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BREVARD COUNTY, 1925

Almost a century ago, the road my grandfather Freddie traveled from his home in the town of Sebastian, Florida, was mostly a rutted, tire-busting, sand- and coquina-packed byway running along a dry ridge next to the Indian River. The newly completed Dixie Highway had recently joined the railroad and riverboats as a way of traveling along the coast of St. Lucie and Brevard Counties.

Freddie apparently liked to take rides along the Dixie Highway, partly for relaxation but also to show off his new car. He was among the first residents in Sebastian to own one. His Overland 6 was noteworthy enough that the *Vero Press*, in nearby Vero, described it as “one of the prettiest sedans among our automobile population.” With his new car, dashing mustache, dark eyes, and head of thick, dark hair tossed back, Freddie must have been a sight: a modern self-made man driving through the latest edition of paradise.

Sebastian is situated on the west shore of the Indian River. A distant barrier island forms the east bank, and on the other side of this lie the beaches of the Atlantic Ocean. The Sebastian environs have always been known for their pleasant climate and sweeping river view. In Freddie’s day, the area was also so rich in birds that many of the most famous ornithologists and naturalists of the day visited there, and the beautiful coastline had begun to attract sportsmen, birders, vacationers, and wealthy retirees from up north.

On cool mornings, breezy afternoons, and mild winter days, Freddie's drive along the Dixie Highway brought balmy breezes across his cheeks and heavenly views of the Indian River's mile-wide waters luffing with sailboats and a few puffing laggards of the steamboat era. Pelicans rode breezes along the river with occasional flaps of their wings, roseate spoonbills waded the flats, and various kinds of gulls congregated along the sandbars.

Freddie had arrived in Sebastian around 1916, during a time of fast and perilous change. The railroad along the river, completed about two decades before, had brought new settlers into St. Lucie and Brevard Counties. By the early 1920s, demand for land had sent prices soaring. With the last stretches of the Dixie Highway completed, the iron horse of the railway had given way to herds of metal ponies along the highway. Swamps were drained, citrus groves planted, towns invented, named, and renamed.

Moving from the less affluent Washington County, Georgia, Freddie had come to Florida in search of better living. Like many new arrivals, he was probably also drawn to the area by magazine and newspaper ads describing the idyllic life there, a place where the infirm came to recuperate and the healthy apparently never got sick. A 1916 city directory described Sebastian as being "located 215 miles south of Jacksonville in the center of the famous Indian River fruit belt. . . . It is on a ridge overlooking the Indian River, and is but 3 miles from one of the highest points between Jacksonville and Miami, the health conditions are ideal. Good schools and churches. A community of live, wide-awake people." Fewer than two hundred lived there at the time.

Freddie, a machinist, set up an auto-repair garage at the intersection of the Dixie Highway and Sebastian's main street in a large, white, metal-sided building with a false front bearing his last name, Walters, in bold, black letters. He taught many of the wealthier residents how to drive their new cars. He lived with his wife and six children in a two-story house at the corner of Palmetto and Louisiana Avenues, a five-minute walk along Main Street to his garage. Although he didn't truly own his Overland 6 yet—the bank did—the car signaled his

newfound prosperity, and the Dixie Highway, which connected a growing labyrinth of roads to the East and the Midwest, must have seemed like the on-ramp to a dream.

Occasionally accompanied by friends or his young sons—including my father—but more often alone, he would drive up to Melbourne, cross the wooden bridge to the barrier island, and go fishing. Sometimes he ventured as far north as Merritt Island, crossing the new bridge at Cocoa. He drove through the citrus groves that covered the southern part of the island and sometimes returned home with crates of oranges or grapefruit in the back seat. Sometimes he braved the sandy roads of North Merritt Island, where only a few fishermen or hunters had built outposts in the surrounding scrub. Occasionally Freddie drove all the way up to a big hardware store in the booming metropolis of Titusville, seventy miles north of Sebastian, for tools or other supplies. Traveling up to Titusville wasn't a banal workaday drive. In those days, especially in a fancy automobile, it was a journey worth telling your children and grandchildren about.

As Freddie drove along the coast, he passed the scattered river settlements of Roseland, Micco, and Malabar surrounded by a sea of pines, sabal palms, or low oaks along the river. Continuing north toward Melbourne, the road passed along low, sandy dunes where tropical morning glories twined across the tops of the rises. Along stretches, roadsides bloomed with yellow or orange sunburst blanketflowers. In places, the shiny, round leaves of sea grapes hung from gnarled gray trunks along the road.

Where the highway veered inland from the river, the roadsides were thick with tough oak bushes and shrubs and graced by a few tall, skinny pines. In spots, the thick walls of scrub rose up to the windows on both sides of his Overland. Now and then, these thick barricades of branches and palmettos would yield to younger, more recently burned scrub and natural patches of bare white sand. Where the road dipped and the sand became moister, the scrub dissipated, and thicker stands of pine rose against the blue sky. This ebbing and flowing balance of pine and scrub stretched along the entire 150-mile length of what was known as the Florida Atlantic Ridge.

In mornings as the Overland 6 approached, scrub-jays would peer from perches near the clearings and dive into the scrub as he passed by. Sometimes they would dart across the highway or flit along the roadside as their sentinels sounded a single, high-pitched *Kweep!* from pine snags in the distance. More than likely, Freddie called them “jaybirds,” or at least that’s how my father referred to them, and it would make sense that he had inherited the name from his father.

Although a kind of jay, they differed from the ones Freddie had known back in Georgia. The Florida bird seemed more streamlined, with a longer, graceful tail, and it lacked the crest and black chin-strap of the blue jay. Whereas the Florida jay’s hues faded from one to the next, the Georgia bird had bold black and white wing bars. If the Georgia bird was bold in appearance, the Florida jay was understated, even princely. Its mostly blue cape gave it a royal air. The bird could be skittish at first but grew accustomed to people more easily than most of the standoffish blue jays in Georgia.

In the scrub clearings, the Florida bird seemed perfectly at home on the bare ground, hopping through the white sand, picking up and caching acorns just below the surface, or prospecting for lizards. The birds deftly navigated around the bases of the scattered bushes, pivoting their heads as they searched for crickets, grasshoppers, or caterpillars in the vegetation. Then, with a few labored wing strokes, they would fly up to a branch of a tree or a bush. In flight, their bodies seemed just a little heavy for the size and lift provided by their wings. Perched, a scrub-jay hung its tail straight down, with its neck extended as if on the lookout or, if resting, with its neck pulled down closer to the body. At one moment, a bird might preen itself. In the next moment, it could snap its head up and zero in on another scrub-jay invading its territory.

After a few miles of travel through the walls of thick oak scrub along the highway, the road swung east back toward the Indian River, and Freddie could see Pelican Island and, beyond that, across two miles of water to the green horizon of the barrier island. Unlike the subdued scrub, the river always teemed with an acrobatic show of wheeling terns and gulls, egrets, herons, pelicans, and phalanxes of

small waders in the shallows. Ospreys dive-bombed fish, and slender terns dipped for minnows. It made life seem easy.

Freddie had moved to Sebastian just in time to witness a renaissance of shorebirds in the region. A mere two decades earlier, many once-common ones along the Indian River had been scarce. During the Victorian era, birds were slaughtered and their feathers used to adorn women's hats. Great egrets and snowy egrets were especially highly prized for their long, lacy breeding plumage. It took an odd leap of imagination—or perhaps a habit of blindness—to believe that feathers bestowing such beauty on birds could transfer their majesty to a species that ruthlessly hunted them.

Pelicans were also shot for their attractive feathers. Beliefs that the birds competed with fishermen also marked them for slaughter. By 1900, Sebastian's Pelican Island had become the last brown pelican rookery on Florida's east coast. Fearing the bird's extinction, in 1903, President Theodore Roosevelt established the island as a preserve. This, along with new laws protecting birds, had by the 1920s helped many species to thrive along the river once again.

Known for marvelous birdlife, St. Lucie and Brevard Counties had attracted notable ornithologists and botanists from around the country, including Frank M. Chapman, the curator of ornithology at the American Museum of Natural History, and John Kunkel Small, a curator of the New York Botanical Garden. Their accounts, along with the naming of Pelican Island as the first national bird preserve, helped to solidify the area's reputation among naturalists of the early and mid-1900s as a paradise redeemed.

The river took center stage for ornithologists, while the counties' wetter pinewoods and marshes drew notable botanists. Many viewed the hot scrub on high, drier land—seemingly nondescript except for its abundance of jays—as an almost alien habitat. As one researcher wrote: “The vegetation is mostly dwarfed, gnarled and crooked, and presents a tangled, scraggly aspect. It appears to desire to display the result of the misery through which it has passed and is passing in its solution of life's grim riddle. . . . Here the sun sheds its glare and takes its toll on the unfit.”