

# BECAUSE FLORIDA

I dreaded childhood beach days with Mom because I burned in approximately 2.5 seconds. We lived in a small apartment next to a 24-hour carwash near the white-white sand of Florida's Clearwater Beach, often ranked as one of the best beaches in the United States. Mom woke up on weekdays around 4:00 a.m. to wait tables so she could help my grandparents pay for my tuition at a Christian school. I spent many nights with my Southern Baptist grandparents, but weekend beach days belonged to her and, begrudgingly, to me. I sometimes attempted to thwart her plans with my version of a rain dance. I lifted my hands and spastically moved my shoulders. These dances never seemed to work. Mom, a self-proclaimed beach bum, made us sandwiches and dragged me to her favorite place.

I've heard people say no one is born in Florida, but Mom and I were. I'm a fifth-generation Floridian. The maternal side of my family lived on the west coast for more than seventy years; before that, my family lived a few hours north in a town near Gainesville. I grew up in Largo, which I tell people is near Clearwater Beach, which is near St. Petersburg, which isn't far from Tampa, which is south of Orlando. People have thought I meant Key Largo, but Largo is about 330 miles north of the state's southernmost tip in Key West. Florida kind of looks like a gun, and some people I've known rock tattoos to prove it. My hometown in Pinellas County sits midway down the grip below the trigger. Retirees might know Pinellas as a mecca for the 55-and-over crowd. Fans of *Cops* might know it, too, as the area often appears on the TV show.

Most people, though, probably know this area best for its beaches.

Mom had walked those beaches when the sand belonged to everyone. By the time we went together, rich people owned some of the beach's best parts. We never had the required access keys or code words or secret handshakes for this section of sand. Mom didn't care. We often went with Mom's friend who had two kids, and our group sneaked past the guard's station to walk down the long, splintery boardwalk. We'd find a spot close but not too close to the water. Mom would lather on my sunscreen, smoke a Virginia Slims Menthol, and turn a radio's knob to her favorite station. She'd fall asleep for anywhere between ten minutes and two hours. I shuffled past stingrays to sandbars and perfected my hobby of picking up sand dollars between my toes. I remember days when pods of manatees swam by me along with dolphins and maybe once or twice a shark I thought was a dolphin. I built sandcastles on shore and sifted through coquinas. I could identify seashells: the tiger's eyes, conchs, and pyramids some people called cones.

Still, I hated the beach.

I hated the boiling-hot sand and the seagulls who liked to steal our potato chips. My list of beach-hates continued, but sunburns proved my main hate. They hurt and embarrassed me. They made me self-conscious, just as my native Florida status would start to do in my teenage years.

It's probably biological for teenagers to wish they had been born somewhere else. Their small town was too quiet or their place in the country was too country. For me, Florida became too "Florida." People could say almost anything about the state, and it would be true. Florida's been known as a sanatorium, a tourist destination, a retirement community. "The state is just everything at once," a comedian once said. "You'd never make Florida on purpose." My never-made-on-purpose state begat weird news stories, and those stories eventually begat the popular "because Florida" joke.

Because Florida, a grandmother was assaulted for a Facebook friend request snub. Because Florida, a woman "Fights to Keep Her Pet Alligator Who Wears Clothes and 'Rides' ATVs." Because Florida, there was a "Snake Farm Shooting."



The first “because Florida” punch line I remember came in the wake of the 2000 Gore versus Bush presidential election. The headlines about the inept recount made Floridians sound like toddlers who couldn’t count. The term “chad” morphed into a four-letter word.

Deborah Clark had worked at the county’s election’s office since 1978 and was 2000’s Pinellas supervisor of elections. Clark could have never imagined the scrutiny brought on by the recount. “That was an interesting five weeks after the election,” said Clark. Florida’s an important presidential swing state with a bunch of electoral college votes. It’s bruised-fruit purple: voted red, then blue, then back to red. This 2000 election had been tight, and the public paid more attention to Clark’s office than it ever had.

Clark’s county encompassed my hometown and had used the same voting system for twenty-four years. The voting system had been solid, and it verified the unofficial results. Clark spent most of the 2000 postelection frenzy at the election service center. The big issue centered on the fact that Florida hadn’t determined a legal definition of a valid vote. Clark found herself surrounded by big-bucks attorneys other states had seemingly airdropped. Staff members at the courthouse office sent Clark and her team flowers.

Voters had punched ballot cards, creating a little hole in the ballot by removing a piece of paper called a “chad.” No one knew how much of the chad needed to be removed from the ballot to constitute a valid vote. One corner? Two corners? Three? “It sounds obvious now,” said Clark. “Most things are clear in the rearview mirror.” Palm Beach County faced the harshest criticism. They used a ballot nicknamed the “butterfly ballot” because pages faced each other like wings. Their supervisor of elections received death threats. She had to have a police escort. Florida and other states had used this type of layout for years without much negative feedback from voters. The recount changed the narrative. “In my opinion, people convinced voters they were confused by the ballot, and maybe some of them legitimately were,” said Clark, “but we have to remind ourselves the media is a business, and they’re looking for a story.”

Election reform ultimately came out of the debacle. In 2001, the state senate passed an election reform bill that finally included a definition of a valid vote. But we got ahead of ourselves. A lot of the reform got repealed, and, unfortunately, Florida faced another big recount issue in 2018. A thin margin decided the gubernatorial race.

A national publication labeled us as the “Land of Recounts and Contested Elections.” This headline transported me back to my teenage years.



Mom married my stepdad the same year as the recounted presidential election. We moved out of our apartment near the 24-hour car-wash and into a house. From this deal, I got three stepsisters, an eventual younger brother, and a pool. My childhood “beach days” turned into self-conscious teenage “pool days.”

On pool days, Mom divulged that, at my age, she had applied baby oil to tan. A baby-oil day in the sun for me would be like lying on the stove’s burner. Mom looked like an Australian Gold spokesperson, and I looked like the son of Santa Claus. The cool kids in school were tan, so I ditched my SPF and started using bronzing lotion against the advice of the surgeon general. I soon pushed my luck and moved to tanning beds, which are coffins lined with ultraviolet lamps.

The idea of a tanning bed may sound over-the-top for someone with fair skin like me. But I was a teenager, and the future didn’t exist. I bought a tanning bed membership, took off all my clothes to avoid tan lines, and closed the ultraviolet coffin’s lid. I then refrained from moving for about seventeen to twenty minutes. One time I burnt my backside so crispy I couldn’t sit properly for days. One might think a crispy backside would help me learn my lesson, but it didn’t. I continued to (try) to tan until I moved to Orlando for college and started to spend all my tanning bed money on alcohol.

In college, I sometimes felt inclined to lie about my Florida-native status at parties. Remember, these parties took place in Florida, but two-thirds of the state’s residents were born elsewhere. “Do you feel like people prejudge you because you’re from Florida?” someone asked at one of these parties. I didn’t have a chance to answer him. He launched into a therapy session about why he didn’t like telling people he was from the Sunshine State. I understood his plight. I was a Floridian who couldn’t tan. I could easily sell out my home state and pretend I’d grown up somewhere less weird, somewhere like the Midwest.

I graduated from college in 2010 and fulfilled my pasty, Midwest destiny. I relocated to Chicago, a city that called the shores of brutally cold Lake Michigan a beach. I loved it. Tan-ness wasn’t

a priority in a city covered by snow for nine months of the year. I made peace with my paleness. Unfortunately, I occasionally slipped up and told people I was from Florida. They met this admission with raised eyebrows and comments like, *Oh, the other day I saw the weirdest Florida Man story*. “Florida Man” had become the personification of weird Florida news stories, and the search term first spiked during the time I lived in Chicago. This correlation may or may not have been a coincidence. I’m going to leave Mr. Florida Man alone for now because he’ll get his comeuppance from me later. I may have once hated the beach, but I hated Chicago winters even more. I eventually left the Windy City for graduate school somewhere warmer.

Things got complicated when I introduced myself to other graduate students enrolled in an MFA’s Creative Nonfiction track. The group perked up when I admitted my Floridian roots because it’s the land of mullet tossers and two bodies, one monkey. I had learned to keep my Florida childhood on the back burner, but as a nonfiction writer it’s bad form to start off anything with a lie. I began a weird-stuff-happens spiel, but a smile stopped me. “I’m from Texas,” said a big-haired blonde woman who looked like she was from Texas. “Crazy stuff happens in both our states. I’m used to it.” Pride radiated from her whole body. The woman wore her state’s stereotypes as a hard-fought badge of honor. I decided then and there to embrace Florida as I had my paleness years earlier.

I vowed to atone for my years spent in Florida denial.



Many people have denied things about Florida since it achieved statehood in 1845.

In 1878, the *Florida Agriculturist* ran the headline: “Where Do You Live and How Do You Live?” Transplants wanted to capitalize on agricultural promises like 300 bushels of sweet potatoes to the acre and \$400 per acre for sugarcane. They were told they could stick an orange seed in the ground and wait for five years to have a grove worth \$100 per tree. These sugarcane promises didn’t all come true. Transplants spread “exaggerated stories to palm off some worthless tracts of land that were lakes in the rainy season and hot beds of malaria in the dry.” The *Agriculturist* presented a call-to-action: “We request that those who have settled down here should give instructions [on how] people can live in Florida by their own labor, and

the prospect for industrious people to prosper.” The paper thought Floridians needed to tell their own stories to combat this negative reputation.

Today’s Florida can be difficult to write about because there are many more Floridas now than there were in the 1800s. These Floridas exist throughout the long state. People call Miami “Little Cuba.” There’s the South in north Florida and Spanish influence in Tampa. More than 21 million people live in the state, and the Census report showed Florida’s racial and ethnic makeup as 53.5 percent “white alone,” 26.1 percent “Hispanic or Latino,” and 16.9 percent “Black or African American alone.” Florida’s population makes it one of the country’s most diverse states, but, as with anywhere in the United States, it has a history of racial issues.

In the late 1990s nearby St. Petersburg wanted to attract a Major League Baseball team. The City claimed eminent domain over black neighborhoods to build a stadium “without any real guarantee that baseball would come to the region at all.” I was a kid then and excited to watch the Devil Rays, who have since dropped the Devil from their name. I didn’t know their stadium continued a legacy of segregation. Decades earlier, the construction of an interstate served to divide the city by race. I didn’t know that in 1914 there’d been a public lynching in the city, and a group of white men and women had “emptied their weapons for 10 minutes on the lifeless body.”

A lot of the bad things people say about Florida are true. The state has a long history of racism, homophobia, drug/human/animal trafficking, wealth inequality, political scandals, notorious serial killers, and the list goes on (sometimes it’s a wonder so many people still want to move here). There are real issues in the state that Floridians must continue to address. This book doesn’t try to “defend” the state, but it does try to present a version of Florida other than the caricature so often seen in popular media. We’ve become so closely associated with outlandish stories that the real people who live here sometimes get overlooked. Residents are as complex as the state itself, and their stories are important for the future of both Florida and the United States. We’re like the flamingo in the coal mine. As the Sunshine State goes, so goes the country.

I moved back home to write about some of Florida’s polarizing people and its contradictions. I wanted to tell people that alligators are misunderstood. The reptiles are ferocious, but many animals rely

on them to survive. In the dry season, they create mud burrows—gator holes—that fill with rainwater drunk by snakes, insects, turtles, and birds. I moonlight as a poet, remember, and this extended Florida-as-gator metaphor is to say: Floridians help us better understand the country's social, environmental, and political landscapes. This may be why certain people want to divorce Florida from the rest of the United States. They act like it's not a real place so they don't have to confront the state's realities.

Every Floridian has their own version of the state; this book is mine. It centers on the realities of Floridians I wanted to better understand. I'm most drawn to write about people I would meet in a halfway house, a drag queen's dressing room, or a gator pit. That must just be the Floridian in me because I spent time with all three while researching this book. Plus, I visited a rattlesnake room, a Confederate reenactment, and a clothing-optional campground. One thing I learned through my talks with Floridians—besides how to extract venom from a cobra—is that it's dangerous to meet our fears with fear. In this book, I've tried to face some of my fears—like the state's invasive species, environmental issues, hurricanes, and ghosts of the past.



I traveled around the state to meet an eclectic group of sometimes controversial Floridians. I chose these folks because I wanted to better understand them and how they shaped my version of Florida. In turn, they might help other Floridians understand their version of the state, too. I organized the book by perspectives on some of my Florida fears. To help tell these stories, I mixed interviews, archival research, and personal history. I talked to many more people than I could include in this book, and there are still so many Florida stories left to tell.

I have tried to escape Florida, but its land and people have always pulled me back home. I wrote this book for my fellow Floridians, those both proud and ashamed of our state. I also wrote it for the outsiders, the people who dream of a second chance and some sun. I wanted to show that even on its rough days—of which there are many—my home state's humanity transcends all those “because Florida” jokes.