Insurance Company have established American Beach, a tract of more than twenty acres, with electrically lighted streets, modern homes, and summer cottages.”*⁶

Abraham Lincoln Lewis, president of Florida's first insurance company and, not coincidentally, Florida's first black millionaire, founded American Beach for his workers. He bought 200 acres of beach in 1935 with the intention of creating a vacation respite where black people could recreate or, if they so desired, own property, calling it “recreation and relaxation without humiliation.”⁷

Today American Beach looks not as glamorous as the Ritz Carlton to its immediate north or Amelia Island Plantation just to its south, but the buildings – some of which stand empty, some in disrepair, and yet others proud and shining remain.

The 2002 film “Sunshine State” goes more into details – albeit fiction-sprinkled – about America’s Beach.

At Florida’s northern end the state parks system – part of the state Department of Environmental Protection – covers most of the prized real estate. Fort Clinch, Amelia Island, Big Talbot, Little Talbot, Pumpkin Hill Creek Preserve, Yellow Bluff Fort and Fort George Island State Parks dot the northeastern edge of the state, gobbling up precious developable land with palms, sand dunes, hiking trails, and wildlife.

Of these parks, only Little Talbot Island offers camping. The park is one of seven state parks that comprise Talbot Island State Parks, and is a typical Florida state park, with well-tended, breathtaking vistas. We pull into our campsite as the sun dips into our line of sight over Myrtle Creek, and I clipped the leash on Calypso so she could stretch her legs after a long day of stops-and-goes in the van. We’re about 150 feet from the water, so I thought she’d enjoy a good roll in the sand.

As she does, I notice a fisherman crouched by the water’s edge, fiddling with something. I move closer and see he’s holding what looks like a young rattler in the water. Under the water, to be precise.

“I caught it with my rod and reel,” he tells me, then explains how snakes can swim “if they want to.” He intends to drown it.

"But don't tell no one, 'cause it's illegal," he finishes.

"I know," I say, watching and debating how much to say. His attempts to hold the little guy's head in the sand under the water don't appear to be working. My righteous indignation just about boils over when Barry comes over and asks the guy why he wants to kill the snake.

"Well, you wouldn't want it waiting for you when you walked outside your camper, would you?" he asks Barry, who regularly sleeps on boats in Lake Okeechobee and must navigate water moccasins on the dock.

"No, but he wouldn't want to be there, either," Barry says and walks away, shaking his head. The man moves the snake to land and tries to stuff its head into dry sand. How, I wonder, does he not get bitten?

Finally, the guy's buddy comes over and points out the vast expanse of trees and underbrush 10 feet from the beach. The snake goes sailing through the air into the woods where, I hope, it lands safely, then slithers away, gasping for breath and trying to figure out what the hell just happened.

The St. John's River flows south to north, one of the few North American rivers that does so. The river starts at an inland Florida bog, its headwaters south of those leading to the Everglades. The waterways begin past one other: the Kissimmee River, which flows south into the famous River of Grass and, ultimately, Florida Bay, starts just south of present-day Sea World outside Orlando, while the St. John's River starts south of

Yeehaw Junction and flows north through Indian River, Brevard, Putnam, Clay, St. John's, and Duval counties.

A1A does not cross the St. John's at its junction with the Atlantic Ocean. Instead, cars may opt to leave the coastline and twist across 28 miles of Jacksonville traffic.⁸

Alternately, drivers can take the ferry (\$5 for a car; less for motorcycles, bicycles and pedestrians) for a less-than-a-mile boat ride across the river.

In the sixteenth century, the French captain Jean Ribault led a star-crossed expedition through this area.

“Two expeditions – one French and one Spanish – landed within 50 miles and two days of each other on this section of the Florida coast late in the summer of 1565.

Captain Jean Ribaut commended the French expedition, which consisted of 600 colonists sent out to reinforce the 300 Frenchmen who had settled at Fort Caroline the previous year. The expedition led by Mene'ndez consisted of 600 Spaniards, who had embarked, according to Menendez, to Christianize the Indians.

“Each force knew of the presence of the other, and both prepared for hostilities immediately upon landing. The French disembarked at Fort Caroline on the St. Johns River; Menendez and his men established themselves farther south, founding St. Augustine. The French decided to attack and put to sea, only to be struck by a hurricane[...]

“Menendez advanced to meet Ribault and his shipwrecked force. While history is not clear on the negotiations between them, Spanish accounts reveal that almost all the

French were executed – not as Frenchmen, but as Lutherans – after they had surrendered unconditionally.”⁹

The ferry that carries cars and passengers is named the *Jean Ribault*.

The *Jean Ribault* connects Fort George Island with Mayport via a pleasant yet quick and unremarkable sail; more interesting than the journey on the *Jean Ribault* is the patchwork of fishing nets, shrimp trawlers and working boats lining the river’s edge here. This, like Fernandina before her, is a working waterfront, and my blood zings at the way Floridians still live off the land... and sea.

Jacksonville Beach contrasts sharply with well, pretty much everything north of Mayport. Its built out, no-view-of-the-beach, chain store stretch of A1A reminds me of the stretch of A1A between the St. Lucie Inlet and the Florida Keys – a suburb on the sand.

At Ponte Vedra the landscape changes back abruptly. Large homes perch on ecru dunes on the Atlantic side. On the west side, they’re shielded from the rest of the world by thickets, a salty tangle of palms, oak, and pines. The two lanes of A1A are truly the only ways in or out of this coastal jungle. In between the beach houses I glimpse the Atlantic, the waves calling out to me.

South of Villano Beach, A1A does not cross the water, turning inland instead, towards St. Augustine. We spend the night at Anastasia State Park. Down on the beach I spend a long time letting the ocean swirl around my ankles as they sink deeper into the

sand. The yellow sun sets behind us, the clear water warms my toes, and the salt in the air replaces everything else.

In the morning, we head back into St. Augustine.

America's oldest city predates 1607 Jamestown by almost a century, which may explain its slogan "Florida's First Coast." The *Guide* lists points of interest as "Fort Marion, City Gates, Old Schoolhouse, Old Spanish Treasury, Oldest House, Slave Market, Fountain of Youth, and others."¹⁰

The Fountain of Youth is part tourist attraction, part museum, part reality. In all likelihood, if he even stepped off the boat, Ponce de León might have thought stumbled upon the Fountain of Youth – for about a minute. More probably, locals later – much later – opted to create this nifty backstory. Throughout Florida's history, tourist-dependent groups claimed Ponce found a potential spring of eternal life all over the damn state. Imagine how that would have gone for him: every other day his group probably found a spring – in Florida, we have roughly two gazillion and three – which meant he would have sent letters to the Crown a few times a week: Found a spring that will cheat death; send more gold. Of course, I paraphrase, but certainly the monarchy would have caught on to this game pretty damn quick. I don't want to imply, though, that for a sixteenth-century explorer, anything in Florida, from twelve-foot long "dragons" to the Seussian palm trees, seemed less than enchanted. When I lose my jaded attitude, born from years of living in the Florida's most densely populated county (See Tour 19), even I see it. This is a magical land, plain and simple. The sun explodes into our lives over an azure sea every morning, then sends glittery jewels down over the state's beaches, swamps, scrub,

and forests every day before it melts into the emerald Gulf at night. From that joining of sun and swamp and beach and scrub and forest comes everything that makes Florida a paradise and a mystery: prehistoric reptiles, orchids that grow in air, sea shells that are minute, compact mathematical equations, and, of course, the dark and lovely verdant green of a spring.

I sit by Señor de León's spring – I like to think of it as his First Spring, in keeping with St. Augustine's marketing – white Dixie cup in hand, waiting for a sip. An "attractions host" fills my cup with water from the spring in front of me and about 30 other people.

If this is the Fountain of Youth, it stinks. Literally. The smell of rotten eggs assaults my nose. I'm not the only one; everyone around me is wrinkling their nose. Our host assures us that what we smell is "only" hydrogen sulfide gas. Before we can dump our water back in the spring, he adds that it will not hurt us and, if we pinch our noses, it won't bother us anymore. Apparently you can't taste the gas.

I pinch my nose closed and take a swig.

Did it work? I can't say for sure, but I have yet to die.

St. Augustine, of course, offers more than sulfur water: the Colonial Spanish quarter, Flagler College's amazing gilded architecture, the city gates, and, well, pretty much all of the city. We settle for our own walking tour, with no purpose in mind. We let Calypso lead us through the city. She's not, shockingly, interested in the Colonial Spanish Quarter (honestly, it looks a little commercialized, so I can't say I blame her) but we do pause for a long while in front of Flagler College and stroll through the gardens in front

of city hall. We move on through the town, stopping to remark that so much of the neighborhood by the waterfront looks like the New Orleans Garden District. There are flowers everywhere, and the houses, while close together, are separated by curtains of foliage. Odd, brilliant bits of color spring forth from gates, surprising the unexpected pedestrian.

We finish our walking tour by the waterfront, where we stroll by homes with widow's walks crowning them. I picture a boat captain's wife, pacing the roof, wringing her hands and waiting for husband to make it home from sea. The city gates are here, too, proud that they look every bit their age (just a shade over 300 years) and one of the only remaining parts of the wall that once encircled the city. On the other side of the road, Castillo de San Marcos still stands, a masonry fort unlike the coquina shell I expect from Florida's historical monuments. Today it's a national park, welcoming visitors and trying valiantly to impress upon them that St. Augustine has earned its place in the history books. Across from it, I spy a cemetery. I walk past it, stopping and looking over the wall, wondering who was lucky enough to get buried here, beneath the oaks.

Then I spy the historical marker and see, who, exactly, was so lucky: victims of Yellow Fever.

St. Augustine is lovely, but I want to return to the ocean. We cross the Bridge of Lions, stop by the lighthouse where, despite my best efforts I cannot convince my legs to carry me higher than the second flight of steps, and continue on to the beach.

“FA” can stand for any number of things, but conventional wisdom is that it means “First Access” because it’s across the street from the first beach access to the surf when we re-enter A1A’s beach path.

We park at FA Cafe, where I order a Corona Light and we split an order of shrimp, and then another. The owner comes and talks with us; we order more shrimp. She and her husband work all day at FA; they lived in the Caribbean before this and, she tells us, this reminded her of the life they loved there. The beer is cold, the shrimp is sweet, and I am in no position to doubt her.

Full on shrimp we head south on A1A; here, several streets separate us from the ocean, and I wonder what about this appealed to a couple from the islands. In a matter of miles, though, by the time we drive through Crescent Beach, I understand. The houses exist beyond the thick curtain of trees. Buildings are low and not commercial. Here, the road is skinny, so skinny in parts that it barely has room for a house and a road. No matter; as long as I am here, there is room and I am happy.

South of Marineland, a charmingly “vintage” aquarium featuring dolphin shows along A1A, the road widens and we find ourselves separated from the Atlantic by blocks, not feet. The air never loses its tang and the buildings never get tall, and before I can work up appropriate righteous indignation at the development, we’re back in a forest of palm and pine and sand, at North Peninsula State Park. It’s only two miles along the coast, but the wild thickets, fawn-shaded sand, and ultramarine water remove anything else as we float through paradise. It could be any year here.

A Beall's department store signals the onset of civilization, and Ormond-By-The-Sea is the opposite of North Peninsula. It's odd, though, how it doesn't bother me; parts of the beach, I reason, must go to the tourists, or else how could we ever know that there was more to preserve? Humans must see what needs saving, so by offering them a taste of paradise we can justify not letting them see the rest – in the name of preservation. I can, I think, live with that. The throngs of hotels, shops, and people thin as we near our stop for the night: Canaveral National Seashore.

Jetty Park, a campground run by the Port Authority in Cape Canaveral, is at the tip of the cruise ship ports and, if it were crowded, it looks as though it would be an absolute nightmare. Tonight, though, we can count our fellow campers on one hand. The beach does not expressly forbid dogs, and Calypso and I both go off-leash and run down the sandy expanse.

If a lot of this road sounds the same, it's because the beach here does not vary. It is a delight, but it is the same: sun, sand, dunes, and salt. Jetty Park makes no exception. When we go to bed that night, I smell the pervasive salt air.

In the morning we string our way down between a series of beaches intended for tourists. Cocoa Beach, a haven for surfers with its majestic Atlantic waves, splits into what I can best describe as a divided highway, but it isn't really. It's two one-way roads separated by squat buildings: a cigar bar here, a restaurant there. There is nothing divine and planned out about it; it simply is what it is.

Americans know this stretch of land for two reasons: we sent a man to the moon, and this was the setting for *I Dream of Jeannie*. A walk through Kennedy Space Center at

Port Canaveral (also called Cape Kennedy) deals primarily with the former; a trek through nearby Cocoa Beach, where almost everything has a space motif, deals with both, slanting only in Hollywood's favor with *I Dream of Jeannie Lane* in Lori Wilson Park.

South of Cocoa, the land is still populated, but by Sebastian Inlet State Park. Here, the park covers a long expanse of A1A, and, on impulse, we stop. I'm writing this as we sit on the dock of the bay, having lucked into a waterfront campsite.

Truth be told, we're on the dock of the inlet. The past two days have been... wonderful and horrible. Wonderful because a leisurely drive down A1A reminded me that not all of our coastlines are 3-for-\$10 T-shirt shops and trinket stores; horrible because so much of the state no longer looks so unspoiled.

The horrible doesn't last. It can't: manatee lazily lumber on by in the bay; great blue herons pick their leggy selves through the rocks. I take a walk and talk to a grizzled old man netting for fish. Wildflowers followed me down the bay. This is, by all accounts, pretty damn close to perfect.

I can't help but think of the people inland, the migrant farmers and the city-dwelling poor, who certainly came to Florida enticed by the seductive drifts of sand, framed by beach sunflowers and emerald seas. Somehow, somewhere, something changed and they ended up inland, picking strawberries and packing guests into Space Mountain at Walt Disney World.

Of course, I remind myself, even inland Florida beats Iowa. It's still a wonder of swamp and freshwater and sweet oranges and berries; it's just not the salt and the sand that seduces me.

I close my laptop and let the sun wash over me.

In the morning we head down A1A toward St. Lucie. The homes along the way prove paradise: cabbage palm and sand pine thickets buffeted by sand. Few condos dot the road, and mom-and-pop hotels are the order of the day. Vero Beach and surrounding cities don't seem as tourist-oriented as their northern sisters. South of State Road 60 (See Tour 11) we jog back to the mainland and rejoin A1A south, following a salty jungle south once again, through the condos and hotels at Hutchinson Island until the we're forced back mainland at Seawall's Point. Here we bed down for the evening at Jonathan Dickinson State Park, where gutsy deer run across our path as we make our way deep into the park. There's a dock by our camp site, and I walk down at sunset, just me and Calypso and the marsh hare she so desperately wants to catch. They're too fast for her, but the sun is slow and low to the earth, and I watch it sparkle over the water before we return to an air-conditioned camper, accompanied by mosquitoes.

Between here Keys A1A does not appeal to me; it is a mass of everything I have seen before, from t-shirt shops to cookie cutter homes to Dollar General stores. The road resumes less-citified traveling again south of Miami at Card Sound Road, the back door to the Florida Keys.

I first saw the Keys until my first year in college. Of course, I had heard of them. I knew that people wanted to go there. I just didn't know why.

Many women remember their first kiss with vivid detail or can recall their first time with a man in blazing adjectives. Me? I can tell you about both those things, but nothing – not even my wedding day or the day the judge finalized my divorce – holds for me the brilliant, rich, and intense images as my mind does of the moment I first laid eyes on the Florida Keys.

As an undergraduate at St. Petersburg Junior College – now called St. Petersburg College – I enrolled in a class called *Identifying Florida Biota*, a non-dissection alternative to *Anatomy and Physiology*. While I enjoyed the outdoors enough and liked my state just fine, this class showed me the Florida I wish everyone could see.

Doctor Jerry Smith took us on a field trip every Tuesday, for the entire day. We also had one trip to the Florida Keys. I wanted to go because I was a college sophomore. I had no responsibilities, not really. I had no bills, not to speak of. I had no reason not to go. Also, I loved the class. It seemed like the weekend would be a good time.

It changed my entire life. We drove through a tangled straight of mangroves, and when they spit us out we came over a small bridge over Snake Creek, and I saw a high and dry marina. Just passed us was the greenest water I had ever seen; “green” doesn’t even begin to describe it.

Something bubbled up within me that I couldn’t name; I couldn’t explain what I felt. Everything about my life has been different from that moment, and it has been different because of that moment. I had a feeling of coming home without knowing I had been away.

My Keys have changed. A few years ago “road improvements” altered my familiar vista. My tradition – cracking open a Corona Light at the high and dry and toasting to paradise – is disrupted by the advent of a fixed-span bridge that hides the marina from view. With little exception, I take Card Sound Road now; this ancient, less-traveled route takes me through infinite mangroves and past a lot of spoken for, anonymous stretches of land. There is a wonderful bar at the toll booth; I have never stopped. I am generally too anxious to get there, too busy chasing that green watery paradise, to stop. Upon leaving, I am generally too melancholy by the sign on the blue canopy of the toll booth that gently, happily reminds me “Don’t Forget Your Keys!”

As if I could.

Crab traps stacked by the side of the road by the bar are the main sign that the tourists aren’t the only things they catch down here. Fish and crabs and even Florida lobster are big business here, and there is hardly a Key along A1A where you can’t stop and taste something caught locally. You can get salmon and tuna in the Florida Keys, but why would you want to? Yellow-tailed snapper, mangrove snapper, grouper, flounder, and a seemingly infinite number of local swimmers offer themselves up to you on a more-than-daily basis.

Nowhere else in Florida are you farther away from the South. The Florida Keys could be their own country, and at one point, they almost were. The story that gets told is largely folklore, and, in the words of one part-time Keys resident, it’s a “semi-true story.”¹¹ It goes something like this:

In the 1980s, the DEA set up a roadblock on A1A to catch drug runners. Keys' residents, who referred to themselves as Conchs, rebelled at the idea that they couldn't get on or off the Keys. They seceded from the Union, hoisting the flag of the Conch Republic, and declared war on the United States. They then immediately surrendered and demanded reparations.

Such is life in the Florida Keys. The first time I snorkeled, I snorkeled in the Keys. At the start of the Florida Keys, the end that really doesn't quite feel like the Florida Keys just yet, in Key Largo, is John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park. This is the country's first underwater state park, and while it has a few scant beaches, ample kayaking opportunities, camping, and walking trails, this park is made for people who want to look up at the glassy surface of the Florida Keys, not down at its teasing teal topside.

Tour boats take snorkelers out to whatever reef the boat captains feel have the best snorkeling conditions – meaning calm and clear, usually – and let them slip beneath the warm water.

If you have never snorkeled or SCUBA dived, think of it as if you're dropped inside an exotic aquarium with a million nooks and crannies to can explore. You could say that it's somewhat similar to watching those HD channels about the Great Barrier Reef, except it's more lifelike than HD and not nearly as deadly as Australia.

Unless, of course, you snorkel upon a shark. Or two.

That day so long ago, twelve of us climbed aboard the snorkel boat and slid under the surface at North North Dry Rocks. I realized that my swimming skills, while lovely, wouldn't help me get deep enough in the water unless I could somehow learn to gain

more muscle. My biggest frustration was diving just beneath the surface of a coral ledge, getting a sneaky glimpse of whatever was under there, and finding myself helplessly buoyed to the surface, a prisoner to the remaining air in my lungs and curvy girlish figure. Even from just under the surface, though, I saw a rainbow. Blue things, purple things. Graceful dancing plum-colored fan coral, intriguing matrices of brain coral, fire-engine red fire coral. Tangelo colored starfish, speckled snarky eels, green and purple and blue stoplight parrotfish... everywhere my eyes came to rest made them jump alive again.

Even the barracuda, silver and torpedo sleek, didn't slow me down. I recalled reading a Jacques Costeau anecdote about how barracuda appeared anxious to "play" in a manner that, while it made the diver rather uncomfortable and somewhat jumpy, brought no harm. They would swim a few feet behind the diver's fins until the diver grew nervous enough that he would turn and try to shoo the toothy fish away. The barracuda would then swim straight at the diver's mask with what I imagine must seem like definite intent, veering off only at the last minute. Within moments, the barracuda would be back at the diver's fin. This, Costeau said, could continue for hours "with no apparent lassitude to the barracuda."

So, no, the barracuda didn't scare me. It was far too pretty to be deadly here on the reef (I had not yet learned about Australia). When one of the professors on the trip stuck her head out of the water, spit out her snorkel, pointed, and said, "shark," I was not alarmed. Instead, I and four others, swam over to investigate.

Yup, that was a shark. He was grey and long and...not alone. Not at all alone; he had a little buddy. Well, not a little buddy. We swam closer. They kept their distance.

The two sharks stayed on the reef with us for a few minutes. I was having the simultaneously the scariest and finest moment of my entire life.

Finally, they swam away. As they left the reef, we had the good sense not to go after them, not that we would have had a prayer of catching them. We made our way back to the boat, whereupon the seven folks with sturdier survival instincts than ours, asked us what we were thinking.

Each of us, it turns out, was thinking the same thing: that we could swim faster than at least two of the other people in our group.

Every trip to the Keys is different and special in its own way. I've stayed at Bahia Honda, a state park with amazing beachfront camp sites where you watch a glazed sun rise over the sand and sea. I've slept in "vintage" hotels that were clean and tired but fronting a sea grove of red mangroves walking on awkward stilts across a shallow emerald sea. I've taken fast boats 70 miles off the coast to Fort Jefferson on the Dry Tortugas, where Dr. Samuel Mudd served a sentence for setting John Wilkes Booth's leg – until, that is, Dr. Mudd used his doctoring skills on Yellow Fever victims in the prison. Why anyone would want to leave the island paradise is beyond me; in the waters surrounding the fort I've snorkeled with a rainbow of fish, barracuda, and sleek, pointy tarpon. I've watched the tiniest of fish pick at minuscule food things in the underwater brick moat wall guarding the fort.

To be fair, I don't understand why everyone – including myself – doesn't live in this string of limestone pearls streaming off the edge of North America. If I am in love with

the whole of Florida, I am obsessed and enchanted with the Keys. It's just that things are different here, different even from the rest of Florida, where things are, admittedly, quite different already. Fishing and diving are the chief industries after tourism, and it seems as though that tourism exists solely because of the fishing and diving. It has to; there are maybe three beaches here, and aside from Bahia Honda, they really aren't anything to write home about. The real treasure here is under the water.

For divers, that's more than poetry: shipwrecks, artificial reefs, and real reefs make the area a beacon for SCUBA divers and snorkelers. This is the end of the road, but it's the beginning of the Caribbean. The starfish and coral and eel and shark and barracuda and parrotfish and Sergeant Majors and... well, just about everything you can see under the sea... keeps me coming back.

On top of the water isn't that bad, either. Islamorada is the sportfish capital of the world; Marathon lays claim to the Dolphin Research Center, where Flipper used to live. Big Pine Key is home to Key Deer, Dalmatian-sized, friendly deer who didn't quite make it north when the glaciers melted and Big Pine lost its connection to the rest of the world.

Key West is another animal entirely. It's the largest key, with room for streets and shops and neighborhoods and a Navy base. Chickens wander the streets. Six-toed cats prowl the Ernest Hemingway Estate, and you can find a beer at every sort of bar, from biker to transvestite, you can imagine. This is land where anything goes, the end of the road and the start of the beginning of a thousand Florida dreams.

This is paradise. Welcome.

Tour 2: Georgia State Line (Valdosta) to Punta Gorda

“US 17, main artery of passenger and truck travel between north and central Florida, serves thriving resort centers, large citrus- and vegetable-growing areas, cattle ranges, and phosphate-mining regions. Leaving the pine woods of north Florida, it parallels the western bank of the St. Johns River between Jacksonville and Palatka, and traverses the citrus belt of central Florida, a region of lakes and hills. Through the broad valley of Peace River it continues southwest to Charlotte Harbor, an arm of the Gulf of Mexico.”¹²

We enter the state where US 17 crosses the Saint Mary’s River, such that remains of it. At first the southernmost state offers no discernible differences between itself and Georgia; remember, north Florida once stretched west to Louisiana and to this day little other than its governor separates north Florida from the South.

The St. Mary’s once marked, according to the *Guide*, the southeastern border of the newly-formed United States of America. Spain ceded Florida to England in 1763¹³, the next-to-last (thus far) in a string of exchanges made with this swampy little dangling state. Today it offers a backroads entrance to paradise.

“Hard surfaced roadbed throughout, mainly concrete– and asphalt– paved; watch for cattle.”¹⁴

I see no cattle here, although Florida remains, at her core, a cattle state. We leave Georgia for the Sunshine State, the ochre black of the St. Mary's stealthy and steady beneath the bright blue span of the St. Mary's River Bridge, divided down the middle by freshly-painted saffron lines. To the west a rusted, pitted trestle bridge parallels our route, a stark contrast to our blinding blue archway to paradise. The trestle once carried Seaboard Air Line rail cars between Georgia and Florida; today it allows trains to cross and can pivot to allow tall boats to traverse the skinny, twisted river. The bright modernity sinks into the background of the swamp, and I think of the trailblazers before me who noted "sandy pine flats [that] stretch back from the marshy banks."

Florida has more swamp than beach, although the coastline chambers of commerce do a far better job of luring people to blonde, sunny shores than murky, cypress water mazes. Where US 17 enters the state it seems nothing lies farther from the promise of paradise than here, although within an hour of this rusted trestle you can find surfers and sun bunnies.

Today we shall not surf. Today we shall slice down Florida's eastern edge and the lessor-seen interior. The standard blue Interstate sign heralds our entrance. Over time the state started adding touches of marketing to the signs welcoming visitors. "Welcome to the Sunshine State!" the signs now announce proudly.

According to the State Department of Environmental Protection (DEP), Florida averaged over 54 inches of rain per year in the twentieth century, well above the national average.¹⁵ Should a visitor actually arrive in Florida on one of the many rainy days –

which is to say almost any day in the summer and any assortment of days in our short winter – the sign must seem more of a taunt than a welcome respite from the north.

Those official-looking Interstate signs, too, have a custom of announcing the state's governor. This would be fine if Florida had a habit of keeping its governors off the news, or even electing governors that some small percentage of the populace admitting to supporting. People driving to Florida over the holidays 2011 would have most known our governor's name because, three weeks before Christmas, a correspondent for a late-night talk show made national news when he presented a urine specimen collection cup at a press conference and asked the governor for a drug test.

Welcome to Florida, indeed!

That sign pales beside a blue sign with stately concrete letters in front of an ash-colored, 1950s-era cinderblock wall. The letters spell "Florida," framed by skinny palms on either side. This sign, too, tells travelers all they need to know.

Between the pine flatwoods of northern Florida and Jacksonville, this heavily traveled route is lined with billboards, filling stations, roadside eating places, fruit and pecan stands, and tourist cabin camps.¹⁶

Here, Florida reveals herself in a thousand shades of green, interspersed with the occasional shuttered old-school motel, the forgotten rooms forming a half-moon around the parking lot and abandoned, empty pool. Ten minutes down the road, the towering canopy of thick vegetation parts to reveal Yulee, the junction of A1A (See Tour 1).

Jacksonville lines both shores of the St. John's River, which, in 20 miles, will empty into the Atlantic. The city's deepwater port receives cargo from around the globe; it also has countless oil tanks, a nuclear power plant, and a bevy of parks.

*"South of Jacksonville the route offers frequent views of the broad St. Johns, a river of horizons; white bay, live oak, dogwood, and holly grow in the dense forests along its banks. Farther south, the highway crosses undulating sandy ridges covered with pine and gnarled blackjack oaks, with an occasional orange grove."*¹⁷

As mentioned, north Florida shares more of her Southern cousins roots, and the Kingsley Plantation lays testament to that. Zephaniah Kingsley, a well-known slave-trader, used his own ships to bring slaves from Africa to Florida. Today, his 1817 plantation remains as part of the National Park System.

*"The Kingsley Plantation is a two story white frame building, with a porch extending around all four sides. The attic contains two small slave prisons; the doors are heavily studded with nails, and have large strap hinges and padlocks."*¹⁸

While a certain segment of tourists and most historians have a keen interest in seeing things like slave prisons and plantations, I consider them on par with Holocaust museums and concentration camps: certainly, we must never forget these atrocities and yes, we should keep this ragged edge of history fresh for every future generation, but I have seen all of man's inhumanity to man that I can bear. Florida's northern roots seem far more – and embarrassingly more – Southern than her southern families, and every time this part of my wonderful state's tragic past presents itself to me I find myself overwhelmed with a concurrence of anger in sadness.

Ashamed as I am to admit this, spending an afternoon at Kingsley Plantation falls low on my list.

Kingsley Lake residents, who live on the lake in a fringe of rentals and privately owned homes with no apparent public access, apparently find such tidbits of history equally bothersome. When I find a portion of the Kingsley Lake Property Owners Association web site¹⁹ devoted to history, its tone suggests disbelief.

“We should note that [the] stated 'legend' — that the lake was named for a ‘Captain Kingsley’ — is apparently not true, and the possibly less romantic fact that it was named after the slave trader Zephaniah Kingsley, is, apparently, the 'real' story.”²⁰ At the bottom of the web page, the author suggests that “it might be that both accounts are true!” but caveats this possibility of truth with “more research needed.”²¹

South of Jacksonville, Clay County beckons. The Clay County Chamber of Commerce boasts that it caters to small businesses and offers a “wide array of programs” to help new and small businesses.

Its real claim to fame? Chimps.

In 1929 the Yale University of Primate Biology established the Yale Anthropoid Experimental Station. Although not open to the public, the Guide authors determined that the station housed “about 30 chimpanzees used for the study of primate reproduction, genetics, behavioral adaptation, hygiene, and pathology²².”

This was 51 years before the founding of People for Ethical Treatment of Animals²³. Locals called the building the Monkey Farm.²⁴ Dr. Robert Yerkes studied the

chimps for three decades; today, his work continues in an Atlanta Zoo under the auspices of the Yerkes National Primate Research Center.

The Anthropoid Experimental Station today houses the Clay County Chamber. We see no chimpanzees.

Disappointed at the chamber's paucity of monkeys, we stop for lunch at Green Cove Springs. The town has a Mayberry-esque aura, although more than one Florida hamlet can make that claim. Green Cove Springs center borders on the banks of the St. John's River, and, true to its name, a spring burbles up into a cement-walled hole, flows through concrete channels into the municipal swimming pool, and continues, at roughly 3,000 gallons a minute, out to the St. John's River.

The spring, today gleaming with only a minimum of plastic Aquafina water bottles and Coke cans resting on limestone rocks rising up from its crystal depths, allegedly enchanted Ponce de Leon, who supposedly presumed it the Fountain of Youth. Of course, Mr. de Leon's actual travels don't fall in line with every spring legends tell us he believed to be the Fountain of Youth; tourist-driven "historians" would like us to believe he took a sort of "Fountain of Youth until proven otherwise" approach to exploration. More of note would be the spring on Florida's east coast that the intrepid Spaniard did not, upon first sight, believe would bestow eternal life.

As do many sulfur springs, Green Cove – despite its failure at providing eternal life – attracted its share of hob-knobbors back when people hob-knobbed. Whether or not the fearless Spaniard actually saw this spring mattered little to tourist bureaus.

“Green Cove Springs was a fashionable spa in the late 1870’s and 80’s. Steamers from Charleston and Savannah came up the St. John’s River and landed passengers at the resort piers. Band concerts were held daily during winter months. President Grover Cleveland (1885 – 1889) and well-to-do northerners came annually. Gail Borden, condensed milk manufacturer, and J.C. Penney, chain-store magnate, bought property here and took an active part in the development of the town. Penney also established a farm colony six miles to the west.²⁵”

The farm colony just outside of town morphed into a Christian retirement community for retired ministers. Today the community accepts residents who practice Christianity; it no longer requires a career in Christian service.

As we stroll through the town center, no band plays. A few city hall employees enjoy lunch along the riverbank, and while some people stroll along the creek leading from the swimming pool to the river, the town shows little evidence of tourists, chain-store magnates, and condensed milk queens.

Further down US17 we pass through Etoniah Creek State Forest. The state manages over one million acres of forests. A note here about Florida’s many state forests: they are not sanctuaries; the pines we see as we poke along Florida’s backroads and byroads will fulfill their tree destinies as pencils, firewood and tables just as surely as any other copse of unprotected trees. The Forest Service itself explains straight up it’s about managing resources, not making sure each tree reaches its full forest potential²⁶:

“Through sound forest management practices, the Florida Forest Service is able to

maintain the integrity of the forest environment while providing for the state's future natural resource needs²⁷.”

Part of that management includes wood cultivation as well as keeping things safe for Bambi and friends. And why not? Florida has a lot of land and a lot of trees. Lacking state oversight, we'd likely have just a lot of strip malls along US 17. These trees will become pencils, yes, but they will do so at a measured pace.

Etoniah Creek State Forest, in addition to keeping Florida's trees safe provides habitat for the scrub jay, a not-so-distant relative to the more common and not-so-endangered blue jay.

Scrub jays get their name from their homes: they thrive in scrub habitats. If you've never seen a scrub, think of it as a Florida desert, meaning dry and sandy and, in typical Florida fashion, able to sustain life easily.²⁸ Scrub jays live here, although as we build Dollar General Stores, Publix Supermarkets, and theme parks smack-dab in the middle of the scrub, the jay packs up and moves into ever-smaller snatches of habitat. Today, the US Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) considers the scrub jay a “threatened” species.²⁹

Despite our insistence on trading scrub for cement, the friendly, nondescript scrub jay perseveres. In 1999, the state legislature briefly considered making the scrub jay, not the mockingbird, the state bird.³⁰ Schoolchildren around the state signed a petition, citing the gentle nature of the bird – including its propensity for eating out of people's hands – as one reason. Marion Hammer, an NRA lobbyist, shot down the choice, calling the scrub jay a “welfare bird.”

“Begging for food isn’t sweet,” she argued. “It’s lazy and it’s welfare mentality.” She also expressed righteous indignation over their feeding habits – the scrub jay eats pretty much anything, and that often includes eggs.

“That’s robbery and murder. I don’t think scrub jays can even sing,” she said.”³¹

Scrub jays do indeed whistle a quiet song.

The scrub jay, despite its unique reputation some might say stereotypifies Florida and Floridians, lost its bid for the state bird, much as it lost its bid for habitat across the state.

A few goat farms later – it seems that Florida has a burgeoning goat industry, or perhaps its already burgeoned and I never realized it – we see a sign for Bardin, and I think of the Bardin Booger.

The rest of the world has Bigfoot, Yetis, and abominable snowmen. Florida has two types of cryptid: the Bardin Booger in north Florida’s Putnam county, and the Skunk Ape in south Florida’s Collier county. The Bardin Booger lives among the pine flatwoods and swamps. Like Bigfoot, those who have seen the man-ape have yet to capture its furry human likeness on a clearly focused strip of celluloid. Like Bigfoot, those who claim the Booger’s existence do so with a passion. Lest you think this sort of passion confines itself to backwoods rednecks, rest assured that even in Florida’s legislature, beliefs hold strong. In 1977, representative Paul Nuckolls (R- Fort Myers) sponsored a bill that would have made it a misdemeanor to possess, harm, or molest “any anthropoid or humanoid animal which is native to Florida, popularly known as the Skunk Ape.”

“It’s an important piece of legislation,” Nuckolls told reporters. “They’re very important, but I can’t get them to the polls.”³²

The bill did not pass, perhaps because of the poor Skunk Ape voter turnout.

The Bardin Booger – I know better than to question his existence – lives in the unincorporated town of Bardin. Putnam County contains only five cities: Interlachen, Crescent City, Pomona Park, Welaka, and Palatka, the county seat.

According to the *Guide*, Palatka started as a trading post on the St. John’s River in 1821, taking its name from an Indian word – pilaklikaha – that means “crossing over.”³³

“Palatka was a popular tourist resort [...] On the menu of one of the fashionable hotels of the day, patrons were offered ‘adolescent chicken’³⁴.”

While it offers no adolescent chicken, Angel’s Diner makes my list of don’t-miss Florida history. A converted train car that’s seen better days, this diner lays claim to “oldest diner in Florida.” Angel’s opened in 1932³⁵ and has triumphed as the premier greasy spoon along the St. John’s River.

The food critic’s take on Angel’s? The food is greasy, the seats are few, and the decor is sparse.

My take on Angel’s? Their food all but screams “diner,” which is exactly what you should want and expect if you intend to pass under the mint-and-Pepto-Bismol-colored awning. This is not fancy food; it isn’t even Florida food – you’ll find no frog’s legs, mullet, or wild hog on this menu. You will find real food: burgers that taste like burgers, fries crisp and leggy rather than fat and mushy, and milkshakes made with real

cream, which the food scholars at the University of South Florida's Florida Studies Program insisted I order.

Angel's Diner, apparently, is one of those places that people think everyone knows about, when in reality it's probably a handful of Florida-philes and a sprinkling of diner freaks like me. I would love to, at this point, sprinkle this anecdote with some amusing historical fact or gastronomic delight. I cannot; Angel's is remarkable in its unremarkability. It has survived 80 years on the strength of diner-osity alone. There is nothing Florida about the tiny diner; nonetheless, many of my Florida friends feel that a stopover at Angel's a necessary part of all trips to or from the northeast corner of the state.

Still full on rich chocolate milkshakes, we stop at Ravine Gardens for a stroll.

People don't praise Florida for its mountains. Along that line of thinking, they don't much mention ravines and valleys, either. The highest point in the state, Britton Hill, reaches only 345 feet.³⁶ To put this in perspective, 16 states have lowest points *higher* Britton Hill.³⁷ The 120-foot plunge at Ravine Gardens is something of a Florida anomaly.³⁸

While Zora and Stetson worked tirelessly to document the state, other New Dealers changed the rough landscape of the ravine into a manicured state park. It took the St. John's River thousands of years to carve the ravine, the state park's web site says, but it took workers roughly one year to cover the ravine in 100,000 azaleas. They didn't stop there:

*“More than 100,000 azaleas and thousands of palms, roses, flame vines, crape myrtles, magnolias and other subtropical trees are planted.”*³⁹ That was 1939. By the end of the century, the Department of the Interior added the park to the National Register of Historic Places and the American Society of Landscape Architects designated it a National Landmark for Outstanding Landscape Architecture.

As we drive the not-quite-two-mile weathered brick loop circling the ravine, the sun pales and what strikes me is that Ravine Gardens looks more like a rainforest than a manicured garden. Palms and oaks shoot up from the belly of the ravine; vines twine themselves around cypress trees. Epiphytes, ferns and wildflowers do as they please in the soil, with little apparent regard for the ordered whims and proper wishes of those federal gardeners. Ravine Gardens, from the top, shows us an orgy of pistils and stamens, a hedonistic flora assault on the senses.

As we make our way down the ravine, the gardens come more into focus. At the bottom of the ravine’s belly, a wonderland of ordered verdigris stands in quiet contrast to the blazing disorder of Florida nature above. A footbridge joins patches of society garlic and St. Augustine grass; cypress trees wait patiently at the water’s edge as water lilies line up behind them. The water itself moves through a brick-lined aquifer. I can squint and picture the gardens in their azalea-tended glory. I open my eyes and the order and effort is replaced instantly by the reality of nature in Florida: it heeds no one, pleases itself, and overtakes any plans the gardener may have for it.

We climb up the ravine, back out into the sunlight, and point the camper south.

As the road wears on and we approach Orlando, the road changes.

DeLand's tree-lined streets and marked old-town feel date back to the town's founder, Henry DeLand. DeLand, a baking powder manufacturer, planted water oaks along the town's infant streets in 1876. A decade later the city council offered property owners a fifty-cent tax rebate for every planted tree at least two inches in diameter. So amenable to trees were the landowners that "the response threatened to bankrupt the town, and the ordinance was repealed less than two years later."⁴⁰

Stetson University, founded in 1883 and Florida's oldest private university, makes its home here. The town feels like a college town, with elegant buildings spread along US 17. The *Guide* tells us that in 1939, the town's activities centered on campus, and this remains true today. Campus buildings line the town, as do oaks. Houses reminiscent of southern farmhouses and cracker houses add to the stately feel of the town.

Not far from the painted white wood homes and black shutters are the teal and jade shades of Blue Springs. Now a state park, the springs offers refuge to manatees. The constant 72-degree water makes the park a safe haven when the rest of the St. John's River grows colder. Campers can stay all year-round, with winter months filling up faster, both for manatees and people. A typical January afternoon at the park will find visitors crowded around the observation deck, staring down at the West Indian manatees, who, in turn, stare back. Visitors may snorkel, kayak and dive the springs, although not during peak manatee times.⁴¹ When the manatee flock to the spring head, they're so thick in the water it is unlikely a snorkeler could wend his way between their lumpy, rough, gray bodies, anyway.

Back on US 17, the stately oaks and blue springs cave in under the weight of Florida's popularity. Sanford skirts Lake Monroe, and today, just as in the 1930s, US 17 contours the lake shore.

*"The highway swings in a long sweeping curve along the shore of Lake Monroe, which was lined with piers and warehouses in the 1880s. A large cypress swamp borders the road for nearly two miles— a gloomy, moss-draped mass of trees that seem dead in winter, but come to life again in the spring."*⁴²

I-4, Florida's only Interstate that doesn't actually travel to another state, also bisects Sanford, although most tourists on I-4 in Sanford would likely still consider themselves in Orlando. Orlando and Sanford, though, share little other than drivers. US 17 goes through both cities, but Sanford, despite the increasing presence of tire stores and fast food franchises, still keeps a rural feel.

If you travel Florida's backroads long enough you'll notice that most city's have a ostensibly unique claim to fame. At one time Jackie Gleason called Miami the "Sun and Fun Capital of the World."⁴³ St. Pete Beach boasts "Sunset Capital of Florida."⁴⁴ Key Largo honors itself the "Dive Capital of the World."⁴⁵

Sanford, according to the *Guide*, holds a similar honor: the capital of Florida's "celery belt."⁴⁶ In 1939, Sanford shipped most of the state's 3.3 million crates of celery to market. Today, Sanford celebrates its crunchy green heritage in myriad ways. The city holds an annual Celery Masquerade Ball (complete with the crowning, of course, of the Celery Queen)⁴⁷. The purpose of the ball? To raise money for *Celery Soup*, a play celebrating the city's history.

Not everything about celery has such altruistic roots: Lennar Homes built Celery Estates, mid-priced, cookie-cutter suburban homes⁴⁸; Celery Estates competes with nearby Celery Key⁴⁹, another boilerplate housing development offering the Florida dream for moderate prices.

The only celery-related items missing from Sanford? Celery.⁵⁰ Modern Sanford boasts no celery farms. It has no farms at all. It does, however, have a zoo, an airport and no shortage of lakes and fishing. Its biggest claim to fame – at least until 2012 – was The Senator, a 3,500-year-old bald cypress tree that reached heights of almost 120 feet. The *Guide* refers to it as the Big Tree, “more than 3,000 years old, 47 feet in circumference at the base and 125 feet high.”⁵¹

The Senator got his name when M. O. Overtstreet, a state senator from 1920 – 1924, donated the land on which the tree stood to the county. Seminole Country used the land to create Big Tree Park, and until January 16, 2012, The Senator (“Big Tree” to locals) was the flagship attraction at the park. In early morning on Monday, January 16, the tree burned. In a matter of hours, 3,500 years of nature thriving a stone’s throw from the congested tangle of Orlando succumbed to fire.

It does seem appropos, though to discuss the death of a historically and environmentally significant piece of Floridana as we head further south together on US 17: The Senator’s death seems foreshadowing of what you will find next. As the cities open up the road closes in, hemmed with the seemingly ever-present Dollar General store, Tire Kingdoms, and KFC franchises.

Here we find our first hints along this tour that, as Florida historian Dr. Gary Mormino says, “there is no here, here.” The road starts to look very much like Anytown, U.S.A. – Gone are the ravines filled with azaleas and palm trees; gone are the hometown streets of DeLand with oaks rubbing leafy shoulders with one another. Instead, we have here a case against globalization. US 17 has morphed from a delightful tour to a neon and plastic midway, with strip malls and stoplights the rides that strap you in against your will.

When we pull off the road for Wekiwa Springs State Park, I breathe a sigh of relief. Snuggled against the pressing weight of Orlando’s outlying development is a spring, a park, and a wooded camp site. The skies are growing dark with an afternoon summerstorm as we slip into the spring.

When I say the encroaching development snuggles up against the park, I mean right up against it. Along the wooded trail to our campsite I glimpse yellow stucco homes with birdcaged-pools and manicured lawns. I wonder how many hapless black garter snakes and not-so-hapless-but-not-as-vicious-as-you’d-think coral snakes receive a death sentence because homeowners didn’t really understand what it meant to live surrounded by nature.

Before settling in, I head to the spring head. Wekiwa Springs pushes 42 million gallons of water down the Wekiva River every day.⁵² The different spellings of the spring and the river are neither a misprint nor a charming Florida mistake; in Creek language – think pre-Seminole – Wekiwa means “spring of water” and Wekiva means “flowing water.” In English, we spell them differently but pronounce them identically.

Years ago I paddled the Wekiva River, putting in at this very spring. I remember the trip vividly, and today the glassy headwaters evoke images of that kayak trip. I turned my Dagger in endless circles over the spring that day, amusing myself with underwater limestone formations that make the water appear as glass of a Jurassic aquarium. When the deafening cacophony in my head and from other recreators threatened to overwhelm the moment, I paddled the narrow crossing into the Wekiva, and after a mile I shared the river with only two other kayakers who broke the silence just once.

“Did you see those gators back there?” the woman asked when we met south of a marina styled after a ramshackle fish camp. “There were three babies and a mother. I grew up in Florida, and this is the first time I’ve seen gators.” She seemed so pleased with herself, so overjoyed at finding a slice of something wild and real, that I forgave her breach of silence. I looked towards her gators and remembered my favorite gator advice, which I read on the National Parks Service web site: “Never get closer than 15 feet to an alligator. If it hisses or opens its mouth in defense, you should back away even further.”

In waters thick with yellow lotus and cypress, I spotted a juvenile gator on a log. He looked lean, but lazy. When I heard a splash behind me, I tensed up. I grew up with a dad who worked construction, and at night he’d regale us with tales of rattlesnake nests under his backhoe and the alligator tracks leading to freshly dug retention ponds. Over time the fear gave way to respect for this prehistoric thing that found no need to evolve in zillions of years, not even to exist sandwiched between swamps and suburbs. Alligators eat what they can. They like deer, but when white-tailed deer gave way to hogs, they decided that pork tasted pretty good, too. When the hogs gave way to poodles, the same thing

happened. You don't need to evolve if you can sense opportunity. Forget the 1950's horror movies; if you want to scare someone, put them alone on a blackwater river and show them an alligator. Not a baby or a teenager or a malnourished retention pond resident feeding on Yorkies and Muscovies, but a true gator, a 12-foot reptilian symphony that sings of Darwin and Bartram and freedom and power with every sweep of his mighty tail.

Further down the river, I heard shrieking and rounded a curve to see two hawks involved in a debate so heated they didn't notice me float by. Hopping amidst the cypress knees and the swamp lilies, they present and jump on one another, then back off and yell some more. Mating or fighting, I couldn't tell, but I watched them for a long time, content in their discontent. When they finally forsook the fight for something unseen, I drifted along, stopping my kayak to get close to an orchid or look inside a hollow cypress stump, finding mostly spiders in the stumps, green, stringy leaves by the orchids, and gambusia trailing my hand as it dragged through the dark river. I love this water; I love the delicate beauty of the harsh banks that welcome anything but people.

The cold water slaps me back to reality as I watch people lap the spring head. Five minutes ago sweat dripped in my most and least delicate places; now I shiver on steps coated with algae at the spring's edge. I watch the swimmers, a group of soccer moms and a small band of college men, as they brave the elements. Barry, a Yankee by birth, looks at the spring, then back to me, wide-eyed.

"I had no idea," he says, and at first I don't know what he means. The cold water? The number of people silly enough to plunge into a chilly, 72-degree water on a warm

September day? The number of human improvements – starting with the steps and ending with concession stands – made for our comfort?

No, he means the spring itself, and I snap out of my spoiled, Florida-girl, cold-water pity party to see the springs through the eyes of a New York boy. He explains later that he always assumed “springs” meant tiny holes in the ground out of which bubbled a persistent yet tiny gurgle of water. Geologically fascinating, yes, he figured, but worth creating a park for so many (Florida has 15 state parks with “springs” in their name; many more parks include springs or water bodies directly connected to springs) of the little trickles? He didn’t get it. Rather, he didn’t get it until today when he saw his first spring, the Wekiwa. While I spent my time shivering and taking the magnitude of the spring utterly for granted, he discovered a football-field sized aquarium, glittering and clear as far down as you can see, pushing water from the earth’s inner reaches at a truly dazzling pace.

Sometimes we tend to see so much of Florida’s overdevelopment – chain stores and congested roads and ever-present real estate advertisements– that we minimize, if not entirely overlook, the things that make Florida paradise. He plunged himself into that water – who knew 72 degrees was the exact temperature of paradise? – and I stood on the steps, still shivering but transfixed by the beauty of the spring head again.

We make it back to camp just as the skies open up and settle in for a night under the pine trees. In the morning we watch deer run through the park and pack it in for another day along US 17. Back on the road, outside Orlando, the scenery vacillates between farm

communities built around cheap Mexican labor and the now-everpresent nondescriptivity of the landscape.

Winter Park offers an almost-small town feel, with a main street, train station, and a true walkable district of shops at the town's core. Laid out by New Englanders with a plan for a 600-acre town, Winter Park still radiates hints of the pastoral, and the private, expensive, and old Rollins College bookends the main street. The other end morphs into somewhat less unique housing communities that hint of Frank Lloyd Wright architecture. Trees and shrubbery abound, some of the last greenery we will see until we trade road for swamp in Kissimmee.

Much writing exists on Orlando and I shall not add to the canon of literature here. Anything you wish to know of the tourist mecca you can learn from a bevy of guidebooks. As we drive through Orlando, I keep hearing Dr. Mormino's words, borrowed from Gertrude Stein, ricocheting through my head: *there is no here, here*. Except for the ever-present knowledge that we are never far from Mickey Mouse, we could be anywhere. Nothing looks like Florida here, nothing at all.

Kissimmee, a chain of tourist-supported endeavors, also has another claim to fame: before the cattle ranching, sugar farming, and Florida Dream dried it up, the Everglades started its slow journey off the edge of North America here. Shingle Creek, one of the initial feeders for the Everglades, ends just behind a gas station across from Sea World, but the closest practical kayak put in is just off US 17/92.

I approach Shingle Creek with a light heart and high hopes.

I welcome the narrow blackwater creek that originates by Sea World and quietly curls south through the theme park and the 3-for-\$10 t-shirt capital of the world: Kissimmee, Orlando's tourist-swollen little sister. In delicious juxtaposition to the dinner and show explosion here, I find my path to the Everglades' genesis, sandwiched between Pirate's Island mini-golf and Gator Alley gift shop. US 192 crosses Shingle Creek, although no sign marks the waterway. At an airboat rental stand touts the "Real Florida!"; I pay my dollar ramp fee and push off.

This tiny creek starkly contrasts with the Kissimmee floodplain and relatively flat banks. It flows south to Lake Tohopekaliga and drains to Cypress Lake, where it will rendezvous with other tiny blackwater creeks as it pushes south. Paddling Shingle Creek reveals Florida's "scrub," a desert with water, prickly pear cactus, and patches of sand beyond oversized, muddy, emerald leather ferns and reedy, plump pine trees. Here lives an estimated 2,000 scrub jays. For a half mile I contend with sunburned tourists powering tiny airboats, but at the half-mile mark the creek closes and shallows, and while markers warn power boaters away, I am free to paddle under, over, and into this world. I glide past a submerged tree, wiggling my boat around its wrinkled skin as a hawk lights on one of its arcing branches, a wriggling fish in his beak.

The creek closes in, trying to choke me out, and I grunt and pole my way around deadwood and cloying weeds, bumping over things and hitting my paddle on branches above. I can't paddle; I have no room. Dry season. The downed trees and underwater obstacles test my agility and maneuvering skills and I surrender what I know to just keep going. I scooch and pole and sweat and breathe. Oak and pine and I don't even notice

what else scrape my head and the tops of my hands. Spider webs tangle in my hair and glistening blue bugs find my thighs. I can't push myself forward more than a foot or two at a time; I tuck my paddle under my arm and develop a plodding rhythm of lurching forward a couple of feet, then turning my boat by sticking one hand in the loam to curl it around an unseen log and using the other to pivot off the nearest upright branch, then reversing over the underwater obstruction for about a foot, catching my breath, and going forward again. Muck and bark coat my hands, mixing with blood and ragged ripped nails and scraped flaps of skin. I twist around branches and follow the water and almost despair and fight the squishy mud and detritus and huff and all at once it opens again. I find myself in a patch of water at least a foot deep and clear and moving just enough for me to know it moves. Little bits of pickerel move around the deadwood and caress my hull. I sit for a moment; ahead of me, deadfall blocks the way.

I stop paddling; the water here runs so shallow that it will not take me upstream or down. This is it; the end of the line, close to the beginning. In higher water I could reach the end of the beginning, roughly across the street from Discovery Cove, channelized in proper Florida fashion. It starts behind a Chevron and parallels a tidy apartment community. The end of the beginning looks no different than a drainage ditch lined with the verdigris of St. Augustine grass and ornamental assortments of ecology.

The 1939 Winter Haven no longer exists. A few vintage signs remain, but otherwise it's a hodgepodge of chain stores and nothingness. The depression at the discovery of this Florida-less Florida starts to lift as we eke our way further south along US 17. By the

time we drive through Arcadia, I feel my muscles start to ease. This slow, rambling countryside grabs back for me the Florida feel; any hints of globalization disappear as I watch evidence of the Florida landscape triumphing over vacant storefronts and abandoned farm equipment. To another, perhaps better-adjusted person, these things signify a failing economy. To me, it is unquestionable proof that, as Dr. Ian Malcolm says in *Jurassic Park*, life finds a way.

It helps, too, that Arcadia is a town that time forgot. If DeLand is a study in proper care and feeding of Florida farmhouses, Arcadia is the rebellious twin. The architecture in these two towns is not dissimilar: you can find white frame homes with shutters, wraparound porches, and shingled roofs. But DeLand is a true small town; Arcadia has land that spreads out from the town. Cattle ranchers and farmers live here, as well as antiques dealers, mechanics, and government workers who head to a stately brick courthouse – probably one of the best-kept buildings in town and also one of the most manicured lawns. The town has an easy looseness not allowed in strip-mall-regimented towns; I see no apparent order as to what store goes where. Certainly, we haven't landed in the boondocks: Arcadia has a Tractor Supply and Publix on intersecting Route 70. But I wouldn't exactly call it a haven for soccer moms and stockbrokers, either.

Further south, US 17 meets its end when it joins up for a final time with US 41. By this time no question remains that this road is unquestionably Florida, from the dulling sameness of Orlando to the beautiful decay just north and south of Arcadia.

Tour 3: Fernandina to Cedar Key

“State 13 crosses north Florida from the Atlantic to the Gulf, connecting old settlements dating back to the earliest Spanish occupation with the still primitive hammock country along the West Coast. Between them lies a fertile flatwood area, a dark green mass of slender slash pines, bled for the gum that supports the naval-stores industry of the state.”⁵³

State 13 does not exist on Florida’s maps. The same stretch of road, once so simply named with one numbered route, now starts at A1A, which becomes 301, which becomes 24. Once outside Fernandina the road offers no evidence of settlements dating back to the Spaniards, although dark green masses of trees still separate the towns.

At the northeast tip of the state, Fernandina offers beachgoers an easy introduction to paradise. What we find differs not much from what I imagine of 1930s Fernandina: “an industrial city in which the shrimp and menhaden fisheries and the manufacture of pulp paper are the leading industries.”⁵⁴

While lovely, the dark and deep Atlantic beaches – not quite the same as the isolated Caribbean beach of the postcards – fascinate me less than Fernandina’s series of fishing docks. They greet fishermen and shrimpers with ready, calloused hands to offload the

day's catch. Fernandina has a longstanding reputation as a vibrant waterfront that gets tourists but, perhaps, doesn't really need them.

I forsake the trendy shops in Fernandina's quaint downtown – every small town in Florida, it seems, has a quaint downtown with disturbingly familiar, unique, trendy shops – for the grungy fishing docks.

The Salustri family unilaterally does not fish, save myself. My father tried it once when we traveled with our neighbors to a cottage in the Pennsylvania countryside. After a day on the lake, he proudly returned with one fish. That pride evaporated when he filleted the fish and realized he had caught and killed a pregnant fish. He never fished again.

Not so with me. I took to fishing relatively late in life – my 30s – but I love everything about the ritual, from baiting the hook to clubbing a feisty kingfish into submission. Florida, especially, is an angler's paradise: you can catch everything from largemouth bass to swordfish. I worked – briefly – in a bait shop, where I loved getting shrimp for the fishermen but hated seeing them off while I stayed behind.

It doesn't shock me, then, when Fernandina's working waterfront draws me in like a mojito called to Hemingway. We park the van, I step outside, and stop for a minute just to smell everything.

Nothing in the world quite smells as coldly sexy as the cloying smells of freshly dead fish packed in ice and salt. The creosote and diesel fumes add to the harmony of odors; I don't know the exact proportions of these four things, but I firmly believe if you mixed them all together you would find the secret to Ponce de Leon's much-sought Fountain of Youth.

I stand, staring at nothing, slack-jawed and smiling like a fool, for a long moment before I pull open the door to the fish market.

How can I describe a fishing dock fish market to someone who has only purchased fish from the local supermarket? Do not expect to see a tidy young man in a heavy apron over an embroidered polo shirt with only a passing knowledge of the fish you see spread out before you. As with most grocery stores you will find a lot of dead fish behind glass cases and a refrigerator full of less-than-premium beer, but that fails to show the full picture. You must picture, too, the bulk of the fish with clear eyes on heads still attached to their bodies, and you should also include a much-erased chalkboard with the day's catch listed and priced in less-than-perfect handwriting. In one corner you may find an old metal rack with a small assortment of Crystal, Tabasco, and Everglades seasonings as well as a few local additions; in another you may spy a sparse collection of dust-coated boxes of parboiled rice, paperboard cylinders of breadcrumbs, and bags of hush puppy mixes. In the center of this dark wood haven a gruff man behind the counter with a big, oyster-colored mustache, meaty hands, and few unnecessary smiles waits for your order. I ask where he gets the shrimp and he looks at me – for just a moment – as if he has no patience for idiots before explaining he gets them off the boats that come in not 50 feet away. I buy a pound of shrimp, a six pack of Corona Light, and beat a hasty, embarrassed retreat.

We settle in just south of Fernandina at Little Talbot Island State Park with a plate of brown rice, a can of spicy Ro-Tel tomatoes, and a heap of “it was alive this morning” shrimp. The next morning I walk out the long weathered boardwalk to the Atlantic

Ocean, and, with great regret, return to the camper to head away from the sea. Next stop, Cedar Key, where we will dine on their famous clams, but first we must muck through the landlocked north center of the state and see what it has to offer.

Fernandina Freshly Dead Shrimp (*Serves 2*)

One pound Atlantic fresh shrimp, best bought from docks at Fernandina

Ro-Tel Diced Tomatoes with Green Chiles

Brown rice

1. Grill or boil shrimp (it doesn't matter if you use water or beer for the boil; the spices of the tomatoes will override anything else you do.)
2. Cook brown rice. Add to shrimp.
3. Heat tomatoes. Add to rice.

“West of Fernandina the highway traverses a thinly settled region of pine forests and small farms. Between Yulee and Callahan it is flanked with drooping willows, wild hibiscus in brilliant scarlet bloom, and elderberry bushes, white with blossom in spring, heavy with purple fruit in late summer.”⁵⁵

It looks almost nothing like that anymore, but that doesn't mean you can't take this fun drive through the Florida countryside. Today – courtesy of Interstate 95 – Burger King, Krystal Burger, and a myriad of gas stations cultivate the immediate western edge of Yulee. Privately owned tracts of pine replace the pine forests, and even they give way easily to infant subdivisions. The stands of pines yet to surrender to development frame

the “For Sale” signs at the edge of the hammock. As for willows? I would swear a few remain, but I find myself flipping through my *Audubon Guide to Florida* to see which ones might grow here. I can only identify a weeping willow on sight, and I can assure you there none of those grow along the route from Fernandina to Cedar Key. Willows tend to like rich, fertile wetland soils and riverbanks, and little wetland remains along this route.

We reach Callahan quickly – the Eisenhower Interstate system leaves the back roads to us real travelers and not the folks intent on making good time – and recognize Callahan as soon as we see it: it’s Anytown, U.S.A. at its finest. Drugstore chains, regional supermarkets, and fast food eateries abound. Callahan also marks the start of A1A or, in our case, the end. Here it turns into 301, a road immediately recognizable to any driver who ever cut across the state from the northeast corner to her southwest segments.

One other thing of significance happens in Callahan: we first start to notice Dollar General stores, with their bright yellow signs and jaunty 1960s-Technicolor-Movie-Era lettering. These two things are more than tangentially related, as I will discover as we lace our way through the state.

Lawtey follows next, known to many drivers as one of the only two speed traps recognized by AAA in the United States⁵⁶. Florida, it is important to note, never instituted a state income tax. Over the years her cities found other ways to generate revenue; Lawtey opted for a tourist tax of sorts, as locals (and anyone who can read the looming black and yellow billboard greeting you as you enter town) know that the Lawtey segment of 301 is a true speed trap. This is not the segment of road where you can flirt

your way out of a ticket; if an officer lets you go with a “free pass,” their police force may not have bulletproof vests next year. Given the amount of tickets they write, those vests are, indeed, a necessity.

The city’s population – under 700 people in 2000 – doesn’t require much, and almost half of what they do need comes from US 301: 48 percent of the town’s budget comes from speeding tickets.⁵⁷

Next up on 301, Starke, Bradford County seat. According to the *Guide*, Floridians knew of Starke because the town exported strawberries and turpentine (although rarely together).⁵⁸ Today people know Starke because of its prison.

Raiford, so named for what the *Guide* calls the surrounding “settlement⁵⁹,” can house 802 prisoners (although currently almost 900 convicted criminals call it home) as well as the state's now-unused electric chair, built in 1923 and used through the end of the twentieth century.

*"The three-legged electric chair was constructed from oak by Department of Corrections personnel in 1998 and was installed at Florida State Prison in Starke in 1999. The previous chair was made by inmates from oak in 1923 after the Florida Legislature designated electrocution as the official mode of execution."*⁶⁰

Before the modernization of electric execution, each county could execute capital crimes as they saw fit, usually by hanging.

In 1933, Giuseppe Zangara made the mistake of trying to kill President Franklin Roosevelt in a state that enforced the death penalty. He missed FDR but mortally wounded Chicago Mayor Anton Cermak, which earned Zangara a bed at Raiford. Until

his execution – a scant 32 days after the crime – Zangara likely made license plates alongside other prisoners. *Tampa Bay Times* reporter Craig Pittman visited Zangara's grave behind the prison, noting that prison officials marked it with a license plate. He also notes that officials misspelled Zangara's name.⁶¹

Aside from creating license plates for a state just finding its way with automobiles, male inmates tanned hides of all sorts of local animals, from bear to possum. White women sewed sheets and pillowcases. Black men and women alike worked in the prison's shirt factory, allowing segregation to continue even in the face of death row.⁶²

In 1954 Florida Correctional Institution opened in Starke, and the women moved from Raiford to the new facility. To this day, only male prisoners live at Raiford.⁶³

Instead of an electric chair, Floridians on death row now die by lethal injection. The state pays an anonymous executioner \$150 to administer the injection. Prison officials regularly test the electric chair to make sure it still works... just in case.

Down the road from Starke, Waldo awaits... with radar guns. Taking a page from Lawtey's full-combat budgeting process, Waldo, too, earns a hefty chunk of change from drivers in too much of a hurry to mind the speed limit. The town has just over 800 people⁶⁴ and covers less than two square miles, much of which borders 301. AAA designates Waldo as the nation's second and final speed trap, and with good reason: In 2010, the City of Waldo collected just under \$150,000 in property taxes but over \$450,000 in court fines. Speeding tickets covered all but \$100,000 of the city's entire public safety budget.⁶⁵

The towns along this route, save for Gainesville, are tiny whistle-stops. Waldo and Lawtey typify the sort of town you find along US 301: small towns that settled around the Seaboard Airline Railway and relied on the railway to export citrus and import visitors. Trains still run along the track but do not stop. Freezes decimated citrus crops that once grew in the center of the state. These towns, former "winter playgrounds" offering a respite of warm weather and tinge of culture, appear little more than shells along the roadway.⁶⁶

While these towns offer little for tourists seeking a beach vacation, hunters and naturalists will find plenty to do. Don't expect a variety of posh resorts or chain hotels, especially compared to the cockroach-like ubiquity of hotels lining much of the coast. Camping and the odd mom-and-pop motor inn, endearing in its basic amenities, epitomize area lodging. A short drive will take you to the Santa Fe Swamp Conservation Area, Lake Butler Wildlife Management Tract, Payne's Prairie Preserve, and the Austin Cary Memorial Forest as well as Belmore and Etoniah Creek State Forests. Not all these facilities are open to the public. In Waldo, a city park doubles as a living history lesson with a red caboose on display, reminding residents that the city owes its existence to the railroad.

The chief difference between these tiny dots of population along the roadway and the larger cities are not the speed traps, blue-collar families, or the lack of saltwater. The trees make the difference. Between Fernandina and Starke, the trees serve as their own landscape, abundant and green and parting only occasionally for the odd business or restaurant. West of 301, this tour diverts to State Road 24 and heads through Gainesville.

There, the trees don't bother to part for the homes, businesses, or even the University of Florida: the town's landscaping evokes a northern neighborhood with oaks and sprawling tracts of wooded land. Through town, SR 24 contains more stands of pine and oak than strip malls. Rolling hills (think gentle Florida hills, not the massive, challenging northern ones) rise up to meet your car. Gainesville is a university town – aggressively so – with a football team. Students, former students, and professors populate this typical college town, delightful in its collegiate way and shocking only in how the pastoral edges of neighboring towns almost completely fail to creep in.

Gainesville gives way to Levy County, the last county on the Tour. The collegiate tone of Gainesville fades abruptly and, after more miles of trees and the refreshingly non-franchised eateries along the roadway, SR 24 narrows to a two-lane road as it drifts out to the coast.

A small green sign marks the town of Rosewood, although the *Guide* fails to mention the town. By the time the Federal Writers made their way to the coast of Levy County, there was little left to see.

In early January 1923, a white woman accused a black man of assaulting her.⁶⁷ Despite an eyewitness account that the married woman's white lover, not Jesse Hunter, hit her, a posse of white men from Gainesville summoned their dogs, the Ku Klux Klan, and came to Rosewood. What transpired next was a hate crime of epic proportions: "The houses were burned by a number of white men while a crowd looked on, but no one could be found who would say that he saw the house burned, according to county officers."⁶⁸ They killed every black person they found, in one instance ordering a man to

dig his own grave before they shot and killed him. When the gunfire ended, the bodies of Rosewood's black men lay where the white men murdered them.

The black families hid in the swamp and at the home of a local shopkeeper; they fled the area as fugitives. The *St. Petersburg Evening Independent* reports no more than two white men died in the assault. The black man accused of assaulting the white woman was never found.

Thus ended the town of Rosewood. Today, little more than historical markers remain.

At the end of the road, Cedar Key waits. The *Guide* describes it as a "fishing village on a white sand island in the Gulf of Mexico, three miles from the mainland." A more apt description of the town include the idea of an outpost. Do not come here seeking sun-soaked beaches; you will find nowhere to stretch out your towel, rub yourself with sunscreen, and read a book on the sand. Cruise lines bus in tourists on day excursions, straight past the clam farms and fishing boats and to the shops on Dock Street. This boardwalk of tourist-centric T-shirt shops and restaurants caters to those not quite ready for the real Florida.

In the late 1800s, Cedar Key served as a central shipping point for food and wood; goods from Mississippi would come to the deep water port. From there workers would pack them into rail cars and send them throughout the state. In addition, the town produced oysters and pencils in abundance. When Henry Plant couldn't buy the railway lines at Cedar Key, he moved his base of operations to Tampa and essentially shut down Cedar Key; the 1896 hurricane finished the job.

Today fishermen, tongers, and clammers all earn their living and make their home on Cedar Key. If you go, plan on visiting a fishing village dotted with clam farms rather than a tourist mecca, no matter how hard the town may try and convince tourists otherwise. To its credit, the town does have a history museum, antiques galore, a cemetery shrouded in oaks and Spanish moss, a random assortment of book stores, general stores, and, above all, bait shops.

The town's one market doesn't sell clam chowder. It does offer a nice selection of craft beers and staples, but as for clams? Head to any of the clam farms on SR 24 and buy them fresh from the fishermen. One caveat: most likely you will have to buy them by the hundred. That's OK; they tend to last longer when they come fresh from the sea.

Other than eating clams and staring into the blue of the Gulf of Mexico, Cedar Key also offers tourists kayaking through the mangroves, bird watching, and airboat rides. The Suwannee river empties just north of the town, and a shallow estuary offers visitors a nifty array of birding, fishing and wildlife opportunities unlike many others in the state.

We gather our clams and beer and head for our campsite just north of Cedar Key, in Manatee Springs State Park. As we carve our way north through the trees on County Road 347, I see a blur of blue and gray: a scrub jay. We slow the van in time to see him (or her) disappear into the woods, but the thrill of seeing my first live scrub jay ever stays with me all the way to Chiefland.

Manatee Springs State Park is William Bartram territory. He came here – I'm not sure how, but he did – two springtimes before the American Revolution. A sign at the spring's edge talks about his discovery.

For those of you not familiar with Early Florida literature (although I do not know if scholars consider Bartram truly “early,” but his work pre-dates the Carl Hiaasen genre of Florida writing), let me explain: Bartram offers a breath of fresh air compared to the flat-out lies told to the Crown’s financing Florida expeditions. After a semester’s study of those early explorers, I firmly believe that “Early Florida Literature” is a creative euphemism for “reports to my boss that justify my large government travel budget.” The Ernest Hemingways of the day did not apply for these posts. These men were bureaucrats with an often-fatal sense of adventure. Traveling the world on the Queen’s dime for the small price of having to send home reports about how that money helping the kingdom likely sounded pretty sweet compared to a lifetime spent grooming the king’s horses or filing reports. Yes, the threat of disease, murder by the indigenous folk, and malaria loomed large, but Europe had a lot of people. La Florida had relatively few people by comparison.

Consider the narrative of LeMoyne, a mid-sixteenth century explorer who traveled Florida with a group of fellow Frenchmen: the pictures contained in this government report include water dragons and reptiles (I’d guess alligators) with snake-like heads and man-like arms. The account also includes a sketch of the Indians stabbing an explorer through the penis and sawing off his other extremities with Stryker-like precision.

Fun stuff, good times, but wholly inaccurate as far as I can tell. Of course, that’s just how Europeans described the natives. Couple that with how a few Europeans can beat down limitless earlier Americans (Read Pizzaro’s account of what he did in Peru)

and you now know the party line for pretty much every exploratory account of the New World.

Enter William Bartram. The guy liked plants, mostly, and as nifty as they are, they don't read well as vicious, man-eating beasts. Well, mostly. It also helped that he explored Florida well after the Spaniards and the British wove themselves along the eastern coastline of America; it's harder to lie when less than an ocean separates you and your boss. They could pop in any old time and see that those dragons were, indeed, tarpon.

I like Bartram. He wrote real words. I mean, he's no chamber of commerce travel writer, but I like that, too. He wrote about what he saw up and down Florida, Georgia and the Carolinas in what I consider more realistic terms. He loved his birds and plants, so that was a lot of his work, not slaying dragons and natives.

Before I left on this trip, I took a long, last look at my bookshelves. My house has fantastic floor-to-ceiling bookshelves stuffed with books about Florida. My hand paused over my copy of Bartram's *Travels*. I wanted to take it. I knew I would want it, knew I didn't remember half of his expedition. All the same, I had packed a lot of stuff. I ended up leaving the book.

So, of course, within two days I find myself at Manatee Springs State Park, gazing down into a spring so blue and encircled with knobby-kneed cypress that I never want to leave the waterside. As I take it all in, I notice a plaque that tells me William Bartram discovered this spring in the late 1700s. The plaque bears a transcription of his

notes about the springs, but says nothing of how he happened across the cerulean oasis. I assume he navigated his way down the Suwannee River to find it, but that's just a guess.

It is also just a guess how our camp site ended up on the trail. I'm not surprised, mind you, just curious. I can picture my copy of *Travels* sitting on the top shelf of my bookshelf, right hand side. Taunting me. I content myself supposing he arrived via the Suwannee River, and I later learn that he did indeed – after traveling a route not dissimilar to the one that took us from Fernandina to Manatee Springs.

The spring is a thousand shades of blue and green. The cypress trees ring it on three sides; on the fourth, it flows out to the Suwannee River where its shimmering translucent blues turn quickly to inky black. A wooded boardwalk leads over cypress knees out to the floating dock; the spring and the creek that leads 100 million gallons of water to the Suwannee and, shortly, the Gulf, are narrow and shallow. The Suwannee is vast and dark. The clear water will hide under the black blanket of the Suwannee for 25 twisting and turning curves, pushed ever forward by the water thrashing from the spring behind it, until it emerges again, unsullied by the deep secrets of the Suwannee as it shows its clear, cool face to the emerald waters of the Gulf of Mexico.

Tour 4: Georgia State Line (Valdosta) to Naples

“US 41 crosses the State line in a thinly settled section of north Florida, near the Suwannee River. Proceeding down the peninsula, it crosses a gently rolling area of good-sized farms, and through the sandy pine woods of west central Florida to industrial Tampa. Curving around Tampa Bay, the highway passes fertile farm lands in the vicinity of Bradenton and reaches the Gulf at Sarasota, a town of art activities, circus quarters, and game fishing. Turning inland to tropical Fort Myers, on the Caloosahatchee River, it traverses a region of flatwoods, palms, and occasional marshland on the western edge of the Everglades. The route returns to the Gulf at Naples, where it joins US 94, a section of the Tamiami Trail leading across the Everglades.”⁶⁹

Section 4A: Jennings to Williston

The northern tip of US 41 bears absolutely no resemblance to the southern streak of the same road. It's not just topography: hills over flatland. The road by the Georgia state line has few of the chain stores that populate the roadway's lower parts.

Jennings, the start of US 41 in Florida, runs a ribbon of hills southeast with fields glimpsed through mossy oaks. The next town is Jasper. If someone asked me to describe Jasper in one word, I would say brick, but many of these brick buildings are marked by vacant windows and derelict vegetation. The town gives the appearance of suffering. The

historical museum is a fortified brick two-story building that looks almost like a church, although it used to serve as the town jail.

This area of the state – Hamilton County – is home to the only Class Three whitewater rapids in the state, Big Shoals State Park. During conditions that meet the region's water needs, the Suwannee River rises about 60 feet above sea level⁷⁰. Today, we could easily cross the riverbed at a leisurely gate without wetting our knees, the ranger tells us. There will be no whitewater rafting today; the water is below 51 feet above sea level which, the park ranger tells us, makes the river non-navigable. When the state gets too much rain, too, the rapids disappear. When the river floods so that the water level reaches 70 feet above sea level, the water goes flat again.

Rangers record the levels daily and can tell you with a phone call what type of water – if any – you'll find at the park. This matters significant because you can't bring your car to Big Shoals. You must hike, kayak or raft in hand, a mile from the parking area to the water. The coordinates from the Big Shoals entrance are 30°21'08.52" N and 82°41' 25.14" W.⁷¹

Nearby we make camp at Stephen Foster Folk Culture Center State Park in White Springs. The *Guide* reports that the springs boast legendary medicinal qualities.⁷² It also reports that the springs had an unusual bathhouse:

“It has long been known as a health resort. In times of flood the river rises nearly 40 feet, and the springs, issuing from a rock hollow, are inundated, which accounts for the unusual three-story bathhouse (25¢), the third floor of which is level with the street.”⁷³

The park offers a host of folk-related activities, including daily quilting, blacksmithing, and other crafting activities and a folk festival the final weekend in May. The park offers modern amenities and bathhouses that border on cushy, although it appears a modest, one-story affair. Each shower stall has heat lamps, benches, and plenty of hot water.

Throughout these tours, we attempted to stay at state parks whenever feasible. With little exception, every park ranger loved his (or her) park and the whole of the state as much as I did and never hesitated to share local anecdotes. The bath houses, however, varied greatly, and without question I found the Stephen Foster bathhouses some of Florida's most well-apportioned.

Every night when we stopped the camper, we had a routine. While my traveling partner hooked up the water and electric and did the "man things" that needed doing, I found my shoes, clipped a leash on Calypso, and stretched her stubby legs and mine in a brisk walk around the park.

It is on these walks where I start to hear tales of snakes. Calypso is paying a downed tree trunk great interest when a couple with a dog of their own stops to tell me about a rattlesnake by the split rail fence about 40 feet away. Now, I don't expect everyone to know how to identify venomous snakes. People often mistake the non-venomous king snake for the deadly coral snake. The two snakes have mostly the same color bands but in different order. Rhymes should help you remember: "red touch yellow, kill a fellow" and "red touch black, friend to Jack," but the one time I saw a coral snake, in my thrill and panic I couldn't recall if it was "red touch black, friend to Jack" or "if his nose is black,

he's a friend to Jack," so I can understand how people might get confused about some snakes. Rattlesnakes aren't one of those snakes, though. I believe this couple's warning. After that I see snakes behind every leaf and under every log in that park, and poor Calypso – bred to go into holes and pull out badgers – doesn't understand why we complete our nightly walk on the paved portion of the path.

The next morning we head south. The Santa Fe River, a tributary to the Suwannee, loops around the state in this area, disappearing at one point. For three miles the river travels underground, disappearing northeast of O'Leno State Park by Interstate 75 and poking its head up for air at River Rise Preserve State Park, southeast of the intersection of county highway 778 and US 41. O'Leno State Park offers typically extraordinary experiences for this area of the state: birds ranging from tiny sparrow-shaped things to owls, mammals like deer and otter, and foliage in abundance. The park once ran through the town of Leno, founded in 1800, but when the railroad went around the town instead of through it, the town withered. By 1896 it was a ghost town, although people from nearby towns gathered at "Old Leno" for swimming and picnics. In 1935 the Florida Forest Service bought the land on which the town once stood, and while Stetson Kennedy and Zora Neale Hurston toured the state for the Federal Writer's Project, the Works Project Administration hired the unemployed workers of High Springs, six miles away, to build a training camp. The camp included a dining hall, tower, and suspension bridge and was intended to train people who wanted to go into the forestry industry. This lasted for two summers, until the Forestry Service turned the park over to the state park system, making O'Leno one of the first parks in the state.⁷⁴

Today the suspension bridge still creaks and groans as I move across it, the river far below me. The water level does not rise, I note, as we travel south.

Section B: Williston to Tampa

“From highlands rich in phosphate deposits, the route passes through fertile valleys into a thinly settled region, dotted with ponds and stump-filled clearings, and on to Tampa, cigar capital of the United States, manifesting marked Latin influences.”⁷⁵

Here bumps and hills begin to straighten themselves into level roads. This is horse country; the tell-tale double fence gives away the four-footed gold found within. Williston and surrounding areas boast over 1,100 horse farms.⁷⁶ South of Williston existed Juliette, the counterpart to the slightly-farther-south Romeo.

“Juliette was named, as was Romeo, for a local legend similar to that in the Shakespearean play; one of the lovers lived here and the other at what is now Romeo. The misspelling of the name was not intentional.”⁷⁷

Romeo still has a listing on maps, as does Juliette, but the towns have little more than a fun history and the odd church. Between the two, Rainbow Springs State Park attracts kayakers, tubers, snorkelers, and flower fans.

“Rainbow Springs, with a flow of 421,000,000 gallons per day, carry off nearly 600 tons of solids in solution daily. At least 32 varieties of underwater plants grow on the rock bottom, and 18 varieties of turtles and 37 different kinds of fish inhabit the crystal-clear depths. The multicolored prisms sparkling in the waters when the sun is high have given them their name; the effect is caused by the deposit of minerals in solution on the sides of

*the pool. The springs have an attractive setting, with high banks, green slopes, and trees.*⁷⁸”

First a phosphate pit and later a privately owned attraction that included glass-bottom boat tours and tree-top monorail tours, the state park closed after traffic repeatedly chose the Interstate over back roads. From the mid-1970s until 1990, the park succumbed to nature, native plants overtaking the manicured gardens, paths and zoo cages. In 1990 the state park service officially took over the park and still runs it today.⁷⁹

A sloping walking tour along flower-fringed brick paths takes guests past a man-made waterfall, the spring head, and a set of eerily overgrown zoo cages, remnants from when the park also had a small zoo. The almost-Victorian feel of some of the gardens falls into wildflower-lined trails at the park’s edges. Volunteers maintain all the flowers and gardens.

Further down the road, Brooksville awaits, as does Miss Kitty’s. Brooksville, once a stop on a stagecoach line, has cobblestone streets, two-story Victorian wooden houses, and trees galore. Thick oak trees and thick wisps of moss set the tone for headstones, some of which date to the mid-1800s. Today the city maintains a cemetery advisory council. The cemetery is east of the town’s center on Olmes.

South of Brooksville the road slants toward the west, angling for Tampa. Within miles the road loses the wooded feel and takes on a more suburban tone, with chain grocers, planned housing communities, and shopping centers.

Section C: Tampa to Fort Myers, Old US 41

Author's Note: In the original Guide, the 40-mile stretch of road between Tampa and Palmetto was Tour 4a and US 541. Today, it is US 41. The original Tour 4 jogged east and ran down a stretch of what is now US 301 before rejoining the tour south of Palmetto. In the interest of simplification, Tour 4 continues here as an uninterrupted trip down US 41, including the former Tour 4a. Tour 4A is now 4D and describes the road between Ruskin and Palmetto.

“Between Tampa and Naples, US 41 roughly parallels Florida's west coast, though for the most part it runs inland, out of sight of the Gulf of Mexico. Touching the Gulf at Palmetto, the route enters a highly productive truck-garden section, passes through Sarasota with its art museum and winter headquarters of the world's largest circus, and reaches Venice, one-time boom city. US 41 crosses Charlotte Harbor at a town of the same name, once the haunt of famous pirates, and continues southeast to Fort Myers, with its towering royal palms, on the left bank of the tidal Caloosahatchee River. Skirting alternate stretches of salt marshes and thick stands of pine, the highway reaches Naples and a section of the Tamiami Trail (US 94), connecting Miami with the west coast.”⁸⁰

This stretch of US 41 runs nowhere near the Gulf of Mexico today, and it's hard to picture where it ever did – Pinellas County wholly and completely gets in the way, although the road does offer the occasional view of tributaries that feed Tampa Bay and, on a clear day, the Bay herself. South of Tampa the road runs closer to the Gulf, but marinas and barrier islands all but block the view.

As the road crosses the Hillsborough River and runs through Ybor City's history-and-nightclub mecca, urbanism awakes. Cubans once planned a revolution in Ybor City; now, the Columbia still serves Spanish dishes in its original building, but visitors to the city are more likely to take in a movie than hear a lector read aloud to the cigar workers.

And yet her history keeps its grasp. Ybor City has a National Historic Landmark District, which means entire blocks, not just one or two buildings, have history worth preserving. The Ybor City Museum Society works to preserve the city's heritage, but the architecture, roadways, and signs all signify that this is not a cookie cutter city.

“Walk down Seventh Avenue [...] and feel yourself transported to a place in another time. Brick streets are lined with sidewalks of hexagonal concrete pavers and old-fashioned, cast-iron street lamps. Buildings present ornate porticos, decorative brickwork, handmade wrought-iron balconies, and ornamental tile work. A few small, plain workers' cottages, once home to Ybor City's cigar workers, have been preserved. Mutual aid society clubhouses indicate the importance of benevolent organizations to Ybor City's immigrant population. On a quiet corner lies a small park dedicated to Cuban poet and revolutionary José Martí. The park is a reminder of Martí's efforts to gain support for the cause of Cuban freedom in the 1890s. These historic sites speak of Ybor City's intriguing past.⁸¹”

In parts of Hillsborough County, the road runs close to the Alafia River. Cytec Industries, after mining phosphate and forever altering the landscape with draglines and heavy equipment, donated the husk of what the *Guide* describes as an area “wooded with magnolia and bay” over to the state in 1996⁸². The state recreated a “second nature,” or a

re-created wild area, for the park, and mountain bikers now use the steeply graded trails created by mining.

The lakes, too, are a byproduct of mining, but the Alafia River runs its course through the park. In college, I saw my first-ever manatee while paddling the river, and screamed like a girl when his powerful grey fluke slapped the black water of the river not two feet from my canoe. It was one of my first paddles on a blackwater river, and not being able to see what lurked beneath, coupled with the stern paddler's inability to keep me from nosing into the spider-lined river banks, had me on edge. In my ignorance I did not expect to find a manatee on a freshwater river, but since the Alafia drains to Tampa Bay, I should not have been surprised.

Geographically, the river runs close to the Hillsborough River, and for years it played second fiddle to the Hillsborough, at least in terms of size. In the early part of the new millennium, though, Tampa Bay Water, an agency created to settle the water wars raging in the Tampa Bay area, started combining Hillsborough River water with groundwater, or water pumped from the Floridan Aquifer well beneath the spongy limestone.

Those water wars centered around groundwater and wells near burgeoning suburbs; homeowners complained that groundwater withdrawals from those wellfields caused both their own private wells and lakes to run dry and sinkholes to suck the ground into the earth. As the debate raged, the West Coast Regional Water Supply Authority – which would later become Tampa Bay Water– tried to help. The agency coordinated water supply and delivery for three counties (Pinellas, Pasco, and Hillsborough) and three cities (New Port Richey, St. Petersburg, and Tampa) while calming tensions.⁸³ The

solution was a compromise – the area still gets drinking water from the Floridan Aquifer, but Tampa Bay Water, which runs the facilities, also uses an often-functioning, allegedly state-of-the-art desalination plant and surface water from the Hillsborough River.

When you consider that the area depended wholly on groundwater for drinking water in 1998⁸⁴ but used the Hillsborough River for 28 percent of the drinking water supply in 2008⁸⁵ and expects to use it for almost 52 percent in 2012, it makes sense that the Alafia River now exceeds the neighboring Hillsborough in the amount of water it pushes to Tampa Bay.⁸⁶ For paddlers, though, either river will do nicely, although the meandering wild Hillsborough is best known for its real gators than manatee. By “real” I mean gators easily longer than my 11 foot kayak; the saurian king of the swamp unquestionably owns the Hillsborough. These green lovely demons, I’m convinced, winter in the Everglades and summer along the Hillsborough.

I’d like to say a I have a healthy respect for the American alligator, but in reality I have solid chicken-hearted fear. It’s not simply the gators ability to grab me, drag me underwater, twirl me in its infamous “death roll” until my lungs flood with river water, and leave me to decay in its mucky underwater kitchen before rending the marrow from my bones in a gruesome tasting party that bothers me about the gator. It’s that the gator has evolved over millions of years to do one thing only: make more alligators. Despite friendly mascots representing state football teams and tiny baby gators on display at roadside attractions, gators are friendly only to other gators who can help them procreate, and even then, the pairing isn’t exactly a expensive-wine-and-lobster affair. It’s a

biological impetus, driven by a need to survive and almost freakish in its singlemindedness.

But back to US 41, where down the road a ways another type of Florida curiosity awaits: Gibsonton and the International Independent Showmen's Association, or ILSA. For those of you not familiar with Gibsonton, allow me to explain: Carnies and circus acts.

Gibsonton didn't always serve, as it does now, as a winter home for showmen. The larger-than-life boot, the breakfast eatery called "Giant's Camp," the midget mayor... in a state surrounded by the bizarre, the extreme, the freakish, Gibsonton wasn't just another carnival roadside stop. It was where the carnies went – and still do – to get a break from the circus, be it a Florida circus or any number of Greatest Shows on Earth across the country.

Of course, before the carnies came, there were pirates.

"Gibsonton, a small trailer camp and filling station town on the southern bank of the Alafia River, was named for the pioneer Gibson family. Residents have often searched for buried pirate gold in the vicinity. One group, in possession of an old chart, unearthed a skeleton sitting upright, and below it a metal disk with the points of the compass and a needle marked on its face; in the excitement one of the party snatched up the compass without noting the direction indicated by the needle. Although many days were spent in excavating the premises, no treasure was found."⁸⁷

Gibsonton has no pirates today, and the town, an unincorporated affair, lacks the carnival splendor described by *Tampa Bay Times* columnist Jeff Klinkenberg:

“Everything is larger than life at Giant's Camp, an otherwise modest eatery on the Tamiami Trail in southern Hillsborough County. There's the size 22 sneaker allegedly worn by the late Al Tomaini. Then there are those biscuits, twice the size of hockey pucks but tasting more of the divine,” Klinkenberg wrote in the fall of 2005. “The dour carnival sideshow attraction known as the Lobster Boy, born with pincers instead of hands, was no stranger to Miss Margaret's cooking. Percilla the Monkey Girl, and her husband, Emmitt the Alligator Man, also were regulars at the lunch counter. Same goes for Melvin Burkhardt, the Human Blockhead, who pounded nails up his nose without damaging his taste buds.”⁸⁸

Today, Gibsonton has a collection of homes on par with any Hillsborough County subdivision. Pockets unlike the rest of the world remain, of course, but you can easily find a three bedroom, two bath grey concrete block home with an attached garage, complete with a manicured lawn and immature oak trees.

Every year, though, ILSA meets for its annual convention, over 4,000 members descending on the unincorporated town of Gibsonton. For that week, they, not the soccer moms and bank employees who live down the street, are back in the heyday of the circus.⁸⁹

Down the road another giant makes an annual pilgrimage to the warm waters of the Apollo Beach power plant: manatees.

“Well, that’s not very interesting!” one man exclaims as I peer down at a herd of manatee basking in Tampa Bay. He has a point – they don’t flip in the air like dolphin, or

sit up and beg for mackerel like walrus, but whether or not a group of manatee are interesting, I suppose, depends on how you look at it. When I was a kid, we learned about manatee in textbooks and slide shows, but as for hands-on experiences like the TECO viewing center? They just weren't out there.

Manatees are warm-blooded marine mammals that look, at best, like gray or brown blobs with tiny heads and even tinier eyes. They have all-but-useless front flippers, a semicircular tail fluke that does the real work of moving them through the water, and a substantial amount of body fat. They feed on aquatic plants, so they're usually hanging out in shallow salt or brackish water, and they are notorious for not being able to get out of their own way – or out of the way of boaters. Most adults have propeller scars on their backs; the less lucky ones don't survive a tangle with a prop. Manatees are considered an endangered species.⁹⁰

The state first started trying to protect manatees in 1893. In 1972, the creatures received federal protection from the newly enacted Marine Mammal Protection Act, which makes it illegal to essentially interfere with the behavior of dolphins and other toothed whales, manatee, and other marine mammals.⁹¹ The Endangered Species Act, another federal law, offered further protection in 1973, and in 1978 the state passed the Florida Manatee Sanctuary Act.⁹²

These protections could not have prevented the winter of 2010. January of 2010 saw the coldest recorded temperatures, both air and land, in the state. Manatee, who prefer their water a toasty 72 degrees or better, did not fare well: of the 500-plus manatee reported dead in 2010, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission reported

that almost half of those manatees (244) died from hypothermia⁹³. These numbers are five times the average annual manatee deaths.

At the Tampa Energy Company power plant (TECO) off US 41 in Apollo Beach, the coal-burning energy plant uses saltwater for cooling, then discharges the water into Tampa Bay. When the rest of the water in Tampa Bay drops below 68°, the manatees head for the hot tub-like basin. The waters grow thick with manatee, and so many people come to see the manatee that TECO built a boardwalk and “manatee viewing station” for the people who showed up clamoring to see them. The viewing center – which expanded to include a gift shop, small-ish butterfly garden, and a hurricane simulator – opens November 1 every year and closes on April 15.

“Ruskin, a co-operative tomato-growing settlement at the mouth of the Little Manatee River, was founded in 1910 as a socialist colony by George M. Miller, Chicago lawyer and educator, and named for John Ruskin, English author and critic. Of the 6,000 acres purchased, 600 were set aside for a proposed Ruskin College, its curriculum to be modeled somewhat on that of Oxford University. Students were to have four hours of schooling and, quite unlike Oxford, four hours of farm work a day. The plans were abandoned at the outbreak of the World War.

“An annual Tomato Festival is held here in spring when prize vegetables are displayed, a pageant staged, and the town's most popular girl selected as queen to preside over festivities.”⁹⁴

Ruskin remains, to this day, a tomato town. The tomato festival, after a three-decade hiatus, resumed in the early part of the new millennium, and the town still crowns a Tomato Queen (and King).⁹⁵

Cockroach Bay, west of Ruskin, was noted in the guide as having Indian remains. Today the area is known as the “least disturbed” part of the Tampa Bay.⁹⁶ As a state-designated aquatic preserve, it harbors young fish, wading shorebirds, and corals. The preserve also includes oysters, seagrass, and spring fed, underwater caves.

The preserve starts at the mouth of the Little Manatee River and runs west 2000 feet into Tampa Bay. Offshore, mangrove islands make up part of the preserve.

In 1939, Sun City, according to the *Guide*, was a ghost town with 85 residents.

“[It] was founded at the height of the boom in 1924 by promoters with confident hopes of luring the motion-picture industry to Florida. The large studio built at that time is now occupied by the Sun City School. When Sun City was yet a glowing dream, there hung in the studio an oil painting of the metropolis as it would appear when it had supplanted Hollywood. A number of weathered gray shacks in a state of disrepair are occupied by Negroes. The little railroad station with a still-bright sign reading 'Sun City,' a large gray powerhouse, and a long warehouse are falling to ruin; nothing else remains. The flatlands on every side are overgrown with palmetto and scrubby grass.”⁹⁷

Today the “ghost town” moved slightly down the road and metamorphosed into an “active adult living area” where “volunteer hosts” escort potential buyers around Sun City’s “amenities campus.” Sun City Center has a team of volunteers who run the community association and permission from Hillsborough County to drive unlicensed

golf cars on streets “all over town, so we can shop from Beall’s department store to Walmart with dozens of stores in between.⁹⁸”

At Rubonia, US 41 intersects US 19 (as Interstate 275) and circles back up towards Pinellas County via the Sunshine Skyway Bridge (See Tour 6). Slightly west of Rubonia, Terra Ceia Island is the final jumping-off point to Pinellas, isolated from the mainland by a mangrove thicket and Terra Ceia Bay.

Here, the Citrus Place stands, one of a handful of remaining citrus soldiers. Ben Tillett opened The Citrus Place in the 1970s as a “You Pick” grapefruit business. When citrus canker struck his groves a few years later he could only allow workers to go into the groves. The Citrus Place became a packing house and ultimately progressed to a packing and shipping business. Today, the Tillett family still owns the grove and the shop in front that sells citrus, juice, jams, jellies, and fruit sections, although he is a dying breed. He admits that the Florida citrus industry is coughing a death rattle, despite what the Florida Department of Citrus’ marketing says. Tropicana and Minute Maid get much of their juice from Brazil. Tasting fresh Florida juice, much less unpasteurized and locally grown and squeezed juice, will be something people tell their grandchildren about, not something they do with their grandchildren.

Tillet recently started selling clams raised by a local clam farmer, Curtis Hemmel, who harvests an average of 300 million clams (including clam seeds) every year.⁹⁹ Tillet displays the clams proudly in the Citrus Place, pulling out a newspaper article about the clam farmer and talking about how the farmer grew them “right here, in Terra Ceia Bay.”

He assures customers that if there are any left at the end of the week – although he is quick to say there never are – Hemmel takes them back to the bay so they don't die.

It's not oranges, but the clams pays the bills.

As US 41 moves south, the density of box stores, chain stores, and drive-through windows increases inversely with the latitude. The route crosses the Manatee River at Palmetto. On the other side of the river the road intersects with State Road 64, which leads you away from the detritus of US 41 towards Anna Maria Island, a “resort at the northern extremity of Anna Maria Key, (which) consists of many cottages in a jungle setting.”¹⁰⁰

Much has changed on Anna Maria Island since 1939. The palm savannas surrendered to beach cottages, and while the island herself rises but a few feet above the warm, turquoise Gulf, bungalows at Anna Maria's edge prop themselves like mangroves, resting just out of reach of salt and waves.

The spirit of the island remains untouched. Sand and shells abound, and the entire low-lying tropical jungle has bursts of blazing pink bougainvillea cascading over fences and dazzling orange birds of paradise standing guard along walkways. While the other side of Tampa Bay boasts the most densely populated county in the state, the pink Don CeSar in the distance fades against the tropical landscape of colors and the ever-permeating salt air.

You can draw the silhouette of much of Florida's coast with condominium-and hotel-colored crayons. Not so here; everything on this seven-mile strip of paradise –even

her stilt homes –is short. The island draws tourists without needing tall hotels and convention centers; visitors can make their way around the island’s shell-lined streets and paths using foot or pedal power. The island has no chain restaurants, and while you can get milk at a local market, you’ll need to head to the next town over for a supermarket.

The towns along the barrier island here run parallel to the coast and US 41. Holmes Beach, Siesta Key, Longboat Key – all these towns are a study in understatement, especially as compared with the McMansions and condominiums scoring the barrier islands to their north. The beaches here are tropical shades of aqua and ultramarine, the sand tanned cream by the sun.

West of US 41 on State Road 684, Cortez is not quite the tourist beach paradise lying east of it. Cortez is a fishing village, littered with docks, wood boats, and fishing boat captains. Fish nets spread across the yards; the area has an annual seafood festival to celebrate its heritage as a seafood mecca.

Back on the mainland, the road cleaves Sarasota, pulling along the now-expected collection of franchises. Off the main road, Sarasota Jungle Gardens lets people scratch a Moluccan cockatoo on its neck and then watch an exotic animal show, complete with the traditional “bird on a bicycle” (and one on roller skates) and Madagascar hissing cockroaches. The park also has a flamboyance of flamingos, a reptile show, and a wooded park.

Sarasota also has the John and Mabel Ringling Museum of Art, the Ringling mansion (called the Ca’ d’Zan), Clown College, and a circus museum. Sarasota used to be the Barnum and Bailey circus’ winter headquarters.

Venice's Beach, west of the town's small airport, attracts beachcombers and divers looking for shark's teeth. Fossilized shark's teeth wash up on the shore of the beach. SCUBA divers also find larger teeth just off the beach, although a walk during an ebbing high tide reveals the black triangular prizes, too. Sophisticated teeth seekers may use a wood frame with a piece of screen stapled across to sift the sand for the prehistoric treasures.

US 41 turns east here, crossing the Peace River, cutting through Port Charlotte, and traveling over Charlotte Harbor. To the west, Rotonda sits, an odd, almost-populated wagon wheel shaped town. In the 1960s, developers planned a circular community. They cleared the land, installed underground utilities, set up water and sewer infrastructure, and named streets. If you build it, they seemed to believe, they will come. Which people did, mostly. Anecdotal history suggests that 75 percent of Rotonda filled with higher-end homes and vacation rentals.

The other 25 percent – all spatially concentrated in an area called Rotonda Sands – did not, rows of platted lots and streets transforming from neatly manicured lots to overgrown parcels of Florida wilderness. Locals suggested that the streets lining the barren lots made excellent landing strips for those looking to bring drugs into the country. The town never had a chance to have a heyday, yet it had a ghost town.

Rotonda Sands had another chance in the housing boom in the early part of the new millennium, and people started building homes on the wild empty lots. Hurricane Charley in 2004 and the housing market crash a few years later halted the development, leaving the “few people who actually finished their houses and moved in before the crash

acting as its lonely caretakers¹⁰¹” in a pseudo-ghost town. In 2012, Rotonda Sands had finally started to finish development as people started turning the abandoned husks of concrete and roof tresses into homes.

Back on US 41, Port Charlotte – new since the 1939 *Guide* – rests on the edge of Charlotte Harbor. The *Guide* calls Charlotte Harbor a fishing village; today, it attracts sun seekers, anglers and snowbirds.

Through this area US 41 alternates stretches of green-lined roadway, growing ever more swampy, and blocks of shops and parking lots. Not far off US 41, an almost-forgotten island, connected to the mainland by the Matlacha Bridge. The mangroves fall away to reveal a gulf coast fishing village peopled with artists, fishermen, and locals enchanted with old Florida. To the south, Sanibel is the prom queen of gulf coast islands, but here Pine Island is her mangrove-encrusted tomboy little sister. Instead of beaches, walls of state-protected red mangroves surround and prop the 34-square mile island up on green water, preserving the calm, slow lifestyle of the 9,000 folks who call Pine Island home.

Pine Island supports a thriving arts community, most evident along Pine Island Road with its loose groups of art galleries and restaurants, housed in shacks splashed in coral, yellow, and pink and topped with corrugated tin roofs.

To most of Florida’s visitors, seeking the theme park and beach experience, there is nothing to see here.

Nothing on Pine Island calls to mind other Florida coastal towns; those root-heavy trees protect, too, the island's roots from developers and droves of tourists seeking New York, Ohio, or Michigan-ified Florida.

This is the Florida that once permeated the lower parts of the state but now lies forgotten, buried deep in the muck of shopping malls, time-shares, and miniature golf courses. The people? They are rednecks, good ol' boys mocked by Yankee heritage. Here is the land Florida forgot to love and then just forgot.

Nothing to see here, really. Instead of cuisine folks serve platters of food, and they serve grits but not escargot, pork in lieu of Pacific Rim. Visitors can take fishing trips or cast a line at the Matlacha bridge, known for almost a century as the World's Fishingest Bridge, but don't even think about asking for sushi.

People come here and find solace as the salty muddy waters calms and quenches. The entire island, including Bokeelia, Pineland, and St. James City as well as Matlacha, is a dolorous souvenir of yesteryear's Florida. Developers either forgot or couldn't sell this nugget of land to the highest bidder before the government hit the brakes on the dredge and sell dream.

Nothing to see here, unless you care to travel south for Sanibel's rich yet quaint lifestyle, head east to Fort Myers for the beach, or further south to Naples for a new Florida experience. Take a boat west to Cabbage Key. Go east to Palm Beach for glitz, but know that Pine Island's too far off the interstate to travel, especially since it foolishly lacks shopping malls, Holiday Inns, and putt-putt or other golf courses. Just a bunch of crusty fishermen and shopkeepers, not much else to see here.

Nothing to see here, nothing at all. Just the present the rest of Florida's beaches traded for the future, and the past it sold before the state even knew it had it. Green and red and aquamarine and silver explode around the island as the sunset lights the streets, palm groves, and trailers. Shrimp nets draped across the boats behind homes remind Islanders of their heritage and, hopefully, their future.

Nope, nothing to see here.

Before the state passed a ban on net fishing, Pine Island was a thriving fisherman's town. Today the island has changed.

"I moved to Pine Island in 1990," Charlie Williams, a career fishermen, says. "There were eight fish houses and over 350 fishing families. Then came the gill net ban in '95. Now there is one fish house and 90 percent of all those families are gone...divorced,foreclosed and dead.....really sad. Multiple generations of true Floridians wiped out by lies and the ignorance of voters in the state of Florida!"¹⁰²

Like other mullet fishermen, Charlie – CW to his friends – is still angry about the net ban. They argue that it wasn't the small-time fishermen like themselves – one man operations in small skiffs – that hurt the population, but the big fishing machines.

North Fort Myers is one the banks of the Caloosahatchee River, a river with origins almost 70 miles east in Lake Okeechobee. The Caloosahatchee marks the northwestern edge of the remaining Everglades. Boat captains who wish to cut across the state rather than around its southern tip run through Redfish Pass, into the Caloosahatchee, and through a series of three locks before they reach the Lake. Captains reach the first lock,

the Franklin, nine miles from the Fort Myers Marina. The next lock, Ortuna, is 22 miles east, and the final lock before the Big Water is yet another 16 miles. The locks help keep water in the Okeechobee; the water levels get progressively higher as the river gets closer to the Lake. Without the locks, both to the east and west, the surrounding towns would flood. The locks also allows the water to flow south to the Everglades; without them the glades could dry out.

In Fort Myers, US 41 explodes into splashes of neon and paint, with the road expanding from two lanes to four and the shops growing larger and more national in nature. Here Thomas Edison and Henry Ford both built winter estates.

*“Edison came to Fort Myers in 1886, in search of a suitable filament for the incandescent lamp he was later to perfect. Thinking that the fiber of the bamboo plant that grew abundantly throughout the town would answer his purpose, he established the Edison Estate, where he spent many months in experimentation, but the bamboo was not used in the perfected electric bulb.”*¹⁰³

*“Many stories are told about Edison and his work in Fort Myers. When the electric lamp had been perfected, he is said to have offered to install free lights in the town, provided the residents would supply the poles and wires. But the town council rejected the proposal, because the lights might keep the cattle awake.”*¹⁰⁴

Henry Ford and Harvey Firestone funded his work, along with the federal government; Edison was certain he could find a way to produce rubber. He did, but nothing came of it.

South of Fort Myers in Estero, the Koreshan State Park is our stop for the night. The Koreshans were, to put it objectively, irregular— even for Florida. When the first *Guide* was published, Estero was the capital for the Koreshan Unity.

“That the universe is within the earth, the flesh is immortal through reincarnation, and perfection will be reached when the sexes blend into one everlasting human entity are tenets of this faith.”¹⁰⁵

The cult, as the *Guide* refers to it, also believed in celibacy – at least for most of its followers – and, accordingly, believers died out at the end of the twentieth century. In the 1960s, the last four believers deeded the property to the state. Today the state runs the historic site as a state park.

While the state park has done an (objectively) remarkable job of preserving the history of a religion many called a cult, what stands out for me is a gopher tortoise.

See, we pulled in here with a pile of dirty laundry. After Calypso’s twilight walk, Barry and I head to the bathhouse and its shiny white washer to put in a load of shorts and grubby t-shirts. When we beat our way back through a barely-cleared path of palms and berries, we see a lazy gopher tortoise lazing about at our campsite. Calypso is both excited and perplexed by this bit of Florida wildlife; she circles and barks at the tortoise, to no avail: it continues its steady but not-so-fast trek back into the palm thicket.

Later, we sit and enjoy a sunset drink as we watch the palms. After the sometimes-hellish globalized path of US 41, the palm thickets and heavy Florida air make a nice, Florida-centric break from the reality of the state’s south urban centers. As we discuss the underbrush and gopher tortoise, a green snake appears on a saw palmetto

frond. He is gone as soon as he appears, but as night falls the stars are easily more abundant than the chain and box stores we passed on our trek into this strange homage to a weird New Jerusalem park.

South of Fort Myers, Naples joins with the old US 94, or the stretch of the Tamiami Trail that runs east to Miami (See Tour 5).

Tour 4D: Between Ruskin and Palmetto

“Left on this road to a junction with Lithia Road, 3 m.; R. on Lithia Road 12 m. to the Bell Shoals Bridge across the Alafia River (Sp., oleander). The stream here is 30 feet deep, its high banks wooded with magnolia and bay. The magnolia tree has dark green leaves, 5 to 8 inches long and 2 to 3 inches wide. Its smooth brown trunk climbs to a height of 80 feet; large fragrant flowers with white petals and yellow centers appear during summer.”

I wish I could say the road still looked like this here. The road that once ran from the Alafia River to Parrish now cuts through Brandon, a popular suburb in Hillsborough County. If Brandon ever incorporated into a city, it would be one of the largest in the state.

Bell Shoals, the setting for a Jules Verne novel, is nothing more than a part of larger Brandon.

“Bell Shoals was the locale of Jules Verne's fantastic novel, From the Earth to the Moon (1865). Here the 900-foot cannon was supposed to have been cast and erected. In

the first edition of the novel the man-bearing projectile was not properly aimed, and remained whirling in a vast orbit around the moon. Readers objected so strenuously to this tragic ending that in later editions Verne brought the adventurers back to earth unharmed. For 60 years a semi-buried piece of machinery on the banks of the river was believed by some to be a fragment of the gigantic cannon. On being unearthed, it was found to be a 10-foot steel shaft with vanes attached at the ends. Although the origin and use of the shaft is unknown, it probably was a part of an old water-driven grist mill that served pioneers in this region. The shaft is on exhibition at the Colson farm, a mile south of Turkey Creek School on Pleasant Grove Road.”¹⁰⁶

Today the area is a collection of shopping plazas, elementary schools, and planned communities. Ellenton, to the south, has an outlet mall. There are few outlying ranches and the remaining strongholds of farming are fewer and fewer with the passing years.

Tour 5: Naples to Miami

*"On the highway, especially in the early morning after night traffic has taken its toll, lie the mangled corpses of snakes, which in large numbers crawl out of the swamps to sleep in the warm road and the bodies of raccoons and other small animals crushed when blinded by headlights."*¹⁰⁷

As I valiantly tried to retrace the *Guide* routes across Florida, my largest task became tracking down the roads. Florida, in her infinitely shortsighted leadership and capriciously-natured development, gave little thought to her history until lately. Oh, we have countless exploration narratives chronicling various expeditions, but for a state with such a rich history (think five flags, oldest city in America, and every truly fine scandal of the past two decades), we could have kept better track of things.

While plotting out the routes I found no indication that anyone had kept track of *which* roads used to go *where*. Simply going by mileage on Google Maps wouldn't work, either, I discovered, because, especially in more popular and therefore more congested areas like Tampa, development and road widenings resulted in so much change that I might find the road as far as a half-mile away from where the *Guide* writers left in in 1939.

Fortunately, the *Guide* not only used mileage (only helpful, by the way, if you start at the beginning and followed the route exactly, as it didn't list distance between two cities but the distance from the starting point), the writers the listed cities they roads included. I used those cities – all still there – and marked the routes that way.

Which is how I figured out that US 94 is what we today call the Tamiami Trail, or, at least, the part of US 41 that stretches from Naples to Miami. The Tampa to Miami stretch of US 41 is the entirety of the Tamiami trail (TAMPA to MIAMI), but the east/west portion of that route is what Mr. Kennedy labeled Tour Five.

“The Tamiami Trail was conceived by Captain J. F. Jaudon of Ochopee, who in 1916 completed surveys of the route,” the *Guide* explains. The Everglades comprised much of this area of the state then – and now. In Carl Hiaasen's *Skinny Dip*, his hero makes the acerbic yet not wholly untrue comment, “River of grass, my ass,” paying homage to the way writers twist the truth to pay the bills. When Marjory Stoneman Douglas wrote *Everglades: River of Grass* in 1947, certainly she had a reverence for the glades, but she knew damn well there was no river. But she also knew the *Rivers of America* series wanted for writers, and she had some writing acclaim – her father founded the *Miami Herald*, and, in perhaps one of Florida's best arguments favoring nepotism, gave his daughter a job. So when she approached publishers Rinehart and Company, she knew her way around the typewriter. She had the skills and the reputation. The problem was, she did not have a river.

The Everglades, you see, are a mucky floodplain. That description doesn't really do the rather unique ecosystem justice. They make a muddy mixture of two thousand shades

of green and an equal number of types of grotty soil in a million different shades of strata. The water – at least, in parts where the South Florida Water Management System hasn't allowed developers and agribusiness to alter the water flow to ensure the world has enough cookie-cutter subdivisions and refined white sugar – blankets the muck with a thin, tea-colored veil only a few inches thick, but miles across, more a flood than a river. Or a mudflat. But until the book publishers came looking for contributions to the “Mudflats of America” series, Marjory knew that she'd have to find a way to make the Everglades into a river.

I do not judge Marjory, not too harshly. Of all of Florida's Marjories, I would love come back as Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, but, in reality, I would likely return to earth as Marjory Stoneman Douglas, looking for a way – any way – to get my writing published and make enough of a living as writer that I never had to go back to our old life, married to a con man and cold in a great barren north. I would not have hesitated to pitch my book about the river of grass. I do not blame her. How could I, even if I didn't reluctantly identify so with her? Her book convinced the world that the Everglades contained something more than a dangerous, murky swamp that bred malaria. *River of Grass* convinced the world that Glades held the key to more than a wide, wet expanse of future subdivisions.

It could not, however, accurately portray of the 'Glades to anyone who failed to read the book. People operate under all sorts of misconceptions about the Everglades: the worst of these describe the Everglades as a river, with banks on either side. In truth, the Everglades is wet land, bordered on its south by the aquamarine shallows of Florida Bay,

its east by the cool, deep cobalt Atlantic, its west by the placid green Gulf of Mexico, and the north by the “dinner and show” motif of central Florida’s performing killer whales and short, fabulous, gay men dressed as the world’s most famous mouse.

Those borders aside, the Glades offer us a wondrous, glorious example of what most of the Sunshine State looked like before we knew it as the Sunshine State. I think of them as Robert Frost did the woods: “lovely, dark, and deep,” although not deep in the traditional sense: the spongy limestone aquifer teeters dangerously close to the surface.

The Everglades, before we called them such, attracted the explorers of one main variety: greedy. Orchid hunters braved the swamp¹⁰⁸ to gather rail cars filled with orchids; plume hunters hunted roseate spoonbills, egrets and herons into near-extinction. Only after those things did the world decide perhaps there we could invade the Glades to find a better way to cross South Florida. Of course, the advent of the automobile helped tremendously, although most of Florida remained skeptical enough that, in keeping with her strength, Florida allowed for a public relations stint to let the world know how safely it could cross the then-US 94 and future Tamiami Trail.

“Lee county citizens organized and dispatched a motorcade over the proposed route to arouse public interest and show the feasibility of the undertaking,” the *Guide* explains.¹⁰⁹

Take note of the word “proposed” route. I don’t understand – and the *Guide* does not at all demystify – how the motorcade intended to safely cross this *proposed* route. While the water ran only a few inches deep and, perhaps, disappeared almost entirely in the dry season (the trailblazers left Fort Myers on April 4, 1923, when the water would

have been nice and low), the water doesn't present the true the problem in slogging across the 'Glades. The muck does, and muck, most years, does not dry out. No, muck stays mucky, hence the name.

Nevertheless, in a blind fit of almost wholly misguided optimism, our intrepid explorers left in a convoy of 10 cars and 23 men, led by two Indian guides (we can assume the *Guide* means local Miccosukee or Seminole men). They headed east, undeterred, we can assume, by threats of malaria, rattlesnakes, or gators.

“After a perilous three-week trip, during which they were reported lost several times, seven cars reached Miami, and the trail became the most discussed highway project in America,” Mr. Kennedy penned. I would think so; he makes no mention of what may have happened to the other three cars, although in her book, Ms. Douglas insists that when men died working on the Trail (disproving the myth that unusual manners of death in south Florida arrived with the drug cartels in the 1980s), workers buried the bodies as they went. Think about that for a moment: when you drive over the Tamiami Trail, travel across a road built, literally on the blood, sweat, and tears of the men who built it.

Nonetheless – perhaps *because* of these things – this is my favorite strip of south Florida road.

Most drivers heading to the Keys or back again take Interstate 75 for the west to east leg of the journey; this stretch, known as “Alligator Alley” offers a speedy and, since the state fenced the gators in on either side, safe route. Adventure seekers, backroads

fanatics, and Florida-philes, however, will not hear of this. The narrow, two-lane Tamiami Trail that cuts its way bravely across Florida's final frontier offers up the spirit and soul of old Florida.

One of my favorite drives in Florida is the one where I head south on US 41 and watch the Dollar General stores and 7-11s fall away and the globalism ultimately disappears. The businesses and development, after a spell, fade away and the bright green darkness of the Glades takes over. It is a physical and spiritual transition of the landscape. As the buildings surrender to the swamps and strands, so does the illusion that our state contains little more than three-for-ten dollar T-shirt shops, theme parks, and beach bars.

As we pass the last of the national minimarts, we spy a man and a woman sitting outside a gas station. What catches my eye first is a sign that announces, "Hold and Hug a Baby Gator!" I like to think I have grown somewhat inured to these attractions – every roadside wildlife exhibit worth its salt allows pale tourists to hold a hatchling or stroke the bumpy smooth inky green head of a juvenile so long as a rubber band holds its prehistoric pointy maw closed – I cringe at the idea of such an exhibit to hug a gator. Gators do not cuddle; they know the word loyal. Feed a gator every day of its life, a gator wrangler at Gatorland once told me, and, given the chance, it will still attack and, if possible, kill you. Gators, of all the prehistoric remnants crawling around today, still retain an ancient genetic survival instinct on parallel with no other. I do not fear gators irrationally; rather, I possess a healthy, learned fear of gators eating me or snatching my dog. Florida daily newspapers and "News of the Weird" columns across the country regularly run pieces about gators appearing everywhere from swamps to shopping malls

and snatching the unsuspecting dachshund, golden retriever, or horticulturist and killing it, hobbling it, or eating its arm.

Hugging, rubber band or not, therefore, is ill-advised.

The sign catches my attention; the couple sitting outside the “exhibit,” clearly doing their best to tempt passerby, holds it.

They look exceptionally comfortable, they and their twin gators, in what once-lovely dining room chairs. They do not look the sort to care about the plumpness of the padding in the high-backed chairs, yet there they sit in 1980s-era, peach chairs. In their laps, they each held a gator.

Not a baby gator, either, but more of a teenager. I do understand that rubber bands or a good quality tape will hold a gator’s jaws closed indefinitely. In all probability, the couple used tape to keep the gators’ jaws shut. We do not stop to ask; the end of this route holds the promise of the bleached limestone pearls nestled amongst the ultramarine Florida Keys.

When I first took my parents to the Florida Keys, I insisted we travel along the Trail. As a young girl we would take Sunday drives; my father would steer our 1976 maroon Buick down every last back road in Florida. Of course, many more existed then, roads unadorned with Dollar Generals and other depressingly auspicious signs of the apocalyptic homogenization of America and, more acutely, Florida. As my father operated a backhoe and bulldozer, helping Scarborough Construction lay water and sewer pipe along the southwest coast of Florida, I must look at the development pragmatically. Yes, he helped overdevelop of our corner of paradise, but he also loved what he

destroyed. He had a family to feed; Scarborough's parent company, Weyerhaeuser, paid for the bulk of my college tuition.

Today I get to show my dad some of the least altered roads in the state. West of Ochopee, I spy a frigate bird that doesn't look right. She has a forked tail like a frigate but a white body and shorter wing span. I hold my breath, quite literally, in disbelief, and grab the somewhat limited *Audubon Field Guide to Florida*. I find the page I need and let my breath out. It IS, it is a swallow-tailed kite. Janisse Ray wrote about them in *Tracking Desire*.

I see another, and I can hardly believe it, and turn in my seat to explain to my parents what they see and why it matters – mostly because I never saw one before – when my mother tells us she sees others. As my mother often identifies ospreys as eagles and catbirds as mockingbirds, I don't quite believe her until I turn my head back to the skies above the Everglades and see a flock of at least 15, perhaps more.

My mother compares these graceful white arcs of avian beauty to stealth bombers. While I tend to see beauty in anything arising from the Glades, her comparison probably has a truer ring to it. Everything about the Glades, from the political rape of the land to the less-metaphorical struggles between the creatures who live there, is a sort of war.

The sawgrass, trees, and sheets of water covering the Everglades hide some pretty fertile muck. Coupled with subtropical temperatures and air that, on a dry day you would still call "moist," and you have two immediate results: things decompose at an alarming rate, and when they do, things grow out of the decomposed soil at another alarming rate.

Under precisely these conditions, delicate orchids, sturdy oaks, and scores of bird colonies thrive.

Sugar cane, philodendrons, and every vegetable from acorn squash to zucchini thrive in this rich black mire, and farmers wasted no time hitching their wagons to these conditions. The only problem, really, was the water. Either farmers lacked enough when they needed it, because it kept moving off the edge of the continent, or they had too much where and when they didn't want it.

In a move strikingly lacking in environmental vision or, even the most rudimentary understanding of that whole "cause and effect" thing, cattle ranchers and farmers and developers dammed the Everglades, straightened the river that fed it, and drained what land they needed.

The Everglades before you is a sliver of its former self. Consider this: Shingle Creek, which starts just south of Orlando's Sea World, is one of the Everglades' northernmost feeders. It used to feed into a twisting and knotted expanse of river that slid its way south to Lake Okeechobee, then meandered on, in its own time, towards the lower third of the state. Most think of that lower third as the Everglades but at one time, everything south of Orlando's International Drive constituted the Everglades. Greedy ranchers and farmers gobbled the land and tried to rework the floodplain. The story of their failure makes for a tale perhaps too depressing and certainly too long to chronicle in a tour book, but suffice it to say that today the Glades suffers from a marked lack of water: the South Florida Water Management District, one of several appointed boards

created to control flooding, now dictates to whom and where the water flows. Most often, the Glades lose to sugar cane, cattle ranchers, and cul-de-sacs.

Life south of the Trail differs than life north, save for Miami, a country unto its own county. On the west edge of the Glades, Ochopee, Chokoloskee, and Everglades City breed a different type of Floridian, ones unconcerned with beaches and Disney and busy working the oyster beds, giving airboat tours, and crabbing.

“Right on State 164 is Everglades, a surprisingly complete town on the Barron River, right miles inland from the western boundary of the Everglades; its tall aluminum water tower is visible for miles. It has a post office, a bank, a public library, a courthouse as the seat of Collier County, a rod and gun club, and fishing piers for departure to the Gulf.¹¹⁰”

To the east Naples far outpaced the limestone-and-oyster bed town and it, not the now-named Everglades City, became the county seat after Hurricane Donna in 1961. It’s likely just as well; the Everglades Rod and Gun Club remains, but so do the people of Everglades City and neighboring Chokoloskee. It is unlikely that the Yonkers and Cleveland transplants of Naples would find much in common with the folks in Everglades City, whose families migrated years before Naples grew into the asphalt jungle teeming with retirees a few miles a way.

Say the name Totch in Everglades City and everyone knows who you mean. Loren “Totch” Brown, a sort of Floridian Robin Hood—meets—Davy Crockett, is the folk hero of these parts. He lived the whole of his life in Everglades City, carving a living out of the Glades as opportunity presented itself. He hunted until it was illegal; after that, he

poached what he once hunted. He fished until running drugs became both more lucrative and prevalent; he went to jail for this but came home a hero and, he points out in his book, he supported his family. He found a way to coexist alongside the looming wet Florida frontier.

Before his death in 1996, Totch explained his life in two paragraphs:

“I am Loren G. ‘Totch’ Brown, a lifetime native of the Florida Everglades. My great-grandfather, John J. Brown and grandfather C. G. McKinney were among the very first to settle in the southwest Everglades, in 1880. My mother Alice Jane McKinney and father John J. Brown, Jr. were born here in 1892. I was born here in 1920.

“At times my life in the Everglades was sustained by no more than what the Glades had to offer and the Everglades have never really let me down. Despite many hardships while bogging across the Everglades for food or hides to sell, they always gave me a warm campfire and a place to lie my tired body down. This makes the Everglades a very special and dear place to me.”¹¹¹

The Brown family still runs airboat tours of the area. My friend Stacey works in a law office in an area of St. Petersburg that feels about as far from Chokoloskee as you can get. You rarely see Stacey without makeup and classy shoes, and yet she has direct ties to Totch Brown. Her grandmother Nellie was Totch’s cousin, and although Nellie lived in St. Petersburg, when she died her family brought her back to Chokoloskee Island. I thought it would be nice to pass Stacey’s well wishes onto family when I stop in for a Totch Brown airboat tour. I ask the ladies behind the desk if they were related to Totch.

“Oh, are you kin?” a hefty blonde woman asks as she snaps her gum. Surprised, I admit that no, I am not. I mention Nellie and her relation to Totch, and soon the ladies at the front counter are retracing the Brown family genealogy with both a rapidity and skill I admire. In less than five seconds they’ve placed Nellie – or, at least, who they think she should be – and pack me off to an airboat captain. As I climb aboard a lavender-hulled airboat I jokingly ask the captain if he’s related to Totch.

“No, ma’am,” the boy says. “My fiance is, though.” He then relates his genealogy as well as hers, causing me to suspect that two families people the whole of Everglades City and Chokoloskee. Conversation quickly ceases over the sound of the airboat, and he takes us out to Chokoloskee Bay for a thrill ride over the flats, coming to rest in front of a small island with an even smaller cottage in its center. This cottage belonged to Totch. He fished here, slept here, and died here, and the Brown family left it essentially intact and remarkably undecayed for the climate. Totch lived sparsely but apparently safely: a bed, a stove, plywood walls, and peel-and-stick floor squares are framed in odd juxtaposition by modern windows, a storm door, and steel green roof. Dead and live bugs adorn odd spots in the shack, the building remains dry, elevated slightly off the land with blocks. We walk quietly around the island, the drone of airboats the only sound in the distance and the breeze lessening the August heat and drying our damp skin.

Back on the airboat our young captain zooms over the bay and heading for a wall of red mangroves. When it appears we will slam into a tangle of salty tree, the captain turns the boat ever-so-slightly and the crooked prop roots part to reveal a tunnel. Within seconds we leave the blue, clear bay for the bistered dark underpaths weaving water

around and through the island. He spirals us through a maze of channels until we see another airboat heading straight for us; the burrows allow room for a lone boat. As we drone towards the approaching boat, the mangroves open up and both boats swing to starboard, passing easily before the tunnel hunkers down around us once again.

Red mangrove roots appear to prop up the rest of the tree. In more developed areas with newer mangroves, these roots rise a foot, maybe two above sea level. Here they look more like wooden cages from a fantasy novel than a sophisticated root system, and from my seat in the airboat I must look up to see the top of the roots. Through the roots I see even more roots in an ever-reaching intricate spiderweb of trees. I see nothing but mangroves and hear only the buzz of the airboat. This, I think to myself, would not be a bad place to dump a body.

Of course, that's not a new idea. The Ten Thousand Islands, of which Chokoloskee and Everglades City are but two, are anecdotally known for such things. The most famous "stasher of bodies"? Edgar Watson.

"He was a successful farmer and to some, he was even a kind and pleasant man. He would occasionally travel to Marco Island, Fort Myers and even Tampa searching for vagabonds, migrants and wayfarer types that he would bring back to his plantation near the Chatham River in order to give them work. Locals believed his success was due to his 'cheap' labor as he never intended on paying them their wages in the first place. One thing is clear: none of these people ever seemed to leave Chatham Bend alive."¹¹²

Marjory Stoneman Douglas also wrote of the murders.

"At Chokoloskee they found several men talking to a Negro in McKinney's store. The story the Negro told was that he'd worked for Watson for a long time and had seen him shoot a couple of men. The Negro said he'd buried a lot of people on his place, or knocked them overboard when they asked him for their money.

"Watson was away, the Negro said. His overseer, named Cox, killed another man and the old woman and forced the Negro to help him cut them open and throw them in the river. He said he would kill him last, but when the Negro got down on his knees and begged to be spared Cox said he would if he'd promise to go to Key West and get out of the country. The Negro came up to Chokoloskee instead and told everything.

"A posse went down to Watson's place and found plenty of bones and skulls. The overseer got away and has never been seen there since.

"The next day Watson came back in his boat from Marco and stopped in McKinney's store in Chokoloskee. He came walking along the plank, quiet and pleasant, carrying his gun. And here were all the men of Chokoloskee standing quietly around with their guns.

"Mr. McKinney walked up to Watson slowly and said, 'Watson, give me your gun.'

"Watson said 'I give my gun to no man,' and fired point blank at McKinney, wounding him slightly. As if it was the same shot, every man standing there in that posse fired. Watson fell dead. Every man claimed he killed him, and nobody ever knew because there were so many bullets in him."¹¹³

No one ever went to jail for killing Mr. Watson. Our airboat continues on, searching.

Coastal Florida towns often offer dolphin-watching tours in abundance, but on an airboat ride the captain will comb the Glades for gator. They never search long: researchers estimate Florida has 1.3 million alligators¹¹⁴. While certainly they may count one or two gators twice, that number should give all but the most intrepid swamp explorer pause: Florida has one gator for every 14 people in the state, or almost as many gators as Florida veterans.

Continuing down the road a bit, one man has devoted his life to a wild animal of a different sort: the Skunk Ape. Ochopee has three claims to fame: Joanie's Blue Crab restaurant, the smallest post office in the United States, and the Skunk Ape Research Headquarters.

The smallest post office is just that – a diminutive building on the side of the Trail about a quarter mile east of Joanie's Blue Crab. Joanie's Blue Crab maintains somewhat capricious hours and costs more than you might expect, but it serves the only non-gas station cuisine along the Tamiami Trail, and the crab comes from local water and tastes fresh. They also serve gator, frog legs, shrimp and, for the less-than-adventurous, chicken wings, hot dogs, burgers, and beer. The live music – often provided by the ironically-named Raiford Starke – adds to the local watering hole feel of the place.¹¹⁵

The final and perhaps most curious stop in Ochopee honors the Skunk Ape south Florida's version of Bigfoot, a hairy, hulking man-ape with, Skunk Ape aficionado Dave Shealy says, a propensity for lima beans.

Big Cypress National Preserve surrounds Dave Shealy's Skunk Ape Research Headquarters. The only spits of privately owned land remaining belong to the Seminole Tribe of Florida and the few lucky landowners who made rudimentary improvements that precluded the government from taking their land for use as a preserve.

Dave Shealy devoted his life to studying the skunk ape; he believes they exist and says he has seen them. He says they live in the Everglades close to alligator holes; he says that they eat both animals and vegetables; he says you can attract a Skunk Ape with lima beans.

If you prefer to cross south Florida via US 41 instead of Alligator Alley, you've seen the Skunk Ape Research Center as you drive through Ochopee. For those of us who remember Florida roads patchworked together with bush league tourist traps, the lure of the Skunk Ape Research Center may be too strong to resist. For those of you who don't remember that Florida, the Skunk Ape Research Center offers a taste of vintage Florida kitsch.

If you've popped in hoping to learn more about the Skunk Ape, you'll find the bounty of information in the gift shop; no need to pay the \$3 admission. Here Shealy sells field guides and DVDs about his quest; they'll tell you about the Skunk Ape's habits as well as some things to expect if you're daring enough to venture off the well-traveled paths in the 'Glades.

Inside the attraction proper you won't learn anything else about the Skunk Ape. Instead you'll see exotic birds and reptiles as well as a paddock of alligators. You can hold a small gator and let a cockatoo snuggle against your neck. Do not expect the bird

show from the \$60-a-day places, but in its stead you can drape yourself in a (hopefully) docile yellow albino Burmese python. Despite the building's dog-eared appearance, animal curator Rick Scholle keeps the animal pens clean and the parrots, social creatures that crave interaction, get more here than in many homes.

At 5 a.m. I wait, wide-eyed and sleepless in a dark hunting shanty that belonged to a man who dug out a pond and elevated a piece of his property. When the government turned the surrounding swamp into a preserve, he held onto his boggy piece of paradise. I lay in wait, just a few long miles from Dave Shealy's place. If the Skunk Ape exists, I might see him here.

Last night's fire rumbled down to embers. The wood cabin's screen-covered openings, ideal for hot summer nights in Big Cypress, offer little protection from the morning's cold murk. As the moon begins its final descent and the sun readies itself for rise, I blink and squint at a shadow by the lake. A deer? Too tall. A person? Too tall. A skunk ape?

Perhaps.

The concept of wilderness perplexes me. I've read that humans cannot see wilderness; the very idea precludes human interaction. But in the rustle of the still winter morning, far from electricity or plumbing, no other word describes this place. Everything outside this wood cabin remains untamed; if I step off the camp to the swamp, I have left civilization. This world tolerates humans without welcoming us.

If you don't want that level of seclusion but you want to spend the night in the 'Glades, Shealy owns a campground next to the Center. It has more amenities than the

cabin where I kept vigil, but odds are the campfires still smell as good and you're still pretty close to Florida's wilderness and, with a little luck, the Skunk Ape.

As for what I saw that morning? I can't swear I saw one. Then again, I can't swear that I didn't.

When road workers built the Tamiami Trail they used the nearest available land to create the elevated roadway. What resulted was a canal stretching the length of the Trail on its north side: a thin ribbon of inky canvas painted with air plants, gators, and orchids. Every now and then a green highway sign will tell announce you have entered Gum Slough or the Fakahatchee Strand. What it really means is that you're in the swamp, you've been the swamp, and, for at least an hour or two, you're going to stay in the swamp. Once you accept or embrace your situation, you can sit back and enjoy the scenery.

And what scenery it is. Here you will find an abundance of La Florida; the wildlife horn of plenty filled to overflowing with kingfishers and their Don King haircuts, alligators and their sleepy, flirty, murdering eyes, and vultures feasting on everything in between. If you have a choice as to when you drive east on this stretch of road, drive it at or near sunrise. The sun lights up the trees and a humming orange glow rises like fire in the Everglades. Birds take flight from every tree, starting their day with hope for swamp bugs, carrion, and fish. Seeing flock after flock take flight from the Glades is a perspective adjustment ordered up by the Universe; it is impossible to believe your

problems matter after you see what certainly must be millions of birds worrying about survival with graceful indifference.

As you edge closer to Miami you have ample opportunity to take one of many airboat rides, and soon after you pass the large Miccosukee Casino at Krome Avenue you find the reassuringly benign assortment of gas stations, Subways, and proof of civilization.

Fewer birds, but you're out of the swamp. Of that there is no doubt.

Tour 6: Georgia State Line (Thomasville) to St. Petersburg

“From red clay hills covered with oaks and magnolias, this route descends into a region of flatwoods and runs straight as an arrow for many miles, passing numerous turpentine and sawmill settlements, and then ascends to limestone hills, with lakes between. Green citrus groves, cypress hammocks, and scattered clumps of cabbage palms relieve the somber vista of cut-over pine land and scrub palmetto. Little of this sparsely settled territory is under fence, and free range cattle are a constant menace to motorists. Upon reaching the west coast the highway is within sight of the Gulf of Mexico, with its palm-fringed bayous and ribbon of low-lying keys, on which are miles of glittering white sand beaches.”¹¹⁶

US 19, in the more populous areas of the state, is a nightmare for commuters. In its northern parts, it is a delight, a series of rolling hills and red clay and leafy green trees.

Monticello is at the intersection of US 90 (See Tour 7). It is distinctly southern, with antebellum homes, an 1890s opera house, and a crumbly cemetery. The homes are pre-civil war construction and preserved by virtue of poverty – when residents couldn’t afford to build new homes during the Great Depression, they instead renovated the older homes. Today they can be seen on a leisurely drive through the town, or by taking a Chamber of Commerce historical walking tour beneath the stately oaks lining the streets. The homes

have large porches, maid's quarters, and gingerbread trim. This, I note, does not feel a bit like Florida.

I spend a good long while in Roseland cemetery, trying to make out the inscriptions on the crumbling tombs. The cemetery dates to 1827 and I find out later that I could have taken a ghost tour through the cemetery. I do not regret not taking the tour; the old stones, aging brick, and moss-draped trees gave the burial ground a desolate, haunted feel without help from paid storytellers.

Monticello hosts an annual Watermelon festival. In the late 1800s, Monticello and surrounding Jefferson County provided the country with the bulk of its watermelon seeds.¹¹⁷ The festival takes place in the summertime and includes bed races, plenty of food, and the crowning of a Watermelon Queen.

At Capps, the road joins with US 27 and US 19 and runs south through Perry and the Steinhatchee Conservation Area. Along this stretch of road I stock jars of mayhaw jelly, Tupelo honey, and whatever vegetables the unfailingly cheerful roadside salesmen have on offer. Mayhaw berries grow in wet, lowlying areas that have alluvial, acidic soil.¹¹⁸ They look like cranberries but don't taste like them. They taste like... well, they taste like mayhaws. The tree grows in swampy north Florida, in the panhandle and along the east side of the state as far south as Marion and Volusia counties. For some reason, though, I only ever see the jelly for sale in the panhandle and along this stretch of US 19.

And what a lovely stretch of road it is here: trees, the odd store and gas station, and not much by way of anything else. I wouldn't want to break down here, but I love the drive along the wooded highway. If one gauged the wealth of the residents by the number

of shopping malls, they would conclude this is poor man's country. If instead one looked at the number of birds, pines, and foliage, one might think the people here quite wealthy.

At Fanning Springs the road crosses the Suwannee River, which is near its end at Cedar Key (See Tour 3). Here the route starts to show signs of more population. The entrance to Fanning Springs State Park is right off the roadway. The springs feed the Suwannee and the park offers primitive camping for people who may have arrived via the Suwannee River. It has cabins for the less water-inclined. You can swim, snorkel, or dive the springs, and although the park doesn't charge for swimming in the spring, it does ask that divers register with the park. They do not allow solo dives.

At Otter Creek, the route passes State Road 24, the one way in and out of Cedar Key (see Tour 3.)

As the road approaches Yankeetown south of the more populated Chiefland, it turns towards the coast and follows it closely through the end of the route.

In 1962, Elvis came to Yankeetown to make *Follow That Dream*, a movie about a family that moves to Florida when their car runs out of gas on a deserted stretch of road. The family starts what becomes a thriving fishing business, outsmarts the mob, and befuddles bureaucrats, emerging triumphant at the film's end. The short story on which it was based, *Pioneer Go Home!*, sets the stage in New Jersey rather than Florida.

In tribute to the film – and Elvis – the town renamed state road 40 “Follow That Dream Parkway.” The sign is prominently displayed as this tour crosses it.

In Crystal River, scallops and manatee await. Tours offer scallop trips for the uninitiated, but during scallop season (July through September, although the actual dates

vary) anyone who wishes may snorkel for scallops. Scallops live in the green grass, have 32 glittering blue eyes, and can slam their shells shut (*escalop* means “shell” in French) to swoosh out of harm’s way.

Bay scallops, once bountiful in the Gulf coastal waters, have declined in numbers. Speculation puts the blame on water quality, as scallops (like clams and oysters) filter their food from the water. If the water is not healthy, the population can’t hang on.

Instead of scallops today, I’m hunting manatee. Well, not hunting, exactly, but looking for them awful hard. In Citrus County, boat captains can take passengers out to swim with manatee under the guise of education. Our boat captain does give us manatee facts and talks about preserving the species, but we’re not fooling anyone: we all are on this boat to pet a manatee.

It’s a gorgeous summer day, and I’m delighted to be out on the water, but I didn’t think this through. You see, all the pictures advertising the tour showed manatee frolicking with humans in the spring head. Manatees lumber towards the spring when the water temperature surrounding it falls below about 70°, which is not the case on a hot summer day.

Three types of rivers flow through Florida: alluvial, blackwater, and spring-fed. Alluvial rivers carry loads of sediment along with them. Their levels and flow are usually tied to rainfall. Blackwater rivers rise out of swamps and generally have a dark tea color from the decaying plant matter in the water. Clear springs gush out into spring-fed rivers. One such river, the Crystal River, starts at a spring head, but do not assume that means the length of the river has that same transparency: the river grows deeper in color the

further we motor from the springs. We do this, the boat captain explains, because the manatee only hang out in springs in the winter.

I refrain from smacking my palm against my forehead. Of course the manatee won't be in the spring. Of course they will be in the I-can't-see-my-hand-or-that-alligator-in-front-of-my-face portion of the river. I enjoy paddling Florida's rivers, but few exist in which I wish to get out and try and touch living creatures. Petting a manatee makes for a fine experience – in clear water. What if the one I pet hangs out by a gator grotto? Anyone who has ever seen even a picture of manatee knows those flippers will not help protect me.

The boat captain assures me I need not worry about gators and snakes concern. This strategy would have worked better had I considered the possibility of snakes before he brought them up. I do not know if I believe him, but I accept my swim noodle (we may not use our arms to swim lest we hit a manatee or, I imagine, anger a gator), slip my mask and snorkel over face, and slide into the water. The manatee waits a few yards away, the guide tells us, but I the murk makes it hard to see anything. Something wraps around my leg. I scream.

River grass. Not a snake. I feel like an idiot, but take solace in knowing that when I put my head back under the water, it's too stained with tannic acid for the others to see me blush.

I see a great hulking shape before me. A manatee. This is actually kind of exciting. I reach my hand out to pet it tentatively, and the beast doesn't seem to care. They're bumpier than I would have thought, and about as motivated. She just floats in front of us

– manatees are excellent floaters, what with all their fat – and even lets us pet her calf. I can only tell she's there by feel; I cannot see her other than to make out a massive darker blob against the ochre water. I muse that, for all we know, we could be petting a gator. My only reassurance is that gators have very little body fat, ergo, this must be a manatee.

After we've more than worn out our welcome, our boat captain takes us for a swim in Three Sisters. He ties his small launch to a river tree. Here, clear water reveals tiny springs, their exit from the earth announced with a rushing gurgle I can almost hear. I step off the boat into water far colder than 72°, as I always believed of all Florida rivers and springs. We walk towards the larger spring, through a group of wood posts set in water, designed to keep watercraft out of the spring head. The force of the water pushes against us as we move toward the spring, but as the narrow channel opens into the spring itself it gets easier. I can see the edge of the abyss; I peer over it, the clear blue sky reflected in chalky white limestone. Deeper down the color turns from an easy blue-green to a deep and persistent blue. Cypress and oak ring the spring but do not cover it, letting the sun and sky dance rainbows across and through the spring water.

We find no manatee here, but that's just fine by me. The springs, uncluttered with kayaks and canoes and too many people, offer a rarer and more full experience.

Homosassa Springs State Park offers a less intrusive way to see manatee: an underwater observatory. If you don't feel brave enough to take your chances in a Florida river, you can watch these giant marine mammals through glass that lets you view them at their eye level. They also have an elevated boardwalk that lets you stroll past cougar, Florida panther, deer, and the ever-present alligator.

Down the road another underwater show takes place seven days a week, several times a day. Weeki Wachee Springs State Park has mermaids.

The mermaids, of course, are quite real. No, not in that they really have tails instead of legs, and they don't get their oxygen with gills. But they do perform underwater shows, breathing through air hoses and performing in tails.

The mermaid shows started with Newt Perry. Perry trained World War II Navy SEALs – then called Frogmen – in underwater maneuvers; in 1946, he trained women to drink grape soda underwater. They learned to eat bananas, have picnics, and swim in unison – all while battling a five-mile-an-hour current wrought by a spring that pushed 177 million gallons a day from the earth. Perry took a spring just off a two-lane dirt road and created a theme park that, long before Disney thought to do so, allowed people to pay money for the privilege of believing in a fantasy.

At Weeki Wachee, that fantasy is mermaids. The mermaids perform beneath the surface of Weeki Wachee spring, with audiences watching them from an underwater theatre. Today the shows continue, as do reunion mermaid shows that feature retired mermaids, some of whom swam with Elvis. The reunion shows – called “Tails of Yesteryear” shows – feature mermaids well into their 70s now. Underwater, these “grandma mermaids” as former mermaid Barbara Wynns calls them, have grace equal to – if not more – than their younger counterparts.

Young mermaids, too, have their chance at the spring. The grandma mermaids help out with mermaid camps for those who want to swim in a mermaid's fin for a day. The park also has kid camps for aspiring mermaids and mermen.

The springs feed the Weeki Wachee River, a clear river with a swift current – at five miles an hour, it takes just a little over two hours to reach the Gulf of Mexico. The park service operates a kayak and canoe livery, and they will pick you up at Roger’s Park six miles down the road.

I chose to paddle upriver and back. The paddle past the houses by Rogers Park is easy and interesting. Houses line one bank of the river and marsh lines the other. One seawall has a cartoonish mural of wildlife; another home pays homage to Jimmy Buffett decorated in Middle American Tiki-bar.

Further upriver the homes thin out and the water gets clearer. The odd rope tied to a branch lets people climb trees, dangle over the river, and plunge, feet first, into the crystal clear water. I’ve paddled the river on weekends when the lines for these ropes are long; today is a Tuesday and the lines are nonexistent. As the river gets closer to Weeki Wachee, the homes disappear into copse after copse of trees. The river is a thin cordon of blue twining around a march forest. At a stand of trees with a wood platform, I tie my painter to a slender tree trunk and stretch my legs while I eat a sandwich. The water is clear and I see no gators, so I let Calypso stretch her legs, too. When we set off again, we’re headed for home, carried by the current. Calypso curls up on a towel drying on the kayak’s bow. We float by a school of mullet, struggling their way upstream. Like a shot she’s in the water, but we’re moving too fast for her to swim back to them. She paddles instead to where I sit and puts a paw on the side of the boat. I pull her in the cockpit, use the towel to squeeze river water from her black fur, and have a moment of thanks for clear water and no gators.

South on US 19 a giant green dinosaur sits. It's been there since I was a kid and the only thing on this stretch of road was the odd gas station, a taxidermist, and Weeki Wachee. It used to house a Sinclair gas station beneath its legs; today it's an auto center in no way associated with Sinclair. This is not a tourist attraction, but it's a landmark that makes the drive a little more interesting.

The stilt homes off the coast of Green Key aren't something you'll see from the road. If you're not a boater or a general aviation pilot, odds are you'll never know they exist.

Just past Green Key's shimmering sands, a cluster of stilt houses rises from Pasco County's clear waters. These fish camps, perched high above the Gulf of Mexico on wooden legs, stand in silent tribute to Florida's yesteryear. The water surrounding these camps is calm and shallow.

Stand-up paddleboards dot the placid waters surrounding Green Key. Paddleboarders dance across key lime water, away from buff-colored shores and out toward a slice of Florida history.

As you paddle into the Gulf, the world beneath your feet comes alive. Cownose rays – tiny, timid stingrays, no bigger than a dinner plate – flutter over sea grass. Mullet twist and toss themselves into the air. As your paddle pushes you through saltwater, redfish zig, then zag, just beneath the surface of this oversized aquarium.

Celebrities from Johnny Cash to Billy Graham have sought respite in these weathered bits of old Florida. The shallow, sapphire-studded waters reflect the sun-bleached wood on these houses, private residences used as fish camps in the Gulf. The stilt houses remain as long as the weather permits: State law says those destroyed in a

storm cannot be rebuilt. The fish camps stand in mere feet of water, so paddleboards are one of the few ways to get close.

Tucked amidst the watery stilt city, Durney Key attracts paddleboarders, kitesurfers, kayakers and boaters. Driftwood and bits of sea glass adorn its shore and fiddler crabs scurry over packed brown sand. A cluster of trees in the key's center offers shelter. Day-trippers and campers alike search for shells and watch the sun set over the fish camps.

On the paddle back toward Green Key, fish scurry from your path as the nightly seabreeze pushes you home. From the sand, you can see the stilt houses in the distance, waiting for your return.¹¹⁹

The most logical launch for the four-mile round trip paddle is on Green Key at Robert K. Rees Memorial Park.

Pinellas County, the most densely populated but second smallest of Florida's 67 counties (Union County has 40 square miles less than Pinellas County's 280), waits at the end of this tour. At the north end, the Tarpon Springs sponge docks offer boat tours, Greek food, and an annual epiphany celebration. The Pinellas Trail, a former railway line converted to paved trail, runs the length of the county with spurs into local communities. The trail has rest stops, water fountains, and a host of bike shops and restaurants along its 33-mile trek through the county.

Like the trail, the route travels the length of the county, and it is here that the road is at its most crowded. Between Wall Springs Park – a historic spring once marketed as a

health spa – and St. Petersburg, the route becomes a glut of supermarkets, gas stations, and car dealerships. In St. Petersburg, a detour off the road over to Fourth Street takes you to Sunken Gardens, where you can descend into the pit of a sinkhole covered in flowers and greenery.

At the county's south end, Fort DeSoto takes over. The fort and park are on five islands interconnected by a chain of bridges and lagoons; the 1100-plus acres of the park are prime beachfront real estate, fronting Tampa Bay and the Gulf of Mexico. The park offers a 13-mile bike trail, fishing piers, camping, beaches, paddling, a boat ramp, hiking paths, and a beachfront fog park.

Off the tip of Pinellas County, two islands offer shelling, snorkeling and less crowded beach going. Shell Key, a nature preserve easily kayaked over tidal flats, has no facilities but plenty of birds. Oystercatcher, skimmers, and other beach birds nest here. Shell collectors often find sand dollars here as large as dessert plates, and the waters between the southern Pinellas mainland and the Key are rife with dolphin and manatee.

Further offshore and not suggested for kayakers is Egmont Key, an island in the main shipping channel for Tampa Bay. Most of the island is open to the public, although harbor pilots have housing on a private piece of the island. Egmont Key attracts snorkelers who want to look for sea life in the sea grass or explore the sunken ruins of the crumbling Fort. Charter boats offer trips to both these islands.

In Pinellas County Gulf Boulevard offers a beachy alternative to US 19. It starts at the west end of the county, in Clearwater, and runs south along the Gulf to Pass-a-Grille. The bulk of this stretch is a two-lane road. Traffic exits a roundabout onto Gulf Boulevard south, passing first through the sandy carnival of Clearwater Beach. The beach has a marina offering every conceivable boat trip, from a yellow oversized speedboat that tempts Atlantic Bottlenose dolphin to surf their gargantuan wake, to sailboats that let the wind pull them through Clearwater Harbor and into the Gulf. Pier 60, the pier at the western terminus of state road 60, has a nightly sunset celebration complete with buskers and artists.

Over the Sand Key Bridge, condominium canyons line either side of the road, the only exception the county's Sand Key Park. Sand Key Park is a beachfront park across Clearwater Pass from the hotels on Clearwater Beach. Beach sunflowers, sea oats, and low lying beach scrub dot the park, a stark contrast to the next town south, Belleair Beach. This quiet community has mostly traditional Florida ranch homes and a handful of two-story hotels on the beach. Belleair Shores is yet another type of city, with walled-off beach mansions, gated beach accesses, and a reputation as the spoiled rich child of the county. Indian Rocks Beach, Redington Shores, North Redington Beach and Redington Beach are the next four towns along Gulf Boulevard. They are chiefly residential, with many vacation homes available by the week or month, but fewer nightly motels. The beaches here are accessible largely by walkover access with limited parking, but they are not as populated as Clearwater beach to the north and every beach to the south.

Madeira Beach is a wider city, owing largely to the dredged residential fingers on her east side. At the south point, a collection of tourist-centric shops offer everything from tacky t-shirts to exotic spices at John's Pass Village. John's Pass is the waterway dividing Madeira Beach from Treasure Island, another larger beach community with a mix of condominiums, hotels, and homes. The city's main shopping thoroughfare, 107th Avenue, runs east over the Treasure Island Causeway, becomes Central Avenue, and runs through St. Petersburg's downtown, ending at Tampa Bay.

The county's final beach town, St. Pete Beach, is in no way associated with St. Petersburg; calling it St. Petersburg's Beach tends to produce an unfavorable response from the town's 9,000 residents, many of whom are seasonal. St. Pete Beach consumes the entirety of Long Key, not to be confused with Long Key in the Florida Keys (See Tour 1). St. Pete Beach bookends Clearwater Beach (which truly belongs to the City of Clearwater, a sandy extension of the mainland city) in size, amenities, and beach. St. Pete Beach has a plethora of hotels, motels, and resorts. Visitors can spend anywhere from \$100 a night at a retro-styled hotel to \$600 per night at the 1920's-era Don CeSar.

Pass-a-Grille, a separate city in 1939, is now part of St. Pete Beach. You will not find a single large resorts here; most buildings have only two or three stories. Pass-a-Grille still retains a sense of individuality from St. Pete Beach, with special zoning rules and guidelines, houses with more foliage than grass, and the distinction of the southernmost point on the southernmost beach in the southernmost city in Pinellas

County. From here you have nowhere to go; as the last hotel on the point advertises, visitors have arrived at island's end.

Tour 7: Jacksonville to the Alabama State Line (Mobile)

“US 90, Florida's longest and most heavily traveled east and west highway, roughly parallels the northern boundary of the State. It traverses pine lands, where lumbering and the production of naval stores are important industries, penetrates the State's principal cotton and tobacco areas, and passes through many plantation towns of ante-bellum days, and a few large cities. The people, architecture, and economic conditions of this region, first in the State to be settled and the first to have a railroad, remain largely untouched by the seasonal tourist influence, standing in sharp contrast to the Florida pictured in resort literature.”¹²⁵

I could stop right there and leave you with a not-wholly-inaccurate picture of US 90 as she runs today, but then you would miss so many things. I'll admit this: I never much cared for North Florida. Too cold. But there's something magical about it, I find, in that it's quite Florida while not being at all the Florida I know.

For one, the palm trees are scarce. North Florida is all about pine trees and flowering trees and hills, wholly unlike the rest of the state's sand and pine and scrub and, in the case of the Everglades, muck.

Jacksonville still has a lot of maritime industry. Its downtown charms me more than I expect: trees pop up in odd places, and I get the impression there are museums and theatre and cultural experiences lacking in many of her outlying areas.

As we drive west out of the city, though, the charm is replaced by industry. Rail yards follow the road and I remember that Jacksonville is a shipping center, as it was in the 1930s.

“Strung along the highway west of Jacksonville are many 'jooks' of the type found on the outskirts of almost all large Florida cities. These establishments, variously denned as roadhouses or suburban saloons, are gathering places for urban and rural patrons who drink and dance to the music of a 'jook organ,' a nickel-in-the-slot, heavy-toned, electric phonograph. The reputation of jooks depends on their record for fights and disorders, and they also differ in the kind of music played. Those featuring old-time or mountain music are known as 'beer joints,' and their walls often bear placards requesting customers to conduct themselves as 'ladies and gentlemen.' In others, groups of youngsters congregate to huddle about a booming loud speaker and stamp their appreciation of the latest swing pieces. Both Negro and white jooks are numerous.¹²⁶”

Here the architecture looks older but the people appear poorer, with cars inartistically painted several colors and buildings needing paint. While the *Guide* writers say both black and white folk used to frequent this area of town, I suspect this is no longer the case. We see few people loitering or moving about without purpose, but the faces we do pass are all black.

Moving westward, the industrial lots gradually grow more and more interspersed by tall stands of pine trees, both slash and longleaf. By the time we cross 301 into Baldwin, we are ensconced in pine forest. Baldwin, the *Guide* reminds me, used to ship pine logs to Jacksonville. I'm guessing the majority of the pines we see between here and Maclenny are younger pines planted to replace those felled since the 1930s.

Maclenny, the Baker County seat, has its share of feed stores, reminding us that agriculture is big business here, not tourism. Although, I wonder as we coast through the small town, it could be, if it didn't have to compete with beaches. The land here is filled with trees, not housing developments; the buildings are old and stately. The biggest buildings I see are an Ace Hardware easily as large as a Home Depot superstore and the county courthouse, a red bricked affair unlike the more casual, modernized courthouses of the late twentieth century. It looks like a sleepy, welcoming town, the sort of place that epitomizes southern charm.

The *Guide* describes a different Maclenny altogether.

"In the back country around MacClenny and near-by towns the widely scattered families are frequently interrelated, forming a rather clannish group, and are apt to look on outsiders with suspicion. Among themselves, however, there is little restraint. Their social affairs are strenuous, not to say violent. Their dances bring together old and young from miles around; on the appointed night merry-makers arrive in battered flivvers, in wagons, on mules and horses, or on foot, at the country dance hall, usually of frame, hidden among the pines along a meandering sand road. Gasoline lanterns throw a

dazzling bluish light on the dancers as the frail hall shakes under the thud of feet in a vigorous square dance to the accompaniment of fiddles, guitar, and piano.

“Men leave the dance hall frequently to refresh themselves from bottles or jugs. There is often as much fighting as dancing. A muttered word—a curse—a flashing blow—and chaos! All dash from the hall, for propriety demands that a man must extend his enemy an invitation to 'step outside' to settle their differences. Now and again a gun or a knife is used, and another blood feud is started. Rarely are such proceedings reported to the authorities; retribution for anything less than murder is a personal matter, affording no cause for the law to mess in.¹²⁷”

Perhaps, I muse, one should never judge a town by its courthouse.

Oaks and pine part occasionally to reveal houses with large yards. Like most of north Florida, it feels less like Florida here than points south, even though we're in the Okefenokee Swamp and the area is rife with cypress. This lasts until we stop at Olustee Battlefield State Park.

The Civil War simply wasn't that big of a deal in Florida, at least not on par with what it was to our Southern neighbors to the north. Tallahassee never fell to the Union, and there were relatively few battles on Florida soil. I've always believed that was because no one cared terribly about Florida, save for the salt works and cattle. Also, this was well before doctors worked out that quinine cured Yellow Fever, and in the 1800s the Sunshine State was actually more of the Swamp State, filled with bogs and hogs and mosquitoes. Dysentery and gunshots were bad enough without throwing alligators and Yellow Fever into the mix.

Florida's biggest Civil War battle took place in Olustee. For some Southerners, this battle is a source of pride: the Confederacy beat the Union troops back to Jacksonville, where they stayed for quite a time. For northerners, the source of pride came from the African-American 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry Regiment, an all-black unit.

In 1912, veterans gathered at the site to dedicate a monument. There are, however, not one but two monuments there today, a typification of the state's conflicted history.

“Two monuments on the site indicate a division of opinion on the name of the battle. One calls it the 'Battle of Olustee'; near by is a smaller monument erected by the United Daughters of the Confederacy as a memorial to the 'Battle of Ocean Pond.’¹²⁸”

Both east and west of Olustee there are work camps, not the last we see along this stretch of road. Despite a disproportionate number of prisons, the drive here is beautiful, a haven of pine and oak and not much else. There is a prevailing sense of peace along the road, with no stop lights and no urgency within the confines of Osceola National Forest. It is an overwhelming feeling of peace that follows us through a chain of small north Florida towns, and the lack of people, shops, and signs of development along this road washes the following towns of Watertown and Lake City (At the junction of US 41; see Tour 4) in shades of quaint and charm.

West of here, through Live Oak and on to Tallahassee, it is delightfully the same with one notable exception: the flatwoods start to gradually give way to hills as the state's elevation rises. I know that beneath the roadway the soil is shifting to a red clay.

We pass through Live Oak, easily the most populated town thus far, and head over the Suwannee River. The water level is disturbingly low. A glance at the local paper reveals something strange, at least to this downstate Floridian: a hurricane is considered a good thing. The rains keep down the risk of fire, recharge the floodplains, and keep the water levels high. There have been no major hurricanes near north Florida in a while, and the rivers and forests need one badly. It's odd to realize that the force of nature that devastates the rest of the state on a regular basis is still considered a good idea up here.

Of course, a look around can explain that easily enough. There's no fear of storm surge here, no levees to swell and burst. These people will get the rains after the storm weakens over land, not as the storms first make landfall. They have little reason to fear hurricanes like the coastal towns do; they have chosen, it would seem, more wisely than their southern neighbors.

Between here and Monticello, the road leans out between small towns, vast expanses of pine and oak broken up by Lee, Madison, and Greenville. Dollar General Stores dot the landscape. Many of these small towns appear struggling, and I wonder how Dollar General headquarters determines where to build a store.

Between Monticello (See Tour 6) and Tallahassee, the route is lined with crape myrtles, pink and white explosions of color along the roadway. The *Guide* mentions Mahan's Nursery in conjunction with Monticello but neglects to mention that Mr. Fred Mahan donated those crape myrtles to the state in the 1932. The Nursery grew pecans and ornamental shrubs. Mahan donated the plants to Jefferson County for highway, church, and cemetery beautification projects. The county's unemployment relief commission paid

45 men an average of \$39 a month to plant these trees as well as the palms, ligustrum, and 40,000 other plants and trees lining the route into Tallahassee. In 1953 this stretch of road officially became the Fred Mahan Drive.¹²⁹

The road dips slightly south to cut through Tallahassee (See Tour 6), the state capital so chosen for its equidistance between Pensacola and Jacksonville. West of the Capital, it passes through Quincy, then Gretna. Gretna is one of the prettiest, rundowns town I've seen, even if the best cared for homes have bars on the windows.

The route brushes up against Georgia in Chattahoochee, where I want to see one thing only: Florida State Hospital. It was the state's first mental asylum, not to be confused with the neighboring Capital building. A drive through the immaculate grounds and historic white buildings evokes every bad image of what happened to people in mental institutions in 1876, the year the hospital opened its doors as the Florida State Hospital for the Insane. Its administration building is on the National Register of Historic Places; it dates to the Second Seminole War (to aid troops, not house insane Seminoles) and was used as officers quarters.¹³⁰ The white buildings and rolling landscape are beautifully creepy. Inside these buildings, somewhere, are the state's criminally insane. I step out of the van to take a photo and find myself wondering who is held behind the white stately building on the other side of my camera lens.

As we exit the ground onto US 90, I have to laugh. Directly across the street is a Dollar General Store.

West of Marianna near Cottondale we see, appropriately, our first cotton crops along the route. Coupled with donkeys or mules (I can't be sure which they were), and they make a nice change of pace from the Dollar Generals.

At Chipley we turn off the route and head south to Falling Waters State Park, checking in to our camp site at dusk. The ranger warns us the waters aren't falling. He also warns us that there have been some snakes sighted in the park. In the failing light we walk through the woods down a boardwalk to where the waterfall should be. It's a sheer wall of no water this evening, but in the fading daylight the cool abyss below, the cliff in front of us, and the pines above make a lovely end to the day all the same. Walking out of the woods, I hear something above me. I look up and follow the slow, decisive, wings of a horned owl, and then a second. My first thought is that they are amazing creatures and I'm fortunate to see two of them. My second thought is that owls love snakes. I remember the ranger's warning and watch my step more carefully. At the edge of the woods I look back and can still see one of the owls, waiting for nightfall in a longleaf pine.

As we back our van into a camp site at the edge of the camping ring, I get out to help park, mindful of the ranger's snake warning. When a green tree frog jumps on me, I scream, then laugh.

After an evening of screeching owls and bellowing tree frogs, nearby Bonifay just makes me sad. The buildings on US 90 tell me the town probably had a thriving center at one point, but now it just looks used up, run down and deserted. The parking lot for the Jehovah's Witness Kingdom Hall has nary a space left. The Dollar General, too, has cars in the lot.

A note about the county extension services here: they're bigger – much bigger – than those along the coast. While on the road, I imagined the big buildings had some sort of agricultural use, perhaps for teaching farmers plow techniques or tractor repair. In reality, I discover, the Extension in Bonifay offers a multitude of housing counseling services for people in trouble with their mortgages or in need of help finding low-income or public housing.

“Ponce de Leon, 45.2 m. (64 alt., 382 pop.), is the Site Of Ponce De Leon Springs, one of many 'fountains of youth' named for the Spanish explorer. In adjacent back country live 'Dominickers,' part Negro and part white, whose history goes back to the early 1860s. Just before the War between the States, Thomas, a white, lived on a plantation here, with his wife, two children, and several Negro slaves. After his death his wife married one of the slaves, by whom she had five children. As slaves often took the name of their masters, her Negro husband was also known as Thomas. Of the five children, three married whites, two married Negroes. Today their numerous descendants live in the backwoods, for the most part in poverty.

“The men are of good physique, but the women are often thin and worn in early life. All have large families, and the fairest daughter may have a brother distinctly Negroid in appearance. The name originated, it is said, when a white in suing for a divorce described his wife as 'black and white, like an old Dominicker chicken.' Dominicker children are not permitted to attend white schools, nor do they associate with Negroes. About 20 children attend a one-room school. As no rural bus is provided, the

pupils often walk several miles to attend classes. An old cemetery, containing a large number of Dominicker graves, adjoins the school.¹³¹”

That’s what made it into the official guide. Here’s what the *Guide* writers wrote that didn’t make the final edits:

“These people are sensitive, treacherous and vindictive. They never start a disturbance but if any one bothers them – the whole family will do childish things to get revenge, to steal a hog or mutilate a crop is as good as a want. They are pathetically ignorant and an entire family will work hard for little compensation.

“The women are low in stature, fat and shapeless, they wear loose-fitting clothes and no shoes. One woman 74 years of age has never owned a pair of shoes. When a person is the smaller type his is almost dwarf-like in size. There seems to be no in-between size. The people move from one hut to another, often living alone for awhile and then moving back into the family group. Men, women and children work in the fields. Some houses are scrupulously clean while others are filthy. They just live from day to day - certainly not an ambitious group. Each generation marries into the lower class of white people, their original group will soon be extinct. Common law marriage is practiced, as a matter of fact - most of them “take-up” with each other.

“Local people claim that the Domineckers are 95 percent Negro. This statement is absurd. They are about three fourths white and one eighth Negro and one eighth Indian.”¹³²

There is no record of what happened to these people.

Not far from Ponce de Leon, DeFuniak Springs has a lovely little historic district. Of course, go a few blocks outside the district and it's a different story. The walking/shopping district borders the springs neighborhood on one side and 90 on the other. A lot of brick with business names painted directly on the brick. Architecture of homes around the springs is lovely and not unlike the more populous St. Petersburg's Old Northeast.

The Walton County Courthouse has a Confederate monument. Welcome to the South, ladies and gentlemen.

This part of the state bears no resemblance to the coast. Everything – everything – is curvy and twisty and bumpy here. Despite the antebellum-ness of the place, it feels northern. Nonetheless, the red clay of the soil dominates the landscape, be it cotton or forest, evoking a marked Georgia feel.

At Crestview we see a copse of new homes. For whom, I wonder, are they building? There is nothing but clay and pine and cotton here. The area doesn't seem to have businesses or any indication whatsoever of a population. Nonetheless, census takers did document over 20,000 Crestview residents in 2010.¹³³

The Perdido River ends the journey across US 90. Pensacola (See Tour 14), at the coast, is a crowded sea port, beach town, and tourist mecca all rolled into one.

Tour 8: Daytona Beach to Lakeland

“This route links Daytona Beach, one of Florida's popular winter and summer playgrounds, with several prosperous agricultural towns in the ridge section. From marshlands and tangled cypress hammocks the highway rises into a rolling prosperous countryside of citrus groves, truck gardens, poultry farms, and large vineyards. Between Leesburg and Lakeland the highway runs for many miles along the divide between Florida's east and west watersheds, a region of cypress swamps and cut-over pine land, in which a few isolated sawmills still operate. Mounds of sawdust and ruins of shacks that once housed hundreds of workers mark the sites of forgotten lumber camps. Farther south, citrus groves blanket low round hills and crowd down to shores of innumerable lakes.”¹³⁴

Today the route, US 92, still crosses less developed lands. West of the on-ramp for Interstate 95, only tiny patches of development between Tomoka Wildlife Management Area (a fancy way of saying a preserved piece of land on which people may hunt) and Clark Bay Conservation Area (a tract of land co-owned by the St. John's River Water Management District and Volusia County) exist. By the time you enter DeLand (see Tour 2), the small oak-lined streets seem to work themselves into the trees nicely.

To the west, the road crosses the St. John's River, passing through several different drainage basins; the *Guide* writers mention that the road divides east and west watersheds, but in reality the route also comes close to the Kissimmee River Basin area. At its terminus in Lakeland, the route meets the edge of the Green Swamp (See Tour 22) and runs again along the edge of the Kissimmee Basin (See Tour 10).

Between Eustis and Leesburg, the area has substantially more development than the greener road to the east. In 1939 the *Guide* described Eustis as a "pleasing tourist town."¹³⁵ Eustis calls itself "America's Hometown." Here, less than 20,000 residents spread over 10 miles¹³⁶.

For over 100 years the town has held an annual GeorgeFest, a February festival celebrating George Washington's birthday.¹³⁷ The festival crowns a King and Queen George, although to avoid confusion (and irony), they call them the "Georgefest Orange King and Queen."¹³⁸

To follow the original route, take Bay Street south out of Eustis to 441 and head west to Leesburg, twining between Lake Eustis, Lake Harris, and Lake Griffin. At Leesburg, the road intersects with US 27 (See Tour 15) and the original route now follows US 27 for a small south run. Branch off to State Road 33 just south of Lake Denham.

Today Okahumpka is a tiny stop, best known for the Okahumpka Service Plaza along the Florida Turnpike. The turnpike crosses south of Okahumpka. Visitors to Cracker Country at the Florida State Fairgrounds can see the Okahumpka Train Depot, built in 1898 and donated to Cracker Country 70 years later when Seaboard Coastline railroad no longer wanted it. The depot marked one of many stops along Henry Plant's railroad. In

Florida, Plant's railroad ran from the northeast corner of the state, through Central Florida, and southwest to Tampa. Along this route rail cars stopped in Okahumpka for lumber and turpentine.¹³⁹

Once the route passes the turnpike, we see few buildings. The roadway here alternates green citrus trees with grassy fields. Just north of State Road 50 (See Tour 9) and Lake Jackson are the first developments you see. Route 33 joins with 50 southeast to Groveland, where the original driving tour heads south again, passing Erie Lake, Pretty Lake, and more greenery and few homes until it reaches Polk City north of Interstate 4. It swivels west and south under the interstate and, for a fashion, alongside it. The buildings crowd closer together as you approach Lakeland, a Florida metropolis boasting distribution centers for supermarkets, automotive supply shops, and furniture stores (See Tour 20).

Tour 9: Indian River City to Floral City

“Known as the Cheney Highway between Indian River City and Orlando, State 22 connects the east coast and west-central Florida. Until 1925 much of the country traversed was accessible only by sand trails. The flora of the region varies from flat pine forests to marshland and scrub palmetto thickets. Skirting numerous lakes, the highway traverses a country of vineyards and citrus groves, and reaches its highest elevation near Oakland.”¹⁴⁰

Nude beaches! I suspect the *Guide* writers had something else in mind, but when I see this stretch of what is now State Road 50, I think of nude beaches.

Down the street from State Road 50 in Orlando the University of Central Florida bustles with college students. When I went there as an undergrad the much-trafficked highway allowed us a great escape from Orlando to Cocoa Beach. At the road’s east terminus a host of diversions tempted us, (See Tour 1), but we only had eyes for Playlinda Beach, an almost legally acceptable nude beach.

Even today, there isn’t much along this stretch of road – even the town of Christmas isn’t much to look at if you aren’t there in December, hoping to get a holiday card mailed with a special postmark. Blame Orlando. After the Mouse and the rash of other theme parks, a wooded two-or-four-lane road doesn’t offer much by way of distraction. To the

west, the road offers congestion and then a lovely expanse of greenery and roadside food stands that may or may not pass the county health guidelines (and yet they taste just fine), but east of Orlando, the road has at first a few planned communities (a polite phrase for “Stepford Suburbs”) and then a few not-so-planned ones and, finally, the beach.

Orlando, of course, is a suburban-and-theme-park star-crossed lover story unto itself.

Orlovista, once known for cock fighting, is now little more than a string of homes. Its Wikipedia page even has little to say of the town.¹⁴¹ To the east, Ocoee used to boast large oaks. Enter here the aforementioned “Stepford Suburbs” and this stretch of road seems engulfed by Tire Kingdoms, KFCs, and other ubiquitous chain stores.

East of Ocoee, the road leans out and drivers see little but green. Green trees, palms, and pines replace popular franchises. From Oakland to Inverness, towns have little to attract tourists, but plenty to attract fans of a Florida more filled with greenery than theme parks. Here this is a lovely stretch of undisturbed Florida. It’s just so... green... and I love it. It doesn’t seem altered by citrus, cows, or vegetables. Of course, we are too close to Pasco and Hernando Counties to be completely untouched, but the land seems that way.

Clermont and Lake Louisa (See Tour 15) are former citrus farming areas starting to come to terms with Florida’s development, and yet the development still somehow plays second fiddle to the area’s wilder parts. Clermont still has the Citrus Tower, but it also has an AT & T store and a Publix. Lake Louisa, a beautiful state park, has rolling hills and a serene lake, but it also reflects the remnants of a citrus industry abandoned for development.

At the Withlacoochee River, I am happy with what may be an illusion. Everything 40 miles either way of Orlando on this road seems irrevocably ruffled by the Disney influence; here, Mickey seems irrelevant, an odd occurrence so relatively close to Cinderella's castle.

And yet, I will take it were I can get it.

Tour 10: Melbourne to Kissimmee

“US 192 crosses a sparsely settled region, parts of which, often under water, are still unexplored. Much of the territory, near the coast, once covered with magnificent stands of pine, has been despoiled by naval stores operators and loggers. Cypress and palm hammocks rise at intervals to relieve the monotony of the vast flat ranges on which cattle graze. Hump-shouldered Brahma cattle, the predominant strain, were brought from India to improve breeds on the local swampy range. A few lonely settlements with Indian names are strung along the branch line of a railroad, originally built to transport lumber.”¹⁴²

US 192 bisects the state from Melbourne on the east to Kissimmee in the center. It’s an easy turnoff onto 192 from A1A, and in no time at all I abandon the beachside palm thickets, trading them for a jungle of box stores, lawyers’ offices, and drive-throughs. The strip of road between the beach and Interstate 95 – the strip the *Guide* refers to as often underwater and unexplored – has fallen not to naval stores but the globalization of Florida. The Dollar General triumphs once again in this cultural wasteland of instant gratification and low quality at marginally lower prices.

But – and this is a refreshing “but” – west of the Interstate all you see is green, green, green. Pastures remain, although the lumpy Brahmans have muddied their bloodline sufficiently enough that most of the cows here have the sleek shoulders of a shampoo model. Pine trees of all sorts, including the much-hated yet gracefully elegant Australian pine – dot the roadways, with cows and palm trees thrown into the mix to keep it

interesting. Sandhill cranes and turkeys wander across the greenscape here, likely in more abundance than *Guide* writers saw. Just east of Holopaw (which, according the *Guide*, means “place where something is hauled”¹⁴³) oaks triumph over pines and cranes. At the intersection of Turn Around Bay Road and 192, Holopaw reveals itself with modest homes and white picket fences. Some of the larger lots are graced with blue tractors and green farm equipment, but the town fades away into the trees, letting the road have its way with the surrounding landscape. The trees open up again briefly for a planned community called Harmony, not on any map but boasting a population of 1,200 people.

This is not a commuter road, I gather. It’s almost five o’clock and traffic has not changed measurably; in all likelihood, Interstate 4 or one of the state’s east-west toll roads carry any commuters who, for whatever reason, must travel between Melbourne and Kissimmee. Most of the cars here aren’t cars but pickup trucks, and not the pretty kind you buy for fun. No, these trucks work as hard as the people who drive them, hauling and towing and pushing. Their paint is not shiny but they are cared for. I am one of few women drivers on the road, I note, and most certainly the only one in a late-model Volkswagen.

Traffic comes to a dead stop just past Harmony. It’s soon clear that the traffic jam is atypical; local boys are stepping out of their cars to see what they can see, although they almost definitely have a higher vantage point from the seat of their D-series pickup truck. No one lays on their horn. No fights erupt. After a half hour, I get out, too. I’m hungry, I have to use the bathroom, and I want to know why we’re not moving.

“Car accident up ahead. Someone died,” one of the men tells me. “They’ve got an air ambulance.” I don’t know how he knows this until I notice the chain of communication working its way back: one driver passes information to a few trucks, then the last driver gets out and tells a few trucks behind him, and so on until the line knows what’s holding up traffic.

This, I think to myself, is what northerners simply don’t get about the people they call rednecks. Our “rednecks” practice a basic civility here not often seen in city traffic jams. These people may not have college educations. They may not work at white collar jobs. But these folks – these neighbors – know what community means. I felt its presence along that roadway. Stuck in traffic, hungry, desperate for ladies room, I saw clearly what the middle of the state gained by not turning itself over to tourists: community. You don’t find it as much along the transient beach towns, with tourists and snowbirds and out-of-state landlords, but here, in the state’s grounded middle, families, not investors, own land, not just homes. They build community and have each other. It was not a big moment, but it sure was nice.

Once traffic picks up again, St. Cloud comes up pretty fast. Here I see signs that the magic of Disney grows nigh. I see the first 7-11s and Walgreens since Interstate 95, and, as even more proof that tourists do venture off the mouse-eared reservation, Reptile World Serpentarium.

In the 1970s Reptile World started as a venom farm. Handlers milked snakes for venom and sent the venom all over the world. By the end of the decade, though, owners

say that the steady stream of people wanting to take a tour prompted them to allow people to watch the snake milkers at work. For under \$7, guests can tour the facility and watch “expert snake handlers milk the world's most viscous and deadly snakes live before your very eyes with only the glass separating you from huge angry cobras, rattlesnakes, copperheads, water moccasins and many more.”¹⁴⁴

The attraction also offers a “relaxing” stroll across the grounds, where visitors can see iguanas, turtles and, of course, an alligator.

Between the angry cobras and friendly traffic jammers, by the time I reach the edge of Kissimmee I want food and a place to sit that isn't a car. I stop at The Catfish Place, where I have to choose between frog legs, catfish, and country-fried steak. I choose steak, collards, and beer. It is the last place I see along 192 that I suspect offers frog legs; between here and I-4 a steady stream of Denny's, Pizzeria Unos, and an odd combination of drive through restaurants and “dinner and show” establishments, where tourists can eat spaghetti and meatballs and watch “knights” joust, assault me.

The final town on the route, Kissimmee, gets only a sentence in this tour, noting it is at the junction of US 17.

Tour 11: Vero Beach to Bartow

“Before this coast-to-highlands route was built, travel through the dense hammock undergrowth of this region necessitated the use of axes; the inundated lowlands proved especially formidable. Between the wet and dry areas are thickly wooded sections called 'scrubs,' into which the Indians retreated and escaped capture when pursued by U.S. troops during the Seminole War. Today, penetrated by good roads, the region contains many lumber mills, citrus groves, and cattle ranches, but is still sparsely settled between Vero Beach and Lake Wales.”¹⁴⁵

Growing up, we didn't call it “60”; only tourists did that. We called it Gulf-to-Bay, because that's what it was, both in name and function. West of Bartow, state road 60 connected Tampa Bay with the Gulf of Mexico. Only as we packed ourselves off to college did we, too, start to call it 60. We joked that you could tell who stayed in Clearwater and who left home by what they called the road

For all that discussion I can count on my fingers the number of times I took 60 east of Bartow before I graduated college: twice. Once all the way to Vero Beach and once again quite by accident.

Pinellas County, the western terminus of State Road 60, has more people per square mile than any other Florida county. We pack nearly one million people into a quite small

space, and three main ways of getting from the airport in Tampa to north, mid or south county. SR 60 offers the northern exodus from Tampa International Airport to our sought-after beaches. Today commuters travel that stretch of SR 60 daily, but in 1939, the tour started and ended at Bartow. The Courtney Campbell Causeway (now part of SR 60), then referred to as the Davis Causeway, existed only as a side trip into the brand-new Pinellas County (prior to 1912, Pinellas was part of Hillsborough County)¹⁴⁶. More popularly drivers entered Pinellas via US 19 (see Tour 6.)

Starting at Bartow, as the 1939 *Guide* would have us do, and heading east the tourist can only believe that things will only get better. Neighboring Brandon and Bartow share one thing: a vast cultural wasteland of strip malls and self-storage facilities. As the route pushes itself east, though, the buildings grow sparser and the landscape grows increasingly verdant, greenery broken only by phosphate pits. The towns nearby exist because of an 1890 discovery of phosphate stores, so says the *Guide*, and today the mines remain, although worked by large companies rather than local ones. The existing phosphate mines evoke images of the South Dakota Badlands.

The Peace River – called the Peace Creek in the 1939 version of this tour – had a more appropriate name in the first version of the book. It offers up little more than a narrow, tea-colored strip passing beneath the road.

As the road winds its way out of Hillsborough, through Polk, and into Osceola County, homogenized suburban living falls away all but completely, replaced instead with cattle, streams, and ever more shades of green: stringy, piney green, heavy, waxy, oak green, and

grassy, easy green. Longleaf pine tower over mature live oaks with shorter limbs draped with silvery, almost yellow, grey moss.

Here we traverse the only ribbon of pavement, save the occasional bar and grill, feed store, or agribusiness-related building. Because no houses sprouted along the roadside – it looks like mostly grazing land, at least from the road – trees grow not just up, but out, and the foliage overtakes the landscape in a wild, yet calmly pastoral, way.

Citrus trees grow in groves here, and although they came here with the Spanish, their ordered, bulbous blossoms seem to fit right in with the wild nature of the landscape.

Cows graze here, as they do inside most of the state, but here each Bessie seems to have her personal mottled brown and white cattle egret. Everyone, it seems, lives large off the bounty of the land here – the oak trees, the oranges, even the bug-eaters, to say nothing of the bovines with their own bird buddy groomers.

Out my window I see something too skinny to be a cow but definitely too large for a great heron or egret. Sandhill cranes – one fledgling “little guy” who still reaches three or four feet high – live here, too.

In the Lake Wales Historic District, homes tend towards the traditional, just not exactly the traditional Florida ranch: these homes have columns. The town, in the middle, really, of nowhere, has an art center not far from the “Y’all Come Back Saloon” (which, I suspect, could give Miss Kitty’s in Brooksville a run for its money when it comes to grit and bleach) and, a little farther away, Bok Tower Gardens. East of town the smell of burning citrus hangs heavy in the air.

Next is Hesperides, then Lake Kissimmee State Park.

Lake Kissimmee State Park makes me think of two things: *The Blair Witch Project* and sandhill cranes. I decided to take myself camping at Lake Kissimmee State Park. Years ago I packed my tent, my kayak, and my camping supplies and headed west on SR 60 to Lake Kissimmee State Park. I had never seen the Kissimmee River before and wanted to paddle her straightened, ruined waters.

I registered for my camp site at the gate, paid the nice ranger, and started my drive into the park. I was not new to Florida but had little knowledge of the state's interior, especially when it came to camping alone. I marveled at large – quite large – grey squirrels, and when I saw deer I tried to get out of my car to take their picture. They wanted none of it and scampered off, but not before I captured (as I later discovered when I developed the film) their backsides adorably scampering away.

When I soon thereafter happened upon a trio of sandhill cranes, I reveled in how they seemed reluctant to leave their spot simply because a human stopped by. I snapped a few photos of the taller-than-me, leggy birds with piercing eyes and red-blazed heads but thought little else of it as I made my way to my camp site, pitched my tent, and took my kayak down to the lake.

The Kissimmee River, the “fixed” and straight part, anyway, bores me. Years ago, humans decided we would “fix” the flooding issues brought about by the seasonal, dependable, essential rainstorms that soaked into the aquifer. These rains proved rather

necessary for maintaining stable supplies of drinking water, providing sustenance for countless ecosystems, and generally keeping the Sunshine State plugging along in paradise much as she always has. For cattle ranchers, especially those who purchased land at a steal close to the river, found the seasonal flooding something of a nuisance and, much to their delight, the local water management district fixed the problem, redesigning an intricate network of slippery, twisty waterways into a flume-like straight, ordered affair.

As with so many environmental fixes, these engineers had no clue what they were doing, other than silencing the protests of the men who wanted a cheap and easy place to work the land and livestock.

Straightening the Kissimmee, to make a long story short, failed spectacularly. It turns out that rivers tend to go where they damn well please, and no math problem or hydrologic model in the world exists that can predict with 100 percent accuracy where that might be. The only way to know for sure where water will go – the ONLY one – comes from looking at where it has gone before. Then, don't try and redirect it.

All things considered, perhaps the engineers tasked with working on the Kissimmee should have done this. These good-intentioned yet fairly clueless hydrological scamps did not. They straightened the river and fucked it up; that is, I believe, the scientific term for what happened. The Kissimmee River, by the way, used to run from the southern edge of what is now Sea World into Lake Okeechobee, which drained, pre-water management hijinks, into the Everglades. Changing the rate of flow and volume of flow caused, in layman's terms, a crapload of problems. In a rushing charge of backwards motion, civil

engineers have started fixing the Kissimmee once again, which, everyone agrees, would be a lot easier had they not tried to fix it in the first place.

Along the fixed parts of the Kissimmee – and by this I mean the stretches that engineers have now fixed twice and, hopefully, for good – the river winds and twists, verdant and lovely and alive with snakes and hyacinth and gators and bass. The parts fixed only once – which is to say they have not been fixed at all but, like a dog, broken so that they no longer function as the Universe intended – the river plays out a boring, dead, straight nightmare. But those living parts, and the lakes that feed them, evoke prehistoric beauty.

Anglers love Lake Kissimmee; outside the state park exists a constellation of fish camps run by lovely, hardened women. They sell beer; not dark beer, not craft beer, but Beer with a capital “B,” because all that matters is that it’s cold, fermented, and hoppy. Beer and Bass: Welcome to Lake Kissimmee.

I paddled the edges of the lake, watching the reeds and water lilies, and noticed a pair of eyes watching me carefully. Gator. Fine. Except I started to feel distinctly “tracked” as opposed to “watched.” I noticed that no matter where I pulled my paddle, the eyes and I remained roughly the same distance apart.

You can tell a gator’s length, folk wisdom holds, by measuring the distance between its eyes. While I had no desire to get close enough to a gator to test this theory, it gave me some measure of comfort to note that his eyes *seemed* fairly close together. Nevertheless, I told myself, I had to go make dinner. I gave my saurian buddy a wide berth, hoisted my lonesome kayak up on the Blazer, and made my way back to camp.

I had fallen peacefully asleep – as peacefully as one can in a tent when one can't find a good patch of sandy ground – when I heard it. A noise. Well, more of a hard-edged rustling, really. I tried to shake it off; in the woods, in the dark, a toad hopping sounds like a hog crashing through the underbrush.

This sounded like more than that. Years before, I mocked the movie *The Blair Witch Project* to a friend whom the film truly frightened. I taunted him for weeks, leaving bundles of sticks on piles of rocks in front of his office door. On this night, I suddenly realized what terrified him about that movie: the Blair Witch hovered just outside my tent.

Never mind that the next campers were about 20 feet away. Before I could talk myself down from the ledge, I grabbed my cell phone, pillow, blanket, and car keys and sprinted to the car. I turned the headlights on and two things happened:

I saw nothing there.

I could not force myself to get out of the car.

I toyed with leaving, but that meant getting out of the car and packing up, and the Blair Witch was *out there*, dammit. I thought about driving to a hotel, but the park lies several miles off SR 60, and SR 60 isn't exactly a Holiday Inn mecca – something, on most days, of which I approve. I recalled a Wal-Mart several miles back but, really, I probably stood a better chance of getting killed while sleeping in a Wal-Mart parking lot than I did from the Blair Witch. I hoped.

That night I slept at the campsite – in the car. In the morning, I stretched my aching neck and lower back and cooked breakfast, then started to pack up, convincing myself I’d only heard the horrible crashing noises in my head when, with my back to the car, I heard the same awful sound. I stiffened; whatever It was, I could feel Its presence right behind me. Slowly, heart pounding, hands shaking, I turned.

I came face-to-beak with a sandhill crane and two of his compatriots. He leveled his gaze at me, looking imperiously *down* at me. We were inches apart. My heart pounded a furious staccato in my chest. I tried to breathe and found no air.

He tilted his head to the right, then stretched it to look around me. My brain whooshed as air rushed in once I realized he was eyeballing my food.

“Shoo! Scat! Go on now!” I said. He pulled his head back and the trio moved to the edge of the campground, watching me carefully as I packed. Nervously I weighed the odds. I had maybe an inch in height on the shortest of these three birds; the other two towered over me. I had more girth, but less beak and also no earthly idea if their claws had sharp nails. Thankfully, they allowed me to pack – quickly – in peace. Only when I started the car and backed out of the camp site did they make their way back into the camp, investigating any evidence of my presence.

“And a good south wind sprung up behind/
The Albatross did follow/
And every day/
for food or play/
Came to the mariner's hollo!”¹⁴⁷

Scary birds, those sandhill cranes. Far scarier, I would say, than the Blair Witch.

Palm thickets and pines escort you along the roadway east. The road meets the edge of Lake Wales State Forest, indicated by a sign and much taller pines. East of the forest Westgate River Ranch offers an “authentic ranch experience,” if such an experience includes a full-service marina, airport, and neatly manicured grounds. The ranch offers rodeos, skeet shooting, hayrides, airboat rides, and a petting zoo, but for those truly wishing to get a bead on the local scene, the ranch offers water access to the Kissimmee River.

Lake Kissimmee narrows to a river at SR 60, feeding directly into the straightened, “fixed” run of river, and cows, water hyacinths, and cattle egrets fringe the water. From time to time the original curls and kinks of the river overlap the dredged and boring canal with scraps of wildlife. The river stays straight and, like the River Ranch, sanitized, and almost nonthreatening, until the southern edge of Kissimmee Prairie Preserve State Park. After the park, it writhes and crunches up on itself before it returns to the static, precise right angles near Chandler Ranch Road. Even then, a squiggle of river defies the ordered plane of water, crossing back and forth over the river, teasing it with its organic path, all the way to Lake Okeechobee.

Back on SR 60, away from the golf course/dude ranch and the Kissimmee River, Yeehaw Junction graces the crossroads of SR 60 and US 441, not far from the Florida Turnpike. Once a town center for cattle ranchers, downtown Yeehaw Junction now boasts the Desert Inn motel and restaurant, a Stuckeys gas station, and a blinking stoplight. Built in the 1800s, the Desert Inn’s bar gives little indication, save for the televisions, that

much time has passed since the grand opening. The main change? The Desert Inn used to have both hookers and booze. Now they just have booze.

In a collection of his columns, *Dispatches From the Land of Flowers*, Florida columnist Jeff Klinkenberg rhapsodizes about the food at the Desert Inn, praising the meatloaf and chili and extolling the virtues of the owner's frog's legs.¹⁴⁸

Since that 1994 piece the owner handed over the cooking end of the business to others. Her pies, frog legs and breaded-right-there onion rings gave way to less individualized food, but the drinks remain strong and the atmosphere, unchanged. George, a defaced male mannequin bedecked in customer signatures, still lurks in the ladies room. The polished wood of the bar still evokes images of cowboys and crackers ending a day in town with a shot of whiskey. The waitresses will still try to scare you with ghost stories about the "museum" upstairs.

East of Yeehaw the road sprawls into four lanes, divided in half by a metal guardrail. After a few miles, the guardrail yields to a grass median. The south side of the road here seems one long orange grove, while the north side is nothing but green between the Desert Inn and Interstate 95 almost 30 miles away.

The road ends at Indian River Boulevard at Vero Beach. In town, a citrus museum pays homage to the once-fertile orange and grapefruit trees and packing plants that once played a starring role in the center of the state but now make only cameo appearances. Further west, the orange, grapefruit, and pine trees give way to the Intracoastal Waterway, and either north or south leads you to causeways that will take you to the "beach" portion of Vero Beach (See Tour 1).

Tour 12: Fort Pierce to Bradenton

“This route from ocean to Gulf penetrates long stretches of flatlands and occasional cypress and hardwood hammocks and skirts the northern edge of the Everglades into an area of extensive citrus groves and truck farms. Signboards are conspicuously absent along the highway. Mosquito control units have done much since 1935 to eliminate insect pests, formerly an annoyance to travelers between Fort Pierce and Okeechobee.”¹⁴⁹

The further south these driving tours take me, the more I marvel at the change in the state. I cannot specify one thing that marks the metamorphosis, such as the houses or vegetation or people; the changes are diaphanous, a delicate haze that covers parts of the state but somehow brings it into focus. The air hangs thicker; the trees grow a clearer shade of green. As the roads approach the mighty swamp that snuggles itself against the state’s limestone mattress, the spiky stalks of palm fronds and the teeth of the sawgrass seem to poke through that gauzy veil of Florida’s tourist-friendly image and let you know that you stand at the edge of wilderness.

State Road 70 demarcates that wilderness. The tour starts in Fort Pierce, and as the road pulls away from the edge of North America and into the center of the state, the hinterland rears up and announces itself.

Tarantulas have found a home in Fort Pierce's St. Lucie County. Mexican redrump tarantulas, to be precise. The fuzzy invader first made its presence known in the summer of 1996, when a citrus grove worker near Fort Pierce found a half-grown tarantula. A week later, other workers found a female tarantula and a few of her children. The Department of Agriculture decided to head down and check out the Fort Pierce tarantula population. They found about 100 tarantulas. As best as the experts can figure, the spiders descended from pets imported from Central America. The South Florida environment has enough in common with the spider's native land – the Yucatan – that the velvety nightmare maker can survive quite nicely outside the exotic pet keeper's terrarium. So far, the state believes the tarantulas confine their ever-expanding population to this lone citrus grove.¹⁵⁰

The road leaves Interstate 95 behind and, for a great expanse, the only businesses a Ford dealership and mini-marts. Cattle, however, thrive. Cattlemen here sell over 150,000 head of cattle annually through the Okeechobee Livestock Market. The Okeechobee Cattlemen's Association holds two rodeos every year, one in March and one over the Labor Day weekend.¹⁵¹

In neighboring Highlands County, the Lykes Brothers raise one of Florida's largest herds of cows (and calves). The Lykes Brothers own 367,000 acres of Florida real estate, making them one of the state's largest landowners. They use much of that property for cattle ranching, citrus, forests, and sugar cane.

Descendants of Dr. Howell Tyson Lykes, who practiced medicine before going into Florida agriculture in the 1800s, still own Lykes Brothers. Today, the Highlands County ranch covers a good bit of the county.¹⁵²

Before the Lykes Brothers – and others like them – bought and drained this land and went about the business of straightening the pesky Kissimmee River and attempting to alter its flood plain (See Tour 11), this land was all part of the Everglades system. Today, if you look south over the heads of cattle, you can see the Everglades in the distance, on the far side of Lake Okeechobee.

Unlike some of the other routes, a lack of development – other than the cattle ranches and citrus groves – marks our trail. Signs note several state-designated “natural areas,” areas studied by the Florida Natural Areas Inventory (FNAI). FNAI notes the plants and animals in these places, which look very much like frontier; even where cattle graze next door, oak and pine and palm all dot the pasture, growing thicker as the ranch ends and these specks of first nature overtake the landscape .¹⁵³ .

At the apex of the lake of the same name, Okeechobee, the road has its first (and one of its only) stoplights. Rural Okeechobee maintains a narrow focus: fishing and cattle. For 44 years the town has hosted the Speckled Perch Festival; unlike other Florida Festivals, they do not crown a queen. The town also hosts a series of bass fishing tournaments and a single art and music festival.¹⁵⁴ In July they have a “Day of the Cowboy,” which culminates with a cattle drive through the town.¹⁵⁵

A modest set of buildings strung together in a traditional main street. Although you can find the odd fast food restaurant and may take your pick of gas stations, the town gives the impression of favoring local businesses over franchises.

The road crosses the Kissimmee River, which travels south to feed Lake Okeechobee. Here the river runs in unnatural angles, straight and measured. In the 1960s, the state modified the river, taking a winding freshwater haven for gators, snakes, and wildflowers and straightening it into a barren rush of water. From a ribboned river that twisted and turned back and forth through the state, gently feeding the Lake and, in turn, the Everglades came an impatient stream of water with no time to waste on nature or ecology. The change, brought about by people with new homes, businesses, and cattle ranches along the three-mile-wide floodplain who didn't enjoy the annual floods,¹⁵⁶ changed a once-sweeping river into a rush to its destination: Lake Okeechobee.

The rate of flow and the changes in the water resulting from a faster trip from Central to South Florida changed the face of the Lake Okeechobee, the Everglades, and the wildlife. In 1999 the Army Corps of Engineers and the South Florida Water Management District started undoing the 1960s "fix" of the river (at, the District estimates, a cost of roughly \$620 Million.) The project will return roughly 40 miles of the river back to its historic flow path; it will also restore 40 square miles of floodplain. The District has already restored segments of the river to meandering helixes of black water. These undulations stand in sharp contrast to the straight runs of river, such as the one jutting into Lake Okeechobee at the town of the same name.

The Peace River runs through Arcadia, a stopping off point between its home in the Green Swamp and its destination, Charlotte Harbor. During the Micocene Epoch (five million years to 26 million years ago) the now-inland river lay at the bottom of the ocean. Today that means fossil hunters can sift through the shallow riverbed beneath the blackwater river and find shark teeth, dolphin bones, and other prehistoric remnants.¹⁵⁷

My kayak club traveled to the Peace River in search of these fossils and put kayaks in the water at a put-in no more than 200 feet off the tour route. As one of the paddlers lifted his foot to take a step, another called out. We looked down and saw a slender brown snake with rust colored reticulation.

“It’s a copperhead!” one man insisted. No, it was not. It was a harmless brown water snake, sunning himself while hoping to avoid hapless kayakers. Nonetheless, many in the kayaking expedition remained skittish for the first leg of our journey north. Not far from the put-in, though, the dangers and dynamic of the river changed: no longer did we fret over snakes. Instead we wondered if families running their all-terrain vehicles through the shallow riverbed would, in their enjoyment of the moment, fail to notice us. As we rounded another bend, the incessant drone of the ATVs faded and we paddled a peaceful, straight stretch of blackwater.

After a series of bends that took us little more than a mile from SR 70, we found a bed of black rocks, visible underneath the running water. I squat; I sift. In 20 minutes time I unearthed a handful of shark’s teeth and what more experienced fossil hunters identified as inner ear bones from a dolphin. Satisfied with my haul, I let the slow current push me downriver to the road.

The snake had moved on; nonetheless, we stepped carefully as we took our boats from the river. Common water snakes can always have big brothers, the kinds with rattles.

(See Tour Two for more about Arcadia)

Okeechobee serves an embarrassment of frog legs as well as beef, and as I pull into the Reef and Beef, I want both. The lure of a juicy local steak proves too tempting, and I order a glass of red wine that doesn't taste bad for a restaurant with a plastic sign boasting an almost-cartoonish cow.

In May 1939, Arcadia held its first cattle sale. The Arcadia Stockyard continues the cattle sale every Monday and Wednesday at noon, although several owners have claimed the stockyard since the *Guide's* first printing.¹⁵⁸ Rail cars used to move the cattle across the country; today, trailers full of cattle take the future steaks to their final destination.

Myakka River State Park offers pristine conditions for finding alligators, kayaking, and camping. The undeveloped areas within the park offer a glimpse of what the entirety of the area once looked like (and much of it still does): pines, oak, and palm hammocks protecting the banks of the gnarled, ancient river. The river itself winds between grassy, wet shoreline, a tie to the prairie it traverses in other parts. The park has a 25-foot-high, 100-foot-long canopy walkway that takes hikers through the treetops, offering a osprey-eye view of the park.

At Bradenton, the route's terminus, the road intersects with US 41 (See Tour 4).

Tour 13: Punta Rassa to West Palm Beach and around Lake Okeechobee

“State 25, the direct route from Palm Beach on the Atlantic to Fort Myers and the Gulf coast, crosses the northern section of the Everglades, America's largest swamp, its 4,000 square miles far exceeding the extent of the Dismal Swamp in Virginia and Okefenokee Swamp in Georgia and North Florida. The route follows the shore of Lake Okeechobee, encircled with fertile black fields growing great quantities of winter vegetables and sugar cane. Passing through the open range country of central Florida, reminiscent of the Old West with its cowboys and herds of range cattle, the highway follows the Caloosahatchee River to Fort Myers and the Gulf Coast at Punta Rassa, fringed with sand flats and low-lying keys overgrown with mangroves.¹⁵⁹”

This tour originally made a beeline from West Palm Beach to Punta Rassa, but we added a hefty leg to it – a complete circle around Lake Okeechobee. Without stops, it should take us just under four hours. Prior to this, the only way I've seen Lake Okeechobee is from the right seat of a Grumman Traveler, a low-wing, four-seater prop plane. The pilot indulged me and tree-topped over the lake, swooping in low so I could get a good look. We followed the series of locks west to the coast before we had to return to higher, safer air. Other than that, I've only read about the lake, heard stories about the lake, and wondered about the lake.

Many of the stories come from Barry, who's a boat captain by trade and used to do quite a few lake deliveries. If you're trying to get a boat from one side of Florida to the other – and you're getting paid a flat rate to do so – you don't go around Florida's southern tip. You cut through the lake, using the channelized St. Lucie River on the east and the Caloosahatchee River on the west. On the east, State Road 76 follows the river; State Road 80 more loosely follows the Caloosahatchee on the west.

A series of locks keeps the water where the water management districts think it should be, which really means keeps the lake from flooding and ruining a lot of sugarcane, which really means keeps Big Sugar happy. Captains time their trips by when they can get through the locks and bridges. Heading towards the lake, the water level rises with each lock. Heading away from the lake, the water level drops. State engineers only allow the lake to touch outside water at roughly 20 fixed points.

Before we start our circle around the pond, we have to cross State Road 80. We leave our cozy spot at Koreshan State Park (See Tour 4) and move east through the swamp.

The waters of the Okeechobee drain south into the Everglades, east into the Atlantic, and west into the Gulf of Mexico. On the Caloosahatchee River's western edge, Sanibel and Captiva Islands are connected to the mainland with a bridge. Motorists pay \$6 to cross over into Sanibel, the larger of the two islands at just over 10 miles long. Sanibel is barely a mile wide at most parts, with its widest part stretching maybe three miles across. The island resembles Fort Myers, Cape Coral, and the mainland cities on the other side of the bridge in much the same way a bulldozer resembles a palm tree. Sanibel has one main road, a two-lane affair lined by a bicycle path that seems more crowded than the road.

The highest building on the island is the Sanibel Lighthouse, painted a deep brown that contrasts with the color-washed island.

The cottages, homes and shops that pepper the island mimic the colors of the tropical jungle they exist between: shocks of fuchsia bougainvillea explode between coral and lemon cottages, peach hibiscus frame the crosswalks, and orange birds of paradise flower between lime green traveler palms, red Poinciana, and soft green pine trees leading to the beach.

Shells on the beach mirror and mute the colors of the island: pink Florida fighting conch, cerulean lion's paw, and lavender olive shells blot out the sand. Sanibel's crescent shape and its position along the edge of Florida make it an ideal landing place for shells getting washed along the sea bed.

“Sanibel Island is notable for the number and variety of sea shells on its beaches. Every tide and storm wash ashore thousands of specimens of some 300 varieties. Among them are the multicolored calico shells, of which the pale lemon-yellow is the rarest; the lion's paw, a dark orange-red; the white, bowl-shaped, yellow-lined buttercup, which comes from deep water and is seldom found in pairs; the delicately scalloped rose cockle, its interior shading from pale salmon pink to deep rose, and often tinged with orange and purple; the large red-brown cockle, used for souvenirs and in the manufacture of trays, lamps, and other objects; the fragile white angel's wing; the Chinese alphabet, a smooth white shell with curious markings; and the slender polished olive, tapering at both ends and shading from dark brown to light tan, also called the Panama shell. Perhaps rarest of all is the junonia, a deep-sea mollusk, its creamy white exterior marked with spiral

*rows of square brown or orange spots. Perfect junonia specimens have sold for \$200. Florida shore life is described in Florida Sea Shells (1936), by B.D.E.Aldrich and E.Snyder. The Sanibel Sea Shell Fair is held annually in February.*¹⁶⁰”

Not much has changed since then. On February 17, the Sanibel Captiva Shell Club kicked off its seventy-fifth annual shell fair (“Shellabration”) with the Sanibel Stoop. The Sanibel Stoop is named after the stooped over posture of a shell collector as they scour the beach for cockles, sand dollars, and coquina. During the Sanibel Stoop event at the fair, shellers gather along the beach en masse to stoop over as if looking for shells.

Shell collectors aside, Sanibel appeals to tourists seeking old Florida, or, at the very least, what they imagine of old Florida. The island does not disappoint. There are no stop lights, no chain stores (except for one Dairy Queen, grandfathered in when the island enacted tight growth management practices), and it still looks much as the *Guide* describes it:

*“The island, 2 miles wide and approximately 12 miles long, is a State game preserve; native and migratory birds are plentiful and can be studied at close range; wild flowers grow profusely in spring and summer; the Gulf and bay offer excellent fishing at all seasons.*¹⁶¹”

There *Guide* makes little mention of development on the island, and that holds true today. While there is no shortage of colorful, quaint beach bungalows, time shares, and inns that will take your money in exchange for a night or two on the island, they come second to the natural splendor. Sanibel seems content to fade behind the brilliant colors of blue wildflowers, roseate spoonbills, and purple donax.

On the mainland, the route traces the crowded banks of the Caloosahatchee. East of Interstate 75 the buildings grow fewer. In parts, cypress swamps still meet the road, but farms and cattle are more prominent than low-lying swampland. As we pass Buckingham Road the road abandons all pretense of following the twisting river and shoots through the right angles of reclaimed swamp.

Everything here is a straight line: the road, the crops lining the road, the drainage canals dug to helpfully dry out the swampland and make the rich muck more useful as soil. Even the Caloosahatchee has succumbed to this idea of order: while the river still curves and bows in places, in parts its lines, too, straighten alongside the neat rows of orange trees, tomatoes, and peppers.

Was this the greatest idea? It depends on whom you ask. The farmers and the homes here likely think so; Everglades-huggers likely disagree. The system of drainage canals and pounds of fertilizer and pesticides used on these farms haven't exactly encouraged the wetland to thrive. It appears that some of the farmers have sold to developers, and signs of subdivisions marching south emerge along this road: a supermarket here, a diner there.

LaBelle exists at a bend in the Caloosahatchee. It is by no accounts a large city, but it is the main population center between I-75 and Lake Okeechobee along the route. It has not quite 5,000 residents and is the Hendry County seat.

“Cowboys ride into town from the surrounding ranches, wearing broadbrimmed hats, high boots, and other conventional trappings. La Belle's big event is the Fourth of July rodeo, at which range hands compete in riding Florida broncos and 'bull-dogging' steers. Roping and whipcracking contests follow spirited horse races, on which wagering is heavy. A barbecue supper concludes the day, and in the evening square dances are enjoyed in jooks and homes to the music of guitars and fiddles, accented by the thumps of heavy boots.¹⁶²”

Today the rodeo continues in LaBelle, as does the annual Swamp Cabbage Festival. The Festival includes “Grasscar” (a lawnmower race); armadillo races, which are exactly what they sound like; and, of course, the crowning of the Swamp Cabbage Queen.¹⁶³

Swamp cabbage, for the uninitiated, comes from the white tender heart of younger cabbage palm trees. When prepared, they look like the logs of string cheese sold in grocery stores, although they taste nothing alike.

In Clewiston I hope to see my first water moccasin. Barry tells stories of crossing the lake on boat deliveries and stopping at the Roland Martin Marine Center for the night. At twilight and after water moccasins would gather on the floating docks, patches of color darker than the dock that looked suspiciously like rope but most definitely were not. The mosquitoes here are so thick that when you sit down to dinner at the marina bar, the server brings you a can of insect repellent, he says.

We stop and walk out to the levee, my eyes more focused on the ground than the water. I leave Calypso in the van to keep her safe from snakes. Cottonmouth water

moccasins are pit vipers with tiny heads and tails but fat bodies. Some sick part of me very badly wants to see a water moccasin up close. I grew up a block away from a creek, and my parents warned me the creek was chock-full of water moccasins. I never saw one, but odds are if I had seen one, it would have been a common nonvenomous water snake, not a cottonmouth water moccasin. Brown water snakes are far more populous in Florida, but not as good a deterrent for keeping a curious seven-year-old out of trouble.

The lake is mostly out of sight, although at the top of the levee I see a canal with four empty rowboats rafted up to grassy lowland. In the distance I see an empty nesting platform, ready for osprey.

I see no snakes.

Clewiston sits at the southwest lake rim. In 1939, it was a company town, owned by US Sugar. The workers – the black workers – who cut the cane and processed the sugar – lived south of Clewiston in Harlem.

US Sugar owned Clewiston's water, power, and phone companies as well as the town hotel. Today, they still dominate. Clewiston is a sugar town; there is no pretending US Sugar doesn't have a hand in everything.

If you've ever heard the phrase "Big Sugar," a term generally used derisively, the person likely referred to US Sugar. Sugar is a huge industry in Florida and a big part of the Everglade's downfall. Without Big Sugar, some would say, there would be no need for the Everglades Restoration program.

While I disagree – greed and avarice are powerful, potent motivators, and businessmen don't need sugar cane to buy, drain, raze, and sell to the highest bidder – I am still profoundly saddened by US Sugar's impact on Florida.

The muck around Lake Okeechobee and the Everglades does indeed make for perfect sugar cane. Big Sugar came here, saw, planted, and – with a little help from government subsidies – grew. They took what water they wanted, and if, during dry spells, they didn't get enough, they convinced the government to let them divert the massive amounts of water they needed. When they got too much, they dammed it up and saved it. The result? Sweet, sweet sugar – but not too much for lands south of the sugar cane, which included the Glades. Because of Big Sugar, the government – through the auspices of an appointed water management board called South Florida Water Management District – can turn Lake Okeechobee on and off like a big faucet. This, as you may well imagine, does not bode well for unique ecosystems that accustomed to getting the same amount of water it has received for roughly 70 million years. Without the seasonal, irregular flow, life in the Glades faltered.

In addition, sugar cane is not impervious to bugs and disease, and, as with most plants, fertilizer makes it grow faster, but they don't disappear – the runoff into the Everglades upped the levels of nitrogen, phosphorous, and a host of chemicals that kill bugs. It also failed to enrich the lives of the birds and fish that feed on the bugs and drink the water.

In time and aided by activists like Marjory Stoneman Douglas, a gifted writer and activist whose father happened to own the *Miami Herald* and thus gave her a far-reaching

platform – people began to understand the significance of the Everglades. We may not like its razor-sharp sedge, its venomous snakes, or its larger-than-life collection of saurian green predators, but we like even less knowing that we, as a species, drove anything to extinction. With Ms. Douglas’ help – and others – we saw all-too-clearly that that was indeed where we were headed. Work began on a “restoration program” to try and keep the Everglades from drying out and dying.

Except, of course, that Big Sugar remained. Death of a one-of-a-kind ecosystem or not, they had to worry about that bottom line, and they were prepared to make sure local, state, and federal laws stayed in their favor.

After years of strife between Big Sugar and pretty much anyone else who read a paper in Florida, Governor Charlie Crist came upon a seemingly perfect solution: why not just buy out the company? For under \$2 billion, the state could buy 187,000 acres of Big Sugar land, close the refinery, and restore the flow of the Everglades.

It sounded like a great plan, at least to this writer. It failed in quick stages. The Governor announced the plan in June, 2008. By November the plan changed: for \$1.34 billion the state could have 181,000 acres but not any of the processing facilities, including the refinery. To make a long story somewhat shorter, the numbers kept shrinking and as of February 2012, US Sugar is still alive and well in Clewiston, much to the relief of its 1,700 employees who depend on America’s sweet tooth to feed their families.

Clewiston’s slogan? “America’s Sweetest City.”

While there isn't much other than these sweet-toothed towns leading up to Lake Okeechobee, the ring around the Lake itself (SR 80/ US 27/ SR 700/ US 98/ SR 700) is fascinating, even without knowing the history.

The name Belle Glade crowns this town belle of the swamp.

"Welcome to Belle Glade. Her soil is her fortune" one sign boasts, and that may be so – but not for the people living here. Of the town's 17,500 people, 33 percent live below the poverty level.¹⁶⁴ The town has 56 percent black people and 34 percent Hispanics.¹⁶⁵ Along the road side we see more Spanish signs than English, and the predominant roadside industry seems a mix of taquerias and drive-through liquor stores. There are over 6,000 homes in Belle Glade, over half of which are single-family homes. As we drive through town, I find myself glancing towards the lake – or, more accurately, the dike keeping the lake from washing over these buildings.

It's not like it hasn't happened before.

*"Belle Glade, 42 m. (1,646 pop.), was hastily built in 1925 and virtually wiped out by the hurricane three years later in which hundreds of its citizens perished."*¹⁶⁶

Here's the problem with putting houses down in this part of Florida: the land is low and wet, and no matter what humans try to do to make it higher and drier, it doesn't work on a long-term basis. The Hurricane of 1928 offers the best example of this.

"At the beginning of the twentieth century, water simply flowed unimpeded from the lake's south shore in a sheet, into the Everglades [...] For the early settlers and farmers, that simply would not do. So between 1923 and 1925, the state built a 47-mile-long dike

of earth. It was about five feet high. Twice in the next three years, it would be shown as useless as a dam made of tissue paper.

“In the early 1920s, commissioners of the Everglades Drainage District, founded in 1913, decided to build a more permanent dike around Lake Okeechobee. The plan was for work to start on the dike in 1927. It would be 110 to 130 feet wide at the base and 20 feet wide at the crest and stand 27 feet above sea level. They concluded that such a levee would resist hurricane-driven surge from the lake. But the legislature didn’t get around to approving the money for it.”¹⁶⁷

When the 1926 hurricane hit Florida, a low dirt dike burst at Moore Haven, a town of 1,200. Estimates say the water rose 17 feet, destroying the under-construction Glades County Courthouse. Officials buried the unidentifiable bodies in a mass county grave.¹⁶⁸

By September 1928, the dike situation had not improved. Nonetheless, area farms still flourished in the rich black muck. Heavy late-summer rains and storms dumped more water in the lake. When the hurricane made landfall on September 16, water dammed in Okeechobee had nowhere to go.

“It woke up Old Okeechobee and the monster began to roll in his bed,” wrote Zora Neale Hurston in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, a fictionalized retelling of the 1928 storm.

The dikes did not hold. What followed was a precursor to Katrina: death of the poor black farm workers on a massive scale. 40 miles inland, the hurricane reclaimed Florida, destroying the levee, obliterating entire towns, flooding farms, and killing thousands. The water had taken back the land, reshaping the topography of Florida’s lowest third.

Before human intervention, the natural system worked. Water flowed from the middle of the state at a shallow, slow pace down the meandering Kissimmee River. During the summer there was more of it; in the winter, less. Some water pooled in Lake Okeechobee; some went around, and still more flowed through. In late summer, heavier rains flooded the land south of the lake as well as the Kissimmee River's flood plain. At the edge of the Everglades, the excess water drained into Florida Bay.

However efficiently it worked for the birds, trees, and fish, this system did not work for those who wanted to farm or sell the land under the water. Under that ever-moving pesky water was black gold: soil so rich from eons of wet, decaying plant and animal life that anything would grow in it. Under that water was land that could hold houses, shopping malls, and condominiums. The land failed to make anyone money while flooded with water, so why not change it – just a bit – to make it more efficient for humans?

The Everglades consists of not one but many unique, interdependent ecosystems. The Glades have more than a bunch of wet saw grass: here you can find hammocks of hardwood trees, mangrove islands, cypress swamp, freshwater prairies, and a patchwork of other communities. The one commonality these ecosystems all share is a persistent need for freshwater, and plenty of it.

Building a dike around Lake Okeechobee to contain the water proved a less-than-prudent decision for these communities. Altering the landscape so that the land surrounding and beneath the lake could be used for farm, cattle, and citrus was also not the best decision for those same communities. Finally, housing poor black farm workers

to live on that newly-drained land proved a prime example of sketchy decision-making. On September 16, 1928, these three decisions collided spectacularly.

“As the Category Four monster raged westward, it saved its most crippling blow for the small farming communities that lined Lake Okeechobee's southern shore. Between Clewiston and Canal Point, 6,000 people lived and worked, and nearly half would perish before the light of day.”¹⁶⁹

Hurricane winds can bend a bicycle around a tree. They can lift a roof off a home. They can pick up cars. In 1928, the wind powered a mighty wave of water through a wall supposed to contain it.

“A five foot muck dike, built to hold back Lake Okeechobee's waves during summer rains, crumbled in the frenzied waters, unleashing a storm surge with the fury of a tidal wave.

“‘Nobody seemed to be too much alarmed,’ said [Frank] Stallings, 20 then and boarded up with his family in their Belle Glade grocery store, ‘until the water started coming in’.

“One family strapped the children to a fallen tree. Some in Belle Glade rushed up the water tower, kicking at anyone who got in their way. In the farming communities surrounding South Bay and Pahokee, thousands of field workers hunkered down in flimsy homes, many doomed to drown.”¹⁷⁰

Category Four hurricane winds pushed the water around in the shallow lake, beating it to a boil. The water in the lake rose 10 feet above the lake level, bursting through roughly 21 1/2 miles of levee on the southeast side of the lake.¹⁷¹ The wall of

water washed through the town, turning houses upside down, washing them away, and drowning those in its path. There was no escape; the water fiercely and wholly covered the towns.

Even today, no one knows how many people died. The first number, 225, quickly grew to 400.

“Ugly death was simply everywhere,” Charles Young, a Glades resident who helped collect the dead, would later recall¹⁷². The work was one part rescue, many parts body recovery. Young found the bodies of a family, including a dead man clutching his stilled child. Another rescuer, Festus Stalling, found the bloated body of a little girl, a toddler wearing a bracelet.

“A month earlier, she had proudly shown him the bracelet, a gift for her second birthday. He grabbed her by that arm, lifted her up, and added her to the pile of death.”¹⁷³

Some bodies were given a burial in a coffin, but not many. The Florida Health Department officially claimed just over 1,800 dead, but historians put the toll higher. Most of the dead were black farmworkers. In 1920s Florida, an unidentified black person didn't get a coffin, especially not with the weight of dead bodies crushing the relief efforts.

Bodies were stacked in piles and burned. The remains were buried in mass graves. At some sites, those corpses were counted. At others, workers were too overwhelmed to keep track. Most black survivors and many white ones never found out what happened to their friends and relatives.

The little girl with the bracelet? She was thrown onto a funeral pyre, her body burned and buried with the others. Festus Stalling never forgot her. Memories of that child – and the many other dead – stayed with him until he died, his son Frank said.

"He said the hardest thing he ever had to do was throw that little girl's body on that fire," Frank said years later.¹⁷⁴

If no one had tried to dam the lake and build a city where the water was, that little girl would have been 81 years old when Barack Obama took the oath of office. Today, the majority of homes and stores around the lake are along the road ringing the lake, less than a half mile from the levees.

Further north, Pahokee looks poorer still, perhaps because of the colonial-styled estates interspersed with housing projects and shuttered businesses. Sugar cane is everywhere. As we drive I try and picture where the bodies of the 1928 storm were buried – not all graves were marked – and in my mind I see a jumble of arms and legs and fire and piles and piles of sugar. There's a fire in the distance; burning cane crops is part of the farming practice. Burning the fields leaves only the stalk, making it easier for the workers to harvest the cane.

Port Myaca is the lone spot along the road where we can see the lake instead of a neatly mowed levee. It is also where we begin to leave the cane fields behind. Between here and the top of the lake, lunkers, not sugar cane, are the order of the day. Lunkers, or largemouth bass, are big business here. Fishing camps dot the northeast quadrant of the lake between Port Mayaca and Okeechobee. If agriculture has attempted to triumph over

the lake and Glades on its south side, fishing has learned to harmonize with both on the north end. It is a wholly more pleasant sight for me; I've never caught a hawg, or even tried, but after the desperation of Pahokee and Belle Glade, the unassuming fish camps are a nice contrast. There are still farms here, many of which are palm farms, but the presence of something at work with the environment instead of against it soothes me.

Taylor Creek marks the top of the lake and also the least-impooverished city along the pond, although it, like the others, contains a fair share of derelict buildings. It also caters more to tourists, although judging by the wealth of fishing camps and bait shops, visitors here have a different idea of paradise than those flocking to see Mickey Mouse just two hours away.

At the western edge of Taylor Creek we stop and walk out to the levee. I want to see a water moccasin, but after Clewiston I hold little hope. We park, this time taking an antsy Calypso, and walk up the levee.

Here the lake seems less wild; there are more buildings and boaters and a man collecting trash from the ramp leading up to the levee. A tractor rests on the inside of the levee on a patch of grass, and a blue heron stares at us. East of our vantage point, a chain link fence separates the heron from a neatly mowed backyard. West of us a barge sits unattended, a colorful sign advertising "ICE SNACKS" in hand-painted lavender letters. White marshmallow clouds over the lake begin to lower themselves and darken. It's time to go.

On its west side, Okeechobee grows wilder as it seems to spread out. Here we find fewer signs of development, save the odd gas station, house, or government building.

Fields of cattle interspersed with cabbage palm line most of the roadway. In Moore Haven, we see a landfill on the lake side of the road, easily the highest point along the route and marked by crows and vultures soaring overhead. Prison inmates help with road construction, holding “STOP” and “SLOW” signs as we chug along the lake’s perimeter. When one of them switches “SLOW” to “STOP” and stop at the front of the line, he pantomimes asking for a cigarette. We shake our heads no and I find myself wondering what one does in this area of Florida to get thrown in jail. The Moore Haven jail offers no more than medium security. It houses fewer than 1,000 inmates, all are male.¹⁷⁵

Back where we started, I am still at a loss to describe the lake. Despite severe alteration to the landscape, it feels like a forgotten and untouched part of the state. It also leaves me with an alternating sense of wonder and melancholy. Part of me looks for a way to empathize with the needs filled by businesses and farms whose owners shaped these tragic decisions, but I cannot find it. Part of me is in awe of the lake and the surrounding communities; earning a living here cannot be easy, even for the wealthier: they battle mosquitoes, snakes, gators, and hurricanes with alarming regularity. This part of Florida, despite our attempt to control it, is still frontier. Despite neat rows of sugar cane and peppers and palms, the lake and the sky still rule this corner of the Sunshine State.

Neatly ordered rows of farmland escort the route east until the Loxahatchee area, where subdivisions, strip malls, and golf courses rise up to meet the road until it ends in West Palm Beach at A1A. From Loxahatchee east, the density of the Palm Beach suburbs

are a blur after the wide open rolling green of the southernmost interior, and it is almost a culture shock to see farms pushed up against the rows of development. The homes line up along the road in much the same way, just moments ago, we saw sugar and tomatoes and peas.

Tour 14: Georgia State Line (Thomasville) to Pensacola

“This route passes through a section heavily wooded with live oak, hickory and pine, and winds southward into sandy lowlands where, during ante-bellum days, prosperous plantation owners established summer homes. Paralleling the Gulf coast, the road runs westward through a region that played a prominent part in the early days of Florida. Here are one-street towns, quiet in the sunlight, their weathered century-old houses still in use. In Apalachicola Bay, more than 400 years ago, a handful of despairing Spaniards, survivors of the disastrous Narváez expedition, launched makeshift boats in an attempt to sail to Mexico, which a few ultimately succeeded in reaching after almost incredible adventures. This region heard the ring of Spanish hammers when forts were built in the 1600s; it quartered French, Spanish, and British garrisons in quick succession.”¹⁷⁶

I love this route. From the pine-lined forests of backwoods Florida to the sunsoaked beaches of the panhandle coast, this road reveals every subculture in the Sunshine State, redneck to tourist.

The tour starts at the Georgia/Florida state line just north of Tallahassee, on US 319 (also called Thomasville Road). North Florida, especially the panhandle part, is a different country than South Florida, with red clay soil, gently sloping hills and a marked antebellum feel wholly absent from the state’s coastline and southern interior. Floridians

and her fans are fond of saying “you have to go north to get south” in Florida, because so much of her southern population consists not of generations of southerners but transplants, and much of Florida feels more like a theme park or resort than the South. This is not the case in inland north Florida: Tallahassee feels more like the Deep South than Key West.

In 1939, *Guide* writers noted the Robert E. Lee monument outside of Tallahassee in Bradforville. The Daughters of the Confederacy built the monument¹⁷⁷ and dedicated it a decade before the *Guide* writers wrote about it.¹⁷⁸ The inscription reads "Erected and dedicated by the United Daughters of the Confederacy and friends in loving memory of Robert E. Lee and to mark the route of the Dixie Highway. "The shaft memorial and highway straight attest his worth -- he cometh to his own" -- Littlefield -- Erected 1927¹⁷⁹

The monument to Lee still stands, although the state moved it up roadside when the it widened US 319.¹⁸⁰

As the route bisects Tallahassee, the wooded roads and sloping hills turn into massive shade tree-lined streets. In 1824, Tallahassee became the city capital because it landed between Pensacola on the west and Jacksonville on the east. The southern reaches of the state had yet to become a significant part of the state's population – most Floridians lived less than 50 miles from the Florida/Georgia border.

Tallahassee boasts not only the state capital but Florida State University and a respectable collection of chain stores and drive-through eateries. The colonial architecture makes a nice study in juxtaposition when inside a frame of Dunkin' Donuts, Dollar

Stores, and Burger Kings. Historic buildings and parks abound, including Natural Bridge Battlefield just outside the city in Woodville.

In 1865, Confederate troops stopped Union soldiers here, helping Tallahassee earn the distinction of the only capital east of the Mississippi the Union could not overtake.

At first glance, Natural Bridge appears little more than a lovely verdant park, perfect for picnics and strolling. Two ponds, less than 100 yards apart, are shaded with knobby-kneed cypress and cluttered with duckweed. Feathery Spanish moss dangles over the river, shadowing the black water with tiny, arching wisps.

The ponds, however, aren't two disparate ponds at all, but one river: the St. Mark's. It flows from the north, vanishes underground, and reappears slightly south, where it continues until it spreads itself into Apalachee Bay, named for the Apalachee Indians, a tribe with a reputation among other indigenous folk as fierce and wealthy Indians. Archaeologists place the Apalachee in Florida around 1000 BCE; they lived between the Aucilla and Ochlockonee Rivers from what is now the Georgia line south to the Gulf of Mexico. Some 50,000 - 60,000 Apalachees lived in the area until the Spanish explorer Pánfilo de Narváez showed up in Tallahassee. Narváez made his way to the area on advice of Indians from the Tampa Bay region who suggested he could find gold in the areas of north Florida more easily than in the peninsula. That was 1528; within 150 years the Apalachee culture disappeared through one of two means: converting to Catholicism and murder by British soldiers allied with Creek Indians. Today, less than 300 Apalachee Indians exist. They no longer live in Florida, having moved first to Mobile then onto the Rapides Parish in Louisiana in the mid eighteenth century.¹⁸¹

As US 319 meanders further away from Tallahassee, the urban traffic, franchises and planned communities diminish. The western edge of the road borders Apalachicola National Forest, noted for longleaf pines and colorful assortments of wildflowers as well as a plethora of water – almost 3,000 acres of freshwater in all.¹⁸² The deep blue of the watery sinks, towering green and ochre fringes of longleaf pines, and tufts of money-colored wiregrass carpeting the forest floor offer what I can only imagine the whole of the inland Florida panhandle looked like 3,000 years ago. Inside the forests of north Florida it's easy to forget the cluttered roads of main cities, the beaches dotted with Canadians and Michiganians, and the airports importing the next round of travelers hoping to see a piece of paradise from their Gulf front motel room.

At every turn, the forest offers new vistas. Everything inside the forest feels and smells like it has just rained, green and new. Saplings and saw palmetto break through the moist ground and stretch for the sky; in swampy parts, squat cottonmouths bump through the bog while wading birds extend black dainty legs gracefully through muddy waters.

US 319 edges along the eastern edge of the Apalachicola, but just east of the road along the stretch travelers will find Wakulla State Forest and Edward Ball State Park.

The Wakulla Forest once belonged to the St. Joe Paper. Edward Ball, the company's founder and member of the duPont family, bought broad expanses of the panhandle in the 1920s.¹⁸³

Locals can enumerate the many sins of St. Joe. The company paid pennies on the dollar when buying land from locals. It opened a paper mill that, while helping employ workers as the Depression came to an end, emitted significant air contamination in the

form of sulfur. The mill used 35 million gallons of water every day, lowering the aquifer levels substantially. The company clear cut old-growth longleaf pine forests and replanted the land with slash pine, reducing the longleaf pine to two percent of its population¹⁸⁴ and earning the area a national designation: Critically Endangered Ecosystem.¹⁸⁵

As payment for the company's environmental sins, the state of Florida named a park after Mr. Ball and paid the St. Joe Corporation \$182 million for 90,000 acres.¹⁸⁶ When the company turned from paper to land development, the state agreed to reroute part of US 98 to better suit the needs of the company.¹⁸⁷

Today the locals are taking aim at a larger enemy than the massive St. Joe company: Nestle. Bottled water is a four billion dollar industry in America.¹⁸⁸ In 2010 Nestle asked the Suwannee River Water Management District for a permit to pump water for bottling. Nestle promised it would pump no more than 1.6 million gallons of water per day from the Wacissa River¹⁸⁹, a river east of 319. Local residents protested, and although Nestle ultimately withdrew its permit in the summer of 2011,¹⁹⁰ the signs still pepper the lower portion of US 319.

Despite the environmental consequences of business decisions made by its namesake, Edward Ball Wakulla Springs State Park is still a lovely place. Hiking trails brim with palms, pines (slash pines, of course), and wildflowers, but the water and the lodge are perhaps the most notable parts of the park. The lodge, built in 1937 by Ball, has almost 30 guest rooms, each with a marble bathroom. In an effort to provide a "quiet and relaxing stay," the rooms have no television, but in a nod to technology, each does have a

data port.¹⁹¹ This is the only lodge in the state park system and, at \$95 – \$150 per night, lodge rooms are the most expensive accommodations in any of the state parks.

The lodge lobby has a large stuffed alligator, dining room, and a gift shop. Just outside, the spring awaits. Wakulla spring feeds the river that share its name. It is perhaps Florida's most famous river whose name no one knows.

Before the magic of computer generated imagery, Hollywood made films the old-fashioned way: scouts chose locations that resembled the studio's vision. The early Tarzan movies – the ones starring Johnny Weissmuller – were filmed at Wakulla Springs State Park on the river. The state-operated boat tours will take passengers down the same stretch of waterway they can see in the movie.

Fans of *Creature From the Black Lagoon* (1954) also know the park as one of the chief locations for the underwater scenes from the film. While the world may better know Tarzan, fans of the *Creature* films can tell you that Rico Browning, a diver instrumental in the creating the Weeki Wachee mermaid shows (See Tour Six) was the “real” creature, pointing to his underwater work. Other fans claim the Ben Chapman, the terrestrial Creature, as the “real” creature.¹⁹² Until several years ago, the Tallahassee Film Society and the Friends of Wakulla Springs State Park hosted an annual CreatureFest, which included a screening of the film in front of the lodge.

Before the Ape Man or the Creature swooped and swam through the park, mythical water people danced in the spring:

“An Indian legend has it that small ‘water people,’ four inches tall with long hair, once held dances in the depths of the springs on moonlit nights, and that at a certain hour

a warrior appeared in a stone canoe, frightening them away.¹⁹³ Wildlife in the park is protected by the state.”

I have never seen the water people on the Wakulla, but one of the state-run boat tours I saw my first snake on a Florida river. I'd always heard that snakes slithered just beneath the surface of every freshwater body in the state and often waited just out of the water's reach, coiled on rocks, waiting for a chance at my big toe. I never saw one of the river. In a mixture of fear and sweaty excitement, every snake bird, stick and leaf in the river caused my heart to jump and fall with the possibility of seeing a snake on the water, but inevitably they always turned out to be not a snake. When I finally glimpse my first snake, a grey lazy fellow nestled in a low branch of a tree, he lacked the courtesy to so much as open his eyes as we motored past, much less attack my toe.

The water people, Creature and Tarzan all set the stage appropriately for the next leg of the tour. US 319 crosses first the Sopchoppy, then the Ochlockonee rivers. Sopchoppy means red oak and Ochlockonee means “yellow water.” The names are largely symbolic at this point, but they do point to one thing: the green of the forests starts here to collapse under the color of wildflowers and blossoms on deciduous trees. The salt in the air thickens slightly, and the buildings have less of a farmhouse feel and more of a fishermen feel.

Southwest of Ochlockonee Bay, the road runs into the Gulf of Mexico and becomes US 98. West on US 98 longleaf pines create a canopy over squat, undergrown palm trees. A string of fishing towns escort you westward, and seafood shacks, oyster bars, and marinas pepper the roadway. Shrimp boats bob on a blue bay and weathered

wooden homes rest on stilts, red mangrove-style. The only houses not on stilts are the occasional old ranch-style beach house. Waterfront homes in the state's more populated areas, such as along Boca Ciega Bay on St. Pete Beach and Treasure Island, are ostentatious declarations of wealth, cookie cutter McMansions squished into postage-stamp-sized lots. Homes here look nothing like those. Pine forests, palm thickets, and sand surround these unassuming and somewhat random collections of graying, salty wood, and steel roofs. So thick are the pines that they completely block many homes from view, the only indication of domicile a mailbox or crushed shell driveway.

*“Carrabelle, a resort and fishing village with a U.S. Weather Signal Tower, ships large quantities of shrimp, oysters, and fish, particularly mullet, throughout the year. The influence of the sea is evident even in the cemeteries, where coral of many colors, sponges, clam and conch shells are used as monuments and markers on both white and Negro graves.”*¹⁹⁴

The cemeteries are no longer segregated, but the *Guide's* description of everything else, including the Crooked River Lighthouse¹⁹⁵ (the Weather Signal Tower described in 1939) still applies. Only the car models have changed.

West of Carrabelle, Tate's Hell State Forest bumps against the edge of the beach, divided only by the road. Separated, too, only by the Ochlockonee River and one layer of government, Tate's Hell is the forest immediately adjacent to the Apalachicola. The Florida Forest Service, not the USDA, owns and operates Tate's Hell. In what some might describe as a uniquely Florida fashion, the forest has its own legend:

*“Local legend has it that a farmer by the name of Cebe Tate, armed with only a shotgun and accompanied by his hunting dogs, journeyed into the swamp in search of a panther that was killing his livestock. Although there are several versions of this story, the most common describes Tate as being lost in the swamp for seven days and nights, bitten by a snake, and drinking from the murky waters to curb his thirst. Finally he came to a clearing near Carrabelle, living only long enough to murmur the words, “My name is Cebe Tate, and I just came from Hell!” Cebe Tate’s adventure took place in 1875 and ever since, the area has been known as Tate’s Hell, the legendary and forbidden swamp.”*¹⁹⁶

Further west coastal dunes and the road trace the edge of the state, the shallow aquamarine trench of St. George Sound the only thing between the pale sandy barrier islands guarding the Gulf Coast. To the east, Apalachicola Bay waits with the bulk of the state’s oysters just beneath its surface.

Florida fishermen, the *Guide* explains, come in two varieties: net fishermen and sportsmen. This is still mostly true, although the state banned netfishing in 1994.¹⁹⁷ In this area of Florida, though, there is a third type of fisherman: the tonger. Tongers, or oystermen, use scissor-like tongs to bring the oysters to the surface. From there, they are sorted by size – oysters have to be at least three inches long for the tongers to harvest them – and brought to shore for sale.¹⁹⁸

For all the oyster activity – this area provides 90 percent of Florida’s oysters and 10 percent of the country’s – Eastpoint looks like a ghost fishing town. Beyond the docks and beneath the boats, however, pulses the beat of an oyster town. The Franklin County

oyster industry accounts for 1,000 jobs and roughly one million dollars. Eastpoint's docks run the length of the waterfront. Fishing charters here include oystering trips as well as sportfishing, and while the town has less to offer land-loving tourists than Apalachicola across the bay, fishing and kayaking trips are offered in abundance here.

Across the John Gorrie Bridge – so named for the Florida doctor who lived here and pioneered the idea of refrigeration and, subsequently, air conditioning¹⁹⁹ – lies Apalachicola, Florida's undisputed oyster capital. The *Guide* mentions only that the city is “noted for its oysters.”

Here a seafood lover can commence eating their way across the panhandle. On April 20, 2010, the Deepwater Horizon drilling rig licensed to British Petroleum exploded, killing 11 workers and creating a five mile long oil slick in the northern Gulf of Mexico. Oil gushed into the Gulf at an estimated rate of 210,000 barrels a day, and while BP scrambled to control the oil, the Florida oyster and tourism industry held its breath, waiting to see how far into Florida the oil would seep.²⁰⁰

Although the disaster did not, as feared, decimate north Florida's fisheries and oyster beds, BP paid claims to fishermen, tongers, and others potentially impacted by the spill across Florida. In 2010, some tongers who received a BP check used the check for living expenses instead of working the oyster beds.²⁰¹ Restaurants had to look elsewhere for their oysters and, in some instances, raise prices. Patrons who assumed this stemmed from the oil spill in the Gulf had it half right: Gulf oysters suffered no damaged by oil, but many tongers opted to use BP money to take a season off from work.

At Boss Oyster, where we inhale fresh oysters and beer, the manager explains that the restaurant has its own boats certified by the state Department of Agriculture for collection and selling. She also tells us yes, the tongers who decided not to work hurt not only their business, but much of the industry.

“If someone didn’t work last year,” she tells us “we didn’t hire them this year.”

Boss Oyster, one of several oyster bars along the bay, doesn’t truck in fancy. We sit outside along the water, in view of oyster and shrimp boats, commercial fishing vessels and, in the distance, more boats. Everything smells of oyster and fish and salt: welcome to a working waterfront. Here we harvest the parts of Florida that make us stand apart from the Caribbean islands off our shores. Many Florida towns may boast of sandy beaches and oyster bars; not many can claim oyster boats.

Apalachicola also has a shopping district, the John Gorrie Museum, a historic district, and, of course, more oyster houses than you can imagine, ranging from the earthy, working oyster houses like Boss to the fancier, pricier oyster bars (although high end fine dining is not on the menu at most of these eateries). The town is walkable, salty and you never forget you are in the presence of fishermen.

The next stop on our gastronomic dining adventure is Indian Pass Raw Bar. The landscape along US 98 continues in raw stretches of sand, palm and pine with no promises of anything to eat between here and our stop for the night. On the porch of this raw bar sit fishermen of all ages, done with the day’s work and sucking on brown icy beer bottles while they trade legends and frustration from an unintentionally shabby-chic

compendium of plastic lawn chairs, painted wood Adirondack chairs, and splintery, rough-hewn benches.

The Raw Bar started as a company store for a turpentine company in 1903. Turpentine, not tourism, once supported Florida – pine gum makes turpentine, but not without help from humans who chipped at the tree’s bark and “tapped” it for the sticky gold. The *Guide* repeatedly refers to “naval stores.” This phrase does not refer places where the Navy buys things; it refers to the industry and products revolving around pine trees. In north Florida, at least before duPont interests and Edward Ball came to town, that meant longleaf pine. In 1939 Florida, over three million acres of pine forest yielded seven million gallons of turpentine.²⁰²

*“The life of the turpentine farm is centered around the turpentine still, the big house of the owner or camp manager and, off to one side in the quarters, the cabins of the darkies. These ‘tar heels of the piney woods’ are good natured, easy going laborers who work four to five days a week, enjoy their Saturdays, and celebrate their pay-days. With no rent to pay, a few greens in their gardens, a few hogs in the woods, their women to catch fish, and a dog or two to hunt possums at night, their lives are filled with contentment.”*²⁰³

The Indian Pass Raw Bar catered to the workers, then later travelers and locals. Jim McNeill, the current owner not averse to shooting a meandering hog and serving free pork,²⁰⁴ came by the business honestly: his grandma, Gypsie, cooked lunch for the turpentine workers in the 1930s. The Raw Bar portion of the business didn’t come to fruition until Hurricane Kate ruined the family’s oyster business in 1986.

“Having more oysters than we could eat ourselves, and not enough to continue wholesaling, the decision was made to open the establishment as it is today,” the restaurant’s web site reads.²⁰⁵

I grab a Corona Light out of the cooler – the yellow of the frosty beer a silent tribute to the turpentine of days past, I tell myself – and, still feeling my Boss Oyster high, order the gumbo, a highly recommended dish. I take a spoonful at our campsite later and can only describe the taste as an okra and shrimp explosion in my mouth. Who, I wonder, would ever pass up this gumbo?

Just past our campsite at St. Joseph Peninsula State Park, we head to Triple Tails for even more seafood. The seafood market/liquor store has Ziploc baggies of fish in shallow gray Rubbermaid bins packed with ice. Each basin has something different: red snapper filets, ivory scallops, pink shrimp and an assortment of other fish.

“What do you have that’s local?” I ask the kid behind the bins. He thinks for a moment and tells me “Not much. The scallops are from Panacea, the shrimp is from Apalachicola... the snapper was caught in Panama City.”

We are in Port St. Joe. Panacea is less than two hours away by car; Apalachicola, less than a half hour away, as is Panama City. Back home in southwest Florida, “local” often means “from the Gulf of Mexico,” but clearly, up here, these men take their fishing very seriously.

We leave with shrimp, snapper, and rum. As we’re paying for the rum, a golden shepherd brings me a stick of driftwood. I pet him and throw the stick. That was not what

he wanted; he looks at me like a child who has just lost a toy to the neighborhood bully. The girl going into work apologizes; I tell her no need. As far as I can tell, the dog amuses himself, unleashed, with his stick and a ball in the sand lot, dozes under the palms, and greets the odd customer while his human completes her shift. This, too, does not happen back home. This is still Florida, but everything I see along the highway reminds me of a Florida I thought existed only in my imagined Florida history.

Even homes. The road to the campsite, Cape San Blas Road, is lined with dots of colorful houses, teetering on stilt legs planted in the sand. Every one seems to have a “for sale” sign in front of them. Rish Park, available only to disabled Florida residents, boasts a strange collection of round, blue-roofed cottages interconnected by boardwalks. Further down the road, the state park is at the western edge of the barrier island, a thin scrap of sand and trees. Our campsite is no further away from the beach than a sand dune, covered in beach sunflowers, sea oats, and general Florida scrub vegetation.

Over the dune, the wind blows in full force and whips the green Gulf into a white froth not unlike the head on my Indian Pass Raw Bar Corona Light, which seems appropriate knowing the ingredients to my lunch, at least in part, come from just below the sea’s frothy head.

The sand, too, is unlike the rest of Florida. People describe panhandle sand as “sugar sand,” which is true enough if you try and brush it off your legs. It looks like powder but feels like a body scrub. Walking through it is another experience entirely; it feels like you’re walking through baking powder, or Bisquick. Of course, the state tourism board can’t promote that – “Come bake on our Bisquick sand!” doesn’t exactly

have the same come-hither ring. As the surf washes over the creamy sand and retreats again, it leaves perfect little circular holes that make the sand look exactly like pancakes forming on a huge griddle. Yes, the sand is like Bisquick here.

More than one park ranger calls September the off season, but our campground seems filled to capacity. Despite the crowds, it hurts to leave. The park office warned us about bobcats, promised us the area had plenty of deer, and cautioned us to beware of skunks. I saw none of those things, but even still I cannot imagine a more perfect slice of Florida's wild beaches. I cannot imagine it even though at the edge of the state park the developers wait, ready to do battle for every speck of sand they can turn into concrete. The road is under construction; the park ranger shakes his head when we ask about development - a slow, sad shake that seems to say, "What can you do?"

We continue on and I continue to marvel that the marinas on this ribbon of water are nothing like the ones in southwest Florida. Fish and oysters and shrimp and scallops pay the bills here, not dolphin watches and sunset sails. Here we see tongers and fish mongers; down south we have charter boat captains and tourists. We look at the same body of water and the same state, but see not the same at all. Everything, again, is different here.

Panama City beach is another set of delights altogether, summed up easily in two words:

Goofy Golf.

I spent about 20 minutes taking pictures at the Goofy Golf: octopus, dinosaur, Easter Island head - (my favorite and apparently an institution at any Florida mini golf

that is not a chain establishment. Only in Florida do we have franchised mini golf.) - and the gamut of the sorts of things you would expect to find at a mini golf establishment along Florida's coast.

Panama City Beach offers untold riches of chintzy touristana. They did it first, and they did it best. Before them there was only gator wrestling and mermaids²⁰⁶. "Come on Florida, you can do better than *that!*," Panama City Beach must have said.

Unlike the newer, glitzy flavors of shlocky tourism, the shmaltzy flavor syrups that drizzle throughout the city are more traditional ones: wooden roller coasters, Ripley's, and a more authentic version of Orlando's International Drive. The gimmicks here hatched I-Drive; the extreme and the overdone cut its teeth on Panama City Beach's gritty fluffy sugar sand before corrupting our state's chewy center.

Goofy Golf remains. Established in 1959, it stands in tropical shades of purple, gold and lame'. You do not feed live gators here (as you may at some of the chains); you do not see a plane crashing into a faux mountain. High rises and planned shopping experiences surround you, leaving none of your vacation experience to chance. The beach, glittering aquamarine against fluffy buff sand, waits if you care to look.

It is glorious tourism for tourism's sake, and the technicolor icons of the mini golf course sum up this pastel tourist life. If surrounding towns want to head down the road to "Anytown, USA," they can, but Panama City Beach keeps its quirky sense of self

We stop again not so very far down the road at Grayton Beach State Park. There is no reason to stop other than the sea pines and sand and forgotten beachside feel of this reach of the panhandle seduces me and I cannot bear to see this stretch of road end. We

take our time getting to the park, and when we pull in after dark, I walk the campsite loop with a flashlight.

There are so few lights here that, despite plastic palm tree string lights on the occasional camper or a sturdy campfire in the park-sanctioned grills, the inky blackness is punctuated only by starlight and the smell of the Gulf. The next morning we take a long lazy walk to the beach – the campsite is easily a bike ride away, but we have no bikes with us – and I spend the day trying to figure out why I don't live here.

I haven't been so in love with a beach since I first laid eyes on the shimmering waters of the Florida Keys, what seems like a million years ago. I was in college, and we were on a field trip to Islamorada. As soon as we broke clear of the mangroves and I saw the sparkle on transparent emerald water, I felt my soul sigh as if coming home.

Years pass. Things change. I married someone who hated the beach. We only went to the Keys once. We divorced. These two things, while not the whole story, are more than a little related. No matter; before the judge decreed the divorce final I had packed my kayak and bike and headed for the Keys.

I still loved it. The water still took my breath away as I came over the bridge. But there was so much... crap. Key Largo had started to take on the familiar chain store patina I've grown to hate; Islamorada was still a respite, but clearly giving up the ghost. Marathon was nice, but K-Mart and Publix? No, thank you.

The water, though. Man, that water was still the same. It is paradise in a thousand shades of a glassy, aquamarine rainbow. It's the kind of water that makes you yearn for

better adjectives. Until you see it seen it, it will be a pale fantasy compared to what I see in my head.

The Keys will always, always have that place in my heart, but the placid thrill of finding a slice of paradise where I didn't expect it flows through me when the sea forest opens up and I see the beaches just south of US 98 along the panhandle. Glass met pale, luminous green, which met penetrating windswept sand dunes with sand fences; the sand itself felt like cake flour when I walked on it but sugar when I brushed it off my feet. I found sand dollars no bigger than a pinkie nail. The water was clear, like it wasn't there at all, and it felt so good to be surrounded by all these glassy green prisms sparkling back up at the sky that I laughed when the waves caught me unaware.

Grayton Beach was, for a moment, the Florida Keys dream that I held for so long until I realized the dream has vanished under the weight of chain stores and chemical runoff. Will the panhandle meet the same fate?

I fear, though, that it's the Keys all over again: no beach will ever satisfy unless they are these, the sugar and cake flour beaches of Florida's panhandle. We are but two hours gone and already I am planning my return, wondering about rental prices, dreaming about a life there.

Florida is fickle. She will give you your dream and then change it on you.

But still... that green. That perfect, undulating sea of green.

In the shadow of Panama City and Grayton Beach, Destin seems homogenized. Certainly it has amusement centers – it appears to be the law that every city between Pensacola and Port St. Joe have at least one – boasting mini golf and bumper boats, but

more of what you see here is franchised schmaltz and trademarked touristana. It is also not as tall of a town as Panama City Beach— buildings don't scrape the sky. The sand becomes even more achingly powder white, taking on the appearance of snow. Still, after Panama City Beach's prised tropical patina, Destin seems a snowy shadow, all the colors of the town shadowed in white.

After Destin the towns come faster and are less distinctive, although there is always, always the powdered sand and emerald shore. Okaloosa Island, Fort Walton Beach and its appealing streets that appear designed for strolling, Mary Esther... At the edge of the state, we make two last stops. First we head to Gulf Islands National Seashore, taking Pensacola Beach Boulevard over the water and to the strip of white sandy island. Santa Rosa Island, where the National Seashore lives at its western edge, is half dressed in lazy shacks dotted in every color, half devoted to a national park. Navarre Beach, the part of the island adorned with the coral and sunset colored homes, comes first, then the island dizzies you with white sand dunes. As they do so often along this stretch of Florida's coastline, the sand and the water eclipse all else.

Our last stop on the tour is west of Pensacola at the Flora-Bama Bar. This bar, as one may surmise from its name, is at the Florida/Alabama state line. It has had its share of hard knocks: the day before it was scheduled to open in the spring of 1964, it caught fire. Forty years later, hurricane Ivan ripped up the main building. Both times, the bar rallied, opening for real in October of 1964 and hosting a "No Tears in Our Beer" demolition party in April 2005.²⁰⁷ The bar insists that Jimmy Buffett wrote "Bama Breeze" about the Flora-Bama, and the fictional bar in the video has a sign reminiscent of

the old Flora-Bama sign and several internet sites quote Buffett's sister Lulu as attributing the song to the Flora-Bama.

The bar also hosts an annual mullet toss, where competitors attempt to toss a mullet from one state to the other. Since the bar abuts the Alabama state line, this is not a Herculean task. It is, however, perhaps the state's best-known mullet toss, featured in the *New York Times* and known to mullet aficionados throughout the Sunshine State.²⁰⁸

The Flora-Bama only tosses mullet; it does not prepare the shallow water vegetarian fish. We feast instead on Royal Reds, deepwater Gulf shrimp found only along this stretch of the nation. They are on par with other Gulf shrimp at \$14 per pound, but they taste nothing like shrimp. Each meaty, succulent Royal Red tastes like buttered lobster. Each Red is easily the size of a half-lobster tail, and as we watch the sapphire waters from our brown picnic table on the ivory sand, I am struck by how every moment of our coastline sojourn has leaked color into the black and white pages of the *Guide*.

Tour 15: Haines City to Moore Haven

“This route climbs the rolling hills of the ridge section, circles sparkling blue lakes, and for miles winds through large citrus groves. From the hilltops the land is a changing checkerboard of green trees, sapphire and silver water, and brown tilled fields. On summer afternoons towering cloud formations pile up in the eastern heavens to frame the landscape, frequently blurred by a distant rainstorm. The road sweeps past sawmills and turpentine camps to the outskirts of the Everglades, where flat fields of cabbages, beans, and sugar cane flourish without regard to the calendar.”²⁰⁹

“The rainbow of this road has not one but dozens of pots of gold for the interested traveler²¹⁰.”

The route starts at Haines City, junction with US 92 and US 17 (See Tours 20 and 2, respectively), but we start it north of here, in Clermont.

Soil beneath the hilly route has not as much sand as it will in parts south. The Lakeridge Winery makes good use of the soil, growing muscadine grapes and making red wine, white wine, and port. The winery makes only grape wine; several Florida wineries market a unique but almost unpalatable variety of citrus or berry-based wine.

The 2010 Census lists just over 28,000 Clermont residents; in 2000, it had less than 10,000.²¹² The 1980s freezes killed off much of the citrus crops, and while the landscape

is still dotted with orange bulbs dangling from trees, a spurt of development has littered US 27 with orange barricades and cones.

The Clermont Citrus Tower is perhaps the perfect Florida landmark, not tall by Manhattan standards, but plenty tall for central Florida. At 226 feet in the hilly middle of the state, it reaches 500 feet above sea level. Before you scoff, remember that Florida's highest natural elevation is Britton Hill, at 345 above sea level. Think of the Citrus Tower as "Florida Tall." Built in 1956, observers could take the elevator to the penthouse observation platform and gaze out over lots and lots of citrus.

In 1956, oranges ruled the land. Groves rolled out over every hill and escorted travelers up and down the road. Building a tower that seemed to touch the Florida sky so people could survey the kingdom must have seemed the natural thing to do.

"Back in those days, it was one of Florida's main tourist attractions," the current Citrus Tower owner, Greg Homan, explains. "The big three [were] Silver Springs, the Citrus Towers, and Cypress Gardens. That was before the turnpike was built and 27 – Highway 27 – was the main thoroughfare. They'd go to Silver Springs where the Tarzan movies were filmed, then they'd come to the Citrus Tower and go up to the top. It was the center of Lake County; it was the center of the citrus industry. Lake County, at the time, produced more citrus than the state of California."²¹³

Homan used to grow oranges, just like his neighbors. In the 1982 freeze, he lost most of his groves to frost. So did a lot of his neighbors. He tried to hang on to his livelihood but found he could not. He turned to real estate, the area's new way to earn a living off

the land. He never got the oranges out of his blood, and when the Citrus Tower (and surrounding acreage) went up for sale in the mid-1990s, he bought it.

“The Tower has taken three hits over the years. The first hit was when the Turnpike was built – it took a lot of traffic off of the highway. The second hit was the investors that I bought the Tower from; they really kind of milked the Tower. It went downhill, not much maintenance was done. And then the third hit [were] the freezes of the eighties wiped out the citrus industry in this area.”

His wife Suzanne runs the gift shop.

“We used to grow oranges. Now we grow houses,” she jokes as she points out the souvenir showcase. The Homans charge \$4 for a ride to the top, which I pay. I ride the elevator to the top – not that I have other options, as the Citrus Tower has the ground floor, and elevator shaft, and an observation platform, now walled-and-glassed in for my comfort and, I imagine, insurance purposes.

As far as the eye can see, it sees houses. In the 1960s, people could supposedly see 16 million citrus trees from the tower.²¹⁴ Today I quickly locate one grove and estimate it contains roughly 6,000 trees. I cannot count the houses.

“I wish it could go back to 1982,” Suzanne says when I mention the view to her upon my safe return to land. She maintains a pragmatic view of development: “I understand the anti-growth people, but Clermont would now be a ghost town.”

As we leave, the carillon – or, at least, a computer program that plays a recording of carillon bells – rings out “Old Folks at Home.” We start the van and drive past the highway traffic cones, barricades, and bulldozers out of the city.

Lake Louisa State Park is nestled atop the state's bumpy center. It sprawls over a gathering of hills and still has some wild citrus trees scattered about. These trees, remnants of orange groves planted in the 1940s,²¹⁵ drop kumquats, lemons, and the occasional sour orange along a path ringing Dixie Lake. The rest of the land, though, is a colorful collection of wildflowers and butterflies. Cabins along Lake Dixie offer lakeside retreat, complete with fireplaces and rocking chairs on screened wood porches.

Heading south out of Clermont the sloping land evokes images of roller coasters. Crops of houses stacked on the hillsides give the urgent impression that at any moment they could slide down the hill into one of the area's many lakes.

South of Clermont, you can still see oranges. The Showcase of Citrus, adjacent to a grove, sells juice, jellies and jam. For part of the year it feels a bit barren, but when the citrus trees fill with fruit every fall, the air is thick with orange sweetness.

Here, too, are copses of trees that look like quite short – less than eight feet tall – longleaf pines. I can find no evidence of that, but a quick Internet search reveals a Long Leaf Pine Street in the city and hikes through neighboring (under 30 miles by roadway, less as the crow flies) Disney World's longleaf pine flatwoods. Since there is also a nearby Sawgrass Bay subdivision and I am unaware of sawgrass' ability to grow along the Ridge, I realize that a street named after a tree doesn't mean the tree grows there at all, but in Florida, anything's possible.

As we approach the junction with Interstate 4, subdivisions with oddly inappropriate and often tragic names ("Eagle Ridge" with a noted lack of eagles perhaps the most obvious example) grow more dense, but once we get south of the cluster of McDonald's,

gas stations, and Denny's servicing people leaving Walt Disney World, the road changes again and we find ourselves passing through citrus groves and old buildings.

Gary Mormino calls US 27 "the spine of the state," and the further along US 27 I travel, the more I see what he means. The Ridge is a wrinkly bump down the center of the state's terrain. Even if I weren't fascinated by the idea that most parts west of it were once the ocean, I like to think I'd still be fascinated by the road down the Ridge.

Alligator wrestling was the first true Florida tourist attraction²¹⁷, but Florida orange groves also drew their share of people at the height of Florida's reign as the queen of citrus. Maybe it was that a perfectly round yellow Duncan grapefruit appears patterned after the early morning sun, or perhaps it's because the deep golden orange of a Honeybell evokes memories of sunset on a beach, but Florida was able to cash in on its citrus crops. Not just by selling railroad cars filled with the stuff – people loved to tour groves and watch machines sort oranges by size. When they were done watching, they'd treat themselves to a sample of fresh-squeezed juice, or, as some called it, "liquid gold." They'd buy gallons of the juice, pay to have gift boxes of oranges and grapefruits sent back up north to their shivering friends and family, and leave with an orange ice cream cone or a box of citrus candy.

In 1939 Webbs made citrus candies. The original candy factory is a House of God "worship center" a half-hour away on US 17, but not far down the road on US 27 the original machines still churn out citrus candies in Davenport. Formerly Taylor Candy and started by a New York family in the early 1930s, the family sold to the Webbs in 1972. The Webbs wanted to move the shop. The only caveat, the lady behind the counter tells

us, is that the Webbs had to agree to keep making citrus candy in addition to the goat's milk fudge and chocolates they planned to make. They agreed, and in 1975 the shop moved to its current location on US 27.

On the counter by the register, a divided dish tempts me with four types of citrus candy. I haven't had this stuff since I was a kid, but ever since I realized we'd be stopping by a historic candy factory, I've been dreaming of those jellied orange slices and spearmint leaves I used to get.

This candy looks only the slightest bit like what I remember, but, I tell myself, it's the real deal. I take a sample. I close my eyes in anticipation. I take a bite.

It's not quite what I expect, and at the time I am disappointed. It is a mix of sugar with a hint of what must be orange, but mostly I taste sugar. Nonetheless, we buy a box of citrus candy – I'm not sure how it has citrus in it, but it does, the woman behind the counter assures me – and send it back home. It may not be the stuff I remember, but it's part of our history.

Although I remember the bitter taste the sugared acidic treat left in my mouth, months later I cannot wait to get more of it.

As we head south, I am reminded of why sugar has such a prominent place in anything Florida.

The tidy little shop that contained Webbs also had a Dunkin' Donuts, and here I start to note more and more construction replacing those rolling orange groves. US 27 quickly

turns into something akin to what I saw on US 17 in Orlando through, or what I will see when I tour parts of 441.

Lake Wales marks the ancient shoreline of the Ridge. Today the city brags that it has “Vintage Charm – Progressive Vision.” The town’s historic downtown is clearly struggling: beautiful brick architecture lines the main street, but of the few shops among the vacant storefronts, many are inexplicably closed midday.

If the main street part of Lake Wales – and this town, too, brags that it is a Main Street Community – the outskirts vacillate between looking absolutely beaten down and downright scary. The grass grows high and reaches out over curbs into the streets; ramshackle homes are in various stages of patchy disrepair.

Back on the route, I grow despondent. US 27 through Clermont – save for the construction – revealed a glorious pastoral countryside finding its way among the development. Here I fear the land has surrendered. I feel the weight of cement on my shoulders as I take one last look at the Hotel Grand; from a distance it looks almost regal, but moments ago I gazed at the crumbling edifice through a locked chain link fence. I looked up at peeling paint and missing fire escapes and boarded windows and felt a real fear that Florida was disappearing.

In his book about small town America, *The Lost Continent*, Bill Bryson spoke of searching for Amalgam, the small town of his youth. He does not find it; he instead fell upon what he called Anywhere, USA – over and over again.²¹⁸ In Florida, we’re not like Anywhere, USA, but I do notice a trend for our cities to homogenize themselves with one another, syncing themselves up to each other like computers mirroring iPods and iPads –

anything you can find in one, you can find in another, and even if the screen looks slightly different, all the same things are there. I start to think of this phenomenon as Anytown, Florida. Through Sebring this sensation of all Florida towns synchronizing their businesses, people, and self grows.

Highlands Hammock State Park is a few miles off US 27, but it's country miles, which means there's plenty of time and space to clear the by-now-ubiquitous Dollar General Stores from my head. We're in palm country well before we reach the entrance to the park, and the only difference between the road before we officially enter one of Florida's oldest parks and the road after it is that the park has more signs. The signs direct us to our camp site, a grassy clearing under tall, stretchy pines. We recline under the pines, listening to the sounds of the forest. In the morning we drive a lazy loop around Loop Drive.

Loop Drive feels like a secret forest trail, with cabbage palms reaching higher than you feel they ought to as pines tower above them, coupled with oaks to close off the sky from the underbrush. It is dark and, even in early September, cool. The boardwalk trail that leads over the swamp is likewise dark and cool. As I make my way along the elevated wood boardwalk, cypress knees rise out of the swamp to greet me. The water is everywhere, it seems, curling around tree trunks and finding ways to run around fallen trees.

The swamp here is perfect. There is no other word to describe it, and when I'm home and look back through my pictures I'm struck by its perfection all over again. The water is a clear black mirror, reflecting the glorious rucked cypress trunks that rise out of it.

Golden white sunlight filters down through the leafy canopy and bounces light patterns off the swamp. The trees and the water and the light all seem to go on forever, disappearing into a vanishing point that dizzies me when I try to look for it.

And it's like that everywhere I turn on the boardwalk. There is no vista that I would leave out, no one sight that takes my breath away less. There is a beauty in its wildness, of course, but there's an empirical beauty in the symmetry of the swamp. It may look to the uninitiated like a pretty haphazard arrangement of green and brown and wet and light, but if you look closely, you can see that everything has symmetry, a counterpart, and a place. It is science and art and reason and wild, which may be as close to perfect as one can hope to find.

The boardwalk itself is part of the experience: tree trunks grow around and through the weathered wood planks, and at one point, the side rail disappears.

The water here isn't deep, of course. I know that. But I also know I'm in a swamp, filled to its brim with snakes and alligators. When the rail to the boardwalk disappears once inside the swamp, I stop trying to identify the purple floating flower and start trying to figure out if that branch next to it is actually a snake. I don't fear dying in the swamp – I'm 93 percent certain that won't happen – I fear the pain involved with a snake attack. I fear a reaction to the venom worse than death, one that leaves me half paralyzed or incontinent or unable to think like a rational adult.

Even the Florida snake with the most toxic venom – the coral snake – is not as deadly as I'd been led to believe. Oh, it's a member of the mamba family and its venom is pretty wicked stuff, but – and try not to giggle here – the coral snake is a nibbler. Instead of

striking, injecting venom, and pulling out her fangs to strike again, like a respectable rattlesnake or copperhead will, the coral snake latches on and ruminates on whatever she's got in her mouth. If that's the tender spot between your toes, you're in a world of trouble. Get to a hospital – a good one – soon. If she tries to nosh on your elbow, though, chances are you're going to get away with a nasty bite. I mean, please don't take this as encouragement to pick up a coral snake and wear it as a bracelet (they are pretty), but there's no reason to walk around with the level of fear that I have as I realize half the damn boardwalk is missing.

Once I calm down, I remember how gorgeous the swamp is here. The water is covered with emerald bits of duckweed with purple swamp lilies floating in its midst. The trees are huge and strong, and I feel a sense of perspective as I wander along the boardwalk, which now starts to jut out at odd, stiff angles, as if a child had hammered the supports haphazardly into the ground below the swamp. Walking 10 feet forward takes 20 feet of zig-zagging boardwalk, and while it's time consuming, the backdrop is unparalleled.

All too soon the boardwalk leads us to an earthen path carpeted in leaves. Vines twine around palm trunks and the banana-yellow orb spiders build webs as big as a Volkswagen between them, although well off the ground and out of the way of humans. So thick, though, are the spiders that often two or more spiders have used the same tree to anchor one side of their web, giving the impression of a silken house with no roof and no floor.

In the more manicured areas of the park, sour orange trees grow side by side with palms that easily reach 100 feet into the air. It is the wrong season for sour oranges – or,

really, any oranges – but the park was long known for its sour orange pie, sold at the restaurant I am told is temporarily closed.

The Civilian Conservation Corps museum across the courtyard is not closed, however, and I poke my head inside.

Parks like Highlands Hammock and many others we stayed at were built at least in part by CCC workers during the Great Depression. These workers may very well have been the sort of men who believed in the importance of parks and preserving part of the wilderness for people to experience, but it wouldn't have mattered: they were between 18 and 25, broke, and unemployed. They needed money, and if nature and the WPA cared to provide it, they would do the work. The work included planting trees, putting an elevated deck through a swamp, or building roads. These college-age men received \$30 per month for their work in the swamps of Highlands Hammock; of that, \$25 went to their mom and dad.²¹⁹

The smallish museum here pays homage to those young men. On display are artifacts of CCC work in eight state parks: Highlands Hammock, Myakka River, Hillsborough River, Mike Roess Gold Head Branch, O'Leno, Fort Clinch, Torreya, and Florida Caverns State Parks.

South of Sebring the route is sparsely populated, buildings a minority to citrus trees and tributaries of the Okeechobee, which grows ever closer. As we cross out of the heaviest citrus land we will see on these tours, we pass a giant orange pineapple with a sign proclaiming "JUICE" underneath it.

Welcome to Shonda's Souvenirs in Lake Placid. The parking lot is empty and the landscaping has reclaimed the weaker parts of the pavement. There is no one inside the ranch-style orange building, and the store is dark. I walk to the glass front door, inside of which a small pile of mail has accumulated. I step back and look up at the lettering running around the top of the building: "TEE-SHIRTS —FRUITS — SHONDA'S SOUVENIRS — HONEY — 2108 — ORANGE JUICE"

Yellow and orange mesh bags of fake oranges and grapefruit hang in front of mostly-closed vertical blinds in each of the stores wide glass windows. Inside the shop looks messy but not abandoned, although the Progress Energy bills yellowing just inside the door belie the notion that perhaps Shonda just called in sick today. A sheet of metal lays in the tall weedy grass against the side of the building; at the road side, a hand-painted orange sign boasting "Fresh Produce" is fading quickly to the color of a Myers lemon. Shonda, I fear, will not be back.

As we make our way towards the end of US 27 ~~and towards Lake Okeechobee~~ (See Tour 13), I try not to think of Shonda as foreshadowing the future of citrus in Florida. Instead, I try and figure out why she built that huge orange pineapple.

Tour 16: Pensacola to the Alabama State Line (Brewton)

“US 29 follows the route of an old trail over which General Andrew Jackson marched from Pensacola to Fort Montgomery in 1818. Roughly paralleling the Escambia River through a swampy country, it traverses a prosperous agricultural section producing pecans, grapes, Satsuma oranges, and small fruits. In many of the small towns are dilapidated red-roofed clapboard railroad stations, abandoned with the advent of the modern highway and motor busses.”²²⁰”

This short route – not quite 45 miles from bow to stern – appears, at its southern end, a congested mess resembles the *Guide* description in name only. I travel it from south to north, and perhaps the sandy grandeur of the beaches creates unrealistic expectations of an inland road: when I try to imagine folks heading south from Alabama to Florida, and, upon crossing the border from Flomaton, seeing this, I wonder how anyone ever made it as far south in Florida as they did.

That lasts only as long as the ten miles it takes us to reach Old Chemstrand Road, just north of US 90, where all the franchises fall away as we head north to the Alabama state line. The *Guide* describes Cottage Hill’s “gently rolling terrain”²²¹ and that description still fits. North of 90 the towns and the road have a Florida-country feel, and just south of Molino I catch a glimpse of something white and fuzzy: cotton. In 2011, Florida growers

planted 122,000 acres of cotton²²², making it the second smallest cotton grower in the southeastern United States. (Virginia grew the least cotton with 97,000 acres.) In northwest Florida, though, cotton seems predominant along the roadway. This land is nothing like peninsular Florida, with fluffy white, diminutive cotton “trees” growing in between tall green forests over every hill.

The hills here could remind some northerners of home. Of course, even with some of Florida’s highest hills in her northwest corner, her highest point, Britton Hill, is still lower than several state’s lowest points. To me, these hills, like the cotton, are an eccentricity of the landscape.

McDavid is a tiny spit of a town in between these hills. Once turpentine country, the town now houses a West Fraser timber mill. Just south of the Alabama state line, Century still stands, a sawmill town founded in 1900. On a building emblazoned with the name Bondurant there is a sign proclaiming “Century: The Heart of the South.” The Bondurant sawmill closed in 1987, although the family still operates an Ace Hardware store in town.²²³

Despite the lack of a sawmill, Century still holds an annual sawmill pageant, including a student poster contest and the naming of a sawmill queen.

The Florida portion of the road ends at Flomaton at the Florida State line.

Tour 17: Alabama State Line (Dothan) to Panama City

“US 231, a direct route south to the Gulf, traverses fertile rolling country occupied before the 1860’s [sic] by large plantation owners. The land still produces crops of cotton, peanuts, corn, and bright-leaf tobacco, and during late summer several drowsy little towns stir into life when auction sales of these products are held.

“Dense forests of shortleaf pine, hickory, sweet gum, and cypress grow in the rich red loam of this territory; the streams flowing through limestone beds are unusually clear and blue, except during spring freshets. Deposits of limestone are often exposed in the uplands; the rock is used locally for chimneys and underpinning, and occasionally for buildings. Many farms in the northern section are owned and cultivated by Negroes.”²²⁴

The tour starts at Campbellton, a town nestled against the Alabama state line. Campbellton calls itself the “Gateway to Florida” and we soon find ourselves adrift in a white and grey sea of cotton and donkeys. Upon entering the state along this route, I start to truly appreciate how Florida lands the brunt of so many backwoods jokes. The tourist board doesn’t show this Florida, with her cotton and mules. But still, cotton is pretty, and the trees and fields make calming change from the damn Dollar Generals and CVS stores.

We start to feel the pulse of this route at, of all places, a Tom Thumb at the junction of US 90 in the aptly named Cottdale. Admittedly, I don’t associate the gas station lunch

counter with getting a true feel of the local community, but this Tom Thumb is the northwest Florida equivalent of the town plaza. In perhaps one of the poorest areas of the state, the men and women waiting for biscuits and chicken at the deli counter of the gas station all laugh and smile. Only after a few moments do I realize that they are not truly friends, but neighbors. The jovial mood both acknowledges and dismisses the idea that it is at all odd to buy their fried chicken and collards at a corner store that also sells Fix-a-Flat and condoms. Outside the gas station, roadway litter obscures the curbs, but inside everything is clean and convivial. I get my biscuit and fried chicken – which isn't half bad, especially for a gas station at 9 a.m. – and we head south.

I hope this short stretch of road, from Alabama to Panama City, allows me to satiate my single-minded, gastronomic purpose: field peas. University of South Florida food historian Andy Huse tells me that field peas rule this area of north Florida when in season – which they are. I want some, and in the midst of the the still-present “rolling agricultural section” I find field peas, beans, and corn. We stop along the four-lane, divided highway – an anomaly around these quiet, two-lane cotton-and-pine-lined roads I've grown accustomed to in the inland panhandle – and I get out, anxious for peas.

A sun-weathered, stooped over man with yellow teeth, white hair, and red clay under his ragged fingernails greets me. He and his wife work a makeshift tent at the edge of the parking lot, and they sell not only field peas, but ears of sweet corn and butter beans. He peels an ear of corn like a banana and punctures a golden kernel with one of his grimy nails. The juice squirts out in a graceful watery arc and lands in my cleavage. He laughs, a raspy smoker's laugh. I succeed in not rolling my eyes.

“We call it candy corn,” he says when he’s calmed the phlegm in his lungs. I am unsure how much of everything I want; I stopped only for field peas, but my god, that corn looks good. The woman tries to help me, but he snarls at her and she acts like she does not notice his rude, dismissive tone. I ask the woman how much; she turns and asks him.

“I’m trying to think!” he snaps, and, not for third time in as many minutes, I yearn to put him in his place. When he names his price – \$19.50 for five ears of corn and two quarts of beans – I am tempted to walk away. I see his wife almost roll her eyes behind him and, illogically, that makes the price OK. This is probably as close as these folks will ever get to making a living off a tourist who can pay a sawbuck for what would cost \$2.97 at the local market. To help pay my bills I once took a job on a dolphin watch boat, and while I don’t endorse cheating Canadians for a quick buck, I will never deny playing up a dolphin sighting or two in my time to up my tips.

Back in the van I downplay the money I just spent, and take a bite of raw corn, taking care to avoid the niblet he punctured with his dirty fingernail. The sweet kernels explode in my mouth; juice runs down my chin and a giggle burbles out of my mouth before I can stop it.

Suddenly, \$19.50 doesn’t seem so bad.

The road rolls on, a series of bumps and twists, and only as we get closer to Panama City do we see signs of life. The most notable are billboards asking drivers if they have “oil spill stress” and giving them a number to call for relief. It’s been a year since the oil

didn't destroy Panama City, but clearly the town, in one way or another, is still feeling the effects.

The tour ends when US 231 meets US 98 in Panama City, although here US 98 runs through the north end of the city, not the beach. Here a wall of traffic, billboards, and franchises, the backstage few tourists ever see, separate the city from the beach and it looks, once again, like Anytown, USA.

Tour 18: Port St. Joe to Marianna

“Along this route, which provides one of the short cuts across northwest Florida to the Gulf coast, towns are few and the countryside is sparsely settled. The highway runs through wooded areas, abounding in small game, where 'coon and fox hunts are customary sports and few inhabitants are without their favorite hounds. In the northern part of the State the route traverses a rolling agricultural section, with scattered stands of hardwood trees. Fields of corn, cotton, beans, and peanuts border the highway, and red clay roads lead to isolated farmhouses and cabins occupied by Negroes.”²²⁵

The nice thing about Port St. Joe (See Tour 14) is that none of the buildings top three stories. Like Mexico Beach a few minutes west on US 98, it's a sleepy coastal town with simple footpaths leading over the dunes and out to the Gulf of Mexico. The town has a few remaining older beach cottages and everywhere you look, it seems, the weathered wood is alternately exposed to the sun and salt or stained with understated tropical beach colors.

The *Guide* mentions St. Joseph, a ghost town almost completely consumed by Port St. Joe. When the state held its constitutional convention there in 1838, St. Joseph boasted 6,000 residents, making it the largest town in Florida. It vanished by the end of the 1840s; only a cemetery remains. Like Port St. Joe, the town's industry hinged on a thriving

seagoing trade, so in all likelihood no one thought anything of it when a ship docked there in July 1841, fresh from the Greater Antilles.²²⁶ At least one of the passengers – in all probability, more than one – suffered from yellow fever, a deadly disease carried by mosquitoes and marked by a yellow jaundice in the afflicted. Three-quarters of the residents died from yellow fever, while others fled the town.²²⁷ Fewer than 500 people remained on September 14, when a hurricane struck St. Joseph, destroying many of the buildings and pushing the remaining populace out of town.²²⁸ Completing the town's trifecta of bad luck, forest fires ripped through the (now almost certainly all-but-completely) deserted St. Joseph, burning every building left standing.²²⁹

In one last attempt to resurrect the 1840s equivalent of modern-day Jacksonville, some residents returned to St. Joseph after the virus, hurricane, and fires worked the town over. They attempted to rebuild the city, but on September 8, 1844, yet another hurricane struck the city. After two days of wind, rain and storm surge, the “sea now reclaimed what was left of the city.”²³⁰

In a move echoed later by south Florida officials in 1928 and New Orleans in the aftermath Katrina, many yellow fever victims received a mass burial: Many yellow fever victims met their eternal rest in unmarked trenches. The St. Joseph cemetery off State Road 284A marks the graves of other yellow fever victims.²³¹

It is also the only vestiges of St. Joseph.

In the wake of yellow fever and the ultimate destruction of a burgeoning 1840s Florida city, it seems odd to think of dinner, but think of dinner I do. We set out in search

of more seafood. In Wewahitchka we stop at a small roadside shrimp store, The Shrimper's Lady. The Shrimper's Lady – and there really is a shrimper's lady, working behind the counter – sells head-on Apalachee Bay shrimp. She also maintains a hearty collection of Danielle Steel, Debbie MacComber, and every author ever to grace a Harlequin editorial desk. The shrimp she sells for \$4.50 a pound; the books she gives out in trade. I grab a book from the camper that aspires to chick lit but, in reality, could easily have been penned by a shrimp flipping his death flop on the keyboard. We talk about Debbie MacComber and cooking shrimp. She has never heard of boiling shrimp in beer; I have never heard of most of the authors on her bookshelf. She promises to try boiling the shrimp in beer; I grab a book to try and wade through when my next bout of travel insomnia strikes.

Apalachee Bay Shrimp

1. Remove heads.
2. Bring beer to a boil.
3. Add a chopped habanero or a dash of red pepper flakes.
4. Boil in beer until they change color.
5. Remove shells and eat.

Besides shrimp, the other commodity here – aside from the landscape – is honey. Specifically, Tupelo honey. The Tupelo tree, which some call a “black gum,” grows in and near swamps, and here, in north Florida, beekeepers build walking docks out to

Tupelo trees, over swampy no-man's land, to ensure monofloral honey. Honey created from Tupelo blossoms does not crystallize, but I do not care about that: I seek it's rich taste. Tupelo honey tastes like sweet, dripped gold, not nearly as dark as clover honey and not as tangy as the less-expensive honey sold in plastic bears with squeeze bottle heads.

Swamps abound in south Florida, but Tupelo trees do not, so only here in Northwest Florida will you find jars of the honeyed gold at every roadside stand and grocer. In this area, Tupelos grow along the Chipola River, which starts in Marianna and feeds the Apalachicola River. In high water times, the Chipola River offers whitewater, an anomaly on top of Florida's flat rivers. Today, though, the water only dreams of whitewater. The locals tell us they need "rain with a name," meaning a hurricane. The winds and storm surge of even the smallest hurricane can prove ruinous for low-lying peninsular Florida, if only in terms of bad publicity scaring away tourists. In hilly north Florida, though, those heavy rains suppress forest fires, keep the aquifer high, and the state's few rapids running.

The Apalachicola seems to have even less water than the Chipola, but perhaps that's because we looked down at it from cliff-like bluffs in Torreya State Park. Florida, as I've noted, lacks bumps: most people could not name two places that reach over 200 feet. She's a rather flat girl, something of a carpenter's dream. In Torreya, though, you wouldn't know that. As we approach the state park by means of a series of winding and perplexing hilly roads that lead me to believe you could kill someone and hide the body anywhere along them without fear of discovery, I steel myself for three experiences: cliffs, Torreya trees, and snakes.

Torrey state park rests on a cliff.

“The creator must have scooped a hunk of the Great Smoky Mountains and dropped them in Florida, complete with the trees and shrubs and wildlife,” Florida writer Jeff Klinkenberg writes in *Seasons of Real Florida*.²³²

Indeed. Behind the house at the edge of the park, we gaze down a steep, deathly plunge to the Apalachicola River easily hundreds of feet below. No more than two feet have ever separated me from land and a Florida river bank; this feels nothing like Florida.

Still, I like it. I *love* it. In Florida, a ravine grabs your heart and squeezes, because you do not expect it as you would in, say, Tennessee, where everyone glances at it and says, “Eh, yeah, a cliff. Whatever.” And here I stand, at the edge of the precipice, with no guard rail and no OSHA signs. One wrong step and I will tumble, most assuredly, to my watery, muddy death along the far-below banks of the Apalachicola.

Of course, if I want to die in Torrey State Park, I can find more spectacular ways here. The trees, it seems, have found one: the Torrey tree, so-named for an 1800s botanist, John Torrey, grows pretty much only inside the borders of the state park. Less than 200 of these tiny, adorable Christmas trees remain, although the tree has distant relatives in Japan and California. This cheerful little wisp of greenery lives one wildfire away from extinction.

If that doesn't bother you – and why should it, as you likely never heard of Torrey trees before that paragraph– consider their alternate name: gopherwood, the tree Noah felled to build the ark. Of course, the epic flood happened nowhere near the Apalachicola,

at least not judging by today's trickle of a water level, but I hate to see a tree as old as, well, Noah, just fade away.

The third thing I want, and also another excellent way to die in Torreya, are snakes. Honestly, snakes brought me here, not the trees or the cliff or the oh-my-god vistas. I have this strange relationship with snakes. I love the nonvenomous ones, like black garden snakes and corn snakes and king snakes. The venomous ones? Well, honestly, I pretty much love them, too. But I have some awe and petrification mixed in there, too. Every time I creep almost within striking distance of one, I freak out, as though I had no idea I could get that close.

Klinkenberg – Klink – waxes poetic about venomous ophidian in his essay about Torreya. In my mind, Torreya houses more copperheads than Torreya trees, and when we leave without my seeing any, I feel betrayed. Klink promised me snakes, and Torreya had none.

I know it does, of course. In all likelihood the coppery, slithering fellows curl under every pile of deadfall, waiting only for me to meander by in my non-snakeproof tennis shoes. I just never wandered far enough, perhaps. Perhaps I spent too much time contentedly casting about for snakes nesting within sight of the river below.

The Apalachicola starts far north of Torreya, in the true Deep South. It begins its journey south north of Atlanta, in the Appalachian Mountains. Despite its origin and termination, in Georgia people know it as either the Flint and Chattahoochee River. The Chattahoochee River marks the state boundary between Alabama and Georgia; the Flint runs to the east of it. Both rivers meet just north of Chattahoochee, Florida, at Lake

Seminole. There, their confluence forms the Apalachicola River, which meanders in twists and turns that shape the waterway into a Christmas bow, ending its journey with a great watery exhalation into Apalachicola Bay.

Marianna, at the north end of State Road 71, is to the west of the river. Two nearby attractions divide my attention: Florida Caverns State Park and Two Egg.

At the edge of Florida, at Florida Caverns State Park, I don't see snakes, but I do take a dark tour through the dry air caves of the north Florida park. Everywhere I look in the underground chambers looks like melted candle; I can't tell a stalagmite from a stalactite, but it doesn't matter: the idea of caves in a state where most folks hit water if they dig too deep thrills me.

My favorite story about these caves – after the idea that they exist at all – involves Indians escaping Andrew Jackson. While hunting Indians – and call it what you will, our former president hunted native folk – the hunt took him to a spot north of Marianna. The Indians hid in a cave while the troops walked overhead, searching for them.

Not a long story, perhaps, but a fun way to understand how Florida's first natives defeated the northern aggressors with little effort.

I can hardly contain myself as we go through the caves. Room after room, I wait to hear the tour guide tell us about the crafty Indians fooling the silly northerner (if we may consider a Carolinian “northern”) but she fails to mention it. Finally, at the tour's end, I ask her, and she tells me to follow a separate, unguided nature trail.

At the end of a 30-minute trek in along an uneven trail, we spy a hole in the side of a piece of land. This looks more like a short, squat tunnel that spans less than 50 feet than a cave. I can see light from the end at its start.

This fooled a future president? I crawl through the tunnel for “historical purposes,” but secretly I revel in walking where Indians hid from a man determined to erase their existence. I wonder if they, as I do, think Jackson a stupid man unable to see more than two inches past his face.

If the Indians hid in a cave that wasn’t, well, that just fits in nicely with Two Egg, a town that isn’t.

“Two young boys came into [a local] business so often on errands from their mother to trade two eggs for sugar that regulars jokingly began calling the establishment a ‘two egg store.’ The name [sic] caught on and was picked up by traveling salesmen and others who spread it to nearby towns.

“The story may seem light-hearted on the surface, but at a deeper level it reflects an effort to put a good face on very hard times. Many local families then were barely surviving and at times of the year, when fresh fruits and vegetables were not available, sugar provided one of the only available sources of carbohydrates. Although it is difficult to conceive in today's era of ‘low carb’ diets, but carbohydrates are a vital necessity of life. They provide the body with energy and help key organs to function. Without them, the listless state easily recognized in people who are under nourished.

“A little sugar added to the diet each day provided just enough energy to help struggling families make it through to the next day. In other words, two eggs worth of

sugar could make the difference between life and death among people already living on the edge of collapse.”²³³

To this day, Two Egg exists as a speck of a town in Jackson County. It has no city government whatsoever. Even as the economy improved, the town name stuck. Two Egg is, for legal purposes, an unincorporated part of Jackson county. You should not expect to find any more eggs there than any other part of rural Florida, and you can no longer pay for sugar with eggs.

Most shops accept cash.

Tour 19: Watertown to Bunnell

“This route runs southeastward through the center of North Florida, passing turpentine and lumber camps and small farms. Pine flats are succeeded by forests of oak, bay, and cedar. Numerous lakes and hills are in view in the vicinity of Keystone Heights. East of the St. John’s River, the highway traverses a sparsely settled region before reaching the fertile farming section around Bunnell.²³⁴”

That route takes us on a short, pretty drive from just outside Lake City in a town called Watertown (which has just over 2,800 residents) to Bunnell (with just under 2,700 residents).²³⁵ The route crosses Florida’s northeast countryside, heading southeast to just shy of the Atlantic. It follows State Road 100 for the entire stretch of road.

Trees dominate this route. It feels less coastal here, with more pines and fewer palms. Few houses exist between Watertown and Starke; instead, we see rows and rows of planted things along this two-lane stretch of highway and, of course, the odd tractor or other unidentifiable-to-me farm equipment. We also find plenty Fundamentalist Christian churches, more than one cemetery, and no indication of where the sometimes-dirt, sometimes-paved roads lead when they leave the highway.

Lake Butler is the exception; it has plenty of trees but the main street – called Main Street – runs past a newspaper, used car lot, local fried chicken restaurant, and a handful

of businesses. The downtown, small and not at all quaint, has few chains, save a CVS drugstore and a Mercantile Bank, but it also has little recreational shopping opportunities. The utilitarian downtown, designed to serve its residents, will not little to attract outsiders.

The buildings here come in two flavors: functional structures that occupy a stylistic void, and brick, historic-looking edifices. The Union County Courthouse fits of the latter classification; most of the shops are of the former. This *Guide* called it the center of town; it does not appear that has changed. As the county seat for the smallest county in the state – Union County encompasses 240 square miles – this Main Street may well serve as the hub of the county.

Lake Butler is not a tourist town. It's not even a particularly pretty town. But as we pass through, I realize I like that about it. Florida sold citrus, then it sold land, now it sells paradise vacations. Lake Butler doesn't selling anything; it just chugs along, same as it ever did.

Down the road, past pine trees and more rows of vegetables and trees, Starke is home to a prison and Florida's death row (See Tour 3). The town of Starke has great buildings and has a historic district – Call Street Historic District. Much of this is lost against the backdrop of poverty. According to the 2011 census, Stark residents earned an average of \$15,000 a year. Almost 30 percent of the city lives below the poverty level.²³⁶

The route continues south out of Starke, and as we approach our campsite for the evening we start to look for a grocery store. The Yelp app on my phone tells me we can find something called “Hitchcock’s” nearby.

“Hey, have you ever heard of Hitchcock’s?” I ask Barry.

“You mean Alfred?”

“No, Yelp says it’s a grocery store.” I now have visions of a supermarket haunted by birds and shaped like Norman Bates’ house. Hitchcock’s can’t be the name of a place where people buy milk and bread, can it?

It turns out that yes, it can. Hitchcock’s is a market – it does not call itself a supermarket – in the Alachua area. They’ve been around for 60 years.

In most of Florida, Publix supermarkets dominate the grocery landscape. I used to joke that if you grew up in Florida, the law required you to work for Publix. Over time, I’ve come to hate the Florida-based chain whose offerings fall short of local produce, quality vegetables, or friendly customer service. All the same, it’s a love/hate relationship. I know what to expect from Publix. I’m used to a Publix.

When we walk through the door at Hitchcock’s, though, the familiar forgotten smell of sawdust hits my nose, and I can’t help but smile. Hitchcock’s is easily as large as a Publix, but it lacks the veneer of the green giant. The bag boys still wear aprons and a fresh young eagerness. The selection wasn’t as good, but the food cost less and the people were nicer. I fell in love with the store when a stock boy offered to help me find canned tomatoes and insisted on making sure he found the best-priced brand. To this day, I don’t know if was the charm of the area or Hitchcock’s itself, but I still hold out hope for a store

like that to make its way down the state and bring a touch of sawdust back to my urban beach.

Armed with canned tomatoes, bacon, a yellow bag of Wise butter-flavor popcorn (which became the official snack food of these tours back and forth across the Sunshine State), and a six-pack of Corona Light, we head for the campsite. Today has been a shorter drive and we still have plenty of daylight left; tomorrow is also kind of a free day – we don't have reservations, although we have a route planned – so it feels almost like a weekend.

“Left from Keystone Heights on State 68 to Gold Head Branch State Park, 9 m., at the head of a ravine from which emerges Gold Head Branch, a crystal-clear stream rising from a group of springs and flowing over a bed of white sand. A footpath descends the steep slopes to the bottom of the ravine, 65 feet below the highway. The gorge is a natural garden, overspread with wild flowers, shrubs, palms, and other subtropical growth. There is a motor road along the edge of the ravine to the site of a mill dam. In the park are Lake Sheeler and Pebble Lake, both well stocked with fish (black bass, bream, shellcracker, jack, perch). The park contains 1,080 acres.²³⁷”

Crisscrossing the state, we talked to a lot of park rangers. Without fail they proved a friendly, knowledgeable, helpful lot of men and women. They all agreed that September was a slower time for the state park system. It makes sense: the kids down here are freshly back in school, and up north it just isn't cold enough to head for Florida. At Gold Head Branch, we were the only people at the park except for the ranger. He told us that

one of the white tiny cabins had someone in it and the campsite had one other camper, but we didn't see another human the entire time we were there.

The solitude of the park was relaxing. The only sounds we heard were birds and squirrels and other animals, including the soft rustle of deer that had Calypso's tiny body tense with instinct and her nose twitching with the rapidity of a power tool.

The park itself is a study in Central Florida nature. The aforementioned deer circle an empty camping loop before catching sight of me and racing down into a ravine. Our campsite is wedged between longleaf pines, and pine duff carpets the forest floor. The ranger told us the elevation was almost 200 feet, but in my mind it feels more like a mountain top with crisp, warm air and the sound of a light breeze. Birds flit from one turkey oak tree to the next, sending leaves fluttering to the floor. I rinse away the smell of the road under a hot water stream in a deserted bathhouse; the park is still empty and I don't bother dressing to walk back to the camper. I simply wrap myself in a towel and traipse across the leaves and rocks. The sun sets over the woods and the light dims, the forest backlit in orange blazes. Once darkness settles over the park, it's nothing but a void with white pinholes high above us.

The next morning we walk down into the ravine. It's September, and the water level at the ravine is low. We circle the ravine on a single file path, Calypso stopping every five or ten feet to smell or roll in something. Perhaps it is the scent of the dog, but we see few animals.

I hear people talk about the quiet of the woods, but I disagree. The woods and rivers and forests I saw, especially Gold Head Branch, were alive and thrumming with a

cacophony of sounds. I heard leaves twitter down, anoles scattering over the ground, and the snap of twigs and branches as the earth moved and settled. The ravine never fell silent.

Back on US 100, the road crosses Etoniah State Forest on the way to Palatka. Tall pines line either side of US 100, blocking the horizon and casting a cool green feel over the road. Few fences and gates interrupt the stretch of forest; long leaf pines, not homes or shops, are the order of the day here. In the middle of the forest it feels enchanted and surreal, as though there is no world outside this green tunnel.

The forest offers refuge to wild turkey, rattlesnakes, and the usual assortment of Florida critters. It is also home to the cheeky scrub jay and an endangered plant called Etonia rosemary.

As the road emerges from the forest and the sky casts its blue warmth down upon us, the trees become shorter and less dense. In South Florida I often see cows along the side of the road, but here we find few cows and fewer horses. Instead – and we found this a lot in North Florida – we see goats. Keystone Heights is home to the Florida Dairy Goat Association, and in 2010 the *Orlando Sentinel* reported an increase in goat farming– from 36,000 animals in 2005 to 60,000 in 2010.²³⁸ I am not kidding when I say I think I drove past most of these goats.

Just over the St. John's River in Palatka, the route crosses US 17 (See Tour 2) and sidles south along the edge of Dunn's Creek Conservation Area. This area is owned by

two different state agencies; the St. John's River Water Management District has responsibility for parts of the conservation area not owned by the state parks department, although both agencies have a similar goal: to keep the area as untouched as possible.

Before becoming a conservation area the state park land was used for turpentine production, cattle ranching, and logging. Today it's used for camping, hiking, and horseback riding.

Halfway down the length of Crescent Lake, part of the St. John's River system, the route turns east and makes a beeline for Bunnell, the end of the road for this tour but a stop along the way for drivers heading south on US 1.

Tour 20: Haines City to Clearwater

“This section of US 92 runs almost due west through mammoth citrus groves, many of them on terraced slopes overlooking diminutive lakes. In February and March both ripe yellow fruit and waxy blossoms cover the orange and grapefruit trees lining the road for miles. The fragrance is especially noticeable during a season of ‘bouquet bloom,’ or unusually heavy blossoming. Roadside stands offer orange juice and blossoms for sale. The route reaches elevations of more than 200 feet, and the hilltops offer good views of well-tended groves, blue lakes, and modern houses.”

Today I-4 overshadows this short trek, but US 92 runs alongside the interstate for a long stretch of this tour. It starts in Haines City, a former citrus center and a town perched on Florida’s ridge. At one time Florida was completely underwater; the peninsula’s middle existed only as a series of islands. As inhabitants of these islands, the resident plants and animals evolved and adapted, learning to survive and even thrive on these islands.²³⁹ In 1939, the ridge was the center of the state’s citrus industry.²⁴⁰

Florida’s land mass grew, and the islands became the center part of the state, a higher point known as the Lake Wales Ridge. US 27 (see Tours 15 and 21 [441, not 27]) forms the backbone of the state; from this center point the peninsula fractures in disparate regions.

As one fracture moves west toward the coast, the road runs between lakes. By the time the route reaches Lake Alfred, seven miles from US 92's branch of US 27, the road has passed a half-score of lakes. Today this area feeds the Disney beast; people know the name Haines City because it's emblazoned on a green Interstate sign that also leads to a popular gas and restaurant pit stop just west of Walt Disney World.

Haines City has grown around Walt Disney World. It's no longer a citrus center; today, 20,000 people live in just over 18 square miles. That's over 1,100 people per square mile; while compared to over 27,000 people per square mile in New York City it may not seem a lot, but after traveling relatively emptier parts of the state, it feels very suburban and crowded.²⁴¹

From the city limits you can see the Walt Disney World fireworks. Also just a stone's throw away you can find Legoland, the former Cypress Gardens.

“Formerly a wild swamp, the gardens contain native and exotic plantings, shaded by huge cypress and oaks, and pierced by quiet log-spanned lagoons. Winding foot trails, paved with pecky-cypress blocks, are marked, as are the majority of plants. Massed banks of gardenias, azaleas, and camellias bloom during spring. A Gardenia Festival is held here annually during April. Flowers, photographs, and cypress novelties are displayed for sale at the clubhouse.”²⁴²

Cypress Gardens, even today, evokes two distinct memories: water skiing shows and southern belles. The park opened in 1936 when its flamboyant owner, Dick Pope, transfigured a swamp into proper garden. It was, perhaps, the earliest incarnation for the masses that proved the wilds of Florida could be tamed.

And so they remained until, essentially, two planes slammed into the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. Fewer people traveled, and within two years the park closed. It reopened in 2004 as an “adventure park,” but closed again soon thereafter. In early 2010, Merlin Entertainment – the owners of Legoland – announced they would open a Legoland where southern belles once stood.²⁴³

Today the park cordons off a plot of land to Cypress Gardens history. Owners brag on the park’s web site that they preserved a banyan tree planted in 1939. They talk of historic gardens they restored – camillas, azaleas, and other exotics.

They have a photo of a southern belle, built entirely of Legos.²⁴⁴

The route heads next to Lakeland, an odd mix of industry and architecture. In Lakeland, Florida Southern College boasts Frank Lloyd Wright architecture. Lakeland also “boasts” the Publix headquarters, a regional warehouse for Rooms to Go (a furniture company that sells complete living rooms sets so consumers don’t have to worry about mismatching a chair with a loveseat), and a bevy of other distribution centers.

Warehouses populate the land here much like strawberries and tomatoes do in the next town over: the aptly-named Plant City.

Plant City still has – as it did in the 1930s – strong ties to berries.

“The town occupies the site of the Indian village of Ichepucksassa (Ind., tobacco blossoms or fields), a name retained for several years. So much confusion arose over the spelling and pronunciation of the name that an Irish postmaster rechristened it Cork, for his home city. At the time of its incorporation in 1885 it was renamed for Henry B. Plant

(see Transportation), who in 1884 had extended his South Florida Railroad into this section. In 1887 a yellow fever epidemic brought death to many citizens, and the entire southern half of the town was destroyed by fire in 1908.

“Once a cotton center, Plant City now ships almost three-fourths of the Nation's midwinter strawberries. Modern refrigeration and express transportation bring the berries to northern markets within 48 hours of picking. The season lasts from early December to late in March, and during this period Plant City warehouses are scenes of excitement and great activity. Sample pints of berries are auctioned to clamoring Northern buyers, and consignments are immediately loaded into refrigerator cars. With high priced early berries, the 'pony express' method is used: berries are packed in small iced units and shipped with other express not requiring refrigeration. The climax comes with the Strawberry Festival in February. The crop brings an average annual return of \$1,000,000.”

Plant City, home to the Parke family (Parkesdale Farms) and host of other purveyors of strawberries, still depends on slightly cool winters for red, juicy berries. The annual Strawberry Festival still takes place in Plant City. The festival includes a poultry show, midway, concerts and, of course, the crowning of the Strawberry King and Queen.

While Tampa offers some interesting things, such as the Franklin Street mall and Tampa Theatre and its rococo architecture, it is still a city filled with urban things. At her west end, the Rattlesnake Emporium used to showcase area rattlesnakes: handlers would sell their meat and put on shows. Guests could watch snake proprietor George End milk a

rattlesnake (he sold the venom), taste rattlesnake, and buy a can of rattlesnake meat in Supreme Sauce.²⁴⁵

“End's Rattlesnake Cannery And Reptilorium: (open), 11.3 m., occupies a former filling station building, on which is a neon sign picturing a coiled rattlesnake. The cannery was established in Arcadia in 1931 and removed here in 1937. The novelty of the product has brought it wide publicity, and reptile meat is shipped to domestic and foreign markets. In addition, the plant markets 'Snake Snaks,' thin slices of rattlers, salted and smoked, to be served as hors-d'oeuvres. Visitors are given samples, which if consumed, entitle them to a card with a patch of rattlesnake skin as a seal to signify that they belong to the Ancient and Epicurean Order of Reptile Revelers.”²⁴⁶

End died when a rattlesnake bit him. Just over the Gandy Bridge, Channel Ten News reports on murders, carjackings, and the occasional snake bite.

The *Guide* lists more than one way to reach Pinellas County: Memorial Highway, a tribute to fallen World War men (in 1939 we had fought only one world war). The Memorial Highway connected Tampa with Oldsmar. Highway improvements and developments have fractured this highway since the *Guide's* debut, although the *Guide* posits that “there is no way of widening the roadbed without destroying the trees.”²⁴⁷ The Davis Causeway connected Tampa to Gulf-to-Bay Boulevard and was named for a local businessman who earned his living by dredging up the sea bottom and turning it to real estate. Today it's called the Courtney Campbell Memorial Causeway, after a Clearwater beach resident and former US Representative. The Tampa side of the causeway has named part of the shoreline Ben T. Davis Beach.

In 1939, *Guide* lists few facts about Pinellas County: a peacock farm and poultry and squab farms in Pinellas Park as well as pirate tales of Safety Harbor and car stories about Oldsmar. Tour 6 goes into greater detail about St. Petersburg, Clearwater and the other communities, but here Clearwater gets mentioned only in the guise of the place where peacocks roam.

“Left on State 73 to the Seville Peacock Farm (open; adm. 25¢, 2.2 m., where a variety of peafowls, including many rare species, roam at large in an orange grove. Photographs and peacock feathers are for sale.”²⁴⁸

On the site, Seville condominiums bear the farm’s namesake, now long gone save for the odd peacock that screeches from the rooftops of the nearby Morningside housing development. “Clearwater Mall” now refers to a collection of outdoor shops, but into the 1990s it was an indoor mall. The logo consisted of abstract peacock tails and beaks, and although the mall had no peacocks, its glass elevator traveled the length of a macaw cage.

North of Clearwater, Tampa Shores (now Oldsmar) is named for R.E. Olds, who made Oldsmobiles. Safety Harbor has a mineral spring within the pricey walls of the Safety Harbor Spa; the town’s first settler, Odet Phillipe, came upon the town when a pirate (who once captured him but ultimately became his business acquaintance) suggested “Espiritu Santo” (the former Spanish name for Tampa Bay) as a place to which only Naples could compare.²⁴⁹

Phillipe settled there. Today Safety Harbor has a small downtown, a marina, the luxurious aforementioned spa, a shoreline park named after Phillipe, and no pirates whatsoever.

Tour 21: Orlando to High Springs

“This route traverses the western slope of the heavily timbered ridge section of north central Florida, winds around and between numerous lakes offering fine fresh-water fishing, and crosses a prosperous citrus-raising area. Side roads lead to several popular springs. Nearly four centuries ago Hernando de Soto and his army marched through this territory in search of fabulously rich cities which did not exist.”²⁵⁰

Orlando, you have broken my heart.

In the 1990s I lived on Winter Park’s Morse Boulevard, just outside Orlando, and I loved it. Other than buying groceries, I did all my shopping by walking around the corner to Park Avenue. I found birthday gifts at local shop. A local florist made me a Christmas wreath for my front door. I sipped coffee at a non-Seattle-based shop that was neither trendy nor pricey. Friends and neighbors would walk down the street and get sushi at a hole-in-the-wall; the bookstore next door always had a lively game of checkers at its sidewalk table.

Orlando seemed very far away, but it wasn’t. Not really. We’d drive downtown to get terrified at Terror on Church Street and marvel at the tourists who’d managed to wander away from the theme parks for an evening. We’d use the parking garage that had

flowering bushes on its outside so we didn't have to fight street traffic, but we'd move the car if we wanted to head down Colonial to Dekko's to go dancing.

I worked, once or twice, as a stagehand for Orlando Opera Company, and the company shared space with Southern Ballet in a building donated by Florida Power. Before every matinee my friend Angi and I would climb a narrow ladder up to the roof and spread dark, heavy, plastic "Visqueen" over the long, narrow skylight. Lake Ivanhoe curved along the building and, while I hated the climb, I loved the view.

In case it isn't clear, I loved everything about Orlando and Winter Park. The only thing wrong was that it was way too far from the beach, and I need salt water like beagles need to howl. I moved back to Pinellas County. At first I visited frequently, but over time the visits grew less frequent. Every time I visit, however, a piece of me dies, because this is no longer the same Orlando with quirky map shops and Korean restaurants where the servers don't even pretend to care that they don't speak English.

Dollar General, automotive chain stores, and fast food chains dominate the landscape. My college and early twenties memories are all that remain of a unique, untouched community. I don't just mean Orlando; Park Boulevard has changed utterly, populated with the smaller chain stores you see in every small town trying to make itself distinctive from the next small town twenty miles over. A few holdouts remain, but the personal feel has disappeared under a cloud of assimilation.

Sadly, this is not confined to Orlando. The towns that traverse any towns near Orlando and other population centers – Tampa, Jacksonville, Pensacola –are littered with homogenization. Even the small towns have signs of it, and over the course of twenty-

two tours, the joke became “Look – a Dollar General. We must be downtown.” If you don’t know where to look, it’s easy to feel set adrift in Anytown, USA.

My thesis chair and Florida guru Dr. Gary Mormino wrote an article for the *Tampa Tribune* years ago. In it, he referenced a 1990s postcard of the Orlando skyline. “Welcome to Orlando!” the postcard read. One problem: the skyline didn’t belong to Orlando. When polled, area readers thought it might be Halifax.

“There is no here, here,” Dr. Mormino laments, and as I drove down US 17 and US 441 through the Orlando area and a dozen other smaller towns, my heart breaks for Winter Park and every other little town in Florida that lost its “here.” Nowhere, though, is this more severe, more pronounced, than in Orlando.

Dollar General stores all look the same, whether they’re nestled under live oak trees or set amidst palm trees, and, after seeing the bits of the state that still have a scrap (or more) of “here” remaining, the yellow signs of these stores symbolized the loss of our “here.”

US 441 through Orlando revealed the very worst of Florida: her homogenized outer skin, a veneer that is peeling up like cheap pressboard furniture that’s been through a flood. If US 27 is the “spine” of the state, as Dr. Mormino once said in passing, US 441 in Orlando is her colon. It is her neon and sandy asphalt bowels. This is hell.

But outside Orlando – and there is much worth seeing just outside Orlando - you can find tree-lined streets and deer, as would do near and in Wekiwa Springs (See Tour 2) and Blue Springs and DeLeon Springs. The crowds thin as we travel north along US 441, heading away from Orlando and Apopka and into towns like Zellwood and Mount Dora.

Zellwood earned a place in the original *Guide* because it sold Lake Apopka muck for fertilizer. In the years that have passed Lake Apopka is no longer the gem in the city's crown. In 1980, Tower Chemical's questionable disposal practices caused pesticides to contaminate the lake. The EPA designated the lake a Superfund site. At the same time, local farmers were letting phosphorous runoff head straight for the lake, which also did not bode well for the lake's residents.

Governor Lawton Chiles signed the Lake Apopka Restoration Act, and the state – through the St. John's Water Management District – started buying corn farms and turning them back to swamp.

While this has been fantastic news for the health of the lake, it has left one lone sweet corn farm – Long and Scott Farms. Every year Zellwood has a sweet corn festival, although twice recently organizers canceled the festival, once in 2009 citing dwindling numbers and again in 2012 with no reason given.

The lake, however, continues to attempt to survive. The Friends of Lake Apopka (FOLA) continue to fight for lake-related issues, from hydrilla removal to stopping a proposed airport.²⁵¹

North of Zellwood, Mount Dora lures antiquarians. Mount Dora's highest elevation reaches 184 feet, tall by Florida standards but merely a speedbump to higher states. Still, the chamber of commerce informs people that "some homes have basements."²⁵² Mount Dora is a small town – just over 12,000 people live there – characterized, both in 1939 and today by its tree cover and older buildings. A drive through the town – this requires leaving the strip-mall-mined US 441 – reveals a quaint

center, lined with bed and breakfast inns, small shops, and tree-lined streets. You can even buy a bumper sticker proclaiming, “I climbed Mount Dora!”

In 1981, however, the town went pink. The filmmakers of *Honky Tonk Freeway* wanted to use Mount Dora as a filming location. The premise of the movie is that the small town of Ticalaw wants an exit on the new freeway, lest its safari theme park lose visitors. The mayor and town will do anything, including painting the town pink to attract visitors. Mount Dora agreed to paint many of its buildings pink for its turn on the silver screen. *Honky Tonk Freeway*, despite characters that included Ricky the Carnivorous Pony and Bubbles the Waterskiing Elephant, was a failure. The movie cost \$24 million; it grossed only \$2 million.²⁵³

Today the town has repainted the majority of the buildings.

Leesburg, “the largest and oldest town in Lake County,”²⁵⁴ is another central Florida city with tree-lined streets and a small-town persona. The high school catches my eye on a drive through town: it has an almost-Mediterranean feel. In 1927, the city built the high school on 10 acres donated by Lee Meadows, who used to play pitcher for the Pittsburg Pirates.²⁵⁵

The rest of Leesburg appears to be struggling. It’s a designated “Main Street Community,” which means the city employs a full-time manager who tries to improve business in the designated “Main Street” area. The idea is that the city can help small businesses by marketing them and making improvements to the area in which they are located. As we drove Florida’s backroads it seemed we saw more Main Street communities clearly failing or (hopefully) just starting their renaissance; the sign

“Welcome to X, A Main Street Community!” invariably signaled an upcoming drive through a one-or-two street district with bedraggled shops, cracked pavement, and only some minor improvements.

Not all Main Street communities fail. St. Petersburg’s Grand Central District (see Tour 6) breathed new life into a rundown area. Leesburg did not signal an area of overwhelming triumph, but it looked like a town that was trying.

*“Right from Ocklawaha on a sand road to the Barker House, 0.2 m., a white, two story residence in which Fred and 'Ma' Barker, leaders of the Karpis-Barker gang, were killed on January 16, 1935, by Federal agents. These criminals had been the principals in the Bremer kidnapping in Milwaukee, Wis., the previous fall. Ma ('Machine-Gun Kate') Barker, a woman well in her 50s, was an experienced criminal and the mother of three criminal sons.”*²⁵⁶

Today, local and national news stations alike run stories of stupid criminals. With a frequency that many would call statistically improbable, these crimes and criminals have at least a passing connection to Florida. Outside of Leesburg is evidence of one of the state’s first stupid criminals.

*“The trail of the fugitives was picked up in Chicago when the Department of Justice men raided an apartment used by the Barkers and found a map of Florida, with the name Ocala circled in pencil. The house on Lake Weir, in which Ma and her son, Fred, were hiding, was discovered, and one day the former was seen standing beside a rowboat, framed against a background of Spanish moss.”*²⁵⁷

Florida has more than functionally retarded criminals, impoverished downtowns, and strip malls along US 441. Juniper Springs has cool, clear water for kayaking. Nearby, Ocala National Forest offers camping and hiking.

Outside Ocala, Silver Springs still offers the glass-bottom boat rides they offered in 1939. The *Guide* describes the spring as “a group of 150 natural springs issuing from the porous Ocala limestone and flowing into a common basin.”²⁵⁸ Passengers gliding over the clear water spring in glass bottom boats can see to depths of 80 feet.

The theme park was once the home of the Ross Allen Reptile Institute. Today the park has Ross Allen Island, which includes spiders, snakes and otters as well as some of Allen’s archives. The *Guide* describes a very different Institute at the park, then called the Florida Reptile Institute:

The Institute “*has on exhibition a large variety of snakes, lizards, turtles, alligators, and crocodiles, and maintains a 100-acre farm for the breeding and raising of reptiles and amphibians [...] Diamondback rattlers cost from \$1 to \$5, depending on size; coral snakes bring from \$3 to \$5. A box of 8 assorted snakes, all more than 4 feet long, can be purchased for \$10, and a collection of 10 small, highly colored snakes for \$2.50. The Institute's catalog advises that it does 'not send poisonous snakes to minors'.*

*“The price of a 2-foot baby crocodile is \$3; that of a 10-foot monster, \$300. Alligators are to be had at prices ranging from 25¢ for a baby, to \$1,000 for a 12-foot specimen. Turtles and lizards bring from 50¢ to \$15, and a choice black widow can be purchased for 50¢.”*²⁵⁹

The *Guide* fails to describe what makes a black widow “choice.” A search of the USDA web site revealed no such categorization for arachnids.

If the strangeness of the Reptile Institute at Silver Springs has died away, something even more curious has taken its place: the Villages.

The Villages, “Florida’s Friendliest Retirement Town,” is a collection of planned neighborhoods, two town squares, and property leased – not sold – to businesses. Touching part of three counties – Sumter, Lake, and Marion – and encompassing 30 square miles, over 51,000 people live in the Villages. It is not a city; it is a privately owned chunk of land.²⁶⁰ The residents, not the counties, maintain the roads, utilities, water system, and other parts of the infrastructure. The developers own a newspaper, radio station, and cable channel in the Villages. This is not the strangest thing about this community of active seniors.

The whole of the Villages allows golf carts, with separate lanes and paths for travel. People who cannot see well enough to pass the eye exam Florida requires can drive golf carts. People who can barely walk can drive golf carts. People who never learned to drive a car can drive golf carts.

Of course, this is not to say that everyone who drives a golf cart is blind, crippled, or ignorant. Many drivers here are perfectly capable of handling a golf cart or a car. Golf carts, however, are so plentiful that many homes come with a garage only big enough for a golf cart, not a car. Golf carts here don’t necessarily look like golf carts, either. Many drivers soup up their cars to look like classic Fords, or Corvettes, or any other car they

always wanted (or perhaps used to own). This, too, is not the strangest thing about the Villages.

Florida's Friendliest Retirement Hometown has skyrocketing rates of syphilis and chlamydia: the occurrence of these two diseases increased by 71 percent from 2005 – 2009.²⁶¹ Local news reports attributed this rise to women and men no longer having to fear pregnancy, but one resident – who asked to remain nameless – has another explanation:

“There's nothing else to do here,” he laughs.

This is perhaps the strangest thing about The Villages.

North of the Villages and Ocala, 441 exhales a sigh of relief. The densely populated road at the edge of Florida's retirement mecca once again spreads out in stands of pine and oak.

Payne's Prairie, which the road bisects, is a flat expanse of wetland. The prairie itself is a collection of tight sinkholes covered in grasses, flowers, and plants; the flora filters the rainwater that recharges the state's main drinking water supply: the Floridan Aquifer. The prairie is home to over 200 types of birds, including the impertinent sandhill crane and the cocky bald eagle. Like so many other undeveloped areas in Florida, you can easily spot a deer here. Unlike so many other undeveloped area, you also must watch for bison, a possibility so real that the park forbids pets on Bolen Bluff, Cone's Dike and La Chua trails “due to potential conflict with alligators, snakes, and bison.”²⁶²

Near Gainesville the road has less green and more concrete, but the green triumphs once again as we drive north. Slash pine and farms, not franchises, line the

roadway, as do stands selling produce and shrimp. Sinkholes filled with spring water make for excellent diving and snorkeling; others, like Devil's Milhopper Geological Park, reveal a tiny rainforest in their drier depths, 120 feet below the surface.

At High Springs the sinkholes and springs tempt divers, swimmers, and nature lovers. This tiny town in Alachua County – just over 3,000 people – is alive with a green canopy of trees over iridescent blue water. Here the road meets US 27 and US 41.

Tour 22: Waldo to Plant City

“Between Waldo and Campville, State 31 runs through pine woods for several miles. The trees stand bronze-green in the sun, their shadows long and black against the slopes. In the timber portable sawmills are noisily at work. Piles of freshly hewn cross-ties appear along sandy trails, awaiting transportation to railroad sidings. Negro women and children, with crude poles, fish for perch and bream in small ponds and in trickling roadside streams so narrow that they can be stepped across. In clearings are pineslab cabins surrounded by beds of collards, cabbages, and corn, all tightly fenced to keep out wandering hogs and the family mule. Many of these primitive houses are covered with the delicate pink coral vine. Farther south, farmhouses and tilled fields appear; large oaks, magnolias, and chinaberry trees dot the landscape; acres of pecan trees, herds of cattle, and many corrals appear along the road.”

State Road 31 now goes by the name US 301, and good lord, at first glance I see nothing but utter crap: a conglomeration of franchises, the forgotten, and traffic. At least, that’s what I thought when all I did was drive it to get from Point A to Point B. Looking at it as a true tourist – one touring – and not someone impatient to just get through the damn speed trap in Waldo, it’s a different ride altogether.

It's a small town, struggling like the rest of small towns in Florida. With no income tax, the state has had to get creative with how it earns its money. Citrus, farming, and cattle ranching works for some parts of the state. Tourism works in others. In the middle of the state, in Florida's tiniest towns, neither of those things work. Waldo turned to speed enforcement, using its dubitably auspicious position along 301 to its advantage (See Tour 3 for the particulars on Waldo's speed trap.)

Waldo had 1,015 residents when census takers walked through town in 2010.²⁶³ That's 312 more residents than the town had in 1939, which may be some kind of record for a Florida town that hasn't become a ghost town. Oh, and when I say walked the town, the emphasis here is on walked – the entirety of the town is slightly more than one and a half miles.

Down a skinny road, skirted on both sides by lakes, is Hawthorn, and if you skitter far enough off a side road you wind up at the Yearling Restaurant. Named after a Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings book of the same name, the restaurant serves sour orange pie, and that is all I want when I walk through the door for the first time.

Sour oranges, also called Seville oranges, originated in southeast Asia and came to the States by way of Spain.²⁶⁴ They're not that common in Florida, although you can find the odd tree in a yard and the odd grove of them here and there. They look like big, bumpy lemons, and if you pick one and try and get an uninitiated person to try it, they will argue passionately that you are mistaken and this is a lemon.

It is not a lemon. However, it is not as pleasant to taste as, say, a tangelo, or a navel orange. Once you juice it, mix it with sweetened condensed milk and a few other

ingredients, and pour it in a graham cracker crust, it's a different animal altogether. I love sour orange pie. I also love sour orange margaritas, a drink I created after quite literally stumbling into a small grove of the trees by Fisheating Creek in South Florida.

At The Yearling I can barely wait to try the pie, but the decor stops me. It's a larger restaurant – it probably has at least 200 seats – divided into rooms that all evoke the feel of a visit with one of my Florida heroes, Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings. Each room recreates a scene from her novel, which, to be clear, I never really enjoyed as much as I thought I should. I did, however, fall in love with her likely aggrandized book of folklorish autobiographical sketches, *Cross Creek*. As the waitress seats us in a booth – and let's be clear, in this part of the state you don't have highfallutin' servers, you have a waitress – and sets menus down, I fall in love with Rawlings and her lifestyle all over again.

When I taste the venison appetizer, I close my eyes in pure pleasure. The Yearling isn't cheap, but the food is pure Florida country food and totally worth it. They serve chicken, grouper, and other crowd pleasers, but their web site says it best: they also offer “traditional” dishes... quail, cooter, frog's legs, and gator.²⁶⁵

Back on the road toward Island Grove is Cross Creek, home to Miss Marjorie's home.

I feel a kinship to Ms. Rawlings, even as I read between the lines in *Cross Creek* and realize she was a bit of a bigot and a lot of an alcoholic. I feel her because she saw a state, flawed in its nature and odd in its people, and loved it anyway. She didn't try to make her neighbors better or different, she just wrote what she saw. She had little room in her life

for anything else – although things and people wormed their way in – unless it was cooking.

When studying Florida, there are three Marjories of significance: Marjory Stoneman Douglas, Marjorie Harris Carr, and my Marjorie. Douglas tried to save the Everglades; Carr tried to save the Oklawaha. My Marjorie? She tried to show the world why Florida was worth saving, and she respected the poor white families that lived by her.

I suspect that, of the three, she had the most success. Drunk, destitute, and remarkably in love with Florida, she died quite young, but not before she showed the world her state.

Past Miss Marjorie's place, a variety of orange shops in Citra sell orange candy, Tupelo honey, and, of course, orange juice. Most of the orange juice sold in supermarkets is from Brazil, and pasteurized for safety. This orange juice is hyper-local – usually from a tree out back – and not pasteurized at all. The taste is a saffroned gold, sweet and heavy and light all at once.

All the towns south of Cross Creek and Citra seem to blend together for me, as if dulled by the brightness of Miss Marjorie. The Withlacoochee, though, is a great scary river, black and hissing, it seems. I gladly put in my kayak and push myself around a series of turns, expecting to see a snake or a gator or a swamp ape at every apex of the river.

The river and the surrounding forest are a great, vast wilderness not far from the hustle of downtown Tampa or the crowds of Ocala. Granted, it's no short drive to the office buildings west of the Tampa Channelside district, but the feel of the Withlacoochee

gives the impression of a forest of northwest Florida, not one an hour or two from people trading stocks and forging real estate acquisitions.

The *Guide* doesn't mention the springs in Zephyrhills, but here is where Perrier bottles its spring water. Spring water, by definition, cannot be pumped out of the ground via a well; it must burble forth of its own accord. It is for this very reason that the springs at Zephyrhills matter so much to Perrier. In the early part of the millennium, the company engaged in a contract with the Southwest Florida Water Management District whereby it could take spring water – as long as it pumped water from another source back into the aquifer. Put another way: if Perrier wanted 70 million gallons of spring water every day, it could have the permits to take it – as long as it found a way to pump just as much *back* into the aquifer.

On top of the aquifer in this area, the Green Swamp feeds the spongy limestone tunnel of water as well as surrounding rivers. The Green Swamp Wilderness Preserve, controlled and managed by the state, reaches into Lake, Polk, Pasco and Sumter Counties. Four significant rivers flow out of this 110,000 acre swamp that rivals the Everglades: the Withlacoochee, Ocklawaha, Hillsborough, and Peace Rivers.²⁶⁶

The Swamp, like the Everglades, doesn't consist of just one type of ecosystem. Rather, cypress ponds, stands of oak, marsh, sandhills and flatwoods all comprise the Swamp. Each system has its own population of plants and animals. No one word describes what you will find when you slosh or trek through the Green Swamp, because, like the Everglades, it's a little bit of everything.

Flowing out of the Green Swamp, the Hillsborough River offers an escape that can be wilderness or urban. As it closes in on saltwater, the river runs through downtown Tampa. Before it becomes the Hillsborough River, it runs through undeveloped tracts. It leaves the Green Swamp, flows through Crystal Springs in Zephyrhills, receiving an infusion of freshwater before becomes the Hillsborough and travels through the state park of the same name in Thonotosassa.

Florida has one alligator for every 14 people, and I believe that many of those gators either live along the Hillsborough or visit an awful lot. I put my kayak in the water at Sargeant Park (also in Thonotosassa) and before I make my way down the creek to join the river, I see gators. On a whim, I decide to see if I can paddle the tricky Seventeen Runs. It's a run of the river that is littered with deadfall, submerged trees, and, of course, gators. As I try and wind my way around a branch and get stuck in the "vee" of an underwater tree, I notice a bank of baby alligators, watching me with eyes too old and mean for their oddly adorable, bright green, bumpy, bodies.

It is precisely at this moment that Calypso decides she's tired of waiting for me to get the kayak unstuck. She sees the small gators and decides, I suppose, to chase them. As she leaps out of the yak, I see visions of not-so-cute mama gator lurking just beyond her babies. I scream, grab Calypso by the tail as her paws touch the black water not three inches from the baby gators, and yank her back in the boat where I stuff her in the bow between my knees. With an increased sense of urgency, I un-stick my kayak, point it back from whence I came, and forsake Seventeen Runs for open water.

As I round a bend a few minutes later, my eyes meet a gator watching me from the shoreline. As I get closer, he slithers into the water and I realize he is what locals would call a “real” gator – easily 11 or 12 feet long. He disappears beneath the water as I pass.

I am in awe of this wild, beautiful river, but that doesn’t mean I don’t paddle a little more urgently, my heart pounding and Calypso now subdued, curled up and asleep in the cockpit between my legs.

A little less wild and not nearly as fearsome is the Plant City Strawberry Festival. In 1939, Plant City provided the US with 75 percent of strawberries grown in the middle of winter.²⁶⁷ Today, the Florida Strawberry Grower’s Association asserts that strawberries grown in Hillsborough County (home to Plant City) account for “virtually all” the winter strawberries and 15 percent of all strawberries in the United States.²⁶⁸ Pick-your-own farms are common in Plant City, as are hydroponic, organic, and traditionally-grown berries. Hillsborough County produces 18 million flats of strawberries every year.²⁶⁹

Plant City celebrates this commodity with an annual Strawberry Festival, held in either late February or early March. The festival includes music, livestock, and strawberries in every incarnation from, shortcake to pie.

The event, of course, also includes the crowning of the Strawberry Queen and her royal court. The Festival began in 1930 and Plant City has had a Strawberry Queen every year except for 1942 – 1947. The Queen wears a flowing red cape adorned with strawberry patches. She rules her court from a red chair shaped like a giant strawberry.

Epilogue

I can't sleep. It's 4:30 in the morning and I've been lying awake for two hours. Even a cheezy dime store romance from the KOA lending library hasn't helped. The healthy shot of Bacardi 151 I poured myself hasn't made a dent. If writing doesn't put me to sleep I'm heading over to Facebook to play some stupid time-wasting game.

Time passes.

It's now 5:05 and all I can think about is everything of Florida I haven't seen on this trip. There just isn't enough time; there's too much of her and not enough of me.

Picture Florida as a piece of orange slice candy. You know the ones I mean: chewy orange slices with a crusty sugar coating. You can't eat too many. The flavor overwhelms you after one or two.

I've spent the past few weeks peeling at the state's chewy orange center, and now I'm worried I won't have enough time to lick at its sugary outer layers. There's just so much to see, so many places almost no one knows about that I've yet to explore, and I really don't have enough time to give them the attention they deserve.

Take the coming day: we have a less-than-three-hour drive to Port St. Joe, where we will camp on the beach. Sounds great, right? Yeah, I thought so, too. Then we drove through Monticello yesterday and I realized that I really wanted to walk around the town

and explore the idea of poverty juxtaposed with pre-civil-war architecture. I want to spend enough time there to make the place breathe for the people who haven't been there.

So, OK, add an hour. If we leave our campground at nine (this has yet to happen but hope springs eternal), we can still be in Port St. Joe by one, right?

Not so fast, math wizards. Because there is still Natural Bridge Battlefield, which is only important because two days ago I realized it referred to the river disappearing underground rather than some land formation arching over the river. So, OK, add another half hour.

1:30.

Plus there's Tallahassee, our capital and an awesome town even if it weren't. We need to take a look there.

2:30.

Wakulla Springs. That's where Rico Browning worked his magic with Creature From the Black Lagoon; it's where Tarzan, Jane, and Cheetah frolicked. There's a great boat ride there and a lodge.

4:00.

Oh, just hell. Oysters. Because we're going right through Apalachee Bay. And with oysters come beer. It's the law in Florida, in case you didn't know. Indian Pass Raw Bar and Moe's are currently vying for our pre-dinner business, but who knows what we'll drive by that I don't already have on my radar?

6:00.

And then we get to the park. The beach. The panhandle's diamond gulf coast, except by the time we set up camp we'll have about an hour to enjoy it. Then it's sunset, dinner, bed, and time to do this all over again. All the while all I can think about are the people and places I'm missing.

Oh, just bloody hell. These are the places that everyone visits, and I'm going because I want to go there; it's totally selfish. But what about the other places? What about the Sopchoppy cemetery? Double Bayou? Blount's Bay? What about all the little places with real people and real lives who deserve to be seen? They have no less value than the hairdresser who bought Moe's on US 98; they are of equal interest as the people who narrate the tour down the Wakulla.

I am failing you, Florida. I am failing and I am sorry. I just don't have the resources to do this on an extended basis. There's too much of Florida to see.

Florida has too many riches; she simultaneously has too much chewy orange center and sugar sand coating. I love all of it and wish I could gather it up in my arms, weave it into some great lime and sand afghan, and spread it out over the state for the whole world to grab a corner and snuggle up.

The Florida Sleep. I would love it if everyone could snuggle under the blanket of Florida and rest, knowing that they would all meet at some point. But that won't happen; the chances of a Miami boy meeting a girl from Panama City are slim, as are the chances of the two respective worlds coming to a mutual place of understanding.

What is my point here? Do I want everyone to find the best oysters, or something more?

Of course, I want something more. Florida is more than oysters and sand. She is more than Disney and the Keys. She is salt and sun and citrus and pines, but she is more.

She is sleeping with your windows open in August and feeling like you could disappear in a pool of sweat.

She is watching the sun set over the shallow turquoise Gulf and knowing that you are home.

She is wading through the swamp, knowing that each step could invoke the wrath of a gator or – more realistically – a snake.

She is railing against Big Sugar and the oil rigs and everything else that threatens what you love, whatever that is.

She is Florida, and she is sunshiney and wonderful and perfect in all her flaws.

If only I could know I could show you all that, I would sleep. It wouldn't be just any sleep.

It would be the great sleep, the one that bears the weight of our history and our future.

It would be the Big Florida Sleep.

December 2011

It's been a couple of months since my trip, and I am supposed to be putting a turkey in the oven. I don't like turkey. I like the leftovers, in the middle of the night, with a cold glass of milk and the refrigerator door leaking yellow light into the kitchen. That's when it's good; that's my real Thanksgiving. One year, during that brief period where I made turkey to make others happy, I sent my Thanksgiving guests home with leftovers and slices of bread. That way they could have turkey sandwiches. That's why I'm making a turkey today: for those lovely sandwiches, with cornbread dressing, gravy, slabs of turkey, and some cranberries on each slice of bread.

So it's fitting that I write this the week after Thanksgiving, when the only turkey in sight comes on a sandwich.

You see, the way I see Thanksgiving is the way I see Florida: that's not how we do it down here. You've heard that before, right? "That's not how we do it up north!" is a popular refrain in our Florida bakeries, pizzerias and grocery stores. Bagels are better in Manhattan; Chicago hot dogs rock; Brooklyn beats Florida hands down in the pizza arena. Wisconsin cheese reigns as the Dairy King, and everyone knows that Philly has better... well, apparently, everything. Some people might try to tell you we've got it wrong down here. No matter what "it" is, it's not how they do things up north.

To these people, I say: damn straight. Things in the Sunshine State *are* different. And that's what I'm thankful for, not just today, or tomorrow, but every day that I wake up in this amazing, messed up, hanging-chad, environmentally compromised, criminally creative, wonderful, backwards, glorious state.

I am thankful that we don't have bagels the size of a dinner plate. I love that finding a pizza that's any good is only slightly less difficult than finding the Holy Grail. I'm so happy that our cheese steaks and hard rolls don't compare to what you had up north. Because that clears the way for Cuban bread (invented by Cubans in Tampa, thank you very much), Gulf shrimp, oysters (yeah, those are all us, too) and key lime and sour orange pies.

I love that I'm sweating in November and that it's been warm enough that I've had my kayak out three times this week. I am glad that you can't stand the heat, because that means that as crowded as Florida gets, you will never live here in July and that is when we get our state back.

I think it's fantastic that we have the tension between developers and - well, just about everybody else. It means that we understand that we have something of value, a treasure in this state's natural bounty that some of us are willing to fight for, no matter the cost. Maybe you don't have that kind of nonsense up north, but you also don't have white sand beaches, the Everglades, or a thousand other reasons to spend winters here instead of there.

No, that's not how we do it down here. New England has its pilgrims; we have our Spaniards. Your Thanksgiving celebrates the pilgrims and the Indians, but, as Florida historian Michael Gannon gloats, "At the time the Pilgrims came to Plymouth, St. Augustine was up for urban renewal." What's that now? Yup, St. Augustine predates your northern society by over a century – 1513, to be exact. Turkey and squash? Yeah, that's

not how we do it down here. Our meals with the natives consisted of trout, sheephead, oyster, heart of palm and shrimp.

We can't claim Thomas Jefferson or George Washington, but we have Ponce de Leon and Jaques LeMoyne. We have no Paul Bunyan, but we have Totch Brown, Everglades pioneer and folk hero. We don't have the founding fathers, but we do have founding mothers: the three Marjories- Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, Marjorie Carr, and Marjory Stoneman Douglas. We don't have Mount Rushmore, the Rockies, or the Appalachian Trail. We do have the Suwannee River, the Florida Keys, and the Everglades.

No, that's not how you do things up north. You have Thanksgiving with winter coats and Indian corn. We have oyster dressing, cornbread, and, on occasion, deep-fried turkey. It's Thanksgiving, Florida style, and it's how we do things down here. Keep your cheese steaks. We can always visit.

Look, I know there's a lot about Florida that's messed up. I'm not blind. She's got her problems - big ones - but I love her. I wouldn't trade mosquitoes, tiny bagels, and crappy pizza for all the turkey dinners in the world. Because, to me, the way you do things up north is a fancy Thanksgiving dinner, and Florida?

She's my turkey sandwich.

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