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Florida's Roving Reporter and *Miami Herald* Columnist

"A Place Called Melrose"

Alachua and Marion County Medical Societies, UF Hotel and Conference Center, Gainesville, Florida, March 16, 2001

I come to you from a place called Melrose, a place so different from most of Florida that it is suggestive of the past, suggestive of the Florida that is slipping away from us so fast.

Melrose is a place where 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 by lightning bugs bumping against the windows, 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.

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.

Deer feed in my yard, possums and raccoons compete with our pets at their dinner bowls, egrets stroll our lake front unmolested, and sandhill cranes live year-round in nearby pastures – and strangers come only by accident.

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 alight on you. In the best of our quiet times in Melrose, we imagine that we commune with the butterfly.

This is all personal. I am retired now, and I don't represent any one – except maybe the everyday Floridian. The Floridian who has no special axe to grind, and no business to promote. The Floridian who sees Florida simply as home, not a business opportunity. The Floridian who is tired of seeing people mess the state up for short-term gain.

We everyday folk think that Florida faces one issue that over-rides all others: how to accommodate growth without being stupid about it, how to let growth provide an engine without taking over the steering. We just want Florida to remain Florida, and not turn into some chintzy imitation of itself. We want to always be able to see, feel, and taste the real thing.

Everything else follows that.

We appeal to you – to all Floridians – to keep Florida in the forefront of their consciences. Remember Florida when you vote, when you donate money, when you lobby, when you talk with friends, when you expose yourself to the hazards of politics and politicians. Keep in mind the health of Florida.

We common folk occur all over Florida, almost anywhere and everywhere – like weeds and wildflowers – and make a statement by our presence. We stir the memory, provoke the conscience, and sometimes agitate the Babbits.

We see Florida as a place struggling to stay true to itself, struggling to maintain an honest identity. We like luxuries and conveniences too, like everybody else, but we think it is possible to pay too much for them. Sometimes, we think that what we are getting in Florida 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, the things of home that are blooded and boned into our beings that represent heritage and identity and reaffirm the individual dimensions of our lives, the true things of Florida.

In Florida the facts and the science tell a powerful story. They accent the Florida dilemma. It is a tale of the many who so love this extraordinary place that they stampede here – branding it with their initials, shaping it with their customs, blocking it out for shopping mall convenience – tasting and feeling and digesting Florida and then turning it into something less attractive.

The numbers are staggering. In 1940 Florida had fewer than 2 million residents; now it has more than 15 million and a high percentage of that growth bypassed the stork; it came through migration. That's an average net gain of more than 200,000 new residents per year. That's like adding a couple of cities to Florida every year for 60 years.

The numbers reveal that we became a state populated by virtual strangers — unfamiliar with each other, and unfamiliar with our beautifully peculiar state with its aquifers and varied ranges of temperature and natural life. Equipped with that ignorance, we set goals and elected politicians. To quote from *Alice in Wonderland*, when you don't know where you're going, any road will do.

The numbers reveal Florida now as a place of many origins and many languages and a smorgasbord of customs — all of them with a legitimate claim on space and propriety. All of these customs belong to genuine Floridians. In today's Florida oldtimers often feel as alien as newcomers. Florida has become a place peopled by strangers, yet it is so uneasy with strangers that the newest and best communities have walls and gates. It has become 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, the frictions created by unlimited demands and limited capacities deliver such a range of problems that it is understandable if sometimes we feel we are under siege.

But the Florida story is imperfectly told if you rely only on numbers. For understanding, we also need to talk about things not measurable by numbers — memory, appreciation, and mystique.

Somehow the natural wonders of Florida — be they springs or forests or swamps or bays — offer the jaded a mental rinse. They nourish respect for our natural past, and they encourage us to recognize that what we have left is too precious to leave to the whims of hucksters who never floated down a stream like the Ichetucknee, never enjoyed the whistle of a bobwhite, never sipped from a spring while keeping an eye on a crawfish at the bottom, never walked through a forest and imagined how it must have been before there were interstates and jets and skyscrapers — when Native Americans or Spanish conquistadores romped through the palmettos and knelt and drank from springs, hopping it would make them youthful.

Those evocative experiences give us a nudge toward historic understanding. Despite wars and depressions, hurricanes and freezes, Democrats and Republicans, the breezes still blow, spring water still bubbles up, swamps still rule as the biological headquarters for the land, the birds still migrate and the seasons still change in their own peculiar Florida way. There still 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.

Even though those old Spaniards never understood, there really was a fountain of youth here all along. They just didn't recognize it. It was not a single place that restored youth, as they had hoped. There was much more. There were these figurative watering holes of the spirit, these natural wonders that every day create new beginnings and new capacities for life.

Almost all Floridians now, old or new, understand that these and other special realities of Florida are more vulnerable than ever because population 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 was here before. 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.

From the Keys north, in every county, along every shoreline, every river and lake, every wetlands, 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.

The writer Loren Eiseley put it well, "We are deliberately poisoning our water and our air and food because we think it will create a better life and a more secure future – that is our thinking."

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.

In a state as individual and peculiar as this one, intelligent analysis can be made only if it is judged against itself, by its own standards and its own natural treasures and by its own past.

Let me offer you some memories, maybe refresh your recall, of the way things were. These are the kinds of things you might think about when it's midnight and you're still trying to go to sleep. As T.S. Eliot said, "Midnight shakes the memory the way a madman shakes a dead geranium." I have a bouquet of those dead geraniums for you.

Maybe you don't remember when you could drive down AIA and see the beaches and the water, rather than condos standing tall on old dunes like tombstones marking the spot where Florida was buried. Maybe you don't remember when you could drive along U.S.1 on the Indian River and stop at Mom-and-Pop seafood stands for a bag of fried shrimp, and sit in an old fish house listening to the oldtimers tell tales of when marine life thrived in that lagoon - schools of fish might be a mile long "back then" when they could go out in a boat at night, hold a lighted torch near the bow of the boat, and the spooked mullet would jump right in the boat.

Maybe you don't remember driving the hills of central Florida's U.S. 27 when the orange trees were in blossom and the air was filled with Florida perfume, or when you could stop grove-side at a juice stand and drink all the orange juice you could hold for a dime?

Maybe you don't remember when the Keys were *not* one big traffic jam and their pollution was *not* seeping out into the gulf or Florida Bay, and the coral reefs were *not* dying, and the fishing industry was *not* withering away.

Maybe you don't 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.

Maybe you don't remember how in southwest Florida the wading birds would fly up in clouds so large they would create a minor eclipse of the sun.

Maybe you did not see Florida in the days when a 50-foot oceanfront lot over at Flagler Beach could be bought for \$25 down and \$10 a month, and few takers.

Maybe you don't remember when Naples was a remote place and property sold for the price of a dinner there today, or when Destin was a long, unbroken stretch of dunes, mile after mile.

Maybe you don't remember the days when you could meet strangers in Florida and they probably would be Floridians.

Maybe you don't 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. Many coastal Floridians can only board up, pray and hope.

Maybe you don't remember when we had plenty of water – in our aquifers and in our lakes – and we could shower as long as we wanted, and we could water our lawns anytime we chose.

Maybe you don't remember when some of those subdivisions were wetlands. In those years, the rains didn't bring floods, and droughts didn't guarantee wildfires.

Maybe you don't remember when you could gather oysters, or catch fish, and eat them without any concerns about whether they might endanger your health. Back then you could dig donax at the beach and make a tasty soup.

Maybe you don't remember when all our lakes had water enough that you could swim in them, and when you could swim in any Florida waters — ocean, gulf, river or lake – without worries that the water itself might be hazardous.

Maybe you don't remember the days when you looked at a restaurant menu and you could recognize the names of all the fish, and you knew that they came out of Florida waters.

These memories could go on and on, but you get the picture. It's a tale of progression. Good and bad things happened but in overview you can tell, from the way that history is blowing, the direction Florida's heading.

As we have gone from frontier to the fourth largest state, in barely more than one lifetime, almost everything we love about Florida has been put at risk.

One of the great dangers is that we grow accustomed to the idea of lowered standards. We get used to them. We forget, and we lower our expectations. We expect the traffic to be bad, the air to be

hazy, the water to taste funny. We accept declining performance as the norm – and as Floridians we cannot afford that.

We need to take special care to remember what has happened, what we have lost. We owe to future generations not to waste the dead-eye accuracy of hindsight. We need those lessons for the future.

And finally, closer to home, I quote another of my favorite authors, from a current book, *The Tropic of Cracker*. It goes this way:

“The beginning of the next Florida is in sight .... The future is happening now.... [But] whether that next Florida will evolve as a true descendant of the old one [has become] a matter now [only] for hope, not prophecy.”

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