

CG 3

Interviewee: Stephen Specht

Interviewer: Steve Noll

Date: June 23, 2003

N: Good afternoon, this is Steve Noll from the University of Florida, working on the Cross Florida Barge Canal Project. I'm here in Silver Springs, Florida interviewing Stephen Specht. Good afternoon.

S: Good afternoon.

N: You don't have to tell me your name because we've already stated it, but tell me your position and how long you've worked here.

S: I'm Steve Specht. I'm fifty-two years old and I'm the Marketing Public Relations Manager for Silver Springs and Wild Waters. I've been an employee at the park here in that capacity since 1995.

N: As part of that job description you're involved in regarding the history of Silver Springs and its relationship to where it stands today?

S: That's correct.

N: Why don't you tell me a little bit about Silver Springs and its beginnings as a tourist attraction in the late nineteenth century.

S: Alright, Silver Springs was always a major watering hole for prehistoric animals, 10,000 years ago when the springs themselves began. Then, it was a major area for the Native Americans who lived in the area, the \_\_\_\_\_ Indians. The Spanish explorers came through, the early settlers, and then when the white settlers came in the Seminole Indian Wars occurred nearby here with Fort King. This area has a lot of history. It was a major part of commerce up until the late 1800s. River boats would come from Jacksonville down to St. Johns, the Oklawaha, and then up the nine miles of the Silver River; unload their good here at Silver Springs; and transport them to Tampa, first by wagon and later by rail. That was faster and safer than the boats actually sailing all the way around the peninsula. This was actually as far west across the state as one could sail, and it was a major port of commerce. Then in 1878, a gentleman, a local resident named Hullam Jones put a plate glass on the bottom of a canoe and started charging folks a few pennies to row them out over the springs. That's how we've been able to document that that was when folks first came to Silver Springs just to look down into the natural clarity of the water and enjoy the beauty and the natural beauty surrounding them. So, since then of course the glass bottom boats have evolved over years. Then they started becoming more comfortable for the passenger. They started putting in cushions, canopies, electric motors. Other attractions opened up here as well with Ross Allen and the Reptile Institute

in the 1920s, Colonel Tooley at about the same time came in with the Jungle Cruise attraction. Over the years other attractions opened up. There was the *Prince of Peace*, there was Tommy Bartlett's Deer Ranch, and there was just a lot of different exhibits and attractions and vendors who participated here over the years. Of course the glass bottom boats were always the main attraction.

N: How long after the advent of the glass bottom boat did the carrying trade in goods decline to where that wasn't a major port and Silver Springs no longer remained itself as a port of entry for middle Florida?

S: I believe the river boat business kind of waned by the turn of the nineteenth century. So, by 1910 there were very few, if any, river boats still operating from what I understand. The glass bottom boats invention and the operation here in the early days still continued while river boats were still operating in the area.

N: What kinds of goods were traded through here?

S: Well, primarily they were non-perishables that were brought in, plus a lot of tourists. The tourist business became very big. Harriet Beecher Stowe came here. Ulysses S. Grant visited here after his presidency. Silver Springs, the notoriety of the area, and the beauty of the area really got out there. The word got out and a lot of people wanted to come here. Of course the fact that they built a three-story, 200 room hotel here called the Brown Hotel, which burned around 1900 and then another hotel was built in its place; but once they had overnight accommodations, it really took off. It was a one-day, two-night trip from Palatka by river boat here.

N: That's the way that most tourists came here then, by river boat right?

S: Right, they could always come by wagon, and as a shorter trip by wagon from Palatka, but people were still worried about renegade Indians in the area plus a lot of robbers and bandits were still in the area. So, it was still not a real safe trip by wagon or stage coach from Palatka to Silver Springs and back.

N: So up until the beginning of the twentieth century, or even after, you could maybe say that Silver Springs is almost closer in relation to Palatka than Ocala? I don't mean geographically, but sort of economically.

S: I couldn't tell you that, honestly.

N: The majority of tourists are coming from Palatka?

S: Oh yeah, because Ocala was basically turning into a railroad depot and it was where all the good, once they came here to Silver Springs, they were transported to warehouses and stores there in Ocala.

N: So when does the railroad from Ocala come to here?

S: That came about around the same time, right around the turn of the twentieth century. In fact it was actually a wooden rail. It actually caught on fire from the embers. I've read stories about it catching fire from the embers from the train before they finally put in steel rails, but that's another story all about the railroad operation. Originally it was just a dirt road from Silver Springs to Ocala. In fact that's why you drive down to Silver Springs Boulevard here and you see that median which has two rows of oak trees. There's almost like a passage way right down the middle. That was the original rail. Now, the highway is on both sides, the outside of those two sets of trees.

N: With the coming of the railroad and the association then of Silver Springs more with Ocala, the river boat traffic basically dried up at that point?

S: Yes, once the railroads became better, the roads became better, it became safer to travel by wagon and more accommodations were built in the area the tourist business did pick up. Then, it started waning between 1910 and 1920. A lot of that of course had to do with the advent of WWI. People were focused on other things. Then, Ross Allen came in here around 1925, 1928, and he brought in his Reptile Institute. In the early days it was just him with a couple of snacks in a bag and an Alligator, and he started doing animal shows. The people that operated the Silver Springs during its heyday, Ray and Davidson, came in 1924 and they actually leased the land, a fifty year lease, from the Carmichael family that actually owned the land. They actually signed a fifty year lease and they're the ones that really brought Silver Springs out. They improved the glass bottom boats; they brought in more outside vendors; as I said, Ross Allen; then they brought in Colonel Tooey, they brought in the Jungle Cruise attraction; and they started bringing in people that did glass blowing; they had restaurants here; and it really became a big business.

N: Did they also involve themselves in overnight accommodations once the Brown Hotel burned down? I've seen these great pictures of the big hotel there. Anymore hotels built around the springs themselves?

S: There were but those were primarily smaller, independent operation. The Ray and Davidson were not involved in overnight accommodations.

N: Okay, so they're separate.

S: Yes, they stayed focused in the early years primarily on Silver Springs and developing it as an attraction.

N: Maybe by the 1920s, to the advent of automobile, tourism really brought Silver Springs up again.

- S: Right, yeah with the better road conditions, better automobiles, plus the fact that Ray and Davidson were great promoters in bringing in the movie industry. In fact the first movie was shot at Silver Springs in 1917, called Seven Swans. From 1932 to 1942, six Tarzan movies were filmed here with Johnny Weissmuller and Maureen O'Sullivan. Over the years, as we all know, there were many more movies. The Yearling was filmed here, Creature from the Black Lagoon, 100 episodes of Sea Hunt in the late 1950s. By then though, ABC had acquire Silver Springs from Ray and Davidson. Of course if you have a big media giant like ABC you're going to get a lot more TV and movie work too at the attraction. Silver Springs was definitely the underwater filming capital of the world between the 1930s and the 1950s.
- N: Well the 1930s then brings us to the advent of the first attempt to build this canal across Florida. In the 1930s ground is broken for this Cross Florida Ship Canal. Ocala appears to be a very big booster of this Cross Florida Canal. What was Silver Springs' relationship to this? Were they in favor of this canal? Did they see it as problematic to the springs or did they see it as an opportunity to bring in more?
- S: I honestly couldn't tell you. I don't know what the official statement was. Ray and Davidson were businessmen, and if they felt it would be beneficial I'm sure they were behind it.
- N: Ocala was just incredible boosters. What year does ABC purchase the park?
- S: In the late 1950s.
- N: So they're owners when the next barge canal comes about, which is 1964. This time President Johnson comes down and pushes the button to start the charge on the side, Palatka. This time, the opposition to the Barge Canal was extraordinarily environmental. Silver Springs appears, in a business sense, to really be worried about the effect of this canal upon their attraction. Can you speak at all about that, how this swath of land could affect the attractiveness of Silver Springs as a natural phenomenon?
- S: I think by then, Silver Springs was *the* tourist attraction in Florida. Disney didn't open up until 1971, and the other major parks were right behind. So, anyone who came to Florida, you came to Silver Springs and/or you might go to Cypress Gardens or Sarasota Jungle Gardens, do some fishing, going to the beach, or visit your family. Everybody came to Silver Springs because this was where it was all happening. You had TV shows, you had movies here, you had the Jungle Cruise, the glass bottom boats, Tommy Bartlett's Deer Ranch, you had all kinds of shops and restaurants going on here, and it was open twenty-four hours a day. There was no admission, not until the late 1960s did they actually put a

fence and start charging folks a few pennies to come out here. Until then, you could come out here twenty-four hours a day and just wander around and not pay a penny unless you wanted to go out on one of the boats. The boats operated every day from dawn to dusk, year round. This was *the* happening place, so I'm sure the owner's, by the 1960s, saw that why kills the goose that lays the golden egg here and going to stick with it as a tourist attraction. They probably saw in the distance that there were going to be other big parks that were going to come up, and perhaps they had some inkling that Disney was going to be coming in the are. So, they felt that they did not want to do anything that would jeopardize what they had.

N: At this point, Silver Springs is an important economic voice in the Ocala area?

S: Oh, it's *the* economic voice in all of Marion County. It was the major employer in the area for many, many years. Everything else pretty much sprang up around Silver Springs. Smaller industries were lumber, citrus before it burned out, but tourism was *the* backbone of the economy locally.

N: With the demise of the Barge Canal and the replacement of it with this kind of natural linear park from Yankee Town to Palatka, it appears that Central Florida is kind of returning to a vision of ecological tourism, which at some level is the vision of Silver Springs. How is the Barge Canal turning into the park, is that having any effect do you think on Silver Springs and people's understanding of what this place is and it's relationship to Florida's natural environment?

S: I think it's a perfect compliment to it. People who are interested in the Greenway definitely would be interested in seeing an attraction that showcases the natural Florida, and vice a versa. So, I see it as a compliment to each other. It can only help.

N: You guys really focus on natural Florida. How, also, are you focusing on the historical aspects of Silver Springs and the relationship of man to the land in this area in how you market Silver Springs?

S: Well, we market Silver Springs as nature's theme park, and come and see the real Florida, Silver Springs. Granted, we do have some exotic animals here, but those were never brought in here as a master plan. They were brought in because, at the time, ABC owned a zoo up in Virginia in the mid 1960s and that zoo went under, so they had to do something with those animals. So, they were brought to Silver Springs, but they were never brought in as part of a [vision to] make this place into a zoo. In fact in the last few years we've been cutting back from that. We're not bringing in any new animals and we're basically just focusing on native species and the natural Florida. We feel that that is definitely our niche, and that's the direction we're going in.

N: Kind of like Homassas and their way of getting rid of all their animals there. I guess all they've got at Homassas now is the hippo, because he's too old to move.

S: Right, and nobody wants him.

N: Are you guys involved in any archeological research dealing with the Native American populations that certainly inhabited this land for centuries?

S: Not at the present time, but we have in the past. When there's been any construction of anything going on here at the park an assessment of the land is made first for archeological artifacts that might be in the area. If we come across anything we stop immediately and call in the expert. This area has been looked at and picked over and examined many, many times over the years.

N: In the spring itself there's artifacts?

S: There are still some artifacts or fossils down inside the main cave area, called Mammoth Cave, here in the main spring area. It's about sixty-five feet down and there are some rib bones from some manatees, some saber tooth cats, and ground sloths that have been found down there. In the mid 1960s an excavation occurred down river about half a mile, in which they actually found a full-size mammoth. They brought it up tusks and all. In fact we even found a spear point in the rib of the mammoths, so we know that man was in the area at least 10,000 years ago.

N: What happened to that skeleton?

S: It's been distributed everywhere, UF, Florida State. In fact the people that excavated it, I think some of them are professors out in Arizona and they've got parts of it right now. Also, the Silver River Museum, I believe, has some of the bones. They have a full-scale pre-Columbian mammoth right there inside the museum when you walk in. It's a wonderful exhibit. Silver Springs has gone through many, many hands since Ray and Davidson and ABC, and it's gone through many hands. Some of the previous owners did not really appreciate the historical significance of Silver Springs, unlike the current owners Palace Entertainment. They're doing a wonderful job. In fact they've funded the opening of a historical showcase here at Silver Springs this year to showcase our 125th Anniversary with the invention of the glass bottom boat. Previous owners, a lot of times, they came in and they would purge a lot of old files, a lot of old books, a lot of old artifacts. Fortunately, the Silver River Museum curator, **Guy Marwick**, came over and picked up a lot of that. A lot of the really good things that we would like to see here distributed and displayed at Silver Springs they've got over there at Silver River Museum, but we're just pleased that somebody's

got them and has got them on display.

N: That was my question, what's your relationship to the Silver River Museum, and you answered that.

S: very close

N: That's a state run museum?

S: Yes.

N: They are located along the Silver River kind of between the spring.

S: Silver Springs' property is adjacent to the Silver River State Park. There's camping over there, they have cabins, and they have a wonderful historical museum there. [They have] a great library with a lot of the old artifacts and a great resource for books and photography over there about the history of Marion County. They also have a full-scale authentic cracker village over there.

N: This Silver River then, which flows out of the springs, ends up in the Oklawaha about seven or eight miles east of here. It's important, I assume, that the river itself stay pristine?

S: Yes.

N: Is that owned by the state right now, both sides?

S: Yes, as far as I know, all 350 acres.

N: That's significantly beneficial to Silver Springs as a tourist attraction because the springs . . .

S: Yes, you're not going to see golf courses or condominiums built on the river rides. It's going to stay pristine, natural Florida. This is a public waterway, so people can come all the way up here from the Ocala boat basin, which is down by the Wayside Park on route forty, right next to the old Barge Canal Bridge, that huge bridge. I wondered when I first moved here, why is this huge bridge built here? Now, I know. People can get in down there. They can launch their boats, kayaks, motorboats, what have you, and motor or paddle all the way up here to the head waters of silver springs and then turn around and paddle back. There's no where else to get out. There is one little beach that you would have to get out and walk about a mile through the woods to get to Silver River State Park, but that's the only exit. So, within 100 yards of the head water here though you're not allowed to dock, fish, or get out of your boat.

- N: You can take your boat all the way into the head?
- S: [You can go] all the way up to the headwaters and then look down into the springs, just like the river boats did back in the late 1800s, and then turn around and go back.
- N: I'm amazed that people could come in here until the late 1960s and do anything. The only charge was simply to use the glass bottom boats.
- S: Right, or go out on the Jungle Cruise, or go into the Ross Allen Reptile Institute. It was open twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week.
- N: Wow, that's amazing. One more thing about that, it's kind of off the subject, the monkeys; tell me about the monkeys.
- S: Thanks to Colonel Tooley with the Jungle Cruise he brought those in in the early 1930s because he wanted to add an exotic jungle element to the Jungle Cruise attraction. That is not something you could do today. He brought in a small troop of Rhesus monkeys and released them on an island out in the middle of the Silver River. Unfortunately, those monkeys promptly jumped into the water, swam to the shoreline and started breeding. They've been there ever since. Some people thought they were brought in for the Tarzan movies, they were not. These things are small, little, skittish animals and they would not sit around and wait for a director to tell them what to do. Those animals were brought in for the Jungle Cruise and Colonel Tooley is the one that brought them in.
- N: Are they trying to eradicate them?
- S: They've dispersed. Silver Springs, like I said, is adjacent to the Silver River State Park which is adjacent to the Ocala National Forest. I've been here now over eight years, and in the last year I've seen only one monkey. I think they're either dispersing and/or they're falling prey to natural predators. There are bobcats out there, there are owls, there are hawks, and alligators when monkeys swim across the river.
- N: Okay, anything else that you've got to add about the human history of this kind of neat place?
- S: History is what Silver Springs has, that I've always said, that's what it has that no other park can touch. [It has] not just the 125 years as a tourist attraction, but the 10,000 natural history of Silver Springs. That's something no mega-park can do. You cannot replicate history. It's just been a real joy to work here because I'm constantly talking to people and learning new things. I'm really please with our historical showcase that has everything from fossils to Native American artifacts, archive photos of the river boat era, we've got film clips of the movies that have

been shot down there, information about and photos of the glass bottom boats. In fact the original glass bottom boat was restored by Ross Allen and it's currently on exhibit in the Museum of Florida History up in Tallahassee. It's an important part of Florida's history, Florida's tourism history and Silver Springs.

N: Well, thank you very much.

S: Thank you.

[End of the interview]