Boasters, Boosters and Boom: Popular Images of Florida in the 1920s

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Florida has always been an upstart state; its cities have always been upstart towns. Development and promotion are the hallmark features of virtually every phase of Florida’s recent past. The land boom of the 1920s represents one apex, and ultimate failure, ordained for a state that rests upon a foundation of boosterism and image-making. So while the boom of the twenties is important to understanding Florida’s past, it may be equally instructive in illuminating its present and anticipating its future.

The boom began around 1920, accelerated to a peak in 1925 and died in 1926 as hurricanes swept across the state. The causes of the boom are intricate and diverse. Numerous forces acting together after World War I attracted many Americans to Florida. Ideologically, postwar Americans confronted a dilemma. On the one hand, they faced the opportunity to pursue a path of establishing and protecting democratic ideals throughout the world, or on the other, of concentrating their efforts on domestic affairs of their own country. In the elections of 1920, Americans expressed their preference, and the domestic emphasis easily carried the day.

Culturally, during this time, Americans sought new outlets, and they had various alternatives with which to experiment. The middle class found that automobiles, radios, and sports provided pleasant diversions. Between 1920 and 1930, a large number of Americans, especially the younger generation, became enamored of such fads as Mah Jong, crossword puzzles, and flagpole sitting. Jazz was their music and symbolized their lifestyle. They wore distinctive clothing as badges of their devil-may-care attitudes. They also worshipped heroes – from matinee idols such as Valentino, to sports figures such as Dempsey, Ruth and Grange, to achievers such as Byrd, Eberle, and Lindbergh, all of whom seemed greater than life. Postwar Americans became frivolous faddists captivated by anything that produced enough noise and ballyhoo to attract their attention. And by the 1920s, Florida was rather adept at producing noise.¹

While general attitudes produced a mood conducive to booms of all types, groups and organizations within Florida initiated measures to make the state especially attractive. Seeking to establish Florida as America’s winter home, these groups campaigned to attract Northern tourists to the Sunshine State. Chambers of commerce, civic clubs, railroads and bus lines achieved some success, and tourists from all economic strata (not just the idle rich who were already in the habit of wintering in the sun) filtered south. This influx, though, was neither great enough nor fast enough for many Floridians. It was action by Florida’s elected officials and a governor dedicated to good roads that helped accelerate the slow migration of the early 1920s into the boom of 1925.

In 1923, the Florida legislature passed a constitutional amendment abolishing state income and inheritance taxes. It was presented to the people for ratification in the general election of 1924, and it passed. The amendment was a drawing card, theoretically, for the capital needed to
develop Florida’s “great latent resources.” According to the secretary of the Florida Development Board, the amendment would “result in millions of dollars becoming available to be loaned at a low rate of interest for building new hotels, apartment homes, residences and industries, resulting in cheaper money to the men who want to build homes and expand manufacturing operations.” This would translate, proponents hoped, into continued employment, increased population and, ultimately, greater prosperity for Florida merchants. Exemptions from state income and inheritance taxes were powerful bait to many Americans, if for no other reason than simply to go south and take a look around.

Ohio cartoonist’s view of the Florida land boom, from Review of Reviews, May 1925.
In 1924, Floridians elected a governor committed to completing the network of roads that had been started in 1915. The successful gubernatorial campaign of John W. Martin sheds light on the mood of Florida’s electorate. Martin, convinced that a system of paved highways would help increase the industry and tourist trades, “promised to build roads from one end of the state to the other, before the people now living [were] in the cemetery.” Postwar prosperity had given the state a sort of “brassy aura,” and Martin exuded the same feeling. He believed the chief executive of the state “should be imaginative, a living advertisement for the splendors of the sub-tropic paradise of oranges, palm trees and white sand.”

Around this time, the citrus industry moved to the southern sections of the state to escape the destruction of freezes. Moreover, the Everglades were being drained for farm use, enhancing the possibilities of real estate development in South Florida.

Spurred by such trends, the state began to boom. The boosters, however, from both Florida and elsewhere, played an equally, if not more, significant role in the Florida land boom. They created the image of the state.

By 1920, boosterism was fairly common in the upstart state of Florida. Shortly after the Civil War, promoters began producing literature proclaiming the unlimited possibilities of the state. The most prolific sources of this literature were the railroads. As Henry Flagler’s line opened up the east coast and Henry B. Plant pioneered the west coast, their organizations frequently hired professional writers to wax eloquent on the beauties and charms of the sparsely settled region. These publicists were often renowned authors such as Sidney Lanier, or would-be artists who used such obvious pen-names as Sylvia Sunshine. As the railroad magnates plowed south and opened up magnificent hotels, the boosters turned out piece after piece concerning the respective projects and the benefits of the area where each was located. Civic groups joined the railroads in the community advertising business, and by the turn of the century, Florida cities were spinning out travelogues and brochures at a prodigious clip.

It was during the 1920s, though, that Florida received dramatic results from the boosters’ efforts. Between 1920 and 1930, Florida’s population ballooned from 1,000,000 to 1,468,211. Its 51.6 percent growth rate was significant compared to the nation’s 16.1 percent increase for the same period. During the boom years, from 1920 to 1925, more than 295,000 people settled in Florida, a growth of 30.4 percent. For the same five-year period, the net income of Florida individuals and corporations rose from $119,656,824 to $815,707,142.

Immediately preceding and during this era of expansion, literature boosting Florida flooded America. The promotional material came in a wide range of written forms that boasted Florida’s claims.

The newspaper industry was naturally one of the most forceful vehicles for publicizing the state. Within Florida, newspapers skillfully advertised the benefits of their communities and state. Daily newspapers spread to virtually every town or city regardless of size. In cities that previously had had newspaper services, other presses arose to supplement the established voice. The total number of daily newspapers in Florida jumped from thirty-three in 1921 to fifty-one by
"Opening of HOMOSASSA Florida"

The first sale of home lots, villas, and business sites in Homosassa, Florida’s own west coast resort community, opened Monday, February 2nd. Millions have been spent improving this famous breas spot. All the west coast needed was transportation. This is now assured.

When the railroad construction is completed the door of the traffic route to Jacksonville will be broken. Homosassa and the Tampa Bay and Manasota districts will be a thousand miles closer to Chicago. Fortunes will be made in real estate here.

Millions are being spent in post-development construction.

A scientifically planned city is under construction. While harbours, streets, water mains, sewers, sidewalks, hotels, homes and business blocks are completed, others are on the way.

The west coast and the new city of Homosassa offer you exceptional opportunities. Beginning Monday, February 2nd.

The Florida West Coast Development Company was formed to develop Homosassa, Florida. Branches and representatives throughout Florida and all principal Northern cities. An unusual opportunity in offered syndicate and individual investments.

Advertisement from Suniland, February 1926.
1925, indicating the importance of this critical boom-time industry. Weekly newspapers
increased from seventy-eight in 1921 to ninety-nine in 1925.°
More important than the increase of Florida publications, however, were the methods of writing and type of articles printed. While national news coverage during the period centered around such stories as Presidential elections, the League of Nations, the Halls-Mills case, the Scopes trial, and the exploits of Red Grange, Florida journalism was preoccupied with promoting the land boom and any related hype of even the least significance. The mission of every Florida newspaper appeared to one observant commentator to be “to broadcast the virtues and splendors of its home town at the top of its voice.” The press’s main function, it seemed, was to pave the way for the real estate men. In defense of his profession, one newspaperman complained:

If the editor becomes lax and forgets to shout, he is reminded by the Secretary of the Chamber of Commerce. If he grows honest and declares that Main Street is a fright and the trash barrels should be kept in alleys, he is instantly damned as “anything but a booster.” If he keeps it up, he faces a future barren of advertising and subscribers.9

One need only scan Florida newspapers between 1920 and 1926 to come away with similar impressions; few editors wanted to be labeled “anything but a booster.”
While the local press reassured residents and visitors of the community’s splendors and future, many national newspapers spread the word to their readers through articles, editorials and advertisements. Newspapers in northern cities printed accounts of Florida which tended, at least in the formative years of the boom, to create a favorable image of the state. These almost formulaic reports often detailed the benefits of Florida as a retreat, related miraculous stories of people who became rich overnight from real estate deals and, finally, urged their readers to make a trip to this magical land. Accompanying such laudatory stories were advertisements for Florida subdivisions and lots, perking the interest of Northern readers tired of the harshness and associated costs of severe winters.

Northerners also became familiar with Florida through promotional brochures. Freely distributed, these ranged from one-page leaflets to book-length manuscripts filled with pictures, maps and hyperbole. One of the most sucessful brochure producers was David P. Davis of Tampa, who dredged a series of islands in Hillsborough Bay into an extravagant residential and resort community called Davis Islands. His brochure campaign ranged from artistic pamphlets detailing the profits “made and refused” on the islands to lessons in investment acumen such as “If – The Barrier to Wealth,” which recounted profits missed by those who failed to buy when the opportunity was ripe. These brochures were also placed as advertisements in newspapers and magazines. 

While developers and subdividers used these small pamphlets regularly, the more elaborate booklet was just as widespread and equally persuasive. Davis Properties, for example, published a number of booklets to lure prospective buyers. One twenty-two-page effort, Life on Davis Islands, Tampa in the Bay: Florida’s $30,000,000 Development, was produced in 1925. It dripped with hyperbole and finely illustrated drawings of the “good life.” Scenes of leisure activities, including people playing tennis, motorboating, sunbathing and golfing, were worthy of accompanying the text of Fitzgerald’s The Great Gatsby. The stories trumpeted in flowery
language the project’s various components: “Entrance Towers—to Beckon a Cordial Welcome”; “Roman Pools—last word in Bathing Luxury”; “Distinguished Homes—where pleasureful living abounds”; “The Yacht Club—Center of Brilliant Activities”; “The Tennis Club—scene of absorbing pleasures”; “Alluring Waterways—of Real Venetian Charm”; “The Davis Arms—Ultimate in Hotel Magnificence”; “The Country Club—Haven of Good Fellowship”; “Luxurious Apartments—Masterpieces of Architecture”; and “Home Life—of the Highest Type.” Images as vivid as these helped assure Davis Islands’ initial success. The first unit sold out in less than three hours after it went on sale. Over $1,683,000 worth of lots and properties changed hands on October 4, 1924.

The skillful use of language and pictures to produce favorable images of Florida was a hallmark of developer publications. In Davis’ *Life on Davis Islands*, for example, the developer used romantic renderings to create a moonlight and magnolia picture of his dredged islands. Then, as the brochure ticked off the highlights of the development, the language reinforced the image while calling to mind the ingredients and virtues Americans typically seek for their home or vacation. The production emphasized a combination of the alluring and the practical—an idyllic relationship for postwar Americans who wished to enjoy their new prosperity.

Civic agencies, such as chambers of commerce, were also quite adept at producing booster literature. Like the developers and promoters, civic organizations used the brochure, pamphlet and book, along with advertisements in the press, to attract vacationers and new residents. Typically, these groups put out literature filled with dry facts that supported the industrial, agricultural and touristic viability of their town or city. Often, though, civic clubs produced literature as artistic as the developers’ publications. The Tampa Board of Trade, for instance, compiled booklets full of hype in the form of letters written home from visitors to the area. Filled with pictures of everything from Tampa’s churches to its beaches teaming with bathing beauties, one such effort included a letter which began “Dear Jack and Mary” and ended on this note:

Hillsborough County, and Tampa the gem, as the county seat, is so near like my dreams of paradise used to be that it is hard to believe. I don’t dare tell you all the virtues, for you would think I had gone into the real estate business and trying to sell you a city lot or farm tract by correspondence. That will come to you soon enough after your arrival, but you will have to take my word for it until you come and see. You be surprised and pleased and your doubts will have gone a-glimmering.

Please give my best regards to the folks I know, and don't delay your trip any longer. The good wife joins me in sending greetings, best wishes and extending an invitation to come.

Your Pal
Jim

Despite the stylistic and grammatical faults (perhaps an attempt to capture the vernacular of the common man), experiments such as these added spice and originality to civic campaigns. As early as 1922, the Tampa Board of Trade annually sent out more than 412,000 pieces of printed matter.
Adorned with artistic covers, promotional literature was often attractive. The Tampa Board of Trade’s 1919 number was graced by a young lady with a tennis racket in hand gazing over a body of water and waving at a carload of motorists riding against the backdrop of Tampa’s
skyline. The prose inside typically spoke of “unlimited future,” “educational advantages,” “hospitality,” “paved roads” and “parks and playgrounds in plenty.” These booster organizations were masters at the art of persuasion, as shown in the following description of the Tampa area.

South Florida is essentially the Land of Happiness, with an equal charm for young and old. The worst pessimist in the world cannot hold the same gloomy views after he has spent a winter in the all-healing sunshine; many magical transformations have been effected. It is said that all legends have a foundation of fact, and it is not hard to understand why the elusive Fountain of Youth should have been sought in Florida. It was no distinct fountain of youth, but a monopoly from November to April of the world’s supply of sunshine and blue skies and summer breezes . . . . They all dreamed a dream of Arcadia, fantastic and unreal, someplace they could be free from the rigors and hardships of a long and bleak winter. That undoubtedly is the secret of South Florida’s charm – it is the realization of every man’s dream – the Fairyland of America. Pack your kit and motor south – to Tampa, in South Florida, the winter playground of America.¹⁴

A penned inscription on one frontispiece testifies to the fact that such literature was passed around. It reads: “You ask me why I love this place ’tis winsome nature woos me here.”¹⁵

Thus, land developers, civic organizations, the local press and national newspapermen all produced booster literature that created in the minds of Northerners a compelling image of Florida. Yet the popular magazines, because of their widespread circulation to a fairly well-educated, middle-class readership, were the most significant image-makers. Whether because of the state’s natural beauty or the booster literature they were handed upon their arrival in Florida, the popular magazine writers were also “wooed.” And the images they created helped woo the rest of the country, or so it seemed, to the Sunshine State.

Numerous popular periodicals of the 1920s, from the Saturday Evening Post to Harper’s Monthly, devoted space to the happenings in Florida. The authors of these articles, purposefully or not, used similar literary devices to create a distinct picture of the state and its boom-time activities. Examining these devices and how a number of writers employed them illuminates one of the essential aspects of the boom – how Florida was depicted to the nation at large.

Mentioning Ponce de Leon and discussing Florida as a Fountain of Youth had been a popular device since the earliest days of the state’s promotion, and one seldom finds an article from the 1920s that fails to invoke them. E.W. Howe, in one of the earliest articles leading up to the boom, opened a 1921 piece by recalling the romantic implications of “Ponce de Leon and his dream of a perpetual fountain of youth.”¹⁶ A classic example of the device is found in Roger W. Babson’s 1925 article, titled “Florida's Future,” which began with the following message:

Ponce de Leon had the right idea. He did not come to Florida to look for paper town sites, isolated acreage, subdivision auctions, or the other paraphernalia of exploitation. He went to Florida in search of a fountain of youth. And he found it; for Florida can add from five to ten years to the lives of people who will spend their winters there in quest of health and happiness.¹⁷
An Unusual Opportunity for Profitable Investment

VENICE possesses every requisite for rapid growth. Its location directly on the Gulf Coast is unsurpassed. This feature along with unprecedented future development and the natural beauty of Venice make it the logical choice for the future resort in Western Florida.

But Venice is not dependent wholly on its natural resources. Much of this great 50,000-acre development is unlimited capital. Vast improvements are being carried on incessantly and immense building activity is getting under way. The sponsors for this massive development are showing their complete confidence in the future of Venice by investing their own money in far-reaching public and private improvements.

Capital attracts capital. Activity begets activity. These are fundamental principles that are doubly true in Florida. Every successful investment in Florida testifies to the fact that the best investment opportunities have been offered by these developers who have been backed by large capital, in the hands of wise, energetic men. In such favorable spots, the momentum gained by sheer force of large operations and unusual personal energy will inevitably drive all investments toward upward.

Men of vision see in Venice the future Magic of the West Coast. But, in Venice you have the opportunity of starting with the upward movement. You can look forward with faith—instead of looking back with regret because you did not invest ten years ago.

Watch for future announcements about Venice. You're likely to find increasing facts for the real estate in Venice that will become the RESORT SUPREME of Florida's West Coast

The Venice Company
Venice, Florida

109 Main Street, Sarasota, Florida
109 Broadway, New York
526 Central Avenue, St. Petersburg, Florida
111 Twigg Street, Tampa, Florida
Jennings Arcade, 4th Ave. South, Bradenton, Florida

Advertisement from Suniland, January 1926.
Naturally, such a place was attractive to the freezing Northerner advancing in age.
Calling Florida a pioneer state where the frontier spirit abounded was an equally popular device. In a 1925 article, significantly entitled “Florida – The Pioneer State,” Frank Peter Stockbridge declared, “Florida is a pioneer State, the largest and perhaps last full-scale stamping-ground in [the] Continental United States for the trail-blazer, the axe man and the road builder, preparing the way for the land agent and the settler.” Throughout this article, the author extended the frontier metaphor by showing how the settler was the key to any boom. The peak, Stockbridge proclaimed, occurred when there were no more settlers willing to pay the prices asked; and in Florida, he emphasized, the settlers had only just begun to buy. Through this method, the writer pictured the state as the last territory where democracy – the keynote of his essay – could prevail. Florida was a place where one could stake a claim and relive the romantic frontier spirit. The state could provide a new home for those who sought a new life. All that one needed was a little vigor, a dash of nerve, a bit of daring, and the good sense to purchase lots on binders.

Asking “How long will the boom last?” and “What parts of the state are booming?” were trademarks of image-making articles. The first question was usually posed because, the writers claimed, it was what Northerners wanted to know. The answers hinted either that it would last a good long time, which was supported by some economic theory, or that in actuality Florida was not really experiencing a boom.

J. Leroy Miller, in his 1926 article, “In the Land of the Realtor,” queried: “How long is the Florida boom going to last? Can the pyramiding of prices go on forever? When is the bubble going to burst?” While searching for an answer, Miller employed several of the usual image-making devices but somehow failed to answer his own ponderings. He recounted that Floridians denied there was a boom in progress and claimed that such vitality was normal and long overdue; that the wealthy who frequented Florida, such as Ford, Collier, and Ringling, would never let the boom burst; that the natives frowned upon the speculative nature of real estate purchases; that Florida's boom was no different than any other period of rapid growth; that people were getting rich overnight; and that all should come “witness” the spectacle and judge for themselves. By posing the question “How long will the boom last?” and hinting that it might never end or at least that there was no end in sight, writers led readers to believe that they had plenty of time to invest in Florida land. If readers had not had the foresight or good fortune to have already purchased Florida land, this device suggested it would never be too late.

“What parts of the state are booming?” was another primary concern writers of boom-time articles thought readers wanted to know. The answer, of course, was that the state was booming all over – north and south, east and west, rural and urban. In 1925 Literary Digest reprinted excerpts from an article from Business Conditions Weekly which concluded that the boom was perhaps centered in the Miami-Palm Beach area but the whole state was feeling its impact. By using a chart, the article illustrated the population growth and rate of increases from 1900 to 1920 for Jacksonville, Tampa, Pensacola, Miami, West Palm Beach, Lakeland and West Tampa in order to reinforce the notion of an all inclusive boom.

The idea of “boom everywhere” was best used by Frank Parker Stockbridge in his lengthy essay for a 1925 issue of the Review of Reviews. As with his earlier work for the same publication, Stockbridge again used almost all of the popular image-making devices. He also
commented on virtually every element of boosterism, including the fountain-of-youth idea,
Announcing Venice

Sarasota County's Premier Investment Opportunity

The only resort city in Florida situated directly on the open waters of the Gulf of Mexico.

WHERE THE TAMIAI TRAIL MEETS THE GULF

Venice FLORIDA

Long famous as one of Florida's choice beauty spots, Venice is now to take its rightful place as the leading resort of the West Coast.

Advertisement from Suniland, January 1926.

winter recreation, Florida’s excellent roads and beaches and get-rich-quick stories. Naturally,
anywhere visitors searched – from the east coast and its beaches, to the west coast and its Mediterranean-like waters, to Pensacola and West Florida – they were likely to find “paradise.” The cost of coming to see the spectacle, Stockbridge concluded, was insignificant and easily managed by families of even the most modest means. Thus, writers pictured the boom as if occurring throughout the state.

Some writers even argued that Florida was not experiencing a boom because a boom implied artificially inflated prices that would drop sooner or later to their true level. This view pictured rapid growth, rising profits, and the subdivision of vast amounts of land as merely signs of natural expansion. The growth in Florida, Northerners could assume, was normal though long overdue. One national magazine reprinted a testimonial by a clergyman who had lived in Florida for a decade.

This is not what could be properly called a boom. I have studied the subject and the situation very carefully. There is some strong force that is causing people to flock down here; . . . rather it seems as if it were the effect of unleashing a force long bound. I think
I have found a clue in my parish records, which go back many years. You may know that prior to the Spanish-American War Florida had been little developed. But when people began to make money and more and more Americans [found] that rest and relaxation were worthwhile, they discovered in increasing numbers the climate and the other charms of this coast. And now that these are widely known, you can not stem the flood that is bound this way. No, this is not a boom; Florida is just coming into its own.22

To prove this argument a number of writers offered economic theories which pointed out that the true value of Florida land had long been underestimated. Thus, the boom was not really a boom, but a period of “economic adjustment.” Felix Isman's article, “Florida’s Land Boom,” used this argument adroitly and serves as an example.

Just what constitutes a boom depends, of course, upon the material fact of value. Land may be worth $100 an acre, we will say, but because it started at five dollars an acre and gets up to twenty-five dollars, that condition is defined and classified very often as a boom if the acreage is in sufficient quantity to permit a number of people to profit by the increment; so we must be very careful in considering the conditions of the Florida boom to see whether it is one which may result in total collapse or whether it is in the twenty-five-dollar-an-acre-and-worth-more class.23

And if Florida’s development was not actually a boom, then why should Northerners fear heading south to purchase land that had not yet reached its true value?

In order to show that Florida’s boom was part of an historical pattern, journalists invoked the authority of history. For example, E.W. Howe began his piece, “The Old Visitors,” by citing the relationships between Florida and early historical figures and events. Columbus had discovered America “almost within sight of Florida – as the crow flies, less than two hundred miles.” Howe then ticked off the long list of visitors who had recognized Florida’s importance: the Spaniards, the British, and eventually the railroad magnates.24

A similar ploy, by comparing the Florida’s boom to other land booms, attempted to show that the mania in the Sunshine State was not all that unusual. In the next breath, however, writers often pointed out that Florida’s boom would “eclipse all others.” In a 1925 article, Roger Babson explained:

A real estate boom in one place or another seems to be as much a part of returning prosperity as a bull market in stocks. In my boyhood days, the part of the country where real-estate speculation struck was in the Middle West, in Kansas and Nebraska. I will recall how excited my neighbors got over the rising values in Omaha, Topeka, Kansas City, and other localities; for both city and farm property were involved.

Ten years or so later another boom broke out, in the Northwest. Whole families migrated and remarkable profits were made, not only in farm lands but in city properties in Minneapolis, St. Paul, Duluth, and other localities. The Dakotas, Montana, Idaho, Washington, and Oregon, all took a turn at real estate speculation.
Today the household words are Palm Beach, Miami, St. Petersburg, etc. But older readers will remember when there was much the same sound in the names of Sioux Jack Dempsey and promoter Burks L. Hamner before a promotional fight on Davis Islands, February 1926.

Photograph courtesy of Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library System.

Today the household words are Palm Beach, Miami, St. Petersburg, etc. But older readers will remember when there was much the same sound in the names of Sioux
Falls, Aberdeen, Grand Forks, Helena, Boise, Seattle, Tacoma and Portland. Most of us recall the California boom of recent past.25

The cataloging of booms past was an attempt to put Florida’s in proper perspective. Nothing that odd was going on down there, except, of course, it was a bigger boom than the others. As the editor of a Maryland newspaper who was freely quoted in the Literary Digest proclaimed, “All our gold rushes, all our oil booms, and all our free-land stampedes dwindle by comparison with the torrent of migration pouring into Florida from all parts.”26

Get-rich-quick stories, which were placed in most boom-time Florida articles, created an image of the state as a gold mine. Such stories usually mapped the fortunes made by individuals on particular properties. For example, Stockbridge dedicated a portion of a 1925 article to the “Fortunes Made in Real Estate.” After mentioning how some of the well-to-do turned quick profits, he focused his attention on the common man.

“Charlie” Carr met Charles A. Hall on a St. Petersburg street. “I hear you just paid $40,000 for a lot on Fifth and Central Avenue,” said Carr. “There is nothing the matter with you except you’re crazy.” Six months later Hall needed cash and sold the lot for $70,000; the purchaser sold it to “Charlie” Carr for $125,000, who in turn sold it for $250,000. “And I’ll give the present owner $600,000 for it today,” said Hall, telling me of the incident. Five miles from Sarasota is an eighty-acre tract, inland, for which the owner was trying to get $4,000 when his death broke off the negotiations. That was in December, 1923. His executors got $45,000 for the tract, and exactly one year later it was resold for $240,000. Exclamation points lose their emphasis when relating incidents like that.27

With tales such as these the Northern reader could hardly help but envision Florida real estate as a safe bet. However, the images produced by this device were slightly misleading. Most lots were bought and sold on binders or options, and the seller, in effect, merely received a promise that the buyer would eventually relieve his obligation. That buyer would also sell on a binder and, as the pyramiding continued upward, the reality that the original seller would ever collect his money became more and more doubtful. These were paper profits. Someone would eventually be stuck with a piece of property owing commitments that could never be met. The spiraling would last only as long as Florida land was in demand. If and when the demand fell off, which was inevitable, the speculation would slow down. Yet the image-makers who employed this device reported only the possible profits to make from a piece of Florida land, and as a result the risk seemed minimal.

Boom-time writers used the earlier success of Southern California as a metaphor to explain why the Sunshine State was so desirable. At the same time, they argued that Florida surpassed California in all areas. The object was to draw potential California visitors south rather than west, with the claim that everything was bigger and better in Florida, even the oranges. Will Rogers pointed out the absurdity of the device by turning it on its head. In his piece, “Florida Versus California: A Debate Held Before the Prevaricators’ Club of America,” a club of which “California was a charter member,” Rogers related most of Florida’s magniloquent claims, and then entertained rebuffs from California, such as the following.
Fla.: We have the longest seacoast of any state in the Union. We have 1145 miles, and is 100 miles more than California has.

Cal.: Now you notice they emphasize the word “California.” Why didn't they say how much more they had than New York or West Virginia? No, they must outdo California. Now what does a large seacoast have to do with the quality of the state? According to the latest returns from Rand McNally, Siberia has quite a mass of seacoast, but I have never heard of any emigration going there – that is, voluntarily – on account of their seacoast. Clam diggers and lighthouse keepers are the only two professions that I know of that I strive off long coast lines.  

Many writers used the California comparison to illustrate the possibilities of Florida. Although Rogers’ article turns the device upside down, the method still created the image of Florida as a vast playground for water-related leisure activities.

By telling how Floridians frowned upon real estate speculation, and especially corruption, writers pictured the natives as honest and trustworthy. Spurred by the Florida Development Board’s 1925 campaign against fraudulent advertising, many magazine articles recounted how Floridians disdained the boom hysteria. One journalist assured his readers that “the state of Florida is doing everything possible to protect” tourists and investors. Another reported, “One salesman encountered upon the west coast declared that he had moved from a certain east-coast town on account of this [speculation, buying and selling on binders] condition.” Thus, Floridians were absolved from any unscrupulous behavior with regard to the boom. The Northerner, accordingly, could trust the natives.

Furthermore, promoters contended that Florida had enough land to support a large portion of America’s population. This reinforced the notion that the state could support virtually an infinite number of visitors and settlers. Literary Digest quoted Governor John Martin as saying, “We have a population of one million two hundred thousand, but we can support fifty million.” As Felix Isman stated, “There are more than 37,000,000 acres of land in the state of Florida . . . and practically all of it has been thrown on the market for a price.” If all of this land had been subdivided into quarter-acre lots, as seemed possible, there would have been more than enough for any Northerner wishing to invest. According to one source, some 20,000,000 acres had already been subdivided. If this were accurate, uninitiated visitors to the Sunshine State could have calculated that such development could support at least 20 million people, or about one-fifth of the country’s population at the time.

By dropping the names of the wealthy associated with developing Florida, writers demonstrated that the state was attractive to insightful businessmen who knew how to invest their money and spend their leisure time. If the titans of industry deemed Florida worthy, why should middle-class Americans feel otherwise? Men such as Ford, Edison, Olds, Fisher, Collier, DuPont, Singer and Deering provided endless examples for booster articles which frequently used the generic terms “millionaire” and “multi-millionaire” to describe prominent investors. Once more, Isman serves as an example.
Billions of dollars have been spent in the creation of homes – investments in health. James Deering, a Chicago multimillionaire, after traveling the world over and seeking a favorable place for rest, pleasure and health, looked in upon the southern east coast of Florida for several days one year. The following year he began building a great estate. Such investors know what they are doing.34

Writers correctly pinpointed the climate as one of the major contributors to Florida’s boom. Most writers assumed that the majority of Americans were attracted to subtropical environments. If so, then Florida was “a wonder land with a magical climate, set in a frame of golden sunshine.”35 It was a state blessed by the heavens in which everything from its landscape to its fruit products was better than in any other place in the world. And, naturally, divine providence explained these blessings. As Will Payne reckoned, “People used to say the supply of real estate was limited: God made only so much and retired from business. They know better than that in Florida.”36

Writers also promoted the good and simple life which they claimed existed in Florida, especially for those with middle incomes. Northerners could head south for a winter of relaxation in the sun and escape the rat race. In Florida, pitching horseshoes or playing checkers under the
palm trees was not condemned. Payne dedicated his 1925 article in the *Saturday Evening Post* to “Capturing the Simple Life” in Florida. Payne listed numerous examples of the simple life, from ready-to-live-in homes to fishing and recreation in the “Mecca,” and he found that “people all along the economic scale live more simply” in Florida, which was “an important reason why they go back.”

Finally, mentioning Florida’s undeniable future was frequently used to create an image of unending and unprecedented business opportunities. It also portrayed Florida’s success as more than ephemeral. Boom or not, Florida would continue to prosper despite the growing Northern skepticism started by Ohio bankers who refused to loan any more money for Florida investments. Many writers ended their articles with the assertion that Florida’s future was bright and unarguable. At the same time, they hinted that the sooner people became involved in the state, the better off they would be. Barron Collier's closing statement serves as a classic example of this image-making method.

The “to-morrow” of Florida is dawning. In its soft light we see the forms of men hurling back the wilderness, draining large tracts, building homes, planting great orchids. Soon will come the blaze of the full mid-day. Picture, if you can, the scene as it will be then.

Heralding the dawn created a hope-filled dream for those who had yet to be initiated to Florida’s alluring mystique.

By using one or more of these devices in their articles, writers of boom-time Florida created a favorable image of the state. Florida was a fountain of youth, an Eden, a settler’s paradise, a gold mine. Yet it was simply history repeating itself; no need to be alarmed. The state was merely experiencing a long overdue period of natural growth. The mania was not encouraged by native Floridians, who were sensible folk. They, above all, recognized the dangers of speculation. The state was large enough to support a great number of people, perhaps half of America. It was an unpretentious place where settlers and tourists could find a good and simple life. And, finally, the boom was the precursor of a resort and business paradise that was undeniably the course of Florida’s future.

While the majority of national magazine writers that focused on boom-time Florida employed formulaic devices to popularize and promote the state, at least one writer, Kenneth Lewis Roberts, refused to invoke stereotypical views and conventions in his reports. Instead, Roberts focused each of his articles for the *Saturday Evening Post* on specific aspects of the Florida scene. These topical concerns were always related to what George Horace Lorimer, the *Post’s* influential editor, termed the “social, political, economic situation” of the state. These issues provided a thesis for each essay which covered aspects of Florida that most other writers ignored. His topics ranged from the propensity of the wealthy classes to kill time in Palm Beach to the habits of Floridians who boasted their community’s benefits, especially growth. As a correspondent to the *Post*, the historical-novelist-to-be (*Northwest Passage* and *Oliver Wiswell*) used a more systematic strategy for reporting Florida, which adds to the significance of his work.
One of the most striking elements of Roberts’ style was his humor. He evoked this through biting satire and caustic wit, which undercut many popular conceptions of Florida and questioned the integrity of those who wrote about the state by relying on clichés. Roberts’ humor permeated his eleven Florida articles and pointed out the absurdity of the boom. His irreverent tongue-in-cheek reports allowed Northern readers to construct their own opinions regarding the mania. At times, his style hinted at his disapproval of the conditions in Florida; at others, he seemed to believe that all would turn out well in the Sunshine State. Overall, Roberts’ posture was ambivalent. This ambivalence toward Florida’s future was the key to his analysis of the Florida boom.

Roberts second article, “The Sun-Hunters,” typifies his Florida work. It appeared in 1924 and investigated the relatively new but growing phenomenon of automobiling to Florida. Beginning with a cross-cultural examination of the foundations of most modern migrations, he pointed out the social and economic underpinnings associated with most mass movements of people. In contrast, these new migrants who headed south each winter were after just two things – sun and air.
Roberts continued by pointing out the difference between the “sun-hunters” and the “time-killers.” The “time-killers,” the topic of his first Florida exposé, were made up of Northerners who parted their names in the middle, spent their winters in Palm Beach riding wheel chairs, changed their clothes three or four times a day, waited for telegrams that never came, constantly pondered what day it was, guessed at the number of nails it took to build such-and-such building, drank bootleg booze from curved pocket flasks and perpetually searched for useless ways to part with their money. The “sun-hunters,” on the other hand, were those Northerners who worked hard all year and desired to spend their winters primarily on Florida’s west coast which was less hostile to the “tin-canners” than the east coast, even though they camped, ate out of tin cans and spent their time pitching horseshoes. Roberts was more sympathetic to the “sun-hunter” who, he told his readers, was “not recruited from any one class of citizens” and who was usually “garbed in dark trousers which hung loosely on his legs like the trousers always inflicted on sculptured statesmen of the Horace Greely period.” The “sun-hunters” were a democratic breed.

A major portion of “The Sun-Hunters” described how Floridians received the “tin-can tourists,” and Roberts conducted an extensive study concerning their habits, clothing, automobiles, and citizenship. His presentation was serious yet witty. His discussion of Tampa’s tin-can camp, for example, illustrated not only the Florida scene, but politics and human nature as well.

The most celebrated tin-can camp is DeSoto Park, East Tampa, on the shore of Tampa Bay. Hundreds of automobiles are lined up side by side throughout the winter in DeSoto Park. The camp, which is carefully regulated and policed by the municipal authorities, is free. A trolley line connects it with the business section of Tampa. In the center of the camp is a pavilion where entertainments are given. The camp has electric lights, running water, city sewerage, shower baths and an enormous hot-water tank. The tourists are permitted to send their children to its excellent schools on payment of fifty cents a week – which is too little.

Throughout his Florida writing, Roberts examined the specifics of Florida, Floridians and tourists. He consistently etched vivid sketches of his subjects, detailing both the positive and negative aspects of the state. Unlike most journalists who wrote about boom-time Florida, Kenneth L. Roberts produced responsible essays that allowed readers to better understand the state.

Roberts’ example aside, most of the formulaic, image-making devices that were used so successfully during the 1920s are still used today by Florida boosters. Tampa’s slogan, “Tampa – Where the Good Life Gets Better Every Day,” is a continuation of the shouting about Florida’s undeniable future, while promising a good deal today. The widespread use of such devices shortly after World War I played a major role in the advances that took place in Florida between 1920 and 1926, but such boosterism also fueled the state’s penchant for land development and speculation of all sorts. The results included grid neighborhoods designed to maximize profits, office towers and parking structures protruding from all quarters of the landscape, strip commercial developments lining virtually every major roadway, a lack of public open spaces and an
affection for the new while disregarding the past. Florida’s boom-time heritage remains with us, and its impact was far from trivial.


7 Tampa Chamber of Commerce, Growth and Progress of the City of Tampa (Tampa: Tampa Chamber of Commerce, 1931); DeBerard, “Promoting Florida,” 51-52.


10 See, for example, D.P. Davis Properties, Tampa’s Unqualified Endorsement of Davis Islands, Tampa in the Bay (Tampa: D.P. Davis Properties, n.d.).

11 D.P. Davis Properties, Life of Davis Islands, Tampa in the Bay: Florida’s $30,000,000 Development (Tampa: D.P. Davis Properties, 1925).

12 Tampa Board of Trade, Tampa (Tampa: Tampa Board of Trade, 1923), 42.

13 Tampa Board of Trade, Tampa Board of Trade, The Community Powerhouse, Annual Report, April 1, 1921, to April 1, 1922 (Tampa: Tampa Board of Trade, 1922), 5.

14 Tampa Board of Trade, Tampa and Hillsborough County, Florida (Tampa: Tampa Board of Trade, 1919), 33.

15 The Gables Company, Tampa: Florida’s Greatest City (Tampa: Tampa Board of Trade, 1925), 1.


21 Frank Parker Stockbridge, “Shall We Go To Florida?” Review of Reviews, 72 (November 1925).


29 Isman, “Florida’s Land Boom,” 141


31 “A New National Migration,” 53.


34 Isman, “Florida’s Land Boom,” 141.


37 Ibid., 189.

38 Collier, “Florida,” 486.
