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Florida Humanities Council.

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THE GULF:
How its bounty, beauty, and bluster have shaped Florida

Rosewood rising from the ashes

Today’s Key West: What would Hemingway say?

A Vietnamese-Floridian recalls her childhood
WHEN I FIRST MOVED TO FLORIDA I went to the beach every Sunday. The Gulf of Mexico had become “my mountains,” I told a friend of mine in the Northwest where I grew up, a place to ponder our relative inferiority to the natural world.

The Gulf was like no other body of water I’d known. In addition to the legendary turquoise water and white sand beaches there was the occasional dolphin or shark surfacing offshore, sea turtles nesting in the sea oats, dark clouds of mating string rays rippling across the water’s surface, and pelicans bomber-diving into schools of fish. There were starfish, crabs, jellyfish, and German tourists in thongs. If I stayed late enough I could catch the inevitable thunderstorm unfurling its black clouds across the water, ready to engulf us in a tropical monsoon. It always seemed like a grand finale to a perfect beach day.

As life became busier, I found myself at the beach less and less, and it was not until 200 million gallons of oil poured into the Gulf last year that I resumed my Sunday visits. Like many, I found myself gravitating back to the beach, fearful that its days may be numbered.

For many Floridians, however, there was more than a day at the beach at risk. Shrimpers, fishermen, and oystermen were threatened both with their livelihoods and their way of life. The tourism industry tanked, and thousands of Floridians lost jobs in the wake.

While this issue of FORUM is not about the oil crisis, it was inspired by that catastrophe. The threat of losing the Gulf reminds us of the defining role the Gulf plays on Florida’s west coast. It is the source of food, a place to recreate, and a muse for our best writers and artists. It’s a place to go to rediscover ourselves and nature. As e.e. cummings reminds us in “maggie and milly and molly and may,” his lyrical poem about the discoveries of four little girls during their day at the beach:

For whatever we lose (like a you or a me)
it’s always ourselves we find in the sea

Janine Farver
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WERE DON’T ALWAYS APPRECIATE THE THINGS WE HAVE UNTIL WE LOSE THEM. Last year, as millions of gallons of oil gushed into the Gulf of Mexico, many of us worried that we were losing this life-filled, life-giving, blue sea. After the Deepwater Horizon oil rig exploded last April, we waited 86 agonizing days for the hemorrhaging of oil to be staunched. We had plenty of time to think about how important the Gulf is to our lives—and to the story of Florida.

For Florida’s early natives, the Gulf was a crucial food source. It was a pathway for European explorers and adventurers. It’s been an incubator and sustainer of life as well as host to ferocious storms that have changed our lives. Its powerful presence—often blue and glittering and rose and gold, sometimes dark and dramatic—feeds our psyches. Its sand, surf, salty air, and seagull calls fill our senses. As historian Jack E. Davis muses in this issue of FORUM: “Imagine the human spirit without the Gulf of Mexico.”

In thinking about the importance of the Gulf to our history, we also wondered how one of Florida’s few remaining working waterfront towns survived the oil threat. Apalachicola,
known as Florida’s oyster capital, is no stranger to crises. While the oil never got close to its oyster beds, this historic town suffered economically because of consumer perceptions that Gulf seafood might have become tainted. Scholar Becky Blanchard reports, however, that the community rallied, just as it always has in its nearly 200 years.

In this issue of FORUM, you’ll also discover how the tragic town of Rosewood is virtually rising from the ashes, thanks to modern technology. And, you’ll learn about the “thrice-removed” reality of modern Key West, a place that just might stun its one-time resident, novelist Ernest Hemingway. Also in this issue, we explore the wondrous world of underwater archaeology, hear the bicultural perspective of a Vietnamese Floridian, and, sadly, learn about the passing of a remarkable Seminole woman.

Meanwhile, we can still gaze out at that western horizon of infinity where sky meets water, where sunsets glow rose-gold, where history and mystery reside. We’ll be cherishing the Gulf more than ever before—and hoping it will always be there.

BARBARA O’REILLEY is editor of FORUM.
THE GULF of MEXICO:
An ancient power central to our lives

By Jack E. Davis

A father and son watch the pelicans from a dock on Marco Island.
SOMEWHERE AT THE BOTTOM of the Gulf of Mexico lie the historical records of Spanish West Florida. They were lost in 1818 soon after Gen. Andrew Jackson invaded Pensacola. Local Spanish officials responded to the invasion by fleeing to Havana on board the schooner *Peggy*. En route, they were intercepted by French corsairs, who learned the *Peggy* carried chests brimming not with gold and jewels but with the public records of the Spanish province. To exorcize their frustration, the pirates heaved the chests overboard.

This tale of historical archives lost to a seabed repository reflects a truth seldom considered: The Gulf of Mexico is a central force in the story of Florida. Rarely is this idea explored in history books and classrooms, and that’s unfortunate. We cannot fully know Florida until we understand the Gulf as an elemental power to which people respond, much as they respond to ancestral cues or lessons learned. Put another way, nature has the capacity to shape human history, and in Florida the Gulf is nature supreme.

Yet, despite its power, its real and active presence, the Gulf retains a particular subtlety. As oceans go, it is not terribly big, the ninth largest in the world, to be exact. Fewer than 1,000 miles of ebbing and flowing sea separate Florida and Mexico. The drive from Pensacola to Key West is farther than the Gulf’s north-to-south reach, which extends from barrier islands along the U.S. coastal rim to the Caribbean and Atlantic shores of Cuba.

Rather officiously, the International Hydrographic Organization has designated the Gulf as part of the Atlantic Ocean. This reduction to mere appendage obscures important differences, however. Gallon for gallon, the Atlantic cannot compete with the estuarine capacity of the Gulf, one of the world’s great hatcheries of finfish, shellfish, and shrimp. By disposition, the Atlantic is often gray and disagreeable, whereas the Gulf is inclined to a cordial, blue-green serenity. The Atlantic is less “place” than entity, stolidly expansive and disengaged. The Gulf is manifestly the opposite. It draws you in. Humbly, it calls you to partake in its essential self, to dangle bare feet off the edge of a sun-faded dock; to peer down at fish that, like window shoppers, scrutinize the dock’s every piling; to look up as a brown pelican in a death drop crashes down upon an unsuspecting offering.

None of this is to say that the Gulf is superior to the Atlantic or free of mood swings. Its warm, shallow waters, for example, naturally attract hurricanes that hurl angrily in from the mother ocean. The argument here is that the Gulf is nothing less than a wonder in itself. The Calusa of precolonial times understood this. They accepted the Gulf’s ancient power and reaped prodigious benefits in return. Theirs was a flourishing civilization, with complex social and political systems and deep stakes in the wind-blown, water-washed coast of southwest Florida. Yet, remarkably, they were not farmers. Most sedentary peoples depended on agriculture to feed a permanently settled population. The Calusa harvested most of what they ate from estuaries. So perennially rich in protein was their diet of pigfish, pinfish, catfish, mollusks, crustaceans, sea turtles, rays, and sharks that they stood a foot or more taller than the Spanish.

Still, as mighty as the Calusa had been, they were defenseless against invading diseases from Europe, brought...
across the Atlantic and in through the Gulf. Eventually, they succumbed to conquest. Nature, not superior weaponry, had sealed their fate.

In the form of an ocean stream fed by Gulf currents, nature also facilitated the transfer of New World wealth to the monarchy and cathedrals of the Calusas’ conquerors. Spanish explorers spent 16 years kicking around the Florida Straits before discovering the Gulf. They named it the “Spanish Sea,” and it became the pathway to new conquests, including gold and silver plundered from natives and mines in Mexico and South America. From its western shores, the Spanish Sea carried heavily laden galleons to the Gulf Stream, which, like a water carousel flung them back to Europe. This extraordinary ocean current, which dramatically changed cross-Atlantic travel, is rarely mentioned in connection with the Gulf of Mexico, though the Gulf’s warm waters and loop currents act as its wellspring.

Conquest was not always profitable; it was, however, always challenging. The Gulf did little to encourage the European occupation of Florida. Its mangrove-tangled shoreline, behind which natives stood steadfast, frustrated one Spanish expedition after another. Similarly, the Gulf fare that nourished the statuesque Calusa provided scant comfort to would-be colonists. Many Spaniards could not stomach seafood. When distressed and starving, they would slaughter and eat their horses rather than touch a crab or oyster. That’s exactly what the men of the red-bearded, one-eyed Pánfilo de Narváez did at Apalachee Bay after an aborted conquest of Florida. Once the Spanish finally established a foothold on the peninsula 37 years later, they all but ignored the Gulf in favor of exploiting products of the land—food crops, cattle, timber, cotton, and indigo. The British followed their lead, and unwisely so. Neither power enjoyed a self-sustaining economy in Florida.

THE CALUSA INDIANS controlled the entire southern half of Florida when Europeans first arrived in the early 1500s. Their 50 villages, centered at Charlotte Harbor near present-day Fort Myers, thrived for many centuries without farming. Theirs was a fishing culture. They enjoyed the bounty of the estuaries, where water from streams and rivers mixes with water from the Gulf.
Not so for the Americans. Shortly after they acquired Florida, fishing wharfs in the Northeast buzzed with stories of the Gulf’s potential. Stirred by possibilities, a seafaring family out of New London, Connecticut, set sail for Florida in 1835. A hurricane took one of their ships; but Leonard Destin, who was blown into the Gulf after losing his father and brother in the storm, was nevertheless impressed by what calmer seas revealed—fish aplenty. He made landfall on the panhandle at a sandy point lapped by emerald-green water, built a house, and eventually launched a successful commercial fishing operation. Word got out about the area’s equally good recreational fishing, and the town of Destin came to harbor one of the country’s largest deep-sea charter fleets. It got a nickname, too, The World’s Luckiest Fishing Village.

The Gulf’s endowments were as vital as ever when the Georgia-born lyricist Sidney Lanier traveled to Florida 40 years after Destin’s eventful voyage. Like his predecessor, Lanier was awestruck. “The most marvelous stories are told,” he wrote, “of the hosts of fish, even to the stoppage of vessels that have sailed into shoals of them.” In later years, experts calculated that the Gulf yields more than the combined fisheries of the U.S. East Coast. The Apalachicola Bay–St. George Sound—nursery to plump oysters rated the best by chefs from New Orleans to New York—form one of the most productive marine ecosystems in North America. In 2009, it was a major contributor to the state’s $6-billion commercial- and sport-fishing industry, which employed up to 60,000 people. Offshore of the five Gulf states, anglers that year landed 173 million seatrout, snapper, red drum, and other fish.

Starting in the early 1800s, the cornucopia spawned fishing communities up and down Florida’s west coast. Their wharfs were crowded with sway-bellied trawlers that, with slouching nets suspended astern, lumbered out to sea on endless parade. Group charter boats of a similar anatomy joined them, their hopeful passengers standing shoulder-to-shoulder with hooks baited and ready for action. And luck was theirs. Countless big-fish stories were told, and

**SPERM WHALES** not only spawn in the Gulf of Mexico, but live there year-round as a well-defined population of 1,400 to 1,600. The sperm whales were hunted in the Gulf during the 18th and 19th centuries, but in a certain touch of irony, survived when petroleum replaced whale oil as a source of energy. The Gulf whales are smaller than their Atlantic Ocean kin and are thought to be vulnerable through ingesting or inhaling oil from a spill.
most were true. The beginning of major league baseball’s spring training can be traced to a nine-foot, 500-pound shark caught off Pinellas Point in September 1913 by Robert Hedges, owner of the St. Louis Browns. Excited by future game-fishing prospects, he took his team to St. Petersburg the next spring to train.

Good fishing attracts all kinds of people. In Florida, voices from Italy, Greece, Cuba, the Bahamas, Ireland, New England, the Deep South, Vietnam, Mexico, and Honduras could be heard over the years on commercial boats and wharfs and in boat yards and processing houses. A game fish gave Tarpon Springs its name, but Gulf sponges turned it into a Greek-American city. Up at Apalachicola, the son of a German immigrant was the first to use the pasteurization process to pack oysters. After the Civil War, the sporting fight of tarpon and king mackerel off Fort Meyers lured some of the state’s first rod-and-reel tourists, wealthy men and women from the Northeast and Europe. Their hired guides and boat captains, like independent fisherfolk everywhere, drew on native instincts and working-class muscles to fulfill entrepreneurial ambitions.

The fear in those days was not a depleted bounty, but storms. Although hurricanes invite little enthusiasm for accepting nature’s providence, few Floridians will deny the capacity of extreme weather to alter the direction of life. Before European contact, storms delivered early warnings of coming cultural change. Amidst the usual confusion of sea algae and driftwood, coastal Indians found the flotsam of wrecked ships, the “gear of foreign dead men,” to borrow words from poet T. S. Eliot. On occasion, that included the dead themselves, oddly clad, bearded men from an unknown land. Similarly odd was Florida’s foul-weather gold and silver. It was the only precious metal the Spanish found in this new land, and it had been salvaged by Indians after conquistadors had lost it at sea.

The Spanish lost settlements to storms, too. Pensacola, not St. Augustine, would likely be the oldest city in the United States today if a September hurricane had not broken up the colony of Tristán de Luna y Arellano in 1559. The otherwise intrepid conquistadors avoided northwest Florida for the next 139 years.

Storms helped write the history of the Americans in Florida, too. During the early territorial period, legislators relocated the capital to the red hills of Tallahassee—with ominous consequences for local Creek Indians—and built a decent road across north Florida. They did so after colleagues had been shipwrecked while sailing around the peninsula between St. Augustine and Pensacola, the alternating sites of the first legislative sessions. Pensacola, it seems, was caught repeatedly in the whirl of such storms. In fact, raging seas that delayed

Log-on to www.SaltwaterHeritage.org to see and listen to oral histories, photographs, and videos of the fisherfolk of Cedar Key and Cortez. This project, “In Their Own Words,” was funded by the Florida Humanities Council.

Clamalot

After Florida’s 1994 net ban undercut Cedar Key’s commercial fishing industry, this Gulf Coast village survived and thrived by becoming the claming capital of the nation. Two local folks celebrated this achievement by writing humorous lyrics to the melody of the 1960 show tune “Camelot.” An excerpt:

Ask every person if he has heard the story
and tell it strong and clear if he has not,
that once there was a fleeting wisp of glory
called Clamalot.

It’s true, it’s true, the climate must be perfect all the year.
In short there’s not a more congenial spot
for happy ever aftering than here
in Clamalot.

Fort Barrancas sits on a bluff overlooking the entrance to Pensacola Bay. Because of the natural advantages of its location, it has been built and rebuilt four different times (by English, Spanish, and American engineers) and utilized during the Civil War, the Spanish-American War, and World War II.
Federal warships prevented the Civil War from igniting ingloriously at Pensacola rather than Fort Sumter.

Whether it delivers us from violence or to it, intense weather is as much a part of the Gulf’s vitality as fish and shorebirds. From a safe distance, from a beach chair say, it is impossible not to ponder a dark storm drawn down upon the horizon in a pageantry of thunder and flashing heaven, forks of lightning striking in dramatic accompaniment. And it is no small point to add that the beach from which this observation is made was built with the aid of storms.

A gift of nature duplicated nowhere else in the United States, Gulf beaches have created a leisure economy without equal. With stretches of pure-white sand fronting a nearly unbroken chain of coastal dunes, some the size of buildings, the panhandle wins the prize for the best beaches. Locals will swear that Hawaiian resorts beautify their waterfronts with sand imported from the panhandle. (They’ll also swear that pirate’s treasure is buried in the dunes.) Any Gulf sand that ends up in Hawaii has traveled a fair quarter of the globe. The beaches at Pensacola, Fort Walton, and Panama City originated several hundred miles away in the Appalachian Mountains as a finely ground crystal quartz that washed to the shore.

Communities farther down the Gulf Coast offered a different kind of riches—something that naturalist John Muir discovered in 1867. He was not yet the gray-whiskered mountaineer of the Yosemite, but a young man of 29 in search of something—self, answers to life. The Gulf had beckoned him on a thousand-mile walk from Indiana, and he ended up at Cedar Key. Although only 400 people lived there, nature had made theirs the busiest port on the peninsula’s west coast. Pine and cedar came out of nearby woodlands; and fishes, blue crabs, green turtles, and oysters out of the deltaic estuary system of the Suwannee River. Muir spent hours a day for weeks perched on shore, writing in his journal, when the Gulf inspired an insight that secured his future as the father of American conservation. Nature is the “one great unit of creation,” he concluded. It makes human existence possible, yet nature’s purpose is not solely for humans. Its purpose is for all.

This insight was not singularly the wisdom of Muir. It was, and is, the manifestation of the Gulf’s sure capacity to intrigue the senses. Inescapable and real, its power is revealed to us by what we see, mayhem sometimes, wonder always. All may not exist for the benefit of humans alone, as Muir said. But imagine Florida, its history and people, without the Gulf’s sunset colors, its birds and fish, its storms, and the unceasing succession of life generated, graciously, by its estuaries. Imagine the human spirit without the Gulf of Mexico.

JACK E. DAVIS, professor of history at the University of Florida, is author of An Everglades Providence: Marjory Stoneman Douglas and the American Environmental Century and is writing a book on the Gulf.
A HISTORY: OFFSHORE DRILLING IN THE GULF

Oil companies have operated offshore wells in the Gulf for about 75 years. In 1938 the first oilfield in the Gulf’s open waters began production a mile off the coast of Louisiana. The modern offshore oil-and-gas industry began in 1947 when the first well beyond the sight of land began operating about 10 miles off the coast. The first deep-water oil discovery occurred in 1976.

Currently there are 4,000 active oil and gas wells in the Gulf.

There reportedly are 27,000 abandoned wells in the Gulf.
the Gulf of Mexico
Apalachicola is a resilient community—a boom-or-bust town that has always found a way to rebuild and reinvent itself after a crisis.

The stately brick warehouses lining historic Water Street stand as reminders of when this was the third-busiest port on the Gulf of Mexico. Dubbed Cottonton in the mid-19th century, it shipped cotton and other cargo to Europe and elsewhere. But when the cotton trade moved from rivers to new rail lines that bypassed this Panhandle town, prosperity went with it.

The town developed trade in lumber and sea sponges—industries that also later collapsed. Over the years, it faced wartime hardships, major fires, and monster hurricanes. It saw a net ban hurt its fishing industry, licensing restrictions reduce the number of crabbers, and imports cut into the shrimp business. At least Apalachicola’s oyster industry continued to thrive.

But then there was the oil spill. Last April when BP’s Deepwater Horizon oil rig blew up and oil gushed into the Gulf of Mexico, no one was prepared for how it would permeate life. Unlike a hurricane, an oil spill doesn’t just blow over.
Apalachicola’s Water Street boasted a busy commercial strip in 1887.

The historic Grady Store, shown here in the 1990s, dates to 1884.

The stern-wheel steamer, Rebecca Everingham, plied the rivers between Columbus, Ga. and Apalachicola from 1880 to 1884.

Hurricane Dennis battered Franklin County and produced storm surges as high as nine feet in 2005.

Two local residents ride down the main street.

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Two local residents ride down the main street.
OYSTERS MAY HAVE A REPUTATION today as a luxury item, but few people get rich from harvesting them. It is backbreaking work. Men and women rise with the sun and head out on 20-foot boats to hand-tong oysters from publicly owned beds. Oystermen sell their catch to dealers for $15 to $20 per 60-pound bag. In a good year—when oysters are thick and the weather is favorable—it is enough money to put a down payment on a truck or buy a new boat motor. Still, oystermen consider it a good living. The water is freedom. It has been the source of life for their parents and grandparents before them.

For decades, experts and the media—and even oystermen themselves—have sounded the death knell for the oyster industry. They say no one is replacing the old salts. They worry about red tide and hurricanes. Some leave oystering for a more secure career and a steady paycheck working at the prison in Carrabelle. Young people go to work building houses for vacationers, finding that they make more money hoisting hammers than oyster tongs.

When the economy declines and those jobs dry up, though, people go back to oystering. It is a pattern that has persisted as long as the town’s elders can remember. Even during the Great Depression, they say, no one went hungry in Apalachicola. What didn’t sell was supper. In the early 20th century, peddlers pushed their carts through the town streets, selling oysters by the scoop for residents’ supper pots.

With so many dependent on the bay’s bounty, the status of the oyster beds is the talk of the town. Everyone has an opinion on which part of the bay is producing the plumpest, saltiest oysters at the moment. Sightings of a thick spat-set—the free-swimming larvae that will settle and grow to three-inch legal size in 18 months—bring hope for the coming years.

People have come to rely on oystering more as other fisheries have declined. When Floridians voted to ban entanglement nets from state waters in 1994, many mullet fishermen became year-round oystermen. Under a limited-entry license system, only a small number of crabbers continue to ply the bay, the youngest in his forties. Shrimpers have struggled to compete with the glut of farmed shrimp imported from Asia. In the midst of recession, over 1,400 oyster licenses were sold here last year—an all-time high.
APALACHICOLA BAY

—one of the country’s last wild commercial oyster fisheries—has for years produced more than 90 percent of the state’s commercial oyster harvest and about 10 percent of the nation’s oysters.

The local commercial oyster industry dates to the 1850s. Apalachicola Bay oysters were canned and shipped to northern cities that had already depleted their own oyster beds.

The bay’s productivity depends on fresh water flowing from the Apalachicola-Chattahoochee-Flint river system, a 20,000-square-mile watershed shared by three states. The fresh water mixes with the bay’s salt water and creates the ideal salinity for oysters to thrive. Florida and Alabama have argued that aquatic species are harmed downstream when Georgia diverts water to its cities and farms.

As months passed and oil continued to bleed unstaunched into the Gulf, people grew angry with BP and frustrated with what they perceived as inaction on the part of state and federal bureaucrats. Life became a parade of emergency meetings. Information changed from day to day, minute to minute.

After much deliberation, the state decided to open all of Apalachicola Bay for oyster harvesting before oil could seep in. Areas that would normally be off limits while oysters grew for the winter harvest were cleaned out. Even oysters too small to legally sell were scraped up into burlap sacks.

Seafood dealers struggled to keep the orders coming in amid consumer fears over the safety of Gulf seafood. These perceptions were hurting business even though testing found no contamination in water or seafood samples from Apalachicola Bay.

Paradoxically, during the oil spill there were also times when Apalachicola dealers couldn’t get enough oysters. In past years, some of the large dealers shucked oysters trucked in from Louisiana to supplement the local harvest. But Louisiana’s oyster beds were closed because of the spill. At the same time, the local Apalachicola labor force was reduced by more than half because oystermen went to work for BP’s Vessels of Opportunity program or collected BP payments in compensation for lost income.

According to analysis by the Apalachicola Times, six months after the spill began BP had paid out $15.3 million to people in Franklin County who claimed lost income or profits. The money and its effects have divided the community. Some decry the new class of “spillionaires” and say that BP payments have hurt the seafood industry worse than the spill itself. Others defend their right to collect as much as they can from BP and argue that spending will boost a sagging local economy.

By winter, though, people appeared optimistic that the worst was over. There is once again a quiet to this stretch of the Forgotten Coast. The news vans are gone, as are the shiny pickups bearing the logos of disaster-response contractors. In Apalachicola Bay, the most productive estuary in the northern hemisphere, snowy egrets wade out on the mudflats at low tide.

Below the surface, the bay’s famous oysters have grown plump to steel themselves against winter’s cold. The oyster business picked up for the Thanksgiving holiday. With the Louisiana beds closed for much of the fall, Apalachicola Bay oystermen who continued to harvest enjoyed higher bag prices. Seafood dealers are talking about adding new delivery routes to meet increased demand. Everyone points to the new layers of growth on oyster shells as their greatest sign of hope.

Today, tourists come to see one of the few remaining working waterfronts in Florida and to taste seafood hauled fresh from the bay. They shop in locally owned boutiques along the town’s main street, eat in local restaurants, and peruse the old cotton warehouses that have been restored and repurposed as offices, retail shops, and a cultural center. The town’s reputation as Florida’s oyster capital remains untarnished. After months of crisis, people are getting to the work of rebuilding. It is a job Apalachicolans know well.

“I think part of Apalachicola’s resilience stems from the type of people that are attracted to the area,” Webb says. “The men and women that work the bay and those that own and operate small businesses here are fiercely independent and self reliant. As long as we maintain our resources, we’ll survive.”

BECKY BLANCHARD, a Ph.D. candidate in anthropology at the University of Florida, researched the oyster industry in Apalachicola in 2009–10.

As hungry birds await a chance for a meal, commercial fisherman Dale Davis adjusts his equipment in 1986.

Rosalie Nichols, Miss Florida Seafood of 1974, tries her hand at shucking oysters.

An Apalachicola Bay shrimp boat is docked in a cove in 1986.
VISIONS OF THE GULF:

Paintings by Christopher Still and Photography by Carlton Ward Jr.

Christopher Still, *Sunset on St. Joseph Peninsula*

Oil on canvas, 2010

24 x 36 inches

Carlton Ward, *Roseate Spoonbills*

Photograph, 2005

24 x 36 inches
After last year’s Deepwater Horizon oil spill, artist Christopher Still and wildlife photographer Carlton Ward decided to celebrate the Gulf with a joint exhibition. “Visions of the Gulf”—currently at the Appleton Museum of Art, College of Central Florida, Ocala—runs through March 20.

“The best way to make people concerned about the Gulf is to share with them how beautiful it is,” Still explained. He created several new paintings, setting out with his easel in a small boat to capture images of the Gulf “before the possible impact of the spill.”

Ward described the oil spill as “a warning to us all” and said he seeks to capture the essence of the Gulf “as seen in the eyes of a fisherman or a flock of birds gliding above a pristine shoreline, reminding us of the living legacies we have the opportunity to uphold and protect, the native soul of the Gulf that without our vigilance will certainly fade away.”
Two new members elected to humanities board

The Florida Humanities Council Board has elected new members to replace two whose terms expired. It also re-elected Norma Goonen of Davie and Brenda Simmons of Jacksonville to second terms on the Board. The new members, who will serve through September 2013, are:

R. ANDREW MAASS of Longboat Key, a consultant and independent art curator/juror. Maass has been a museum executive for more than 40 years, including serving as director of the Tampa Museum of Art, interim director of the Florida Holocaust Museum in St. Petersburg, and interim director of the Museum of Art in Fort Lauderdale. He has a bachelor’s degree in American History from the University of Wisconsin and a master’s degree in American Government from The New School for Social Research.

ROBERT SUMNER, a lawyer and president and CEO of the First National Bank of Pasco. Sumner traces his Florida roots to the end of the Civil War when his ancestors settled in Pasco County. The San Antonio resident has spent a lifetime in law, banking, and civic activities—including coaching youth baseball teams, serving as president of the Pioneer Museum, and initiating a wildlife corridor protection program. He has a bachelor’s degree in accounting from Florida Southern College and a law degree from Stetson University.

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Hear stories about the conquistadors and colonists who claimed Florida for Spain and the pirates and runaways who fought them. Learn about Florida’s first Thanksgiving and its first Cuban Americans. These stories and many more are featured in our new 2-minute audio programs commemorating Florida’s 500-year relationship with Spain. Hear them on Florida public-radio stations or via our website, www.flahum.org.

Don’t miss application deadlines for Florida Humanities Council grants

Several types of grants are currently available from the Florida Humanities Council. Here are the deadlines to apply:

APRIL 1—PrimeTime grants are available for Florida library systems to sponsor six-week programs of reading, discussion, and storytelling for low-literacy, low-income families with children between the ages of 6 and 10.

APRIL 1—Museum on Main Street Partnership grants are available for small rural communities to bring a Smithsonian Institution traveling exhibit to their area.

JULY 1—Partnership Grants are available for nonprofit community organizations to design and conduct annual series of humanities programs over a two-year period.

MARCH 1, MAY 1, JULY 1, SEPT. 1, AND NOV. 1—Mini-Grants are available for nonprofit community organizations to plan and implement small-scale public humanities projects.

For more information and application materials, visit www.flahum.org/grants.
Here are some highlights of the hundreds of free public events we sponsor around the state. Dates and times are subject to change, and new events are continually added. For complete, up-to-date listings, go to www.flahum.org/calendar.

**SARASOTA**—Two events at Mildred Sainer Pavilion at New College:

**March 16 at 6 p.m.**, Author and *St. Petersburg Times* reporter Craig Pittman and William Marquardt, archaeology curator at the Florida Museum of Natural History, present “Lessons for the Environment.”

**May 18 at 6 p.m.**, Barbara Little, archaeologist with the National Park Service, and John McCarthy, general manager of Sarasota County Parks and Recreation, discuss archaeology and the preservation of history.

**NICEVILLE**—March 17 at 7 p.m., Niceville Community Center: Fritz Davis, a lifelong naturalist and professor of science history, discusses the life of Archie Carr, who was the world’s authority on the ecology, migrations, and conservation of sea turtles.

**LAKE WORTH**—April 2 at 6:30 p.m., St. Andrew’s Episcopal Church: Harry Coverston, instructor at the University of Central Florida, discusses the future of the mainline religious traditions, the mega-church phenomenon, and the rise of the “spiritual but not religious” American.

**BEVERLY HILLS**—April 3 at 4 p.m., Shepherd of the Hills Episcopal Church: Florida storyteller and Palm Beach County Judge Nelson Bailey presents the history, near history, and legends of Florida’s first Cracker settlers among the Native Americans.

**ORMOND BEACH**—March 26 at 9:30 a.m., Anderson-Price Memorial Building: Award-winning author Fred Hitt discusses Indian wars they don’t teach in school—the story of the Timucuan tribe that rose up to fight 16th-century European invaders.


**ONLINE AT www.TrailofFloridasIndianHeritage.org**: This newly launched webpage, funded by a Florida Humanities Council grant, features an interactive map and lots of information about 54 Native American locales in Florida, including such sites as caves Indians used near Marrianna and federal forts significant during the Seminole Wars. It is designed to assist visitors, residents, and students in planning visits to sites and in learning more about Florida’s Native Americans. A companion brochure with map and driving directions will be available later in the spring.

This etching of Timucuan Indians is based on a painting by Jacques LeMoyne de Morgues, who accompanied the 1564 French Huguenot expedition to settle Florida.
REx FROM HIGH SCHOOL graduation in St. Petersburg in 1963, a friend and I drove through Florida on a lark. Exploring hinterland pockets along the state’s Gulf Coast, we wandered off State Road 24 into the eerie remains of what must have been a long-ago town. Creeping jungle shrouded a few battered chunks of brick that were lying scattered like bones of ancient buildings. It was a hot June day, so silent not even a bird twittered, and the heavy air seemed to smother our own strained voices. We soon scared ourselves, fled to the snug comfort of my compact car, and hummed back to the highway. Only then did we take deep breaths and look at each other. What the heck was that, we wondered.

Years later, I learned. In the early 1980s journalists and scholars began to unravel the details of a horrible racial episode that had been hidden for decades: the deliberate burning of African-American homes in the town of Rosewood.

It happened in 1923. On New Year’s Day, a white woman alleged that a black man from Rosewood had attacked her. The accusation ignited a week of lynching, arson, and pitched gun battles between blacks and whites. At least eight people died and many more were injured. Every African-American dwelling in Rosewood was burned down; every black resident fled, never to return.

My friend and I had unwittingly discovered Rosewood’s remnants during that happy-go-lucky graduation trip. When the new research about Rosewood’s history began to emerge, I was fascinated. I was well into a journalism career and mulling story ideas, so I made two or three trips to the spectral town. I never did write an account, but did look up lots of history. I wondered: What did Rosewood look like, what did it feel like before that terrifying day in 1923?

Soon we’ll know. Rosewood will virtually rise from the ashes, thanks to modern technology. Edward Gonzalez-Tennant, 35, a University of Florida doctoral candidate, is using computer programs to create a “virtual” Rosewood that will be available for all to see online. Using census reports, Levy County property records, and oral histories, he is recreating Rosewood as it existed before 1923. We’ll be able to see the town’s three-dimensional character—with houses, streets, stores, hotel, train depot, churches, and other buildings. (For a look at the project, including 3D examples, visit www.virtualrosewood.com.)

Gonzalez-Tennant, who has a background in anthropology and archaeology, wants his cutting-edge Rosewood work to honor the community and remember what was lost there. “My goal is to expand our understanding of the development and life of Rosewood as a multi-ethnic community and make that history accessible to a wide public so we can begin to truly understand what was destroyed that first week of 1923.”

Gonzalez-Tennant has spent weeks doing research for this project at the Levy County courthouse. He combed through thousands of property records dating to the 1860s. What he gleaned contradicted stereotypical concepts of Rosewood. For example, African Americans owned a great deal of property in the town, sometimes large chunks. Moreover, the community was not strictly segregated.

“The Rosewood community is more complex than [indicated by] the history we have. It is more interesting.
to have this nuanced picture. You have blacks and whites living together during the [1910s] and '20s during this tumultuous time in American racial history," he said.

Rosewood was largely an agricultural community where yeoman farmers cultivated orange groves. Nearby Sumner had a sawmill and was more of an industrial community. Named for the red cedar that once proliferated there, Rosewood had a population of perhaps 300 in 1923.

Rosewood burned at a time of intermittent racial violence around the nation. Between 1910 and 1930, 870 African Americans were lynched nationwide, according to statistics compiled by the Tuskegee Institute. Many cities experienced racial violence, including Tulsa, Okla., East St. Louis, and Chicago. The Ku Klux Klan re-emerged as a powerful tool of white supremacy.

A historical marker commemorating Rosewood can be seen on State Road 24. It has been vandalized as recently as last year, but Gonzalez-Tennant said he encountered no hostility while researching an unpleasant aspect of Levy County’s past.

“I’ve experienced the complete opposite,” he said. “People go out of their way, I come in (to the courthouse) and they say ‘Oh, you’re back, I’ve found some records for you.’” Moreover, the county records are meticulously organized, microfilmed, scanned, and available as pdf files, he said. “You can do most of your research on their computers.”

In 1994, Florida became the first state to compensate survivors and their descendants for damages incurred because of racial violence. Ten years later, the state declared Rosewood a Florida Heritage Landmark. The roadside marker names the victims and describes the week of fear culminating in the fire.

Social justice is a major theme of his project, Gonzalez-Tennant said. He hopes it instructs and inspires others to create their own such virtual projects or their own views of Rosewood. “I want to give...communities the ability to do what I did. Schools, community organizations, encourage them to do basically what I’m doing. I want to make sure kids have these alternative ways of exploring the past,” he said.

“If what I’m doing does nothing more than open up conversations about Rosewood and other [subjects] like it, then my goal to broaden the arena of conversation, to publish my research so that it reaches different audiences in various formats has been achieved.”

JON WILSON, a retired Florida journalist, is a frequent contributor to FORUM.

This Jan. 4, 1923, photo shows a Rosewood dwelling as it goes up in flames in a deliberately set fire.
SPAIN'S EARLY QUEST to colonize Florida disintegrated in 1559 when a raging hurricane destroyed its largest fleet of ships in the Gulf. The Great Tempest, as the Spanish called the storm, wrecked a half-dozen heavily laden vessels, sending some to the bottom of what is now Pensacola Bay.

More than 400 years later, an intrepid group of scholars in scuba gear dived down into the bay to explore what one called a “nautical time capsule.” They brought up thousands of artifacts—and a fascinating tale of dashed dreams and history-changing tragedy.

“This information is the real treasure of shipwrecks,” said Della Scott-Ireton, one of the underwater archaeologists who delved into this sunken history. She worked with a team from the University of West Florida’s Maritime Archaeology Program and the Florida Bureau of Archaeological Research.

The project, which began in 1992, was among Scott-Ireton’s career high points. The work helped document Florida’s earliest known shipwrecks and a major Spanish effort to lay claim to the New World and keep it out of the hands of England and France. The Spanish fleet, under the command of Tristan de Luna, carried about 1,000 colonists and 500 soldiers and cavalry—enough settlers, armed men, supplies, and equipment to create a huge outpost of the Spanish Empire. The area that is now Pensacola would have become the launching point for land expeditions to the Atlantic coast and a new Spanish foothold in North America.

But because of the storm, the colony failed. While an initial encampment had been established on shore, a number of people died and their supplies and equipment were destroyed or went down with the ships. Survivors struggled to establish a community, but disease and starvation further weakened them. The Spanish abandoned the settlement in

A diver plunges into Pensacola Bay to explore a ship that sank in 1559. Photos courtesy of the Archaeology Institute, University of West Florida.
Della Scott-Ireton  
Northwest Region Director and Associate Director, 
Florida Public Archaeology Network  
B.A., anthropology, University of West Florida  
M.A., historical archaeology, UWF  
M.A., international relations, Florida State University  
Ph.D., anthropology, FSU

They did not try to establish another on the northern Gulf Coast until more than 130 years later.

The artifacts Scott-Ireton and her colleagues discovered in Pensacola Bay ended speculation that de Luna’s fleet might have landed somewhere else. They also told a story about the movement and spread of people and their ideas, language, and culture. Two de Luna ships (a second was found in 1997 near the first wreck), yielded information about the food, utensils, tools, clothing, ceramics, animals, plants, and weapons on board—all the things that 16th-century people thought important enough to load on a ship and take to distant places for trade, commerce, and settlement.

This kind of information is gold to underwater archaeologists. Past human behavior is their passion. “It’s not so much the things we find, but what those things can tell us about the people who built, used, and left those things behind,” Scott-Ireton said.

She noted that she served as field supervisor during the 1992 project. “But with such a small crew we all did everything—excavation, recording, toting equipment, tending pumps and dredges, conservation.”

The underwater specialists use many of the same methods as their counterparts on land: They dig in precise grids and levels and keep detailed notes, photographs, and records. “Only our tools are different. Instead of using a truck to get to our sites, we use boats and scuba gear,” Scott-Ireton said.

Besides such intriguing projects as exploring shipwrecks, underwater archaeologists also study inundated prehistoric sites, remains of docks, wharves, landing sites, harbors, bridges, and lighthouses. “All these things tell us about our past, and many of them are threatened by construction, erosion, dredging, and looting. Like any site on land, if they are destroyed or damaged, we lose a part of our heritage,” she said.

Scott-Ireton has also used new technology to share information about Florida heritage. When she worked for the State of Florida’s Bureau of Archaeological Research, she was responsible for creating a website called Florida’s Underwater Archaeological Preserves (museumsinsithesea.com). The site contains information about these preserves, how sonar is used to find shipwrecks, and how shipwrecks become habitats for sea life.

How did she initially become interested in underwater archaeology? Well, she received scuba diving lessons as a high school graduation present. But the perhaps the real passion was sparked by a childhood book, she said. “I remember my dad read me The How and Why Wonder Book of Lost Civilizations, and I was hooked on the past.”

JON WILSON, a retired Florida journalist, is a frequent contributor to FORUM.
This is one of those rare novels that both entertain and inform. The characters are real, the actions are real, and the scenes are real. Highly recommended!"
BRANDER AND LIGHTNING, the twin bad boys of Seminole lore, spat and roared and fought in the sky. The Twins were angry. They sent down a livid rain as we huddled quietly, safe and dry, in the church that used to be a chickee. My ears perked for the old Storyteller’s high voice, warning children: “Quick! You find a chickee. It will protect you from Twins.”

In an open casket, her skin still smooth and beautiful, the old Storyteller lay, her hands clutching a Bible. After 88 years, her great inner clock, timeline of an entire Indian nation, had finally wound down.

Betty Mae Tiger Jumper crossed over the morning of Friday, Jan 14. “She went to sleep and never woke up,” said her son Moses Jumper Jr. A great flock of birds appeared suddenly outside James Billie’s window in Brighton, near Indiantown, where Betty was born. As Bird Clan, he instantly knew. “The doggone robins told me,” said Billie, a Tribal Chairman for 22 years. “I was stunned. My whole life she was always there. I don’t know what this Tribe would have done without her.”

No Seminole Indian alive today can remember this Tribe without Betty. With her early grasp of three languages—Muscogee Creek, Miccosukee, and English—she was the one back in the 1950s who prevented the government from terminating the Tribe. She caught every technicality in their documents. She explained every whereas to her fellow tribesmen, most of whom spoke a halting English, if at all. Few women in American history can match the impact she had on her world.

One by one, her mourners came to the pulpit, speaking in wonderment and praise for Pah-tah-kee—laying flat (like a snake), her Indian name. Through anecdote and legend, they described her triumphs in government and politics, her critical importance as the trusted interpreter and liaison to the dominant culture, her dedication to health and education, her never-ending outreach to troubled Tribal youth, her sensitive merging of Christian and pagan traditions, her preservation of Tribal culture.

She was the truant officer, honking and chasing absent students all over the res. She was the tour guide who taught kids to sing Jesus Loves Me in Seminole for tourists’ tips. “I used to run away from her,” said Rev. Hank Osceola. “She was the lady with needles who came to our camp and gave the shots.” She was known for breaking out loudly in song when the preacher faltered, and the congregation would follow her.
lead until he found his place. She was the lady who cooked chicken necks for any kids who stopped by. As the first Tribal nurse, she was present at every Seminole birth in the 1940s. “She gave me my English name,” said the current Tribal Chairman. “She told my mother, ‘He is Mitchell Cypress,’ and wrote it in the paperwork! I have no idea where she got that.”

She was the matriarch of the Snake Clan, wrestled gators with the best of them in her younger days, sewed jackets, created dolls, and brokered a huge Seminole crafts display at the Florida Folk Festival for over 30 years. She is said to have owned more than 100 dogs and countless turtles in her lifetime, each one her favorite.

“Aunt Betty saved this tribe. She was tri-lingual, the last of the founding generation,” said her nephew Max Osceola Jr., a Tribal leader for more than 30 years. “She provided the seed to grow where we are today.” As the country’s first female Tribal Chairman (1967–1971) she took the Seminoles’ $35 treasury and built it to $500,000 in four years, “and that was B.C.,” quipped Osceola. “Before Casinos!”

“She certified I was not a gorilla,” joked James Billie, who was born on the Dania Chimp Farm. When elders attempted to drown the half-breed Billie, Nurse Betty (a half-breed similarly threatened as a child) grabbed tiny Who-kiip-pee (taken away) and saved his life. He became Chairman in 1979 and is credited for pioneering the Indian gaming industry, “The New Buffalo.”

“When I first advocated the bingo and the casinos, every preacher on the reservation was out to get me. The people, especially the older ones, all looked at Betty for advice. And she could have stopped it,” remembers Billie. “But she stayed out of the way. Instead of challenging me, she went with it. Everyone watched and followed her lead. All she ever said to me was, ‘These are new times, James. You got to do what you got to do. Number one is we Indians got to survive.’”

PETER B. GALLAGHER is a Florida folk musician and lyricist, public-radio host, and writer from St. Petersburg. He worked for the Seminole Tribe for 15 years, until 2001.

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IN THE TWILIGHT OF KEY WEST, I can almost feel the weight of its outlandish island dreams settling around me here on Duval Street. Roots of sapodilla trees push up through cracks in the sidewalk, and fuchsia petals of bougainvillea lay like confetti on the street. Overhead, frigate birds soar in and out of the scarlet clouds.

Down here on the thin limestone crust of the island, the nightly pub bacchanal known as the “Duval Crawl” is underway. Neon bar signs glow, music thrums, and mopeds buzz like giant salt marsh mosquitos.

It seems as if the ground itself is vibrating under me. Old bodegas and buildings where Cubans once rolled cigars by hand morph into souvenir shops, pubs, and designer clothing stores, almost overnight. I get the odd feeling that I’m atop a tiny raft bobbing unsteadily in the warm turquoise sea—a raft that at once holds a carnival, a maritime museum, and a giant t-shirt shop.

Some of my favorite authors have walked these same streets during the last century, from novelists Ernest Hemingway and Tom McGuane to poets James Merrill and Elizabeth Bishop. The trick is to resist the hype that would have visitors seeing them all here at once, on command. Surely, this modern Key West is nothing if not richly tiered. Its decades of tinsel and tawdriness seem stacked, each upon the other, like an untidy layer cake. Once, novelist and poet Jim Harrison, who lived on the island, returned to Key West after being away for years. He roamed the streets with his friend McGuane, trying to figure out what old funk had been replaced by the new. “It was like a drunken ‘Songlines,’” Harrison said, referencing the Bruce Chatwin book about Australia and aboriginal myth.

Shorty’s, a downtown diner catering to locals—sometimes to the exclusion of tourists who were simply locked out—has now become a shop for tourist geehaws. The last time I checked, El Cacique, my favorite Cuban restaurant, had moved out to “Sears Town” because the rent was too high, taking its café con leche and generous plates of picadillo with it.

I exited with my friend Michelle from a small plane on the tarmac of the tiny “international” airport just two days ago, walking under a large official sign welcoming us to the “Conch Republic.” During the next few days, I’ll be off on a Songline quest of my own, a Walkabout that lets me burrow deeper into the spirit of this mythic old island town. Despite the over-the-top marketing hype, there’s something very compelling that still draws me here and I want to identify it, once and for all.

The city of Key West, which sports a pink-lipped queen conch shell on its official seal, “seceded” from the Union back in the 1980s via an official city proclamation. After doing so, it declared “war” on the United States, and then one full minute later, the mayor surrendered and requested foreign aid. This actually happened, even though the federal government chose to ignore it.

Earlier today, Michelle and I were at a local party for the grassroots conservation group Reef Relief out near Garrison Bight. There, we met the “Secretary-General” of the Conch Republic, one Sir Peter Anderson, a tall good-natured fellow who enjoys pontificating about the “state of mind”...
that Key West commands. Sir Peter has a real office with a real flag, issues passports for a fee, and even implies a very real diplomatic immunity might even be achieved—if you really, really believe. The Republic’s motto is: “We seceded where others failed.” There’s a strong tendency to want to play along, especially since the Republic back on the mainland doesn’t seem to be having a whole lot of fun these days.

We’re here in the hurricane season, which means that at any given time, a tropical storm can swell up and then cuisinart its way over the top of this flat, two-by-four-mile island with little effort. If this was anywhere else in Florida, TV weather people would be scaring the bejesus out of us with thunderstorm alerts. But the big news here is about the forthcoming Hemingway Look-Alike Contest—followed by ongoing reports about the status of the “gypsy chickens of Key West,” a heady issue that appears to have divided the town into pro and con poultry camps. (A chicken catcher was once hired to corral the fowl, but no one is sure what has become of him.) Meanwhile, at the Chicken Store on Duval, I can sign a petition to “hold dear the heart-stoppingly beautiful wild chickens of the City of Key West and ask they be preserved here forever.”

The sovereignty of the Conch Republic, ruled by Sir Peter and inhabited by anyone with a sense for the idiosyncratic, implies immunity to just about all higher forces—from tropical storms to rigid normalcy. At Greene Street, Michelle and I dodge the Conch Train tour, a cartoonish mini-locomotive trailing along open cars full of brightly dressed tourists like a mechanized conga line. I notice some of the passengers are actually taking photos and home video of us as we stand on the curb, waiting to cross. It occurs to me that an “attraction” in this old island town is just about anything that fits inside a viewfinder.

During hurricane season, the sea seems as if it has come ashore in one languorous tide of moisture and torpor and sweat. The air is so thick you may as well be underwater. It was the sea, after all, that first defined this place—that rare fusion of Gulf Stream and coral reef and mangrove-fringed shoal. When Miami was still a coastal swamp, Key West was the wealthiest city in all of Florida, thanks to pirates and wreckers who ransacked the ships that grounded just offshore. Opportunism has prevailed ever since.

On Greene Street, we duck under a sign with a giant grouper into Capt. Tony’s Saloon, where a couple of decades ago, I remember spending a leisurely summer afternoon chatting with the good captain himself. Tony

Wild chickens, beautiful but controversial, divide Key West city into pro and con poultry camps.

A royal poinciana splashes color along Duval Street.
told me that before buying the bar, he captained sport fishing boats that cruised the offshore Gulf Stream, and otherwise used his boat to haul whatever needed to be hauled. Someone once wrote of Capt. Tony that he seemed “like a dropout from a Hemingway novel” and Tony liked that so much he had it printed on the cover of match packs that advertised the saloon. A few years ago, Tony sold his saloon to rich folks from the mainland who were not dropouts from anything. Not so long ago, a conch-slinging feud erupted when the new owners of Tony’s were sued by the new owners of Sloppy Joe’s, just a few lurches away on Duval. The current Sloppy’s relies heavily on promoting itself as “Hemingway’s Favorite Bar,” although the original pub was actually in the building where Tony’s sits today. Little signs are now posted in both bars that clarify when and where Hemingway actually drank, putting an end to the litigious spat.

Built in an old morgue, Tony’s still has that fecund and decadent feel that once marked all of this old town of pirates and wreckers, spongers and shrimpers. And Tony’s was the place where Papa met his third wife Martha Gellhorn in 1934. If you squint into the dark cavern of the bar, past the trunk of a banyan tree growing through the ceiling, beyond the bras and thousand shards of notes and money tacked to the walls, you can still imagine Papa, sunburnt from fishing out on the Gulf Stream, with the brainy and striking Gellhorn, hunkered down on the wooden bar stools.

Back out on the street, we stop in Sloppy Joe’s where a clutch of white-haired cruise ship passengers is huddled around a table under a stuffed billfish and a large photo of Papa. Onstage, some tattooed slackers are banging out a rock cover song that is so discordant I can’t even identify it. I notice the air...
conditioning is blasting away, even with the doors swung wide open. Ceiling fans spin, but only as an accessory. For now, one can purchase a “Papa-Rita” for $8 and buy more than three hundred pieces of merchandise with the bar’s logo in the adjacent retail store, including golf balls. It’s very difficult for me to picture Papa spending much time in Sloppy Joe’s today, unless it was to start unloading on the patrons with one of his elephant guns.

The band mercifully breaks, and I look up on the stage and see Michelle hunched over and shooting photos of the crowd. Some of the crowd is shooting photos of her shooting photos. Behind me, a “Sloppy’s Bar Cam” also captures her on giant screen, just in case you missed it the first two or three times. Umberto Eco was right about thrice-removed reality seeming more real to Americans than reality itself.

Out we go into the balmy tropical evening, heading for the Schooner Wharf bar, which edges up to the waters of the Key West Bight, the historic harbor of the island. Not so long ago, working shrimp trawlers berthed here, so thick you could walk the entire harbor from one deck to another, ducking below the nets and outriggers. Faced with a gentrifying harbor with costly docking fees, the raw, picturesque boats and their raw, picturesque crews moved north to Stock Island. Today, the Bight is full of expensive yachts and sightseeing charters.

The poet Elizabeth Bishop, who lived on nearby White Street in the 1930s, once wrote “The Bight,” a poem that was elegant and searingly precise. Some of her images still remain true today:

Black and white man-of-war birds soar on impalpable drafts
And:
At low tide like this how sheer the water is,
White, crumbling ribs of marl protrude and glare.

But other images have not fared as well: The frowsy sponge boats keep coming in with the obliging air of retrievers

Except for one room with a pool table, there are no walls at the Schooner Wharf, just a bunch of frond-covered huts. The Bight, where tarpon still come and roll under the soaring man-of-war birds, is just a few feet away. There is a large dog sitting at the bar, drinking a beverage from a cup held up to him by a pretty woman. Next to her is a guy who looks like an accountant—with glasses, button down shirt, and pressed slacks, but who is wearing a pink tutu. A few yards away, a lean, dangerously tanned guy in tight shorts and a plaid fanny pack is gyrating to the music on the gravel and dirt floor, alone. His eyes seem to be focused on some point that is far, far away.

In the morning, we’ll ride a small flats boat into the shallow backcountry of the Gulf, beyond islands named Woman, Ballast, and Crawfish. With fins and mask, I’ll descend to a fossilized reef that seems like a miniature castle from a kid’s dream, brightly colored damselfish and gobies flying over make-believe parapets and bastions.

I realize that defining Key West is like mounting a delicate, exotic butterfly in a specimen case in the foolish conceit of preserving ephemera. But then I figure: It probably always was.

BILL BELLEVILLE is known most widely for his writing about Florida’s natural environment. This article is excerpted from his new book, Salvaging the Real Florida: Lost and Found in the State of Dreams, which chronicles his search for nature and “sense of place” throughout Florida.

Bill Belleville

Photo by Bill Randolph
We walked arm-in-arm through the bustling Hanoi market. Rows of vendors selling tea leaves offered samples in tiny ceramic cups. It was mid-morning and the streets of the capital city of Vietnam were already crowded with shoppers snatching up fresh ingredients for the day’s dinner.

It was the summer of 2000 and I had returned to Vietnam for the first time since fleeing my war-torn homeland with my family 25 years earlier. I was only 2 years old then, so I had no memory of my birth country and no relationship with relatives left behind.

That morning, as I shopped with a younger cousin, she asked me questions about my life in America. She leaned in and whispered so softly, her voice was barely audible over the roar of passing mopeds.

“Is it true,” she asked in Vietnamese, “that all roads in America are paved with gold?”

I laughed out loud. I grew up in Florida, where potholes rattle my car; where there are riches, but also pockets of poverty and homelessness, unemployment and sickness.

“Nonsense,” I answered back in Vietnamese. “Life is tough in America, too. People work very hard to build a good life for themselves.”

My parents were no exception. We arrived in America as refugees in 1975, settling first in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. At that time, Lancaster was among several communities across the country to erect tent cities, which served as temporary housing for the mass exodus of émigrés from Vietnam.

With help from a sponsor family and their church, my father immediately took a blue-collar job and enrolled in school. In 1978, he graduated from Penn State University with a computer science degree and moved the family to Florida where the warm climate had also lured other expatriates.

My father worked as a computer programmer and my mother assembled small electronic parts in a factory. They bought a tiny, three-bedroom, one-bath home to raise their five children. They had no savings and spent each paycheck on food, clothing, and what they considered basic necessities—music lessons to enrich our lives and braces to straighten our teeth.

I spoke no English when I started kindergarten, but I picked it up quickly. Some of it I gleaned from my mother, who struggled to learn the language. In second grade, when the teacher asked for words that began with the letter “A,” I proudly answered: “al-cah-
hawn.” My classmates snickered. That was how my mother, with her heavy accent, pronounced rubbing “alcohol” at home.

The language barrier kept my parents in the dark about many things outside the home. They did not know when report cards were distributed and never attended a single conference with a teacher. They were unable to help us with our English homework and science projects. As long as they saw us studying, they were content.

In second grade, my mother did hear from a friend about a program called Girl Scouts. It sounded like a good activity to her. That year, I happened to be friends with a girl named Amanda, who, over the next decade, would introduce American culture, including Girl Scouts, into my very Vietnamese life.

Amanda always wore the latest styles: Coca-Cola shirts and Member’s Only jackets, stirrup pants and UNITS belts. She tabbed her jeans at the ankle and adorned her wrists with jelly bracelets. Meanwhile, I wore the same pair of pin-stripe pants to school every day. Despite being a head taller, she would loan me her clothes. I still remember my favorite outfit in seventh grade: an oversized sweatshirt with different colored lips on it, paired with bright green balloon pants.

One Christmas, she received a hard-to-find (and signed!) Cabbage Patch doll from her parents. My parents gave my three brothers and sister and me much-needed bath towels.

Many Friday nights, I went to a church youth group with Amanda and her family. Sunday mornings, they picked me up for services. Some Sunday afternoons, I accompanied my parents to the Buddhist temple where we burned incense, chanted, and prayed. And every Saturday morning, for years, we attended Vietnamese school.

In the ’80s, much like today, Florida’s Vietnamese population was spread out across the state. But a handful of families who lived in the Tampa Bay area pooled their money together to hire a teacher to instruct their children how to read and write in Vietnamese. They became our social circle. At dinner parties, the parents compared their children’s grade-point averages and SAT scores. Did you hear about Mr. Hung’s twins? Co-Salutatorians. How about Mr. Ha’s son? Medical school.

To them, education was the key to success. It didn’t matter what else we did with our time, as long as we brought home all As. My siblings and I conspired to present our report cards only when we all had good marks. If one of us had a “B,” we waited until the next grading period to reassess. Once, three quarters went by and my mother wondered aloud why she hadn’t seen our grades in a while. We just shrugged our shoulders. It’s not like she could call up the school. She spoke no English.

Because my mother worked in a factory with other Vietnamese women, she didn’t have an opportunity to learn the language. She took English language classes at night, but she had a seventh-grade education. Learning another language in adulthood while working and raising five children was difficult.

It was fun for us. My siblings and I discussed our lives freely in front of my mother. “Don’t tell mom,” my brothers would say at the dinner table in rapid English, “but we’re going out tonight.” My mother just continued eating her rice.

But my parents kept a tight fist around us, constantly lecturing us about our studies. College was not an option. It was an expectation. They told us stories about our cousins in Vietnam who were hungry, lived in huts and
had no education. People died trying to come to America, my mother said. I can still see my mother weeping into our rotary phone one summer after receiving news about a cousin’s death. Thai pirates had intercepted a ship filled with Vietnamese escapees in the middle of the ocean and threw the men, including her cousin, overboard.

My parents fled Vietnam to raise their children in a free country, where there is unlimited opportunity if you just take it. All five children, first-generation Vietnamese-Americans, went to college and have achieved success in their own ways. That’s the beauty of America. You are given many paths to travel. Everyone has a chance at an education and has the freedom to choose which path they take.

Perhaps my cousin was right. The roads in America, the ones we travel in life, just might be paved with gold.

PHUONG NGUYEN COTEY, a former Florida journalist, is assistant director of News & Information Services at the Collins Center for Public Policy.

Brutal winters in Pennsylvania chased the Nguyen family to Florida in 1979. Phuong receives a trophy for her winning sixth-grade essay: “What freedom means to me.” The competition was sponsored by Hillsborough County Rotary Clubs.

PHUONG NGUYEN COTEY, a former Florida journalist, is assistant director of News & Information Services at the Collins Center for Public Policy.
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