

Introduction

IT WAS IN THE EARLY EVENING HOURS of October 10, 1991, when the phone rang inside the residential trailer nestled in the woods off Rattlesnake Road in Lake Wales, Florida.

“We’ve lost Gamble,” uttered the subdued voice of the caller.

“Lost him? Well you better go find him.”

The news was so stunning it never even registered. Gamble Rogers, Florida’s beloved troubadour, was lost forever. How could it be that this legendary figure, bigger than life, could be gone in an instant? All of the mystique, the charisma, the charm, and the downright goodness washed away without even the slightest warning.

To those who knew him, Gamble Rogers’s sudden, tragic death was the ultimate paradox. It came as no surprise that he took it upon himself to strip to his shirt and underwear, blow up an air mattress, and try to rescue a perfect stranger from the fierce nor’easter wreaking havoc on the Florida coast. However, it was obvious that the creator of a treasured repository of Florida folklore had no chance. At age fifty-four, his mobility was limited by an arthritic back condition discovered in adolescence that plagued him most of his life. “He couldn’t swim in a swimming pool, much less the ocean,” remarked a close friend.

While there was no autopsy, the cause of death seemed far less important than the “Good Causes” he left behind, the title track from a CD released after his death. The fact that Florida even has a folk tradition was due in large measure to Gamble Rogers and the community of mythical misfits and malcontents he imagined and brought to life night after night in remote pubs and taverns across the state. His followers would return to hear the very same stories over and over,

looking for a new nuance or simply because they just needed another good laugh. More than a polished performer and storyteller, Gamble connected with people regardless of their backgrounds or status.

“He could relate to a fruit picker with no education just as easily as he could the president of the United States,” said a contemporary. In typical fashion, when he arrived at a party he would make sure to greet the kids and the dogs first, before mingling with his admirers and well wishers, recalled his close pal and fellow folksinger Bob Patterson.

“In the final analysis,” Gamble often quipped, “the size of one’s funeral is always determined by the weather.” Not so in his case. A single memorial service wouldn’t suffice. There would be three separate public gatherings in Florida within days of his death. Tributes poured in from across the country, from Pete Seeger, Jimmy Buffett, Tom Paxton. “Gamble was the greatest spirit I’ve ever known. I loved him,” wrote Paxton. Strangers weighed in with stories of how meeting Gamble changed their lives.

Lost at sea in the Florida surf would be so many lasting images: the distinctive chin, the corkscrew gait, the onstage facial contortions, and the sight of his faded, lime green 1965 fastback Mustang parked outside a local saloon signaling that Gamble was in town.

A persona consultant could not have come up with a better name, such that the last name Rogers almost became superfluous. It was just “Gamble this” and “Gamble that.”

He had a look that fit the part. “You could have put his face as the marquee of the labor movement or the folk movement,” recalled St. Augustine folksinger Charlie Robertson. “He just had that chiseled look of something out of ‘Let Us Now Praise Famous Men.’ It was a look that defined America.”

As it turns out, the mission to find Gamble Rogers was easier said than done. For certain, his physical body, belly distended, was brought ashore on Flagler Beach only moments after his heroic but fatal attempt to rescue a drowning Canadian tourist. But there was so much more.

Finding the real Gamble Rogers, the man behind the myth, was a much bigger challenge. Who was this man, so revered that a quarter century after his untimely death, the mere mention of his name brings

tears to the eyes of so many he befriended? Who was this folksinging raconteur who shed the family's well-to-do upbringing and architecture pedigree for a life on the road performing in honky-tonks and college campuses from Florida to California and all places in between, including a gig with the legendary Doc Watson at Carnegie Hall?

How is it that the folklorist often compared to Mark Twain and Will Rogers has remained an enigma? Even in his home state of Florida, where an annual music festival, middle school, and state park bear his name, he is a fading memory. Despite having been inducted into the Florida Artists Hall of Fame with cultural icons like Ernest Hemingway, Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, and Tennessee Williams, Gamble Rogers remains a virtual unknown to those outside his orbit.

There have even been politicized efforts to have his name removed from the state park dedicated to his memory. One city official told the *St. Augustine Record* newspaper, "No one really knew who he was." The official reasoned that changing the park's name back to the original Flagler Beach State Recreation Area would attract more tourists and improve the economy.

"What a crass tradeoff for the life of a legend," responded the *St. Augustine Record* on its editorial page. Legend indeed. While he never had a record on the hit parade, Gamble assembled an intensely dedicated, cultlike following of admirers and proteges.

"Everyone wanted to play guitar like Gamble," said a fellow folk musician. "But more than that, everyone wanted to be like Gamble." His life has been memorialized in dozens of tribute ballads and folksongs, some written by performers who never knew him but were inspired by his spirit.

A chance encounter with one of his earliest childhood friends started my own search to find Gamble Rogers. Despite having lived right in the middle of Gamble's prime years and in close proximity to his performing neighborhood, I too missed out on one of the most prolific and charismatic figures to emerge from the 1960s folk culture.

Believing it's never too late, I began my search to find Gamble Rogers. His life was a journey of Americana in its truest sense. It began on the intimate Isle of Sicily in Winter Park, Florida, and wound its way up to the hills of the Nacoochee Valley in northeastern Georgia,

where Gamble spent his formative summers working on the family farm while spying on the Sky Lake Campfire Girls. Here was the imagery that laid the foundation for his Southern Gothic tales and helped populate the landscape of his fictitious Oklawaha County.

In my search I retraced seminal moments in Gamble's life, from his meeting with William Faulkner at the University of Virginia to his unscheduled stop in Greenwich Village, where a last-minute audition with the Serendipity Singers would solidify his folksinging career, forever ending his brief flirtation with the family's prestigious architecture legacy. Serendipity indeed! Gamble was on the way to seek work with an architecture firm in Massachusetts when he took the detour that would change his life forever.

It was a journey back in time to a bygone era that produced a generation of black sheep who would seek their own means of creativity and expression to change the world rather than pursue preordained family destinies. I encountered colorful characters, some real and some not, and some of the most flavorful taverns of the era, like St. Augustine's notorious Tradewinds Tropical Lounge, Chicago's Earl of Old Town, and the now defunct Flick coffeehouse in Coconut Grove, Florida, that hosted, among others, a young Joni Mitchell and the folk goddess Odetta.

Most of all Gamble's life embodied the human spirit, filled with triumph and tragedy. The sound track of his career was a smooth but purposeful arrangement of unforgettable choke-style guitar picking laced with uproarious yet often poignant polysyllable storytelling with a bullseye aimed squarely at life's many ironies.

In the end, my journey to find Gamble Rogers was a search for the truth. But as with so many folk legends, the real truth is often obscured. It should come as no surprise that there are conflicting versions of the story.

So, who was the real Gamble Rogers? Was it the guitar picker extraordinaire who, along with Will McLean, Jim Ballew, and Paul Champion ushered in a renaissance of Florida folk music in the mid-1970s through the early 1980s?

Was it Gamble Rogers the linguistic humorist, who preached the erudite philosophies of Still Bill, Agamemnon Jones, War Bunny,

Downwind Dave, and other rural alchemists who inhabited the primitive backwoods squalor of Oklawaha County and held court at the Terminal Tavern?

Was it Gamble Rogers the family man, who balanced the demands of a hectic professional life with that of being a devoted father and a friend to those who loved and knew him best?

Was it Gamble Rogers the environmentalist, who sought peace and inspiration traversing Florida's natural waters and parks with his trusty kayak and battered bicycle?

Or was it Gamble Rogers the giving soul, who thought not for a minute before making the ultimate sacrifice of plunging into the raging sea to save a perfect stranger?

Maybe Gamble himself answered it best. When interviewed for the radio show *The Songs of Florida* he was asked, "What do you consider yourself to be, a guitar player, a humorist, a storyteller, or a folksinger?" Gamble replied, "Well, I ain't nothing more than a whiskey salesman. I play in these dives and the more whiskey they drink, the more money I make."

The search to find Gamble Rogers has its historical roots near the end of the Revolutionary War in the stockades at Bryan Station, Kentucky, with none other than Daniel Boone.