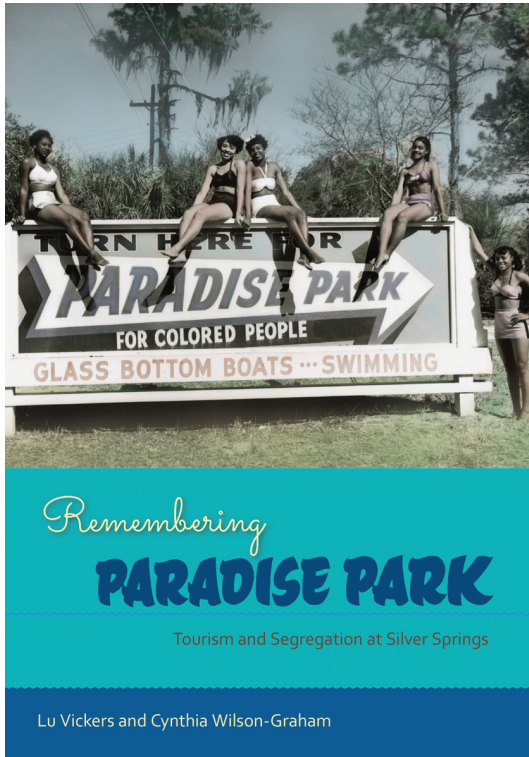


WHAT PEOPLE ARE SAYING



“A strange and unsettling glimpse of the land of sun and surf in the waning moments of segregation in the South.”—**GILBERT KING**, author of *Devil in the Grove: Thurgood Marshall, the Groveland Boys, and the Dawn of a New America*

“A testament to the efforts of a black community determined to provide wholesome recreation for their families in a segregated society. This masterpiece of local history changes the way we think about the history of tourism and civil rights.”—**SUSAN SESSIONS RUGH**, author of *Are We There Yet?: The Golden Age of American Family Vacations*

“The story of Florida tourism has been told in many ways, but this book gives a perspective that has been missing from most of them. Vickers and Wilson-Graham finally open the gates to Paradise Park so that all are welcome to sample its wonders.”—**TIM HOLLIS**, author of *Selling the Sunshine State: A Celebration of Florida Tourism Advertising*

“An invaluable time capsule. This bittersweet book vividly describes the joys of Paradise Park, while acceptance and endurance of racist practices are also remembered and voiced.”—**MARSHA DEAN PHELTS**, author of *An American Beach for African Americans*

“The story of Paradise Park has been waiting to be told, and there’s no one better suited to tell it.”—**GARY MONROE**, author of *Mary Ann Carroll: First Lady of the Highwaymen*



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REMEMBERING PARADISE PARK
Tourism and Segregation at Silver Springs
LU VICKERS AND CYNTHIA WILSON-GRAHAM

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Photo by Samuel Cherrier-Vickers

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Photo by Nychele C. Walker

LU VICKERS AND CYNTHIA WILSON-GRAHAM
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Q & A with

**LU VICKERS AND
CYNTHIA WILSON-GRAHAM**

authors of

Remembering Paradise Park

*Tourism and Segregation
at Silver Springs*

Photo by Nychele C. Walker




How did you first become interested in Paradise Park?

CWG: I became interested in Paradise Park after seeing a black and white vintage picture of African American people hanging out the window of a boat, which looked similar to pictures that I had seen at Silver Springs.

LV: After having written three previous books on Florida attractions, I was considering doing a book on Silver Springs so I was aware of Paradise Park. I knew that Cynthia had been working on putting together a book on Paradise Park for years, but had not been able to. Rather than do the book on my own, I contacted her to see if she would be willing to work together. I felt strongly that the book needed to include a brief history of segregation related to recreation, as well as info on other parks since Paradise Park was only open for twenty crucial years.

There were other segregated recreational attractions and parks during Jim Crow, including Amelia Island's American Beach and Miami's Virginia Key. How was Paradise Park different?

LV: American Beach was one of a couple of African American owned beaches in Florida—Butler Beach is the other. American Beach was founded in 1935 by A.L.



Lewis, president of the Afro-American Insurance company, and is still owned by African Americans today. African American access to Virginia Key in Miami was spearheaded by African American soldiers returning from World War II. Although the genesis of each of these parks was different from Paradise Park, the impetus was the same: African Americans wanted to enjoy Florida's natural resources like anyone else, and fought—often in fear for their lives—for the right to do so.

CWG: Paradise Park was for African Americans but was owned by the same white Americans who owned Silver Springs, Carl Ray and Shorty Davidson. Both parks used the same glass bottom boats and captains.

What insight does your book provide on the history of Florida tourism that other works may have missed?

CWG: In the midst of racial discrimination, and even lynchings, African American labor had a significant impact on Florida tourism, especially at Paradise Park.

LV: Most books on the history of Florida tourism devote a few sentences to African American contributions to Florida tourism. The truth is that African Americans always played an integral role in Florida tourism, from helping build railroads to building their own hotels as Dana Dorsey did in Miami; from piloting steam boats on the Ocklawaha to establishing their own parks such as American Beach, or operating parks, such as Paradise. How many people know that millionaire Dana Dorsey, the son of former slaves, established a park for African Americans in Miami in 1917, or that he was the original owner of Fisher Island?

The famous Groveland rape case happened right as Paradise Park opened. How did that affect the park's opening?

LV: The Groveland rape case didn't directly affect the opening of Paradise Park, although it did make the park more necessary. African American parents were terrified for their children during those dark days before and after the Groveland case. The retrial was held in Ocala, and even future Supreme Court justice Thurgood Marshall feared for his life. Harry T. Moore of Mims, who was heavily involved in the Groveland case, and whose daughter taught at Howard High school in Ocala, was killed along with his wife as a result of his involvement. Against this backdrop, having a place like Paradise Park for families to enjoy without fear of being harmed was a blessing.

Of all the stories you heard and the photos you unearthed, what detail of the Paradise Park story most surprised you?

LV: The detail I was unaware of prior to interviewing a couple of the boat captains, was how instrumental the captains themselves were in prompting Silver Springs' owners Carl Ray and Shorty Davidson to open Paradise Park. Silver Springs only hired African American glass bottom boat drivers during segregation, and of course they wanted their families and friends to see the main spring and the river. They were allowed to take family and friends out on the sly, and as Henry Jones said, it got to the point where it made sense to open Paradise Park downriver on a property Silver Springs already owned.

CWG: I was surprised that white Americans were interested in the activities at Paradise Park and would try to sneak in for visits.

What are some of the remnants of Paradise Park that visitors to Silver Springs Park today might not realize are part of the old African American tourist attraction?


CWG: Today, the Fort King Waterway runs through the former location of Paradise Park.

LV: There are physical remnants of Paradise Park on site down the river from Silver Springs. Someone bulldozed all the buildings and if you walk over the property you can find pieces of broken plates and soda bottles from the lunchette, as well as remnants of the concrete benches.

What was the process for tracking down the former employees and patrons of Paradise Park? What was their reaction to you wanting to tell their story?

CWG: Tracking down former employees and patrons of Paradise Park involved a simple visit to Silver Springs to speak with Leon Cheatom, Roosevelt Faison, David Faison, Virginia Ferguson, and Oscar Collins. Next a phone call to Grandvera Bryant and Arizonia Vereen-Turner, who provided me with a list of names and telephone number for employees and patrons.

LV: Cynthia put me in contact with some of the boat captains and family members. I also made connections at a Black History month event in Ocala and emailed people who I thought might have gone to the park, like Tampa Bay Times columnist Bill Maxwell, and filmmaker Kenneth Jones. Other people were put in contact with



me via word of mouth, such as the Gary family. Reviewer Marsha Phelts, author of *An American Beach for African Americans*, recognized these amazing sisters in a photograph and I was able to interview them at the last minute. Larone Taylor Davis was one of two former Miss Paradise Parks who were sent my way by others. I am grateful for how open people were with me, especially since I am white. I think they could tell right away that I truly cared about the project; I had done my research and was familiar with African American history in Ocala and the surrounding areas and that made them feel more comfortable.

Was there anyone you didn't get to talk to? What would their story have been?

CWG: Yes, I wasn't able to talk to Thelma Parker, who would have told the history of African Americans at Paradise Park from the viewpoint of a columnist.

LV: I would have loved to talk to Mr. Eddie Leroy Vereen who Ray and Davidson tapped to run Paradise Park. Every person I talked to expressed the utmost respect for this man. Although he had a limited academic education, he was clearly a brilliant businessman who not only ran Paradise Park like a kingdom, as his grandson said, he also helped arrange housing for out of town visitors. He was acutely aware of the effects of racism and chided whites for failing to recognize—not only the moral benefits, but the economic benefits—of opening hotels and motels for African Americans. He was also a devoted husband, father and grandfather who took in his sister's children when she passed.

What hopes do you have for this book?

LV: My hope is that others will see the value of interviewing and recording the histories of people who lived through segregation and not only survived but thrived. When students are taught about Civil Rights, they often only see the firehoses and police dogs. Although those images are necessary, students often don't get to see that African Americans had actual lives and they went on picnics, went to beaches, and celebrated special occasions in spite of being treated as second class citizens, and in spite of the omnipresent threat of violence. I also hope that the book will inspire others—particularly those within the communities where they existed—to write about the places that are similar to Paradise Park, not just in Florida but across the country. Writing the book inspired me to change the way I teach African American literature. I now require my students to interview older family members and/or friends about their experiences during segregation. The results are phenomenal.

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“South of the South”

In spite of its reputation as a tourist region, [Florida] had been an Old South slave state as well as a stalwart member of the Confederate States of America during the Civil War.

WALTER HOWARD, *LYNCHINGS*

Although African Americans may have had the “best part of the park” at Silver Springs, as Tom Cavanaugh of Florida Leisure Attractions said, the reality is that Florida itself was well known to be unsafe for African Americans even as it promoted itself as the “Land of Sunshine, Oranges and Health.”¹ Around the same time that Irving Berlin wrote “Florida by the Sea” in 1925—with the lyrics: “In the lovely land of Florida/Sunny Florida by the sea/All the sunshine in America/Is in Florida you’ll agree”—the African American newspaper *Florida Sentinel* published the following “Warning to Negro Tourists”:

Those who have automobiles want to exercise more caution when driving over the State. The small villages and towns are far from civilized and at every opportunity give their savagery full play. The Negro who drives a Ford gets by no better than one who drives a Lincoln. Every one must pay a toll for driving through these small white settlements. You don’t have to speed. If you roll along at the rate of four miles an hour, if you happen to be the least colored[,] it is sufficient reason to hold you up and take from you a batch of your cold cash, and on top of that be rough-necked by a man whose nickel-faced badge is his only protection against the charge of high-way robbery.

The editorial went on to explain that the judges and cops in these small towns must rely on tickets for their pay as “the town itself may



The 11th District of the American Legion Post was composed entirely of African Americans and sponsored the annual “Miss Paradise Park” contest on Labor Day weekend. They used the event to raise money for charitable causes. A soldier blows the whistle as the annual contest begins. Photo by Bruce Mozert. By permission of Bruce Mozert. Courtesy of Cynthia Wilson-Graham.

not afford enough to keep up a razor-back hog.” The piece ended with some admonitions including, “Don’t leave your city unless you are certain you have enough gas to carry you to the next city.”²

Gilbert King, author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning book *The Devil in the Grove: Thurgood Marshall, the Groveland Boys, and the Dawn of a New America*, wrote that Florida, at the time Paradise Park opened, still had a “boundless capacity for racial inhumanity” and was “south of the South” but had somehow managed to avoid the “scrutiny”

applied to Mississippi and Alabama, even though by 1930 Florida reported more lynchings than any other state. Not only were there more lynchings, but at times whole towns were wiped out.³ Against this backdrop of violence, the creation of Paradise Park becomes even more meaningful.

In 1920 in Ocoee, Florida, a small town about 115 miles south of Ocala, a racial riot broke out when a black man was barred from voting in the presidential election because he had not paid the poll tax. In the dispute that followed, with shootings on both sides, the riot became a massacre. The town's whites went on a rampage, burning homes, churches, and a lodge and killing at least six African Americans by some accounts, or more than fifty by more recent accounts, including July Perry, who was lynched. Over the years as the number of dead on both sides has been debated, one fact remained clear. Nearly five hundred African Americans left Ocoee shortly after that night, and none returned. With the exception of a couple of blacks listed on the census in 1930, Ocoee was an all-white town up until the 1980s. As late as in 1959 the town had a sign at the city limits that read "Dogs and Negroes Not Welcome."⁴ A similar incident took place at Rosewood in 1923, when at least six African Americans were murdered and the entire town was burned to the ground because a white woman accused a black man of rape.

In his book King writes about an infamous case that took place in June 1949, just one month after Paradise Park opened, in the small town of Groveland, about an hour south of Ocala. The Groveland Four, as Ernest Thomas, Charles Greenlee, Samuel Shepherd, and Walter Irvin came to be called, were young African American men falsely accused of raping a young white woman in Groveland. Thomas was immediately tracked down in the woods and killed, and the other three were arrested. A mob swarmed the jail in an attempt to lynch the men. When that failed, they headed to Groveland, where they burned numerous homes, terrorizing the African American families who lived there. Except for the word of the white couple, there was no evidence that the men had done anything wrong.⁵

Edmond Fordham of Ocala said his brother, William Fordham, was one of only three African American lawyers in Florida in 1949 when he went to interview the men at Raiford, the prison where they were held.⁶ According to Robert Saunders, field director for the Florida

NAACP in the 1950s, Fordham, who had just completed law school, had set up an office in Tampa. “If you read the history of the Groveland case, you’ll find that it was Fordham that went up to Raiford. In questioning the three youths who were up there, he found a lot of blood on the clothes and everything. It was this report from Fordham that opened up the real effort to fully investigate what happened in the Groveland case.”⁷

However, partially because evidence that would have proved their innocence was withheld, they were convicted. When the case went to trial, Sam Shepherd was murdered and Irvin was gravely wounded by Sheriff Willis McCall as he was driving them to court. Then, because of his role in the case, Harry Moore and his wife were assassinated. Edmond Fordham said his brother William was also involved with this tragic event. “The sheriff in Lake County, McCall, was a terror,” he said. “When Harry Moore’s house was bombed my brother was the first person down there.”⁸

After Irvin recovered, the trial was moved to Ocala. His lead attorney for the retrial held in Ocala in 1952 was Thurgood Marshall. Besides gaining a retrial for Irvin, Marshall had recently appeared before the Supreme Court to argue that school segregation was a violation of the fourteenth amendment, an argument that culminated in the famous 1954 *Brown vs. Board of Education* case. Still, even though Marshall was welcome at the Supreme Court, he wasn’t welcome in Bennett’s Drug Store in downtown Ocala. Attorney Guy Musleh recalled taking Marshall to lunch at Bennett’s with two other lawyers during a recess. “We sat at a table in Bennett’s and everyone was looking at us . . . some with very disapproving looks.” The lawyers ordered club sandwiches, and when they came, Marshall swapped plates with Musleh. “He said teasingly that if it was being poisoned, someone else would get it.”⁹ Given the fact that he was under constant threat in Florida, and given what had happened to Harry T. Moore, Marshall had every reason to worry for his life.

Despite Marshall’s pleas, Irvin was convicted again and sentenced to death. Former governor Leroy Collins commuted that to a life sentence in 1955; Irvin was released from prison in 1968 and died just one year later.¹⁰ In September 2012 the families of the four men petitioned Florida Governor Rick Scott to clear their names. They received a letter from the governor’s office informing them that they needed to

contact the state attorney's office as the governor could not "expunge records."¹¹

The Ocoee, Rosewood, and Groveland cases are deadly examples of the discrimination that permeated every aspect of the lives of Florida's African Americans, whether they were rich or poor. As far as tourism or entertainments went, the state played Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. African Americans made up a large part of the tourism workforce but were excluded from enjoying the attractions where they worked. As for entertainers, from the 1930s to the 1960s stars like Duke Ellington, Cab Calloway, Count Basie, and Sam Cooke played in segregated Miami Beach nightclubs but weren't allowed to sleep in whites only hotels. Josephine Baker famously refused ever to perform in the United States again after being "crudely hounded out of two East Side hotels" in New York. She planned to skip America completely for her 1950-51 tour, but was contacted through her agent by Ned Schuyler, co-owner of Copa City, the famous nightclub in Miami, who offered her good money to do a show there. When told that the club did not allow African Americans inside, she refused. Schuyler then flew to Havana to meet her in person, literally begging her to change her mind. "I have been told that Negroes cannot go to nightclubs in Miami Beach," she told him. "I cannot work where my people cannot go. It's as simple as that." She finally relented when the owners agreed to add a clause to her contract stipulating that there would be no discrimination against any patrons no matter what race.¹² Baker's one-woman protest led several other prominent Miami night clubs to adopt similar policies, prompting the editors of *Ebony* to write:

It was inevitable that eventually the nauseating bigotry of the South would result in revulsion among Northerners in Miami. The forces of democracy are slow and plodding but as certain of victory as was the tortoise over the hare. Today in Miami a slow but sure revolution seems to be in the making and seemingly for the first time since the Civil War, the North is establishing a beachhead of democracy in the South. Miami is that beachhead.¹³

For years, Miami officials required the city's tourism workforce to carry official identification cards. These rules applied to everyone, white or black, but African Americans were routinely stopped for checks. In the 1930s Iona Holmes worked as a maid at the Mayfair Hotel, where

a sign posted in the lobby read “No dogs, no Jews, No coloreds.” Jews had it bad, Ms. Holmes recalled decades later, but blacks had it worse. “We couldn’t even use the toilets in the hotel where we worked,” she said. “If we had to go to the bathroom during our 8 hour shift, we had to walk three blocks away to another hotel that had a special servants’ bathroom for blacks—even when it was raining. We couldn’t drink a glass of water at the hotel. Had to go outside to use a public water fountain, one that said ‘Coloreds.’”¹⁴

Heavyweight world champion Joe Louis fought before a segregated audience in Jacksonville a couple of months before Paradise Park opened in 1949. One consolation for the crowd, as a newspaper reported, was the Brown Bomber’s generous ringside announcement: “Negro fans were invited to be his guests at a colored bar after the bout . . . and [he] picked up a sizable bill.”¹⁵ In the early sixties, “when neither money nor fame was enough to secure them a room at most hotels in town,” Malcolm X, a young Muhammad Ali, and Martin Luther King Jr. frequented the Hampton House Motel in Brownsville, a black community near Miami Beach. In 1964 Ali, or Cassius Clay as he was then known, told a crowd at the Hampton that he was going to “whoop” Sonny Liston, and he did, then went back and ate a big bowl of ice cream to celebrate—at the segregated motel.¹⁶ The Hampton House, originally named Booker Terrace, was built in 1953 by Harry and Florence Markowitz and renovated and renamed in 1961. Martin

Hampton Inn in Miami was the place to be in the 1950s and 1960s. Today the inn is being renovated to become a museum. By permission of Lu Vickers.

