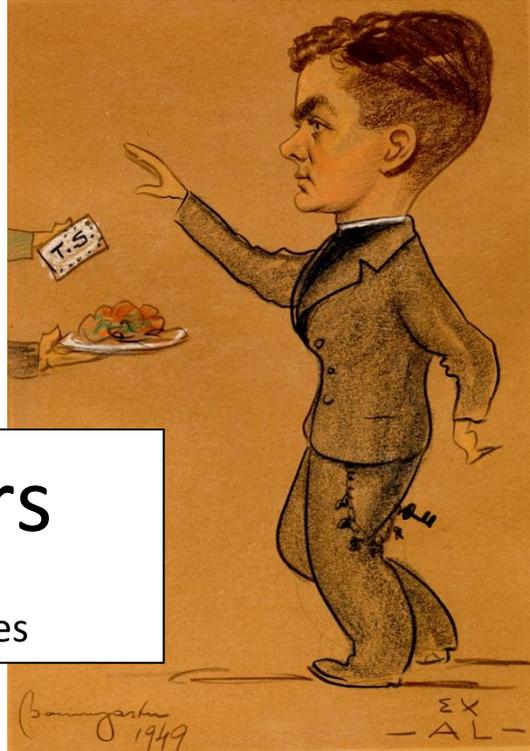


Al Burt Papers

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Florida's Roving Reporter and *Miami Herald* Columnist

"Recalling What Used to Be"

Tropic of Cracker book promotion, Live Oak, Florida, July 23, 2003

When Jim Senterfitt and I were back at the University of Florida, it was a different world.

Cows had the right-of-way on the highway and even though the train ran down the middle of Gainesville's Main Street, there were no traffic problems. A very different time.

Back then I was skinny and had a head full of bushy black hair. Jim then was known as "Red," and you can see now why that's changed back to Jim. We can remember when we could eat all we wanted at the university cafeteria for a quarter, and then we would go back to the dorm and gripe about it.

Back then there were open honor boxes posted unattended on the UF campus. You were expected to drop in one nickel and take out one apple. The Honor System worked then, but I wouldn't want to take the risk of an apple investment like that now.

One year when we were in school UF lost every football game, and it was still fun. A year later when the first victory came along it was enough to prompt a bonfire celebration on University Avenue. Right there in front of the old College Inn. Fire got so hot the tar in the street itself caught fire. Now, eight victories in a season are almost enough to get a coach fired.

Every Friday afternoon students would line up out on Waldo Road and hitch-hike home to Jacksonville. No one got kidnapped or killed that I heard of, but only the very brave or very foolish would do it now.

The fraternity boys could buy a bottle of illegal booze in dry Alachua County from certain cabbies, but the boys with cars could buy it legally, by driving down to Ruby's Bar just across the Marion County line. Jim and I never did those things, of course.

In Florida, it is useful to remember the old days because they help us judge whether the passing years make our lives better or worse. Nearly always it's a mixed bag. One thing must be balanced against another. But we need to have full knowledge of that balance if we are to have a decent future.

Most of the time that future creeps up on us quietly like a new habit, arriving not with thunder and lightning, but more quietly, like an old man out on his daily walk, coming at us step by slow step. We see it approach, yet often we still are surprised when it gets here.

But if we just look at those steps one at a time, we might be able to understand them. We might better understand where that old man came from and, if we pay close attention, we might even be able to guess where he's headed, what that future might be that he is bringing.

Think of me for a moment as that old man, toddling out of the past, mumbling about how it used to be...

Remember when you could meet strangers in Florida and they would be Floridians?

Remember when you looked at a restaurant menu and could recognize the names of all the fish, and you knew they came out of Florida waters?

Remember when the best place to stay in Gainesville was not out west toward 1-75 but at the downtown Thomas Hotel?

Remember when you could drive down AIA and see the beaches and the ocean?

Remember when Tampa Bay looked more like Wacassassa Bay, or when Silver Springs looked more like Wakulla Springs, or when Sanibel Island looked a little like Dog Island?

Remember when all coastal areas could evacuate when a dangerous hurricane approached?
(Something that can't be done now because there are too many people)

Remember when some of those subdivisions were wetlands, and the rains didn't bring floods, and droughts didn't bring wildfires?

Memories shouldn't be a surprise, but when you review some of these things, it seems surprising.

You can tell, from the way our history is blowing, the direction Florida's heading.

Those aren't just an old fogey's memories. They are measuring sticks. We owe it to future generations not to waste the dead-eye accuracy of hindsight. For the sake of our future, we need to remember our past.

We here in north Florida need to remember that however difficult our problems might seem to be, we nevertheless are blessed to live in an area that still has the character of Florida stamped in its landscapes.

Our Florida still has its earth jewels. We have not entirely rouged over our bone and grit. We still have Florida truth around us, the plain skint-knuckle truth, sometimes harsh, but nearly always beautiful.

We have scenes so genuinely Florida that they all but speak to us of heritage. We have prairies and open fields. We have two-rut roads leading to old homesteads with tin-roofed Cracker houses. We have these wondrously dimensioned flatlands that include such a mountainous variety of life. We have these sandhill communities, these bone-dry dune islands amid greenery delivered by springs and lakes and rivers.

We have memories passed on of steamboats, and citrus groves, and disappearing lakes, and beleaguered Native Americans, of buffaloes and panthers, of scalawags and heroes, and a thousand other things. These places and these memories tell us who we are in a way no library or classroom can match. These have such scale and beauty that no art gallery ever could contain them.

We are the lucky ones in Florida, who still can know the satisfaction of walking under tall trees and across unbroken land. We still can know the rustle and the call of wild things. We still can find wonder in our familiar surroundings.

Maybe, in the eyes of untutored tourists, our area has the look of an ugly duckling, but that is because they are among the unlucky ones, who do not know of these things and therefore do not understand and appreciate them. And maybe we are lucky that they don't.

I come to you from one of those out-of-the way places, a place called Melrose, in the outback way down yonder east of Gainesville among the prairies and lakes, and I bring essentially just one message: that my travels across Florida for the past quarter-century have convinced me that we are paying a high price for progress. My travels generated in me a fear that we are developing a toxic culture, one in danger of losing its balance, one where the costs of convenience and ease undermine too many of the rewards. We have reached the point, I fear, where what we are gaining is not always as attractive as what we are losing. We are into a cannibalizing process.

And so I have dedicated what words I have left, to sensitizing the consciences of Floridians about natural Florida. I don't have any illusions that it will change anything, but it makes me feel better.

I appeal to consciences. These days, most folk consider that impractical, perhaps even naïve, but I don't. I believe in the human conscience and the democratic process. They might be slow, but eventually they work.

I live with the hope, however faint it may be sometimes, that the good sense of the citizen sufferer has a power that will translate into political influence, into votes of conscience that will make things better in Florida.

Living in Melrose, I think, encourages that attitude. There is, about such places as Melrose and Waccahoota and Micanopy and other small places, a certain touch of the genuine, a feeling of truth in life. There you can see what Florida looked like before it sold its soul to the tourists.

In Melrose, we like to brag that a good night's sleep is more likely to be interrupted by the sound of an acorn rattling down a tin roof, or lightning bugs bumping against the windows, or a chuck-will's widow singing on a tree stump, than the wail of a siren or the honk of a horn.

I look out from that little haven and I see our state as an imperfect, peculiar, but stubbornly wonderful place struggling to stay true to itself, struggling to maintain an honest identity.

I have a simple wish, that Florida remain Florida, a real place and not some glitzy imitation of itself. I don't want I to become a dishonest sideshow that mimics the real Florida, a carnival that has no meaning and purpose other than to finagle tourists out of their money. I'd like enough of natural Florida to survive that we always will be able to see, feel, and taste the real thing.

There is reason to worry. From the Keys north, in every county, along every shoreline, every river and lake, every wetland, every natural vista, every natural treasure, is in some way threatened or outright spoiled. What a waste. What incredible damage to an enduring Florida economy.

I always liked the subtle message buried in the story of the old timer in Melrose who innocently complained to me one day about how times had changed. He did not like it. He felt that life was losing its directness and therefore much of its meaning, and he had a surprising example. "Used to be," he said "that roads went somewhere. They led to somebody's house, somebody's lake, someplace special... Now they don't go anywhere; they just keep on going and going and going. You never know where they're going to take you."

That old timer saw a world of roads and wanderers. In his mind people got on the roads and traveled forever, riding the interstates like lost sailors on a wheeled version of the Flying Dutchman, doomed forever to roam but never to arrive anywhere, never to find what they were seeking.

That old fellow was more right than he fully understood.

The Florida story at heart is a tale of attraction and change, of the many who so love this place, no matter where they came from originally, that they stampede here to taste it and consume it and digest it and then to reshape it in more familiar forms.

So every day we have to face the question of how to deal with this stampede of population which has been going on for more than a half century, changing the face of Florida decade by decade.

All this time we have been trying to learn how to be civilized, and positive, and hospitable, while being overrun. We've been learning how to be practical about the advantages of this new population, but still not be so stupid about it that we overlook the jeopardy that comes with those large numbers. We try regulations, zoning, different theories of growth management, and so far, nothing has worked to full satisfaction .

We still face the daunting job of being creatively courteous, profit-sensitive, and environmentally defensive, all at the same time, while making a place for and welcoming those new Floridians. It's a task for Solomon, you might say, but we've tried that, too.

Government, again and again, has turned with Solomon-like wisdom to reasonable political compromises. They have met problems head-on and halfway and prided themselves on being fair. And time after time they have sliced our earth babies in half to save them. Florida's natural environment has so often been sliced in half for the sake of reasonableness that the pieces we have left seem pitiful representatives of what once was here. And we have reached a time now when we are being compromised to death. We cannot afford much more of that Solomon-style wisdom. We cannot really stand for any more of our earth babies to be saved by cutting them in half.

In Florida, almost nothing stays in place but memory, and even that fades pretty quickly. Our state has this mobile, dynamic scene where almost everything moves and shifts and circles and returns in patterns migrating human populations, ocean tides, birds, marine life. The story of Florida becomes the story of new numbers and that new atmosphere being imposed on a place that already has immense natural variety.

That variety is astonishing. In the south, Florida rises out of the subtropics, where freezes are rare, and where the trees and grass stay green in the winter, and exotic flowers bloom even at Christmas time. As the state climbs across the Everglades and Lake Okeechobee into the temperate zone, not only the weather changes. The geography goes from sea-level to hilly, from swampy to desert-like, sometimes mucky, sometimes clay.

And each of those physical changes represents the preferences of a range of living things. Certain people and certain plants and certain animals cluster to the parts they prefer or that best suit them. This gives Florida unique combinations of good and bad. And it makes it an elusive place that's growing too fast, changing awkwardly, becoming piece by piece a reflection of other places, putting an overlay of other identities on our natural one.

We see pattern in the forgetting of our own special history and the loss of understanding about the special nature of Florida and the customs that grew out of adaptations to that. We see it in the loss of visual reminders about where we came from, and how this place got to be what it is today, and how we got to be the people we are today. We see it in a loss of sensitivity and a protective love for the unique qualities of this state.

Florida has become a place where we have to worry about declining standards, not only in supply and quality of water, but in other things as basic as clean air. Air that smells funny, air that you

can “see” have periodically made some of our swimming beaches and some of our rivers and lakes become too polluted for the recreation which, with the climate, has been the foundation of the state's tourism.

It is now a state where the frictions created by unlimited demands and limited capacities deliver so many problems that it is not surprising if some of us feel we are under siege.

In a state like this, intelligent analysis can be made only if it is judged against itself, by its own standards. I have written five books but the last three — *The Tropic of Cracker*, *Al Burt's Florida*, and *Becalmed in the Mullet Latitudes* — represent a trilogy based on my experiences in Florida. Each of those titles represents a kind of spiritual attitude about Florida, an honest but hopeful view of the state and its people. They are what one man thinks of his home state.

Let me give you a sample from the opening lines of my most recent book, *The Tropic of Cracker*. The opening lines go like this:

“In the Tropic of Cracker there are no parallels staked out ... circling the earth at certain degrees and so many minutes above the equator ... marking a zone and rendering scholarly identification of the climate and range of life.

The Tropic of Cracker has no boundaries. In Florida it simply occurs ... rooting in the minds of Floridians who have links to their past and kinship to their native heritage ...

Whatever brings to the mind a confirming identification with native Florida, whatever reassures that there can be natural beauty and treasured culture among common folk and in common places, can conjure up the Tropic of Cracker

The Tropic of Cracker represents commitments blooded and boned into the lives of Floridians as they grew up. Those feelings became an idealized vision of home. Nothing can change them.”

That’s how the book begins and how this talk ends.

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