



Florida's Roving Reporter and *Miami Herald* Columnist

"Springs and Water Issues"

Springs Conference, Sheraton of Gainesville, Florida, February 7, 2003

Springs have a way of getting into your mind and staying there. My first spring was a small one, but I have never forgotten it. A small goblet hollowed out of the earth. To drink you got down on your hands and knees and put your face into it.

On the bottom — maybe two feet down — was a crayfish, wriggling a bit in the sand boils. Above, a snake curled around the limb of a tree.

It did not matter. I leaned over and lapped up that sweet water anyway — and the mystique of springs was forever imprinted on me.

Since then, there have been many springs, most of them larger and more powerful. Some springs you could swim in, though they had a few gators lounging on the banks of the far side. It was like swimming in Tarzan's water cooler.

But that mystique always was there. There was something special about experiencing the freshening and cleansing by water that poured out of the ground like an incredible gift, like a process of rebirth. It is something that seems too large for simple gratitude and appreciation.

Geologists and water managers can break down the springs into numbers and definitions that explain how and why they came to be, but for us common Floridians that mystique of the springs leaps

far beyond exact measurement; it dips into the imagination. These natural marvels generate an unnatural affection, a feeling of connection with a generous earth.

The beaches and the oceans are the marvels that attract the tourists, but the springs are the marvels that attract Floridians who have a larger sense of this unusual state.

You can turn on almost any faucet and get clear water, you can buy bottled water that comes from our springs, but for me at least, the faucet and the bottle are false springs; they are not natural gifts, they are products. They come without crayfish and gators – and without that good-earth mystique.

I live in a place called Melrose, east of here in the outback of north central Florida. Most of our springs over there are buried under beautiful lakes, but we know that they are there and – especially in these days of drought – we are grateful.

Melrose is the kind of Florida that is fast slipping away from the mass of Floridians. It is the kind of Florida that has become as elusive as some wild thing that keeps retreating from the crowds until it can retreat no more. Too soon we may be able to find only small, sensitized patches of that Florida behind clicking turnstiles in air-conditioned museums. Monotone guides will tell us how it once was.

There is, about such places as Melrose, a certain touch of the genuine and the real – a feeling of truth in life. This is Florida with a full set of thorns. It's native Florida that glories in its blemished jewels – not cosmetized, not hidden behind exotic facades that mimic some other place. There you can see what Florida looked like before it sold its soul to the tourists.

I tell you about these things because they affect my viewpoint. I see Florida as home, not as a business opportunity.

It's a place where 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, etc. The story of Florida becomes the story of new numbers and a 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, 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, it's not just the weather that changes. The geography goes from sea-level to hilly, from swampy to desert-like; sometimes it's mucky and sometimes it's 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.

It makes it an elusive place – growing too fast, changing awkwardly, becoming piece by piece, a reflection of other places, putting an overlay of other identities on our natural one.

Over time I have become one of those common folk in this state who would like Florida to remain Florida, a real place – not to become a chintzy imitation of itself, or a dishonest sideshow that

mimics the real Florida, or a facade that can be crowded into the corner of some strip mall or museum to please tourists. We common folk want to be able to see, feel, and taste the real thing.

We occur all over Florida, almost anywhere and everywhere. Sometimes we're as prickly as sandspurs and sometimes as pleasing as phlox, like intrusive weeds and welcome wildflowers. We make a statement by our presence. We gladden the memory, invade the conscience, and sometimes agitate the sinuses.

We see Florida as a place struggling to stay true to itself — struggling to maintain an honest identity. We, like everybody else, want luxuries and conveniences too, but we think it is possible to pay too much for them. Sometimes, we think that what we are getting is not as good as what we are losing.

We are people who find significance not only in headlines, and beauty not only in broad vistas and colorful horizons, but also in the small things of Florida — the sights and sounds and smells that we grew up with. These are the things of home that are blooded and boned into our beings, that represent heritage and affirming identity and the individual dimensions of our lives; they're true things of Florida.

High among these are the springs. Like nothing else, they add a melody to our measled land.

"Measled" was Archie Carr's description. He was Florida's great poet-scientist and he used words with clinical precision as well as lyrical imagery, "The world," he once said, "is all broken out with man."

He made it sound as though Florida, in particular, had come down with an ugly case of the measles.

He saw the development of Florida as "the partly aimless, partly avaricious ruin of unequalled natural riches."

"In Florida," he said, "under the mindless din of welcome to industry coming in... You can hear the voices of the old ones.... grieving over the passing of the wilderness. [But] they no longer watch landscapes wasting away. That happened long ago. What is going on now is just a lot of little cleanup operations... of small ... patches of the past [that were] overlooked in the first waves of ruin... It is sad in Florida these days."

How prophetic. He said all that in 1964. And since then, no one has found a cure for our measles. We have had nearly four more decades of that progressive land pox.

You can see for yourself. Look around you in Florida at all the self-inflicted injuries and take stock. It is not just a matter for the laments of poets or old-timers now. All Floridians have a reason to mourn.

Carr celebrated places like Waccahoota and Tuscawilla, Micanopy and Lochloosa — places like Melrose, too — because he understood what they represented.

He especially loved one piece of natural Florida — Paynes Prairie just south of Gainesville. When someone questioned that, he explained: "There is peace out there quiet enough to hear rails call and

cranes bugle." His appreciation was whetted by his understanding of what was happening to such places in Florida.

In the opening pages of *The Yearling*, Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings' wonderful book about Florida past, the boy Jody went rambling from his home in the Big Scrub.

"He went down to the spring a secret and a lovely place . . .," Rawlings wrote. "Water bubbled up from nowhere (it) cut itself a channel through white limestone and began to run rapidly down-hill to make a creek. The creek joined Lake George ... part of the St. Johns River ... the great river flowed northward and into the sea.... It excited Jody to watch (this)... the beginning of the ocean.... The bubbling spring would rise forever from the earth.... when he was an old man, as old as his father, it would continue."

Today, Jody might not be so sure about that. He might look at the diminished volumes of the springs, and he might check out the dry or dwindling lake beds, and he might have second thoughts about whether his bubbling spring would really last forever.

The idea of a spring as a source, as a beginning that will never end, suits our best dreams about Florida. Clear water gurgles up out of the earth, and along its flowing path old sea dunes – as dry as deserts – turn green. Creeks, rivers, and lakes form. We have a creative beginning that graces everything it encounters. The waters slide toward the sea and so sweeten the salt waters around its edges that marine life flourishes. We have a beginning that doesn't end, we have always believed. But now we have to wonder.

Rawlings' words lift a small spring into the formation of an ocean. She reveals this everyday piece of Florida as significant to a vision of the world. She tells it the way Floridians want to believe it.

Springs deliver these messages to all of us, and somehow they reach and salve hungers that transcend our conscious appetites. With their mystique, they become "watering holes of the spirit" where we can refill our imaginations with hope, where there is a pool of inspiration to revive our jaded views of the world. They nourish respect for our natural past, and they encourage us to recognize that what we have left is too precious to squander on hucksters who never sipped from a spring while keeping an eye on a crawfish at the bottom or on a snake hanging off a tree limb overhead.

Whatever the distractions and distortions around them, however strip-zoned and ugly the road there might be, and however concreted or constrained those once sandy banks might have become, springs still can deliver a living piece of Florida that performs much the same way it did during our childhood, and even before that.

In our parks the springs still set a scene that lets you imagine with some accuracy how it must have been before your memories started, what it was like before there were interstates and jets and skyscrapers – when Native Americans or Spanish conquistadores knelt and drank from their pure waters. Except that in some of these springs now the color might be clouded a bit and might have a suggestion of salt, or a chemical bite, or even the faint flavor of cement dust. And now if you drink carelessly, later on you might suffer. You might discover that such lovely water is not as virginal as it looks.

The Florida dilemma is a tale of the many who so love this extraordinary place 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 and feel and digest Florida and then reshape it, to improve upon what God already did for us here.

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, bringing us a net gain of 230,000 new residents each year, 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 have 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 masses of 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. It has met problems head-on and halfway and prided itself on being fair. But time after time we have seen it slice 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 any 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.

The numbers reveal this as a place of many origins and many languages and a buffet of customs – all with a legitimate and claim on space and propriety. This is a place where old-timers feel as alien as newcomers, a place peopled by strangers but so uneasy with strangers that the newest and best communities have walls and gates, a place where by national comparisons with states the same size the taxes are low and the needs are high – and our leading politicians promise us they will keep it that way. It is a place where we seem to be faced with declining standards – in supply and quality of water, in things as basic as living space, even clean air. It is a place where in rainy season we have to worry about floods, and in dry season we have to worry about wildfires. Here there are frictions created by unlimited demands and limited capacities which deliver such a range of problems that it is understandable if sometimes we feel we are under siege.

My folks moved to Florida in 1925 – two years before I was born. And except for a few years when work took me away, I have been here ever since. Most of that time was spent in the cities, but what I saw happening to Florida while travelling the state as a newspaper columnist changed me.

I began to develop a fear that Florida, a great state with a great history, was developing a disturbing downside – that our progress is bringing with it a toxic culture that carries more penalties than it should. This downside gives a negative tilt to what should be creative change. The conveniences in our lives have begun to outstrip the qualities, and that we need a better balance.

This concern is not any sort of complicated intuition or philosophy. It's based on that reflex of self-defense, the desire to save the things in both our built and natural environments that influence our

lives with something more than the daily appetites. It's based on what all of us see out there in our daily lives.

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

Sidney Harris once wrote that when a man has a pet peeve it's remarkable how often he pets it. I have been petting this one so long that I have grown old on the job and a little cranky, and I know that I repeat myself, but the message never seems old to me, and I never get tired of delivering it. Who gets so tired he would quit defending his home? Or, quits defending the air he breathes and the water he drinks?

My attitude is something like that of the old detective in one of Raymond Chandler's novels: He said he was neat, clean, shaved and sober – and didn't care who knew it. That's me too.

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. Why not? I don't see anything else working all that well.

I cling to a belief in the human conscience and the democratic process. They might work slowly, but eventually they work. Eventually, we hope, the good and the bad will take on their clear identities. Eventually, we believe, the damage will pile up so high it angers us; the great pity is what we have lost in the meantime. Yet, however stressed Floridians might be, our springs still have their magic. They still offer experiences that we can find nowhere else, and out of those can come a sense of connection with how Florida evolved and what Florida really is.

We go for a swim or a float or just to gawk and there comes a nudge toward historic understanding. Despite wars and depressions, hurricanes and freezes, Democrats and Republicans, the water still bubbles up. Like all of us, the springs have been stressed, but incredibly they keep bubbling, and they still keep promising that in Florida there remain these lovely and inspirational gifts – enduring if cared for – that are irreplaceable, beyond any dollar value, easily enjoyed if left natural, but easily destroyed if too closely captured.

Those old Spanish conquistadores who came here in the 16th century were looking for the fountain of youth but never found one; they were looking for the wrong thing. They never understood it, but they really did find place of rejuvenation. 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 – many springs, rivers, and lakes and an extraordinary range of geography, climate, plant and animal life.

Florida springs were, and still are today, watering holes for the spirit where every minute, every hour, every day offers 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 gold or magic, as the conquistadors did, you miss the greatest treasures.

How the Spaniards treated the land and the peoples here created what historians have called a Black Legend, a major soil on their historical reputation. But it wasn't just the Spaniards. In Florida it

has been happening over and over ever since. Sometimes it happens with old-time Floridians who should know better and sometimes it happens with wave after wave of new arrivals who act before they have had a chance to learn better.

The Spaniards might have started it, but myopic exploitation has been the curse of Florida ever since its founding. We have added our own black legend.

Let me close with a couple of favorite quotations. I often use them because for me they have always captured the dilemmas of Florida.

From the writer Loren Eiseley, "We are deliberately poisoning our water and our air and food," he said, "because we think it will create a better life and a more secure future — that is our thinking."

Eisely quoted what an Eskimo told an explorer in the Arctic, "We fear the cold and we fear the things we do not understand," the Eskimo said, "But most of all we fear the doings of the heedless ones among us." This quote touches on the problems of Florida. We have to fear the doings of the heedless ones among us, whether they hold political office or not.

Herman Melville said much the same thing in his great novel, *Moby Dick*, "There is a madness loose in the world that passes for reason," he said. In *Moby Dick*, Captain Ahab was obsessed with the killing of a whale, but Ahab's methods were business-like and sane. Only his purposes were mad.

Such madness is not just the stuff of novels. Look around you in Florida at all the self-inflicted injuries, and take stock.

Especially take a long look at the springs, and resolve to do everything you can to keep them, too, from breaking out with a case of what Archie Carr saw as terminal measles.

[© 2011 University of Florida George A. Smathers Libraries.](#)
[All rights reserved.](#)
[Acceptable Use, Copyright, and Disclaimer Statement.](#)