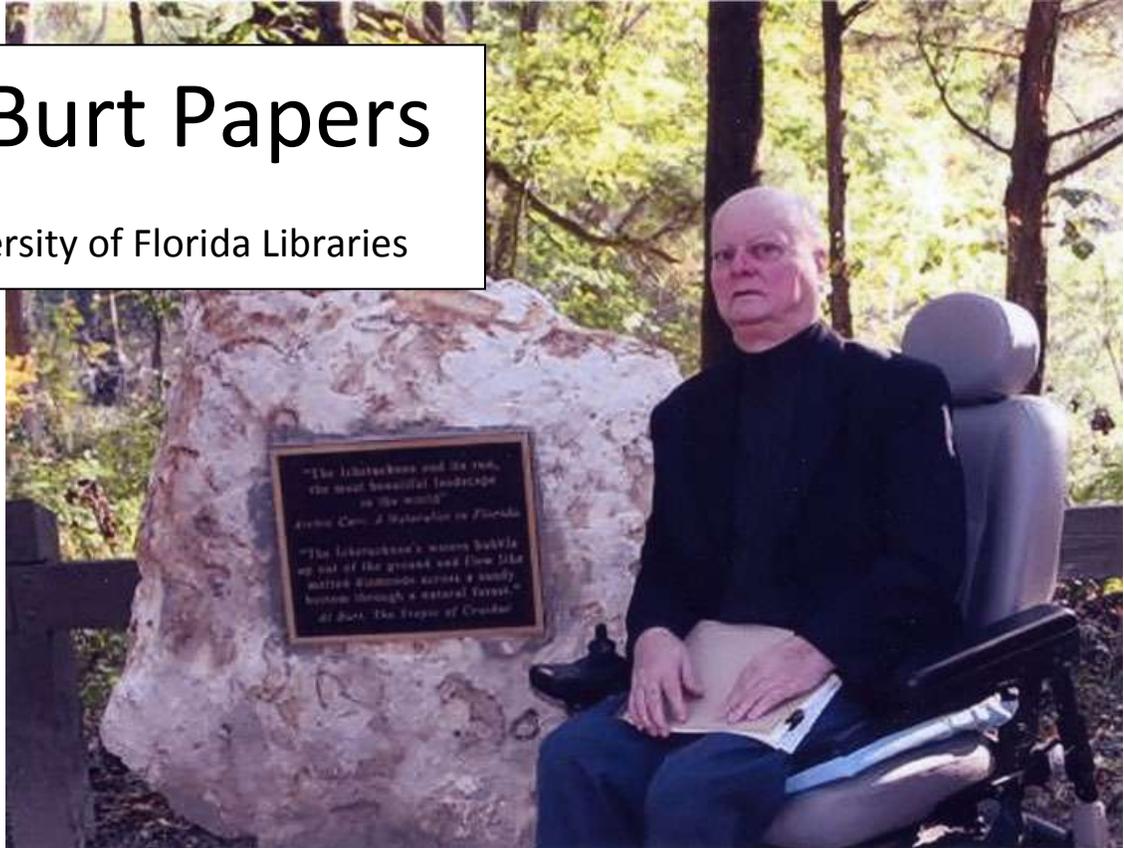


# Al Burt Papers

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Florida's Roving Reporter and *Miami Herald* Columnist

"Why We Need Real Florida"

Florida Surveying and Mapping Society, World Golf Village, St. Augustine, Florida, August 18, 2000

I am one of those Floridians who would like Florida to remain Florida, a real place, not some chintzy imitation of itself. I don't want it to become a dishonest sideshow that mimics the real Florida, or a facade that can be crowded into the corner of some strip mall or made into 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.

Obviously I am not a politician.

This is my personal view. I bring you a common folk vision, the view of most everyday Floridians. My folks moved to Florida in 1925, two years before I was born. Except for a few years when work took me away, I have been here ever since. I spent nearly a quarter-century travelling the state as a newspaper columnist, and what I saw changed me.

I come here essentially with the message that I think most Floridians, however poorly or well they might articulate it, fear that Florida, a great state with a great history, has developed a disturbing

downside. They are worried that our progress brings with it a toxic culture that carries more penalties than it should and that this downside gives a negative tilt to what should be creative change.

This concern is a basic matter of self-defense. Most Floridians want to save the things about Florida that they love, the reasons why they chose this as a place to live. Most of us want to save the things in our built and natural environments that influence our lives with something more than the daily appetites.

Sometimes, this seems to be a struggle against the inevitable. It's the kind of thing that might never be won with finality, but never should be given up as lost.

I once had a great lesson in that.

When I first began to retire by degrees from deadlines and newspaper columns I was 60 and getting tired of dragging myself around the state on two walking canes. My friend and hero Marjory Stoneman Douglas was appalled. She's the lady who in 1947 wrote that great book about the Everglades, *The River of Grass*, and it's still the best book on the Everglades.

Marjory said I was too young to quit. At the time she was 97 years old, nearly blind and still going strong. Still, she understood my reasons, and I did retire. And then a few days later, Marjory called the newspaper and applied for my job.

She knew what counted and she still had the will and the spirit to try, qualities that will bring almost any obstacle down to size. So I got back into it by writing books, and now in retirement my view comes straight out of the palmettos and the sandhills, not from an editorial ivory tower, and not from any business interest. I simply see Florida as home, as an imperfect, peculiar but stubbornly wonderful-place struggling to stay true to itself, struggling to maintain an honest identity. Everything else follows that.

Along with everybody else, we common folk like the conveniences and luxuries represented by progress, but we think it is possible to pay too much for them. In some cases, we think that what we are getting is not as nice as what we had.

At heart we are two-legged native plants, as quiet and as insistent as weeds. Sometimes we are pretty as wildflowers and sometimes we are as prickly as sandspurs. We occur without invitation and without cultivation as an expression of native Florida. With the fact of our presence, our civil reminders of Florida's natural wonders and frailties, we try to stir the memory, provoke the conscience, and encourage belief that better things are possible. We offer a beautiful itch in the hope that it will compel a powerful and negative scratch.

We try to be persuasive from low places. We try to convince all Floridians, old timers and newcomers alike, that they have an equal stake, a self-interest of their own, in protecting Florida. We live with the faint trope that the good sense of the citizen sufferer has a power that will translate into political influence.

As a way of further explanation, I especially bring you greetings today from the land of Melrose, in north central Florida's scrub country, where I live and hide out. It is a piece of that old Florida that is fast slipping away from us, a part of Florida that tourists rarely see, and where strangers rarely come except by accident, and for that we are grateful.

The pavement ends just down the road from our driveway. Some see that as the end of the road but for us it's just the beginning. We like to brag that a good night's sleep there is more likely to be interrupted by the hoot of an owl, or by the sound of an acorn rattling down a tin roof, or lightning bugs gently bumping against the bedroom window, or a chuck-will's-widow singing on a tree stump than by the honk of a horn or the wail of a police siren.

When we go to bed at night, the brightest lights we see outside are the moon and the stars. Deer feed in our yards, and egrets stroll our lake shores unmolested, and sandhill cranes live in our pastures year-round.

Sometimes I get carried away talking about Melrose. Strangers, of course, might see it with different eyes. Earlier this year, I was talking to a group downstate and a woman came up to me afterward and said she had been to Melrose once, and she thought it was "just another dinky little town." Now, she said, she wanted to go back because obviously she had missed something. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder.

Anyway, dinky or not, in Melrose we agree with Hawthorne, who wrote that happiness is like a butterfly. If you pursue it, it will fly away but if you will sit down quietly, it might come to you. In the best of our quiet times in Melrose, we imagine that we commune with the butterfly.

In Melrose, we have fun telling stories about the Snowbirds, those visitors who come down here and fill our pockets. For example, the story about the Snowbird who moved to Florida and became a nature lover. She fed or took in every wild thing she encountered; squirrels, deer, raccoons, and possums. And one day she found in her yard a little brown casing, an egg of some kind. She took it into the house and kept it warm; she would hatch this wild thing. And then she got her reward, out crawled a big old palmetto bug. She had hatched a roach. Whatever would we do without the Snowbirds to teach us better ways?

I always liked the story of the old timer in Melrose who 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 — 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, like lost sailors on the Flying Dutchman, doomed forever to roam but never to arrive anywhere, never to find what they were seeking. An interesting lament.

The Florida story at heart is a tale of attraction of the many who so love this place, no matter where they came from originally, that they stampede here to mark it with their initials, to brand it with their customs, to block it out for shopping mall convenience, to taste it, and consume it, and digest it and even to reshape it.

This has been both Florida's blessing and its dilemma. Every day we have had to face the question of how to deal with this. How should we greet this stampede of population which for 60 years has averaged a net gain of 230,000 new residents for Florida each year? How can we be civilized and positive and hospitable in the face of all this? How are we to be practical about the advantages of new population, but not so stupid about it that we overlook the jeopardy that comes with those numbers. We have the job of being creatively courteous, profit sensitive, and environmentally defensive all at the same time while making a place for those new Floridians. And that's a tough call.

When you take our present population of 15.3 million and you add the visits of 40 million tourists annually, and you mix in the large numbers of people who get unhappy with what is happening and move out of Florida or who change residences within the state, you get a picture of extraordinary turbulence, a place constantly churning. Real estate salesmen love it and in fact it creates great opportunities for many, but turbulence and transience encourage a kind of rootless mindset, and you can see it at work. Think of it in terms of the human impact, lives always being uprooted and full of strangers, always a tearing away of the ties to the old and the difficult business of establishing new ones. Think of the impact it has on continuity in politics, the loss in terms of heritage and self-identity, the impact on feelings of responsibility and community.

We have this mobile, dynamic scene where almost everything moves and shifts and circles and returns in patterns – migrating human populations, ocean tides, birds and marine life. The story of Florida becomes the story of those numbers and that atmosphere being imposed on a place of immense natural variety.

It's a peculiar state with about 1200 miles of coast that includes extraordinary beaches, beautiful barrier islands, an interior with a huge ridge down the middle, mysterious underground aquifers, natural springs, lakes, rivers. It's just so different from other places. In the south, Florida rises out of the subtropics, where freezes are rare and where the trees and grass stay green and where exotic flowers bloom in the winter. As the state climbs across the Everglades and Lake Okeechobee into the temperate zone, it's not just the weather that changes. The geography goes from sea-level to hilly, from swampy to desert-like; it's 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 that best suit them. This gives Florida unique combinations of good and bad.

It becomes a state of many languages and many origins and customs, all with a legitimate and proper claim on space and propriety. A place under great strain, as evidenced by the figures that rank Florida high among the major states in the statistics of stress: divorce, crime, violence, traffic accidents, deaths, etc. We see it 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 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. We have to worry about air that you can see and that smells funny. Periodically 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 a state where in rainy season we have to worry about floods, and in dry season we have to worry about wildfires. This is 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.

We common folk place a lot more importance on understanding this complex, fast-changing state. It has made us want to deepen our own understanding and to evangelize for better understanding among others, especially newcomers because we feel that those who understand Florida very likely will love it and defend it.

It has made us understand better that there is significance in things that do not make headlines, and there is beauty in more than broad vistas and colorful horizons. It has helped us also find significance and beauty in the small things of Florida, like the sounds and smells and sights that we grew up with.

Everyone has a collection of those wherever they're from and as you get old, they come to represent the special qualities of home, the things that give dimension to a life. They represent heritage and affirming identity. To us, they become the true things of Florida. They develop the same weight and heft as love of family and home and country.

Those things project and expand into the fundamentals of Florida, and they are worth defending. Each of us, as caring Floridians, makes life more satisfying by making this connection and finding a personal way to act on it in whatever way that suits our temperament and commitment.

To achieve this feeling, this feeling of blood-link to Florida, you have to decide you belong here and you need to understand why. You have to understand the rewards and the risks. Whatever that balance, you have to make a commitment that this is home and always will be.

What has happened to Florida too often has been a rouging of the old realities, a gilding of something that was already golden, like taking crayons to a rose. Too often we have plastered the preposterous on the unique, we have smothered meaningful character with the gloss and glitz of a carnival. This effectively expresses dissatisfaction with what natively was here; ultimately, it's an untrue appreciation.

When you trade natural treasures for synthetic ones, you need to be careful. If you get careless, you can also be trading values. Bit by bit, you can lose that appreciation of place and home, without which natives feel like spiritual exiles even in the place where they were born.

In a state like this, intelligent analysis can be made only if it is judged against itself, by its own standards, its own natural treasures, and its own past. It cannot be judged by the standards of some other place with far worse problems and a different history of how and why it arrived to them.

Once, a tradition-minded friend of mine in south Florida who was getting married decided that he wanted the ceremony to take place in a setting that wouldn't change, a place that he could return to in later years and find still intact, just like it was on his wedding day. He wanted this significant memory to be kept alive. He looked at place after place. Finally, he chose the Ding Darling Wildlife Sanctuary on Sanibel Island. He decided that was the only place in south Florida that might remain recognizable a quarter-century later.

During the 1950s a group of Miami friends was driving in Naples, down in southwest Florida. They had the top down on their convertible, and the radio was playing at normal volume. Police ticketed them for disturbing the peace. Today, in these days of boom boxes, no one would even notice. They're little things, but they represent a change in values.

When you spend nearly a quarter-century travelling a fast-changing state like Florida, as I did, trying to understand it, you accumulate more than just memories and old stories. You develop a personal sense of Florida history. You develop opinions about what kind of state this is, and what it is becoming. That's what I have written about in my books.

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**, and I remind you that the word Cracker, as I use it, simply means either someone of native birth or someone naturalized to Florida by their affection for its realities. 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.

It has no created facade. It was not invented to please a stranger for the purpose of taking his money, though that might be a side benefit. It simply celebrates all of native Florida, all of it.

The Tropic of Cracker, in all its imaginary grandeur, is a matter of plain folk and an unashamed tethering to the land ... It is a thing of the mind, a matter of memories and appreciations, of recalling people and things and places that you would sacrifice to bring back, things whose value goes beyond the measure of numbers.

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

Almost all Floridians now, old or new, understand that the special qualities of Florida are more vulnerable than ever because growth forces difficult decisions about them. Historically these decisions, again and again, have turned with Solomon-like wisdom into reasonable political compromises. But we have reached a time now when we are being compromised to death. 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. 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.

When talking about Florida and what is happening to it, I like to remember something that Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings wrote in her great book, *Cross Creek*. Her words express her philosophy about land. The famous passage went like this:

“Who owns Cross Creek? .... the human ownership of grove and field and hammock is hypothetical. But a long line of red-birds and whippoorwills and blue jays and ground doves will descend from (their) ... nests in the orange trees, and their claim will be less subject to dispute than that of any human heirs .... the earth may be borrowed but not bought. It may be used, but not owned .... we are tenants and not possessors, lovers, and not masters.”

No one has said it better. Natural Florida delivers messages to all of us. Somehow it reaches and salves hungers that transcend our conscious appetites. It offers a mental rinse. We are refreshed and reminded, in the way that our Mamas used to remind us in their most spiritually hopeful voices, that we are, after all, good people or at least we should be, and good things are expected of us.

Those old Spaniards who came here in the 16<sup>th</sup> century looking for the fountain of youth never found one, because they were looking for the wrong thing. This really *was* a place of rejuvenation, but it was not located in a single magical spring as they had hoped. Instead, it was in the nature of this place. Instead of one spring that restored youth there was this dazzling array of natural gifts, not only springs but rivers and lakes and an extraordinary range of geography, climate, plant and animal life. This place Florida provides many natural chapels where the world-weary can find rejuvenation of the spirit. This is a place where every minute, every hour, every day there are created new beginnings and new capacities for life. But you have to be able to recognize these things to claim them. If you come looking only for gold, or only for magic, you miss the greatest treasures.

How the Spaniards treated the land and the peoples already here created what historians call their “Black Legend,” a soil on their historical reputation. But it wasn’t just the Spaniards. It has been happening over and over ever since. Sometimes it happens with old timer Floridians who should know better, and sometimes it happens with wave after wave of other new arrivals.

The Spaniards might have started it, but myopic exploitation has been the curse of Florida.

Finally, we need to remember that although our state might not be what it used to be, extraordinary things do survive, and if good citizens and good governments care enough to fight for them, these things can live and last as far into the future as they have backward into history.

But for that to happen, all of Florida’s common-folk, all its weeds, sandspurs, and wildflowers, need to stand a little taller.

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