

## “I Caught a Turtle, Ev’rybody”



**A Postcard of Sanlando Springs, circa 1955**  
**Courtesy of Eleanor Fisher**

9/8/02

When I was a teenager living in the hot summers of Daytona Beach without air conditioning, I remember a few blessed days when a group of us tumbled into a car and drove the fifty some miles out 17-92 to get to Sanlando Springs. It was closer to go to De Leon Springs north of Deland or even to scramble over the bank at Blue Spring in Orange City. But the furthest possibility of cool for the east central Florida teen was Sanlando Springs because it had a magnificent slide and the canteen with a juke box and a dance floor. You got in for a quarter and a nickel bought you a bottle of coke or a dance with Elvis. At the bottom of all this fun was the rock and roll of the Little Wekiva River.

I have to admit that back then I never thought of Sanlando Springs as Wekiva, Little or Big. As we all do when we grow up, each experience is an atom of its own, connected mostly to the now.

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This morning the FOWR have sponsored a field trip to The Springs, a development of 950 homes that is the dream fulfilled of Earl Downs. In 1972 he bought Sanlando Springs and the surrounding territory to build an upscale neighborhood in the corner between SR 434 and Markham Woods Road. Now you enter at a guard house, ride through a labyrinth of streets with

a beautiful mixed hardwood canopy, drive over the Little Wekiva without realizing a bridge is there, and arrive at the clubhouse, a completely renovated version of the old park's facility.

Many of the thirty folks who have come for this occasion are like me, curious to see what is left of a childhood or teenage vision, in my case half a century old. Eleanor Fisher, the *grand dame* of the Friends of Wekiva, brings a postcard of the place from the 'fifties. It is bright colored and shows the view from the boil straight out to the Little Wekiva, a beach with tall palm trees that seem to be the very same ones you can see now, in that lilting pose that captivated so many of America's finest landscape painters, out over the marshes of the St. Johns.

Looking at the postcard, though, I don't remember the place as so bright, open, and colorful. However, one of the young men in the picture is wearing swim trunks exactly like a style I once enjoyed. I kid Eleanor that I could be in this picture, but I am not. A beautiful girl is reclining in the water, her hair the same style and almost the same perfection that my sister wore to her prom in 1951.

Part of the point of our field trip today is to see the controversial changes to the landscape ecology of this bright treasure of the Wekiva, now in the management and care of a homeowners association. It seems they deliberately violate many of the rules of the state and the water management district about how to preserve the quality of the river community. The first thing I felt when I came to the top of the hill and looked down was the large open lawn and the gigantic size of the pool. In my mind's archive, this place is much narrower and overhung with trees. We should be walking mostly over leaves and dirt.

Memory is not always an accurate witness. Before Eleanor came to confirm it, I could feel where the two structures (the word *building* seems too substantial) used to be, on the upward slope behind the boil, but when I asked about the position of the slide opposite from the canteen, she corrected by about twenty degrees. Eleanor actually knows the man who still has the old slide, in his barn I presume, a testimony to how strong the urge to preserve idyllic memory can be. I'm guessing it's not the thirty-foot drop my body remembers, that landed us into something more than standing depth.

"We all came here in the hot summer," Eleanor says of her visits in the '30's and '40's, "because you know in those days nobody had a swimming pool." Even then, the spring was supplemented by a pool, where indeed its successor now still reclines, with matching his and her saunas on both sides.

Michelle and her husband Jeff tell me about how they came here, at different times actually, but their recollections are much more precise than mine because they came so often. They remember the dirt roads they traveled to get here. Michelle laughs that her folks would give her a quarter and drop her off for the whole summer's day. She points over beyond a row of townhouses to the other spring, Palm Spring (some now call it Sulphur Spring), where there was an old broken-down building. Eleanor reports that it was the first swimming hole developed and later this pool

with its concrete retaining wall, curving around the boil and moving at almost a right angle along two sides, was built to contain the slope of the hill. At the north end then, a single sluice was built with boards set across it to control the level of the spring pond, as it does even now.

However, the management of The Springs has altered the hydrology of the pool by creating two more outlets, all with wire traps that flow out west to the Little Wekiva. In the past two years they have been improving the landscape, in their own image, by cutting down native trees, ripping out native plants (hence, whole aquatic habitat), extending the sandy beach another hundred feet, planting the islands created by the new channels with lawn, securing the banks with black plastic pond liner, stacking some of that with hand-sized rocks backed up by bright-colored filler grasses. All this leads up to the slopes where azaleas and camelias thrive in the shade of some grand old oak trees left over from the days before Father Knows Best. One of the grand oaks on this side of the pool is gone now, replaced by a neat row of exotic palms native to Cuba. Will the spring water's constant temperature preserve them from the next freeze?

In a word, without any appreciation or care for stream ecology and the aquatic communities which have evolved here, they have turned this site markedly in the direction of a swimming pool. It makes a better postcard now, but a worse river.

Their logic might have something to do with the little baby I see, playing with her daddy over on the beach. He sits with his bottom on the sand and his feet in an inch or two of the water, the child between his legs about as long as his calf, splashing with glee. No modest bliss. The homeowners don't want a gator to come in and eat that beautiful child. It is an idea we can all appreciate. So they try to keep the algae, the fish, and the otters out of the spring so that the grand carnivore doesn't forage in here and give them a lawsuit they can't afford.

Our host at The Springs is Dr. Brent Weinman, an optometrist. A longtime resident here and board member of the FOWR, Brent has worked tirelessly to get his neighbors to see the light. At lunch he shows us videos he has made and gathered from other residents. They document the quality of the fish-life prior to this recent onslaught to the spring ecology. Through his homemade underwater video camera, we get to see hundreds of bream and bass of good size and other many species I don't recognize, as he swims through canyons of eel grass following a large soft-bellied turtle. He used to be able to swim each morning with three or four otters, also fully documented in films, who no longer are in the pond.

Part of the problem now is the loss of the substrate of organisms in the spring pool. According to Brent, they periodically pull the plug, lower the pool to a few feet of depth, and use pressure cleaners to kill the algae on the concrete walls using clorox or some other algicide. When I swim back and forth now across the pool, all I see are a few stalks of hydrilla and a thin carpet of green algae on the bottom, nothing like the intricate pathways of eelgrass that were in the various underwater shots from the late 'nineties.

When I drove up this morning at nine and the guard said I was the first of our group to arrive, I felt rather squeamish about being a member, as it were, of the environmental police. Who wants someone to come into their backyard and tell them what's wrong with their constructed habitat? The boundary between our constitutional rights to privacy and our local heritage of community (inherent in the quality of water, the hydrology of river flow, and the perdurance of native plant and animal wildlife) cuts a very stark contrast in Sanlando Springs.

Suppose you're my friend Bill Carlie and it's your job, working for the Water Management District, to go around and issue citations and fines when homeowners, builders, or collectives violate the laws of the State regarding river community. The river itself is the state's property; for all practical purposes then, this spring, its pool, and all its outlets belong to Florida. The Springs had to apply for a permit to do all this "landscaping" and it's your job now to come in and fine them for all the ways they have superseded that permit. If the state were a private citizen, owning the springs, the homeowners association lawyers (the same folks who tell them about the liabilities surrounding one gator attack) would be frightened to death of the suit that would follow. But you're just a civil servant and you have to get approval to take on the powerful interests of private property.

The state has already spent millions of dollars trying to keep the Little Wekiva from a variety of serious problems of pollution, siltation, and extraction (think mostly herbicides) of intrusive exotics like hyacinth and Chinese tallow. They have had their battles with The Springs and nothing has come of it. In a mild way, The Springs is a kind of Waco where the government has backed off, it seems, or is just waiting. Channel Two News has presented the issue as a deadlock. So what can FOWR do? We are the ecological conscience of the river community, we have legal standing, and we often are fighting at the design and development stage for strict adherence to the rules. But once the development becomes a human community, is fully occupied, we tend to back off and accept the degradation of the environment out of respect for the democratic process inherent in the homeowners association.

So I am torn as I arrive this morning between the awkward, unstated mission of the "citizens patrol" and the joy of recovering my teenland, that wet 'n wild experience of my youth. I can't help feeling that I would love to live in here and be able to swim with the turtles and otters every morning, put my kayak in at night, and explore the river without the tiresome twenty-five minute drive.

I park behind the sauna-pool complex and descend to the boil in sandals and bathing suit. Four white ibis across the spring-pond are rummaging back and forth, up and down on the edge of the white sandy beach, steadily picking over the vegetables to get their breakfast of grubs and snails with their long orange-red chopsticks. In concert, they seem like a quartet of white-haired ladies working a giant loom.

Behind them pops out the white-on-slate-blue of the Louisiana heron. Crows caw above the nine a.m. concert of cicadas—a stadium full of them seems to be concocting a steady wave of

crescendo and decrescendo. As I walk to the boil and the diving platform over it, I am amazed at how deep it looks, later tested by the simple process of exhaling and stroking down feet first, I can't come near the bottom before I panic a little and come up for air. It looks like thirty feet down before any cave opens up. A large turtle, looking like a plated hub-cap, pokes up at the wall opposite me.

Walking around the pool to the beach side, I cross the first bridge where the spill-out, eight feet wide, generates today a powerful stream. It drops four feet to a wide, white, scoured substrate with a scattering of twenty limestone rocks that lead to a shallow ridge; then it turns dark green and opens, curling into a channel. It flows past newly planted cypress trees and some brush where later I try in vain to sneak up on an American egret. Now I say hello to the only other person here, Estelle, a stocky woman my age, sitting with her feet hanging over the wall below a stand of palms.

In the clearing beyond, it's all lawn till you get to the second channel and the house beyond that. Darting by my face, I notice the large-bodied cicada killers, shaped like WWII bombers, coursing the landscape to find the crackling noisemakers. They poison the cicada, crawl and haul them to a proper height, then glide a distance to a hole prepared in the ground where they bury their victims, with their eggs attached, so that two hundred days later they can emerge to silence next August's generation of cicadas. This arrangement is far older here than the spring which serves it.

I follow paths westward through some thick woods to discover the main stream of the Little Wekiva. Looking south from a footbridge which would take me immediately into someone's back yard, I look upstream to the road a hundred feet away and beyond that to the concrete bridge of State Road 434 that I passed over to enter The Springs. The water is high and swiftly running. Right below my feet a perfectly motionless great blue heron stands on the end of the point created by the confluence of the Little Wekiva on the right and the third outlet from the spring on the left.

A twenty-five foot willow that shades the heron is full of warblers (one I think perhaps a prothonotary) and a cardinal. In the distance some very tall pines have an osprey calling from them, but I can't for the life of me locate the bird. This is a scene I recognize from several cleanups I have been on with the FOWR over the years. An early morning jogger goes by on the road and then a car or two. The water is a beautiful study in color for, as the early sun shows in the white substrate of sand on my left, clouds of brown tannins are intruding, hustling over the edge of the clear spring stream. Instinctively you might take this brown for something filthy and contaminating, but it is only nature's mixture of earth and cloud.

In spite of all the signs of degradation that one might debit to the homeowners community, the river goes on with considerable equanimity. In the good-ole-days when I swam here as a young man, Brent tells me, they used to dump whole blocks of chlorine into the spring-pond and that caused a substantial harm. The recent practice of spraying will not last against the buildup of

algae and so forth, so that if later in this century democracy produces either a more enlightened homeowner leadership or a better enforcement of the law by the water district, then all the critters may indeed return to their prehistoric splendor.

It strikes me as strange now that the FOWR lobbies almost exclusively with government and bulldozers, but we have forgotten to engage all the homeowners associations where many folks like Estelle will say, "I live here, but I don't see how this – the spring and all – can be called private property." Just as we go on living if we smoke, but our lungs restore themselves if we stop, this day of dreadful dangers at The Springs can eventually be reversed.

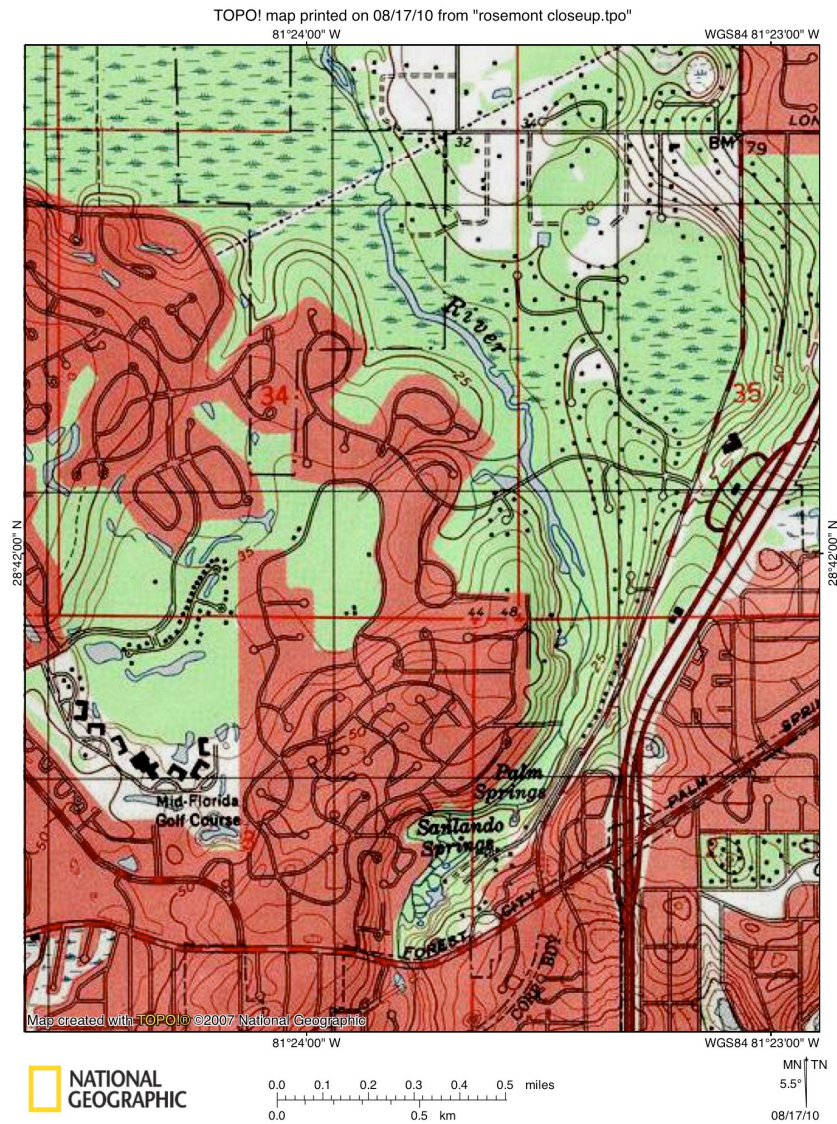
In the wild stream downriver, bright red leaves from a sweet gum are floating over a large armored catfish and some high-arched fish with vertical stripes is mixing with an occasional torpedo shape with a single horizontal blaze. Turtles sitting up on the ridge of a palm-tree's footer contemplate my slow movement in their direction, but decide not to plop. Here in the lawn I spot an array of three-foot high sprinkler heads with the rotating mechanisms that spackle forward in spasms punctuated by the water hitting a flat panel. I can hear them sputtering tomorrow and imagine the fertilizer they wash into this lawn and its creeks. The barred owl I hear now, whooping over the river, seems to be saying: who scoops your lawn, who cuts your grass?" They say the same thing in our neighborhood.

After a swim that is perfectly refreshing, the water and air temperature probably very close to the mid 70's, I rise out of the pool to watch a large V of white-winged birds with black tips and black beaks, scrambling south over my head. They move by a mixture of fun and freedom, changing places and shapes. They are not easy to count, but going by twos, I get up to 38. When I turn to watch them head out over the trees and the clubhouse, they bank east into the sunlight. I block the glare with my hands and notebook, and then for a brief second or two they turn into silvery slips and disappear in a variety of angles. They too are a collective, a homeowners group, following their leaders and their instincts, and surely emerging from solar fire to approach their river selves soon again.

Now the FOWR members and others who have read about our exciting program of cave footage coming next Thursday night have arrived. Everyone is locating memories as I had done earlier. The present is under severe test from the past. Not much can compete with the memories of childhood for purity and pleasure. After we have come to a summation of all the changes, Jeff pipes up, "Well, we've really changed."

His statement floors me with its depth. We and the river are like two bullet trains, one passing the other with a whomp. Each individual changes by a program, going through the human passages of life, but also changing by time and culture faster, really, than the effects of the development started by Earl Downs. We may try to make a spring pool as clear and safe as our bath tub, but nature is winning that battle. His remark puts a stop to the guilt trip of any eco-enforcer. Just the private property of my body has gone through degradations enough to outstrip this mecca of my teen years even though for decades I have been living a clean life.

I go back to the car to get my camera and returning, stop at a picnic table at the top of the slope to write a few notes. As I pick up my pen, the loud clear voice of a boy of ten, in orange trunks and snorkel gear, cries out, “I caught a turtle, ev’rybody.” The clear note of triumph and the six-inch turtle held aloft strike a truth about how we all need to grab hold of the wild at The Springs.



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