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**SR 80 – Circling the Pond:  
Shells, Sugar, and 1928**

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Florida cowboys. If you don't spend time in Florida's inland areas, that may sound odd. Florida doesn't have cowboys; the *West* has cowboys. Florida, by comparison, has beaches and sand and Disney. Somewhere between those beaches and the mighty mouse, though, Florida has cows. Lots and lots of cows. Since Ponce de Leon dropped off the first herd in 1521, Florida's cattle industry has kept the interior of the state alive: Today, Florida ranks 12th in the country for the number of beef cows, with four million acres of pasture and another one million acres of woodland used for grazing.

Cattle ranching in Florida isn't a new concept; cows and cowboys roamed this route when the WPA's

Federal One project sent to document life along the state's highways and byways. The resulting work, the *Guide to the Southernmost State*, gives travelers a road map for the ultimate Florida road trip, sending them through the cinnamon clay of the panhandle, Ocala forests, and – most important to note here – the state's many, many cattle ranches. If the travelogue's tone is any indication, people didn't realize how much ranching factored into the Florida economy back then, either:

Passing through the open range country of central Florida, reminiscent of the Old West with its cowboys and herds of range cattle, the highway follows the Caloosahatchee River to Fort Myers and the Gulf Coast at Punta Rassa, fringed

with sand flats and low-lying keys overgrown with mangroves.<sup>1</sup>

The cattle ranching tour in the *Guide* ran a fairly direct line underneath Lake Okeechobee, crossing the northern edge of the remaining Everglades, (which writers noted as “America’s largest swamp,” although today we know the Everglades includes nine disparate ecosystems, several of which are not swamp), and then “following the shore of Lake Okeechobee” just as State Road 80 does today. The writers also noted the lake was “encircled with fertile black fields growing great quantities of winter vegetables and sugar cane.”

As we drive along this State Road 80 route and plod along the lower swampy third of the state, there’s no doubt that Florida’s chief land use has more to do with working the land than sunning oneself upon it: this route has pasture and planted fields in abundance. In 1939, this tour ran in a straight line from West Palm Beach to Punta Rassa, but we opt to also circle

around Lake Okeechobee. Without stops, this route will take just under four hours. Prior to now, the only way I’ve seen Lake Okeechobee is from the right seat of a low-wing, four-seater prop plane. The pilot indulged me and tree-topped over the lake, swooping down low so I could get a good look at the big water. That day, our single-engine Grumman Traveler followed a series of locks west to the Gulf coast. Beyond that, however, I’ve only read about the lake, heard stories about the lake, wondered about the lake.

Many of the stories come from a boat captain who made boat deliveries and would often cross Lake Okeechobee. If you’re trying to get a boat from one side of Florida to the other you don’t go around Florida’s southern tip: You cut through the lake, using the channelized St. Lucie River on the east and the Caloosahatchee River on the west. On the east, State Road 76 follows the river; State Road 80 more loosely follows the Caloosahatchee on the west.

A series of locks keeps the water where the state water management districts think it should be which means they keep the lake from

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<sup>1</sup> *Guide to the Southernmost State* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1939), 472

flooding sugarcane fields. For boat deliveries and pleasure cruises, this means captains must time their trips by when they can get through the locks and bridges. Heading towards the lake, the water level rises with each lock. Heading away from the lake, the water level drops. State engineers only allow the lake to touch outside water at roughly twenty fixed points.

Lake Okeechobee drains south into the Everglades, east into the Atlantic, and west into the Gulf of Mexico. On the Caloosahatchee River's western edge, bridges connect Sanibel and Captiva Islands to the mainland. Motorists pay \$6 to cross over into Sanibel, the larger of the two islands at just over 10 miles long. Sanibel is barely a mile wide at most parts, with its widest stretch maybe three miles across. The island resembles Fort Myers, Cape Coral, and the mainland cities on the other side of the bridge in much the same way a bulldozer resembles a palm tree. Sanibel has one main road, a two-lane affair lined by a bicycle path that seems more crowded than the road. The highest building on the island is the Sanibel Lighthouse, painted a deep brown that

contrasts with the color-washed island.

On the mainland, the route traces the crowded banks of the Caloosahatchee. East of Interstate 75 the buildings grow fewer. In parts, cypress swamps still meet the road, but farms and cattle are more prominent than low-lying swampland. As we pass Buckingham Road, State Road 80 abandons all pretense of following the twisting river and shoots through the right angles of reclaimed swamp. This part of Florida is a study in right angles: the road, the crops in rows lining the road, and the drainage canals dug to dry out the swampland and make the rich muck more useful as arable soil. Even the Caloosahatchee has succumbed to this idea of order: while the river still curves and bows in places, in parts its lines, too, straighten alongside the neat rows of orange trees, tomatoes, and peppers.

Was this draining project the greatest idea? It depends on whom you ask. The farmers and the homeowners here think so; Everglades-huggers disagree. The system of drainage canals and pounds of fertilizer and pesticides used on

these farms negatively impact the Everglades ecosystem. It appears some of the farmers have sold to developers (who, in turn, sell to the unsuspecting folks from out of state), and signs of subdivisions marching south emerge along this road: a supermarket here, a diner there.

LaBelle exists at a bend in the Caloosahatchee. It is by no accounts a large city, but it is the main population center between I-75 and Lake Okeechobee along the route. It has not quite 5,000 residents and is the Hendry County seat. In 1937 cowboys rode into town for a rodeo. According to the *Guide*, LaBelle's "big event" happened on Independence Day:

[R]ange hands compete in riding Florida broncos and 'bulldogging' steers. Roping and whipcracking contests follow spirited horse races, on which wagering is heavy. A barbecue supper concludes the day, and in the evening square dances are enjoyed in jooks and homes to the music of guitars and fiddles, accented by the thumps of heavy boots.<sup>2</sup>

The rodeo, since pre-war Florida, has continued, but it has grown: modern day LaBelle also has an annual Swamp Cabbage Festival. The Festival includes "Grasscar" (a lawnmower race), armadillo races, and, of course, the crowning of the Swamp Cabbage Queen. Swamp cabbage, for the uninitiated, comes from the white tender heart of younger cabbage palm trees. When prepared, they look like the logs of string cheese sold in grocery stores, although they taste nothing alike. I can't get enough of the squishy, sour-ish hearts, but I freely admit they aren't for everyone. The following exchange may give you some sense of the divisions on the topic:

"Ate some in Holopaw," Florida literature professor Thomas Hallock wrote on an early draft of this manuscript. "What does it taste like? For me, like urine-pickled cauliflower."

Jono Miller, a cabbage palm expert, disagrees. He explains that swamp cabbage is the brand-new part of the tree. Like a brand-new baby, it doesn't have its own personality yet, so it tastes like whatever you soak it in.

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<sup>2</sup> *Southernmost State*, 480.

"My suggestion?" he says in reply, "Avoid the urine-pickled swamp cabbage – the ease of preparation is offset by the result." Even cabbage palm experts, it seems, have a sense of humor.

While circling the Okeechobee I hope to feed my odd fascination with Florida's legless reptiles. My boyfriend, Barry, tells stories of crossing the lake on boat deliveries and stopping at the Roland Martin Marine Center for the night. Beginning at twilight, water moccasins would gather on the floating docks, patches of color darker than the dock that looked suspiciously like rope but most definitely were not. A more prevalent but decidedly less deadly evil, the mosquitoes here are so thick that when you sit down to dinner at the marina bar, the server hands you a can of insect repellent.

On our trip around the pond, we stop the van and walk out to the levee, my eyes more focused on the ground than the water. Cottonmouth water moccasins are pit vipers with tiny heads and tails but fat, snuggly bodies. Curiosity compels me to see one up close: I don't want to cuddle it, exactly, but I do want to know if they're as fearsome as my childhood

nightmares. I grew up a block away from a creek, and my parents warned me it was chock-full of the dastardly serpents. I never saw one, but odds are if I had seen one, it would have been a common nonvenomous water snake. Brown water snakes are far more populous in Florida, but not as useful a deterrent for keeping a curious seven-year-old out of trouble. At the top of the levee I see a canal with four empty rowboats rafted up to grassy lowland; the lake itself remains mostly out of sight. In the distance I see an empty nesting platform, ready for osprey. I look carefully at the ground and the levee wall. I step carefully. I see no snakes. We walk back to the van and continue circling the pond. Our next stop? Sugar Country.

If you've ever heard the phrase "Big Sugar," a term generally used derisively, the person likely meant US Sugar or Domino Sugar. Sugar is big business in Florida and a major player in the Everglades' downfall. Without Big Sugar, some say, there would be no need for the Everglades Restoration Program. While I disagree somewhat – greed and avarice are powerful, potent motivators, and

businessmen don't need sugar cane to buy, drain, raze, and sell to the highest bidder – US Sugar's impact on Florida profoundly saddens me. The company irrevocably altered one of the sweetest, swampiest places on earth.

Clewiston sits at the southwest edge of the lake's rim. In 1937, it was a company town, owned by US Sugar. The workers – the black workers – who cut the cane and processed the sugar lived south of Clewiston in Harlem. In the 1930s the US Sugar Corporation owned outright Clewiston's water, power, and phone companies as well as the town hotel. Today, US Sugar dominates Clewiston still; there is no pretending US Sugar doesn't have a hand in everything. To the south, the Fajul Brothers run a similar saccharine empire with Domino Sugar and Florida Crystals. While Florida Crystals, especially, markets itself as "carbon free" and prides itself on dredging "nutrient-rich" soil out of nearby (man-made) canals and re-using it on the fields, make no mistake: sugar is killing the Everglades. If you want to preserve the remaining Everglades, stop eating sugar. Let me explain.

The muck around Lake Okeechobee and the Everglades grows perfect sugar cane. Big Sugar came here, saw, planted, and – with an inordinate amount of help from government subsidies that they still receive today (almost \$900 million in 2012 alone) -- grew. They took what water they wanted, and if, during dry spells, they didn't get enough, they convinced the government to let them divert the massive amounts of water they needed. When they got too much, they flushed it out along the Caloosahatchee and the St. Lucie Rivers. They dammed it up behind a wall in case they needed it.

The result? Sweet, sweet sugar – fantastic news for US Sugar and the Fajul Brothers, but not so much for lands south of the sugar cane, which includes the Glades. Because of Big Sugar, the government – through the auspices of the South Florida Water Management District – can, at the governor's whim, turn Lake Okeechobee on and off like a big faucet. This, as you may well imagine, does not bode well for unique ecosystems accustomed to getting the same amount of water they have received every year since the last ice

age. Without the seasonal, irregular flow, life in the Glades faltered.

In addition, sugar cane is not impervious to bugs and disease, so farmers use pesticides to keep that sugar coming. As with most plants, fertilizer makes sugar cane grow faster, but once they send those green stalks on a growth spurt, those chemicals don't disappear – they leach out into the Everglades. Since the first stalk of sugar cane sprouted from the muck, US Sugar and the Fanjul Brothers have steadily yet dramatically increased the levels of nitrogen and phosphorous, chemical cocktails that kill bugs, grow big sugar cane, and decimate the Everglades.

The *Guide* brags about “intensive efforts to reclaim the swamp,” that started with Florida getting legal ownership of the Everglades through a federal land patent. Two years later Florida politicians established the Everglades drainage district, which allowed for what the *Guide* writers called “drainage operations.”

The major problem was to control the overflow from Lake Okeechobee which inundated the territory to the south,” the

*Guide* says. “To that end, the southern half of the lake was rimmed with dikes, and a series of canals was constructed, radiating from the lake to both the Atlantic and the Gulf.<sup>3</sup>

Optimistically, one may assume this happened because people failed to realize the environmental ramifications; in time, activists like Marjory Stoneman Douglas, a writer and activist whose father happened to own the *Miami Herald*, helped people understand the significance of the Everglades, although she herself rarely ventured into the Glades, describing them as buggy, wet, and inhospitable.

Her personal distaste for the swampier aspects of the Everglades, coupled with her tireless passion – when she died at 108 she still campaigned fiercely for the preservation of the Everglades – to restore harmony there still resonates. We may not all like its razor-sharp sedge, its venomous snakes, or its larger-than-life collection of green saurian predators, but we should like

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<sup>3</sup> *Guide to the Southernmost State*, 473.

even less the knowledge that we, as a species, drove an interconnected series of ecosystems to extinction. With Ms. Douglas' help – and others – we saw all-too-clearly that was where the 'Glades were headed. Work began on a "restoration program" to try to keep the Everglades from drying out and dying. Her work – and ours – is not finished. Clewiston's slogan? "America's Sweetest City."

While the sweet-toothed towns like Clewiston pave the road to Lake Okeechobee, the ring around the Lake itself (SR 80/ US 27/ SR 700/ US 98/ SR 700) has a mystique all its own: The wall keeping the water just out of sight, the possibility of crossing paths with a venomous pit viper, the migrant farm worker communities juxtaposed with the odd colonial home lined with massive palms and green, sweeping lawns. The southern edge is littered with liquor stores, markets, and other hastily-lettered Spanish signs. No apparent middle class exists. Those colonial homes are few and far enough between that you start to believe the ruling class barely exists, either, but sugar's grainy white hand remains silently at work. It's not just

sugar that rules the day here – anything that grows enslaves the poorest class in these towns.

Consider Belle Glade. The name itself crowns this town "belle of the swamp." Ironically, Belle Glade has perhaps Florida's most tragic history. "Welcome to Belle Glade. Her soil is her fortune" one sign boasts, and that may be so – but not for the people living here. Of the town's 17,500 people, 33 percent live below the poverty level. The town is 56 percent African American and 34 percent Hispanic. Along the road side we see more Spanish signs than English, and the predominant roadside industry seems a mix of *taquerias* and drive-through liquor stores. There are over 6,000 homes in Belle Glade, over half of which are single-family homes. As we drive through town, I find myself glancing towards the lake – or, more accurately, the dike keeping the lake from washing over these buildings. Not that it couldn't if it wanted to. It's not like it hasn't happened before.

Here's the problem with putting houses down in this part of Florida: the land is low and wet, and no matter

what humans try to do to make it higher and drier, it doesn't work on a long-term basis. The Hurricane of 1928 offers the best example of this. In his book, *Black Cloud*, South Florida journalist Eliot Kleinberg explains how this happened, "At the beginning of the twentieth century, water simply flowed unimpeded from the lake's south shore in a sheet, into the Everglades.... For the early settlers and farmers, that simply would not do. So between 1923 and 1925, the state built a 47-mile-long dike of earth. It was about five feet high. Twice in the next three years, it would be shown as useless as a dam made of tissue paper. In the early 1920s, commissioners of the Everglades Drainage District, founded in 1913, decided to build a more permanent dike around Lake Okeechobee. The plan was for work to start on the dike in 1927. It would be 110 to 130 feet wide at the base and 20 feet wide at the crest and stand 27 feet above sea level. They concluded that such a levee would resist hurricane-driven surge from the lake. But the legislature didn't get around to approving the money for it. (Klienberg)

When the 1926 hurricane hit Florida, a low dirt dike burst at Moore Haven, a town of 1,200. Estimates say the water rose 17 feet, destroying the under-construction Glades County Courthouse. Officials buried the unidentifiable bodies in a mass county grave. By September 1928, the dike situation had not improved. Area farms still flourished in the rich black muck. Heavy late-summer rains and storms dumped more water in the lake. When a hurricane made landfall on September 16, water dammed in Okeechobee had nowhere to go.

"It woke up Old Okeechobee and the monster began to roll in his bed," wrote Zora Neale Hurston in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, a novel partially based on the 1928 storm.

The dikes did not hold. What followed was a precursor to Hurricane Katrina: death of many poor black families on a massive scale. Forty miles inland the hurricane reclaimed Florida, destroying the levee, obliterating entire towns, flooding farms, and killing thousands. The water had taken back the land and reshaped the topography of Florida's lowest third.

Before human intervention, the natural system worked. Water flowed from the middle of the state at a shallow, slow pace down the meandering Kissimmee River. During the summer there was more of it; in the winter, less. Some water pooled in Lake Okeechobee; some went around, and still more flowed through. In late summer, heavier rains flooded the land south of the lake as well as the Kissimmee River's flood plain. At the edge of the Everglades, the excess water drained into Florida Bay.

However efficiently it worked for the birds, trees, and fish, this system did not work for those who wanted to farm or sell the land under the water. Under that ever-moving pesky water was black gold: soil so rich from eons of wet, decaying plant and animal life that anything would grow in it. Under that water was land that could hold houses, shopping malls, and condominiums. The land failed to make anyone money while flooded with water, so why not change it – just a bit – to make it more efficient for humans?

Tragedies rarely result from one single misstep; more often than not, a series of poor choices lead to

catastrophe. The 1928 tragedy south of Okeechobee came about because of at least three bad decisions. Building a dike around Lake Okeechobee to contain the water proved less than prudent; altering the landscape so that the land surrounding and beneath the lake could be used for farm, cattle, and citrus compounded the problem; housing poor black farm workers to live on that newly-drained land completed the trifecta of bad decisions.

On September 16, 1928, these three decisions collided spectacularly. Nicole Sterghos Brochu, for the *Sun-Sentinel*, tells the story like this:

As the category-four monster raged westward, it saved its most crippling blow for the small farming communities that lined Lake Okeechobee's southern shore. Between Clewiston and Canal Point, 6,000 people lived and worked, and nearly half would perish before the light of day.

Hurricane winds can bend a bicycle around a tree. They can lift a roof off a home. They can pick up cars. In 1928, the wind powered a mighty

wave of water through a wall supposed to contain it, crashing through the five-foot dike made of Everglades muck. Today we know that category four hurricane winds pushed the water around in the shallow lake, beating it to a boil. The water in the lake rose 10 feet above the lake level, bursting through almost 22 miles of levee on the southeast side of the mighty lake. The wall of water rampaged through the town, turning houses upside down, washing them away, and drowning those in its path. There was no escape; the water fiercely and wholly reclaimed the land and swallowed the towns in its path.

Even today, no one knows how many people died. The first number, 225, quickly grew to 400. In *Black Cloud*, Eliot Kleinberg recounts the stories about the storm's aftermath. "Ugly death was simply everywhere," Charles Young, a Glades resident who helped collect the dead, would later recall. The work was one part rescue, most parts body recovery. Young found the bodies of a family, including a dead man clutching his stilled child. Another rescuer, Festus Stallings, found the bloated body of a toddler wearing a bracelet. Stallings

recognized the bracelet. The month before, the tiny girl wearing it had shown it to him. It was a gift for her second birthday.

Some bodies were given a coffin burial, but not many. The Florida Health Department officially claimed just over 1,800 dead, but historians put the toll higher. Most of the dead were black farm workers. In 1920s Florida, an unidentified black person didn't get a coffin, especially not with the weight of dead bodies crushing relief efforts. No records exist of the farm owners dying in the storm, perhaps because they lived elsewhere.

Relief workers stacked bodies in piles and burned them, burying the remains in mass graves. At some sites, they took the time to count the corpses. At others, workers were too overwhelmed to keep track. Most black survivors and many white ones never found out what happened to their friends and relatives. The young girl with the bracelet? She was thrown onto a funeral pyre, her body burned and buried with the others. Festus Stallings never forgot her. Memories of that child – and the many other dead – stayed with him until he died, his son Frank said. "He said the hardest

thing he ever had to do," Frank said years later, "was throw that little girl's body on that fire." Today, the majority of homes and stores by the lake's southern stretch lie less than a scant half-mile from those levees.<sup>4</sup>

Further north, Pahokee looks poorer still, perhaps because of more of those colonial-styled estates interspersed with even more decrepit housing projects and shuttered businesses. Sugar cane is everywhere. As we drive I wonder about the unmarked graves from the 1928 storm. A cane fire burns in the distance, *de rigueur* in cane farming. Burning the fields leaves only the stalk, making it easier for the few remaining workers – machines do most of the work today – to harvest the cane.

Port Mayaca is the lone spot along the road where we can see the lake instead of a neatly mowed levee. It is also where we begin to leave the cane fields behind. Between here and the top of the lake, lunkers, not sugar cane, are the order of the day. Lunkers, or largemouth bass, make

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<sup>4</sup> Eliot Kleinberg, *Black Cloud: The Deadly Hurricane of 1928*. New York: Carroll & Graf, 2003.

for big business. Fishing camps dot the northeast quadrant of the lake between Port Mayaca and Okeechobee. If agriculture has attempted to triumph over the lake and Glades on its south side, fishing has learned to harmonize with both on the north end. It is a wholly more pleasant sight for me; I've never caught a hawg, or even tried, but after the desperation of Pahokee and Belle Glade, the unassuming fish camps soothe me with their contrast. There are still farms here (largely palm farms) but the presence of something at work with the environment instead of against it eases the ache I felt in Belle Glade.

Taylor Creek marks the top of the lake, and also the least-impooverished city along the pond, although it, like the others, contains a fair share of derelict buildings. It caters more to tourists, although judging by the wealth of fishing camps and bait shops, visitors here have a different idea of paradise than those flocking to Disney just two hours away. At the western edge of Taylor Creek we stop and walk out to the levee. We park, this time taking our antsy dog Calypso, and walk up the levee.

Here the lake seems less wild; there are more buildings and boaters and a man collecting trash from the ramp leading up to the levee. A tractor rests on the inside of the levee on a patch of grass, and a blue heron stares at us. East of our vantage point, a chain link fence separates the heron from a neatly mowed backyard. West of us a barge sits unattended, a colorful sign advertising "ICE SNACKS" in hand-painted lavender letters. White marshmallow clouds over the lake lower themselves and start to darken.

It's time to go.

In Moore Haven, we see a landfill on the lake side of the road, easily the highest point along the route and marked by crows and vultures soaring overhead. Prison inmates help with road construction, holding "STOP" and "SLOW" signs as we chug along the lake's perimeter. When one of them switches "SLOW" to "STOP" and we stop at the front of the line, he pantomimes asking for a cigarette. We shake our heads no and I find myself wondering what one does in this area of Florida to get thrown in jail. The Moore Haven jail offers no more than

medium security. It houses fewer than 1,000 inmates, all male.

Once we come full circle around the pond, I am still at a loss to describe the lake. Despite severe alteration to the landscape, it feels like a forgotten and untouched part of the state. It also leaves me with an alternating sense of wonder and melancholy. Part of me looks for a way to empathize with the needs filled by businesses and farms whose owners shaped these tragic decisions, but I cannot find it. Part of me is in awe of the lake and the surrounding communities; earning a living here cannot be easy, even for the wealthier: they battle mosquitoes, snakes, gators, and the threat of storms with alarming regularity. This part of Florida is still frontier.

On its west side, Okeechobee grows wilder as it seems to spread out. Here we find fewer signs of development, save the odd gas station, house, or government building. Fields of cattle interspersed with cabbage palm line most of the roadway. On its east, neatly ordered rows of farmland escort the route east until the Loxahatchee area, where subdivisions, strip malls, and golf

courses rise up to meet the road until it ends in West Palm Beach at A1A. From Loxahatchee east, the density of the Palm Beach suburbs are a blur after the wide open rolling green of the southernmost interior, and it is almost a culture shock to see farms pushed up against the rows of development, and I laugh as I recall the *Guide's* description of an 1880 homestead application for what was, by the 1930s, the business section of West Palm Beach. Irving R. Henry wrote on his application that he lived three miles from his nearest neighbor. The homes line up along the road in much the same way, just moments ago, sugar cane and tomatoes and peas did.