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LA FLORIDA. Spanish explorer Juan Ponce de León gave the peninsula its modern name when he stepped ashore on the Atlantic coast in 1513. It was Easter season, known in Spanish as the *pascua florida*.

You have no doubt heard that when he discovered Florida, Ponce de León was searching for the Fountain of Youth. One sip from the magical fountain would cure any ailment, keep a man young. To this day, schoolchildren learn the story in fourth grade. But it is not true. The best historical sources, including the highly detailed charter given to him by the king of Spain, offer no evidence that Ponce de León ever gave thought to a Fountain of Youth, much less that he sailed to what is now Florida to look for it.

The truth is that Ponce de León carried a contract to settle the lands he discovered and to enslave native people. Such is myth. If it is more appealing than the real story, and if it endures long enough, it can overcome truth.

Florida has always drawn powerful mythmakers, so bold in their visions that their made-up stories have often come true.

Consider: On the eve of the twentieth century, Florida was home to

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only 529,000 souls, and among the poorest states in the American South.¹ Even as land speculators pitched the place as a balmy, beautiful land of opportunity, they mourned privately over worthless swampland and malarial living conditions. The most famous, a Philadelphia industrialist named Hamilton Disston, set about to drain the Everglades. Instead, the great swamp drained him. He committed suicide in his bathtub in 1896.

Fast-forward one hundred years. Florida met the twenty-first century as one of the most influential states in the nation: the fourth most populous, it would soon overtake New York as the third behind California and Texas. Floridians decided the 2000 U.S. presidential election. South Florida was a bridge to Latin America, with Miami the region's headquarters for banking and commerce. Orlando was the top destination for tourists in America. And Floridians had jobs: as the nation's jobless rate rose in the early years of the century, Florida's remained among the lowest of all the states.

From backwater to bellwether in one century. How? Much credit is due John Gorrie, the Florida physician who pioneered air-conditioning. But those most responsible for Florida's remarkable turnaround were blowing not cold but hot air. More than anything, the state's destiny was shaped by a colorful succession of pitchmen—and some noteworthy pitchwomen. Some, like the social reformer Harriett Beecher Stowe, promoted the “raw” and “unsettled” state in an earnest effort to save it.² Others, like Disston, made outrageous claims to pump up land sales. “You secure a home in the garden spot of the country, in an equable and lovely climate,” boasted one of his ads, “where merely to live is a pleasure, a luxury heretofore accessible only to millionaires.”³

The plot may well have been under water.

ENDLESS LAND, ENDLESS WATER

When Florida entered the Union in 1845, it was an “empty, often impenetrable and endless land” with 57,951 residents.⁴ Their first state flag said this: “Let Us Alone.” Statehood was supposed to bring settlers. But with the western frontier still wooing adventurers, Florida was a hard sell—particularly after January 1848, when California miners found gold at their camp on the American River at Coloma near Sacramento. By 1860,

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Florida's population had reached only 140,423: 77,746 whites, 61,745 slaves, and 932 free blacks. Most of them were clustered in a thin band along the northern border of the state.⁵

Their part of Florida was a deep-wooded wilderness, much of it dark and wild. Tall longleaf-pine forests dominated the uplands and coastal plains; hardwood hammocks thick with granddaddy oak, beech, and magnolias spread across the river basins. Black bears and panthers tamped down pine-needle paths through thick saw palmetto. On sunny days, so many alligators clambered out of rivers to dry out and sleep that the banks looked paved with black granite.

More than anything, the region was defined by water. In these days long before the Intracoastal Waterway, salt marshes stretched for miles inland from the Atlantic and Gulf coasts. In the interior, three grand and powerful rivers—the St. Johns in the east, the Suwannee in the center, the Apalachicola in the west—quartered the state. They flowed in and out of thousands of acres of cypress swamps, ponds, and lakes of every imaginable size. Throughout those waters bubbled up hundreds of ice-blue springs from deep below ground, reminders of the constant and forceful flow of water through underground channels in Florida's limestone core.

Exploring the St. Johns River in 1774, the naturalist William Bartram described one such spring as an “enchanted and amazing crystal fountain, which incessantly threw up, from dark, rocky caverns below, tons of water every minute, forming a bason, capacious enough for large shallows to ride in, and a creek four or five feet depth of water, and nearly twenty yards over, which meanders six miles through green meadows, pouring its limpid waters into the great Lake George, where they seem to remain pure and unmixed.”⁶

But to most pioneers, Florida was not so enchanting. Across the nation's frontier, nineteenth-century homesteaders viewed the wilderness as maleficent, their moral purpose to destroy it.⁷ President Andrew Jackson asked in his 1830 inaugural address: “What good man would prefer a country covered with forests and ranged by a few thousand savages to our extensive Republic, studded with cities, towns, and prosperous farms, embellished with all the improvements which art can devise or industry can execute?”⁸

In Florida, the conventional wisdom was that the peninsula was far too wet, a malady that came with frightening symptoms, from poisonous

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snakes to cloudlike swarms of mosquitoes. Wrote one new resident in 1872: “From what I have observed, I should think Florida was nine-tenths water, and the other tenth swamp.”⁹

Indeed, until the late 1800s, most of South Florida was a vast expanse of interconnected wetlands that covered 8.9 million acres and extended from the lakes and marshes south of today’s Orlando area all the way to the bottom tip of the state. In this region, too, a mysterious marsh flowed for a hundred miles from Lake Okeechobee to Florida Bay. An 1846 U.S. survey map called it “Pah-Hay-O-Kee or Grass Water, known as The Everglades.”¹⁰ The marsh was a jungle of wildlife—the only place in the world home to both crocodiles and alligators. It became the last major sanctuary in the eastern United States for egrets and herons, threatened with extinction during the Gilded Age because of a fashion craze for plume-decorated hats. During nesting season, the southern tip of the marsh was so thick with plume birds that it looked like “a white cloud, a cloud in constant motion.”¹¹

Also hiding out in the marsh was a small number of Seminole Indians who had fled their woodland homes during the United States’ three tragic wars against the tribe. In fact, the bloody accounts of Indian wars in these wetlands first piqued the federal government’s interest in the Everglades, writes Glades historian David McCally.¹²

In 1847, the government sent a respected St. Augustine lawyer named Buckingham Smith to investigate the marsh, particularly whether it could be “reclaimed and made valuable.” His lyrical report described “a vast lake of fresh water extending in every direction from shore to shore beyond the reach of human vision, ordinarily unruffled by a ripple on its surface, studded with thousands of islands of various sizes, from one-fourth of an acre to hundreds of acres in area, and which are generally covered with dense thickets of shrubbery and vines.”¹³

“A solitary inducement can not now be offered to a decent white man to settle in the interior of the Everglades,” wrote Smith, who proclaimed the region suitable only as “the haunt of noxious vermin, or the resort of pestilent reptiles.”¹⁴

Even Floridians who, like Smith, saw beauty in the swamps nonetheless dreamed of draining them dry. Alexis de Tocqueville pondered this on his American travels, during which frontierspeople considered him insane to want to experience wilderness for pleasure. Tocqueville figured Europeans yearned for nature because they had lost it, while having to

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live in the wilds made Americans prize “the works of man” over those of nature. “Their eyes are fixed upon another sight,” Tocqueville wrote in *Democracy in America*. They “march across these wilds, draining swamps, turning the course of rivers, peopling solitudes, and subduing nature.”¹⁵

Buckingham Smith believed draining the Everglades was not only feasible but that it would reveal a fertile expanse of soil suitable for plantations that would rival the West Indies for tropical fruits, coffee, tobacco, and sugar. He estimated it would take \$500,000 and less than a decade.¹⁶ Eager politicians and adventuresome businessmen latched on to his vision. They would not let go of it for the next century.

In 1845, the United States had welcomed its twenty-seventh state with a gift of 500,000 acres of federal land, much of it submerged, for “internal improvements.” In 1850, Congress passed the Swamp and Overflowed Lands Act, which turned over any wetlands considered unfit for cultivation to the states to drain for settlement. Florida’s take was more than 20 million acres. The young state’s elected officials spent five years fighting over how to manage their newfound land wealth. Finally, in 1855, they came up with the Internal Improvement Fund, with a board of trustees composed of the governor, comptroller, treasurer, attorney general, and registrar of state lands.¹⁷

These board members, along with other state leaders, set upon the path their successors would follow for the next 150 years: giving natural resources away to foster private development. The legislature passed the Riparian Rights Act in 1856, handing over state-owned sovereign lands to shoreline owners who would construct docks, wharves, and other projects to spark commerce and growth. The Florida Supreme Court later ruled this handout violated the U.S. Public Trust Doctrine, which obligates states to hold public lands and waters in trust for the benefit of all residents.¹⁸

Florida joined the Confederacy; some believe the Confederate treasury is buried outside Gainesville. During the Civil War and long after, the state remained sparsely populated and extremely poor—with little going for it save the land and the water. Desperate to grow, the trustees dangled these two primary assets to would-be developers, often handing them over for nothing. The water and land giveaways often proved foolhardy. Yet Florida’s leaders continued them into the twenty-first century.

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In the twentieth century, the big freebie was groundwater. Back in the nineteenth, it was swamplands. In one particularly disastrous decision by the Internal Improvement Fund, antebellum railroad and canal companies that had forged track and ditches before the Civil War convinced the trustees to put up the state's swamplands as collateral for their bonds. This violated the Swamp and Overflowed Lands Act requirement that the wetlands be drained for human settlement. But the railroad men argued their work would open the wild interior to homesteaders. Instead, devaluation of the Confederate currency plunged them into bankruptcy, and they defaulted on their loans. Bondholders rushed down to Florida to claim millions of acres of land. Court injunctions prohibited Florida from using its lands until the creditors were paid.¹⁹

But Florida was broke and faced losing millions of acres worth far more than the debt. Trustees and state lawmakers tried for more than a decade to squirm their way out of paying. In fact, the Florida legislature kept trying to hand over the land it no longer controlled to developers. In 1879, lawmakers passed a bill ordering the trustees to award ten thousand acres of swampland for each new mile of canal or railroad track built. Again, creditors got court injunctions to stop the giveaways.²⁰

Finally, in 1881, newly elected governor William Bloxham (1881–85) struck an ambitious economic development gambit with Hamilton Disston to bail Florida out of the crisis.²¹ In a real estate deal the *New York Times* called the largest land purchase by an individual in the world, Bloxham arranged to sell Disston 4 million acres for 25 cents each to pay off the creditors and free the land from the courts.²² In return, Disston and his partners would drain 12 million acres of swampland to the north and west of Lake Okeechobee in exchange for half of what they drained, or 6 million acres.²³

The deal handed Disston control of nearly half of Florida—including the still-uncharted Everglades. Disston promised “to drain all the lands overflowed by Lake Okeechobee, the Kissimmee River and its branches, and contiguous lakes . . . to lower the level of Lake Okeechobee, to deepen and straighten the channel of the Kissimmee River, and to cut canals and ditches to connect Lake Okeechobee with the Caloosahatchee River on the west, the St. Lucie River on the east, and the Miami and other rivers in the southeast.”²⁴ Mark Derr, a chronicler of humans and the land in Florida, notes that “the final configuration of south Florida's maze of canals, dikes, and channelized rivers generally follows this blue-

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print, but it took nearly a century and more than \$500 million to accomplish.”²⁵

Not only in the Everglades, but across the peninsula, Floridians were in a frenzy to get rid of the water. The state’s first water laws were the so-called ditch-and-drain laws of 1893. They authorized counties to “build drains, ditches or water courses upon petition of two or more landowners.”²⁶ No one could have imagined one hundred years later developers would petition state agencies to try to find water for growth.

While Disston went to work draining the swamps, Governor Bloxham paid off the creditors and opened up millions of Florida acres to railroad construction. When Bloxham took office in 1881, Florida had 550 miles of rails. By 1891 there were 2,566 miles; by 1900 there were 3,500.²⁷ The lines included Henry Morrison Flagler’s East Coast Railroad, stretching from Jacksonville to Miami, and Henry B. Plant’s lines along the west coast.

Flagler, Plant, and others tried to outdo each other’s promotions, publishing guidebooks that advertised their railroads and grand hotels. Great Atlantic Coastline Railroad hired the Southern poet Sidney Lanier to write a guidebook called *Florida: Its Scenery, Climate and History* (with a chapter for consumptives). Lanier started his book with a note on the genre: “So much being said about the abundant protection of strict truth, one can now go on to detail (without the haunting fear of being classed among the designing hysterical ones) the thousand charms of air, water, tree and flower which are to be found in Florida, and which remain there practicable all the winter days.”²⁸

Florida’s most famous promoter was Harriett Beecher Stowe, who wintered on the St. Johns River. The wildly popular author of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* cranked out articles about Florida life for the religious press and published her ode to the state, *Palmetto Leaves*, in 1873. Stowe well knew Florida’s “roughness,” “hardships,” and “loneliness.” Still, she recommended it to three types of people: those suffering from pulmonary or rheumatic conditions, who might find Florida “the salvation of life”; those who enjoyed nature and outdoor activities like fishing and hunting; and the “industrious young man” who might start off planting citrus trees and within a decade “realize a handsome independence.”²⁹

The late water historian Nelson Manfred Blake observed that Stowe’s enthusiasm made a strong impression on Northern readers. If a person-

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ality “denounced as a disturber of the peace in the antebellum South could find a happy second home in Florida, other Yankees could also expect to be well treated here,” Blake wrote. “And more and more of them visited the state each winter.”³⁰

During the depression of the 1890s, Hamilton Disston’s income from land sales lagged far behind the huge expenses he had incurred trying to drain the Everglades. He began to mortgage his Florida holdings for loans and more loans. His situation became increasingly desperate after the Panic of 1893. No longer able to pay his workers, he had to halt his dredging operations. Banks called in his loans, and he defaulted on bonds. On the night of April 30, 1896, after attending the theater in Philadelphia, he filled his tub with water, climbed in, and fired a bullet into his head.³¹

Now, these new bondholders joined hundreds of other claimants Florida had to fight over the legislature’s overly generous land grants. As the state’s politicians sobered up from their decades-long railroad and canal-building binge, they realized that they had no more land to sell or grant. They had promised more land than the state even owned.³²

The Populist governor Napoleon Bonaparte Broward (1905–9) won election by painting the railroad companies as land thieves, and promising to drain the Everglades once and for all. More and more political and business leaders had begun to deride the idea as “a great scheme to drain the State Treasury. . . . The attempt will simply result in a waste of the people’s money.”³³ But Broward traveled up and down Florida to convince voters that state-funded drainage was a crucial investment in Florida’s economic future.

Real estate developers certainly thought so. Those who specialized in swampland sales put enormous pressure on Florida’s politicians to keep the state dredges working to get rid of water. Only if reclamation was underway could they sign up new customers and keep the old ones paying their monthly installments. It is sort of a mirror image of today: in the twenty-first century, Florida’s home builders put enormous pressure on state and local politicians to *find* them water so they can break ground on new developments and presell homes and condos.

While buyers who invested in the Everglades muck hoped for a long-term payoff that seemed less and less likely, those lucky enough to have found Florida’s palm-shaded southeast coast got in on the most spectac-

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The first dredge in the Florida Everglades, circa 1907.

(Courtesy of the State Library and Archives of Florida.)

ular real estate boom in American history. At least while it lasted. Increasingly accessible by train, and then car, the tropical cities around Miami drew Florida's first population boom—2.5 million people in 1925 alone. That year, mainland property six and eight miles outside Miami was selling for \$26,000 an acre. Just a decade before, pitchman Carl Fisher had offered up Miami Beach property for free to anyone who would come down and settle it. This torrent “exceeded anything the nation had seen in oil booms or free-land stampedes,” wrote the Florida historian Michael Gannon.³⁴

To keep up with the boom, developers opened one subdivision after another of hastily built homes on hastily built land. In Fort Lauderdale, for example, Charles Green Rodes invented “finger-landings” to sell more high-priced waterfront lots: he dredged a series of canals at right angles to the New River, pulling out mangroves as he went, and used the fill to make new land. Down each artificial finger he built a street, dead-ended at the river for privacy. Each home was waterfront, with easy

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access to the river and the entire east coast canal system. The success of this “dredge-and-fill” development would make it a favorite of Florida home builders for the next forty years.³⁵

Scarcely heard over the squawk of the real estate salesmen who called from bullhorns along Miami Beach, some Floridians decried the loss of the environmental treasures that made the place so inviting in the first place. Flagler had struck nature a severe blow before the turn of the century by dredging Biscayne Bay and the Miami River, obliterating their deep blue springs and thick vegetation.³⁶ In 1923, the naturalist Charles Torrey Simpson asked: “What natural beauty will we have left for another generation? What right have we to waste and destroy everything nature has lavishly bestowed on the earth?”

“The only attraction belonging to the state that we do not ruin is the climate, and if it were possible to can and export it we would do so until Florida would be as bleak and desolate as Labrador,” Simpson wrote in his *Out of Doors in Florida*.³⁷

He was wrong, of course. People were ruining the climate, too.

Inevitably, Florida’s first real estate bubble would burst. The boom came to an end in January 1926, with failed banks, ruined speculators, and northerners cheated out of their savings. That fall, a great hurricane would further shatter the dreams of Florida’s boosters. The September storm hit the southeast coast with 130- to 150-mile-an-hour winds and moved across the interior, killing some 372 people, injuring 6,000, destroying 5,000 homes, and leaving 18,000 without shelter. Just two years later, in 1928, another September hurricane, the deadliest in state history, would roar through southeast Florida, taking more than 2,500 lives.³⁸

Florida’s hopes of reclaiming the Everglades had already dimmed, as decades of land giveaways, overbonding, and swampland sales by governors and the Internal Improvement Fund trustees caught up with the state, leaving the project hopelessly in debt.³⁹ The deadly hurricanes inspired a new partnership between the state and federal government, and a fundamental change in the way they managed South Florida’s water. Drainage would no longer be the order of the day. Flood control would take its place. Of Florida’s few remaining Everglades holdings, 1.3 million acres were set aside for water conservation; another 800,000 acres south of Lake Okeechobee designated agricultural.⁴⁰

The real estate collapse and bank failures in 1926 plunged Florida into

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the Great Depression three years ahead of the rest of the nation.⁴¹ The Depression era saw in Florida the one and only instance in the state's history in which leaders and promoters made any serious effort to slow growth—at least growth of a certain sort. For three winter seasons in the 1930s, state police took the extreme step of patrolling highway entrances to Florida and turning back travelers who lacked provable means of support, many of them desperate families pouring south in search of work and warmth. In the winter of 1935–36 alone, an estimated 50,000 people were turned back at the state line.⁴²

Still, Florida's boosters kept spinning their sunny myths of prosperity and opportunity. Within a decade, their stories would begin to come true.

P O P U L A T I O N B O O M

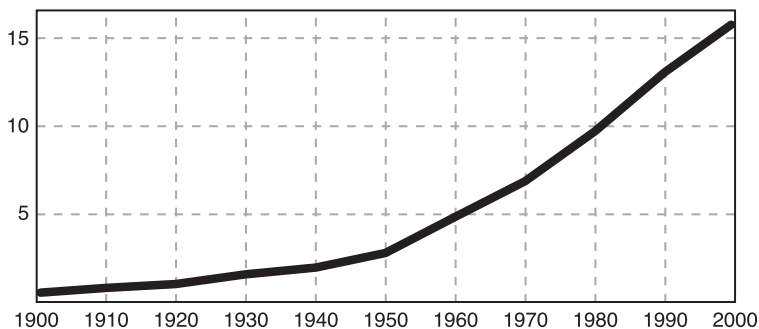
By December 1941, Florida was seeing signs of economic recovery from the Depression—and growth. Along the east coast, Highway 1A carried a steady stream of two-way traffic buzzing past mom-and-pop motels, seaside trailer parks, and a new retail phenomenon: roadside citrus shippers where visitors could grab a sack of Florida navels or send one north.

The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor stopped tourism in Florida as fast as lightning clears a swimming pool. But U.S. entry into World War II brought another stream of visitors to the Sunshine State. They were not wearing bathing suits. In the words of Florida historian Gary Mormino, these newcomers came in khaki, olive drab, and navy blue.⁴³

At the start of the war, America's generals had a problem: the country's military training facilities were overburdened. When they looked around for a place to house hundreds of thousands of soldiers, they found it in Florida—and its empty resorts. Soon, the state's hotels were barracks, its restaurants mess halls, its white-sand beaches vast training grounds with formations of soldiers sweating in the tropical heat.

In all, the state was home to 172 military installations, including the army's basic-training center at Camp Blanding, during the war Florida's fourth-largest city after Jacksonville, Miami, and Tampa. (Two thousand German prisoners, some captured in U-boats prowling Florida's coastline, were jailed there as well.) The federal government poured hundreds of millions of dollars worth of war contracts into the state. And by the end of the war, more than 2.1 million men and women had called Florida home for military training.⁴⁴

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Florida's population growth, 1900 to 2000 (in millions).

(Data from U.S. Census Bureau. © Christopher Sheek.)

This exposure would be key to the dramatic population growth of the postwar era. It was the introduction of the American GI to Florida—crucially combined with the growing uses of air-conditioning and mosquito control—that made the state accessible to the middle class.⁴⁵ After the war, families began to pour into the peninsula, not just to vacation anymore, but to set up households, make a new start. Florida exploded with new residents between 1945 and 1960, with population growth averaging 558 people a day during the fifteen-year period.⁴⁶

Finally—growth! Florida's leaders were euphoric. They looked forward to a surging economy with lots of jobs. Despite the massive migration and new residents' complaints about poor schools and inadequate services, they continued to beat the drum for more. "Emphasizing low taxes, a healthy environment, inexpensive land, and a pro-business political climate, state agencies, led by the governor's office, appealed to potential investors throughout the nation," write the Florida scholars David Colburn and Lance deHaven-Smith.⁴⁷

By the 1950s, it would have been hard to believe that sandy beaches were natural to only a few parts of Florida—on Cape Sable and on the ocean side of some barrier islands. The entire remainder of the coast, once thick with red, black, and white mangroves, labyrinths of roots and trunks that made the perfect nursery for young marine animals, was being chewed up by the mile.⁴⁸

The assault on Florida's environment that had been thwarted by the Depression now grew more frenzied every day. The top priority was the

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same as it had been a century before: getting rid of the water. Wetlands were drained by the thousands of acres. Along the coastlines, hundreds of miles of mangroves were bulldozed and left to rot. Huge sand dunes that graced both sides of the peninsula were flattened and used for fill—replaced with buildings and seawalls. Back in business after the lean war years, developers returned to the old finger-islanding techniques to build, the old installment plans to sell. In just one small scene that repeated over and over in South Florida in the 1960s, the Deltona Corporation in 1964 divided up a deep-forested, twenty-four-square-mile island called Marco, a sanctuary of tidal creeks and mangrove swamps teeming with fish and wildlife—a nursery for redfish and drum, a rookery for roseate spoonbills, snowy egrets, wood ibis, and countless other birds. The company sold lots to finance a dredge-and-fill operation that would chop the island into a stark, treeless geometry of roads and canals to create 5,700 waterfront lots.⁴⁹

Charles Green Rodes's dredge-and-fill technique had become particularly deadly to Florida's ecosystems, once dominated, of course, by wetlands. In 1957, lawmakers in the state capital, Tallahassee, tried to gain some control with a law called the Bulkhead Act. Local governments now had to issue dredge-and-fill permits and establish "bulkhead lines" to define the outer limits of waterfront development. The permits had to be okayed by the trustees of the old Internal Improvement Fund. But environmentally destructive filling remained rampant. One county, Pasco, set its bulkhead line two miles out into the Gulf of Mexico.⁵⁰

Luther J. Carter, one of the first journalists to chronicle Florida's environmental losses, reported in 1974 that "more than 60,000 acres of prime estuarine habitat for fish and shellfish had been lost to dredging and filling alone."⁵¹

Just as Florida's early boosters paid too dear a price for development in the days of the land giveaways, those at midcentury could not seem to see what they were sacrificing for growth. They also made a key miscalculation. They figured state and local governments would become so rich with tax revenues from the new residents that there would be plenty of money to fund their needs: new schools, new highways, much-needed sewage-treatment plants. They were wrong. By 1960, the pace of development had far outrun that of infrastructure. Pollution began to plague Florida's rivers, lakes, and canals. Only one sewage-treatment plant had been built in the entire state. For the most part, raw sewage was piped

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straight into rivers, the Atlantic, or the Gulf. A series of pipes off Miami Beach spewed millions of gallons of untreated sewage each day into a site visible from shore. It was dubbed the Rose Bowl for its odd pink tinge.

Then as now, Florida was a schizophrenic place, at once touting and destroying everything that made it feel like paradise—the granddaddy sand dunes, the unobstructed ocean views, the fat redfish and long-snouted snook that hid out in mangrove bushes.

Even as the concrete poured, Florida's magnificent natural areas and wildlife had kept the state at the vanguard of the conservation movement. In 1901, for example, Florida became among the first states to outlaw plume hunting. In 1903, U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt established the first U.S. wildlife refuge in Florida—at Pelican Island in the Indian River Lagoon. And Florida's eminent environmentalist Marjory Stoneman Douglas wrote her famed *The Everglades: River of Grass* in 1947—more than a decade before the dawn of the popular environmental movement in the early 1960s. *River of Grass* “reshaped the way America saw the southern tip of its southernmost state,”⁵² giving Americans, for the first time, a view of the Everglades as a national treasure rather than a dismal swamp.

But destruction of wetlands, pollution, and other problems associated with growth were outrunning conservation efforts. In 1962, Rachel Carson published *Silent Spring*, the book that opened ordinary Americans' eyes to the threat of toxic chemicals and explained humans' ecological dependence on the earth. In Florida, that was the year bald eagles reached their lowest point, due to both pollution and habitat degradation, with an estimated 251 nests statewide.⁵³ As the future governor Bob Graham—a developer himself—was fond of saying, Florida had become so attractive that “the walls of constraint collapsed under the desire to find a home in the sun.”⁵⁴

“WATER WONDERLAND”

No one represents Florida's mid-twentieth-century developer as perfectly as a clean-scrubbed, handsome pair of brothers: Leonard and Jack Rosen. And no place exemplifies how tall tales come true in Florida better than the city the Rosens built on a point jutting out from the state's southwest coast: Cape Coral, nicknamed Florida's Water Wonderland.

The Rosens were born to Russian-Jewish émigrés who had settled in

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Baltimore, Maryland. They honed their remarkable sales skills as teens, after their father was run over by a streetcar and killed during the Depression. In the 1930s they hawked coat hangers and other household goods at carnivals and on the boardwalks of Atlantic City. During the 1940s they built a furniture empire by selling to families on installment. By the 1950s they had tapped television, coming up with long-form, storytelling commercials to sell lanolin hair products.⁵⁵

The brothers used all those tricks and more to hard-sell a city that existed only in their dreams. In 1957, they bought 1,724 acres of palmetto scrub near Fort Myers for a \$125,000 down payment. Ten years later, they were multimillionaires at the head of the largest development corporation in the country, Gulf American Corporation, bringing 50,000 visitors a month to Florida to look at yet-to-be-built Cape Coral. (The Rosens bought into the marketing superstition that developments had to have repeating initials, thus their Florida legacies Cape Coral, Golden Gate, River Ranch, Remuda Ranch, Barefoot Bay, and Rio Rico.)⁵⁶

The Rosen brothers convinced thousands of small, installment buyers from throughout the United States and Europe that this mangrove-choked, mosquito-infested scrubland where the Caloosahatchee River empties into the Gulf of Mexico, with only one dirt road in and out, would someday be a paradise of waterfront homes, lush tropical landscaping, and country-club amenities.

The pitch was part scam: Gulf American was notorious for selling land it did not own, for switching homesites after sales were made, and for making it almost impossible for small owners to resell their lots. But there is no denying that most of Leonard and Jack Rosen's promises did come true—beyond anyone's wildest dreams. Fifty years ago, Cape Coral did not exist. Today, it is the fastest-growing city among those with populations over 100,000 in the eastern United States. It has the waterfront homes (thanks to some 400 miles of canals), the palm-lined streets, the yacht club, the sparkling pools, the green golf courses.

All this comes with a steep environmental bill. Today's Cape Coral residents are still paying it. The moving of so much land and water, combined with overdevelopment and drought, has resulted in a water-supply crisis in the Water Wonderland. Today, water levels in Cape Coral are so low that 4,000 homeowners are watching their wells go dry. Meanwhile fire department officials, who depend on the city's canal system for

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hydrants, say about a third of Cape Coral is at risk of not having enough water pressure in case of a major fire.⁵⁷

To build up Cape Coral, Gulf American ignored Florida's new dredge-and-fill laws and scooped millions of cubic yards of fill from the Caloosahatchee River without permits. The company obliterated thousands of acres of mangrove habitat. Said one wildlife biologist in 1973: "They've developed a Sahara Desert down there. Every time the wind blows, the dust flies. They've completely denuded the land of every bit of vegetation. It's a bad one—an abortion."⁵⁸

Such practices were standard operating procedure for the times. Florida's local governments were not equipped to stop them. Through the 1960s, Lee County, home of Cape Coral and several other Gulf American communities, had no master plan and virtually no zoning. In fact, by 1970, more than half of Florida's counties still had no planning or zoning whatsoever.⁵⁹

But amid the burgeoning environmental consciousness of the 1960s, Florida would become among the first states in the nation to take bold steps to protect water, land, and wildlife. The man who led the way was an unlikely green: a one-term governor named Claude Roy Kirk Jr. with no personal interest in conservation. The charismatic but quirky former marine had been elected in 1966 in a stunning victory that made him the first Republican governor of Florida in the twentieth century.⁶⁰ He became the first chief executive in state history, and the first in the South, to make the environment a centerpiece of his governorship.

Kirk's inspiration was Nathaniel Reed of Hobe Sound, the governor's dollar-a-year environmental adviser. Reed, reared in a wealthy Connecticut family that spent half the year in the then-wild tropical paradise of Jupiter Island, was so rabid a nature lover that his mother said he "came out of the womb casting a fly rod."⁶¹

Reed convinced Kirk to champion Florida's environment, a repayment to Mother Nature that he would soon repeat at the national level. In 1971, President Richard Nixon—another politician with little interest in nature—asked Reed to serve as assistant secretary of interior and preside over the greatest handout of conservation monies in U.S. history under the Land and Water Conservation Fund. Reed helped convince both Nixon and Kirk of the extraordinary political capital to be tapped in the nation's growing environmental ethic. Opportunistically, both

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men built unprecedented environmental records, with President Nixon creating the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) by executive order, and signing into law the Clean Water Act, the Clean Air Act, and the Endangered Species Act. (Nixon vetoed the Clean Water Act of 1972 on cost grounds, knowing that he would be overridden by Congress.)⁶²

Governor Kirk's delight in ruffling the feathers of Florida's power brokers, combined with his love of a press-generating cause, made the environmental platform an easy sell. "He had an interest in the lowest guy on the totem pole and at that time, conservation was the lowest thing in anybody's mind in Florida," remembered Reed. "It was rape and run, avarice and greed. Make money now, and do not worry about the future."⁶³

At Reed's urging, Governor Kirk championed two key conservation measures his first year in office. One was the Florida Air and Water Pollution Control Act of 1967, which created a board and permitting process to oversee air and water pollution discharges. The other was an amendment to the 1957 Bulkhead Act. The 1967 update required a biological survey as a prerequisite to any state or local decision allowing alterations to tidal lands or the bottoms of state-owned lakes.⁶⁴

Known as the Randell Act, the new restrictions to dredge and fill were named for their sponsor, state representative M. T. "Ted" Randell of Fort Myers, who had become alarmed by impacts on his favorite fishing holes. It directed the cabinet to weigh the public benefits of proposed waterfront development against environmental losses. From that point on, owners of submerged lands in Florida could no longer assume they could be filled or used as fill. Also at Reed's urging, Governor Kirk frequently opposed dredge-and-fill permit applications, which made it difficult for the six Democrats who made up the cabinet to approve them.⁶⁵ In the wake of the Randell Act, approvals for the permits, which had been averaging two thousand a year, dropped to two hundred a year in the last three years of Kirk's term.⁶⁶

Despite the early rolls of an environmental drumbeat, however, Kirk and other Florida leaders continued to march with the growth band. Kirk's appetite was whetted particularly by a man named Walt Disney, who claimed his idea for a "City of Tomorrow" could bring as many as 13 million visitors a year to the Sunshine State. Kirk greased the project mightily. On one famous occasion, he flew to California in the middle of a teachers' strike crisis back home to visit Walt Disney's brother, Roy. On that day, Kirk said, he assured Roy Disney "that our effort would be

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to be sure that no politician, no city, no code enforcement people would put their arm on them either legally or illegally to make them change the nature of what they were trying to do.”⁶⁷

Walter Elias Disney had acquired his 27,500 acres in Central Florida in 1964 for an average of \$200 an acre. It helped that they were mostly underwater. The dreamer who had spent his boyhood doodling whimsical pictures instead of studying, who grew up to create the character of Mickey Mouse and hundreds of animated cartoons, envisioned an ultra-modern fantasy city on those acres where others could see only swamp.

“No, no, this won’t do,” Walt Disney said the first time he saw the property’s water—stained black by tannic acid from the cypress trees that dominated the land.⁶⁸ He wanted the wetlands drained. He wanted the trees gone, replaced with civilized flora and fauna. Most of all, he wanted the water blue.

He got all that, and much more. In a handover of power to private industry that was astonishing even by the standards of the state’s long-boosterish governors and lawmakers, the Florida legislature in 1967 gave Disney governmental power over its own land. Walt Disney had implied the legislation would make or break his grand move into Florida. The package of three bills turned the company’s holdings into two cities and the Reedy Creek Improvement District. Since no one lived there but a few Disney employees—that is still true today—the move handed the company all the rights and responsibilities that would have fallen to the two counties its acreage spanned: Orange and Osceola.

The legislation passed just months after Walt Disney died of lung cancer—he was an aficionado of tiny cigars. It ensured his project could remain “in a state of becoming,” as early planning documents insisted it should be, “freed from the impediments to change, such as rigid building codes, traditional property rights and elected political officials.”⁶⁹

Over the next four years, Disney’s Imagineers would transform the wet wilderness into a tightly controlled environment. Working around the clock under bright spotlights, workers excavated 8 million cubic yards of fill to make way for the Mouse. To get rid of water, they carved out 40 miles of canals, 18 miles of levees, and 13 water-control structures. They drained the property’s large lake, removing the decaying organic sludge that turned the water brown. They dug a two-hundred-acre lagoon to make Walt’s blue-water entrance to the Magic Kingdom. They used the fill to raise the theme park 12 feet above its surroundings.⁷⁰

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Walt Disney World opened on October 1, 1971, after spending a total of \$400 million on construction.⁷¹ Three decades later, the Walt Disney Company, now the number two media conglomerate in the world, had made Central Florida home to four theme parks, two water parks, and scores of other thematic lodgings and attractions. It also was drawing far more visitors to the Sunshine State than its boosters ever dreamed—at last count more than 40 million a year.⁷²

Like the generations of pitchmen, promoters, and developers who came before him, Walt Disney, with considerable help from Florida's elected leaders, imagined a paradise and made it come true. His dream took shape as an oasis: his blue lagoon. The canals that snake throughout the theme parks. Gently bobbing water rides for children. Soaking thrill rides for adults. Glittering, manufactured lakes reflecting patriotic fireworks that burst over the parks at night. And everywhere: fountains. In all, 85 of them grace the four parks. The most famous is Epcot's Dancing Waters, whose music-timed sprays can reach heights of up to one hundred feet from 264 jets.

A few years ago, Dancing Waters dried up.⁷³ Disney officials had to shut it down to comply with water restrictions as Florida faces a water-supply crisis—one that would seem impossible in a state so recently sub-merged.

Like the myth of Ponce de León's Fountain of Youth, like that of Cape Coral as "Water Wonderland," Walt Disney's oasis does not really exist.

You might call it a mirage.