

Introduction

Arise and go toward the south.

Acts 8:26

Any oracle divining the events that whiplashed Florida in the first decade of the twenty-first century would have been pummeled by citrus-greening-infected oranges and foreclosure signs. Neither Carl Hiaasen, Dave Barry, nor Tim Dorsey could have imagined a single decade featuring Y2K silliness, the Elián saga, the melodramatic 2000 election, the heart-stopping, nation-altering events of 9/11, state leaders as interesting and diverse as Jeb Bush, Charlie Crist, Mel Martínez, Marco Rubio, and Rick Scott, a series of technological revolutions that hooked the young and confused the old, the cratering of the printed newspaper business, a searing economic collapse known as the Great Recession, a death spiral of the citrus industry, an opioid crisis, and an environmental reckoning. The Great Rebound in 2010 witnessed a return to normalcy—critics suggest “abnormalcy”—as the rush to Florida renewed and the Sunshine State reclaimed its status as, in Sarah Palin’s words, “a hopey-dreamy” state. Meanwhile, the turnstiles in that memorable decade often witnessed 1,000 clicks—many of them immigrants—every single day.

While commercials and bitter winters lured 1,000 newcomers a day during the era 2000–2007, the misfortunes wrought by housing foreclosures, financial shenanigans, and negative publicity turned many Americans sour on Florida. The pipeline bringing newcomers quickly ran dry. The era 2000–2010 was a cautionary tale of two Floridas: the haunting Dickensian ghosts of the Florida Boom

and Florida Bust, the Florida Dream and the Florida Nightmare. Postcards and infomercials rarely highlight a once-stunning environment afflicted by red tide and green algae slime, eroding beaches, oil-slicked coastlines, and growing concerns about the future of the fragile environment.

How should one approach such a study? Kevin Starr laid the framework for “dream state studies” in his brilliant but daunting eight-volume series beginning with *Americans and the California Dream* (1973) and ending with *California on the Edge* (1990). In his concluding volume, Starr’s reservations surely resonate with many Floridians: “I became fascinated as the 1980s turned into the 1990s by the possibility—sometimes the probability—that California has seriously gone awry.” Starr also understood the most salient issue of the era. “There are limits,” he pleaded in 1991. “We have a new kind of environmental limit, not so much having to do with damage to the environment but how much population is sustainable in the environmental engineering formula.” A proper perspective, indeed!¹

If there is a single quote that serves as a thematic Orange Star, it comes from an unlikely source. As an undergraduate at Millikin University in the late 1960s, I read a book by Will and Ariel Durant, *The Story of Civilization*. They wrote,

Civilization is a stream with banks. The stream is filled with blood from people killing, stealing, shouting and doing the things historians generally record; while on the banks, unnoticed, people build homes, make love, raise children, sing songs, write poetry and even whittle statues. The story of civilization is the story of what happened on the banks. Historians are pessimists because they ignore the banks for the river.²

Millions of persons arrived in Florida during the time frame 2000–2010. New rivers of commerce and travel brought people from around the world on ships, planes, and automobiles. Others arrived on rafts and even by foot. This is a study of Floridians along and around the Withlacoochee and Sopchoppy; Baghdad, Sumatra, and St. Petersburg; Two Egg, Yahoo Junction, and Fort Lonesome; Ozona, Bonita Springs, and Panacea; Naples, Venice, and Genoa; Yankeetown and Dixie County. The book also focuses upon Miami and Hialeah, Tampa and Jacksonville, Orlando and Kissimmee, big cities attracting a more diverse population.

In 2005, journalist David Shribman perfectly captured the era’s energy with a spirited essay, “The Future Is Florida”: “Florida may have symbolically replaced California as an important cultural indicator. It may be that Florida, rather than California, is the place where the future is best viewed.” In almost every significant index of American life—the sheer numbers and influence of the elderly and foreign-born, the old and new nuances of race, the jigsaw patterns of

residential life, environmental challenges, the pursuit of happiness and political melodrama—Florida matters. A government official, when asked to offer a glimpse into the future, answered: “the Floridization of the United States.” The 2000 Election, 9/11, Terri Schiavo, the escalating tensions over religious politics, the housing collapse, the housing rebound, and sports cannot be understood without the perspective of Florida.³

The novelist Wallace Stegner insisted that the geography of the West expressed the “geography of hope.” If so, Florida manifested dreams of individual happiness amid tropical splendors. Stegner also believed that California resembles America, only more so. The Sunshine State and Golden State—called “sister Sunbelt giants” by a reporter at the *Ocala Star-Banner*—represent America’s two great “dream states.” In the half century following World War II, California set the rules and served as a trendsetter for movies and education, music and protest, politics and culture. In the 1960s, comedians joked that all the nuts in America rolled westward. Increasingly, Florida was becoming a weathervane or gyroscope. The murder of Gianni Versace in 1997 on Miami Beach and the earlier rampage of Ted Bundy in Tallahassee spoke to our obsession with the lifestyle of the famous and infamous. Florida and California also shared identities as ethnic-immigrant hothouses, political trendsetters, and economic engines of opportunity.

If the opening years of the new century compressed a single word that explained the juggernaut called Florida, that word would be “more.” What does Florida do? Florida grows, adding 1,000 new residents a day. But another word also underscores Florida in the new millennium: “less.” Floridians had less confidence in their government and their futures. And still another word clashed with the optimism that was once associated with Florida: “loss.” More can be less. Daily, thousands of acres of wetlands, forest, and field were transformed into shopping malls, residential sprawl, and bustling highways. Growth threatened the fragile ecosystem and its beaches, wetlands, and natural springs.

The word “new” also defined millions of residents and their adopted addresses. Some of the fastest-growing and most dynamic communities in Florida did not exist in 1950. Or 1999. Florida brimmed with instant cities: Marco Island, Cape Coral, Lehigh Acres, Golden Gate, East Naples, Port Charlotte, North Port, Spring Hill, Coral Springs, Wellington, Weston, Miami Lakes, Plantation, Davie, Greenacres, Palm Coast, Palm Bay, Viera, and Port St. Lucie. The way Floridians sprawled across the landscape acquired new names distinct from the old suburbs: exurbs and boomburbs, microburbs. The churning and clashing of so many people in new spaces challenges our traditional notions of community.

Writing in 2005, a journalist concluded, “This is a different place than it was; any state that grows by about 800 people a day almost has to be.” A year later, Florida was adding 1,000 newcomers every day.⁴

The story of Florida can be understood in myriad ways. Its history involves the movements of people, the mastery of technology, the genius of buying thousands of acres of mosquito-infested cattle ranches and selling the land by the square foot, and the marketing of a place that was for much of its history too isolated, too hot, too humid, too wet, and too disconnected. In spasms of spectacular growth, Florida leaped from a distant destination best known for roadside tourist attractions to a state famous for Cape Canaveral, the world’s most modern theme parks, and immigrants from everywhere. In the new century, Florida remained a place where just about everyone came from someplace else. To many outsiders, Florida was also a vast gerentopolis, a place where more seniors were clustered together in what have only recently been called active adult retirement communities. Future historians may select a half-century-old condominium in Surfside to symbolize the state’s defining characteristics: migration and immigration, retirement and fantasy, and questions of sustainability and safety on a barrier island.

Florida is everything to everybody, a mirror, but also a house of mirrors. Southern, it is America’s “southernmost state” and yet the most unsouthern place in the Deep South. In a Panhandle oyster bar or at a roadside vendor selling smoked fish in Baker County, the taste and smells reflect ancient southern customs and tastes. In Flakowitz’s Deli in Boynton Beach, you might swear you are in Brooklyn or Long Island; at Café Versailles on Calle Ocho in Miami, you can fantasize 1958 Havana. Not long ago, midwesterners gathered around horseshoe pits every February at Fort Myers Beach, Sarasota, and Pinellas Park. If Lake Worth in January seems a lot like Finland, Tarpon Springs and Masaryk-town radiate Greek and Slavic rhythms.

The study of decades appeals to historians and journalists. However, the practice of writing history through the prism of decades can be fraught with dangers and difficulties. Journalists write the first draft of history. Historians need distance and perspective. The predicament is like that of strangers attempting to understand Italian life: Ten days, just right. Ten years, not enough.⁵

Historians have argued that the 1950s really ended in 1963, while the 1960s extended to 1972. The best argument for the technique may be the 1920s. Called the Roaring Twenties and the Jazz Age, that remarkable decade enjoyed early prosperity but ended in depression and despair. The Roaring Twenties, like the 2000–2010 era, generated spasms of optimism and pessimism, the decade’s

highest highs and lowest lows. The decade 2000–2010 lacks a catchy nickname. Wikipedia offers “Double Ohs,” “the Aughts,” “the Aughties.” Wise guys prefer an alternative nickname, “The Noughties.”⁶

What distinguished this era from others in Florida’s history? The 1920s ushered in extraordinary change, the result of a real estate boom that created Coral Gables and Miami Beach, Boca Raton, and Temple Terrace. New highways, manners, and morals accompanied the Age of Speed and Jazz. The 1930s, pockmarked by depression and scarcity, inspired an outpouring of literature and music, still unrivaled. The decades following World War II witnessed the rise of Florida from an underpopulated, marginal state to a Sunbelt power. By the end of the century, Florida had rocketed to become America’s fourth-largest state. Increasingly, Florida challenged California to become America’s cultural and demographic touchstone. But the era 2000–2010 also seems different: wilder, coarser, scarier, and fractured. The state and world seem simultaneously too distracted and too intense.

The book begins New Year’s Eve 2000, at the start of a new century and millennium. Although it would be bruised by the infamous election of 2000 and the tragedy of 9/11, the decade opened with optimism borne of a torrid land boom and record-setting housing sales. In 2000, Al Gore and George W. Bush debated how to spend the billions of peace dollars, the dividends of the Cold War’s end. One book captured the mood: in *The End of History*, Francis Fukuyama, confident that fascism and communism had been tossed into the dustbin of history, foretold the spread of liberal democracy and peace. History, instead, took a cruel turn.

“Between 2003 and 2007 was a hell of a time to be a Floridian,” observed Adam Weinstein. “It seemed like everyone was a mortgage originator or a house-flipper.” Rising home prices seemed to predominate conversations in the first half of the decade. Weekly, it seemed, home sales in general and housing values individually validated reasons for Florida fever. But real estate is boring compared to sports; indeed, baseball, football, and basketball serve as social safety valves. In college football, the era between the 1980s and the early twenty-first century will be nostalgically recalled as a golden age. Never had the University of Miami, Florida State, and the University of Florida all triumphed at such high levels. In a three-year period between 2005 and 2008, the University of Florida pulled off the impossible, winning a total of four national championships in football and basketball. In 1993 and 1999, the Florida State Seminoles won the national football championship, a feat more than matched by the University of Miami in 1983, 1987, 1989, and 2001. In professional football, the Tampa Bay Buccaneers won the 2003 Super Bowl, while the Miami