

## The Year of the Wekiva: 1988

*We are used to telling our story in dramatic terms with individual heroes, tragic and comic, but we fully understand that those headlines conceal all of us in their simplicity. History is a function of community, not of individuals, however powerful and charismatic. In other words, in a democratic society, leaders are only as great as the community which supports them. Even an organization like the FOWR cannot claim a hero's place and pretend that the accomplishments of five or six years of their careful use of science and persistence in lobbying produced the actual results: The Wekiva River Protection Act of 1988. Nonetheless, the results are impressive.*



### Eddie Williford

In January of 1988, Eddie Williford got the governor for a day and put him in the bow of his canoe at the headspring of the Wekiva. It was an opportunity of a lifetime, the kind of thrilling historical moment your grandchildren will tell theirs. The Little Wekiva was especially in danger from colossal growth and all the efforts to install some sort of protective buffer against the onslaught of dense development in Seminole County seemed to be failing.

Even though the Friends of Wekiva had helped win state approval for the river as an Outstanding Florida Waterway, an Aquatic Preserve, and a Florida Wild and Scenic River, and even though by 1987 the state's outstanding program for natural land preservation had featured purchases of thousands of acres of land in the basin, and even though the threats of pollution from water treatment and storm runoff had been checked by an award-winning program in the Little Wekiva, a crisis was building. The whole process of growth in the conservation program was in jeopardy if the combination of state, regional, and the local governments did not do something practical to sustain the river in the face of astounding growth. It's a simple economic principle: a growth of income should be matched by a growth of savings.

Bob Martinez was not the governor you would expect to be jumping behind a call for solving this problem, let alone to champion a law specifically designed for just one river in the state. But sometimes it takes a case, not only to test a law, but sometimes to create it. It was up to Eddie to make that case.

I first met Eddie when he worked at the college as a painter. I used to see him and his crew in white overalls, scaling the walls of our buildings, fighting the mildew, and rolling on the variety

of beiges, off-pinks, and yellows that grace the Spanish architecture of Rollins College. His long light hair and darker beard framed a round and smiling face I still cherish in my mind. I really can't say how we got acquainted, but I remember the day he said he was quitting the fumes of this painting job to go to work for the Florida Audubon Society at their Maitland offices. I cheered.

So then every time I took my class or family and friends to visit the Birds of Prey Center there, we'd go into the gift shop to jaw with Eddie and his wife Lorraine about the issues of the day. Eddie would sometimes drag out new posters and other materials he knew I'd be interested in for my environmental literature classes. A few years later, Eddie left Audubon because he landed the canoe concession in the Wekiwa Springs State Park and that's when he started to become "the river man." On the side, he made extra money designing canoes and boats, and even flew to California once to fill an order from Michael Jackson.

I remember especially a day when Eddie was taking us on a river cleanup. A student leader at Rollins had marshaled forty students at 8:00 am of a Saturday morning to pour into canoes and head down from Wekiwa Springs for a day of hauling out the river trash. We all had a lot of fun, once we got a little wet, going overboard, as they say, to get the most inaccessible items. Covered with muck and the attendant scorn of our comrades, we started to feel a pride in the store of weird treasures we were recovering for the dump: plastic seat cushions, tattered Goodyear radials, pieces of carpet, rusty metal plates, bed springs, and grocery carts.

Life on the river was different in January of 1988. The upper Wekiva was still full of fifty or sixty makeshift shacks and shanties maintained by a variety of hunters, fishers, and even squatters, all using motorboats. It's the fourth law of thermodynamics, don't you know, that entropy somehow catches a small part of every boat and cabin and plops it down in the river. Some gets spilled, some tossed, some blown away, some hooked on branches, and some just falls or rots off. The Friends of the Wekiva had always been lobbying for the state to assert its legal rights in the park and get the squatters and shanties out. Our gain, if Eddie and the governor would change all that.

In the closets of my memory, Eddie is still giving a talk about all the ancient bones of prehistoric mammoths and mastodons, turtle shells, sharks teeth, shards and points he has recovered from various parts of the river. He was an expert too on the native mound dwellers. I can see him explaining to a group of my students just how, with an atlatl, a Timucuan forebear might have launched an arrow with enough force to fell a mastodon or a panther.

On the river Eddie was always full of stories of his Wekiva boyhood, of the critters in the river and all the plants along the water's edge. His father gave him a lot of leeway when he was a young teen; so he built himself a raft out of inner tubes and wagon parts to navigate the river. Soon he built a chickee out of palm fronds and lived out there, fishing and hunting, eventually growing immune to mosquitoes. He was the first person to tell me about duckweed, that mystical

light green cover of little round pads, no bigger than these letters, filling often an entire slough or half an acre of swamp in elfin delight. Eddie is Wekiva's Tom Sawyer.

How far did he and the governor go? To paddle the entire Wekiva in one day from the main spring to Katie's Landing is no small feat. I reckon, if they did that much, the governor had a sore bottom by day's end and woke with aching shoulders—if indeed he paddled himself—and that in itself would be a great boon for the river. The river community has no chance if the people of Florida and their leaders don't have such elementary experiences.

I don't know Bob Martinez. He's from Tampa and they have great rivers over there flowing out of the Green Swamp or out of some of Florida's major springs. Perhaps he is a world-class fisherman. But for the sake of this reenactment at which I was not present, let's suppose we have in this canoe one river-native Floridian and what amounts to a political tourist. Let's play epical history and forget all the other FOWR experts and attendant local politicians who were also there. So, in this simplified vignette, one person with understanding spent one day with another person who has power. The river experience itself negotiated their differences.



Eddie and Lorraine were charter members of the FOWR, two of the nineteen board members who signed the original articles of incorporation. Bob Martinez was born out of the river of his mother's body and sustained by rivers all his life, so the grassroots of both power and understanding were working in both men. And out of this meeting was made a law, probably the most important environmental law in Florida in the last twenty years and a keystone of a twenty-year program of enlightened state attention to the issues of conservation and smart growth, a legacy of several former governors and their legislatures.

The governor went home refreshed in spirit and established a task force to generate the law that would define a variety of buffers and protections. It is no simple task to hammer out legislation to restrict the rights of

Shell Island: a tree, a rope, a splash

builders. Every item of the law has to stand up to vigorous contesting in hearings and eventually lawsuits. Three months after the river journey, The Wekiva River Protection Act (1988) was

passed unanimously in both the Florida House and Senate. Can you believe that? **Unanimously.** “Where did that clarity go?” you might be asking. It’s always right there below your paddle.

Martinez, a Republican, was not aligned at all with the long-time efforts of his democratic predecessors, Leroy Collins, Reuben Askew, and Bob Graham. But none of those governors is the hero of this story because the legislature and the people, the Audubon Society, Sierra Club, and many other environmental groups had been building up to this point unconsciously for two decades. Since the purchase of the Wekiwa Springs and the opening of the State Park there, something matured in all of us and the government acted for the sake of generations to come.

I remember once taking a group of graduate students to Hontoon Island one Saturday and walking along toward the large Timucuan mound at the back of the island (1100’ x 40’ x 50’). A civics teacher from a Lake County high school was along with her friend from my class and we got into a lively debate. Suddenly, something I said had her completely incensed and I could not figure out what it was. Later, in the retrospection of my guilt-chasing mind, I realized that I was blaming the government for something and in her mind the government was I or we.

Even if I did not serve on the Task Force or write the law, The Wekiva River Protection Act was my act, and perhaps yours. On the river Eddie was governor and, by the same score, the governor was a Friend of the Wekiva. There is no hope for us if we do not write our history with the pronoun *We*. Grassroots outfits like FOWR are all about getting together activists who will meet and lobby and educate the rest of the We, including the legislature and the chief executives of the state, when that is necessary. The year of this We has two seasons in Florida, the fall elections and the spring legislative session.

Another primary agent in the creation of The Wekiva River Protection Act was *The Orlando Sentinel* and its editors who for twenty years have published expositions that support the river community. I doubt very much this canoe trip would have succeeded without the galvanizing effect of Jane Healey’s sequence of articles and editorials entitled “Florida Shame.” She and her paper won a Pulitzer prize for this series, but countless others over the years have kept tabs on the river, frequently on the front page.

It wouldn’t have succeeded as well aside from the state’s program of conservation and land acquisition (CARL), and specifically without each of the almost 40,000 acres of state investment in the river basin to that date. Important parcels of land went from purchase, to planned development, to public or community consideration, and finally to conservation. Each step took the river closer to the special law of protection. Even the broken dreams of the builders and the difficult negotiations to render property owners fair market value for their buildable acreage represent the *We* in The Wekiva River Protection Act.

The Governor’s Task Force brought all the prime government, growth, and conservation interests together to decide how to give the river community the special protection it needed while growth proceeded apace. It is incredible how in just five or six years’ time, the focus on the health of this

little tributary of the St. Johns had risen to the highest order of provision in the state's system of comprehensive planning and growth management.

The law said in effect there should be several dimensions of buffering for the river—within 550 feet of the actual stream beds, within a much larger area about half of the basin itself (designated as the Wekiva River Protection Area), and within the basin as a whole. It substantially affects seven elements of the river community:

1. Water quantity (minimum flows and levels)<sup>1</sup>
2. Water quality
3. Hydrology of the river system
4. Wetlands associated with the river system
5. Aquatic and wetland-dependent wildlife species
6. Native vegetation within the Wekiva River Protection Area
7. Habitats within the Wekiva River Protection Area which support designated species.

The heart of this law ties the biotic and human community up in a neat ribbon with the following provision: “The various land uses and densities and intensities of development permitted by the local comprehensive plan shall protect the resources enumerated in paragraph (a) [the list above] and *the rural character* of the Wekiva River Protection Area” [italics mine].

All the rules for development and permitting would have to be more strictly enforced. Local and regional plans were now required to take this into account and the Department of Community Affairs would be the state agency to adjudicate all issues of the law. In practice this has not been uncomplicated, but for the most part the law has been enforced and growth has proceeded apace at a reasonable level. Now in these areas a new We has entered the basin and the job of taking all of them and their children down the river is Eddie's and his successors'.

## Epilogue

5/13/04

Recently I called Eddie to find out what really happened on that famous river trip. As always, he started out by saying, “Oh, it was magical, Steve.” There was a big crowd gathering at Wekiwa Springs, bolstered by the press and security forces. The governor flew in by helicopter to the

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<sup>1</sup> Currently the state is in the process of establishing MFL's for all of Florida's spring-fed runs. The idea is to watch each aquatic species's dependence on the amount of flow. To be safe, they should be comparing their data at lower levels to the average of a normal year. Major decisions about withdrawals and human water use have to be dependent on accurate MFL science, or the river community will be threatened.

park. When he got to the spring, Eddie brought his canoe along side the platform so the governor could step right into the bow.

At first he tried to paddle, but soon gave that up. A long line of canoes with Friends of the Wekiva River and local politicians was launching out of the paddock and Eddie worked hard to get ahead of them. He wanted the governor to himself. As they passed the others, Lorraine called to him, "Honey, give the governor a paddle." As Eddie tells it, the governor was very attentive, in awe really, but it was clear that his mind was made up before he got there. Eddie told him stories of his boyhood on the river, conscious that the governor "didn't spend much time with anyone like myself."

Leaning over the gunnel, he said to the governor, "Look down there. See all those white shells? Right here was once an Indian midden that's now under water." In between identifying the trees and birds, Eddie weaved his story of the Mystical Magical Wekiva, a tale he had often told to local elementary and high school classes or local civic groups, about the marvelous history of the first human settlers on the river.

They only went about a half mile down stream, at his old raft's pace, but the river boy-man who in his youth had camped out for days and supplied his family with river fish and game told his Timucuan story. Years later, Eddie told me on the phone, the two of them met again, believe it or not at Disney World, each with a grandson in tow. "I want to thank you, Sir, for coming to the Wekiva that day," Eddie said.

"Such a beautiful jewel," the ex-governor replied.

I wanted to know how it could happen that Eddie and Lorraine, after so many years of enjoyment and so much support for the river, could ever bring themselves to leave. Eddie answers in stories. The first is a long and long-ago one about happening upon a wild man, living like a hermit, on an Indian mound along Rock Springs Run. While Eddie's describing his first slow approach to the stranger's campsite, just south of Camp Cozy, I'm wondering what this all has to do with Eddie's moving away. The man's name turns out to be Clyde Love and he occasionally swaps skins with members of the Apopka Hunt Club in exchange for store goods from town.

Eddie and Clyde soon become friends and begin to exchange gifts, swapping native artifacts for cans of pork and beans. The gist of the story comes out when the hermit gets too old for his river regime and a few hunters make arrangements for him to live his last days in a home in town. Eddie was there the day when Mr. Love met the hunters at the old ford. He saw Clyde kick away his handmade dugout canoe. Even now it's hard for Eddie to tell this story without tears. Then Clyde had a second thought and sadly hid the skiff where no one would find it.

The second story that makes us come full circle is the story of growth and development in the springs area. It made Eddie sick to see Conrad Kittredge and others planning such large projects right around the springs in the late '60's. "I wanted to leave right then," he said, and describes how he and Lorraine went to North Carolina and nearly bought a place up there. But then he decided to stay and fight to protect the river. Finally, in 1992, then, while serving on the Wekiva Working Group, Eddie saw the new plans for black bear corridors reaching up to the Ocala Forest and the rest of the comprehensive plans for the basin. "Steve," he said, "I saw Wekiva was in good hands and I could leave."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Eddie and Lorraine now run Florida Canoe Expeditions out of Monticello, Florida.