



Al Burt Papers

University of Florida Libraries

Florida's Roving Reporter and *Miami Herald* Columnist

"The Changing Condition of Florida"

Indian River Symposium, Melbourne, January 18, 1985

I have a lot more to learn about the Indian River than I have to pass on. I am here only as a representative from the bleachers offering personal opinions from the peanut gallery. I am from the ranks of the Florida Crackers who find painful this process making every inch of the state urban and cosmopolitan. We don't doubt the inevitability of Florida's growth but we feel an irresistible urge to grumble about what it does to our natural treasure. Places like the Florida Keys and the Everglades and those mangrove coasts in the southwest and the gorgeous Panhandle beaches and, of course, this incredible lagoon that's called the Indian River.

As solutions for the massive problems in Florida began to take form, I keep getting the feeling that our situation bears some comparison with that of a grandmother I knew who had heart trouble. She was given a pacemaker to solve it. Afterwards the doctor told her proudly, romance can return to your life. She smiled big, thought about it for a moment and asked a question, "Does that mean I can eat sausage again?"

Even though I am a man who enjoys an occasional breakfast sausage, I have to say that in a remedial process where sausage becomes the equivalent of romance, we have lost something. Yet it strikes me that in Florida today the kind of inevitability involved is in many of the dilemmas we face. Most of the solutions we have come up with so far have the charm of false teeth. But the reality remains; they are necessary.

However, I think we have to be careful in this process not simply to get used to decline and routinely to accept it. Dr. Bernard Yokel, president of the Florida Audubon Society, once told about his fears on that score. "The unhappy thing is that man is so adaptable," Yokel told me. "He so easily gets used to a diminished condition that it is frightening" He told a story to illustrate his point. In the 1950s he taught school in the South Pacific Islands and going from Florida to those islands he noticed little change in the air. But about 15 years later he went back to the South Pacific, and he was amazed at the differences he found, the greater visibility and the crystal clear atmospheric conditions.

Suddenly, he realized with more clarity than ever what was happening in Florida. Here was a trained environmental scientist, a man preoccupied with clocking such things, who had not noticed because the decline was so gradual. That's what we have to worry about – the subtleties of change that we do not notice until there is an emergency, until it is so late that the only solutions are compromises.

We ordinary citizens of Florida need to be careful to notice and not to let our leaders forget that we feel pain about those things. Some of them are like the boy that Abraham Lincoln found skinning live eels. Lincoln asked the boy if he did not think it was cruel to hurt the eels that way. "Oh no," the boy replied. "It don't hurt then so much. It's been going on a long time. They're used to it."

With all due respect and gratitude, I sometime get the feeling at gatherings like this that we parallel a story told by that remarkable cultural essayist, Wendell Berry, about a farmer who stepped into some interesting things. But he would not wipe the manure off his shoes. He would save it, let it collect until there came a time and a place where he found a spot of bare ground where it might do some real good. There, he rubbed it off.

We who are eager to know and understand more about the Indian River are here hoping that whatever discomfort occurs with this process, something productive will rub off on us.

Listening to the experts here, I think a case can be made, if we are not too scientific about it, that the Indian River is much like the state of Florida. It is long and narrow and often misunderstood. It's not really a river, but a 125-mile long lagoon. There's a lot of interaction and trouble with flushing out problems, it attracts damaging urbanization, and it's worth an enormous amount of money but not a lot of us know very much about how to use it wisely.

Florida is loaded with wild and exotic species that endanger each other. From north to south it changes from temperate toward tropical. At the top of the survival chain there are a lot of opportunistic predators (sharks, eagles, and more). We can't handle all the problems one on one. There has to be a broad system approach.

I will use that excuse today to talk about all of Florida, keeping in mind that it and the Indian River are similar models (valuable, fragile, complex, and improbable). Despite our eagerness to preserve their finest qualities and the sort of awesome respect most of us have for what is here, not everybody feels that way when they first arrive.

At this point I always like to remember my grandmother, who had lived all her life in the Appalachian foothills. She had never traveled and never wanted to. But late in her 80s she made a request of the family. Just once, before she died, she wanted to see the ocean. My parents took her to the beach in Jacksonville and that frail old lady walked out on the sand and stared across that endless horizon for a long time. My folks felt very good about this. They were very happy that Granny, a naturalist at heart and a lover of the hills and mountains, was seeing this great, endless mystery of the ocean.

But she was disappointed. "It's not as big as I thought it'd be," she said.

When I'm trying to put together an orderly picture of Florida I like to remind myself that although it is a place with hardly any hills and few curves not very many can see ahead clearly. It is a state in the midst of a creative explosion. Stuff is flying all over the place and it is not clear where or how it will all settle.

It is difficult to be knowledgeable about all of this varied, changing state. I should explain that part of my job is trying to gather up some of the pieces that offer clues. For about 12 years now I have been roving the state for *The Miami Herald* and *Tropic Magazine* looking at Florida as a generalist would, not as an expert in any field.

I make an effort to clock some of the shock, disorientation, and reformation that take place in a state that has quadrupled its population in the last 30 years. I am concerned less with the blood-and-guts events that make headlines than with the common joys and dilemmas that, in sum, help explain how it is for the common Floridian in these times.

I try never to forget that in Florida we are undergoing a population transfusion and in the process we are exchanging customs and traditions for new ambitions and new directions. I keep finding that even during this computer age nearly all answers still begin with the reasoning and resolve of one individual.

If there is a problem with this life though, it has been that I have had a front-row seat, watching the state change at a pace beyond its capacity to absorb change. It makes us appear to flounder, and we have to be careful that we do not respond by trying to turn back and live in the past.

At the heart of Florida's most difficult adjustments, of course, is the rise in population numbers.

To try to understand what is happening to Florida it is important, I think, to keep in mind this idea that little is certain and therefore all is at stake. It is a place where less than one-third the population is Florida-born. About 11 million live here, and probably at least five million think of somewhere else as home. It has seemed to me that for some time now too many residents fool more of us into a sense of ownership in Florida rather than kinship. Too many consider it more a good place for frolic and speculation than as one that should be nurtured and preserved.

Not enough Floridians commit themselves to it in long-range ways that involve love of place more than financial options. That is not unique to Florida, but I think it may be more common here.

There is, I think, such doubt about what kind of place Florida will be in the future that a great many routinely set themselves up so that they can bail out if things go bad, or if the profits from increased land values become too tempting to pass up. What is too often missing is a sense that this is home and always will be, and so let's not foul it up.

There seems to be in popular thinking an expectation that one day Florida will become too crowded and shabby, a place mostly for the very rich and the very poor who attend them. Uncertainty and defensiveness too often make people care less than they should about bringing quality and permanence into their lives and enterprises.

There are a lot of reasons for it but most of them stem from those population changes and the incredible transience of this state. Everything moves frequently, if not constantly. The people are like the tireless and sometimes blundering images on a computer game guided by beginners.

Florida blossoms larger than New York and is feeding upon perpetual, restless movement. No other state, I think, has such significant tides and counter-tides. The future is being pieced together without a blueprint. For so long it seemed as though we were trying to invent a machine by first inventing individual parts and later we would see what they made.

In their recently published *Book of America*, authors Neal Pierce and Jerry Hagstrom call Florida a "synthetic civilization."

"What has developed on the Florida peninsula," they say, "is a deeply disjointed society, one that has yet to develop a coherent sense of itself and perhaps never will." Yet they add that Florida "in many ways holds the key to America's future." What they are saying is that the whole country is being scrambled and we, with our disparate parts and odd combinations, are among the scramblers.

Look at some of those human tides flowing this way that create great swells of energy that fuel the growth of Florida.

They begin with the 40 million tourists who dominate all else, outnumbering residents each year by about four to one. They come here looking for what sometimes seems to be 40 million different kinds of pleasure. There are winter tourists and summer tourists and seasonal residents.

The most powerful of those tides is the one that brings hundreds of thousands of new residents into the state each year. Most of them come from the East and the Midwest to find better places and ways to live.

For example, the past year some 650,000 to 700,000 new residents moved to Florida (something like 80 an hour). Usually you don't hear such high figures in official reports. Usually we are told only the net gain in residents. But the actual numbers of arrivals and departures have a great deal more impact. The University of Florida Population Bureau tells me that for every two new residents who come to Florida, one leaves. Because of that, the net gain to Florida last year alone was *only* 300,000 to 350,000, *only* about 40 an hour.

At that pace, if they all moved into the four counties along the Indian River, those counties would double in population every two years. Take a look at what that means in transience for the state. No wonder the highways are full and the real estate agents are busy.

Add to this picture of residential transience the tourists and the seasonal residents, and intrastate residential moves, and the influx of international refugees, and the annual arrival of migrant agricultural workers.

All of that gives us a state with intricate, winding patterns. From afar, they create the picture of a simple scramble. But there are powerful, distinct forces in motion while Florida makes a search for balance and stability and tries to preserve its natural resources and quality of life.

It seems apparent, at least to me, that this is a situation where we are not likely to find answers in history. The old axioms in Florida have to be questioned. The Florida emerging must invent fresh solutions and the coming Florida will require from its most productive citizens a creative temperament.

In tourism, for example, should we worry more about what Fred Bosselman in his book, *In The Wake Of The Tourist*, called the spreading of "placelessness"? Should we be content to turn into a cartoon state? Should we be concerned about taking the wonderful natural attractions we have and tricking them up into papier-mâché places for tourists whose devotion is notoriously fickle? Should we worry about overbuilding, distorting, and changing our natural base? Should we fear in the long-term what Bosselman calls a "psychological saturation" among local populations that creates ill will not only toward tourism but toward all development?

Bosselman offered a striking example of that risk when he quoted from a book on tourism in the Fiji Islands. "These tourists," said the book, "travel the world like registered parcels, blindly unaware of the local populations, problems and tragedies. Instead of mutual understanding, they promote mutual contempt."

When assessing the impact of all these new Floridians, do we find that we should do more to acclimate them? A lot of us who have lived here all our lives have difficulty making intelligent decisions at election time on the alternatives proposed for the state. What about that half of the population which moved here within the last 10 years? Most of them are from industrial cities whose problems make even a wounded Florida look like paradise. Not only do some of these new people not understand the peculiar and fragile nature of Florida's seascape and landscape, many do not see that any problems exist at all.

Those 300,000 or so new residents a year represent an overwhelming supply of energetic ignorance about Florida. They make up an overwhelming vein of unawareness which an uncaring politician or a greedy developer can manipulate to create a constituency for short-range gains that in the long-range may boomerang. This thrusts upon public officials and the media a large immediate burden of education.

Mark Twain used dark humor to illuminate that, too. Huckleberry Finn might have been speaking for some of our less thoughtful politicians when he pondered a question of public support and came up with an easy answer: "Ain't we got all the fools in town on our side?" he asked. "Ain't that a big enough majority in any town?"

Should we worry that all this transience in Florida tends to make him right? Teaching children is difficult, but to teach adults attitudes that appeal to reverse ideas held for a lifetime, well, that calls for mass education of a sort that can take place only when the public gets enough understandable information to recognize a clear and present danger.

In the old days, we soft-paddled hurricanes and glossed over their threats. We don't do that anymore. Now we understand that was foolish and dangerous. We see the potential disasters that have been created on our coasts and are waiting to happen. But we still need to translate other realities into that kind of clear and uncompromising advisory.

The changing conditions of Florida put a premium on the need for a common framework of understanding and standards. We don't have it. We have to move fast, but we have to be careful, I think, that we learn the right lessons. Mark Twain told us the story of the cat that sat on a hot stove lid. He said the cat would never sit on another hot stove lid, but it wouldn't sit on a cold one, either.

Communication can be tricky. There was the story about the woman who walked up to a church, stood there a minute impatiently, twisting around and fluffing her hair, and finally turned to a boy standing there and asked him, "Sonny, can you tell me whether mass is out?" The boy looked her up and down seriously and said, "No ma'am, it ain't, but I think your hat might be on backwards."

The philosopher Rene Dubos might have been speaking for Florida conditions when once he described himself as a despairing optimist. He described that as a state of being discouraged by the history of clumsy approaches to problems but perpetually optimistic about the possibilities.

Aldo Leopold could have been talking to Florida when he said that conservation based solely upon economic self-interest was hopelessly lopsided. He reminded us in his book, *Sand County Almanac*, that it is foolish to discard those odd and seemingly useless little cogs and wheels of the biotic clock and still expect that it will continue to function with only the economic parts left.

Loren Eiseley in his fine book *The Star Thrower* found great truth in what an Eskimo told the explorer Rasmussen, "We fear the cold and the things we do not understand." But then the Eskimo said, "But most of all we fear the doings of the heedless ones among us."

There are heedless ones among us inflicted with a kind of greedy madness. Those who would find honor in killing the last panther, building on the last open beach, collecting the last shell, picking the last blossom, selling the last acre.

There in a kind of madness in the world that assumes the guise of reason, author Herman Melville said in his novel *Moby Dick*. Captain Ahab was obsessed with the killing of a whale, but his methods were calculated and sane. Only his purposes were mad.

Where does a despairing optimist turn for fresh hope? I put my hopes on the mullet latitudes. They are a little like a Cracker version of the twilight zone. I am not sure whether I discovered them or invented them, but I have written often of them. They are made of the materials that permit philosophers to muster optimism for undocumented reasons. I can't tell you where to find them but they are our individual moods and visions and musings about the mystery of Florida. They are in the things that make us love this place. The Mullet Latitudes are as mysterious, bewitching, and contradictory as blackberry winter or Indian summer. They envelope newcomers, and natives, and urbanites, and country Crackers alike; they're very democratic.

They are the potent if unearthly influences that inspire a kind of reverence for Florida's natural side and a persistent concern for its fragility. Wherever they came from, and however they got here, and however long they have been here, they settle upon people who understand that the soul of a river or a state or a civilization cannot be saved by anything that can be measured in numbers alone.

You can see them at work around the state these days, when you find a splendid old piece of Floridiana, when you encounter a civic movement to save another aspect of Florida's natural identity. There is a good chance that it will be some fellow from Michigan or Miami who got becalmed in the mullet latitudes.

I think that's where Florida's hope comes from, those magical mullet latitudes. They nourish our capacity to create a new Florida, but a new Florida that remains true to itself.

[© 2011 University of Florida George A. Smathers Libraries.](#)

[All rights reserved.](#)

[Acceptable Use, Copyright, and Disclaimer Statement.](#)