WHAT PEOPLE ARE SAYING

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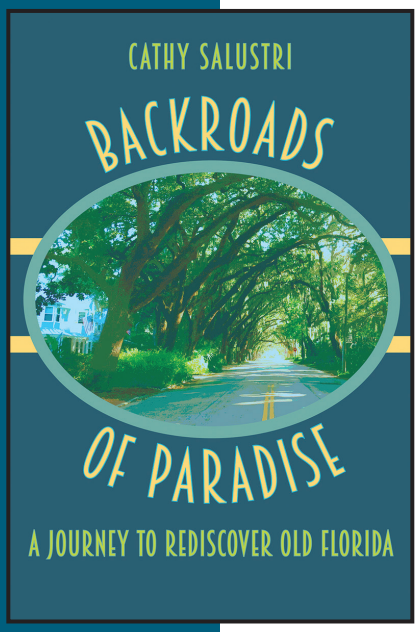

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BACKROADS OF PARADISE

A Journey to Rediscover Old Florida

CATHY SALUSTRI

978-0-8130-6296-9 • Hardcover $24.95 • 256 pages, 6 x 9, 22 maps

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Q&A

with

CATHY SALUSTRI

author of

Backroads of Paradise

What inspired you to share your journey through the backroads of Florida?

In grad school we read selections from *The Guide to the Southernmost State,* a WPA guidebook containing driving tours. I hadn't heard of it, and up until that point I'd never found a comprehensive guidebook to Florida—travel guides tend to compartmentalize Florida, either into regions or by the type of person traveling (grandparents, LGBT, travelers with kids, with dogs, with iguanas, and so forth). Of course, the travel information in *The Guide* was 70 years old when I first read it, so it was more of a travelogue than a guide. I wanted to follow those roads, though, and see where they led.

What were some of the biggest changes you witnessed from the Florida that authors such as Zora Neale Hurston described in the WPA guidebook?

Well, geography. We've migrated south. Air conditioning and mosquito control made living south of the panhandle possible. Many of the 1939 tours take drivers across the panhandle, because relatively fewer people lived on the

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peninsula. Today, of course, that's not the case. And, I hope, our attitudes about race have changed. I like to think we would treat poor Zora better now than we did then; she deserved a much better position with the WPA than she received, and everyone knew it, but she was black and we were not kind to black people in the 1930s.

Are you concerned about the commercialization of these areas of "paradise" as more people discover them, or do you think we can add to these locations in ways that won't spoil them?

Of course I worry about that; anyone who loves Florida worries about our popularity causing our downfall. We have an amazing state parks system, and I think if we give these guys more land, they'll safeguard it for us. The trick is getting a Clinton Tyree as our governor, or maybe the Lorax, because it's not only too many people, it's the demands on our resources and the way we allow industry to dictate how much of paradise we preserve.

What are your best tips for finding off-the-beaten-path treasures in Florida?

Don't have a plan. Having a plan too often means you don't want to stray from that plan. I think it's better to have a goal: say "I want to see the springs in the middle west panhandle," instead of "On Monday, we'll go to Cherry Sink, and stay at Falling Waters State Park," because that way you don't feel pressured to meet a self-imposed timetable, and that's how you find things you won't discover on the internet. You have to let the road discover itself as it goes, if that makes sense—you can't plan the road. Florida has a way of expanding along the road.

When you travel to a new destination, how do you learn about that location's culture?

Researching the place is as much fun as going. I start with *The Guide* and look for place names and small towns near where I plan to travel, then search online to see if those places have endured. From there, I have a wonderful network of Florida writers and Florida-philes from the graduate Florida Studies program at USF St. Petersburg. We really are our own tribe, you know? We all have different areas of focus, and we have a Facebook group, so often I'll ask the group for ideas. It's a micro-hive mind. One of my favorite resources

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for north Florida and the Deep South is *Garden & Gun*; I've followed their advice and found an amazing coonhound cemetery in northwest Alabama, and also discovered a few places in our own panhandle. Frequently, I disagree with where they send people in Florida, but that's OK—they have too many readers to send them all to some of my favorite spots. I look at Google Maps or Apple Maps to get an idea of the density, I look for things nearby on Yelp. Comments tell a wonderful story. I look up their historical societies to see who their market is, tourists or locals.

While traveling throughout Florida, you enjoyed a variety of foods. What, for you, is the quintessential Florida meal?

Oh, my god, seafood. You know that line from Jimmy Buffet's "Tin Cup Chalice"? "Give me oysters and beer for dinner every day of the year"? That's me. I could live on Apalachicola oysters, Royal Reds, Key West pinks, and maybe a few other things. I want to include sour orange pie and all sorts of things here—I love food—but Florida's seafood came first. It's how our first Floridians sustained themselves, and really, it's how I do, too. We spend a lot of money on oysters in our house. We may be some of the only people in the world with an oyster budget.

You spent a lot of time on the road while working on your book. What were your road trip essentials?

Calypso, my dog, was essential. And my boyfriend, Barry. He made already great trips even better. Beyond that? If you're going to hit the road in Florida, the least you need to take is mosquito repellant (the good stuff, none of that Skin-So-Soft stuff; get DEET), anti-itch spray (trust me, no repellant works all the time), a toothbrush, toothpaste, deodorant, face soap, a swimsuit, a change of clothes and an extra pair of shoes, preferably closed-toe ones for hiking. In our warm months I'm already wearing flip flops and a swimsuit under my clothes. You need two swimsuits, because getting into a wet one is no fun. Seriously, that's it. I can fit everything into one tote bag. Oh, and a smart phone. My phone is my *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy.* So, you know, a good data plan and a company with decent Everglades coverage.

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Do you have any road trips planned for the near future?

Well, every year we take a road trip to the Keys. I always have trips on my radar, but I rarely plan them, except for the ones I do for my monthly "Road Trip" column at *Creative Loafing Tampa*. It takes shockingly little persuasion to convince me to grab my bathing suit, the dogs, and Barry and hit the road. I want to spend more time in the panhandle, I want to stare at the abyss on the edge of a bunch more springs. I want to catch bass at a fish camp. I want to go to Flagler Beach and hang out on that cinnamon sand for a while.

What's it like to talk about traveling in Florida for a living?

I started speaking about my travels well before I had a book, and one of the most unexpected, delightful surprises has been the way Floridians—natives, newcomers, and snowbirds—have reacted to my talks. I've had former Weeki Wachee mermaids in the audience, people who can trace their Florida lineage back seven generations, and newcomers who pepper with questions about things to see. After every talk, there's usually at least one person who tells me about a new part of Florida they think I would love to explore. Talking with so many people who all have their own version of paradise gives me hope that the backroads of Florida and the secret corners won't get sold to the highest bidder.

Which parts of Florida do you wish to explore further?

Oh, man, those WPA writers spent so much time in the panhandle—which makes sense, really, because it was way too hot south of there to spend much time, so most Floridians lived in the panhandle—and so, when we retraced the trips, I spent a lot of time there, too. And it enchanted me, not only for the powdery beaches and the tiny watercolor seaside towns, but the super-gritty working waterfront towns and the cotton fields (Cotton! In Florida!) and red clay hills and Deep South rednecks (which is not a pejorative, by the way—I love rednecks) and the heart-achingly broke small towns where tourism never made a home but where so many people proudly make lives, even if they don't stand much of a chance of living above the poverty level. I just fell in love, so hard. And I asked Barry if we could move there and he reminded me I get cold when the mercury dips below 86 degrees, and so we visit. But if someone told me, Cathy, you need to spend a month researching the panhandle, I'd go in a heartbeat.

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If you had to pick one part of Florida to live in for the rest of your life, where would you choose?

I already live there: Gulfport. We're this un-hip little vintage town; I like to say we not only march to the beat of our own drum, we make up some extra instruments to play, too. I think our unofficial motto is "live every day like it's a full moon," but if you don't know us, that sounds mean. I came to Gulfport in 2003. I grew up in Clearwater, about 40 minutes north of Gulfport in the same county, and I had no idea this town existed.

Gulfport has this delightful combination of craggy old fishermen who made a suspiciously good living flats fishing—think on what I'm saying here—and a thriving LGBT community. It's the most beautiful, perfect thing, because you have all these people you kind of know will vote for Donald Trump, but they're best friends with socialist liberals like myself. We co-exist because we see each other as people, and no, we don't all love each other, but we don't all love each other because we're one big, incredibly dysfunctional family, and that's how families work—it's not about who we love or how we vote. I love my town, our rednecks and fishermen and LGBT community and dogs, and I love its flaws. Gulfport's a tiny metaphor for Florida, because everyone's here to find their own paradise, and if you ask 10 Gulfportians what makes Gulfport paradise, you'll get 10 different answers and none would be wrong.

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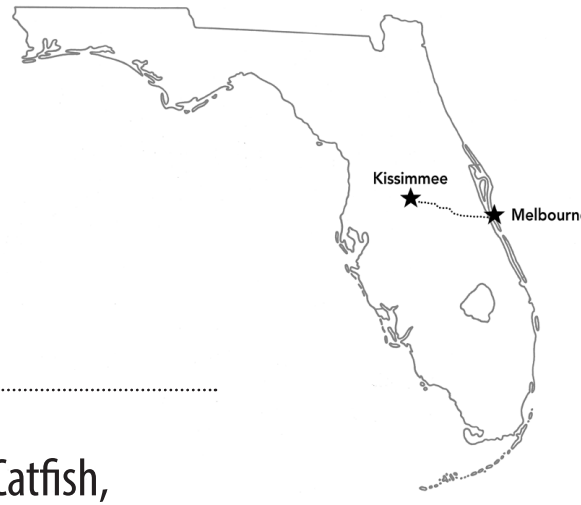

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Reptile World, Catfish, and Dinners and Shows (US 192)

A Guide to the Southernmost State tells us that US 192 offers "limited accommodations." Today, this road, at its western terminus, has every type of lodging you could imagine, from camping to luxury resorts featuring daily duck parades. By comparison, the middle segment and eastern end may as well be the far side of the world.

When I say "middle" and "eastern," don't let me kid you: US 192 is a stub of a road, especially compared to the seemingly endless streamers of road comprising some of the longer tours. It doesn't go far, its 74 miles bisecting the state from Melbourne on the east to Kissimmee in the center. It's so short that I travel it alone in my candy-apple-red Volkswagen Rabbit rather than the camper. After visiting friends in Cocoa Beach I decided to return home via 192; it's an easy turnoff, and in no time at all I abandon the beachside palm thickets, trading them for a jungle of box stores, lawyers' offices, and drive-throughs. This is hell, suburban-style. The strip of road between the beach and I-95—the one the *Guide* called "underwater" and "unexplored"—fell first to naval stores and then to homogeny. The Dollar Generals of the state

once again triumph, however briefly, in this cultural wasteland of low quality at marginally lower prices.

But—and this is a refreshing "but"—west of the interstate you see only green. Pastures remain, although the lumpy Brahman cows of *Guide* times have muddied their bloodline sufficiently enough that most of the cows here have the sleek shoulders of a shampoo model. Pine trees of all sorts, including the much-hated, "non-native," gracefully leaved Australian pine—dot the roadways, with cows and palm trees thrown into the mix to keep it interesting. Sandhill cranes, with their crimson-kissed heads, and wild turkeys with ugly throats and beautiful plumage wander across the greenscape. Just before we reach Holopaw (which the *Guide* tells us means "place where something is hauled" but doesn't clue us in as to what was hauled to or from there) oaks triumph over pines and cranes. At the intersection of Turn Around Bay Road—and yes, that is its real name—and 192, Holopaw shows up with modest homes and white picket fences. Some of the larger lots are graced with blue tractors and green farm equipment, but the town fades away into the trees, letting the road have its way with the surrounding landscape. The trees open up again briefly for a planned community called Harmony, boasting a population of 1,200 but not on any map. That's because it isn't a real place; it's what developers call a "master planned community," and at first glance I write it off. Now, I don't know how I feel about it, which I suspect may be the developer's plan.

Read the PR: Harmony promotes sustainability and green practices. That's a good thing, right? But there's something intrinsically suspicious to me about a planned community, perhaps because I live in an unplanned community that offers the intangibles Harmony promises. But Harmony's core values posit that "people live better when they live in regular contact with animals and nature," and Harmony apparently has tried to put those words into action with public access to motorboat-free lakes, miles of nature trails, and landscaping guidelines that encourage native plants.

But still, Harmony is not an organic place. It is yet another in a long string of contracted paradises nestled among Florida's less-touched paradise. The developers re-created wild Florida, but they had to clear

a goodly bit of wild Florida to do so. They do lots of good things from an environmental perspective, but in the end, Harmony is a planned development. The homes get cut from a mold, and the lawns are not "first nature"—they're re-creations based on what used to exist rather than what used to actually exist.

Something about a planned housing development that cuts down trees to replant things in a more organized manner, all while shielding the streetlights so we can see the stars and encouraging people to produce less waste and recycle their rainwater still makes me uneasy. I want to like it, if only on principle, but cannot, on another principle.

Back on the road, I realize that if people use 192 for commuting, it isn't during normal commuting hours. At almost five o'clock, traffic has not changed measurably. In all likelihood, I-4 or one of the state's east-west toll roads carries any commuters who, for whatever reason, must travel between Melbourne and Kissimmee. Most of the cars here aren't cars, but pickup trucks, and not the pretty kind you buy to occasionally pull your Chris-Craft to and from the boat ramp. No, these trucks haul and tow and push, but don't let the lack of shiny paint fool you. The men driving these trucks—and, for my proximity to Harmony, it seems discordant not to see any other women drivers—take care of their vehicles.

Traffic comes to a dead stop just past Harmony. It's soon clear that the traffic jam is atypical; local boys step out of their cars to see what they can see, although they almost definitely have a higher vantage point from the seat of their D-series pickup. No one lays on their horn. No fights erupt. After a half hour, I get out, too. I'm hungry, I have to use the bathroom, and I want to know why we're not moving.

"Car accident up ahead. Someone died," one of the men tells me. "They've got an air ambulance." I don't know how he knows this until I notice the chain of communication working its way back. One driver passes information to a few trucks, then the last driver gets out and tells a few trucks behind him, and so on until the line knows what's holding up traffic.

This, I think to myself, is what northerners simply don't get about the people they call rednecks. Our "rednecks" practice a basic civility here not often seen in city traffic jams. These folks—these

neighbors—know what community means. I felt its presence along that roadway. Stuck in traffic, hungry, desperate for the ladies' room, I saw clearly what the middle of the state gained by not turning itself over to tourists: community. You don't find it as much along the transient beach towns, with tourists and snowbirds and out-of-state landlords, but here, in the state's grounded middle, families, not investors, own land, not just homes. They build community and have each other. It was not a big moment, but it sure was nice.

Once traffic picks up again, St. Cloud comes up quickly. Here I see signs that the magic of Disney grows nigh. I see the first 7-11s and Walgreens since I-95, and, as even more proof that tourists do venture off the mouse-eared reservation, Reptile World Serpentarium.

In 1972 Reptile World started as a venom farm. Handlers milked snakes for venom and sent the venom all over the world. By the end of the decade, though, owners say that the steady stream of people wanting to take a tour prompted them to allow people to watch the snake milkers at work. For under ten dollars, one website boasts, guests can tour the facility and watch "expert snake handlers milk the world's most vicious and deadly snakes live before your very eyes with only the glass separating you from huge angry cobras, rattlesnakes, copperheads, water moccasins and many more."

The attraction also offers a "relaxing" stroll across the grounds, where visitors can see iguanas, turtles, and, of course, an alligator.

Between the legacy of angry cobras, planned communities, and friendly traffic jammers, by the time I reach the edge of Kissimmee I want food and a place to sit that isn't a car. I stop at the Catfish Place, where I must choose between frogs' legs, catfish, and country-fried steak. I choose steak, collards, and beer. I suspect it is the last place I will see along 192 that offers frogs' legs; between here and I-4 a steady stream of Denny's, Pizzeria Unos, and an odd combination of drive-through restaurants and "dinner and show" establishments where tourists can eat spaghetti and meatballs and watch actors play knights and gangsters will dominate the roadside.

The final town on the route, Kissimmee, gets only a sentence in the *Guide*'s tour, noting it is at the junction of US 17. In reality, Kissimmee is a huge part of what most tourists see when they come to worship at

the altar of the mouse, but in the 1930s, there was nothing to see here. Which, if you can picture it between the neon signs, corkscrew-shaped water slides, and dinner-and-show venues, is nice, and alive and well just a few miles east on 192.

Kissimmee, Orlando's tourist-swollen cousin with a chain of tourist-supported endeavors, also has another claim to fame. Before the cattle ranching, sugar farming, and Florida Dream dried it up, the Everglades started its slow journey off the edge of North America here. Shingle Creek, one of the initial feeders for the Everglades, ends just behind a gas station across from SeaWorld, but the closest practical kayak put-in is just off US 17/92.

I approach Shingle Creek with a light heart and high hopes.

I welcome the narrow blackwater creek that originates by Discovery Cove and quietly curls south through the theme park capital of the world. In delicious juxtaposition to the dinner-and-show explosion, I find my path to the Everglades' genesis, sandwiched between Pirate's Island mini golf and Gator Alley gift shop. US 192 crosses Shingle Creek, although no sign marks the waterway. At an airboat rental stand boasts a sign touting "Real Florida!" I pay my dollar ramp fee and push off.

This tiny creek starkly contrasts with the Kissimmee floodplain and relatively flat banks. It flows south to Lake Tohopekaliga and drains to Cypress Lake, where it will rendezvous with other tiny blackwater creeks as it pushes south. Paddling Shingle Creek reveals Florida's "scrub," a desert with water, prickly pear cactus, and patches of sand beyond oversized, muddy, emerald leather ferns and reedy, plump pine trees. Here live an estimated two thousand scrub jays. For a half mile I contend with sunburned tourists powering tiny airboats, but at the half-mile mark the creek closes and shallows, and while markers warn power boaters away, I am free to paddle under, over, and into this world. I glide past a submerged tree, wiggling my boat around its wrinkled skin as a hawk lights on one of its arcing branches, a wriggling fish in his beak.

The creek closes in, trying to choke me out, and I grunt and pole my way around deadwood and cloying weeds, bumping over things and hitting my paddle on branches above. I can't paddle; I have no room.

Dry season. The downed trees and underwater obstacles test my agility and maneuvering skills, and I surrender what I know to just keep going. I scooch and pole and sweat and breathe. Oak and pine and I don't even notice what else scrape my head and the tops of my hands. Spider webs tangle in my hair, and glistening blue bugs find my thighs. I can't push myself forward more than a foot or two at a time; I tuck my paddle under my arm and develop a plodding rhythm of lurching forward a couple of feet, then turning my boat by sticking one hand in the loam to curl it around an unseen log and using the other to pivot off the nearest upright branch, then reversing over the underwater obstruction for about a foot, catching my breath, and going forward again. Muck and bark coat my hands, mixing with blood and ragged ripped nails and scraped flaps of skin. I twist around branches and follow the water and almost despair and fight the squishy mud and detritus and huff, and all at once it opens again. I find myself in a patch of water at least a foot deep and clear and moving just enough for me to know it moves. Pea-green specks of pickerel move around the deadwood and caress my hull. I sit for a moment; ahead of me, deadfall blocks the way.

I stop paddling; the water here runs so shallow that it will not take me upstream or down. This is it; the end of the line, the beginning. In higher water I could reach the beginning's end, roughly across the street from Discovery Cove, channelized in proper Florida fashion. It starts behind a Chevron and parallels a tidy apartment community. The end of the beginning looks no different than a drainage ditch lined with the verdigris of St. Augustine grass and ornamental assortments of ecology.

The *Guide* doesn't focus on the Everglades and its ecology but instead brags on land tycoon and developer Hamilton Disston, who bought most of this land for twenty-five cents an acre and installed a system of drainage canals. Since that 1881 purchase, much about the Kissimmee area has also celebrated all things Disston-esque, whereby we set upon conquering the land, making it bend to our will. An unfortunate side effect of what the *Guide* inaccurately calls the "reclaiming" of fields and pastures is the temporary triumph of man over wilderness, and while many of my colleagues decry Walt Disney World for this, it started well before him with Disston's land purchase. Disney, by

the way, has set aside no small measure of its property for wilderness to reclaim, which it has, with vigor. As for Shingle Creek? This trickle so rarely seen by tourists in rented canoes or taking an airboat ride assures me that, even in the most populated corners of our state, if left alone, the wilderness seemingly tamed by Disston and others like him, survives and will one day return.