

## Introduction

In 1999 the National Recreation and Park Association awarded the Florida Park Service (FPS) its coveted National Gold Medal for Parks and named the FPS the nation's best state park system. That honor has been repeated twice since, a feat not achieved by any other park system. Today residents and tourists alike consider the Florida Park Service one of the state's prized jewels. Numbering over 150 park units, the Florida State Parks are a major draw for visitors as well as a refuge for residents. The FPS has also given validity and visibility to the state government's environmental policies because one plank of the FPS mission has been the protection and restoration of Florida's fragile ecosystems. Yet despite the praiseworthy activities and excitement at today's state parks, the observant visitor may still notice at a few of the parks small metallic signs fastened to some of the older structures. The inscriptions on these signs read: "Built with the assistance of the Civilian Conservation Corps." Until quite recently these inconspicuous and seemingly insignificant signs were the only public recognition of the FPS's earliest days, a period when the agency was not quite so green-minded and when the CCC played a much larger role than is acknowledged today.

The following chapters examine the relationship between the Florida Park Service and the Civilian Conservation Corps between 1935 (when the FPS began) and 1945. It was clear early in my research that the CCC not only assisted the FPS in the early years; it funded, designed, built, and in large part ran the state park program. The FPS is financially, thematically, ideally, and literally a direct product of the New Deal. The New Dealers believed in conserving nature for society's use. This belief resulted not only in the CCC's highly publicized efforts in tree planting and fire prevention but also in the building of public parks and other nature-based recreational activities. The Florida Park

Service was one of the many manifestations of the New Deal programs and efforts to encourage a healthy society and put people to work.

From the perspective of Florida's civic elite, however, the New Deal meant other things—infrastructure, political patronage, and a steady supply of federal dollars needed to restore Florida's position as the nation's playground. The Florida Park Service was conceived as a way for Florida to take advantage of the New Deal's goals and ambitions in order to achieve its own agenda—namely, to help revive and expand Florida tourism by using the FPS. Florida leaders then took the New Dealers' desire to provide recreation, conserve resources, and offer work relief, and used it for their own ends. For them, state parks were not about restoring the state's ecosystems, changing society, or even bettering life for fellow citizens. For those leaders the state park system was, plain and simple, a tourism venture for which the federal government footed the bill.

There was also a third party who played an active role in the development of both the FPS and the CCC: enrollees who volunteered their time and efforts. The CCC was, after all, a voluntary organization, and people could leave at any time. Without their willing participation, the CCC and the FPS would not have been possible. There were other options available, though admittedly few as appealing as the CCC. They could have worked in other programs, migrated out of state, or even turned to crime. But the enrollees not only chose to sign up for the CCC; in so doing they also agreed to help their families, as most of their pay was sent home to dependents. Though they did not have access to the decision-making process, the enrollees nevertheless shaped how the FPS and the CCC were run in Florida. They sometimes rebelled and protested if their desires were not met. Some petitioned the government, others went AWOL, while still others took up the pen. Enrollees also offered insight and ideas for solving problems encountered in park construction and operation. Although their options were limited, enrollees exerted what agency they could within the CCC and the FPS.

In this book I argue that the desire of Florida's government and business leaders to create a Florida Park Service for tourism was often in conflict with the aims and goals of both the federal government and the CCC enrollees—as well as with those of some local citizens who resented the social, cultural, demographic, and political changes that tourism brought. The tensions that sprang from these conflicts required negotiation and compromise and resulted

in a Florida Park Service that, in its final form, reflected the agendas of these parties.

As politicians, park employees, and citizens continue to debate the role and purpose of the FPS and argue over park planning and operations in the present—the Florida Park Service has long been a favorite topic among both voters and elected leaders)—having a sense of the agency’s origins may prove useful. Like most organizations, the FPS has been an evolving agency, reflecting the concerns and values of each generation since its inception. It turns out that many of today’s debates over commercialization versus preservation, or balancing visitation and property protection, are nothing new. And all sides may be surprised to learn that today’s thrice-awarded FPS bears little resemblance to its original incarnation. Readers can decide individually whether that is a positive or negative development.

But this is more than just the story of the CCC’s creation of a few state parks. It also serves as a launch pad into understanding the larger story of Florida’s current cultural and political climate. This story provides a window into the creation of modern Florida, a state where people debate whether it is southern or sunbelt. Who are “real” Floridians? Has Florida improved or declined over the past few decades? And are we paying too high an ecological and cultural price for commodifying the state’s climate, history, and resources? In other words, the creation of the Florida Park Service is the story of modern Florida.

There is little scholarly doubt that tourism and other forms of commodification have played a crucial role in Florida’s social, economical, and cultural past. Whether the topic is the environment, politics, race relations, or Florida’s southern identity, at some point the discourse involves Florida’s commercialized image as an inviting paradise. But few studies have dealt directly with that commercialization and its cultural and social effects upon the state. Fewer still have tried to locate the start of such commercialization. In this study I attempt to accomplish that by looking at Florida during the New Deal era. In its simplest form, the other major argument presented here is that Florida’s commercialization in a modern sense began in the 1930s, although admittedly these efforts were a rebirth and intensification of earlier efforts. But what was unique to the 1930s was that these efforts were fueled in large part by federal relief programs as well as by an influential and largely non-native commercial-civic elite.

As English professor Anne Rowe explained it, “the ideal of Florida—the

image of a tropical lush ‘Good Place’—has been developed, explored, and interpreted by a series of American authors” from the earliest European explorers to the late twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> Yet for much of that time, most Floridians themselves did little to promote, expand, or duplicate that image. In fact, aside from a few entrepreneurs on the East Coast and at a few freshwater springs, most rejected such fanciful notions as “Yankee” ignorance of the South and of Florida. But by the 1930s a portion of the Florida populace took advantage of this centuries-old view of Florida to lift the quiet, agrarian southern state out of the Great Depression. In addition to the usual suspects (roadside attraction entrepreneurs, real estate agents, advertising firms, hoteliers), several groups embraced Florida’s manufactured image, including citrus farmers, foresters, and conservationists, all of whom either serviced the influx of visitors and new residents or promoted their wares as components essential to the maintenance of that image. Many historians have discussed the earliest roots of this transformation in the early twentieth century as well as the cultural, environmental, and economic consequences in the later part of the century, but few have looked squarely upon the actual transformation itself.

While this book investigates that transformation primarily through the Civilian Conservation Corps’ development of the Florida Park Service, it also branches out to explore how the federal and state governments, alongside the local civic-commercial elite, transformed Florida in order to make concrete Florida’s long-standing literary and popular image. In addition, it also shows that such a transformation was not welcomed by all. In many ways, a cultural and political battle ensued over the future of Florida as economic and political priorities shifted from agriculture and extraction of the state’s resources to a stance of promotion and attraction. For many residents, the consequences were not just economic and political but also personal.

While this cultural process and negotiation would not end in 1945, as this study does, nonetheless a conflict arose in the 1930s over regional and local identity. Long before Disney World opened for business and bold-faced the cultural divisions in the state, native white Floridians of the 1930s whose parents fought for and supported the “Lost Cause” were none too happy to find themselves residing in a state becoming more known for coconuts and flamingoes than for cotton and states’ rights. A new white southern identity emerged to contest the prevailing tropical image. The Florida cracker, a long-used derogatory moniker, was repackaged and reformatted to provide the label

for a diverse and often divisive group who were nonetheless united in their rejection of the state's catering to so-called foreigners. By the 1950s and 1960s when the image of the Florida cracker had solidified in the public mind, this conflict would combine with battles over segregation and even the Cold War to provide fertile ground for such phenomena as the Pork Chop Gang, the Johns Committee, the environmental movement, and such cultural products as the Florida Folk Festival and southern rock music. In other words, one cannot understand modern Florida history and its cultural and political milieu without a stronger foundation in the New Deal era. A similar claim can be made for the entire American South, as much of this region followed Florida's lead in commodifying its resources and image during the following decades.

Also of interest here is the effect these changes had, both upon the human relationship with Florida's environment as well as upon the physical environment itself. As so much of the image of Florida rested upon its climate, palm trees, sandy beaches, and tropical forests, much was undertaken to realize that image physically. Forest fires were extinguished, livestock fenced, ecosystems altered, and even local fauna such as panthers, bear, bobcats, and turtles slaughtered in order to provide a safe but exotic "natural" environment. Today thinking of state parks as tourist attractions is alien to most; we usually see such places as antidotes to the kitschy and overtly commercial theme parks and tourist attractions. Yet in the 1930s nearly all the state's tourist attractions utilized some natural aspect, including swamplands, beaches, natural springs, alligators, the climate, and limestone caverns.

This book is divided into eleven chapters. The first explores the social and economic conditions in Florida during the 1920s and early Depression. By providing a snapshot of Florida up to 1930, we can then gauge the social and cultural changes throughout the next decade. Chapter 2 explores both the nation's and Florida's reaction to the Great Depression, resulting in the New Deal and the creation of the CCC. The next two chapters examine the development of both conservation and tourism during the 1930s and how both led to the creation of the Florida Park Service. That is followed by a detailed look at the planning, construction, and advertising of Florida's state parks. Of particular interest here is how the FPS served as an example of state-sponsored tourism. The New Deal era was the only time when Florida's state government controlled the industry, using both local civic groups and federal relief programs to develop

and sell its tourist resources. Chapter 6 looks at the CCC enlistees who built, staffed, and played in Florida's state parks.

Key to Florida's tourism was the commodification of the state's natural resources, tangible and otherwise. Florida developed a specific image of itself: tropical, exotic, safe, and natural. But reality did not always cooperate. In order to present the expected natural landscape to visitors, the CCC created state parks fitting the popular image of what Florida was supposed to look like: it began to remove native fauna and flora, alter water flow, introduce exotic species, and artificially landscape areas that were then presented as natural. Similar processes occurred in other areas of Florida. Although advertisements, publications, and other forms of popular culture celebrated Florida's Eden-like qualities, many in the state still believed that paradise needed improving. This is explored in chapter 7.

Conflicts over the resultant economic, environmental, and social changes in Florida make up the next two chapters. Chapter 8 follows Governor Fred Cone's failed attempt in 1937 to circumvent the federal restrictions over welfare funding in order to control state spending and patronage. This effort arose not only out of political motives but also as a way to challenge directly and reverse the efforts to commercialize Florida. And chapter 9 looks at those Floridians who rejected this manufactured version of a tropical paradise. Resentful of the changing political and economic priorities, these people (including ranchers, farmers, turpentiners, and North Florida politicians) saw "foreign" control over their livelihoods and culture. First, we look at the development of the Florida cracker as an idea and cultural construct. Although *cracker* was long used as a derogatory label, writers such as Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings converted that image into one of Jeffersonian frontier farmers whose lives illustrated an alternative and "authentic" Florida. The book concludes with two case studies, tick eradication among Florida's cattle and the anti-fire campaign, in which we see direct clashes between rural and agrarian people with those favoring the creation of a new image for Florida. While ultimately Florida tourism would survive these challenges to rise to astronomical heights by the 1970s and beyond, the cultural and social challenges to a commodified, commercialized Florida would remain as well.