

INTRODUCTION

The legislators, the judges, the Chambers of Commerce in Florida, are interested in one thing only: TOURIST TRADE! Tourist money and the state and local taxes levied on the tourist and the winter resident keep the state solvent. Therefore, anything which might offend or alienate the visitor is banned. Florida has nothing to offer but grief for the flamboyant, the flaunting homophile. On the other hand, as in most other places, the quiet, the self-respecting are lost in the crowd.

—J.R.

In March 1963, “J.R.” wrote to the Los Angeles-based homophile organization ONE, Inc., publishers of *ONE* magazine, to report on the state of homosexual/homophile life in various parts of Florida.¹ His letter included descriptions of Miami, Jacksonville, and Pensacola, among others, and ultimately concluded that Florida “has nothing to offer but grief for the flamboyant, the flaunting homophile,” but the “quiet and self-respecting” are safer because they more easily blend into the crowd. On some levels, his assertions are accurate for this moment in Florida’s history. A variety of surveillant authorities, bureaucrats, local boosters, and ordinary citizens *were* primarily interested in increasing the tourist trade across the state. Looking around, J.R. would have seen various advertisements for local attractions, stories about the Florida Showcase in New York City, and his newspaper would have been daily filled with stories about tourism. He is also correct when he asserted that there was much grief for those men and women whose homosexual desires became known. Like so much of the country after the Second World War, Florida changed rapidly, and a variety

of individuals, behaviors, and identities were unwelcome in the hologram of paradise known as “The Sunshine State.”

Through so many brochures, colorful maps, bus tours, welcome stations, and glasses of orange juice, Florida became “The Sunshine State”—the imagined tropical paradise with perfect, sunny weather that promised a release from cares and worries. This title was both fiction and fact. It was a deliberate creation, but also reflected a real possibility of experience for a certain part of the vacationing public. This book uses the full official title, in ways that might feel awkward, because it evokes everything beyond a description of the weather or what was possible in Florida. “The Sunshine State” was an intentional, aspirational, carefully constructed, tightly managed, and heavily policed version of Florida that was packaged and sold on the increasingly competitive open market. Florida was a brand, and “The Sunshine State” was clever branding, to use marketing jargon. Salespersons, government officials, local boosters, and advertising agencies sold this vision to the outside world while local and state law enforcement policed the boundaries of respectability within Florida.

The decades surrounding the middle of the twentieth century were a time of intense and dynamic change in Florida. As common knowledge holds, South Florida became the North and northern Florida remained culturally identified with the Deep South. As pensioners, migrants, and wealthy vacationers from the U.S. Northeast made up an ever-increasing percentage of South Florida’s population, the region’s politics came to reflect the change. This led to many struggles between the northern rural counties, whose representatives formed the “Porkchop Gang,” and southern urban counties because of Florida’s malapportioned legislature.² Added to this conflict were anxieties over the civil rights movement, Cold War anti-Communist hysteria, increasing homosexual visibility in cities such as Miami, and the increasing percentage of budgets based on the shifting sands of tourism.

This work focuses on the northern part of the state, the area between Pensacola in the west and Tallahassee in the east, and the changes wrought by postwar capitalist expansion. Though Pensacola, with its deepwater port, has enjoyed a long history as a hub of activity and circulation, and Tallahassee, because of its role as Florida’s capital city, has enjoyed a similar status, most of the Panhandle remained rural and agrarian until World

War II. Some realized the potential of the beach and began to capitalize on it in the first years of the century. However, many of the smaller municipalities along the coast were based around fishing villages or timber farms until military installations and defense industries, such as shipbuilding, brought tens of thousands of people to the Panhandle during the country's mobilization for war. It was not until after the war that tourism and the business of selling the region's patch of "The Sunshine State" began in earnest on the Panhandle.

After fighting ceased and the country settled into the Cold War, another shift in population occurred. Many war workers relocated to other parts of the country in search of employment. Former soldiers, laborers, and their families settled along the Gulf Coast. Still more people traveled to the coast for vacation thanks to increased automobility, better roads, and that new American civic virtue: leisure spending. Beginning in the early 1950s, this net population growth (both permanent and vacationing) inaugurated fierce competition on the free market for tourist dollars as motels, amusements, and restaurants replaced sand dunes at an ever-increasing rate. Even beyond the spaces immediately adjacent to the sand, the quest for tourists had dramatic impact inland as county governments, state-level commissions, agencies, and politicians grappled with maintaining a favorable public image in the search for increased revenue.

J.R. was incorrect when he asserted, "anything which might offend or alienate the visitor is banned." At this time in the United States, the politics of exposure meant that naming and shaming wrongdoers, especially those deemed subversive to the "American way," became everybody's duty. Interested parties in Florida constructed threats to carefully crafted "family-friendly" images as threats to livelihood, which were to be dealt with publicly. Newspapers became arbiters of the increasingly rigid public morality and an essential part of constructing, selling, and enforcing local slices of "The Sunshine State" as racially moderate, good for business, and family friendly. In 1962, R. J. Strickland, lead investigator for the Florida Legislative Investigation Committee (FLIC) stated, "we should not overlook the newspapers and if the newspapers would get in back of this program the job would be much easier for the law enforcement officers and other groups in the problem."³ Whether reminding readers to treat visitors as guests, pick up trash along the roadways, or report any

suspected homosexual activity to law enforcement, newspapers went a long way toward shaping and reinforcing particular images in their parts of the Panhandle and the entire state.

At mid-century much of the Panhandle lacked the glitz and glamour of Miami—but that was intentional. As historian Harvey H. Jackson III asserts, “along this coast folks from the lower South found a way of life, a culture, and context, much like the one they left back home—segregated (where blacks existed at all), small town, provincial, self-centered, and unassuming. Only the landscape was different.”⁴ Summer vacationers from around the South did not travel far either physically or culturally for their vacation—part of the reason that part of Florida became known as the Redneck Riviera. Many southerners newly raised to the working or middle class had only one to two weeks’ vacation per year and so wanted to maximize their time. Though they found an environment much like that back home, it was far enough from prying eyes. At the beach they could do things they would not necessarily do back home in front of the neighbors. Sociologists as early as the 1920s called this phenomenon a “moral holiday.”⁵

The three cities that feature most prominently—Panama City, Pensacola, and Tallahassee—are the largest cities in the area. Their populations ranged from 50,000 to 200,000 residents. They had bars, restaurants, and coffee houses. All three cities had cinemas, theaters, and various levels of an art scene. The populations of Pensacola and Panama City Beach swelled dramatically over the summer months in this period. On the surface, they seem miles away, both literally and figuratively, from the smaller towns inland, the kind with one traffic signal and a boiled-peanut stand on every corner. These cities occupy spaces between rural and urban life, trading on their association with the nebulous concept of “small-town values.” It is tricky to define just what those values are geographically or temporally. For this reason I use “rural” and “small town” not as physical descriptors or pejoratives but as shorthand for a set of ideas (imaginaries) that have come to be associated with the small-town South: conservatism, patriotism, heteronormativity, free-market capitalism, nationalism, Protestant Christianity, family, faith, and folk communalism.

The Panhandle was a place of seeming contradictions after demobilization from the Second World War. *Miami Herald* reporter Robert Shaw described Pensacola as like a gangly teenager suddenly unsure of what to

do with itself.⁶ This was true for much of the Panhandle as well. Conflicts over how best to capitalize on tourism and sell their part of “The Sunshine State” frequently erupted as municipalities sought to purge from their midst, and discourage from coming, an ever-shifting array of undesirables. Nothing exemplified this more than the changes in name for the Panhandle from “Redneck Riviera” to the aspirational “Miracle Strip” or “Emerald Coast” during the last half of the twentieth century. At certain times, there was plenty of room in North Florida for the weird, the kitschy, the madams, the gamblers, the promoters, and “all the infections of Western life.”⁷ Yet there was precious little room for the sexually queer as mid-century morality hardened the boundaries of acceptable behavior. Even scholarship on the Redneck Riviera and the politics of the coastal South fails to address LGBTQ contributions and presence in the region. This book, therefore, is a start to queering the Redneck Riviera.

Words have meaning and carry weight. All of the terms used throughout this work perform different types of conceptual labor. Each comes with its own baggage, and some readers will approach words differently from how I have used them. “Gay,” “lesbian,” “homosexual,” “homophile,” “queer,” “pansy,” “fairy,” and “faggot” have all been used at various times to describe people both pejoratively and as reclaimed self-identifiers. It is difficult to read identities onto another person accurately. It is downright dangerous to read identities, labels, desires, or their meanings onto individuals in the past. This book endeavors to use the terms that individuals used or that were in general use at particular moments. “Homosexual” and “homophile” are mainly used in the early parts of the book while “gay,” “lesbian,” and “LGBTQ” are used later to connote the shift in identity politics.

I use “queer” as both an adjective and a verb. Men and women who *liked that* (same-sex sexual activity or homosex) but were not necessarily *like that* (out, gay, or lesbian) confound neat definitional boundaries, and so far “queer” is the best word scholars have come across to describe these individuals. This strategy grew out of groups such as Queer Nation and ACT UP in their attempts to reclaim and thereby remove the stigma from these words. As a verb, “to queer” means to transcend, play with, or confound definitional boundaries or assumptions. “Queering the Redneck Riviera” means to play with assumptions about the beliefs and behaviors of people (transient and local) in this part of Florida.