

Wekiwa Springs State Park 1969

I.

Sublime Chambers of Commerce

While Howard Kelly was dedicating his park at Rock Springs Run in 1927, Wekiwa Springs was being advertised as “The Wonder Spot of Florida.” According to testimonials for a new housing development, “The Mystery Water of the Seminoles” would heal your liver or kidney problems, salve your rheumatism, and even help with Bright’s disease. In the flyers for the proposed community, the creator of this fantasy, M. E. Miller of Detroit, even provided water analysis from the U. S. Geological Survey. His Wekiwa Springs Corporation folded at the end of the decade, having produced just two homes and an abundance of sidewalks.

No doubt he thought it was a failure, but he had the right idea for central Florida: to build a healthy community around the springs and the river, to use science to monitor the quality of water and wildlife in the basin, and to respect the traditions of the natives who have preceded us. Fortunately for us, the depression put an end to his enterprise, just long enough for a few native Floridians to catch hold of a better vision. Instead of building homes around the springs, they wanted a substantial setback from the most precious outflow of Wekiva, including its immediate uplands and bottomlands.

Miller was not the first to explore the recreational and commercial potential of the river. Wekiwa was originally called Clay Springs, after L. H. Clay, the settler who first put it on the map in the mid-1800’s. Situated between Apopka and Sanford, the river had steamboat traffic that provided transportation for people, store goods, citrus, and other agricultural produce from the Apopka region to and from the river port of Sanford. At the head of the river early settlers built saw and grist mills, a general store, later adding a post office, a hotel, and even a newspaper. Of course, as always, there was fishing, hunting, and swimming.

If you want to get a feeling for what life was like in Wekiva in the last decade of the nineteenth century, you should read the diary of Major John Steinmetz. He came in 1882 from Norristown, Pennsylvania, just twenty-five years old. At first he planted citrus groves and built an orange packing house, but in 1898 he took over the lease of the hotel which J. D. Smith had built and included a bath house, toboggan slide, picnic grounds, and a dance pavilion. He was the first in central Florida to conceive of a wet and wild amusement park at Wekiwa Springs and in 1921 he was a leader of a local group of hunters who started the Wildlife League, a movement to improve wildlife management statewide.

His diary reveals a man of adventure who appreciated the comic in this life. It starts out with a description of his trip by boat from Wekiwa Springs, camping the first night at Blue Springs, then going out the St. Johns River at Mayport, down the coast to St. Augustine, and finally by inland waterways arriving at the frontier outpost of Miami. His trip is full of the delights of simple pleasures like pineapple wine and turtle-egg omelets. But most of all he likes to tell stories of arrangements, shortcuts, and ways that he saved money.

Other shorter excursions are recounted in the diary, but the rest is largely a set of folktales of Wekiva life, not far really from Zora Neale Hurston's *Mules and Men* or Marjory Kinnan Rawlings vignettes from *Cross Creek*, like "A Pig Is Paid For," except that Steinmetz lacks the literary flare of those Florida collections. He has a story for green-horns about a trained gator, tales of huckleberry pie, a wildcat fight witnessed by two black men lost in the swamp, and a trip of five ladies and four men on a lighter to Silver Springs. When the boat gets stuck in the river (presumably the St. Johns), they dynamite the channel and blow the corking out of the front end of their boat. Most of the stories are about hunting possum, deer, turkeys, bears, wild hogs, and even an account of setting up a tripod in Lake Prevatt to shoot a bass in its spawning bed.¹

A railroad came into play at the turn of the century linking Apopka, Clay Springs, and Tavares, altering the patterns of economic growth and tourism. You can see the sudden expansion of central Florida by viewing the early railroad maps. From 1856 to 1870 they show just a handful of towns and several maps even have the river wrong, drawing a branch from Rock Springs Run going north to Blackwater Creek, thence to Lakes Norris and Tracy, finally to the St. Johns just below Lake Dexter. The biggest contrast appears between 1882 and 1888 when suddenly a period of punctuated equilibrium is followed by drastic radiation of rails and towns, with the concomitant extinction, in name at least, of other map markers.

This pattern repeated across America created an alternative to river traffic that was boosted decades later by the automotive industry. Small tributaries like Wekiva got a reprieve from the engines of transport and hence the scale of growth at Wekiwa Springs (the name change occurred in 1906) was small compared to the coastal areas and transportation centers. The first seventeen governors of Florida (six as a territory, eleven as a state) had come from other parts of the union to advance the manifest destiny of Florida's natural potential. They supported scions of the industrial revolution like Henry Flagler and Henry Bradley Plant, granting large parcels of land in exchange for the building of railroads that began immediately to serve timber, cattle, citrus, and tourist industries on a grand scale. In such a frontier, you would be hard put to find a voice of conservation to balance the frenzy of growth, until the twentieth century.

M. E. Miller was riding the wave of the great Florida land boon when he set out his stakes at Wekiwa Springs, but by the time Dr. Kelly opened his park in 1927, Major Steinmetz was in the picture, but not Miller, whose land values were lost. He too was bleached off the map. In his place came a new entrepreneur, A. E. Wilson. During the 1930's, the Wilson Cypress

¹ The best account of the wilderness life of the 1890's is Henry Stoddard's early chapters in *Memoirs of a Naturalist*.

Company of Palatka bought up most of the land in the Wekiwa basin for logging of the old growth trees. However, even as the saws started grinding, something much bigger than Howard Kelly's gift started to take shape—The Mill Creek Preserve.

As we saw in chapter one, at first this was an informal group of local men who purchased a lease from Wilson to hunt the uplands between Rock Springs and Wekiwa. Then, in 1941 when Wilson's company was done logging the area, he sold 6000 acres to the group of fifty shareholders who had by then incorporated as The Apopka Sportsmen's Club. As a result of that purchase, they became an important part of Florida's and America's history of conservation. So the grand springs of Wekiwa, those subliminal chambers of commerce, created a succession of growth cycles that eventually called forth the local preserves and initiated new projects of restoration.

II.

In Large Measure

a world without insects a world without birds
 a world without flowers a world without bees
 a world without forests a world without turkeys
 a world without fish a world without eagles
 a world without humans a world without reason
 a world without science a world without sun

There's an age-old connection between the environment and fitness. Since some demagogues are turning *environment* into a dirty word, perhaps we should concentrate on the ideas of land and fitness instead. Environmental science as a branch of physics has to do with fitness. When conditions on the earth were fit, certain elements of life emerged. Water is a necessary condition of life and therefore calls forth life. Producers are essential to consumers, calling them forth into sustenance. The whole evolutionary chain defines a process of diversification that in large measure makes the world a fitter place for more and more species and inside those species and their individuals more and more diverse behaviors are forged. This

manifest biological destiny is what Whitman called “amelioration,” but more often referred to as “development.” In this sense of the economy of the natural world, the springs themselves are developers of ever expanding and improving communities of plants and animals.²

Likewise, the prey calls forth the predator, not just to eat, but to modify its behaviors and even its body shape, sharpening the edge of its place in life. A swamp thick with trees narrows the rack on the buck whereas the deer manage the population of saplings to extinction at their own peril. All of this is by way of introduction to American conservation and land use. When game was plenty, hunting had no season, a rifle no rules. Eventually, however, where too many big game were shot, populations dwindled. In the Wekiva of the 1920’s, it was the deer population struggling with tick fever and unregulated hunting. Only the hunters and fishers themselves really had a sense of the losses.

All across America, by the last quarter of the nineteenth century, before ecology was a scientific term backed by hard numbers and experimentation, the American sportsmen were brought together by the game and fish they treasured. They too became flocks and herds, incorporated with by-laws to govern the “preserve.” As John F. Reiger has shown in *American Sportsmen and the Origins of Conservation*, both the wealthy members of the Boone and Crockett Club (including many U. S. presidents) and poor settlers requiring game and fish for subsistence, were the backbone of the movement to preserve habitats for wildlife.

They were not motivated by profit, indeed deplored the taking of animal life as a commodity, and so crafted rules of conservation, bought and leased land for their hunting and fishing pleasures in order to manage the populations for themselves and their offspring whom they assiduously trained in the disciplines of forest and stream.

We often tend to think that it belongs to the government to preserve, but really every conscientious land owner can be doing preservation. Furthermore, grassroots recreation organizations have preceded the national, state, and local government interest in seeing the game, the flora, the spring, the mountain, or the desert through many generations. That word *Preserve* is a magical icon in American history that since the time of Teddy Roosevelt has been gathering enormous force across America. It was a counterweight to the expansive era of growth in America. Such vision continues to keep growth from becoming a dirty word. The healthy body has inhibitors to unbalanced cell growth. Our social system has gradually, because of the voices of conservation, built up a similar antidote against cancer in our river basins.

² This descriptive account in no way argues for or against teleology or any of the other unscientific views of evolution. For an exceptional account of the autonomy of biology as a science and for the bias toward Newtonian physics among philosophers of science, see Ernst Mayr’s *What Makes Biology Unique?* In his view, our contemporary thinking is still contaminating biological concepts with principles of mechanics so simple and reductive as the laws of gravity. We need to get over the notion that physics has priority over biology and look for the origin of creation in the river that our life calls forth. Wekiva operates for sure inside the laws of physics, but is far more complex than that .

III.

Science and Conservation in Florida: A Module of History

In the nineteenth century, following the trails of Mark Catesby (1721) and the Bartrams (John and William 1765 and 1772-6 William alone), the two great namesakes of American conservation, John James Audubon (1832) and John Muir (1867), explored the natural Florida and wrote fine accounts of the precious birds and plants they found. They were the beginning of a steady stream of botanists, ornithologists, and marine biologists who came to study the treasuries of tropical wildlife; but for the most part they took their accounts and their specimens north, where long established universities and natural history societies welcomed them.³ Many of these scientific explorers, made aware through successive trips of the negative effects of development on the habitats and species of their interest, tried to speak out for preservation, but it usually takes a local and a native group, snowbirds who become settlers, to actually make the difference.

The comprehensive history of preservation of natural sites in Florida has not yet been written, but it starts with the national outrage at the marketing of snowy egret feathers (120,000 birds lost in one year) and a small group in Maitland that in 1900 formed a charter as the Florida Audubon Society. They were dedicated to stopping the senseless eradication of Florida's loveliest waterfowl to supply the fashions of haberdasheries from New York to Paris and London. John Steinmetz was an early member of this effort.

From the start they enlisted the help of outsiders to foster a Florida law protecting non-game birds, indeed on the very first board they got the Governor of New York, Theodore Roosevelt. Later in 1903, it was by his executive order as President, that Roosevelt established Pelican Island as the first federal bird preserve. However, their crowning achievement was a short-lived legislative victory in Tallahassee that banned the hunting of the heron family of waders. Poaching continued and wardens actually died, so that eventually the law was repealed. The FAS continued its programs of education about birds and has become indeed the backbone for most grass roots environmental action since, especially in Wekiva (see Chapter III).

In addition to FAS, a few scientists turned into Jeremiahs. One of the first, crying in the swampy wilderness, came out of South Florida. Charles Torrey Simpson came to Florida in 1882 (before Miami was born) and started publishing books on native and exotic tropical plants in 1914. Before he was done, he established 125 species of plants and shrubs. He studied

³The University of Florida was founded in 1853. Rollins is the first private college in Florida (1885) and Stetson the first private university (1885). Other major state universities came later: Florida State (1887) and the University of Miami (1926).

thoroughly the ecological effects of the hurricane of 1926 and wrote about seeds traveling the gulf stream and how the sea planted one of Florida's most beautiful hammocks in the highest point around, Miami. In 1929 he wrote a book that put tree-snails on the ecological map.

His crowning work on *Florida Wildlife* (1932) contains a chapter entitled "In Memoriam," a summary of the degradation and losses that came of extraction, dredging, draining to get to the peat, the extraction of mangroves, the acres of hammocks lost to sugar and vegetable farms, and the building of homes in the most precious habitats in South Florida: "This wonderland should have been set apart as a bird sanctuary, as something unique, as one of nature's inimitable masterpieces."⁴ All his writing is a combination of science and eulogy. "All the skill, all the science in the world cannot revive a dead animal," he protested, "they cannot restore a single species of plant that has been exterminated."

Another botanist of the era, John Kunkel Small, produced a similar outcry in *From Eden to Sahara: Florida's Tragedy* (1929). The book describes conditions in Florida in 1922 as "wholesale devastation of plant covering, through carelessness, thoughtlessness, and vandalism." In the context of the 1906-7 drought, he saw the potential in Florida that growth could produce a man-made desert. High on his list of crimes of his time were the burning of forests and the bulldozing of aboriginal sites, shell mounds and middens. For all of these woes, Small provided compelling pictures, sometimes even before and after shots that showed conclusively the vandalism that was his main theme. So far Wekiva had escaped such devastation, but Wilson's cypress lumbering would soon put an end to that.

More optimistic than Small, Simpson concludes the tirade at the end of his book with a message of hope, referring to a few examples of private preservation, including the donation of five hundred acres of the noblest hammock in the state to become Highlands Hammock State Park. Little pockets of preservation started to rise up all over the state, such as the Big Tree park in Sanford and Kelly Park already mentioned in the 'twenties. The first significant state program for habitat preservation was The Civil Conservation Corps (1933), providing stimulus for land acquisition. Two years later the Florida Park Service was initiated with eight original parks.⁵ Each of these has its own history which often includes an initially private preserve that was sold or given to the state for the park system.

When Leroy Collins, a native of Tallahassee, returned from the war in the Pacific, he soon became a Florida senator and, having been impressed with the expanded park systems of the west, proceeded to initiate legislation for a greatly expanded park system in Florida. After the passage of the State Park Act of 1949, he became governor and set the trend for his successors to support appropriations for land acquisition. So the land and rivers of Florida were ripe for a special kind of harvest by 1966 when Gov. Hayden Burns signed a bill to float a \$20 million

⁴ Page 188.

⁵ Highlands Hammock, Hillsborough River, O'Leno, Myakka River, Fort Clinch, Gold Head Ranch, Torreya, and Florida Caverns,

bond. Growth began to be balanced with green space, habitat loss in general was balanced with preservation of the most valuable niches and biomes in Florida's many ecosystems.

What's the proper percentage of growth to preservation? Is it reasonable to have a rule of thumb, say 5%? Not a bad idea, but better yet to understand what are the most critical areas for concern and work on those first. Later it will be possible to provide connections between those areas and the whole state will eventually retain its natural communities intact. In 1930, it didn't matter much in Florida, though, because the great hurricane of 1926 and then the depression put a serious stranglehold on growth. This set the stage for Wekiva to join the state park system and become the paradigm for river community based on protection and restoration. It all started with the Mill Creek Preserve and the Apopka Sportsmen's Club.



Hand-drawn map of the hunting stations in The Mill Creek Preserve (courtesy of John Land).

IV.

The Mayor of Apopka

John Land came back from the European theater of operation in 1946 to settle back into Apopka and his Wekiva friendships. Right away they asked him to run for mayor, but he said he wasn't ready. His older brother Henry had already held the office of county commissioner and John had helped him plenty in his campaigns. Three years later, when they asked him again to run for mayor, he said yes, and except for one term in the late 1960's, he has been mayor ever since, better than a half century.

When I called to talk to him about the spirit of community that motivated the Apopka Sportsmen's Club to sell their land to the state for Wekiwa Springs State Park, he obliged. I think he intended to put me off two days because of a town meeting that night, but he took the phone from his assistant and spent about an hour filling me in and answering my questions. Everybody at the Apopka Historical Museum had told me, "Talk to John, he'll tell ya." It was extraordinary the way he took time for me, as though he was retired or something, and had nothing better to do, just running the second largest city in the county, annexing and growing even faster than Orlando.

As I hung up the phone, I assured him we could get together on Friday and he promised he would look for any documents or information he had about the group. Looking over my notes, I thought I already had plenty and wouldn't need to see him again. Meanwhile, I started calling the other friends he mentioned and they were considerably more guarded and less detailed in their memories. John is one of the youngest at 85. They all confirmed that their idea in selling to the state was to insure that their hunting preserve would be kept in a pristine condition and not fall prey to the developers that kept knocking at their doors.

On Friday morning I was outlining my essay when the mayor himself called to tell me he had found a bunch of stuff, but hadn't had time to look through any of it, could I come at one o'clock, before his meeting downtown. That would give us an hour. The mayor loves to talk history and I felt like an old friend.

When we first met that afternoon, he called me "Professor." In his large office, with tables, chairs, and desks stacked with the materials for two dozen current projects, we didn't have much space to work, so we both sat in front of his desk with the "stuff" on the floor. As he sifted through a metal file box and its various envelopes and folders, this silver-haired gentleman regaled me with a hundred stories.

John Land's mind is completely a-swim with all the people in his Apopka world. Even though I asked a few questions and responded to several of his tales, he gradually put together

not just the history of the purchase, but his whole life from his daddy's veneer furniture company, to his childhood on the Wekiva, the war, his mayor's career, and his philosophy of retirement. "Don't ever say you're going to do something that you don't know for sure you'll do," he counseled, "and don't ever say this is your last term."

I kept feeling that he should wind up the meeting, even stole a look at my watch a few times, and finally said I didn't want to make him late for his meeting. It was 2:30 before his administrative assistant appeared in the doorway to say he had a phone call, and so he allowed me to move to the outer office to try to get the map of the deer blinds and a few pictures copied.

One of the items he showed me was the guest book at Camp Cozy, the clubhouse so to speak where they held all their functions. It was a flat board with a notebook attached, its title printed on the cover in pencil. The entries by various members described their hunts: what they saw, shot, and missed. "Don't you want to make copies of some of that?" the mayor asked. I couldn't see that any of it showed better than the generous manner of this kindly public official how and why they all offered their 6000 acres at a cut rate (\$350/per acre; \$41,000 per member) rather than opening their beloved uplands and swamps to development. I suspect that all of these men, just like you and I, were eager to make money in their lives and knew the fair value of whatever they owned. They were mostly builders in their community, of one sort or another. Wekiwa Springs State Park is now the heart of every building and organization in our community.

What I was looking for, I told him, was really in the "Objects" of the hunt club's by-laws:

1. to promote and develop interest in...the sport of hunting and fishing,
2. to protect, develop, and propagate wild life and game animals,
3. to prevent forest fires,
4. to assist in the enforcement of fish and game laws,
5. to own, develop, and manage a game preserve for the benefit and entertainment of its members,
6. to provide places of meeting and entertainment for its members,
7. to ... dispose of property to these ends.

The by-laws also refer to the importance of members abiding by the hunting regulations, but we wouldn't find a copy of those, John said, because they were discussed and approved in detail each hunting season.

From the beginning, even before they bought the land, the club had already instituted a restriction on shooting the does. The population of deer was greatly reduced by the tick fever of the late '20's. However, as soon as they put a curb on shooting does, the population quickly rebounded, as healthy populations can.

John also told the story of how one year they brought in deer stock from Wisconsin to offset the tick fever declines and the bucks had these huge wide racks that didn't ride well in the

crowded forests of the swamp. Our deer, he says, grow theirs just about straight up, and he shoots his hands straight up from the ears.

The Apopka Sportsmen's Club, for all practical purposes, was already a private or volunteer Wekiwa State Park with its own principles of management and the important ingredient of a non-profit entrepreneurship, seeking values other than return on investment through building healthy populations and conditions for habitat. Fire regimes were not a part of their ecological understanding, but for safety sake, they didn't want to be setting fires accidentally.

Even in the charter and by-laws, you can see the elementary conservation ethic of this group that came together to have fun. Each fall, at the beginning of hunting season they began with a feast at Camp Cozy where all the members and associates entered a lottery, drawing numbers for one of the forty-five stands (see map above).

When I asked John about the bear population back in the '30's, he revealed an unusual perspective—completely unexpected—describing the experience of seeing a bear as something so fleeting, passing so quickly before his eyes (keen even now), that he dared not claim for sure it was a bear. “Saw one once,” he owned, “looked like a wild boar, but we don't have them here 'cause they don't mix with the bear.”

V.

The Developers

*I live my life in growing orbits...
and I have been circling for a thousand years
and I still don't know if I am a falcon,
or a storm,
or a great song.....*

Rainer Maria Rilke

As mayor of Apopka, you're a part of history on November 15, 1965--one of four or five hundred handpicked guests of Governor Hayden Burns at the Cherry Plaza Hotel in downtown Orlando--when Walt Disney makes his announcement. He's the one who has mysteriously been buying up half a county to build his city of tomorrow, something bigger and better than

Disneyland in California. Leading figures in Florida's growth and government schema suddenly turn brain-numb, trying quickly to contemplate the impact for their own spheres of this exciting news. My mind conjures up feeding time at Gatorland when someone throws buckets of raw chicken parts into the pit and there's a turmoil of whipping tails and powerful cracking jaws.

Disney makes one thing clear, land speculators will be too late to take advantage by buying along the perimeter because the park will be built deep within a buffer of Florida's elegant pine flatwoods that he already owns. No one hears him. As mayor of Apopka's fifteen thousand, safely removed some forty miles north of Walt's project, you start to worry about the long-term effects on your city and the rural character of the Wekiva River basin and its wildlife. Already the new university in town, Florida Tech (later renamed the University of Central Florida), has been considering building in the area and right away other developers start to show an interest in the Sportsmen's Club holdings. At Camp Cozy, generations of those who know best the haunts of the swamp bucks and turkeys are beginning to think of the dire prospects for the river they grew up with, if more of the basin's riches are not preserved.

Time will tell, but their intention, as John Land recalls, was to counterbalance the Disney scramble for growth with a Wekiva park that would be kept pristine long after Disney closes its doors. In the long run, their decision may indeed have been more important than Walt's.

Even though they had substantially higher offers, the officers of the club decided to sell to the state and furthermore worked hard, not only to close their own deal, but to lobby other neighboring landowners to add important smaller parcels to the park site. One of those, Conway Kittredge, was not going to be an easy mark. He had bought the acres surrounding the springs themselves for a family home.

Coming back from the war, Conway Kittredge entered the real estate business with his father. By coincidence one of the early properties he handled is the very neighborhood where I now live on the west end of Lake Maitland. My neighbor Bert, across the street, bought his lot and his father bought ours early in the 1950's for \$2500 a piece, about 1/60th of its current value. Bert describes Kittredge driving up in a scruffy old car, a small-time operator. But it wasn't too long before this energetic businessman multiplied his assets in a similar fashion, developing shopping centers and speculating on all kinds of Florida projects: the University of Central Florida, Cape Canaveral, and so forth. When the state started to seek his Wekiwa Springs holding, Conway held out for a higher price for quite some time. An aide to Governor Claude Kirk is reported to have said that Kittredge's parcel was well overpriced. One of his friends among the Apopka sportsmen admitted to me that Conway was a tough bargainer.

With hindsight, however, the million dollars they paid Kittredge is probably the best bargain the state of Florida has ever made. The county appraiser sets the park's land value now at better than thirty million. That's the nature of land value in Florida. If you sell your home three times in as many decades, you can easily live five to ten times better off than you started, unless of course there's a bust in your boom. Development is not a dirty word, but a part of the

American dream: life, liberty, and the pursuit of real estate. When wealth in the form of land is transferred from private to public hands for the sake of preservation, then even as a simple profit transaction, the developer does a great public service. Howard Kelly gave his springs, Conway Kittredge made a profit and gave his springs, and the sportsmen of Apopka perpetuated their own ethic of preservation by entrusting their land at a deflated price to the management of the Department of Natural Resources.

This complicated story tells us that even if you factor in the politics, the disillusionments of democratic processes and habitat loss, the gist of the matter is the ecology of the river community in small-town America: every one knows about every one else and a man like John Land, who takes time to talk to and look out for so many in the community, is loved for the way he tells stories and keeps everyone in mind. Central Florida and the Wekiwa Springs State Park are bigger now, but much of the rural spirit or character of the river community has been preserved.