

Kelly Park 1927

The story of the Wekiva's vision of community and river protection begins in 1927 with an extraordinary man, Dr. Howard Atwood Kelly. Gathering a crowd of local dignitaries, he formally presented his two hundred acres, including Rock Springs, to Orange County for the purpose of public recreation and spiritual enrichment. A devout Christian and scientist, one of the four founders of the Johns Hopkins Medical Center, Kelly considered Rock Springs the most beautiful of all he had seen, especially because of the mysterious cave out of which the water flows at a constant rate.¹



Kelly stipulated that the park should be free of charge and supervised by a Christian who would be delighted to ensure that there would be no liquor, guns, fishing tackle, concessions, or merchandizing of any kind. The liquor, concessions, guns, and rods are still absent, but the rest of his designs have run amuck in the new millennium. Fees are charged at the gate to cover the costs of maintenance by a variety of county park rangers. Kelly imagined the springs as a Divine oracle, and he expected that many of Florida's people would be able to read God's book of nature at the springs and be drawn thereby to follow the Word of God.

In his autobiography Kelly contended that he only became a doctor and surgeon because it was the best way for a naturalist to earn some money. All his life, however, he had a keen interest in wildlife, large and small, that took him all over the world and, fortunately for us, to Florida. His most important books were written on gynecological surgery, but later in life he wrote one on the snakes of Maryland, a second on fungi, and another on lichens. It makes you wonder how he could also have been such a leader in his field of medicine. All his life he was a strong advocate

¹ Measurements of Rock Springs flows go back as far as 1932 and 1935, when the maximum cubic feet per second was 61 (41 million gallons a day), just a hair above the mean flow recorded regularly over the past half century. See Ferguson *et al.*

for the study and treatment of women's health problems. It is a challenge to wrap your mind around the whole life of this remarkable benefactor of Wekiva.

Traveling across the globe, he gathered fine emblems of other cultures, some of which he bestowed on Rollins College where I teach. For example, I found an elegant rare Buddhist manuscript in the Pali language from Cambodia. I have pulled his gift out of its long thin box and laid it out for study in the Rare Book room. He was a strong opponent of the ills of society: alcohol abuse, prostitution, tobacco, and the oppression of women. In his home state of Maryland, he found time to involve himself in the community to prosecute his own solutions to these social issues.

He wrote his autobiography of sorts in a book on the scientist and the Bible. There he describes his family's religious heritage, a mixture of Methodist and Quaker, with a couple of evangelical preachers thrown in. In this book, you clearly see his own strong tendency to preachment and the centrality of Bible study throughout his life. Outstanding scientist that he was, it was all secondary to the believer in him; and so he wants to dismiss the "new" critical theories of Bible scholarship. Such studies, for him, seek to or inadvertently lead to the division of the authentic unity of the work. If you designate different authors, sources, and historical languages, you destroy the essential value of the Bible as God's work. Without using the words *systemic thinking* or *ecology*, he makes it plain that a Bible fragmented by such scholarship will leave nothing to believe in or be guided by. We would say the same today about Rock Springs and the rest of the creatures in the river basin.

When Kelly visited Wekiva, he fell in love with Rock Springs. The rest of Florida was not yet awakened to the necessity of conservation in the face of growth. The threat to the Everglades and its long history of degradation and restoration had not begun. Marjory Stoneman Douglas had not yet written her *River of Grass* to awaken the nation to its unique heritage when Kelly took the lead in central Florida. Think of what it means, how many plants and animals and children have grown up for eighty years in the kindness of his vision.

Just as it is true that a Florida scrub habitat cannot remain wild if divided by roads and other human impacts or spoiled by pollution, a great river community cannot be prepared and built to a state of restored integrity without the first piece. In 2027 Wekiva will have a century of this legacy of Howard Kelly's to celebrate. He was the first person to imagine the Song of Wekiva, the idea of river community set forth in this book. He put that idea into action, thinking carefully about what would be the best state of its management.

Each time someone gives or sells a piece of property or development rights in the basin, putting it back into the public domain, it increases considerably the likelihood of success at the next point of protection. Kelly's donation was the beginning of a chain reaction so that, when the climate for improving river community arose forty years later, the people and their elected

officials would step forward to add to the perfection of Kelly's park and protect what they had enjoyed as children for a whole generation.²

² For a fine collection of old photographs and much more narrative of the broader history of the river, see *Along the Wekiva River* (Images of America series) by Robison and Belleville.