

6

“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.

