Slowing Down to Look, Listen And Visit Our Hidden Corners

When I met Ann Hyman in Jacksonville last year, she told me that she always takes the back roads. My first thought was — how does she have time to take the back roads — when I always seem to be going just a bit too fast down 95, 75 or 10? My second thought was that Ann would be a great choice for a writer’s tour of Polk County. We decided that we needed someone who would leap at the chance to poke around a hidden corner of Florida.

Each March, the Florida Humanities Council invites Floridians to explore a different corner of their state at the Florida Gathering. This is the festival for you if you want to learn more about your state’s legends and landscapes — in the company of 300 or so other Floridians.

It takes about a year for us to prepare for a Florida Gathering. We spend time in the community getting to know the people, asking friends to introduce us to their friends, visiting the institutions and industries. We give the organizations in the community a priority in our grant program, supporting proposals that will develop the infrastructure for cultural tourism. These grants often bring together groups that have not collaborated in the past — for example, the Visitors and Convention Bureau and the public library or a college and a national conservation agency.

For the 1998 Gathering in Polk County, the Florida Humanities Council made six grants totaling $49,000. Through these grants, and with the advice of the community, we organized a weekend full of programs, tours and conversations.

Our advertisement for the 1998 Gathering promised the “juiciest weekend of the year.” But, the fun we have is only a part of the impact. We hope that as we come to know our state better, we will love it more — and treat it as our home. We know that by bringing hundreds of Floridians to our smaller communities, by asking local citizens to show us their treasures and their way of life, by commissioning authors and photographers to compose a portrait, the inevitable result will be a sense of pride in place — for those of us who visit and for those of us who live in the community. Perhaps this pride is the first step, or a necessary step, in making Florida home.

Last year only those who were able to attend the Gathering received this publication. This year, we have decided to share it with all of you who receive the FORUM. Many people have told me that they keep their copies of the FORUM on their reference shelf. If you are one of those keepers, you will soon have a collection of these FORUMs devoted to Florida’s back roads — a collection to share with friends and visitors who are traveling around our home.

— Ann Henderson
Polk County Ramble

From the reconstructed cow camp at Lake Kissimmee State Park to the giant phosphate pits of Mulberry, Bartow, and points north, Polk is one big and diverse county (Florida's fourth largest in land area). It also is a bit of a time warp with preserved-in-amber tourist destinations from the '30s and '40s, a Frank Lloyd Wright campus, archaeological sites, expansive orange groves and plenty of '90s-style commerce and development.

Story by Ann Hyman
Photos by Bud Lee
TY RAMBLE
Polk County preserves pockets of the past from the endangered scrub jay to some of Florida's most improbable tourist attractions. At the same time, it is getting on with a commercially busy present and future.

**STORY BY ANN HYMAN**

**PHOTOGRAPHS BY BUD LEE**

Polk County is built on dreams, big dreams and goofy dreams — how else to describe turning a hill on which cars seem to roll up the grade into a tourist attraction, Lake Wales' Spook Hill?

Near the end of the Great Depression, a college president dreams of convincing a legendary architect to design a campus in an orange grove in off-the-beaten-track Central Florida.

A man plants a garden in a few acres of Cypress swamp more than 60 years ago and dreams that it will grow into gardens that the world will come to see.

A woman dreams, (literally, in her sleep) of building a fruit stand, a place to make a modest living selling cukes and yams to folks just over the county line on the Bartow/Tampa road.

"I saw a stand in a dream, a vision of a vegetable stand. And my mother saying, 'Honey, come home.' After that, I would have these dreams, these visions, whatever you call them, about a shed. But it wasn't no ordinary shed," Ruby Williams recollects, nodding at the proof of her dream, the extraordinary shed where she sells tangerines and folk art, whichever catches the customer's eye.

It is no ordinary shed.

And Polk County is no ordinary place.

Polk County sprawls across more than 2,000 square miles of Central Florida; 2,000 square miles of cattle range, phosphate mines, major league baseball outposts, lakes, time-worn hills, citrus groves, pine woods wilderness, scrub, wetlands, snug retirement villages, sprawling malls, and old towns with long histories, as history is counted in this part of Florida.

There are moments when Polk County preserves a glimpse of a frontier Florida Brigadoon, the Broadway-born mythical Scottish village that appeared only once every 100 years, thus preserving forever another way of life. Polk County can generate that sense of other times in the midst of a tall, silent, old citrus grove in Homeland or on a high, sandy trail along the Lake Wales Ridge where the Florida mouse — not Mickey — and the gopher tortoise, the sand skink and the Florida scrub jay make a last stand.

But Polk County is no isolated Brigadoon.

It's a modern, economically thriving county, in area the fourth largest in Florida, home to 400,000 plus folks who live in 17 — count 'em — municipalities, each with its own character, and characters. The largest are Lakeeland and Winter Haven. Others include Auburndale, Bartow, Davenport, Dundee, Eagle Lake, Fort Meade, Frostproof, Haines City, Highland Park, Hillcrest Heights, Lake Alfred, Lake Hamilton, Lake Wales, Mulberry, and Polk City.

Interstate 4 slices across the top of the county, squeezing agriculture, and sprouting development that in-
Three faces of Polk County: Traffic crawls along Interstate 4 (top), a swimming hole near Winter Haven (below), and Lake Morton in Downtown Lakeland (facing page).

**Polk County Facts:**
- Land Area: 2,010 sq. mi.
- Population: 452,707 (1996 estimate based on 1990 census)
- Per capita income: $19,126.00

evitably changes the landscape and culture, changes the people with deep roots in Polk County, and changes, as well, newcomers. Both camps must shed old lifestyles and adapt to new.

Bob and Angie Clark stepped back from the hassles of burgeoning coastal Fort Lauderdale, bought a spectacular Victorian property a block or so from downtown Bartow, and became innkeepers. They operate The Stafford Inn, catering to business travelers, to folks with business at the county government center in Bartow, and to a few vacationers and B&B aficionados who find the inn magnificent, the town quaint.

"I'm very happy with the small town attitude, the friendliness of this town. I'm very happy here," (Angie) Clark said.

Their 13-year-old son, Kevin, is adapting to small town life.

"He has more friends than he had at home. He can walk to school," she said. "It's a different way of life."

It is a different way of life, small town life. But, the Clarks did not exactly move to the boonies when they left Fort Lauderdale.

The interstate puts Polk County in the middle of things. From Lakeland, it is 90 minutes to the Kennedy Spaceport at Cape Canaveral on Florida's Atlantic coast, 30 minutes to Disney World, and 90 minutes to St. Petersburg and the Gulf beaches.

People, places, and interests spin around Polk County like chips in a kaleidoscope, settle into a pattern that blends old and new, urban and rural for a moment, then breaks apart and begins again.

"Diversity" may be the buzzword of the day; and Polk County has it, not simply diversity of people but also diversity of landscapes and of ways of life.

A visitor can drive a few miles in Polk County and move from cattle country that looks like east Texas grassland to phosphate pits that look like the backside of the moon. With only a little looking, you can find old orange groves that border, literally, on the newest subdivision. Polk's 2,000 square miles are full of surprises. Who, for instance, would not be surprised to find a sophisticated, world-class inn on a country road in Polk County? But, it's there. Chalet Suzanne is a loving recreation of provincial France — with its own airstrip to accommodate airborne guests, and praise from the likes of Gourmet magazine. It is within sight, as the bird flies, of the unlikely and beautiful Bok Tower in one direction, and of a shopping mall in another. Chalet Suzanne, operated by the Hinshaw family since 1931, is known all over the world for the table it sets.

The lavish, butter-intensive spread comes at a price. A six-course dinner is $59 to $79, while lunch is $29 to $46. But a meal at Chalet Suzanne is an occasion. It's not just the famous broiled grapefruit topped with one perfect chicken liver. It's the ambiance. Old world all the way. Even the wait staff is in costume. Talk about Brigadoon. This place even has the set and the costumes.

It is breakfast time at Chalet Suzanne. Fog moves through the little orange grove that surrounds it, settles on the surface of the lake, wraps the
Polk offers tourist attractions that nod to an earlier era: Bob and Angie Clark at The Stafford Inn in Bartow (opposite page, left); Cypress Gardens founder Dick Pope Sr., circa 1950s with Southern belles and a Florida-shaped pool (opposite page, right, courtesy Cypress Gardens). The elegant Chalet Suzanne (this page, above and left).
inn in ragged gauze, closing a few folks who have come early to the dining room into a pale cocoon. Zero visibility beyond the windows. As the world warms up for the day, the flow of cool air over warmer water pushes and pulls at the fog so that it shows the lake for a moment, even a hint of the far shore, then conceals it again. The fog slides aside enough to show a tall blue heron fishing in the shallow edge of the lake. The bird rises silently and disappears into the fog.

Its next stop might be Cypress Gardens or a reflecting pool at Bok Tower or a patch of reeds in a backwater of the Peace River. A ditch by the side of the road will do too. Herons aren't fussy about atmosphere; it's the menu they're particular about. Polk County is a good place to catch fish whether the fisher is a wading bird or a human angler. There are hundreds of lakes in Polk County, and thousands of largemouth bass.

Polk County is an ideal spot for exploring Central Florida's tourist kingdoms; some magic, some less so. For the historically-inclined tourist, two of Polk's attractions are among the oldest and most enduring in Florida.

They are Cypress Gardens and Bok Tower.

Cypress Gardens, founded in 1936 by Dick and Julie Pope on 16 acres of lakeside property, is Central Florida's oldest tourist attraction.

Before interstates and the Florida Turnpike carried travelers non-stop, at 70-miles-an-hour across the state, a river of midwestern and southern tourists flowed south on U.S. Highway 27, and Cypress Gardens was a must-see. Lush tropical and subtropical gardens were the main attraction. Then, there were the water ski shows. The sport may not have been invented at Cypress Gardens, but it was surely perfected there. Today, Cypress Gardens bills itself as the water ski capital of the world — and no one argues the point.

For decades, lush gardens, Southern belles in hoop skirts providing photo opportunities, and water skiing derring do were the whole show at Cypress Gardens.

Competition from Disney and the other elaborate tourist attractions that began to rise in Florida in the 1970s, along with changing times, have pushed the attraction to take a look at itself and its market, and to update. Now, there are a zoo, wildlife sculptures, a new biblical garden, laser shows, an ice show, a big band concert series, and a butterfly conservatory.

A few miles away, Bok Tower, which is listed as a historic landmark on the National Register of Historic Places, chooses not to "keep up with the times." Its mission is to preserve and enhance nature's work, to tend serene gardens, to invite visitors to climb the highest hill in peninsular Florida — all 298 feet of it — to see Edward W. Bok's remarkable marble and coquina tower, and to hear one of the world's greatest carillons, housed in the tower.

The tower and gardens are not intended to attract tourists as much as to preserve what the place has always been: a one-of-a-kind architectural wonder in the midst of a refuge — for people who need to chill out and for birds looking for a place to sing. There are times when visitors may lit-
From lovely to not-so-lovely, Polk County liberally mixes the natural and man-made. Two sandhill cranes stroll down a Lake Wales subdivision street (facings page, top); a commercial strip near Auburndale (facings page, center); the tranquil Bok Tower and a nun's orchid from its gardens (left and below).

erally be unable to hear their conversations with one another because of the layers of bird song.

Bok was a Dutch immigrant who became a millionaire author and publisher. He founded a women's news syndicate, was editor of the Ladies Home Journal, and winner of the Pulitzer Prize. He saw the tower and gardens as a way to say thanks to his adopted nation; as a way to make the land "a bit more beautiful." It was dedicated in 1929 as a gift to the American people.

The tower has been called "America's 'Taj Mahal.'" Well, both structures are striking and exotic. They are somehow mysterious, with spirit breathing inside their stones. They declare that there is a story here.

Anyone who came upon Bok Tower without a sign to point the way and explain its presence on the hill wouldn't have a clue. If the visitor arrived during a carillon concert, he might wonder if he had stumbled into heaven.

Mary Ann Bryan served for some time on the board of the Bok Tower Foundation. "It's absolutely unique. It's supposed to be a peaceful, meditative environment for the busy world. That's one of the problems, though. They want people to come, but if you get too many people..."

The tower is surrounded by 128 acres of gardens — azaleas, camellias, magnolias, palms, ferns, oaks. More than 100 species of wild birds call the gardens home.

Inevitably, development, the plowing of citrus trees into subdivisions, is lapping at the feet of the perfectly-made tower on the hill. Bok Tower remains above it all.
The First Providence Missionary Baptist Church operates a community activities building on West Polk Street, on the west side, the poor side, of Bartow. The building is a utilitarian, cement-block box in a fenced lot. Its walls bear witness to the congregation’s creed of Christian faith and the civil struggle for justice, represented by the figures of Jesus and of the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. Inside, the room is clean and plain, with a desk, conference tables and folding chairs, and a refrigerator of soft drinks in the back of the room.

From the activities building, you can see the intersection of Hope and Battle Streets.

Hope and Battle. It’s a perfect metaphor for what is going on in West Bartow where a stirring of curiosity, a hunt for history, is changing lives. In time, it should change the embattled neighborhood.

“We can get the police to run the drug dealers and prostitutes out of here but they go from here to there,” said Clifton Lewis, a Polk County “in-law” who was born in Louisiana, retired from a corporate position in Washington, D.C., and moved to Bartow in 1989.

“It is my wife’s home,” he said. “And I love it here.”

Lewis is the founding spirit behind the West Bartow Improvement Committee, an ad hoc assembly of people who want to save the neighborhood, to revitalize it. The group did not set out to gather history. They simply set out to find something, some strategy, that would help.

Lewis wondered if gathering the history, lore, and memories of the African Americans with roots in Polk County would help. “I wondered, if we could convey a sense of history, maybe that would appeal to people, and ignite a fire,” he said. “At one of our first meetings, it was decided to do something on history as an improvement effort.”

History as a neighborhood improvement project is not an everyday idea. The older people had the stories
Then and now in Bartow: Members of the Ned Green family attending services at the First Providence Missionary Baptist Church in the early 1900s (facing page, top) and some of the church's parishioners today (this page top); forebears include Black Seminole Abraham, Micanopy's slave in the 1830s and James Waldon, born in 1885, grandson of one of Bartow's founders (facing page, bottom); Clifton Lewis, who has led African-American history research (above); views of Bartow in the early 1900s and today (right).
to tell, the memories, the deeds, the wills, the photographs to share with the young people. The thing was, nobody had asked them before. Now, the neighborhood improvement group was asking.

"The kids need to know their foreparents played a significant role in creating whatever we have here, however humble; and it’s incumbent upon them to make it better. We want to dig into the history of common, everyday people. We’re not looking for Booker T. Washington or W.E.B. Du Bois. We’re looking at common, everyday people," Lewis said.

The role played by African Americans in the Polk County story dates back at least to the Seminole Wars early in the 19th century when runaway slaves and freedmen allied with the Seminoles, who were themselves "runaways" from the Creek nation to the north. The Indians’ allies were known as Black Seminoles. They were fierce warriors. Congressmen Joshua Giddings wrote of the black warriors after the Battle of the Suwannee in 1818, "The Battle of Suwannee gave evidence of their devotion to freedom... They met the disciplined troops who constituted General [Andrew] Jackson’s army, with firmness and gallantry."

The community improvement detectives learned that the first non-Indian children born in the Polk County-Peace River area were most likely the children of a black couple who were the slaves of pioneer Rigidon Brown.

The group learned that one of the founding fathers of Bartow was Prince Johnson, an African American landowner who, in 1882, was among 25 men who voted for incorporation of Bartow.

"Andy Moore was also one of three black men who were founders of Bartow."

More scenes of West Bartow: a school bus makes rounds through the neighborhood (top), a tidy front stoop (right), a big house and a more modest house (facing page).
of Bartow — and Andy Moore happened to be my mother-in-law’s grandfather,” Lewis said.

As it has become known in the community that the group is gathering information, people have come along to help. At least one contact was a surprise, to say the least.

“A white man in his 70s called. He wanted to visit with us. He said he had some stories he wanted to share,” Lewis said. “He talked about the Ku Klux Klan in the ’30s and ’40s. This is not what we’re really looking for but it is going to surface. It can be painful.”

Historian Canter Brown observed: “We have striking dichotomies. The National Association for the Advancement of White People is headquartered in Polk County. We had terrible lynchings in the past. A man was burned to death. On the other hand, we’ve had instances where white people have armed themselves to defend blacks. Blacks and whites who worked in the mines at the turn of the century were paid the same wage — one dollar a day.”

Klan activity in Polk County was intense in the ’20s, ’30s, ’40s.

Lewis recalled paying a call last year on a 94-year-old former deacon of the First Providence Missionary Baptist Church who lived in a nursing home in Lakeland. He was a big, gentle, taciturn man. Lewis recalled: “We chatted about an hour and as I was leaving I asked him, ‘Deacon, what is the one thing you would like for me to pass on to the kids?’ He said to me, ‘Those crackers sure was mean.’ Those were the last words he said to me. Though we really don’t want to focus on that part of it, it inevitably comes out.”

The interest in the project that Lewis has seen among people of all ages and from all corners of the community encourages him.

“Everyone has been cooperative, the Lakeland Ledger, Florida Southern, the Tampa Bay History Center. We have not heard a discouraging word.

“I think the seed has been planted,” Lewis said.
CHILD OF THE SUN

Long before Kevin Costner heard that enigmatic whisper in Field of Dreams instructing him to "build it, and they will come," the president of little Florida Southern College, in Lakeland, sent a similar message to the legendary architect, Frank Lloyd Wright.

"Draw it and we will build it," FSC President Ludd Myrl Spivey is said to have told Wright, world-famous for designs that include the Imperial Hotel in Tokyo and the stunning private home, Fallingwaters. He would have seemed beyond the reach of FSC, but his work was underrepresented in the east, and not represented at all in any major work in Florida.

Spivey was confident that if he had the drawings, the promise, it would be a snap to find donors to support construction.

"Come on out and talk about it," Wright is said to have replied.

So, Spivey went to Wright's workshop outside Phoenix, Arizona, Taliesin West, and pitched his school as an opportunity to build a temple to education in the heart of Florida.

"Draw it, and I will find the money," he repeated. In addition to financial support, Spivey said that the students could be counted on to pour the foundations and raise the walls.

Wright agreed to draw the plans.

That was 1938, and it was the beginning of a 20-year collaboration between the architect and the college. Twelve buildings were built on Wright's plans, including the campus's signature work, the Annie Pfeiffer Chapel.

Maryse Dale grew up in Plant City. She came to Florida Southern in 1940.

She helped build the library, now the Buckner Building and a treasure house that displays Wright memorabilia and examples of his work, not only as architect but also as designer of furniture, china, fabric.

"We began digging the foundation in 1941," she said, looking around the big room that serves today not as a library but as an information center for visitors curious about the campus and about Wright.

"In that time, this part of the campus was an orange grove — a few of the old trees are still around," she recalled.

"The students didn't mind pitching in on the construction work, rolling wheelbarrows of cement up narrow wooden ramps, and dumping it in the excavation that would become the foundation. Wright's formula, in keeping with his devotion to the principles of organic architecture which grows from the earth, included Florida sand, coquina shells.

"We were Depression kids. We were used to working — practically all of us were on some kind of work scholarship," Maryse Dale remembered. "We expected to work. What we had not been expecting was to have a college education."

They didn't mind the work, but they were not necessarily enamored of the architecture, no matter how important the architect.

"We were just country kids. We had not been anywhere, had not seen anything. We even said among ourselves that we wondered if God recognized the chapel as a chapel." she said.

Wright visited the campus often during those years.

"He came several times while I was here. He was distant as far as the students were concerned. He didn't mix and mingle."

Maybe not. But Wright's creative
Maryse Dale (below) was a student at Florida Southern College in the 1940s as the campus was built out. Frank Lloyd Wright’s design includes airy walkway openings to the bright Florida sky (facing page) and an unconventional chapel (above); Wright on site in the 1940s (left).

imagination was with the young people, focused on the process of education.

He defined the spirit of the place. Spivey had called Florida Southern a temple of learning.

No, Wright corrected. It is a college in an orange grove on a hill by a lake. You are out of the ground into the light, a child of the sun.

There is a reason for everything in a Wright design.

The low ceilings of the covered walkways that connect the Wright buildings are in keeping with the architect’s philosophy that we go through life not really able to see very far where we are going. A walkway is a place of transition. Wherever Wright considered that the people using the space were in transition, ceilings are low. In areas of arrival, ceilings go up.

Darrin Diem graduated from Florida Southern in 1994. Wright’s philosophy of places of transitions was a headache for him.

“I’m six feet tall. I was always hitting my head,” he said.

He was hitting his head on the largest collection of Frank Lloyd Wright’s work on a single site in the world. In Lakeland. On a hill by a lake, with a few old orange trees scattered across the Child of the Sun campus.
RUBY WILLIAMS AND “1,000 FEETS”

ake State Road 60 west out of Mulberry, and keep an eye on the north side of the road. When you see it, you’ll know it. RUBY’S FRESH TURNIPS COLLARDS MUSTARDS. OKRA. RUBY’S MELONS LOPIES. HOME OF BONNIE FISHBAIT TIRED OF BEING GOOD.

It’s the vegetable stand of Ruby Williams’ vision. And it is no ordinary vegetable stand.

It’s also a folk art site, where Ruby Williams paints and sells paintings; shells peas and sells peas; invented her recurring character, Bonnie Fishbait; and is sewing a stockpile of folk art dolls.

Williams started with the polka dots, the bright colors, the casual spelling and grammar of her art, simply to pull more folks off the road to buy her oranges and eggs.

“My family was always ashamed of the signs. They were ashamed of me because I would do these signs and put them out on the highway. But, I never was ashamed,” Williams said. “I said, I’m going down the road and put a four-by-eight sign up there in the corner. ‘PRODUCE 1,000 FEET.’ I put the ‘S’ on feet. I knew what I was doing, I knew if I did it, I would get attention. I got on the Internet with that.”

Williams has been discovered.

She is on the Internet, has had gallery shows, has been written up in newspapers and magazines, has been on television, has sold paintings that now hang in Europe, has a curator. And all for OKRA, STRAWBERRIES, the antics of her Bonnie Fishbait character, her cows like cows no one has seen before, mules, and a crowing rooster. She has messages memorializing people who have died of AIDS, appeals to God to go easy on the human race, praise for Jesus, and a caution to her customers to take NO PHOTOS OF RUBY’S ART, ONLY ONE OF RUBY.

And she keeps right on selling produce.

She sorts through a big basket of sweet potatoes, separating them by size into small baskets. Double handfuls of collards like bouquets stand in buckets of water. A bin holds onions, covered with a gritty powder of the dirt they grew in.

Williams grew up on this land. It belonged to her mother.

In the ’60s, she married and moved to New Jersey. But her life took a bad turn when her husband left her.

She was depressed, homesick. That was when she had her dream to come home and build a place by the side of the road to sell produce grown on her son’s farm, and to sell her art.

Williams sees her art and the stand as a kind of missionary work.

Her family has lived for generations in the Bealsville area, just at the Polk/Hillsborough counties line. It is a community founded by freedmen after the Civil War. The Antioch Baptist Church is a center of life in Bealsville. In her day Ruby Williams’ grandmother kept the preacher’s family fed from her garden and table.

“My grandmother was Rosa Glover. She lived for the Lord and taught me how to be a loving, kind person, no matter whatever happened. She taught me to be what I am today. My grandmother taught me...
how to love," Williams said. Williams takes a signal from her memory of Rosa Glover as she offers a willing hand to young people who need books for school, and to people who are hungry and need food.

"Helping people gives me joy," she said. "I want to help people because we have too many people on drugs; drinking. If we can take just one or two people from the community and educate them, I feel good."

Her success feels good. She’s always felt art inside her; now it’s free to come out, and it is welcomed by the experts as well as the folks.
who stopped to buy CUKES
SQUASH and ended up with a Bon-
nie Fishbait original.

"I have an insight of my own.
They say, 'You something like Mama
Moses.' I say, 'No I'm not, I'm like
Ruby. Ruby. I have my own version
of everything I'm doing. My way. Not
your way. My way.'"

Ruby Williams is doing her art
her way, but it is not an isolated phe-
nomenon.

"There is an extreme interest now
in Southern folk art around the coun-
try," said Kristin Congdon, a profes-
sor of art at the University of Central
Florida.

Congdon sees the interest and
critical approval of Ruby Williams' work as part of the trend.

"I think she's terrific," Congdon
said.

Even when the images may seem
far-fetched, folk artists paint in an al-
most documentary fashion of their
culture, their personal lives, and their
experience.

New England used to be per-
cieved as the cradle of folk art; just
about the only cradle. Think Grand-
ma Moses.

Now, as interest in the form
moves south, the special value of
Florida folk art is being recognized.
The motifs adapted by the artists are
becoming recognizable to collectors
— Polk County folk artist Rodney
Hardee's cats, Ruby Williams' Bonnie,
Missionary Mary Proctor's dark and
bright angels.

"We're just beginning to tap the
resources we have in Florida in folk
art," Congdon said.

More of Miss Ruby's mix of
agriculture, art and sad
stories — showing one of
her current series of dolls
(above), the fruit stand
(left), feeding chickens
(below).
Nearly 5000 banks have disappeared since the 1985 Supreme Court decision to deregulate banks. This rapid decline in the number of banks is of heightened concern to many who have spent a lifetime accumulating substantial wealth and are anxious that their bank may be vulnerable to the disruptive effects of a merger.

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Over the years nature and the massive cranes of the phosphate industry, like this one in Cornersville on Route 60, have found a way to coexist.

**Bone Valley**

In the Bible story of Ezekiel, the prophet sees a valley of bones and is told to preach to them. And he does. "Hear the word of the Lord!" he tells the dry bones; and they rose and listened.

Alas, the bones in central Florida's Bone Valley don't listen. They lie buried under tons of Polk, Hillsborough, Manatee, Hardee, and DeSoto county soil until miners come and dig them up for their phosphate.

Then, processed into fertilizer, the bones help to feed the world.

It is a huge, international industry — 70,000 year-round, well-paying jobs in Florida are tied to the phosphate industry; 90 percent of the phosphate becomes fertilizer. Plants cannot grow without phosphate. The world cannot feed itself without fertilizer.

Telling the story of phosphate mining is the mission of the Mulberry Phosphate Museum — a couple of railway cars, a dragline bucket, and an old wooden building holding old bones, with a video tour of digging them — a mini-lesson in Florida's ancient geology and zoology.

No one needs a museum or a video to understand how enormous the business of digging out bones is.

Go west in Polk County. Soon, there will be a phosphate mining or processing site, looking like a scene for the climax of a James Bond movie. Giant draglines — they can cost $20 million — dig out the sand, the clay, the phosphate rock in 55-ton bites.

The land mass covered by the mines is huge.

So, what to do with the pits and the mountains of displaced earth — technically known as the "overburden" — when the mine is played out?

The aim is to return the land, as much as possible, to its pre-mine condition. Cattle are grazed on the land,
lakes are made and stocked with bass, wetlands and woodlands are created that attract wild life and native and migratory birds. Housing and shopping centers are built. Gypsum, a byproduct of the phosphate mining process, registers minute traces of radiation, but it is said to be well within safety standards, less than the exposure of a dental x-ray.

Inevitably, an industry as large as phosphate mining has a tremendous impact on the environment. The use of recycled water has eased stress on the aquifer, the restoration of abandoned pits to useful purposes is welcome. However, the long-range effect of even a trace of radiation in an intensely used space, like a living room, is a concern. So are the troubling, recurring collapses of mine-holding dams that, from time to time, release millions of gallons of sludge and mud into Polk County waterways.

Phosphate mining is one of Polk County’s most visible occupations. There is no way to miss it when exploring the county, especially its back roads and byways.

The other two most visible industries are citrus and cattle.

The growth in population and development in Polk County would lead logically to the conclusion that agriculture must be on the decline. Logical, but it ain’t necessarily so.

Dr. John Attaway is a citrus grower. He also worked 36 years for the Scientific Research Department of the Florida Citrus Commission, for 26 years as its director of scientific research. He is a world-acknowledged authority on citrus cultivation, and he is still involved with citrus as a University of Florida Adjunct Professor Emeritus working in the education program at the Citrus Research and Education Center in Lake Alfred.

“I’ve always been interested in citrus,” he reflects. “My family was in the citrus business in Haines City, and when I was a boy, I helped in the grove. I helped to fire the grove when a freeze threatened.”

To fire a grove is a phrase that refers to citrus growers building fires or lighting smudge pots in groves to warm and keep the air moving, to hold the freezing air at bay and prevent it from settling and freezing fruit, even freezing trees.

Attaway has recently written a book, A History of Florida Freezes (Florida Science Source, Inc.) that is definitive. It presents history, meteorology, impact charts, temperature charts, the movement of the frost line south and south and south, from South Carolina in the 18th century to the rich new citrus culture that flourishes now around Okeechobee.

But, despite killing freezes in the groves throughout the 1980s, and despite changing land use that tears a grove up by the roots, Polk County is not displaced as the center of Florida’s citrus business.

“We are still the major county in terms of production,” Attaway said, “Now, St. Lucie County and Hendry County have more trees, but our trees are older, the production is higher.”

Attaway believes the future of the citrus industry in Polk County is se-
A medley of citrus scenes — a harvesting truck (top), the gift fruit trade at Dr. Fergie’s on Route 27 (middle left), a bit of roadside advertising (above), and a grove laden with fresh oranges (left).
Florida’s cattle country in the late 19th century, and painted the Florida cow hunters as he painted the western cowboys.

Floridians were called cow hunters because hunting cows that wandered the scrub was what they did. The native Florida scrub cattle were the descendants of cows that strayed from the herd Hernando De-Soto brought to the new world in 1539.

As pioneers moved into Florida, they built their herds by hunting and adding the scrub cattle.

During the Civil War, Florida cattle supplied the Confederacy. A lively cattle trade with Cuba was carried on for years, and the cattlemen were paid in gold, a harder currency than the Confederate dollar in more ways than density.

In the 1890s, range wars among Florida cattlemen were as violent as...
anything in the Western movies. Herds were rustled, hired guns showed up to equalize disputes, and dark-of-the-moon ambushes were common.

There is a reconstruction of an 1876 cow camp, with actors who play the roles of cow hunters and a pen of scrub cattle and cow ponies, at Lake Kissimmee State Park. Brigadoon with redbugs!

Real cattle country is on either side of the road on the way to the camp. And there are groves that seem to cover not mere acres but miles of Polk County.

Stricker said that Polk County’s cattle count has not declined with burgeoning development.

But the economic impact of the cattle industry is not as great as might be imagined. The cattlemen have huge land holdings, big houses, and long histories in Polk County.

Raising livestock is not a labor-intensive industry, however. Typically, ranches have few employees, and so have minimal economic impact on the county.

And what does Stricker call those employees who work the cattle?

“I call them cowboys,” he said.
What makes Polk County “Imperial”? Candidate Jeb Bush asked the question on a recent campaign swing. But even longtime residents profess uncertainty over the term’s origins. While it may sound like an allusion to President James Polk’s “manifest destiny” or a knockoff of California’s Imperial Valley, the nation’s biggest agricultural empire, those are not the prevailing view. More trace the term to a success story.

Agriculture’s Contribution to Polk Economy (1994-95)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Product</th>
<th>Estimated value of agricultural production</th>
<th>Value of sales in the economy from agricultural production</th>
<th>Workers employed full time</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Processed Citrus</td>
<td>$391,380,000</td>
<td>$680,533,000</td>
<td>7,868</td>
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<td>Fresh Citrus</td>
<td>55,170,000</td>
<td>90,082,000</td>
<td>2,284</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nursery Products</td>
<td>52,783,000</td>
<td>84,437,000</td>
<td>943</td>
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<tr>
<td>Beef Cattle</td>
<td>19,857,000</td>
<td>27,880,000</td>
<td>195</td>
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<tr>
<td>Poultry (Eggs)</td>
<td>16,719,000</td>
<td>23,661,000</td>
<td>229</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dairy</td>
<td>6,756,000</td>
<td>8,623,000</td>
<td>114</td>
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<tr>
<td>Forestry</td>
<td>3,228,000</td>
<td>6,403,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Aquaculture</td>
<td>2,330,000</td>
<td>4,620,000</td>
<td>133</td>
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<tr>
<td>Vegetables</td>
<td>2,400,000</td>
<td>3,850,000</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honey</td>
<td>784,000</td>
<td>1,305,000</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>$551,412,000</strong></td>
<td><strong>$931,395,000</strong></td>
<td><strong>12,054</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Agriculture’s Contribution to Polk Economy

Processed Citrus $391,380,000
Fresh Citrus 55,170,000
Nursery Products 52,783,000
Beef Cattle 19,857,000
Poultry (Eggs) 16,719,000
Dairy 6,756,000
Forestry 3,228,000
Aquaculture 2,330,000
Vegetables 2,400,000
Honey 784,000

Total $551,412,000

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SOMETHING SPECIAL ABOUT THE PLACE

"Whoa," cautions author and historian and Polk County native Canter Brown.

"Be careful now. We have no cowboys in Florida, none whatsoever. If you own the cow you're a cattleman. If you go out and find the cow, you're a cow hunter. You can get them riled up calling them cowboys," Brown said.

Brown, Historian in Residence at the Tampa Bay History Center, knows Polk County from family talk, archival records, and from growing up in little Fort Meade, oldest town in the county. It's in the southwest corner of the county, and retains some of the flavor of a small Florida town as yet undiscovered by tourists and developers. Of course, there has been change, as there has been change everywhere. But for the moment, Fort Meade seems to have a core that has survived.

Brown, author of *Peace River Frontier* (University of Central Florida Press, 1991) has written a lot about the cow hunters.

"I think they reveled in the life. Well, think of it. The land was beautiful, staggeringly beautiful. They felt very little responsibility for their families. The women did the hard work. The cow catchers went out and were with their buddies in this gorgeous land. They'd get drunk at night and tell stories and play poker. It was a love, it was a religion, a way of life," Brown said.

Brown loves Florida history.

He left a job in Washington, D.C. as a congressional aide to come home.

"I had always wanted to research and write about Florida. I left Washington and came back to the University of Florida." But he found the history department there unresponsive to his brand of Florida history. "I got fed up, quit, moved to FSU. FSU is very strong in support of Florida history," Brown recalled.

Academic ambivalence to Florida history comes at a strange time. Popular interest in Florida history is widespread. People seem to be discovering Florida history 400 years after the European era began.

Why do we start so late to look carefully at the past?

"I think part of it was the remoteness, the sparse population. What happened here, in most people's mind, didn't really matter," Brown speculated. "Most people still don't think of Florida and its history but of Florida and Disney World."

Nevertheless, Brown finds interest in Florida's history wherever he goes. He also finds history.

"There is no part of the state, there is no town in the state, there is no group of people in the state in which exciting new historical research couldn't be done with stunning results," he said.

Florida is a diverse subject for study.

"Florida was always complex, even when it was small and remote and underpopulated. We were an international crossroads. We were a cultural crossroads. We were an ethnic crossroads. We were an economic crossroads."

"Plus, our geography affects us. A long narrow peninsula — obviously water affects everybody. There is focus on water, proximity to water. There are ports, which bring towns, so Floridians were never far from town. We were very quickly the most urban state in the south."

From the first, Polk County saw itself in the center of the picture. It long called itself, and sometimes still calls itself, "Imperial" Polk County, reflecting a sense of being a separate kingdom from its neighbors, a place with a destiny.

Brown felt it growing up.

"The feeling was that this was a special place. The feeling related to its past. There was a sense related to its past. There was a real sense that important things had happened there, that there was something special about the place."
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Besides its other attractions, Polk County boasts the ecologically unusual Lake Wales ridge, sometimes called a "Little Galapagos." In this extract from Orange Blossom Trails (John F. Blair, 1997) naturalist Phillip Manning describes a walk through Lake Kissimmee State Park near the Polk-Osceola border.

Beyond the campsites, the trail enters a lovely live-oak hammock. We pass huge oaks, broad and squat and so verdurous with resurrection ferns that their limbs look like fuzzy green logs suspended in space. The shade is dense, and only a few rays of sunlight make it to the saw-palmetto understory.

Though the hammock is spectacular, it is small, and the trail soon breaks out into more open country. Tiger Lake is visible through a veil of trees. Then the trees drop away.

The jay we are watching finishes its berries and flies off. Suddenly, the scrub seems a dreary place. We move along slowly. Lake Kissimmee is a great park for birders, and I'm hoping to see one other bird here. The Kissimmee prairie is known for its sandhill cranes. I've only seen sandhill cranes once before in Florida. Two stately gray birds — specks, actually — were grazing a prairie in the Everglades. Although I was several hundred yards from them, they flew as soon as they saw me. Later, I discovered that this skittishness is normal for sandhill cranes. Even Audubon had trouble getting close to them, as he noted in his writings:

The wariness of this species is so remarkable, that it takes all the cunning and care of an Indian hunter to approach it at times, especially in the case of an old bird. The acuteness of their sight and hearing is quite wonderful. If they perceive a man approaching, even at the distance of a quarter of a mile, they are sure to take wing.

No one is ever going to confuse my stealthiness with that of an Indian hunter, but I figure that the relative abundance of these birds on the Kissimmee prairie might give me a chance to get within binocular range of them. So we poke along through the scrub, eyes peeled for cranes.

Near the end of the walk, the scrub gives way to mowed fields. Cranes love corn and wheat, so I stop to scan the fields every few minutes. I spot crows, meadowlarks, and hundreds of tree swallows, but no cranes.

On the way out, we stop at the park entrance to say good-bye to George Aycrigg, the assistant park manager. I tell him about the wildlife we've seen — and the cranes we missed.

"Cranes?" he asks. "You want to see cranes? Come with me."

He leads us to the front of the entrance station. Two sandhill cranes are feeding in the grass. They are spectacular birds, nearly four feet tall, with red topknots, gray bodies, and long legs. I walk to within six feet of one. The bird that Audubon considered one of the wariest creatures in North America ignores me.
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Residential development now laps to the edge of the grounds of Bok Tower Gardens, a contemplative shrine created by immigrant Edward Bok nearly 70 years ago.

1998 Polk County