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Florida's Roving Reporter and *Miami Herald* Columnist

"The Ocklawaha River"

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More than a half-century ago I camped overnight alongside a river with a funny name – the Ocklawaha—and forever after the natural eloquence of that crooked river stayed with me. I would never forget that name that has such a nice phonetic bounce, or that river that curled and bent its way through a large forest. This was Florida at its best.

Now we are here to salute that river that has been crippled so long by a thorn in its gullet. It has a dignified name, the Rodman dam but I think most of us here would prefer to call it by a more descriptive name, "The Dam Shame."

The river deserves a psalm sung to it, but we'll have to make do with some simple words of appreciation. Where free, the Ocklawaha fits symbolically into Florida, a place that naturally bends and curves, one that borrows a laidback flexibility from the tropics to our south.

It's the natural inclination of Florida to let the winds blow and the streams flow and to bend and bow with them. It seems like a proper acknowledgment of what they represent. Their natural form makes the rigidity of the Dam Shame seem as alien as a girdle on a manatee, a tight, choking girdle.

The biologists and other scientists can give you a lot of stone-cold reasons that can be reduced to math on why the dam should not be there. I give you the same answer Abraham Lincoln once gave to a woman who sat on his stove-pipe hat. "Ma'am," he said, "If you would have asked me before you tried it, I could have told you it wouldn't fit."

The dam just doesn't fit.

It interrupts a dream, and interrupted dreams make our hearts ache. Still, sometimes they create our most compelling legends.

The story of King Arthur and the sad fall of Camelot is one fictional example. There are a lot of real ones though. The assassination of President Kennedy elevated him and his never-realized ideals into legend. Gov. LeRoy Collins, whom I think of as Florida's greatest statesman, lost his last political campaign – and it added a poignancy to his life and career that made all the rest of it seem greater. We see these things all around us. Marjory Stoneman Douglas, the great crusader for the Everglades, lived well past 100 – but the Everglades still were in jeopardy when she died and entered legend. Art Marshall, the pioneering Florida environmentalist who lived his last years over here in Interlachen, died just as his life's theories and dreams about the Everglades reached their greatest legitimacy. The damming of the Ocklawaha – the creation of the Dam Shame – spoiled the dreams of our own great lady right here at home, Marjorie Carr and her family of fellow believers.

Those names have passed into history, where their stories will inspire Floridians for all time. Their contributions will never end. We are here tonight – with a special focus on that “Dam Shame” – to try and keep their ideals and their standards alive in Florida.

We do not doubt that one day the dam will come down, but it has been a long wait and we are tired of waiting for our politicians to do the right thing.

Those heroes believed in the Florida that came to us naturally, as a gift from God – the Florida with all those intimidating swamps, and those nights that fell black without the interruption of halogen lights, the one with free-flowing rivers and great stretches of forests whose silence was broken only by the wind or the cry of an animal. The real Florida, not the facade that overlays it.

Our heroes believed that the great Florida treasures would not fit into a museum or a vault; that they needed the setting of open vistas and the influences of seasons and currents and natural life. Their vision was to keep the best things of Florida alive, vital, and responsive.

They loved natural Florida and all its necessary parts – the heat and the thunderstorms as well as the clear springs and uncluttered beaches. They believed that the good life – and a buoyant marketplace – depended on good surroundings. They believed the economy and the environment to be mutually dependent. They believed that it was not necessary to cannibalize the natural gifts of Florida in order to have good jobs and a secure life. They believed that there could not be a good and enduring economy without the encouragement and attraction of a good and enduring environment.

As our state scrambles for answers, we live in a time of great jeopardy. I have come to fear that we have developed a toxic culture that eats up our identity as a special place, and upsets our balance as we weigh decisions about the future.

Nothing beats the dead-eye accuracy of hindsight. Let me sharpshoot a little bit.

“Midnight shakes the memory the way a madman shakes a dead geranium,” T. S. Eliot wrote. It is midnight in Florida and I am going to shake a large bouquet of dead geraniums at you right now.

Remember when native Floridians would have fallen over laughing if someone suggested we needed to rebuild or re-create some swamps.

Remember when cows had the right-of-way on the highway? And if you hit one, it was your fault. It seems silly now but some special interests then said that it was absolutely necessary for business.

Remember when you could meet strangers in Florida and they would be Floridians?

Remember when we had real wildflowers in the landscapes when no one had to plant them? And when there were native plants available natively – and not just in nurseries?

Remember when you looked at a restaurant menu and you could recognize the names of all the fish, and you knew they came out of Florida waters?

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?

Remember when it was possible for coastal areas to evacuate when a dangerous hurricane approached?

Remember when some of those subdivisions were wetlands, and the rains didn't bring floods, and the droughts didn't bring wildfires ?

Remember a time when mosquitoes were so bad that ranchers kept their cows on Oceanside property at night so that sea breezes would blow the mosquitoes away?

Remember those tacky roadside stands that sold live baby alligators for one dollar each and those huge piles of Conch shells pyramided out front? Marine life skeletons being sold as doorstops and bits of the now-sacred coral reefs broken off and ready to become dust-catching knick-knacks.

Remember when there were open honor boxes posted unattended on the OF campus, where you were expected to drop in one nickel and take out one apple – and students did that?

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 is being big buried?

Or, 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. You could sit in an old fish house and hear the old-timers tell tales of when marine life thrived in that lagoon – when, for example, schools of mullet might be a mile long and fishermen could go out in a boat at night and hold a lighted torch near the bow, and the spooked mullet would jump right in the boat .

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? You could stop grove-side at a juice stands and drink all the orange juice you could hold for a dime.

Remember when the Keys were NOT one big traffic jam and their pollution was NOT seeping out into the gulf and into Florida Bay and the coral reefs were NOT dying and the fishing industry was NOT withering away.

Remember how in southwest Florida years ago the wading birds would fly up in clouds so large they could briefly eclipse the sun?

Remember when Destin was a long, unbroken stretch of dunes, mile after mile after mile? Remember when you could gather oysters, or catch fish, and eat them without any concerns about whether they might endanger your health? Remember when you could dig donax at the beach and make a tasty soup?

Remember when you could swim in the ocean, or the gulf, or in any river or lake, without worries that the water itself might be hazardous?

Remember when the Kissimmee River was turned into a ditch at a cost of millions of dollars (it was necessary for business), and then years later its curves and bends were put back in at a cost of more millions?

And, of course, tonight especially we remember the Ocklawaha River before the “Dam Shame” came along – when the river curved and twisted gracefully through lush forests.

That sample of memories is not just nostalgia, not just an old fogey’s memories. Those things are weather vanes from the past.

You can tell – from the way that history is blowing – the direction that Florida’s heading. The future is just down the road and just over the hill and we can almost see it.

The state of Florida is becoming the city of Florida. From the gulf to the Atlantic, from Georgia to the Caribbean, it’s becoming one great big city. It emerges, year by year, without blueprints, inventing itself more by simple additions than by civic imagination. It arrives in turbulence, with an arrhythmic heartbeat and a spinning mind and a grasping hand, and it is a very different place from the Florida of my youth, and yours. It is one that grows so fast it forgets; it has little appreciation of history.

Florida has grown too fast and changed awkwardly, adopting other visions brought from other places and becoming piece by piece a reflection of somewhere else, putting an overlay of exotic identities on our natural one. There has been a pattern in the forgetting of our own special history and a loss of understanding about the special nature of Florida and the customs that grew out of adaptations to that. We have lost 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. There has been a loss of sensitivity and protective love for the unique qualities of this state.

The job for us, who care, is to sensitize Floridians about natural Florida and about our history. I think we ought to begin by trying to appeal to consciences. These days, most folk consider that impractical, maybe even naive – but I don’t. I still believe in the human conscience and the democratic process. They might be slow, but they work.

I live with the hope – however faint it may be some times – 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.

Our problems would tax the wisdom of Solomon, you might say. But we've tried that, too. Government, again and again, has tried Solomon-like approaches tried reasonable political compromises. It has met problems head-on and halfway and prided itself on being fair. And time after time it has sliced 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 much more of that Solomon-style judgment. We cannot really stand for any more of our earth babies to be saved by cutting them in half.

Floridians like me are not against all change. We don't believe that change has to be bad, but we have cause to be cautious and skeptical, and we *do* believe that change should be creative. We think moderation and balance need not be old-fashioned concepts. We think good possibilities need not be looked on as impossible miracles, even though we are not encouraged by what we see.

We need to recognize that what we have left is too precious to let it be squandered by hucksters, many of whom have never dug a sandspur out of a bare foot, or sipped from a clear spring, or been struck with fear by the raspy warning of a nearby rattlesnake, or been startled by a deer, or by a sudden flushing of quail.

We old-time Floridians have become weary of the snake-oil salesmen who are always coming along with a new plan to improve Florida, offering these great schemes to gild something that is already golden – always promising that this new thing, this time, will let us all live happily ever after.

There is plenty of evidence about what is happening to Florida on display. Take stock. From the Keys north, in every county, along every shoreline, every river and lake, every wetland, 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.

Finally, let me borrow favorite wisdom once again, this time from the great novel, *Moby Dick*. In that book, Captain Ahab was obsessed with the killing of a great whale, but Ahab's methods were business-like and sane. Only his purposes were mad.

"There is a madness loose in the world that passes for reason," Melville explained.

The madness is not just the stuff of novels. Look around you in Florida. It's a "Dam Shame."

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