

CELEBRATING 40 YEARS AS A NATIONAL SCENIC TRAIL 1983-2023

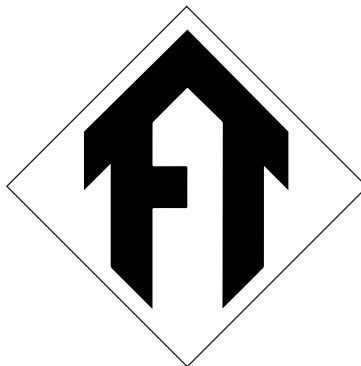
FOOTPRINT

Spring 2023 Volume 39 Issue 1

Magazine



**Florida Trail Association
Celebrating 40 Years as a
National Scenic Trail
1983-2023**





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Our Mission

The Florida Trail Association builds, maintains, protects, and promotes the Florida National Scenic Trail (Florida Trail), and a network of hiking trails throughout the state of Florida.

The Footprint Magazine welcomes your comments. The editors are committed to providing balanced and objective perspectives. Not all letters received may be published. Letters may be edited for clarity or length.

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OUR MAGAZINE

The *Footprint* is published by the Florida Trail Association, a volunteer-based nonprofit organization focused on Florida hiking and trail building. Since 1966, the primary mission of our organization has been the care and protection of the Florida Trail, a 1,500-mile footpath across the Sunshine State - Florida's own National Scenic Trail.

OUR GOAL

To provide outreach to our readers through informative articles that express appreciation for and conservation of the natural beauty of Florida; to inform our readers of Florida Trail Association efforts; and to provide information on Florida hiking and outdoor recreation opportunities.

CONTRIBUTORS

Please contact the editor at communications@floridatrail.org to discuss ideas for feature stories prior to submission.



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As a Florida Trail member, you receive a subscription to The *Footprint* magazine, membership in a local chapter, a local newsletter with local activities, opportunities for outdoor skills training, participation in regional and annual conferences and more. To become a member, you can visit our website, mail in the form on the last page of this magazine, or call 352-378-8823.

ADVERTISING

Reach a highly targeted demographic of Florida outdoor enthusiasts by advertising with us or becoming a regular sponsor. Your advertising dollars directly support production and publication of this magazine and assist the Florida Trail Association in fulfilling its mission. Call 877-HIKE-FLA or email communications@floridatrail.org for more details.

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Executive Director's Corner

by Royce W. Gibson, Executive Director

First, I would like to thank all of the people who contributed to this special edition of the Footprint. Everyone has been working diligently for months to bring you this celebration of the 40th Anniversary of the naming of the Florida Trail as a National Scenic Trail. I hope you enjoy the magazine and that it will inspire you to help us continue this great project.

Former Interior Secretary, Stewart Udall once stated, "A national trail is a gateway into nature's secret beauties, a portal to the past, a way into solitude and community. It is also an inroad to our national character. Our trails are both irresistible and indispensable". He also said, "In a region with a growing population, if you're doing nothing, you're losing ground".

When the first orange blaze was painted the population of Florida was just over six million, and when the Florida Trail became a National Scenic Trail in 1983 it was 11 million. Today we are more than 22 million and growing at a nearly one thousand people per day. We need to redouble our efforts to close the gaps in the trail and complete the trail before available options disappear forever.

Forty years ago when the comprehensive plan for the Florida Trail was written and the location of the trail was defined, no one envisioned today's rate of growth and sprawl. We need to revisit the comprehensive plan and the optimal trail corridor in order to protect the trail and complete it. We need to find new ways to educate and inspire all Floridians to protect the trail and the vital ecosystems it traverses.

The Florida Trail Association, for almost 60 years, has helped build and maintain

the trail with the support of our volunteers and members. Today we are working to find new ways to inspire the next generation to continue the awesome work we do. We have created the Next Generation Coalition of 18- to 35-year-olds to be our ambassadors to their peers. We renewed our Florida Trail Gateway Community program which brings visitors to both the trail and to the community. We are also creating new partnerships with like-minded organizations to promote each other's missions. We are using our social media platforms to highlight all these endeavors.

One of the great things about the Florida National Scenic Trail is that it is supported across the political spectrum at the national level. I recently attended "Hike the Hill," an annual advocacy event for all the national scenic and historic trails. Our five person team of staff and volunteers were able to meet with the staff of 25 of Florida's 30 members of Congress to talk about the work accomplished and our funding needs for the coming fiscal year.

The Florida Greenways and Trails Act (SS 260.012 (6)) recognizes the Florida National Scenic Trail as the official nonmotorized trail of the state of Florida and further encourages all state, regional and local agencies to acquire sufficient legal interest in lands to ensure the permanency of the trail. The Florida Trail currently has more than 300 miles of road walk and it is our goal this year and every year to close as many of these gaps as we can. We are going



to advocate and encourage you to do the same, to remind our local, regional, and state officials of this statute and of the local needs and opportunities.

Together with you, our agency partners, our volunteers, and everyone who enjoys outdoor recreation we can complete the Florida National Scenic Trail and put it permanently in the public domain.

Happy 40th Anniversary Florida National Scenic Trail,





From the Desk of the Forest Service

by Shawn Thomas, Florida National Scenic Trail Administrator



Please allow me to share my immediate thoughts about the Florida Trail: a fabric of peoples past, present, and future; connections; special places; partnerships; natural wonder; community; solitude; wildlife and plantlife oasis. These are just a few powerful reminders to me that the Florida National Scenic Trail (FT, FNST) is indeed a national and state treasure. The Florida Trail is critically positioned as the backbone of Florida's entire trail system and so importantly poised with the responsibility of Connecting [Florida's Public Lands](#).

For the past eight years I have had the honor of serving as the Administrator of the Florida National Scenic Trail. This is a privilege and responsibility that I do not take lightly, and I strive each day to better carry out the shared goals and objectives of the U.S. Forest Service and our partners to not only maintain and protect the FT but to close the gaps in the more than 1,500 miles of the Florida Trail. During my tenure as FNST Administrator, I have made a genuine effort to strengthen the partnership with our primary partner, the Florida Trail Association. This partnership

has accomplished so much great work over the years, but it cannot be denied that it has also been through some challenging times in years past. When I accepted this position, my desire was to start fresh and rebuild trust and a working relationship with FTA and Florida public land managers; the benefit of coming in without any knowledge of past history I suppose. I do not mean that in any way to disparage the efforts of past Forest Service or FTA employees but simply as written, I was coming in without any history; I was coming in understanding that I get to work for the Florida National Scenic Trail – that's it, a dream come true!

A Strong Foundation

One of my first actions was to recommit the Western Corridor of the FT to the priority network because who doesn't love a-choose-your-own-adventure, and it did happen to have existing designation of course. I also worked to build an FNST staff that has the capacity to best assist land managers and partners. Through my program budget, I invested a significant portion of our annual funding allocation to help ensure that the FTA has the resources they need as an organization to promote, maintain, and protect the Florida National Scenic Trail. I have worked closely with FTA leadership

during the last eight years to build a full-time FNST program staff that has the capacity to liaison with each land manager in the state of Florida as well as support the FTA Chapters. We have placed direct emphasis on expanding the scope, ownership, and awareness of the Florida Trail in a manner that is a reflection and representation of the citizens of Florida. These efforts have resulted in seven full time positions which include a trail manager for each of the three FT regions as well as an overall trail program director, a GIS Specialist, a communications and outreach manager, and a gateway communities coordinator. I am a strong advocate for the volunteer base that comprises the FTA and my commitment to continue to support the sustainability of all of our FT partners remains at the forefront of my priorities. My long-term vision eight years ago has remained unchanged; a complete and protected FT for everyone to enjoy and always in my mind is the connectivity of wildlife habitats and public spaces; after all, how hard is it to close four hundred miles of gaps, right?

Closing the Gaps

Completing the Florida Trail in a manner that is permanent and protected is our best hope for achieving a sliver of the natural landscapes, communities, and cultures that make this trail and Florida a destination that cannot be found anywhere else on earth. My role as administrator is not only to ensure that we meet the laws, policies, and guidelines of a federally designated trail but I see a responsibility to do so in a manner that respects the history of the trail and leans towards the future. The Florida National Scenic Trail Comprehensive Plan of 1986 is the guiding document that outlines the management of the FT. This document covers the responsibilities of the Forest Service, state land managing agencies, and the Florida Trail Association (FTA). Naturally, to complete a long-distance trail in one of the nation's most populous and developing states requires more than administering policies. My goal is that we manage this resource so that 40 years from today a young person discovers the beauty of natural Florida, a town resident can make their day just a little better by walking or biking to work or the grocery store on a green lined commute, rare and not so rare plants and animals disperse and thrive,



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Resources



and Floridians across the state and beyond find the FT worthy of protection because after all it is their trail.

A Coalition of Partners

March 28, 2023, marks the 40th anniversary of the Florida Trail as a congressionally designated National Scenic Trail (NST) by way of an amendment to the National Trails System Act of 1968. One of only eleven National Scenic Trails in the Nation, we collectively have a responsibility to steward this treasured resource for current and future generations. During my tenure I have had the opportunity to develop so many lasting relationships with the many land managers, volunteers, and communities that encompass the FT.

The formation of the Florida National Scenic Trail Coalition of partners by the Forest Service in 2010 has been instrumental in working towards a set of shared goals and objectives for the advancement and protection of the FT. One only needs to look at the unique position of the FT among the ten other National Scenic Trails to see that the FT is not majority protected on federal public lands but rather relies on a cohesion of state,

federal, and private lands, and that only about 200 miles of trail is on National Forests lands and even less so on other federal lands. Therefore, it is critical that the FT must garner the support and commitment from the more than thirty land managers across the state. These include the Seminole Tribe of Florida, most state agencies, counties, municipalities, and private landowners which the trail crosses. The FNST Coalition seeks to strengthen these partnerships and share best management practices among land managers and partners. The Coalition is structured around four main goals developed by the Forest Service in partnership with the FTA to focus our efforts on advancing the Florida Trail. I would like to highlight these goals and just a couple of progress highlights over the past six years, and I encourage the reader to consider areas that they may engage in these efforts.

◆ Promoting Connections by connecting citizens with the natural and cultural heritage of Florida through increasing the awareness, use and protection of the Florida Trail.

This goal has led to the development of the Junior Explorer program where young people

are invited to utilize a curriculum based adventure guide to explore the FT environment. The FT Next Generation Council and the reenergized Gateway Communities Program were also products of this goal. We also developed the official Explore the [Florida Trail video](#), check it out through the FTA website.



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◆ **Completing the Trail by closing the gaps in the Florida Trail through long-range planning, acquisition, and agreements for long term protection of the Trail corridor.** This goal set out to remove 30 miles of roadwalk while adding 50 miles of designatable trail. Over the past five years I am pleased to report that we have added 56 miles of new trail and achieved a reduction of 30 miles of roadwalk. Forty years ago, there were just over 500 miles of trail. Today we have 1,126 miles of designated trail. I will note that the low hanging fruit has been picked and each mile gained often comes as the result of many months of relationship building.

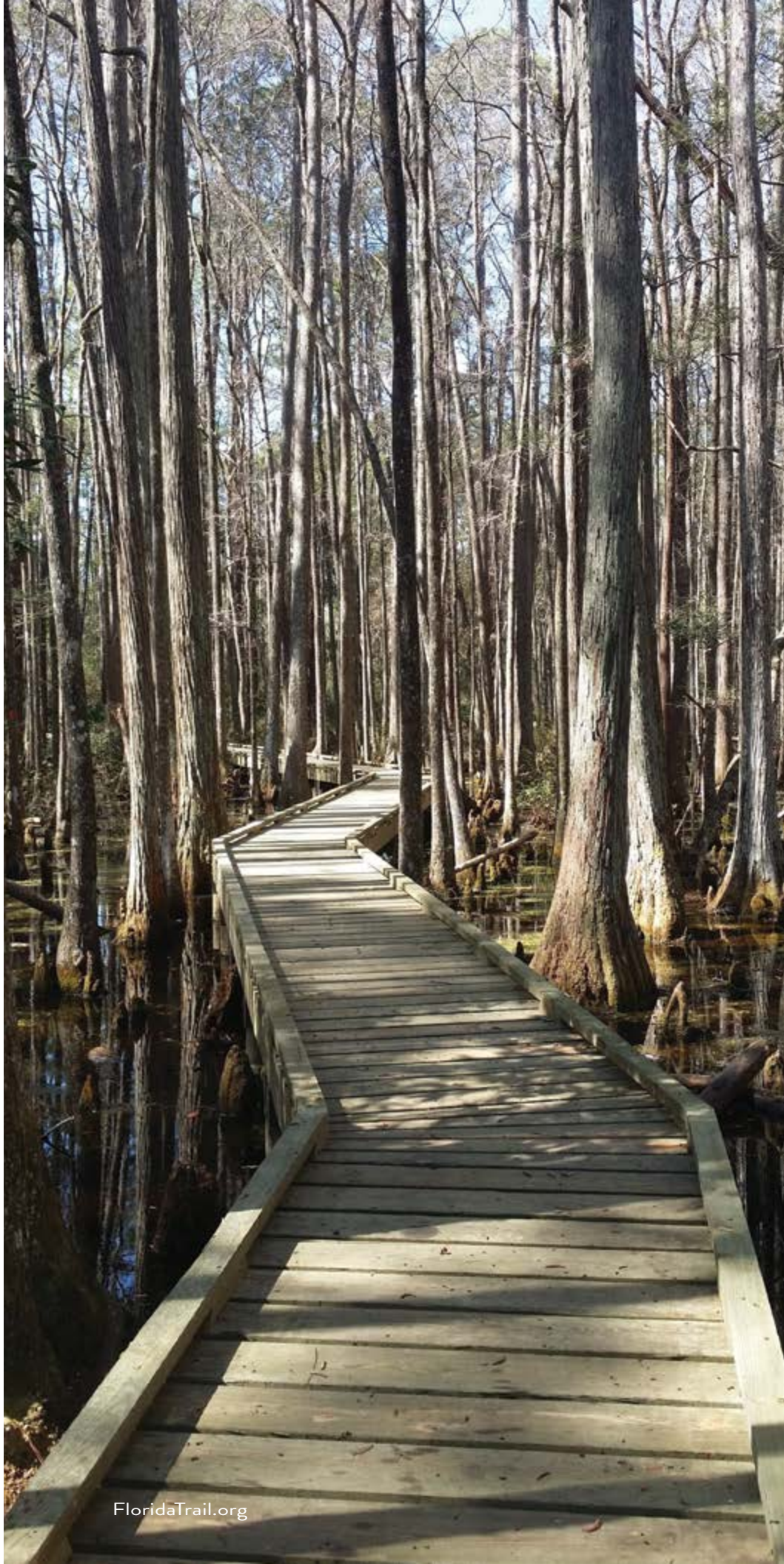
◆ **Sustainable Management through metrics designed to ensure a high-quality recreation experience for current and future generations.** This goal has helped us create a spatial inventory of all infrastructure and trailhead resources allowing for a more targeted approach to trail maintenance and improvement. We developed and made available standardized boardwalk and bridge design plans which meet Forest Service design requirements. Land managers and FTA chapters can submit trail assessments in real time in addition to our annual call for projects.

◆ **Strategic Partnerships which encourage a diverse community of partners in the management, promotion, and completion of the Florida Trail.**

Dedicated Volunteers

Volunteerism is critical to the success of each of our goals and the overall long-term protection of the trail. Our agency and partner agencies have a set of responsibilities to carry out, but ultimately the Florida Trail is a result of a citizen effort to create a long-distance path that showcases the diverse Florida environment while offering an array of opportunities and experiences. The future of the trail remains dependent upon this citizen involvement, the idea that volunteering to maintain a trail benefits more than oneself, but rather an entire community and a notion of a long-term vision. The FTA community of volunteers contributes an equivalent of roughly \$350,000 annually in service to the FT. This remarkable amount of volunteer effort keeps the trail open, safe, and accessible to the more than 1,000 people per day who find themselves utilizing this outstanding resource. So, whether you volunteer with loppers or chainsaws, manage hours or chapter business on your computer, or simply share the story and importance of the trail with your friends, neighbors, and community leaders I really want to thank you. You make this trail possible, and generations will benefit from and follow in the work of volunteers.

Finally, I would like to share just a few projects that I am most proud to have been a part of and hopefully added a small contribution towards the success of our partner staff and volunteers. These specific examples encompass the value of partnership as they are made possible by two non-profit organizations, and seven separate land managing agencies. In addition to these examples, we have secured funding through a grant for Gulf Coast natural resource damage assessment resulting from the Deepwater Horizon oil spill to begin the planning and implementation of





a major boardwalk and bridge project within the St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge. This effort is now in the planning and permitting phase and construction will begin in the next year or two.

Bridges and boardwalks help to provide the required closure of gaps and safe access that is needed to complete the Florida Trail, but we cannot stop there. We must continue to find our path through willing sellers and access agreements. The FT gains so much character through the patchwork of natural communities, small and medium sized towns, as well as major cities that it skirts, but these connections also present significant challenges for a complete and continuous trail. Will there always be some roadwalk and gaps in the FT? After eight years in my role, I am slowly starting to accept that the answer is likely yes. I was once asked if I truly believe that we can “complete” the Florida National Scenic Trail simply through agreements and willing sellers. “Yes I do, of course I do, or I am not the person for this important job” was my response. I believe there is a part of our American identity that seeks to have

protected long distance corridors, and we not only accept, but we embrace that some look different than others, and yet they all add value to this exceptional National Trails System, found nowhere else in the world.

In time and with your continued support we will have a completed FT. One that allows for a safe and varied experience throughout the state and one that encompasses a representation and place for all Floridians to feel belonging and ownership. This means that we will have co-location with paved networks, and we will, at times, weave in and out of the forested experience to a more urban-interface one. Yet, one day, roadwalks will be minimal. Until then, I can certainly say that this trail built on partnerships and volunteerism has been and continues to be an iconic success and honor to be a part of.

I hope to see you on the FT and in the meantime, follow the orange blaze on your next adventure!

Best regards,

Shawn

PHOTOS

- 8** *Shawn Thomas at the U.S. Forest Service*
- 9** *Northern terminus marker and kiosks, Gulf Islands National Seashore*
- 10** *Ocean Pond Boardwalk, Osceola National Forest*
- 11** *Swift Creek Bridge, Suwannee River Area*
- 12** *Crabgrass Creek, Bull Creek WMA.*
- 14** *Alaqua Bridge, Eglin AFB*









Connecting People and Places

by Paul Strauss



Paul Strauss – Florida Park Service Volunteer – Savannas Preserve State Park, NAI Certified Interpretive Guide, Tropical Trekkers Chapter – Florida Trail Association

According to the Florida Natural Areas Inventory (FNAI), there are 81 distinct natural communities within the Florida peninsula, and the Florida Trail weaves through most if not all of them. For an interpretative nature guide like myself, the trail is a 1,500-mile-long ribbon filled with Florida's natural history, cultural foundations & environmental legacy.

From Big Cypress Swamp near Cape Sable to the Apalachicola long-leaf pine forests surrounding Sopchoppy; the Florida National Scenic Trail is a true-life information highway. For those interested in our natural world and sharing that learning with others, textbooks and classrooms will take you only so far. For a true understanding of Florida's ecosystems, their flora & fauna, there is no substitute for time spent exploring the trail, listening to the sounds of nature, observing the behavior of Florida fauna first-hand, and immersing yourself in the natural communities that define the Sunshine State.


The number of miles underfoot strengthens your understanding of the connections in our natural world, the transitions between habitats are made real, the interface of nature & the built environment; it's all found within the confines of orange blazes.

Wading through the cypress swamps of South Florida, rich with epiphytes and exotic orchid species, hiking the oak hammocks & dry-prairie habitats of Central Florida and searching for pine forest bird species or carnivorous plants builds an intimate understanding of nature's cycles, the sophistication of food webs, the relationship between fire and plant diversity.

For the interpretative guide that is interested in providing a rich experience for park or nature center visitors and pursuing a deeper understanding of Florida's unique natural communities than reference and guidebooks provides, there is no substitute for placing your footprints among the hikers, explorers, and adventure seekers on Florida's Scenic Trail.

How the Florida Trail Began

by Jim Kern, Founder

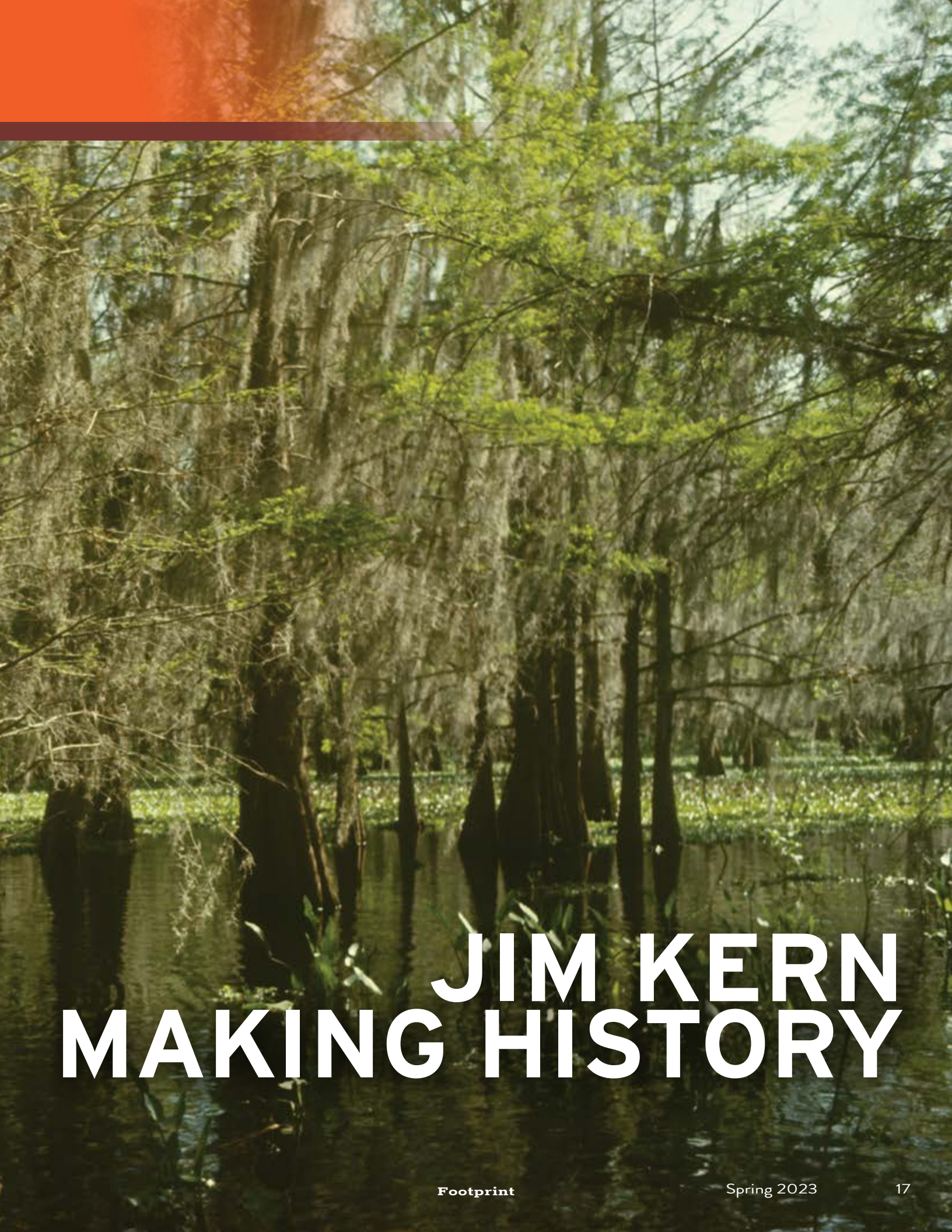


Jim Kern, a New Jersey native who moved to Miami in the 1960s, came up with the idea of the Florida Trail while on what he described as “a miserable trip,” his first long-distance hike on the Appalachian Trail in the Great Smoky Mountains. After the harrowing experience of being woefully unprepared, scaring off a bear, and sleeping in the rain, Jim was happy he survived.

Yet, upon returning home he wondered, *Is there a long-distance trail in Florida?* He envisioned the stunning sunsets of Big Cypress and the sweeping views from the banks of the Suwannee, a trail that cut through the wilds of the Ocala National Forest and Osceola National Forest, then through Apalachicola National Forest and out into the panhandle.

In 1966, soon after the first Florida Trail Association board meeting, Jim set out with Miami Herald reporter McGregor “Mac”

Smith Jr. and a group of boy scouts to dramatize the idea of such a trail. The following piece by Jim Kern originally appeared in the Miami Herald Sunday Supplement on May 1, 1966, and served as the public’s first introduction to the concept of what would become the Florida Trail.



JIM KERN MAKING HISTORY

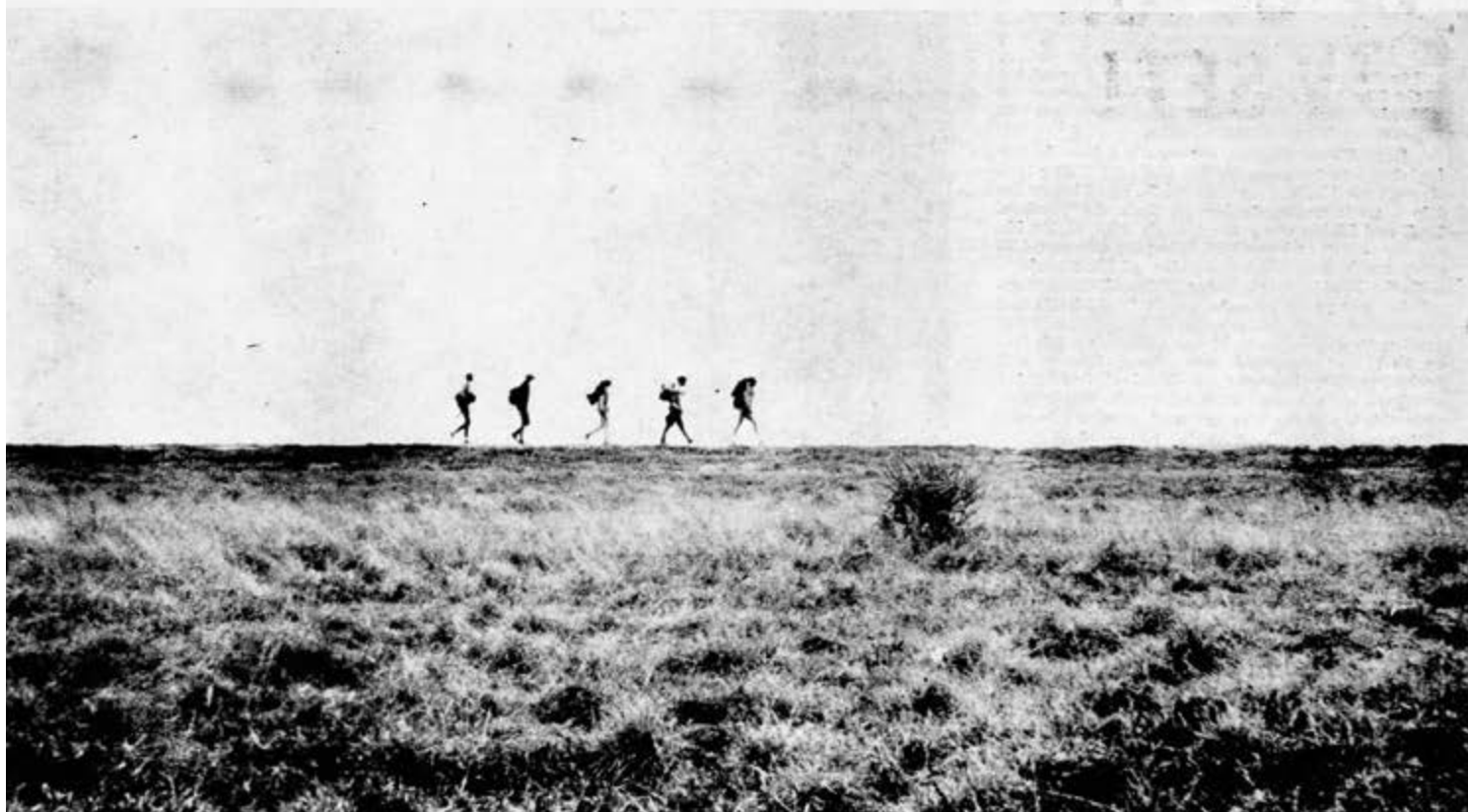






Hiking the Florida Trail

Adventure-lovers blaze a pioneer path through Florida's natural beauty.



Silhouetted against the gray of morning, five Floridians with pioneer's spirit and muscular legs file along the top of a long, high flood control dike, part of the path they explored with Jim Kern in his campaign to establish a Florida Hiking Trail.

By JIM KERN

THE long, high dikes now coming to an end had been my hiking trail for 100 miles. I had walked them from the 40-mile bend on the Tamiami Trail to the western side of Lake Okeechobee. I was now about to leave them to wade northward across Fisheating Creek.

At Moore Haven the day before I had been joined by Dade Thornton, president of the Tropical Audubon Society, Wayne Hoffman, a young Miami naturalist, and six explorer scouts from Miami. We would be together until we had reached the north side of Fisheating Creek and hiked westward to Palm-dale.

The best spot to ford the first stream in our path was waist deep. We slipped off our pants and shoes and with packs and clothes on our heads waded the stream.

After lunch in a grove of melaleucas, we broke out across open country. Slight undulations in the land accommodated both lines of cypress and scat-

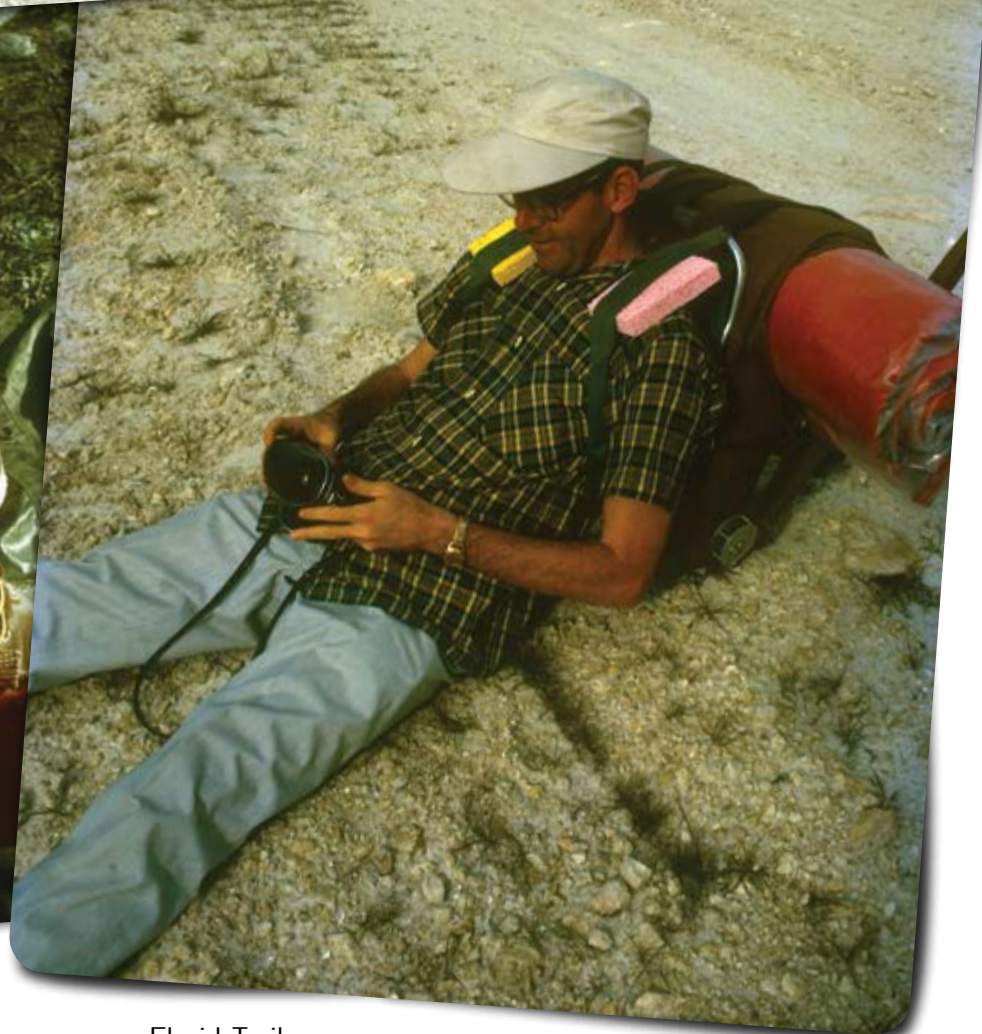
On the surface, Jim Kern is a mild Miami real estate salesman. But beneath that gray flannel suit beats the heart of a Richard Haliburton. Kern loves adventure, the outdoors, nature. Every so often wanderlust strikes him and off he goes. Once he went to Borneo to film the rare proboscis monkey. Recently he got the urge to establish a hiking trail from one end of Florida to the other, and off he went. Here is his own story.

tered oaks. Wild iris were opening in the damp spots. Water hyacinth clogged the shin-deep puddles. The water didn't matter. We kept a NW course and let our feet get wet, for we knew the water would be getting deeper. Soon we could see the strand ahead of us.

As we approached a fence, we saw two does slip quickly under the barbed wire 50 yards away and bound off into the cypress. Armadillos were plentiful

on the higher ground, snooting in the soft soil for insects. On seeing them, the scouts dropped their packs and chased them zig-zag from one palmetto clump to another. Eventually they caught one. Earlier we flushed three big wild turkeys. The boys also found a pigmy rattler and a cottonmouth moccasin and caught three black racers and a ring-neck snake, which they stowed away in their snake bags.

Once inside the cypress we found no dry land. The water was knee deep and flowing, it seemed, every which way. Only our compass kept our heading correct. The water was colder, too. As it continued to deepen, we knew the main streams still lay ahead of us. The bright sun sifted through the apple-green cypress, giving the spring foliage a translucent look, and danced in irregular patterns across the dark water. Spanish moss and bromeliads festooned the inside branches of the cypress. Here and there we found the clam-shell orchid and the brown epidendrum. Once we flushed a sleepy barred owl from his daytime roost, and on a low limb we found a yellow rat snake



Hiking the Florida Trail

sunning himself. Whenever we heard a buzzy warble overhead, we looked for parula warblers in migration.

Soon we were on high ground again. We found a huge log under some live oaks and slipped off our packs. From that point we followed a dirt road to Palmdale. The scouts were met right on time by their leader, Fred Tooker. There to meet Dade and Wayne were Dade's wife, Hilda, and the Hoffmann family, and to greet me were my companions for the next leg of the hike. Ross Allen of Silver Springs had brought with him Charles Graham, an Englishman, and two explorer scouts from Ormond Beach.

Ross Allen's purpose, as mine had been in the beginning, was to dramatize the idea of a hiking trail through Florida. McGregor Smith Jr. and I began the trip a week earlier, taking off from the Tamiami Trail and hiking along the easterly edge of the big cypress swamp on levee L-28. When the dike ended 18 miles north, Tom Shirley and two of his associates with the Florida Fresh Water Fish and Game Commission met us by prearrangement in air boats and transported us across ten miles of Everglades to the continuation of the levee. It was halfway up this levee that Mac developed some mean blisters and decided to let a fisherman take him back to Miami. I continued on to Moore Haven, taking six days to complete this leg of the hike and meet up with my next hiking companions. Now that I had reached Palmdale, Highlands Hammock State Park remained only 40 miles away. My wife, Lynn, was to meet me there at 4:00 p.m. Thursday and I didn't want to be late.

My hikes along the Appalachian Trail in Great Smoky Mountains National Park had first got me thinking about a hiking trail in Florida. The grandeur of the mountains would be missing, but a Florida Trail would have unique beauty of its own. Although heat and mosquitos would make a hiker uncomfortable in the summer months, a trail through Florida would be, perhaps, the only major hiking trail open throughout the winter.

To begin a campaign for a hiking trail through Florida, I made a formal presentation to the Florida Board of Parks and Historic Memorials. As an outdoor recreational facility, I urged the Park Board to consider establishing a hiking trail as part of the Florida Park system. The director thought the idea an excellent one but gave no indication that the Board would take action. To prevent the idea from dying a premature death, I established the Florida Trail Association to draw attention to the project.

When my family found "pack frame and bag" on my Christmas list, they thought it merely amusing. In fact, though, the talking stage was coming to an end. I ordered geological survey maps from Washington. By studying these and Flood Control maps, I laid out the first 150 miles of the trail. My list of equipment also began to take shape: sleeping bag, air mattress, poncho, two pairs of shoes, canteen, compass, and a host of other items. Freeze-dried meats and vegetables cut the food weight to 1.5 pounds per day, but my pack still weighed in at 45 pounds.

The evening we arrived in Palmdale the scouts headed for home, but Hilda Thornton had come to meet her husband well prepared. In the back of the Thorntons' Wagoner were tents, cooking equipment and some choice steaks. That night, camping along Fisheating Creek, Dade and Wayne provided a hootenanny to the background accompaniment of the barred owls, and Ross told of his past expeditions to South America after poisonous snakes.

The next day our new group set off in a westerly direction from Palmdale through open saw-palmetto and occasional scrub oak. Sometime after noon, we again met Fisheating Creek where it begins to turn northward. There we found an old homestead. The grass looked as if it had just been mowed, and there were fruit trees growing among the oaks, but we found no buildings.

We kept a northerly course all afternoon, keep-



Hiker-author Jim Kern slogs along through a clearing in his trek. He walked 150 miles in 12 days, from the Tamiami Trail to Highlands Hammock State Park.

ing Fisheating Creek a couple of miles to the west of us. Ross Allen carried his typical survival pack, which he says will keep him in the Florida "bush" for fifteen days. His pack weighed less than half mine. The scouts were not well supplied with food, so Ross suggested they catch an armadillo. Eventually several scrambles through the saw-palmetto were rewarded. Ross skinned and cleaned the critter on the spot. One of the scouts wanted to know if the meat tasted anything like chicken. Ross said yes, a little.

"White meat or dark meat?" the underfed scout asked. "I don't like dark meat."

That night we camped at another hammock. Ross made a bed of Spanish moss in a hollow under a large saw-palmetto. ("Pull it off the trees or it might have chiggers in it.") Then he covered his mosquito bar with palmetto fronds and crawled in. We were sure the temperature plunged into the low 40s that night, but Ross said he stayed warm until shortly before dawn. The Englishman, attempting to follow Ross's technique, also left his sleeping bag behind; he said he froze.

The next day at Old Venice, Ross and his group decided to turn back. We had lunch together before they hitched a ride back to Palmdale. It had been a pleasure sharing their company. Now I was striking out again alone.

My route from Old Venice was shown as Footman's Trail on my map. Perhaps many years ago this

was a path connecting hamlets in interior Florida. I doubt if anyone had used it as a hiking trail for years. Cows and an occasional jeep had kept it open. Sparse pine and saw-palmetto covered the countryside. The sun was at my back, a cool northerly breeze on my face — ideal conditions for hiking.

I decided to leave Footman's Trail south of State Road 70 and follow a ridge on the east side of a broad prairie. I would be leaving areas covered by my maps and would be hiking through ten miles or so of wooded terrain, aided only by my compass.

That night while my freeze-dried pork chops and carrots were cooking, I watched the sky. The moon was late in rising. The dry north wind had swept the clouds away, and the resulting blackness revealed the stars in such profusion the prominent constellations appeared lost among the rest.

The next morning I awoke before it was light. Craning my neck to see over a palmetto frond, I looked eastward for Venus. I had purposely left my watch at home so that I would rely on some of nature's clocks and had learned to tell from Venus' height in the sky when it would get light.

The country the following day was picturesque. Our wet winter had kept things green. Slender hardwoods and thick oaks edged many of the small streams. Pines and cabbage palms dotted open pastureland. I avoided cypress heads, knowing I would find water in them.





Sometimes the going was a mite damp. Kern and companions, who joined him for part of the hike, waded through hip deep water. Map shows route of entire 500-mile proposed trail.

I was now less than 20 miles from the end, and I began to dwell on hot showers, cold drinks, soft beds, and the morning paper.

About the middle of the afternoon I found myself following an opening through a tangle of underbrush, heading more westerly (toward low ground) than I should have. At the end of this path, instead of emerging somewhere, I faced a wall of jungle vegetation. Seeing light on the other side, I pushed through a few hundred feet of thick foliage and slippery, soupy mud. Vines with large thorns draped themselves through the trees and across my path. Little light penetrated to where I was. The natural inclination at such times is to keep going, thinking things will get better. With 45 pounds on one's back, retracing steps is always painful. This time things got worse. Had I been in any other country, I would have expected to be pulling leeches off me by now, or to stumble upon some gigantic crocodile, or be finished off by a swift green mamba, entwined in perfect disguise around one of those vines. If something caused me to stop there in my tracks, I was reconciled to the fact that no one would ever find me.

When I broke through the other side of the clearing, instead of finding a path or a road, I stood on the edge of a marshy pond, surrounded on all sides by the vegetation I had just penetrated. Two pines on the opposite side made me think there might be high ground in that direction, so I waded around the

edge of the pond and plowed through the thicket on the other side. In a few minutes I stumbled out onto a grassy, water-soaked plain that stretched north and south for miles. Only by slogging northward along the fringe of the woods for about an hour did I come upon an open route to higher ground — just as the sun was setting.

That night as I stretched out on my sleeping bag and waited for my meal to cook, I realized things could have been a lot worse that night than they were.

About the middle of the next day — it had been two days since I saw a soul — I came upon a dirt road which I was able to identify from a small country map. From that point I paced off nine more miles along dirt roads to arrive at the entrance to Highlands Hammock State Park at 3:15, 45 minutes early. Our car broke a fan belt on the way up, and Lynn didn't make it to the Park until 5 o'clock.

During the next two years we intend to lay out and then hike the entire 500-mile trail from the Everglades National Park to Fort Pickens in Pensacola. This fall we will open the leg from Ocala National Forest to the Suwannee River, passing through such scenic spots as Alexander Springs, Juniper Springs, Gold Head Branch State Park, and Osceola National Forest. All this sounds like a lot of walking. But give your legs a chance. They'll cooperate as you watch the raw loveliness of an undeveloped Florida unfold.



The Miami Herald SUNDAY MAGAZINE Sunday, May 1, 1966







PHOTOS

18 *Hiking the bank of Lake Okeechobee near Moore Haven*

20 *Lynn Kern and 5 year-old Jimmy say farewell to dad at 40-Mile Bend on Highway 41*

20 *Jim and McGregor Smith Jr.*

21 *Miami Herald page 1*

22 *An Explorer Scout troop accompanies Jim and Mac Smith at their departure point on the Tamiami Trail.*

22 *Mac Smith attending to foot problems.*

23 *Miami Herald page 2*

24 *Airboats were needed where a dike ended. The hikers got a lift to the next dike going north.*

25 *Miami Herald page 3*

26 *Jim Kern in red shirt crossing Fisheating Creek with scouts.*

27 *Some of the wild citrus was sweet.*

27 *Ross Allen brought two students and joined the hike north from Palmdale.*

28 *The last 100 yards to Highlands Hammock State Park where the adventure ended.*

28 *Jim kept a log while enroute.*

All photos courtesy of Jim Kern

Connecting People and Places

by Franklin Adams



AN UNFORGETTABLE DARK SKY NIGHT AT THE BEARS DEN CAMP IN THE BIG CYPRESS SWAMP

It was the spring night of March 13, 1989, and Karl Greer and I were enjoying sitting by the campfire sipping some bourbon and listening to the Barred owls calling.

As the lighted pine fire died down, we decided to go in and cook our supper of venison backstrap, pole beans fresh from Homestead and corn shuffle.

It was a cool dark peaceful night and we were thankful to be out of town and in the wilderness woods of Big Cypress. After a delicious supper we continued to talk about the good old days and finished off with some homemade Key lime pie. I set up the coffee pot for the next morning and decided to stoke the campfire and relax a while before hitting the sack. A whippoorwill began to call nearby. I hoped to hear an Osceola gobble at first light.

Walking out into the hammock edge I looked to the north and suddenly it looked like the entire Big Cypress Preserve north of Alligator Alley was on fire. Karl and I were amazed at the height of the

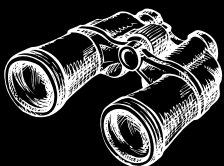
distant fire. (We both had seen many wild and prescribed fires over the years in the cypress country.)

As we watched intently the distant fire seemed to waver and move and reach into the heavens, not something we had seen before. I jokingly said, it's probably just the Northern Lights, the Aurora borealis. It was an incredibly impressive display in that dark night sky.

When I returned home four days later, I mentioned our experience to my wife Kathy. She smiled and walked over to the newspapers that she had saved for me and held up the headline page. A rare sighting of the Aurora borealis seen in South Florida for the first time in many years.

Many nights in Big Cypress it almost seems that you could reach up and touch the Milky Way, it is so clear in that dark sky. Karl and I were so fortunate to have experienced this totally unexpected viewing of the Aurora. Most likely, a once in a lifetime opportunity for us in the wilds of Big Cypress.

In 2016 the
Big Cypress National Preserve
was designated an
“International Dark Sky Place”
by the International Dark
Sky Association.



Jim Kern hikes 171 miles from the Tamiami Trail to Highlands Hammock State Park to dramatize the idea of a footpath through Florida and establish an early trail route of the Florida Trail before National Scenic Trail designation. Florida Trail Association is formed to “promote the creation of a trail the length of the state.”

Congress passes the National Trails System Act, authorizing a national system of trails and establishing the Appalachian Trail and the Pacific Crest Trail.

The Florida Trail is admitted for study as a National Scenic Trail, ultimately gaining approval and FTA staff Bob Fiore writes the feasibility study.

1966

FTA joins the Hike the Hill week of advocacy to showcase the work of the FTA and state their case for federal funding.

1968

Eight FTA members form the Florida Trail Land Trust to close gaps in the Florida Trail and help FTA reach its goal of a continuous footpath.

1976–
1979

1997

1993

2000

FTA President Dick Schuler announces a “Close the Gaps” initiative to focus on completing the Florida Trail.

2003

U.S. Forest Service acquires funds for corridor acquisition from the Land and Water Conservation Fund, and adds land acquisition staff.

Present
Day

FNST Coalition continues to identify parcels and apply for funding to purchase land, work with land developers and local authorities to carve our green corridors, and work with state partners to ensure the FNST remains a state priority trail.

A modification to the National Trails Act establishes the Florida National Scenic Trail as the sixth NST in the NST system.

First informal meeting between the FTA and the U.S. Forest Service to talk about the management of the Florida Trail.

Florida National Scenic Trail Advisory Council created.

MAR 28
1983

Forest Service hires their first staff person for the FNST project, FNST Coordinator Steve Sherwood.

NOV 28
1983

FTA and Forest Service develop a Comprehensive Plan for the management of the Florida National Scenic Trail.

1984

1987

1985

"To date we, the Florida Trail Association, a group of private citizens, have constructed over 400 miles of footpath through the wilder regions of the state. If you have not already done so, we hope you will take an opportunity this winter to walk a few miles on the Florida Trail. We would also appreciate your giving some creative thought as to how this footpath might be set aside for posterity."

~Jim Kern,
from a letter sent to
Florida legislators

The Florida (not yet National Scenic) Trail

by Margaret Scruggs/edited by Sandra Friend



Editor's Note: A vibrant part of the beginning of the Florida Trail, Margaret Scruggs was the first woman to participate on a trail crew and paint blazes on the FT in 1966. She shared her original typewritten narrative with me a decade ago while my husband and I were interviewing "old timers" for their stories for our 50th anniversary book on the Florida Trail's history. The following are her words, written in 1994 as an outline to give a talk at an FTA chapter meeting. It is edited for clarity and space.

Establishing a Trail

Quoting from *The American Walk Book* by Jean Craighead George, the history of the Florida Trail dates to 1964, the year a young man from New Jersey, James A. Kern, arrived in Florida and bought a house. As he watched the evening sky fill with wood storks and glossy ibis, he began thinking of a magazine devoted to photography and nature called *Florida Trails*. The magazine never came to be, but the trail did.

When Jim wanted to hike he drove to North Carolina, as did hundreds of other Floridians. But Jim felt Florida should have its own trail. He began with a small group of Miamians, the original Board of Directors. He flew over the state surveying routes; he talked to many well-known Floridians who

cared for the 'natural' Florida, such as Ross Allen, Archie Carr, Alan Cruikshank, Marjorie Stoneman Douglas, and Carol Beck. Jim was a writer, photographer, and a good public relations person. The summer of 1966, he had the first Activities sheet ready with three activities plus the Annual Meeting. The first two were hikes through Southwest Florida—Collier County, Corkscrew Swamp, Fisheating Creek, Highlands Hammock State Park, all west of the present Florida Trail. People joined in or dropped out as they crossed roads. They appeared in the *Miami Herald* and out-of-state newspapers and magazines.

I lived in south Marion County then. A friend of my daughter, Ken Alvarez, was milking snakes and wrestling alligators for Ross Allen when Jim came through Silver

Springs. Ken listened to Jim and gave him my name. The letter I received said, "your name was given to me recently as someone very much interested in the idea of a Florida Hiking Trail. I am enclosing some information on the trail. Perhaps we can make a member out of you!" The Inquiry Response Letter at the time closed with these words: "Say 'yes' to the Florida Trail by returning a membership card with one dollar. Do it today." And I did.

The first MEMO (newsletter) I received contained the two hikes in South Florida and one in late October through the Ocala National Forest. Ken Alvarez and I met Cliff Edstrom, Jim Kern, Tom Montoya from Auburndale, and a U.S. forester at the entrance to Clearwater Lake on Highway 42 to begin the hike. The picture taken of us there was on the front of our first brochure. The forester said we could take any route we liked and wished us well.

We hiked north along the least difficult route, mostly following old forest roads. A lot of deep sand, very hot by day, below freezing at night. We blazed away with a can of Mary

Carter orange spray paint at regular intervals, one day wandering into the bombing range. We were driven out in a Jeep by service personnel who told us “stay out.” Jim and Cliff had freeze-dried food but the rest of us used grocery fare. I was a poor teacher’s wife with pretty sorry gear and nearly froze to death. Ken was a college student. Tom had made all of his own gear, including a pack made from a fifty-pound lard can. Considering how miserable backpacking was in those days without hip belts or packs as light as they are now, it’s a miracle we kept on hiking. Jim used a tump line*, which I’d never seen before.

Jim led another hike in the Apalachicola National Forest that November but they got lost for three days and when they finally came out to a road, hitchhiked back to their car.

The first Annual Meeting was December 3 at Highlands Hammock State Park, with about 20 or 30 of us. We met a lot of Miami people around the campfire. Ross Allen proposed “Hike for Health” as a motto; a patch was proposed and adopted; a slate of directors was elected; and a set of Bylaws was approved.

Activities were attended by all active members, many of whom drove half of Friday night to be there on time. Tom Montoya attended Jim’s first Suwannee hike, arriving in a timely fashion in the correct meeting place. To his surprise, he looked across the river to see Jim—who had used a road map to find the spot—on the opposite bank of the river. They waited while he got loaded up again and drove around by the bridge.

The first stretch of Section 18 opened along the Suwannee January 1968. Tom built 18 driving from Auburndale. I had moved to Titusville. We’d work like mad until late Sunday and go home, having finished another little piece of trail. I was section leader on 12, Ken had 13, and Tom had 18.**

In the MEMO: “We realize our first efforts at marking trail and mapmaking need refining.” The understatement of the year!

Building Camaraderie with Activities

Activities were well divided between North and South Florida but our Annual Meetings were in the south to accommodate the large percentage of Miami membership. Maps were free to members and two camping equipment concerns offered 20% discounts.

Fall 1967, Jim led the first out-of-state hike on the AT. Tom, Jackie, and the three Montoya daughters attended, the youngest five. The second day, Jackie woke them to tell of her nightmare of seeing Tom (who slept on





the ground) with a bear standing over him. Tom started to get up and noticed a rip in the top of his sleeping bag. There were bear tracks on both sides of him!

By April 1968, Jim stressed keeping activities at manageable sizes. We didn't have a problem on work trips but the size of groups on pleasure activities were getting out of hand. On a day hike from Jupiter to Hopkins Prairie I had 35 people—many inexperienced, one carrying her dachshund because he couldn't continue walking. They also ran out

of water and it was hot! Al Stone was on this hike and helped me keep track of them. We left the majority with our water at on a road and brought our vehicles back to pick them up.

Jim wrote, "the Wekiva River canoe trip was an improper sequel to my stress on smaller groups—we had over 60 people, 22 canoes. Fallen trees had closed the narrow, winding Rock Springs Run where we were supposed to begin and a hyacinth jam prevented us from reaching the St.

Johns River where we were supposed to end." Another MEMO mentioned the Cape Sabal trip had the largest flotilla of canoes Everglades National Park had ever seen.

The 1968 Annual Meeting was at Jonathan Dickinson State Park. Ken, Tom, and I became directors. Dues were raised to \$2 and a family membership was created for \$3.

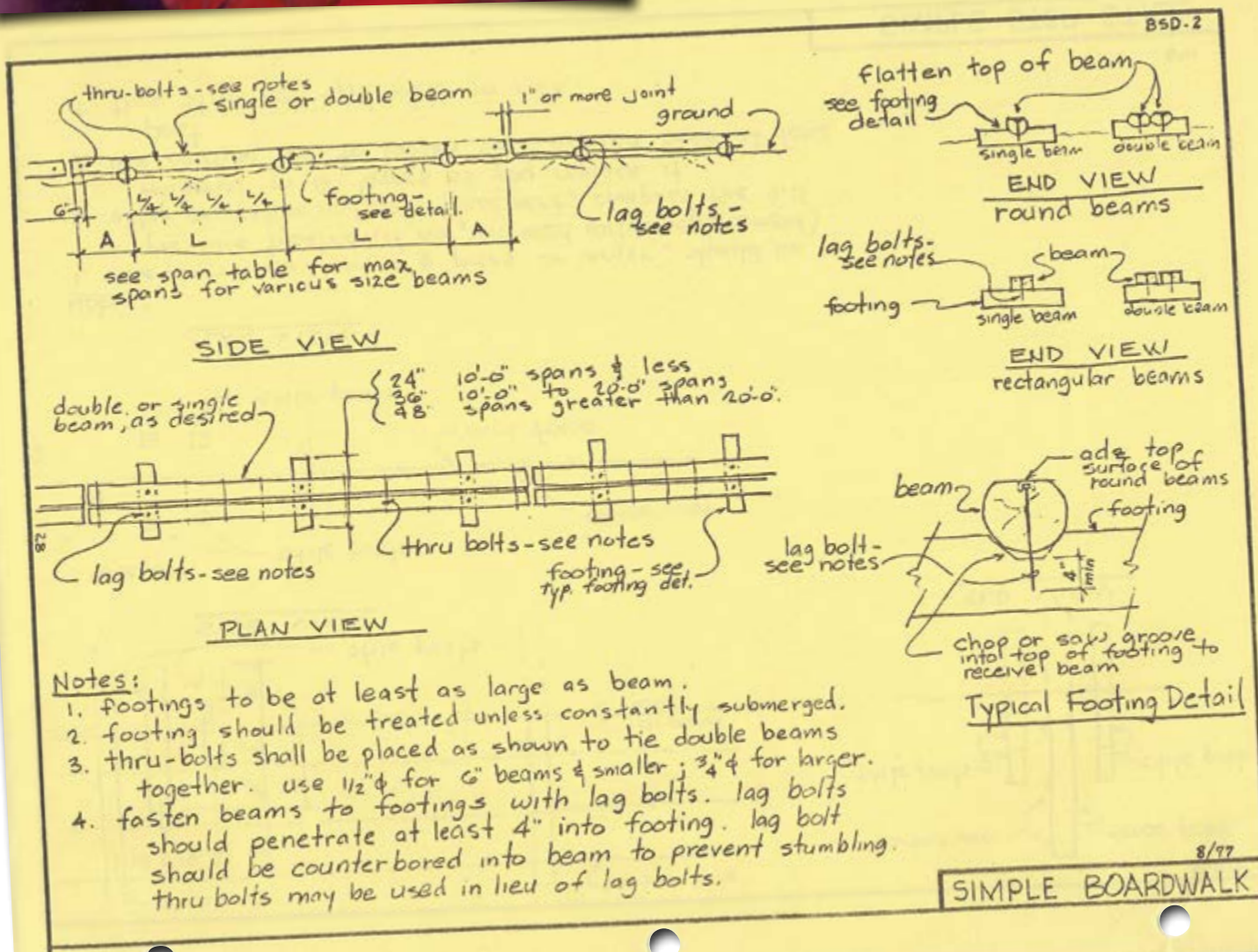


A Northerly Focus

Fall 1968 I moved to Gainesville. Fred Mulholland turned up. Trail building became an art under his tutelage. He took Section 12 and left me free to begin in the Osceola. We had a survey hike in January 1969 and a backpacking trip in November. Fred, Jim, Al Stone, Ken, Tom, and I were teaching seminars at all FTA meetings: backpacking, canoe camping, canoeing, trail building, mapmaking, and making your own gear.

Cecil "Kirk" Kirkham appeared on the trail that fall in the Osceola. It was very wet. Very! Kirk said he'd never gone through water that deep if I hadn't been ahead of him. Ken taught me—I saw him wade to his shoulders. When Bill Craig came along, he just laughed and said the U.S. Forest Service would never open a trail where you might walk waist deep in water. Kirk and Troy Hager did a lot of the work on Section 17. Backbreaking work, with machete, mattock, and sling. No power tools.

The '68 Annual Meeting introduced the orange-shaped footprint patch. There was lively debate but Tom, who designed it, won out. We built our first shelter, a chickee. It was dedicated in April 1969. It soon became an eyesore because it was easily reached by casual walkers. Later, when Gold Head Branch asked it be removed, I was section leader for 15 and was able to salvage some of the timbers for bridge building. Kirk had taken charge of Section 17. Tom Montoya





engineered most of our bridge building in those days with a large flattened (wooden utility) pole and a cable for a handrail.

The first Summer Conference was at Juniper in June '69. Ken Alvarez did a slide show, Jim directed a business meeting, and I led a canoe trip. That fall the U.S. Forest Service began to take an interest and agreed they would try to get funding to help with the maintenance of the trail.

In 1970 we raised dues to \$3 and \$5. Al Stone led the first organized hike on Section 14, south of Gold Head Branch. He did a masterful job of contacting landowners, laying out trail, drawing up maps, and doing slideshows for civic groups. He was an engineer with DuPont and had done the same kind of thing for the Appalachian Trail in Pennsylvania before he retired. Dorothy Laker began to turn up regularly. She had hiked the AT end to end three times and wrote two chapters in the Rodale books about it. She arrived at the closest point to the beginning of an activity by bus then walked five or more miles to get there.

Dorothy, Al, and Fred Mulholland were





all Directors. Everyone did everything in those days. Bill Craig was the Recreation Director for the U.S. Forest Service. He served on the FTA Board, built Section 22, and taught us how to pull a lawnmower down the trail, saving hours of slinging. He also rerouted a lot of the National Forest trail to more scenic areas because they began to put in boardwalks. We had over 400 attend the 1970 Annual Meeting.

April 1971's MEMO listed 12 sections of trail with section leaders—not all open for hiking, some partially ready and being worked on. In January 1972 the Florida Trail Association became tax deductible. Until then, FTA bought paint and survey tape only. Volunteers could take the cost of tools, lawn mowers, and activity expenses off our income tax. Whew!

Jim's greeting in January 1973 was headed "NEWSLETTER." He had divided the state into regions for the purpose of locating activities. We had a lot of authors in our membership besides Jim, who wrote for magazines, newspapers, and *National Geographic*: Norman Ford, Travel Editor for the *New York Times*; Bob Colwell with his books on hiking and canoeing; Dorothy Laker; Betty Slaughter Watts with *The Watery Apalach*; Ken Alvarez, *Twilight of the Panther*; and probably many more. Other "old hands" now on board included J. J. Brasington, Saima Takken, John Krickel, Ned Kraft, Brett Poirier, Cornelia Burge, Inez Frink, and Selmer Uhr. Most important have been our cartographers—Al Stone, Ernie Baldini, John Keller, and Nancy Gildersleeve—with their painstaking work.

Why is the FTA office in Gainesville?

The office was first run by Jim and his wife Lynn and a part-time secretary in their Miami home. Jim wrote the newsletter, organized activities, and appointed activity leaders; Lynn kept the books and took meeting minutes. The MEMO stated "our income has been exactly equal to our outgo" but actually we owed Jim many times. Inquiries from the public came in every day and threatened to snow-under the Kerns.

In 1973, Jim announced in the NEWSLETTER that the Association had hired an Executive Secretary and the office had been moved to Gainesville—the telephone number 378-8823, my number since I'd moved to Gainesville. I accompanied Jim from the Summer Conference at O'Leno State Park to Miami, spent three days in training with him and Lynn, rented a car, and drove the FTA office north up the Turnpike.





Jim's announcement read "We haven't let this major change slow down our expanding activities. Between its writing and publication, Margaret will complete a canoe trip on the Buffalo River in Arkansas, Fred Mulholland will represent FTA at the second annual National Trails Symposium in Colorado, and I will lead a five-day backpacking trip in the French Alps.

I want to close with another quote from Jean Craighead George, more like poetry than prose.

"When the sun shines, and the waters recede, the Florida Trail is a glistening and fascinating path. It wends past cypress swamps and over bright islands. A rise of no more than 12" will support an entirely different community of plants. The hardwood islands called 'hammocks' support mahoganies, oaks, gumbo-limbos and pond apples. Orchids bloom, bromeliads erupt like fountains from the ground and from tree limbs, primitive birds shriek and rasp."

Obviously South Florida, Section 1.

Editors note: Margaret Scruggs passed away on April 21, 2023 in Dowling Park, Florida. Her legacy will live on with the Florida Trail Association.

PHOTOS

- 32** 1966–Jim Kern
Fakahatchee expedition
- 33** 1969–Gold Head Branch
- 33** 1966–first work hike Ocala
- 33** 1970s–Suwannee pole
bridge crossing
Photo by Pat Canova
- 34** 1970s–new boardwalk
in Ocala NF
Photo by Pat Canova
- 34** 1970s–Ocala Trail
Photo by Pat Canova
- 34** 1st Trail Blazer,
Margaret Scruggs

- 35** Simple boardwalk plans from
the Trail Manual
- 35** 1988–Jean and Ernie Baldini
with Kent Wimmer
- 36** 1975–Margaret Scruggs and
workers on Suwannee
- 36** 1988–Fred Mulholland and
Paul Cummings
- 37** 2000–Margaret Scruggs
and Cecil Kirkham
Photo by Judy Trotta
- 37** 2006–Tom Montoya
Margaret Jim reunite at
Clearwater Lake
Photo by Sandra Friend
- 38** 2015–Margaret Scruggs
Photo by Sandra Friend

*A tump line is an around-the-forehead support line used in the Himalayas to counterbalance heavy loads.

** Florida Trail sections were once numbered. 1=Big Cypress, 12=Ocala South, 13=Ocala North, 14=Rice Creek/Etoniah, 15=Gold Head/Camp Blanding, 17=Osceola, 18=Suwannee, 22=Apalachicola.

A National Scenic Trail

by Sandra Friend



Lady Bird Johnson had a mission to “call attention to the natural beauty of the nation.” We saw that mission unfold in highway and city beautification projects when we were kids, but her concerns as First Lady ran deeper. She opened the 1966 White House Conference on Natural Beauty with a question. “Can a great democratic society generate the drive to plan, and having planned, execute projects of great natural beauty?”

It’s no surprise that as President, Lyndon Johnson paid heed to his wife’s words. During the Johnson administration, 200 new environmental laws were passed, establishing major conservation initiatives we treasure today - the Wilderness Act of 1964, the Land and Water Conservation Fund, the Wild and Scenic Rivers Program, and the National Trails System Act.

Passed by Congress in 1968, the National Trails System Act authorized a national system of trails. It defined four categories of trails: National Scenic Trails, National Recreation Trails, National Historic Trails, and the connecting or side trails between these. It also established the Appalachian Trail and Pacific Crest Trail as the first National Scenic Trails.

A BOOT IN THE DOOR

The National Trails System Act set up a process for any long distance trail in America to apply for National Scenic Trail status. It was 1974 when the Florida Trail Association when the organization first took note of this option.

Discussing it at their September Board of Directors meeting, the Board moved that Jim Kern and Bob Livingston look into what it would take to include the Florida Trail, and to work towards that goal. Selmer Uhr was to check with the forest industries in Florida to find out their opinion on the matter.

The meeting in Washington D.C. with Senator Lawton Chiles - who had campaigned for the position by walking across Florida when Governor - did not drum up the support needed. Jim Kern felt that “there was not

much interest indicated by Mr. Chiles’ office.” At the same time, the Bartram Trail asked FTA to support their application to become a National Trail. The Board decided to not support any other trail’s efforts to seek support from the National Trails Act until the Florida Trail had the opportunity to benefit from it.

At the Fall Board Meeting in 1975, Jim shared the next step. A bill would have to be drafted to recommend a feasibility study. The Board voted to take that step. Jim’s report about the Third National Trails Symposium included concerns that the event’s “orientation towards all trails - ski, snowmobile, motor bike, equestrian,” eclipsed more traditional uses, “far less emphasis on hiking and backpacking trail.” He also noted that “federal and private interests had not meshed well, leaving the AT with doubtful benefits” from its inclusion in the National Trails Act. He brought along William “Bill” Kemsley, Jr., publisher and editor of *Backpacker* magazine, to introduce to the Board.

Jim drafted and sent a letter to all Florida legislators introducing them to the Florida Trail by enclosing a copy of his cover article in *Backpacker* magazine about the trail. “To date we, the Florida Trail Association, a group of private citizens, have constructed over 400 miles of footpath through the wilder





regions of the state," he wrote. "If you have not already done so, we hope you will take an opportunity this winter to walk a few miles on the Florida Trail. We would also appreciate your giving some creative thought as to how this footpath might be set aside for posterity."

This outreach led to support. In 1976, Senators Chiles and Stone introduced S2486, a bill requesting that the Florida Trail be included in the National Scenic Trails study planned by the Department of the Interior. The six FTA members who sat on the State Recreation Trails Council urged the Council to also write letters in support of the study. By the fall, Senator Chiles sent a letter indicating that the Senate bill had passed. Paul Pritchard, Executive Director of the Appalachian Trail Conference, was a guest speaker at the Annual Meeting and during his talk, shared the news that the Florida Trail had been admitted for study as a National Scenic Trail in the very last hours of the very last session of Congress for the year.

DIFFERENCES OF OPINION

Bob Fiore, a planner with the Bureau of Outdoor Recreation in Atlanta, came to the FTA Board Meeting in February 1977 to introduce himself and to learn who he'd be working with. After Karl Eichhorn shared the history of the Florida Trail's first eleven years and Fred Mulholland talked about future trail development plans, "Mr. Fiore indicated it was a very slow process and could take years."

The Board decided to participate up through the educational process of the initial study phase, but there was some discomfort among newer board members about the study. President Karl Eichhorn sent a Memo to the Board of Directors to clarify the process, noting "it is clear that some of you have personal reservations about this study. While differences of opinion represent a normal situation on a Board such as ours, it is important that each of us base our opinion on a common and accurate understanding of the history and how we, as an Association, reached this point in time...In point of fact, we lobbied to have the Florida Trail included."

"One recurring bugaboo," Karl continued, "which bothers some people, is the issue of taking or eminent domain for hiking trails...the feasibility study for the Florida Trail cannot authorize taking – only Congress may do that."

A special mailing went out to all FTA officers, directors, and advisors to inform them of the upcoming National Park Service workshops, sharing the official policy statement of the Florida Trail Association:



The Florida Trail Association recommended and does support this National Park Service study of the Florida Trail as a possible Foot Trail addition to the National Scenic Trails System. We do so because of our great concern for the continuity and protection of the Florida Trail for the enjoyment of future hikers.

The Association believes that decisions from this study must benefit private property owners, as well as hikers, through concepts such as ad valorem tax reductions in exchange for hiking trail easements.

The Association has no preconceived opinions as to how preservation of the Florida Trail is to be achieved in the future.

The Association strongly supports continuation of the historic role of volunteers in the future maintenance of the Florida Trail.

The study began in late 1978, soon after the Ocala Trail was designated a National Recreation Trail. Around the same time, Representative J.W. Lewis of Jacksonville

introduced HB 916, “An act establishing the Florida Recreational Trails System, providing for a network of recreational trails to be used for hiking, bicycling, canoeing, horseback riding...”

Karl Eichhorn shared HB 916 with the FTA board. The bill included no mention of the Florida Trail or FTA, but no discussion was recorded about it during the subsequent board meeting. The Florida Recreational Trails Act would be made law in 1979 without FTA’s involvement.

Bob Fiore advised FTA that the organization should “continue building trail, conducting negotiations for rights-of-way” while the National Park Service feasibility study was underway. It would take two years and involve eleven Regional Planning Councils.

A FLASHPOINT

The National Park Service held public hearings throughout Florida to determine whether Floridians truly wanted a National Scenic Trail. Many did. As the meetings played out, the FTA board became concerned about the outcome of the study, since “shelters, horses, bicycles, and management” were frequent

topics of discussion at public meetings. There were two camps in opposition to a National Scenic Trail. The first included major industries. The second included citizens with a deep-seated mistrust of the government.

Ernie Baldini was among those members who felt the heat in person. “One of the meetings was at White Springs. We’re introducing ourselves as we sat down - Florida Trail Association, Fish and Game - and a guy over here gets up and says ‘I’m from McKee Oil, and my mission here is to kill this goddamned trail.’ During the meeting, he says he was sent by the CEO of this conglomerate to kill this trail because it was going to go through lands along the Suwannee that McKee owned for phosphate. So we’re looking at the Suwannee River path, which is gorgeous, and who’s standing in the way but McKee Oil?”

Among those in the audience at White Springs was a part-time FTA employee. She “owned a couple of lots along the Suwannee River,” said Ernie Baldini. “She and Margaret (Scruggs) became good friends. This girl was working part time in the office, and encouraged other land owners along the



Suwannee River to consider the trail going through their place.”

During the meeting, this Florida Trail supporter took a look at the proposed maps of the trail route that the National Park Service had brought. Her eyes settled on “an ideal drawing of a trailhead on the Suwannee River,” said Ernie. “It encompassed part of her property. Here she was, working with the trail, and she didn’t know anything about it. She blew her stack. She became an enemy of the trail. That turned off a lot of landowners along the Suwannee.”

In his President’s Report at the end of the year, Karl Eichhorn shared the news that another scenic section of the Florida Trail had been lost. “Nothing is all roses. During the year we were distressed when one of our landowners chose to close a portion of the Trail near Big Shoals, because of their objection to the projected Scenic Trail study.”

After the first round of public hearings in 1978, Bob Fiore related “the hearings indicated a strong resistance to the Park Service involvement with the Florida Trail among both small and large landowners, but that there was no ill will felt towards the Association itself, or the Florida Trail.” Seven more hearings would be held during the first half of 1979. In the end, the scales tipped towards recommending the Florida Trail as a National Scenic Trail.

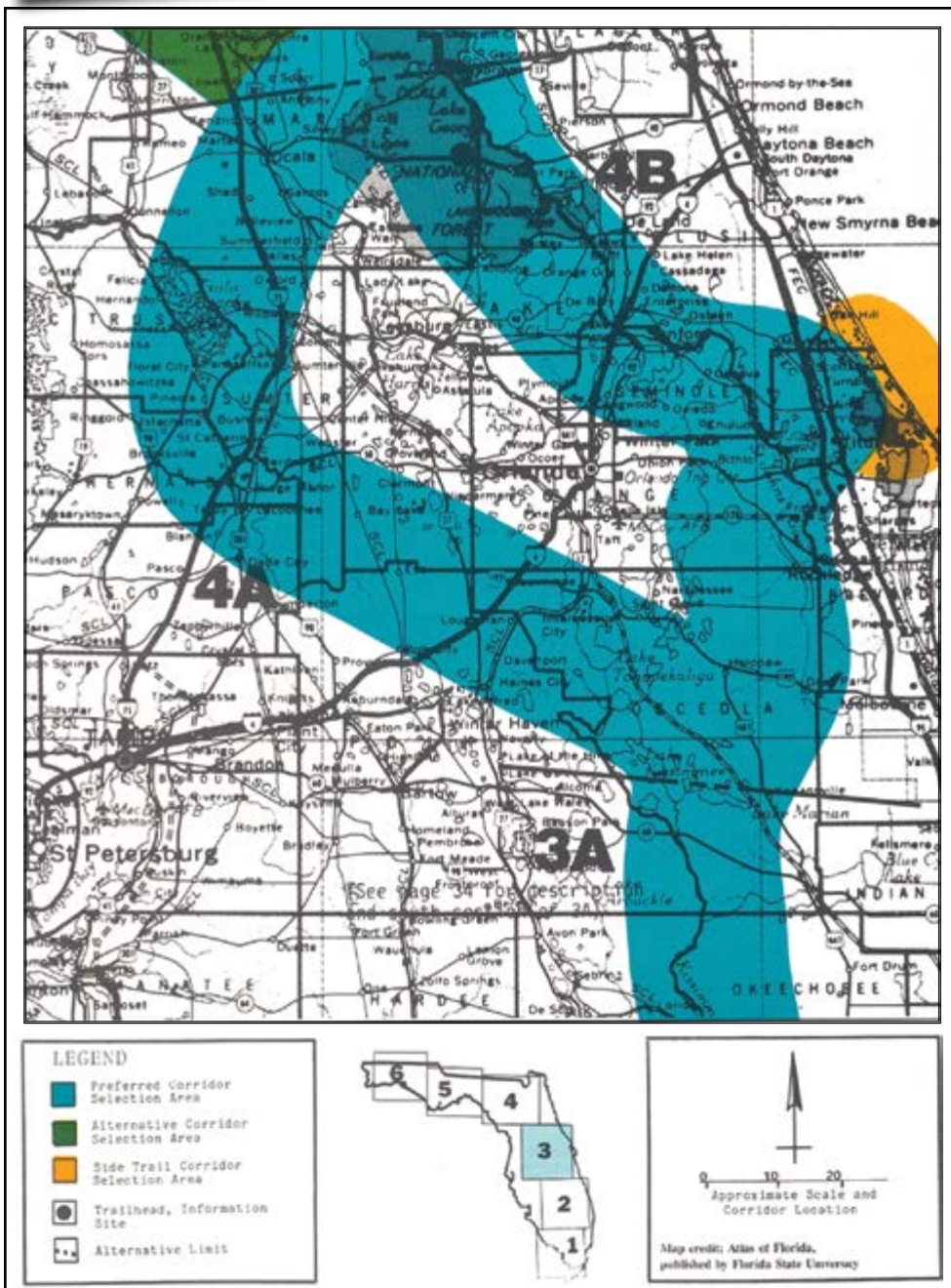
PARK SERVICE OR FOREST SERVICE?

When it became a National Scenic Trail, management of the Appalachian Trail was taken on by the National Park Service. Once the workshops were over and the Florida National Scenic Trail study was published, “The Park Service was overcommitted at the time to the Appalachian Trail,” said Ernie Baldini. “They kind of let up on the Florida Trail for a little bit. Our guy (Bob Fiore), who was working for the Florida Trail and wrote the feasibility study, was losing momentum. I think he was instrumental in saying ‘this is more than the Park Service can handle in this region, and besides it involves a lot of forest land, maybe the Forest Service ought to have it,’ and the next thing we knew it was in Forest Service hands.”

On March 28, 1983, Public Law 98-11, a modification to the National Trails Act, established the Florida National Scenic Trail as the sixth National Scenic Trail in the National Trails System. It states “The trail shall be administered by the Secretary of Agriculture.”

A FOREST SERVICE PROGRAM

Nov 28, 1983 marked the first informal meeting between the Florida Trail Association



and the U.S. Forest Service to talk about what it meant for the Florida Trail to become a National Scenic Trail. Attending for FTA were President Mary Ann Twyford; Vice Presidents Ernie Baldini, Jim Pace, and Mary Anne Freyer; Section Leaders Fred Mulholland and Steve Powers, from the Ocala National Forest; and Past President Karl Eichhorn. Attending for the U.S. Forest Service were Tom Lennon, Trails Specialist for the National Forest System; Charles Huppuch, Trails Specialist for Region 8; Norm Heintz, Recreation Staff for the National Forests in Florida; and Phil Smith, Forest Landscape Architect.

Through a slide show and presentation with maps, FTA volunteers demonstrated what the Florida Trail was all about, explaining everything from how the trail was developed and maintained to how local chapters had responsibility for nearby sections of the trail. Speaking for the Chief of the Forest Service, Tom Lennon stated “the Forest Service wants to be a partner of the Florida Trail Association in the management of the National Scenic Trail in Florida.”

Creating the Florida National Scenic Trail Advisory Council (FNSAC) would be the next step. As mandated by the National Trails Act, it had to be in place by March 1984. FTA and the Forest Service were to jointly craft the structure of this governing body. From the meeting minutes:

“As to who should be involved in the Advisory Council, a list of 16 groups was made that included Federal lands in Florida, State agencies whose land the Florida Trail crosses, major land owners, and others. Concern was felt by FTA members present that FTA would not have the voice needed to maintain an interested and functioning Advisory Council. Noting their concern, President Twyford suggested that the Advisory Council be made up of one-third FTA members, one-third representatives of state and federal agencies, and one-third private landowners and citizens. Tom Lennon thought this mix to be a fair one. Once the Council is established, it remains unchanged for the 10-year life of the Council.”

FTA President Mary Ann Freyer served on the Advisory Council for many years, as did Ernie Baldini. “The Forest Service, the Park Service, the paper companies, water management districts, we were all one big happy family,” said Ernie. “We laid out all the cards on the table. That’s when the Forest Service assigned a coordinator.”

A clock also started for development of a Comprehensive Plan for the management of the Florida National Scenic Trail. It would need to be pulled together by March of 1985.





U.S. Forest Service Oversight

The U.S. Forest Service was a key player from the very beginning of the Florida Trail, first allowing, then urging, trail development through the National Forests in Florida. They did not assume a formal role until assigned in 1983 by the National Scenic Trails Act revision that placed the Florida National Scenic Trail under their management.

THE EARLY DAYS

After National Scenic Trail status was finalized, much work remained to be done. The Florida National Scenic Trail Advisory Council (FNSTAC) had the duty of developing the first Comprehensive Plan for the FNST. President Ernie Baldini was one of several Florida Trail Association members on the FNSTAC. "In the midst of all of this," said Ernie, "we still had everybody (land managers and agency heads) at the table and we're becoming good friends."

Serving on the FNSTAC since its inception, Jim Pace shared a report in the May 1987 *Footprint*. "The U.S. Forest Service staff in Tallahassee has done a great job carrying out the council's recommendations in the midst of many other duties. Additional staff persons who can carry out trail coordination duties are needed. More on this later. As yet no part of the Florida Trail is certified part of the FNST."

Later that year, the U.S. Forest Service hired their first staff person for the FNST project office. An FTA member and a ranger from the Apalachicola National Forest, Steve Sherwood worked hand in hand with volunteers. "Steve was a real brain, and at the same time a great outdoorsman," said Ernie Baldini. "There were many instances in which his contacts and leverage from the trail office – even in Atlanta – using the Forest Service logos and names and so forth, was able to open some doors and get us listened to."

THE BALDINI LETTER

In the first decade of National Scenic Trail status, very little of the Florida Trail was certified as National Scenic Trail, primarily the segments through the National Forests in Florida. This troubled one top volunteer.

"We got to a point where it was very clear ... their primary resource was trees, raising trees and cutting trees. Recreation was secondary," Ernie Baldini said. "In some frustration, I wrote to the regional office in Atlanta and I said 'If you guys don't loosen up, I'm going to the Secretary of the Interior and the Secretary of Agriculture.' I said, 'You're paying attention to so much tree work, tree stuff, that the paths through these trees don't matter to you. I'm going to ask, if you don't loosen up and get off the dime, I'm going to the Park Service. It has to be all in for the

whole trail thing.'"

"Fast forward to just a decade ago," said Ernie. This was during the period of Forest Supervisor Marsha Kearney. "When she first came on, I met her at a conference somewhere in Central Florida. She says, 'I've heard a lot about you. You're the author of the famous Baldini letter.'"

I said, 'What do you mean the famous Baldini letter?' She says, 'Oh yeah. It's in everybody's file. If you're going to do your job, you don't ever want to get a letter like this.'

My point to them was very simple. The Park Service cares about stuff like this more than the Forest Service. Apparently, it shook up the recreation side of the Forest Service about that time, enough that they shook some jobs around, moved some people out, marked some more trail and let people in."

CHALLENGE COST SHARE

After 14 years as an FTA volunteer serving on a variety of state boards and committees that impacted conservation and trails, Kent Wimmer left the FTA Board of Directors and joined the staff in 1999 with the title of FNST Liaison.

"When Debbie Caffin left as FNST Manager at the end of 1998, I went to Mark Warren of the National Forests in Florida and told him I was interested in her job. He wanted to hire me, but I didn't have federal



status so he couldn't hire me directly. Mark proposed to Dick (Schuler) that they enter into a Challenge Cost Share agreement which used unspent funds from Caffin's salary for the agreement." Kent resigned as VP of Administration to take the full-time job. "Until Michelle Mitchell was hired in 2004, I acted as the FNST manager as a FTA employee within the National Forests in Florida Supervisor's Office."

In 2000, the Florida Trail obtained a "Millennium Trails" nomination from Governor Jeb Bush. FTA President Dick Schuler took the trip to Washington D.C. to accept the honor from First Lady Hillary Clinton on behalf of the Florida Trail Association. There was also extra funding attached.

"The Clinton Administration put money into trails," said Dick. "Their program focused on significant trails across the country. It was probably the real start of our partnership with the U.S. Forest Service. We were given this pot of money, and then had to figure out: how do you spend it wisely?"

As the annual appropriation to the Forest Service also grew due to FTA's efforts with trail advocacy, the amount of funds flowing to FTA through the Challenge Cost Share agreement increased dramatically. That allowed FTA to expand programs through adding staff. "The most funding the FTA received in one year was about \$1.2 million after the hurricanes of 2004 and 2005," said Kent. "After that it leveled off to about \$650,000."

Each year, FTA and the Forest Service negotiate a new Challenge Cost Share agreement, which details the upcoming year's Program of Work and the volunteer effort expected to match funding—which is why tracking volunteer hours became crucial to the success of FTA.

A COOPERATIVE EFFORT

For more than 20 years, there were great strides in forward progress towards the goal of completing and protecting the trail. Regular reports were provided to the U.S. Forest Service and to FTA membership. Trail Advocacy ensured that our Congressional Representatives were aware of the successes of the partnership. By 2002, the future looked bright indeed. In his column in the *Footprint*, Kent shared the positive news.

"This year we will try to certify, or open to the public, an additional 266 miles of

FNST throughout the state. After 35 years, we finally have the critical mass and resources necessary to make a serious and concerted effort to complete the trail. Through the partnership of FTA's great volunteers, the USDA Forest Service and our supportive land managers, we can and will be able to realize our goal of completing the FNST by the end of the decade."

FTA Acquisitions Coordinator Howard Pardue described the successful partnership in 2008. "The work to close gaps in the trail is shared between FTA and the U.S. Forest Service. As a general rule, FTA staff defines and maps a preferred route for the trail, identifies and works with landowners, identifies and secures new funding sources and works with public officials to get routes approved. FTA volunteers bring essential energy, credibility, and site specific knowledge to the process. Federal agents working for the Forest Service conduct the real estate transactions including costly survey, appraisal, title, and closing services."

By 2010, the goal of completing the trail had a little more than 300 miles to go. But the dynamic changed.

THE FNST COALITION

A shift in the partnership between the U.S. Forest Service and the Florida Trail Association happened in 2010. The statement was made that the "USFS felt that by delegating on-the-ground project decisions and land manager relations to FTA, it had abdicated some of its responsibilities as Trail administrator."

This statement is part of a 2014 case study published by Conservation Impact, a company contracted by the Forest Service to reinvent their partnership with FTA. For Florida Trail volunteers, the analysis from this outside firm was unsettling. "USFS and FTA held dramatically different views of what the Trail was (and should be in the future)."

How did this happen? FTA section leaders and trail coordinators worked directly with land managers on trail routing, maintenance schedules, and infrastructure needs. If a boardwalk or bridge was needed, they'd drum up the funds locally for the wood, encourage the land manager to foot all or some of the bill, or send the request up the line to the FTA trail staff for evaluation for funding. FTA volunteers were focused on the trail, on trail building.

What was missing, and the Forest Service keenly felt should be in the picture, was the input of land managers at the level of the trail as a whole. As the report states, "The business plan defined the land manager coalition model





as a 14-member committee of senior level decision makers representing the 28 land management agencies.”

As the business plan stated, “Coalition members serve to prioritize and secure resources for Trail projects that will bring all segments up to the standards defined in the strategic plan and create annual work plans.” However, FTA had only one seat on the Coalition. Some of the recommendations and decisions made by the Coalition did not match the long-standing goals and objectives of the Florida Trail Association.

Vice President of Trails Tom Daniel voiced his frustration in the *Footprint*. “Whether it was by accident or design, the FNST Coalition has managed to limit the role of FTA in strategic FNST decisions.”

It was a speed bump in the partnership. With new faces at the table in 2015, the background knowledge that FTA volunteers brought to several contentious decisions was listened to, and recommendations that caused consternation among some of the FTA membership, like removal of FNST designation from certain parts of the trail, were dropped.

THE PARTNERSHIP TODAY

Mutual respect now flourishes between the National Forests in Florida and the Florida Trail Association. Kelly Russell, the new Forest Supervisor, has worked in the Southern Region (Region 8) of the U.S. Forest Service for 24 years of her career, and grew up in Panama City, Florida. FNST Manager Shawn Thomas previously worked with FTA as the point of contact on Avon Park portion of the Kissimmee section.

“I see no way to continue the success we have had or gain future success without our partners, particularly the FTA,” said Shawn Thomas. “The Florida Trail is truly a collaborative of partners and its continued success relies on the strength of these partnerships. I see the Forest Service as one component of this partnership, charged to organize and to bring common interests together to create a strategic vision for the long term protection and completion of the FNST. I see my role as essentially a steward of the National Trails System Act and the Comprehensive Plan.”

Sitting and talking with both Shawn and Kelly about trail use and hiker needs, we can tell that they are willing to listen, ask questions, and do the right thing on behalf of our National Scenic Trail. While there may always be growing pains, the future of the partnership looks bright.

Protecting the Corridor

“The opinion was generally expressed by the board that the Florida Trail Association will continue to build a footpath the length of the state and wait for popular support to develop, virtually independently, that would involve the state in the ownership, care, and maintenance of the trail through appropriate legislation. The FTA has bought no land to date.” – FTA board meeting minutes, November 1971

Just a few years in, it was time to talk with state government about the ever-lengthening Florida Trail. In April 1969, board members Maurice Dilberto and Jim Kern met with Governor Claude Kirk and his Cabinet. The State adopted a resolution that Florida

“further endorse the Florida Trail project and offer full cooperation to the Florida Trail Association in a joint program to develop a comprehensive system of public hiking trails for the State of Florida.” However, when boots met the ground, state agencies were reluctant to help. It wasn’t from lack of interest, but lack of funding. Just as today, agencies that managed parks and forests were running on bare-bones budgets, underfunded by the state legislator.

Still, partnerships developed, but not without their challenges. Early discussions with the Division of Recreation and Parks (today’s Florida Park Service) “resulted in a request from them for urban trails and a reply to FTA questions concerning eminent domain for trails,” wrote FTA President Karl Eichhorn to fellow board members.

One early stumbling block with the Game and Fish Commission, after they had agreed to let the Florida Trail be routed through Prairie Lakes, was their desire to impose a user fee on hikers and backpackers. This had not happened elsewhere on the Florida Trail. The FTA board was appalled. “Monies from such a fee would go into the general fund (of the State), not set aside for trail maintenance or construction.”

It was suggested that trail building efforts in wildlife management areas be suspended until the matter was resolved. Within a few years, Gold Head Branch State Park insisted on walk-in user fees as well. It became clear that unlike the Appalachian Trail, user fees along the Florida Trail—and a raft of differing rules and regulations on different public lands—would be the norm. Until the Florida Trail was accorded National Scenic Trail status, no tools were available to protect the existing completed footpath from the whims of state politics and state agency policies. It was a private trail, not a public one.

WHAT DESIGNATION MEANT

Before National Scenic Trail designation, the work of corridor routing was managed by FTA volunteers. For the development of the Comprehensive Plan for the Florida National Scenic Trail, it would be necessary for FTA to pull together full details on the planned corridor for the trail, including all agreements entered into with landowners. By the late 1970s, FTA developed uniform “owner’s agreements” for trail access. Having an agreement on paper enabled a more manageable paper trail of “who said what to whom.” 1979 marked the first series of Florida Trail regional meetings focused on routing the trail. Attendees brought their homework to the table, including property research



completed, agreements in progress (or not progressing) with landowners, and potential corridor options.

After designation, the U.S. Forest Service entered the mix. The depth of their involvement has varied over the years, but includes the oversight of the flow of federal funds for both land acquisition and construction of the Florida Trail. The initial 1986 Comprehensive Plan, developed by the Florida National Scenic Trail Advisory Council for the FNST, set the guidelines for managing the trail. Once a segment of the Florida Trail was certified as National Scenic Trail, it would be open to public use and become part of the public trust.

What did it take for certification? The 1986 criteria included:

LOCATION. A trail segment must be generally located within the Florida National Scenic Trail corridor. Philosophically, the trail location shall emphasize nationally significant scenic, natural and cultural features which viewed collectively will attract a national clientele.

AVAILABILITY. A trail or segment must be available and open for public use.

USE. Public uses are limited to those permitted by the National Trails System Act. Restrictions such as day use only and user fees may also exist.

LENGTH. The length of a certified segment may vary, but 10 miles is a recommended minimum, unless a shorter section would either connect or extend an existing trail.

DEVELOPMENT. Existing and proposed trails and segments must conform to minimum trail standards.

MANAGEMENT. Existing and proposed trails and segments must be managed in accordance with Florida National Scenic Trail guidelines. Cost of construction, maintenance, and administration shall be the responsibility of the land management authority. The Florida Trail Association may assist in construction and maintenance of the trail. The USDA Forest Service will provide the uniform marker for the trail.

“NST designation is really about protection of a trail from development and the public’s right of access,” wrote Deb Blick on FT-L. “NST designation does not guarantee that the designated route is

actually ‘scenic’. The creation of a ‘scenic’ trail that adds up to a quality hiking experience is up to us – the hikers and maintainers.”

THE FLORIDA TRAIL LAND TRUST

To close the gaps in the Florida Trail and help FTA reach its goal of a continuous protected footpath, eight FTA members formed the Florida Trail Land Trust in 1993. Notable Florida Trail supporters made up the trustees, including Dr. June Atkinson, Kent Wimmer, Dennis Nymark, Mary Anne Freyer, Ernie Baldini, Wiley Dykes Sr., Pam Hale, Jim Kern, Ethel Palmer, Albert Stricklen, and Elizabeth Van Mierop. They were joined by FTA Vice President of Trails Fred Schiller, who served as the liaison between the two nonprofits. It was based on the models of land trusts created to support the Finger Lakes Trail, the North Country Trail, the Ice Age Trail, and the Appalachian Trail.

The rationale was that a small, committed group of individuals could directly work with landowners and funding sources. FTA trail leaders would identify priority trail segments for protection, and trustees would begin negotiations with the families or individuals who owned the land. “The work of the Florida Trail Land Trust positioned FTA to take a

leadership role for the FNST land acquisition program,” said Kent.

Around 2003, the U.S. Forest Service was able to tap money for corridor acquisition from the Land and Water Conservation Fund, and added land acquisition staff focused on FNST needs. At the same time, FTA had “begun working on building relationships with the Florida Forever Program,” said Howard Pardue, “a much bigger pot of funding than the available Federal funding.” With other avenues now available for acquiring trail corridor, there was no longer any need for the trust. It was dissolved and its funds folded into FTA.

Two projects started by the trust were later completed: the Lawson property at Oak Park Bridge on the Sopchoppy River, and the Spring Creek Tract in St. Marks NWR. Funds from the trust were “used for at least two deals,” said Kent, “one for a corner lot to provide access to Mills Creek and funds to help close on a tract along Econfin Creek.”

PARTNERSHIPS PRODUCE SIGNIFICANT SUCCESSES

In 2000, FTA President Dick Schuler announced a “Close the Gaps” board initiative to focus on completing the Florida Trail. A new preferred routing study grew out of the

inputs that FTA Acquisitions Coordinator Howard Pardue had from maps trotted around to conferences and meetings for feedback. Kent Wimmer provided a snapshot of FNST certification in his *Footprint* column.

“Only the AT and Pacific Crest Trail are near completion, and nearly their total lengths are on federal forest and park land. It can be suggested the FNST is much closer to its completion after 35 years than any of seven other national scenic trails were after 35 years from their genesis (the concept for the AT is nearly 80 years old). According to our best estimates, 523 miles of the 1277 mile long trail are certified as FNST making it 41 percent complete. We estimate that another 464 miles or 36 percent could also be certified if routes and trail could be built on existing public lands where we currently have gaps. This leaves 289 miles or approximately 23 percent where there are gaps in the trail which a route must be acquired to establish the FNST. This gap mileage is primarily between Eglin Air Force Base and the Apalachicola National Forest and between the Green Swamp and Three Lakes Wildlife Management Area.”

Within the year, the U.S. Forest Service accepted FTA’s preferred routing study. Once approved, the study would be used by

Howard Pardue to talk with landowners. Kent Wimmer wrote “We worked with over 30 FTA trail experts to develop nine acquisition action plans that more specifically locate the trail route through gaps of private land largely focusing on the Panhandle and in Seminole and Lake Counties.”

An important acquisition along the Suwannee River from Maywood and Mary Ruth Chesson was one of these. After receiving an award at the FTA annual conference in 2002, they wrote “We are pleased to have contributed to SRWMD’s acquisition of our land on the Suwannee to assure public enjoyment of a 2200 foot segment of trail which FTA has used gratuitously during our 25 years of ownership. Future hikers can continue to enjoy your footpath over the high bluffs with an outstanding view of the scenic Suwannee River landscape around the confluence of Falling Creek at the historic Waldron’s Landing.”

In June 2006, a comprehensive application, identifying a goal of a full 1,400-mile route for the Florida Trail (with a preferred width of a quarter mile to provide a buffer to the footpath) was filed with the state of Florida, with the support of several major players in land conservation. In 2007,

EXPLOSIVE GROWTH STYMIES CORRIDOR

In 1990, Florida Trail was named as one of America’s most endangered trails by the American Hiking Society. One of the biggest factors was loss of negotiated corridor due to Florida’s rampant growth. While FNST designation was applied to the Florida Trail in the National Forests in Florida, it did not extend as far as the trail needed it to go for permanent protection. When Wiley Dykes, Sr. initially routed the Florida Trail through Seminole County in the 1970s – doing so with permission from the lands the trail crossed – there were four campsites available to hikers between Oviedo and the Wekiva River. Now there are none. In a 1990 article in the Ocala Star-Banner, Wiley said “They built a housing development, then a shopping mall, and another and another. The trail is now on private property, under a powerline. You can still walk it, but who wants to?”

To remedy the issue, Dick Schuler forged ahead with an approved effort to create the Alexander Springs Wilderness Trail across the eastern side of the Ocala National Forest. Plans were to connect



to the rail corridor that is now slowly being linked together as the Spring-to-Spring Trail. To Dick, Bill Taylor, and Forest Service personnel, it seemed a good solution to the issues in Seminole County.

“While we’re doing all this,” Bill Taylor said, “Wiley Dykes Jr. told his dad, ‘Well, the trail is never going to come through Seminole County. And his dad, with all the maps, said ‘you just do it like this.’ He went to Seminole

County and sold them on the idea of a linear parkway. He said ‘oh by the way, I understand they’re going to six-lane I-4, how about they put a bridge across it too.’”

As that work in Seminole progressed and the Wilderness Trail ran into issues trying to bridge Alexander Run, the St. Francis Trail was born – as was the Spring-to-Spring Trail, now wholly independent from the Florida Trail.

the corridor was approved by Governor Charlie Crist and his cabinet. Florida Forever would be a funding source.

“There is the cost of doing the work, there is the cost of paying for the land,” wrote Howard Pardue in the May 2008 *Footprint*. “To date the U.S. Forest Service has spent \$15.4 million just to acquire properties (pay for the land) and over time needs to spend another \$50 million to acquire property that state and local funding will not pay for... FTA currently budgets about \$100,000 a year to provide 1.7 persons for our share of the work.”

Nearly two decades of significant strides in closing the gaps came to a halt soon after. No replacement could be budgeted for the Acquisitions Coordinator position after Howard Pardue’s retirement. When Kent Wimmer’s position also lost funding, it was a double blow to the FTA’s progress towards the goal because of his deep connections within state agencies.

While the U.S. Forest Service stepped back from acquisition for a short while, FTA’s partners are back to work identifying parcels and applying for funding from the Land and Water Conservation Fund to purchase them. Routing discussions continue through the FNST Coalition, with potential routes identified to eliminate roadwalks. The Forest Service is developing a prioritized acquisition plan to focus on properties where a closure would major disturbance to the existing corridor, such as along the Suwannee River is a major area of focus. Finding pieces of land next to other public lands such as state parks and state forests is also a priority.

“Florida continues to develop at a rapid pace and it is essential that we bring local governments and communities to the forefront of the planning and commitment to the Trail,” said FNST manager Shawn Thomas. “Together with the support of the FNST Coalition, we have reached out to many of these communities and asked them to join this effort. The way forward in the completion of the remaining 300 miles is complex and will require a creative strategy with layers of contributing partners: working with land developers and local authorities to carve out green corridors in community planning, working with our state partners to ensure the FNST remains a state priority trail, and, most importantly, engaging new users within Florida and beyond.”

Excerpted from *The Florida Trail: Florida’s National Scenic Trail* by Sandra Friend and John Keatley, published in 2016. The book is available for purchase in the FTA shop at floridatrail.org/shop.

PHOTOS

39 Fred Mulholland gives a presentation on the FNST, late 80s

Photo courtesy of FTA Archives

39 Mary Ann Freyer at work during the Boston workshops

Photo courtesy of Margaret Scruggs

40 Hosted by the Appalachian Mountain Club, FTA board members travel to Boston in December 1982 as part of the National Volunteer Project for training in building volunteer capacity for FTA. Mary Ann Freyer and Karl Eichhorn to left, Margaret Scruggs in middle, Ernie Baldini, Mary Ann Twyford, Jim Pace to far right

Photo courtesy of Margaret Scruggs

40 FTA members attending the FNST dedication ceremony at Camel Lake in the Apalachicola National Forest

Photo courtesy of Dick Schuler

40 Government officials flanking Jim Kern after he cuts the ribbon at the FNST dedication ceremony at Camel Lake in the Apalachicola National Forest

Photo courtesy of Dick Schuler

41 Jim Kern cuts the ribbon in 1988 for the first officially designated section of the FNST

Photo courtesy of FTA Archives

42 Jim Kern cuts the ribbon in 1988 for the first officially designated section of the FNST, the Apalachicola National Forest

Photo courtesy of Dick Schuler

42 One of many corridor maps in the 1986 Florida National Scenic Trail Comprehensive Plan, defining where the trail route will go U.S. Forest Service

43 Early discussion on developing the Comprehensive Plan for the FNST

Photo courtesy of FTA Archives

43 FTA volunteers attended a signing ceremony at the Reagan White House

Photo courtesy of FTA Archives

43 Frank Orser, Charlie Huppuch, and Ernie Baldini discuss Florida Trail connectivity to Alabama at a Florida Trail meeting in 1990

Photo courtesy of FTA Archives

44 FTA Vice President of Trails Van Taylor shakes Ginger Moore’s hand at the dedication of the Jackson Trail in Blackwater River State Forest as part of the Florida Trail in 1992

Photo courtesy of FTA Archives

45 FNST Manager Debbie Caffi n overseas Cecil Kirkham cutting the ribbon for FNST designation of the Osceola section, 1993

Photo courtesy of FTA Archives

45 Dedication of the FNST at Lake Okeechobee in Pahokee, 1993

Photo courtesy of FTA Archives

46 National Forests in Florida Recreation Officer Mark Warren, left, and Pam Hale, middle, are among those cutting the ribbon to dedicate Bull Creek as part of the FNST

Photo courtesy of Joe Hale

47 Western Gate chapter members at the dedication of the northern terminus at Fort Pickens, 1994. Front, L to R: Shirley Moody, Ginger Moore (straw hat), Peggy Grantham, Pat Moreland, Mary Pat Cross, and an unidentified NPS volunteer. Back, L to R: Tom Moody, Vernon Compton and Ed Moore. The Moodys assumed responsibility for the new section.

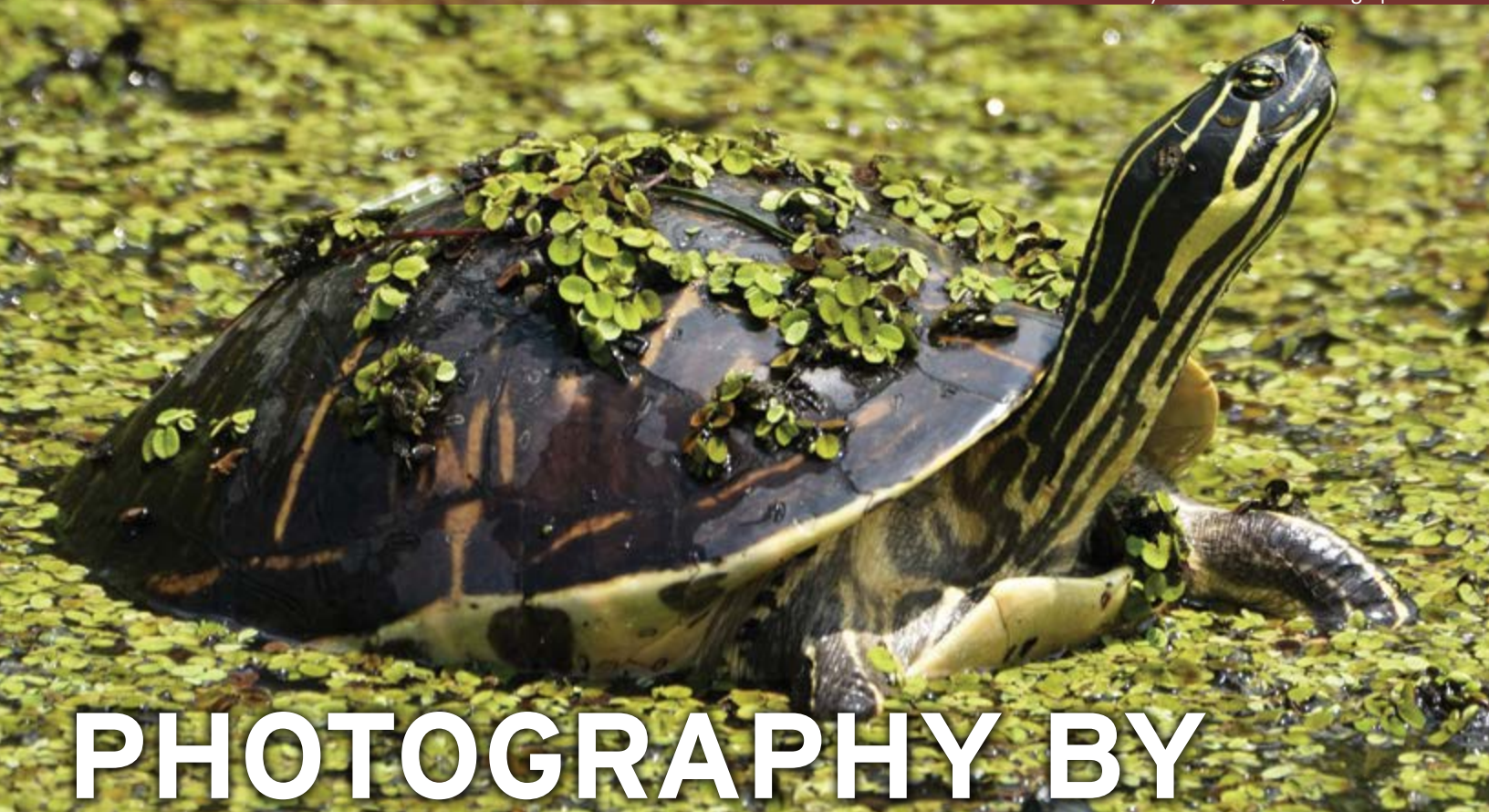
Photo courtesy of FTA Archives

48 Wiley Dykes, Sr. documented how the negotiated corridor for the Florida Trail was quickly vanishing under subdivisions in Seminole County in the 1990s. His efforts led to acquisition of the rail corridor that became the Cross Seminole Trail. He was honored by the Seminole County Commission in 2001.

Photo courtesy of Wiley Dykes Sr. family archives

Florida's Natural Communities

by Paul Strauss, Photographer



PHOTOGRAPHY BY PAUL STRAUSS









PHOTOS

- 50 *Cooter Turtle*
- 50 *Pearl Crescent Butterfly*
- 50 *Red-Winged Blackbird*
- 51 *Red-Shouldered Hawk*
- 52 *White-Tailed Deer*
- 54 *Simpson's Zephyrlily*
- 55 *White Peacock Butterfly*
- 56 *Red-Bellied Woodpecker*
- 57 *Florida Trail sunrise*
- 58 *White-Tailed Deer*
- 60 *Florida Trail sunrise*
- 61 *Pine Lily*
- 62 *White-Tailed Deer*
- 63 *Green Tree Frog*
- 64 *Meadowlark*
- 65 *Green Anole*
- 65 *Little Metalmark Butterfly*
- 66 *Florida Trail sunrise*
- 68 *Eastern Cottontail Rabbit*
- 69 *Green Anole*
- 70 *Florida Trail sunrise*





















Connecting People and Places

by Sean Blanton



Training for the Florida Trail and setting the Fastest Known Time (FKT) was an adventure of a lifetime. While I was training, I went to see 600 or more miles of the trail. I spent a lot of time alone just hiking and running on the Florida Trail and as many other side trails and parks I could find in Florida. The FKT was the most painful thing I've ever experienced. Every second of every day. Me, my mind, my body and the path ahead always had new surprises around the next corner.

I truly feel like the 1,500 miles of unique trail I've done in Florida doesn't compare to anywhere else I've ever been. From prairie to beach to swamp, the Florida Trail has it all. The Florida man is out there and I might have become him for a time.

Through volunteer trail work, I've put in hundreds of hours of giving back to the trail. I received chainsaw training from FTA and I enjoy maintaining the trail so others may experience the outdoors. I've donated about \$20,000 to FTA through race events I've organized utilizing parts of the trail. The Florida Trail is one of the few trails and places that is truly unique every time you visit. I hope to share my experiences and continue to improve the trail for others.

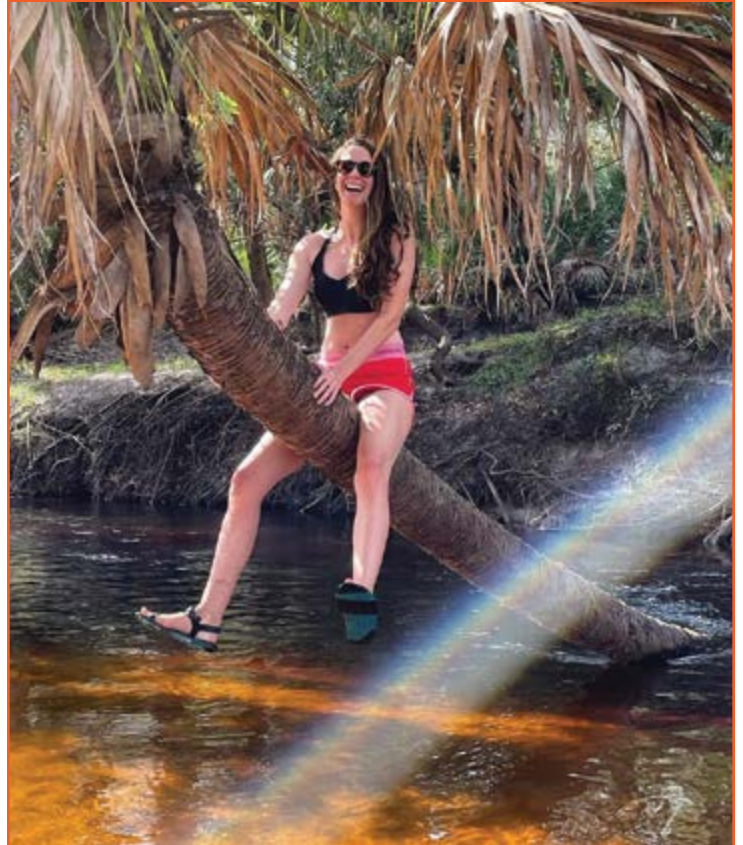






Connecting People and Places

by Katelyn Sessions



Katelyn cooling down and goofing off along the Econlockhatchee River section of the Florida Trail in Seminole County.

In the loneliest times of my life, the Florida wild has been my best and most loyal friend, and when I was preparing to move out of state, my home forest was the thing I was most sad to leave. After all - you can't call a sunny river bluff on the phone and the local kingfisher doesn't have an Instagram story.

The day before I set to drive the long miles to Colorado, I took a slow hike to say goodbye, breathing in and memorizing every detail of my dear friend.

I felt the weight of humid air draped over me like a blanket and the thick grass sliding past my legs on the soft sandy track. I heard the drone of the cicadas and the purdy-purdy-purdy of the cardinal. I smelled the slow tannin water and the rain on the horizon.

Everywhere I looked, my friends reached out to me; the resurrection fern waved from above and the smilax clung to my angles. The leaves of the sunshine mimosa shyly folded under my feet while their pink pom-poms winked at me.

I wondered: when I'm gone, a thousand miles away, what will I do when loneliness finds me again? What bird's song will drown out my worries? What green friend will count my footsteps?

It's been six months since I left and with every snowy day that passes, my heart aches more sharply for the green heat of my home. Will I learn to find solace in firs and craggy peaks, or will the wind in the palms keep calling me forever, so softly that I can't even hear them?









Connecting People and Places

by Melissa Redon



From the not-for-the-weak-of-heart conditions and wildlife of the Big Cypress section, to the Florida "elevation" of the Croom section, to the spring studded Ocala National Forest section, to the soggy yet serene Suwannee section; I have yet to have a bad hike on the Florida Trail.

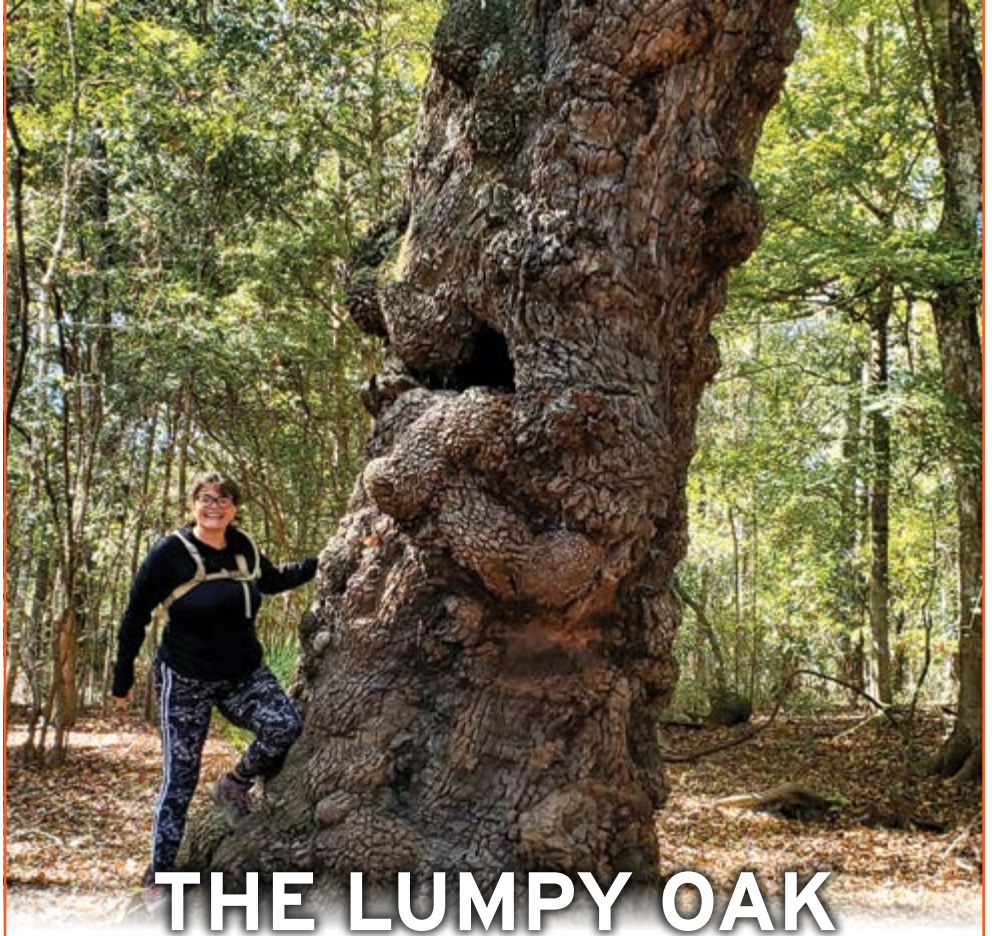
I have been hiking the Florida Trail for more years than I care to admit, and every experience has been a great one regardless of the frequently harsh Florida sun, the nagging mosquitos, or the often uncomfortable flooded conditions and soggy socks.

Three years ago my appreciation grew when I chose the Florida Trail as my practice place for my multi year section hike of the Appalachian Trail. Not only did hiking the Florida Trail condition me, but I was surprised to find that despite our state's relatively flat elevation, it challenged me more than my section hikes of the AT have.

One day while hiking the Ocala National Forest section and talking about about the magic of the AT and all the memories we'd make on the trail, I stopped and laughed when I realized that hiking 15 flooded miles through the Ocala National Forest during a tropical storm was not only an amazing moment but would be a memory I'd share on the AT.

Florida really is a different kind of wild and the Florida Trail is a walkway through the wildest parts.





THE LUMPY OAK

Every year the cold comes, the days get shorter, and I feel less and less like going out and hiking. Which is a vicious cycle, because when I hike less, I start feeling worse about myself, and begin to feel less and less like going out and hiking. In short, I'm seasonally affected.

In order to combat this I planned a lot of hikes this winter. I knew if I planned things ahead of time, and got others involved, I'd be less likely to back out. I hiked the Ichetucknee north and south trails, I explored Old Bellamy Road Interpretive Trail, I did the Blue Heron and Fox Squirrel loops at Watermelon Pond WEA, I even braved the sandspurs to see the beauty of the longleaf pines out at Bell Ridge WEA.

Finally, the day comes for a hike to the Fort White WEA. I had planned to go with my boyfriend, Joel, and we are especially looking forward to it. We heard there was a beautiful trail right along the river there. However, I'm feeling especially gloomy, and lumpy, and downright ugly and imperfect, and I tell him so.

"When you're feeling this way it's just proof that you need to get out on the trail and connect with nature," he patiently explains to me, "You'll see things differently once we get out there."

He's right and we go. I see tiny purple flowers, a shiny blue bug, and I identify a bush I've never noticed before! It's amazing how many different things you see on the Florida Trail in winter that you never see in summer. I remark on that, and stop to take a picture, and Joel takes a picture of me taking that picture. He tells me I look beautiful; he tells me I look joyous. I look at the picture and I agree.

Later, as we walk along that river trail we were excited about, he points out the lumpiest and bumpiest oak tree either of us have ever seen. Years of living at the flood line permanently marred this tree, but it was also the coolest tree ever. Maybe being lumpy and imperfect isn't so bad after all. Maybe there is even a bit of beauty in that imperfection. Maybe you really do see everything differently once you get out here.

Blazing the Trail in Tosohatchee

by Doug Sphar, Tosohatchee Section Leader (Retired)



Photo courtesy of Doug Sphar

The story begins in December 1978 when an official of the old Florida Department of Natural Resources invited the Florida Trail Association to send a delegation on a tour of the recently purchased Tosohatchee State Preserve. FTA jumped at the opportunity and former FTA President Karl Eichhorn pulled together a delegation that included soon to be Section Leader Bill Arbuckle and myself. The delegation was awestruck by the beauty and diversity of Tosohatchee. We envisioned a trail where hikers could experience the St. Johns River, virgin cypress, virgin longleaf pine, pine flatwoods, and hammocks. After the tour, FTA welcomed the challenge to build the trail.

Planning the trail began in earnest in early 1979 under the leadership of Bill Arbuckle. Reflecting back, this was almost a magical time at Tosohatchee—an experience that could not be duplicated today. This small crew of a half dozen or so was granted a 28,000 acre canvas of pristine conservation land upon which to paint a trail system. We got to experience all the historic artifacts of the

ranching operation at Tosohatchee that are no longer there. These include the Beehead Ranch House and associated bunkhouse, the cattle barn and corral, the various unique hunt

cabins and camps, and the duck hunting pond with hundreds of ducks. The Beehead Ranch House was so named because it was located in a head of oak trees that contained bee nests.



Photo courtesy of Doug Sphar

FloridaTrail.org



Challenges in Trail Building

We were basically on our own with little guidance from FTA on how to approach building this new section of trail. In 1979 the FTA was more of a confederation of local chapters with a sparsely staffed office in Gainesville. There was no paid staff of professional advisors to offer guidance. Margaret Scruggs and a part time assistant ran the office and published the *Footprint*. Volunteer Cartographer Ernie Baldini manually produced the trail maps on a drafting table using pen and ink, glue, and scissors. A map was then photocopied for reproduction.

Contrasted to today, this was a far different era of trail planning. There was no GIS, GPS, personal computers, or smartphones. The planning involved gathering around U.S. Geodetic Survey maps spread on a dining room table. We scrutinized the maps and talked up notional routes. Tosohatchee is in the St. Johns River floodplain and is a mosaic of uplands interspersed with wetlands. The challenge was to weave a three season trail through this mosaic and provide



some high and dry campsites. Routes were penciled in for later field check using map and compass. The team had a hint of technologies to come when a member with connections to the Air Force Eastern Test Range obtained a large format, high resolution, false color photograph of Tosohatchee taken by a high altitude reconnaissance aircraft. The false color technology enhanced topographic detail and we spotted a linear feature that turned out to be a long forgotten logging railroad grade. This high and dry grade was incorporated into the trail.

As the team passed through this planning phase, it was time to go out into the field and start flagging the trail with surveyor's tape. The state had assigned the management responsibility for the Preserve to the Florida Division of Recreation and Parks (DRP). In 1979, the Preserve was closed to the public, but FTA got access to flag trail and start trail work. At the time, there was a cattle ranch operation at Tosohatchee that was given three years to wind down operations, so the team had to respect all fences and gates. The spring was spent flagging the trail and this was completed before the summer rains hit and work paused.

Trail construction was planned to start after Labor Day 1979, but this got disrupted by Hurricane David which flooded Tosohatchee. Once things dried up, trail construction got underway. In that era, trail users had a different expectation of the trail experience than hikers today. In those times, the trail was rustic and less groomed – more akin to an animal trail. Basically, this was a consequence of not having power equipment, such as mowers and brushcutters. As work started on the Tosohatchee trails, the tools were loppers, handsaw, and the Suwannee Sling. After slinging out a stretch of Gallberry to create a trail, you knew you had done a day's work! To illustrate the tenor of that era, DRP staff did not have ATVs, but relied on horses to access the backcountry. These horses were stabled at a corral near the Beehead Ranch House.

Bill Arbuckle appointed three section leaders and assigned responsibility for a section of trail to each. Bill also scheduled some group work weekends where the work party camped at the old Hoot Owl Hilton hunt camp. The lodge was a unique Swiss chalet style cabin. Unfortunately, this cabin was contaminated with asbestos and was demolished. The cattle operator had a pair of tame hogs that tagged along like puppy dogs as we worked the trail. I took to carrying along some apples to share with them.

A number of footbridges needed to be constructed at various points along the



Photo courtesy of Doug Spahr



trail. It is hard to believe today, but the FTA proposal to the state included the option of constructing bridges by felling and delimbing nearby trees and placing the logs across the stream or ditch. DRP rejected this option out of a concern that Florida's voracious termites would make short work of the untreated logs! FTA got a donation of salvaged utility poles and these were muscled to the bridge sites by rope slings, rollers, and Come – Alongs (a type of hand winch.) These bridges would not pass muster by today's standards as they were just two slippery logs, laid side by side across a ditch and with no decking or handrail.

DRP planned to open Tosohatchee to the public in January 1980. Our target was a completed trail system to greet the first visitors. We were close to the finish line when a glitch hit. Back then orange was the FTA standard blaze color. The blazes were barely dry when a DRP directive came down stating that all Tosohatchee blazes should be white. Bill Arbuckle requested a reconsideration, but to no avail and we repainted the blazes. The trail work got done and Tosohatchee opened to the public in January 1980. This event was featured in an article in the local newspaper.

Modifying the Trail Route: Ranches and Floodplains

The annotated map of Tosohatchee shown here reflects the trail system that existed in 1993. At that time, the FNST was envisioned to come up from the south through Deseret Ranch and enter Tosohatchee at the southwest corner, where there was a campsite with a well. The trail proceeded north, crossing Taylor Creek on a suspension bridge that no longer exists, and then north to a trailhead at SR520. After crossing SR 520 (then 2-lanes), the trail headed east on a berm that connected to the dike that paralleled the St. Johns River.

The trail headed north on the dike to SR 528. Airboaters had cut a bootleg channel through the dike to gain access to the Main Back Canal on the landward side of the dike. The late Wylie Dykes headed up the Central Florida Chapter's work at Tosohatchee South and the dike. Wylie's team built a fixed bridge over the airboat cut. This bridge had a short life as it was an inconvenience to airboaters. Wylie repaired it, but life was again short. At that point the ingenious Wylie designed and built a bascule bridge, pictured here. The trail passed under SR 528 at the Mud Lake Canal bridge, and proceeded north west to intersect the main trail. Then, the trail headed north to Christmas.

Two things happened that spoiled this vision for the FNST. First, Deseret Ranch



Photo courtesy of Doug Sphar



Photo courtesy of Doug Sphar



Photo courtesy of Doug Sphar

DRP map dated 7/93

The Tosohatchee Recreational Trail provides the opportunity to see Central Florida in its most natural state. The trail begins near Tosohatchee Creek and winds through hammocks, pine flatwoods, and along marshes and swamps.

The abundance and diversity of animal life on the reserve is truly magnificent. Observant visitors will see such animals as the otter, fox squirrel, deer, wild turkey, and bald eagle.

Tosohatchee State Reserve is one of Florida's most outstanding natural areas, and the Tosohatchee Trail is one of the best ways to enjoy this beauty.







The trail was developed and is maintained by the Florida Trail Association.

Overnight camping requires a telephone reservation made a minimum of two weeks in advance.

All campers' vehicles must be parked at the Youth Camp parking area. To reach it, drive east from the entrance on Beehead Road one mile to St. Nicholas. Turn north (left) and drive 1/4 mile to Youth Camp parking area.

Bicycles are permitted on all roads and orange-blazed trails.

LEGEND

-  Reserve boundary
-  Trail
-  Camp site
-  Parking area
-  Creek
-  Power line

Trail lost to floodplain restoration

Deseret Trail (closed by Deseret)

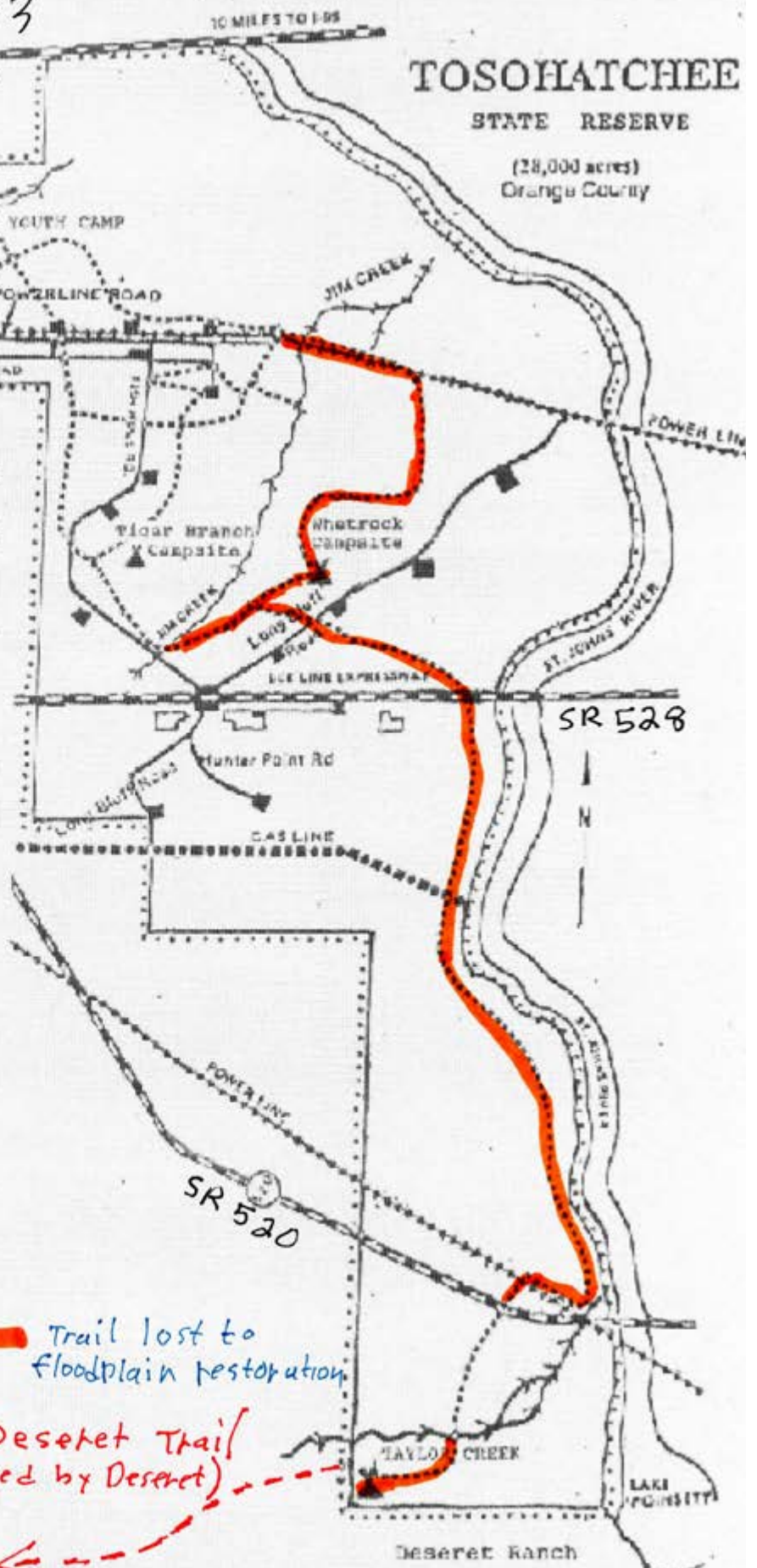




Photo courtesy of Doug Spher

abrogated the trail agreement. Second, the state undertook a massive floodplain restoration project that removed the dike and filled in Mud Lake Canal and some other drainage ditches. Jim Creek was restored to its historic channel. This resulted in the loss of all the trail east of Jim Creek that is highlighted in orange. Also gone was the Whetrock Campsite, so named because there was some type of rock where feral hogs whetted their tusks. Note: all Tosohatchee place names are from a hand drawn map of the longtime caretaker.

The dike removal caused a firestorm within FTA, with both the main office and myself being contacted by individuals demanding "How can they do this? Doesn't the trail establish priority?" Based on Florida Statutes Chapter 259 Land Acquisitions for Conservation and Recreation, "such lands shall be primarily managed to benefit the resources for which the property was purchased to protect, and that all other uses, such as recreation or hunting are secondary and must be in consonance with the primary purpose." Thus, the dike trail was trumped and the dike removed.

Unfortunately, between SR 520 and SR 528 all the dry upland is on the Deseret side of the boundary. This did not deter a number of adventurous individuals from undertaking a quest similar to the historic Search for the North Passage. For several years, park management and myself received requests for access to Tosohatchee north of SR 520 so they could scout a route to SR 528. As was known to both me and Parks, such a route would only be possible under drought conditions. A survivor of one of these search parties organized by the legendary Tony Florhes, who told me they turned back when the water level got up to a woman's chin!

As evidenced by obstacles met along the way, a trail is never truly complete. These historical accounts of the Tosohatchee section reflect the collaboration, perseverance, and adaptability that is necessary to build and maintain the Florida Trail.

PHOTOS

- 72** *Turkey Camp*
- 72** *Beehead Ranch House*
- 73** *Bunkhouse near Beehead Ranch House*
- 73** *Bumby Camp Ruins*
- 74** *Horses used to access the backcountry in Tosohatchee*
- 76** *Remnants of the ranch at Tosohatchee*
- 76** *Bascule bridge designed and built by the late Wylie Dykes*
- 76** *Original powerline road canal bridge*
- 77** *Tosohatchee map dated July 1993 showing the trail system that existed at that time.*
- 78** *Wildflowers in Tosohatchee*
- 79** *Tosohatchee creek at present day*
- 80** *Tosohatchee creek at present day*







Connecting People and Places

by Tommie Gipson



HOW THE FLORIDA TRAIL CHANGED OUR LIVES

I discovered the Florida Trail from a YouTube channel a few months after my wife died unexpectedly. We were married 37 years and losing her left a huge hole in my life. I decided to get outside more and began section hiking the trail near my home in the panhandle. Hiking with my wife's Yorkie became therapeutic for both me and her dog. Being in nature and soaking in the quiet stillness of life all around helped heal the deep wound in my heart.

One day while hiking to the highest point, I stumbled on something I could not believe. There is a bench at the highest point along with a sign. Two ladies had covered the bench with a tablecloth of the American flag. On top of that was wine, cheese, grapes, crackers, and chocolate. I knew we were at least five miles from the closest road and just had to stop and talk to them. They had been section hiking from the northern terminus over one hundred miles away and decided to celebrate. They loved my dog and asked me to join them. I took out a beer from my pack and sat down next to them.

We hit it off and I began weekly section hikes with them heading SOBO. Eventually one of the ladies (who was 71) decided she had gone far enough, but Deb and I continued hiking. Deb returned to the northern terminus and re-hiked the trail back to the highest point with me.

That was almost two years ago. Together Deb and I have section hiked over 300 miles from the northern terminus all of the way through Bradwell Bay in the Apalachicola National Forest (including the connector trail through Blackwater Forest to Alabama.)

Deb was not sure what direction to turn before she discovered hiking. She was stuck in an unhappy situation and was looking for a way out. She began hiking, hoping to find something to put her life back on track. She tells people that hiking literally saved her life. She rediscovered a side of her she had suppressed long ago. When she was hiking, all was well with the world and she began to return to a place where she could once again see the magical mysteries of life.

We both allowed the Florida Trail to change our lives. Together we have enjoyed the diverse beauty of the Florida Trail and the wonders of nature. After many miles on the trail, we have become more than just the best hiking and camping friends ever. We have bonded in ways that can only come from hiking miles and miles together. Hiking the Florida trail has changed our lives in beneficial ways neither of us could have imagined. We will forever be grateful for finding each other at the highest point on the Florida Trail.



THE FLORIDA TRAIL GATEWAY COMMUNITY PROGRAM THROUGH THE YEARS

The Florida Trail Gateway Community Program began 17 years ago as a marketing initiative for the Florida Trail, spearheaded by Sandra Friend. Sandra first got involved with the Florida Trail after moving to Florida as a young adult. She was a fan of hiking, but was unsure of how one “hiked” in Florida. Surprisingly, she fell in love with Florida hiking during the summer when she joined a series of group hikes led by Joan Jarvis. One could say she was hooked. Deepening her connection to the Florida Trail hiking community and outdoor recreation opportunities in Florida led Sandra to start writing about Florida hiking in her *50 Hikes in Florida* series.

Sandra started working with the FTA after doing contract work with the organization. Her travel writing experience and



excursions throughout the state connected her with small towns off the beaten path, who had many attractive recreation opportunities and amenities. Her exemplary work in Florida travel writing pointed Sandra towards partnership with VISIT FLORIDA and local tourist development councils across the state. When she was invited to sit on a VISIT FLORIDA nature and rural tourism committee, she seized the opportunity to point to the Florida Trail as a tourist attraction and economic resource for towns, which laid some of the groundwork for the Gateway Community Program concept. Partnership with tourism development councils was an opportunity for the FT to pursue greater name recognition, funding, and empower communities along the Trail to sell outdoor recreation to visitors. She recognized the potential to “bring outdoors



into communities using the Florida Trail as leverage.”

Deborah Stewart-Kent, then FTA Executive Director, was supportive of the initiative and brought the proposal to create the Florida Trail Gateway Community Program to the FTA board in 2006. There was a plethora of dedicated volunteers in communities along the trail who were eager to support the program and promote the trail as a draw to their community while increasing visibility of the trail. Volunteers did much of the heavy lifting on the ground in their communities: they set up meetings with their community leaders and elected officials and were eager to get their communities involved with the trail right there on the ground. Sandra Friend describes the momentum behind the program as ideas for events and activities formed: “the more enthusiastic [FTA] chapter members dashed out and said ‘Let’s do it!’”

While volunteers were in the field

working with communities to educate on the FT and coordinate and execute Gateway Community designation proclamations, Sandra was marketing their efforts and the program from the FTA office. She produced engaging Gateway Community fact sheets for promotion and to showcase at Hike the Hill. In 2006, FTA issued the first Gateway Community designation proclamation in the town of White Springs with great support from community leaders and members alike. White Springs went on to become an extremely active Gateway Community; the town hosted the Florida Hiking Festival and later became the first IDIDAHIKE site (IDIDAHIKE returns to White Springs this March!).

The first annual Florida Hiking Festival in 2008 was made possible by the close working relationship between the North Florida Trail Blazers, the town of White Springs, local businesses, Stephen Foster Folk Culture State Park, and funding provided by VISIT

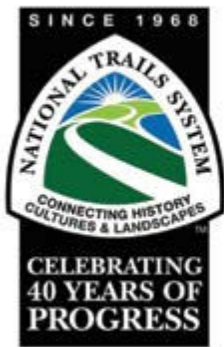
FLORIDA. The Florida Hiking Festival also coincided with the National Trail System’s 40th Anniversary, making it a timely celebratory gathering. The festival departed from FTA’s typical conference model marketed towards FTA members. The Florida Hiking Festival welcomed all, and it drew quite the crowd with almost 700 attendees. The activity list was robust and included 13 group hikes, paddling trips, trail maintenance demonstrations, seminars led by artists and scientists, and so much more. Crowd drawing, family friendly events were essential to attracting folks to a young National Scenic Trail. This event also showcased what the charming town of White Springs offers visitors and therefore was beneficial to their community.

Sandra Friend moved on from her role at FTA to publish some of the most influential guide books on the Florida Trail. FTA staff members continued to work closely with volunteers and establish partnerships

FLORIDA HIKING FESTIVAL 2008



WHITE SPRINGS, FLORIDA MARCH 28-30



Celebrating the 25th anniversary of the Florida Trail's designation as a National Scenic Trail and the 40th anniversary of the National Trails System Act of 1968—creating what now totals 17 National Historic Trails and eight National Scenic Trails.

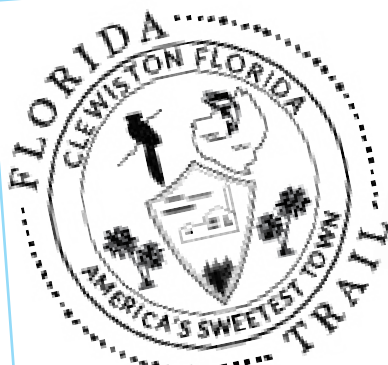
PRESENTED BY THE FLORIDA TRAIL ASSOCIATION
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with more communities along the trail. In 2008, Randy Madison of the North Florida Trailblazers chapter introduced the first IDIDAHIKE in White Springs, which aimed to fundraise for FTA's operational costs. After a great success, the event has run nearly every subsequent year, excluding only 2021. IDIDAHIKE continues to be a bread and butter fundraiser for FTA and a brilliant showcase of the Florida Trail's regions and communities. While FTA chapter members execute IDIDAHIKE to get folks onto the Trail and to supplement operational costs for the FTA, they ultimately have also introduced hikers to Gateway Communities and given communities and local businesses the opportunity to put their best foot forward and get involved.

Renewing the Vision

In 2017, the US Forest Service and FTA put their heads together to revitalize the Gateway Community Program. The program had a strong foundation and support from communities all across the state. By 2010, 20 communities had been designated and many more were interested in participating. Since its inception however, the program didn't have a staff member designated to work solely on the Gateway Communities Program. As FTA personnel and local community leadership went through changes, many of the partnerships lost momentum. The Forest Service sought to incorporate the program into the Florida National Scenic Trail Strategic Five-Year Plan, since the program aids in the FNST Strategic Plan's goals to connect people with places along the Trail. Read on to hear from Forest Service FNST Administrator Shawn Thomas on the program's revitalization:





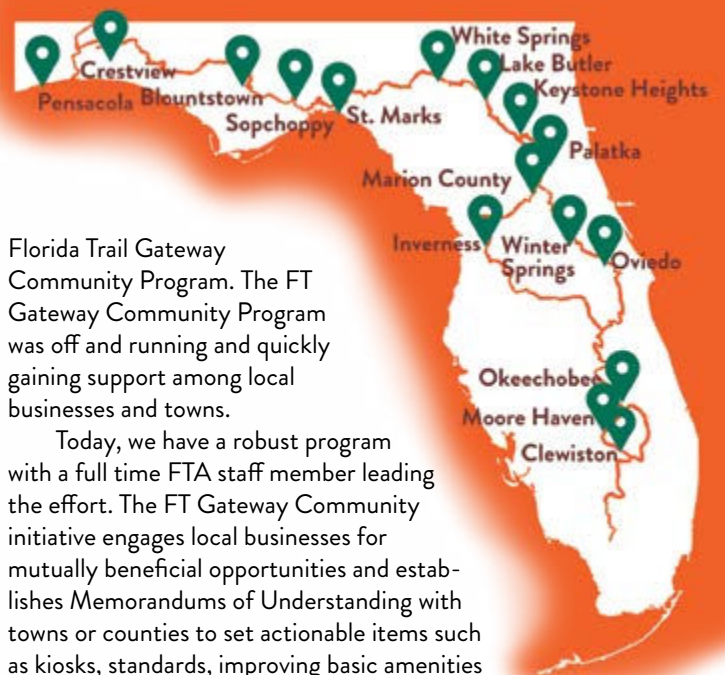
In 2017, I took on the task of a significant update to the Florida National Scenic Trail's (FT/Florida Trail) five-year strategic plan. My staff and I were looking at the current needs of the trail as well as past and future projects that have had a positive impact on the trail or perhaps had fallen short of their intended objectives.

The Gateway Communities Program was one such project that had been stagnant for quite some time and it was very clear that this program had a lot of potential to connect people, places, and businesses to further our plan goals of Promoting Connections and Strategic Partnerships to the Florida Trail.

The origins of the Gateway Community Program were years ahead of many sister trails in the National Trails System and the foresight of those who led this effort allowed us to build upon a solid foundation. There were some major revisions to undertake in a deliberate manner such as maintaining a specific focus to towns, businesses, and communities that have a direct tie to the FT. We wanted to structure the program in a manageable and tangible way that realized benefits to both the day and long-distance trail user community as well as the local economy of small towns and counties within the FT footprint.

Initially, I worked with the Florida Trail Association (FTA) to set up an opportunity for an internship position to lead the effort once we jointly established a set of goals and objectives for the program. The FTA Trail Program Director and I met with the Florida Department of Environmental Protection's Office of Greenways and Trails (OGT) as they were also considering a community engagement program around the state's trail system. Ultimately, we decided that our programs were complimentary but standalone in enough aspects that each agency would pursue separately but in coordination when possible.

Happily, just five short years later there are two wonderful programs which bring cities, counties, towns, and business in direct connection with the long-distance trail systems. OGT is operating a very successful Trail Town Program and FTA is leading out the



Florida Trail Gateway Community Program. The FT Gateway Community Program was off and running and quickly gaining support among local businesses and towns.

Today, we have a robust program with a full time FTA staff member leading the effort. The FT Gateway Community initiative engages local businesses for mutually beneficial opportunities and establishes Memorandums of Understanding with towns or counties to set actionable items such as kiosks, standards, improving basic amenities or area attractions to promote to trail users. Many businesses offer exciting opportunities such as discounts to trail users or a place to resupply. In exchange, those establishments enjoy promotion within the FTA network as well as special highlights at events or other occasions. Some have been designated as official stops to obtain a FT Passport Stamp, you will definitely want to check out the FT Passport Program, another offshoot of this effort.

I am really proud of this program and the direction that FTA is taking it. I think it is an incredible showcase of private, non-profit, and public participation which contributes to the recreation economy as well as promoting and protecting the national treasure that is the Florida National Scenic Trail.

Shawn Thomas



2018 marked an exciting year for Gateway Communities; FTA hired Halle Goldstein, the first Gateway Communities Coordinator with the support of the Partnership for the National Trails System (PNTS) Trail Intern Grant. Halle worked closely with the then Trail Program Director Alex Stigliano and Shawn Thomas to update the program and regain some momentum. At this point, many of the established designations were deemed inactive, and Halle prioritized working with these communities to reestablish them as active and engaged partners. The program's revitalization was inspired by other National

Scenic Trails' successes with trail town initiatives along trails such as the Appalachian Trail and the Continental Divide Trail.

The same year, the Florida Trail team unveiled the first ever Florida Trail Passport. The Florida Trail Passport Program works in conjunction with the Gateway Community Program to increase community involvement with the Trail. Towns and businesses alike can participate by contributing to their personalized Florida Trail stamp design and hosting the stamp at a prominent location. Trail users collect a personalized keepsake of their travels, and towns and businesses enjoy increased

traffic and free marketing. For this reason, the Passport Program quickly became a staple aspect of the Gateway Community partnerships as towns and local businesses were eager to adapt unique stamps for hikers and visitors to collect.

During Halle's time in the role, she successfully partnered with 11 communities along the trail and developed over 20 passport stamps. Halle prioritized visiting target communities who had the potential to participate in mutually beneficial partnerships with the Florida Trail. She found that in-person visits provided excellent outreach opportunities to educate community members about the FT as a unique resource and to garner support and a sense of stewardship towards the trail within those communities. Halle now reflects fondly on her 2019 visit to Okeechobee, where she was invited to join the Okeechobee Chamber of Commerce luncheon and inspired several local businesses to become program partners. She found that many communities will have an enthusiastic response to the opportunity to participate and showcase their section of trail. After Halle, Austin Tezak continued with similar efforts to reestablish partnerships and forge new ones, this time met with the unique challenge to foster partnerships with communities during a global pandemic. Austin added several communities and passport stamps



to the program and also laid the foundation to coordinate the first Florida Trail Gateway Community kiosk in Okeechobee during his time in the position in 2020.

Jane Pollack, FT thru-hiker and current FTA Communications and Outreach Manager, got her start at FTA as the Gateway Communities Coordinator in 2021. She feels that during this time FTA, in collaboration with the Forest Service, began emphasizing the goal to deepen the relationships we already have between current Gateway Communities and present new opportunities for communities to engage with the Trail. As Gateway Communities Coordinator, Jane really enjoyed working with local volunteers in Gateway Communi-

ties and feels that this type of engagement really adds dimension to what the program is all about: enhancing experiences for community members and visitors to those communities. This continues to be a priority as the Gateway Community program expands and welcomes new ways of engaging communities, volunteers, and partner organizations. Stay tuned for commemorative community events throughout the state as we celebrate our 40th anniversary as a National Scenic Trail!

Thank you to Sandra Friend, Shawn Thomas, Halle Goldstein, and Jane Pollack for taking the time to contribute to this article and for excellent work dedicated to this integral Florida Trail Program.



Footprint

PHOTOS

82 *Deborah Stewart-Kent and Mayor Joseph McKire unveil White Springs' Gateway Community road sign as part of the town's designation celebration in 2006.*

83 *FTA volunteers reveal Inverness's Gateway Community road sign as they celebrate the city's designation and National Trails Day in 2007.*

84 *Florida Hiking Festival
Flyer provided by Sandra Friend.*

85 *Jane and FTA volunteers show off their handiwork at the newly installed Liberty Park Florida Trail kiosk in Oviedo.*

86 *Halle Goldstein stands with members of the Okeechobee Chamber of Commerce after their meeting in 2019.*

86 *Pensacola Beach unveils their Florida Trail Passport Stamp design at a community Opt-Outside hike.*

87 *enjoy a hike along the Suwannee River at the 2011 IDIDAHIKE in White Springs.*

87 *2023 thru-hiker Crystal Gail Welcome has her Florida Trail Passport stamped at the Ochopee Post Office.*

Photo courtesy of Justin Bright.





Putting in the Miles

by Sandra Friend



A HISTORY OF LONG DISTANCE HIKING ON THE FLORIDA TRAIL

Finding your way along the Florida Trail in its early days was a challenge, even for experienced hikers. First, you needed to learn it existed. Belonging to a Scouting group helped, as both Boy Scouts and Girl Scout troops participated in trail maintenance and hiked on trail sections with their leaders. If you didn't stumble across the Florida Trail Association on your own—by seeing a newspaper article, an announcement of a meeting or activity, having a friend or colleague tell you about it, seeing a trail sign and calling the phone number on it—you weren't going to find out where it went.

No guidebooks existed. No GPS units for mapping, no website, until a decade later. The trail wasn't printed on highway maps. TrailJournals.com didn't exist. Social media didn't, either. Only maps. Early cartography was accomplished by hand, with inputs from

trail maintainers who used optical transits and measuring wheels in the field along with a base map and compass. FTA's first volunteer cartographers—Al Weintraub, Al Stone, and Ernie Baldini—physically drafted maps, until Ernie shifted the work into the computer age in the 80s by reconstructing it all in Page-Maker on his brand-new MacPlus.

As Ernie told me, "If you were a card-carrying FTA member, you'd find a map." If you weren't, wayfinding was a problem.

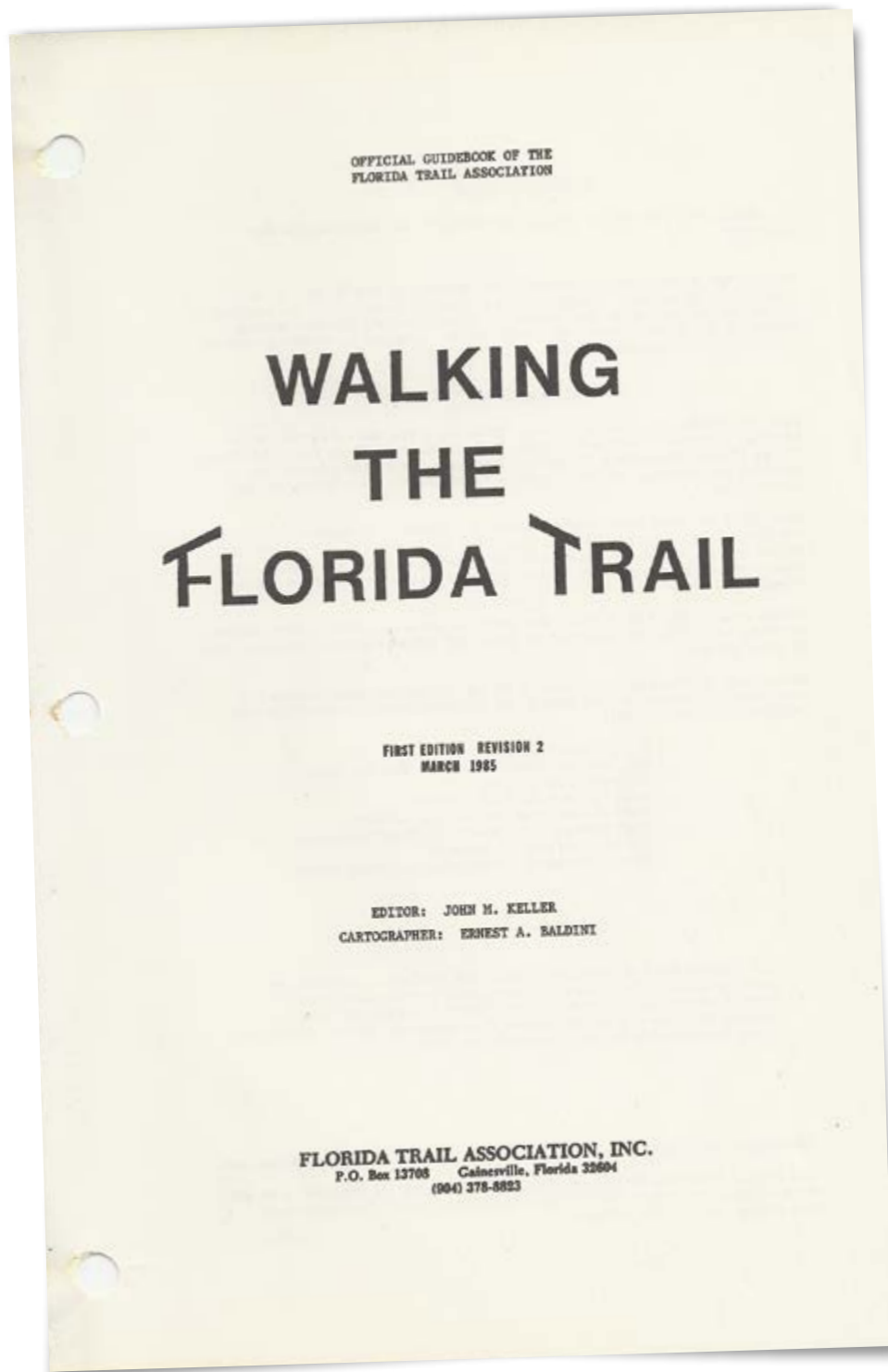
The 1960s and 1970s

The first long distance hikers in Florida were FTA volunteers. In scouting potential trail routes in South Florida and drumming up interest for the trail, trail founder Jim Kern was the first to take on any lengthy backpacking trips in Florida. In 1966, he led a group of friends from Big Cypress through Faka-

hatchee Strand, blazing as they slogged to the Audubon's Corkscrew Swamp, and followed up with a hike covered in the *Miami Herald* from the Tamiami Trail in Big Cypress to a point north of Lake Okeechobee. Boy Scout leader and nationally-renowned herpetologist Ross Allen joined Jim on the latter part of that journey.

Using the Florida Trail Association archives for my research for *The Florida Trail: Florida's National Scenic Trail* almost a decade ago, I missed several significant early long-distance hikers—until they or their families reached out after the book was published. In 1969, Bob Kranich saw an article in the *Tampa Tribune* about the Florida Trail and wrote for information. Jim Kern responded. No maps existed yet. Inspired by reading Colin Fletcher's *The Thousand Mile Summer*, Bob planned his hike to start April 1, from the Florida border near Lake City to Key West. His 2015 memoir, *A Walk Across Florida*, details the journey with maps, photos, and sketches made during his hike. Roadwalking southbound, the first Florida Trail marker he found was in Gold Head Branch State Park, near a chickee constructed as a shelter for backpackers. Bob didn't encounter the trail again until he walked into Juniper Springs to camp. Following orange blazes south to camp at Alexander Springs, he met a hiker at Clearwater Lake the next day who told him it was the southern terminus of the trail. Back to roadwalks to Key West.

Next came Cecil Kirkham. A dedicated FTA volunteer, Cecil organized two end-to-end backpacking trips once four sections of the Florida Trail (called 12, 13, 14, and 15) could be walked in a continuous hike of 126 miles between Clearwater Lake and US 301 south of Starke, near Hampton. In 1974, Cecil, Ned Kraft, and Dorothy Laker made the journey. An FTA activity leader from Clearwater, Dorothy was one of the first women to thru-hike the Appalachian Trail, completing her first hike in 1957. She was the second woman to complete three thru-hikes. It took the trio two weeks to cover the mileage. Cecil arranged a progressive series of backpacks along the route the following winter, inviting any FTA members to join in. He titled the series "The First Official End to End Backpack of the Entire Existing Florida Trail." Cecil and Dorothy were the only ones to complete the



full series. Later on, in his role as VP of Trails, Cecil backpacked newly developed segments alone or with hiking partner Davida “Pete” Gates.

Five years after Cecil’s pioneering hike, retired Army major Paul “Bigfoot” Tourigny brought his size 14 hiking boots to Florida after a successful completion of the Appalachian Trail. Writing the ATC in early 1979, he said “my attention is centered on the Florida Trail (in February and March).”

The 1980s

The 1981 Florida Trail map set marked a quantum leap in trail information. While still only available for member purchase, it now included *Walking the Florida Trail*, a guidebook written by Ernie Baldini and fellow aerospace colleague John Keller, who drew the accompanying illustrations. Written overviews opened each section and maps were first paired with data charts. Pam Hale and her trail crew encountered “Bigfoot” again in 1981, who said he’d returned since the new

maps included suggested roadwalks between existing trail segments. He later completed three more long distance trails and did the AT a second time.

In 1984 Dr. Winston Lumsden roadwalked from Key West through Florida and Georgia to reach Amcalola Falls State Park to start his Appalachian Trail hike. He took a week off “to hear America’s first Black astronaut (Ron McNair) deliver the ‘84 graduation address at Tuskegee Institute.” On that journey, “The Man from Tuskegee” must have learned of the existence of the Florida Trail. In January 1988, he walked into the FTA headquarters in Gainesville “to say hello and to gather trail information.” At age 55, he was on the return leg of his yo-yo hike from Key West to the Canadian border and back, a trek that earned him a new trail name: “The Great Appalachian Trail Super Athlete.” Elizabeth VanMierop recounted Winston’s adventure in the *Footprint* that May, stating “Winston is on the trail now, avoiding the busy highways and consulting his many maps to find the most enjoyable, if not the most direct route.”

A western terminus for the Florida Trail had been fixed at the west end of the Apalachicola National Forest around the time of the designation of the FT as a National Scenic Trail, west of where the ceremony was held at Camel Lake. But another piece of trail was designed FNST a few years later, the Jackson Red Ground Trail in Blackwater River State Forest. In 1988, Nancy Gildersleeve assumed the role of volunteer cartographer from Ernie Baldini. Based in Gainesville, she worked in the attic of the FTA office—at the same desk I inherited a decade later—and developed updated waypoint-annotated maps based on county maps. She also oversaw an updated guidebook, the *Hiking Guide to the Florida Trail*. Both were still only available to FTA members.

In 1989, two self-proclaimed thru-hikers—both with the intent of documenting their journeys of being the first to do so—tackled the Florida Trail. Each eyed a different goal.

At age 51, Army veteran Chet “MEAC” Fromm saw it as a way to get in shape and get his Type II diabetes under control. He’d planned to hike the PCT, but as a Port Orange resident and FTA member, undoubtedly saw the statement published in the new edition of *Walking the Florida Trail*: “As of early 1988, no one has claimed to have walked the continuous Florida Trail from end to end.” Challenge accepted.

Fromm decided on a flip-flop, pivoting around his Central Florida home. Published a decade later in *Long Distance Backpacking the*

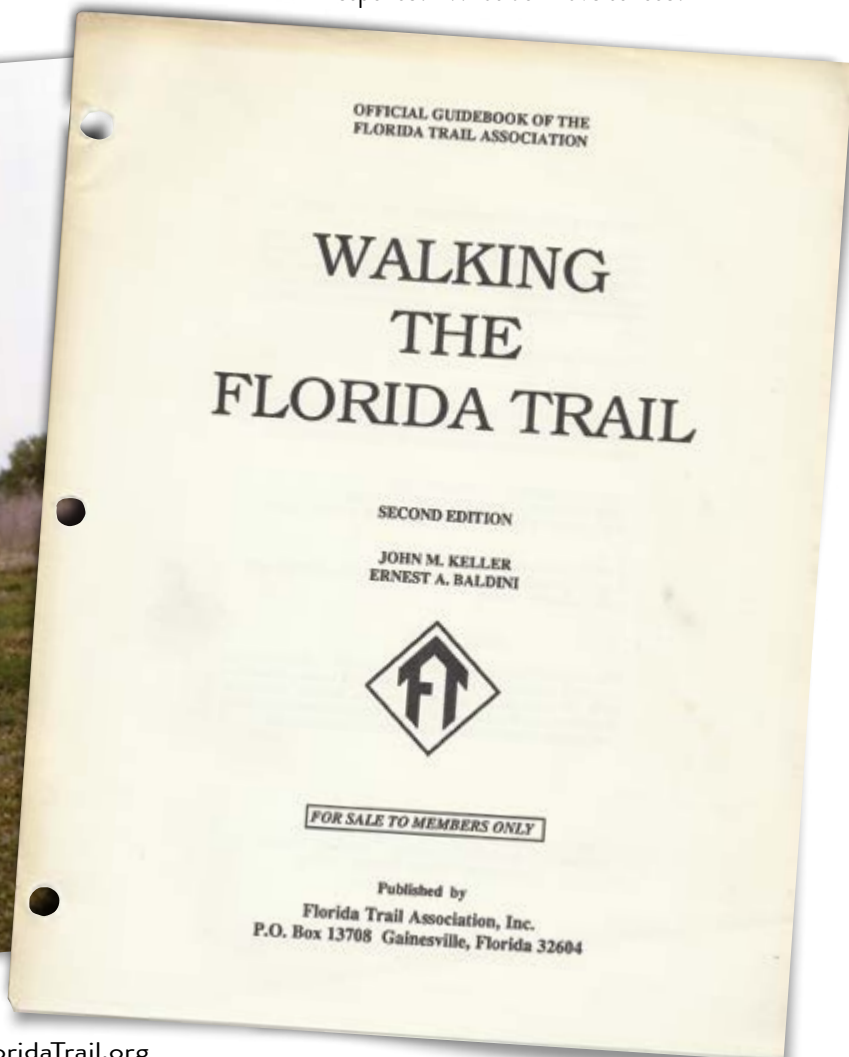


Florida Trail, his sparse trail journal recounts moments most FT hikers recognized. "Worn out from sucking mud." "Lost trail several times, finally lost it all together." "Came across guy shooting snakes in a creek with a pistol." The good times, too. "Trail magic again!" "Stuffed face with cold drinks and sandwiches." "I told (a guy) I was hiking the whole FT. He said I was nuts!"

Chet's flip-flop jumped him from Juniper Springs to Blackwater for the walk home. As a veteran, he had the luxury of staying in military recreation areas in the western Panhandle. He was the first to walk across Eglin—on the road system—and noted, when he made camp, "Will the military police find me and chase me out? This is federal land. How come no FT through it!"

In mid-April, Chet discovered he wasn't the only one focused on being "the first thru-hiker." He called his wife from Youngstown (west of Blountstown) and "she says a Steve Sheridan was in paper, he started trail in February. What a letdown, as he will probably complete FT before me!"

Steve Sheridan already had. A 21-year-old college dropout, his father thought he should be the first person to hike the trail. His response? "What do I have to lose?"





North Florida 129

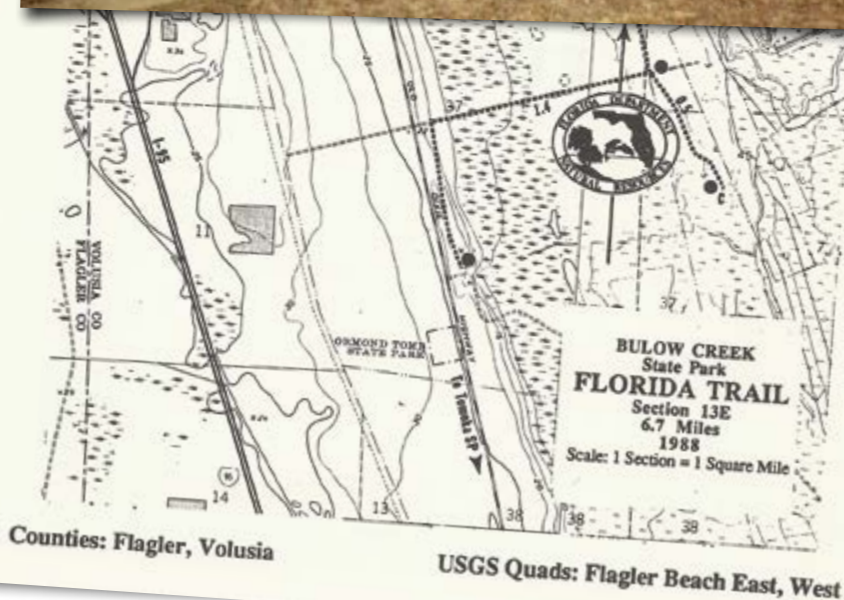


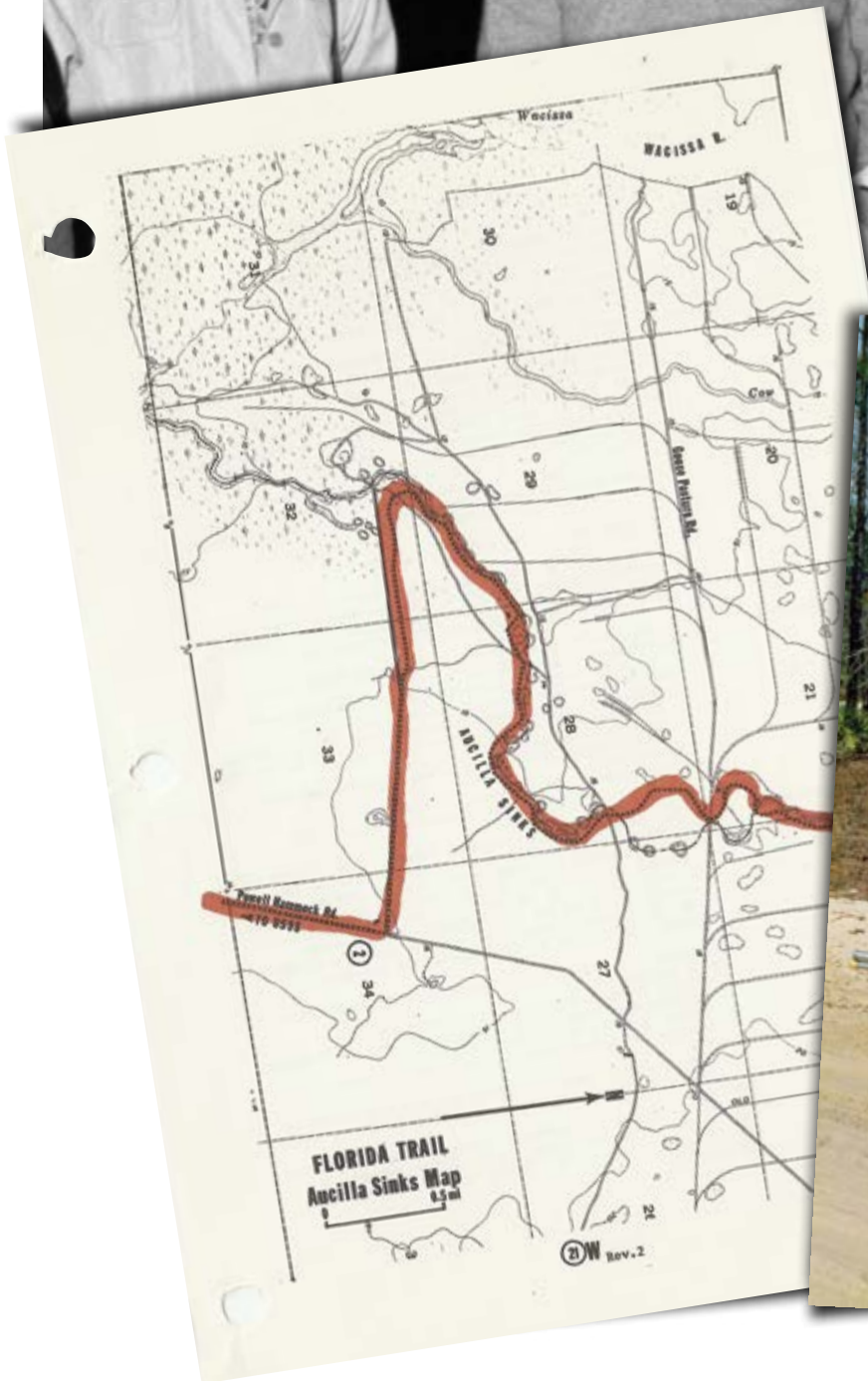
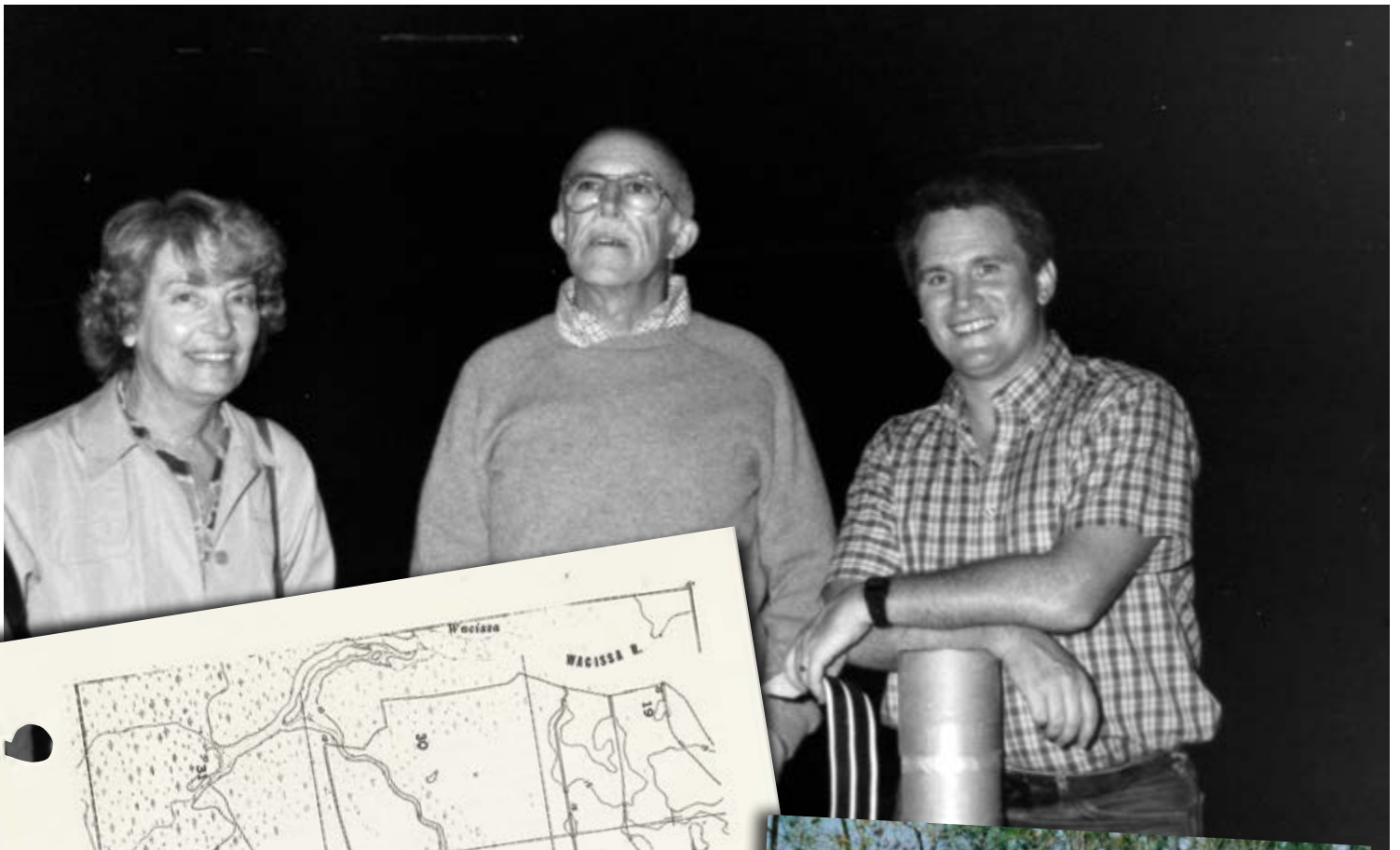
Unlike Chet, he had his parents set up publicity for his hike. He'd call in to an NPR affiliate in Tallahassee from the trail and recount his experience. Reporters tracked him down along the trail. Steve's father sent a rough itinerary to the FTA office in Gainesville, hoping to drum up additional publicity through FTA. While VP of Trails Frank Orser gave Steve pointers, family friends primarily provided resupply and trail support. Handling FTA promotion at the time, Sylvia Dunnam and her husband Carl met Steve on trail once. Published in 2012, Steve's trail memoir, *Florida Any Way You Can*, recounts both his thru-hike and a cross-Florida canoe trip. His descriptive prose provides a window into the past of landmarks long vanished, such as the Godwin homestead at Rattlesnake Hammock, and pieces of the trail lost in relocation.

The 1990s and beyond

As with the seemingly predictable "Fastest Known Time" challenges along the Florida Trail in recent years, you would assume a publicized "first thru hike" of the Florida Trail would immediately draw more hikers.

It didn't. Back to the proprietary nature of Florida Trail maps and guidebooks. You couldn't walk into a bookstore or an outfitter and discover them. That changed in 1991. With Nancy Gildersleeve and her sister Susan as editors, the Florida Trail Association published *Florida Hiking Trails*, the first guidebook the public could purchase. It contained a subset of the members-only information for hikes on public lands and was used to build FTA membership. A limited run





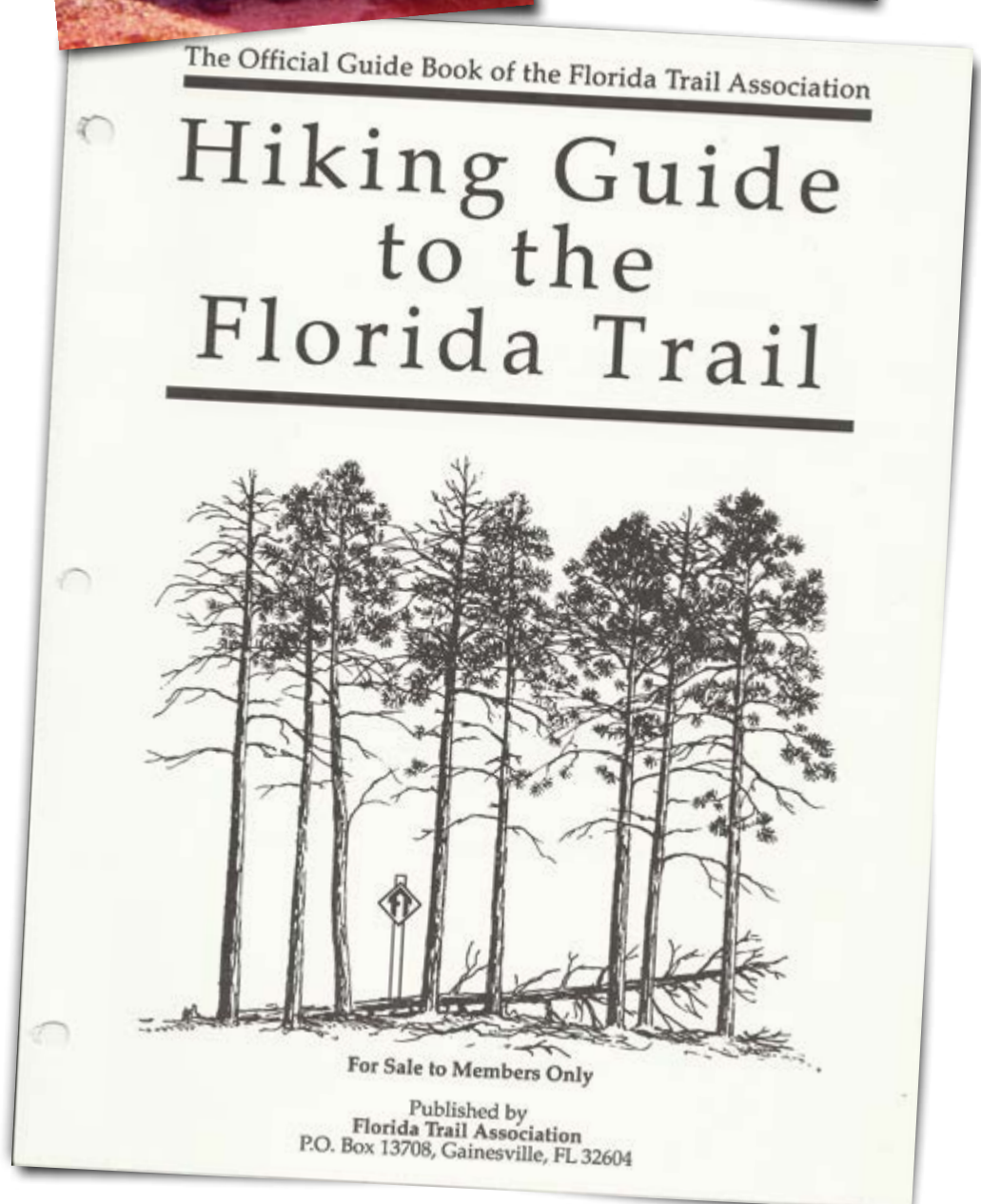
effort, it sparked new interest in the still-developing route.

As an intern with the U. S. Forest Service, Kent Wimmer aided with the conversion of trail maps to USGS quadrangles. As a cartography volunteer, he took over from Nancy on the next edition of the *Hiking Guide to the Florida Trail* and the updated maps. Later in the decade, software expert Deb Blick jumped in, learning how to develop maps in ArcView mapping software. Both Kent and Deb became part of the FTA staff. Deb brought a solid long distance hikers' viewpoint to FTA. The timing was perfect.

Joan "Igloo" Hobson made a splash across Florida newspapers as "The Hiking Grandmother." At age 65, she started southbound in November 1996, teaming up with hiking partner Rick "Vagabond" Gushè, who'd been inspired to tackle the trail after attending the 1994 dedication of a northern terminus at Fort Pickens. Exhausted after a month, unsure he'd want to backpack again he returned home to find a letter, "God's message to me telling me why I backpacked North Florida when I did." He'd lost a piece of gear and a man volunteered to find it for him. He did, and Rick was extremely grateful. That night, the man had been considering taking his own life. He credited meeting Rick and Joan to "restoring a small spark of faith in humanity to his dark mind." Rick took the missive—and his incomplete hike—as a lesson in humility.

Rick picked up his hike again in 1997, as did Joan, who started northbound from Big Cypress collecting trail data along the way. Joan had planned to hike the Appalachian Trail in retirement and couldn't find a hiking partner. "My frustration led me to consider the Florida Trail, as it was in my own back yard." After ending her hike with Rick near Camel Lake in 1996, she flip-flopped northbound in January 1997 with the help of Army special forces veteran Jon "Wanchor" Phipps, who was tackling the trail for his first time. Joan knew of two more long distance hikers on the trail as well—John Brinda, who started from Key West and would go on to establish what's now called the Eastern Continental Trail route, and Damon Stuart. Three of the four met at an FTA chapter meeting to talk about long distance hiking. The spark grew. A Long Distance Hikers Committee was formed within FTA.

Completing his hike, Rick oversaw the publication of *Long Distance Backpacking the Florida Trail*, including his trail journal as those of Joan, Jon, and Chet Fromm. A later edition included M. J. "Nimblewill Nomad" Eberhardt's first published journal





66 Central Florida



BULL CREEK
Wildlife Management Area
Section 7
FLORIDA TRAIL
17.8 Miles
Scale: 1 section = 1 Square Mile

as well. Joan Hobson became the first (and so far only) VP of Trails for the Florida Trail Association and did two more thru-hikes. She and hiking companion Susan “Dragon Lady” Roquemore published *From Here to There on the Florida Trail*, a service-oriented guidebook for long distance hikers. It persisted through five editions in 1998-1999. Using the format of the *AT Companion Guide*, which I’d assisted with for a season, I compiled a similar book called the *Florida Trail Companion Guide for Long Distance Hikers* during my tenure as an FTA staff member.

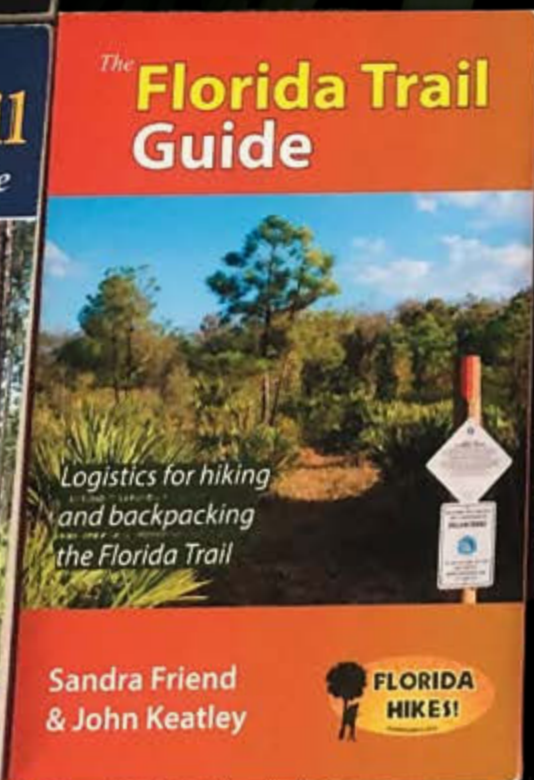
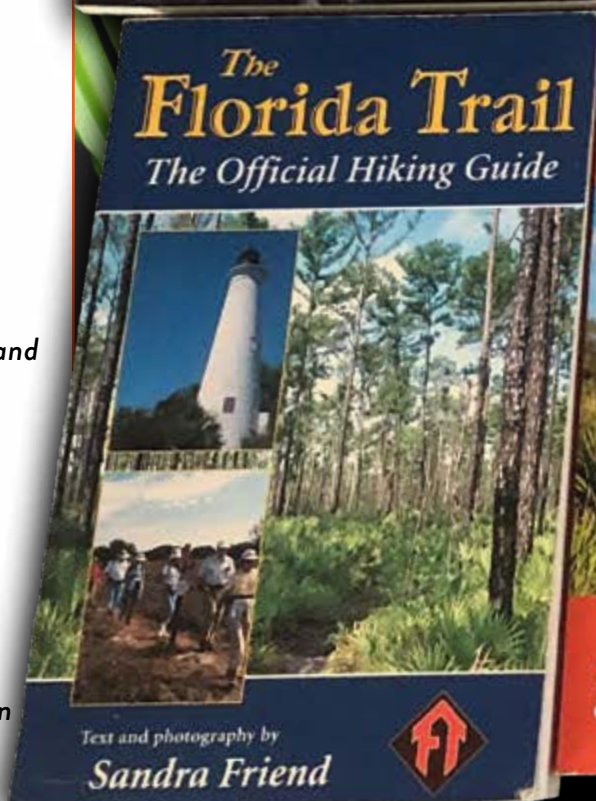
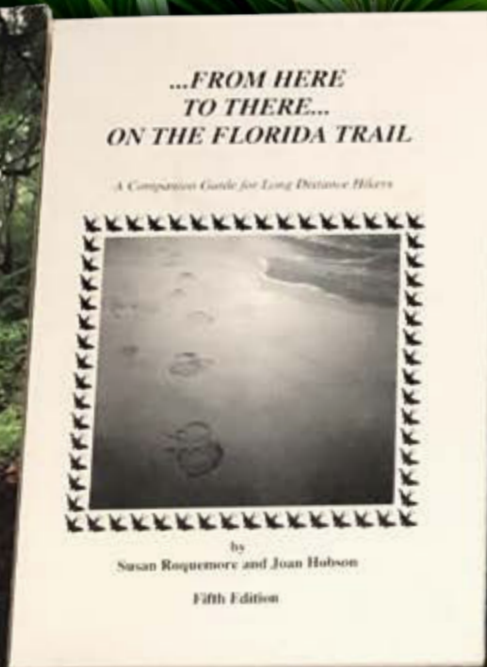
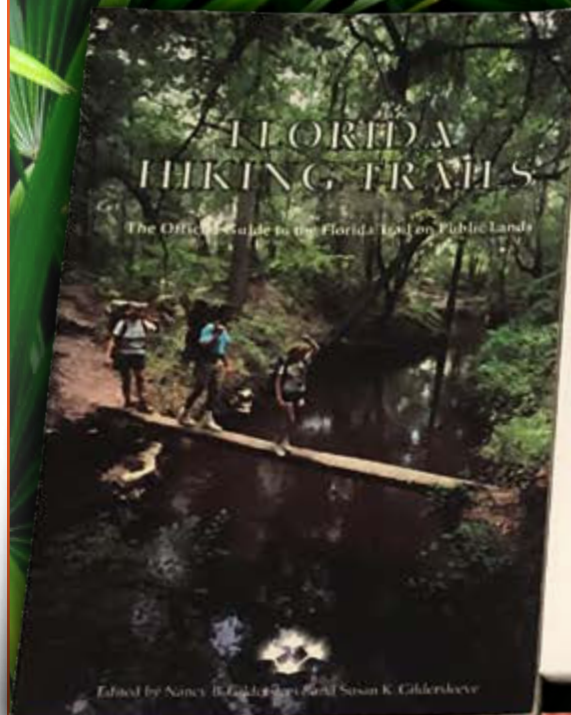
Immersed in the Appalachian Trail community while living in Pennsylvania, I learned about the Florida Trail in 1998 thanks to Nimblewill Nomad, who I stood next to in a cafeteria line at Trail Days on the AT. He’d walked there from Florida. I’d been section hiking the AT with friends and did my own long distance hike of the Laurel Highlands Trail that spring. I found an online Florida Trail community which some of the people mentioned above belonged to and sought out Floridians at that year’s ALDHA Gathering. When family pulled me to Florida in 1999, Joan “Bluetrail” Jarvis ushered me into the FTA family. At meetings and conferences, I connected with many of the hikers mentioned above. Jumping in to assist Nimblewill Nomad with trail reconnaissance while knocking out my own miles led to me writing the first Florida Trail guidebook sold nationwide by a major publisher. Joan and Susan’s book formed a foundation to work from, and Deb Blick provided the maps on behalf of FTA. The *Florida Trail Official Guide* debuted in 2004.

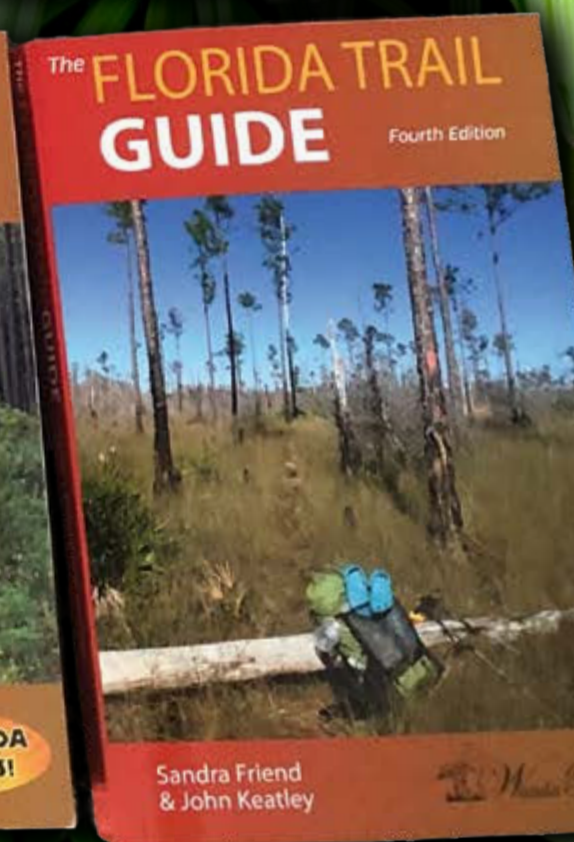
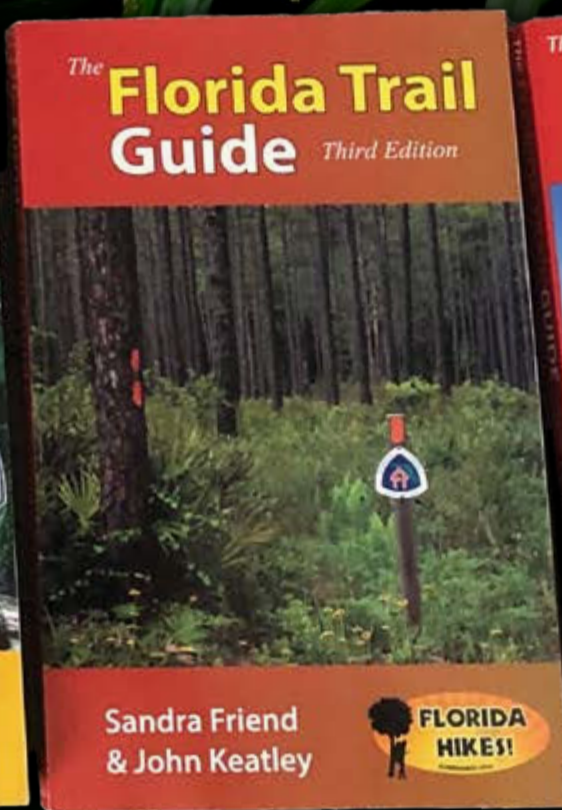
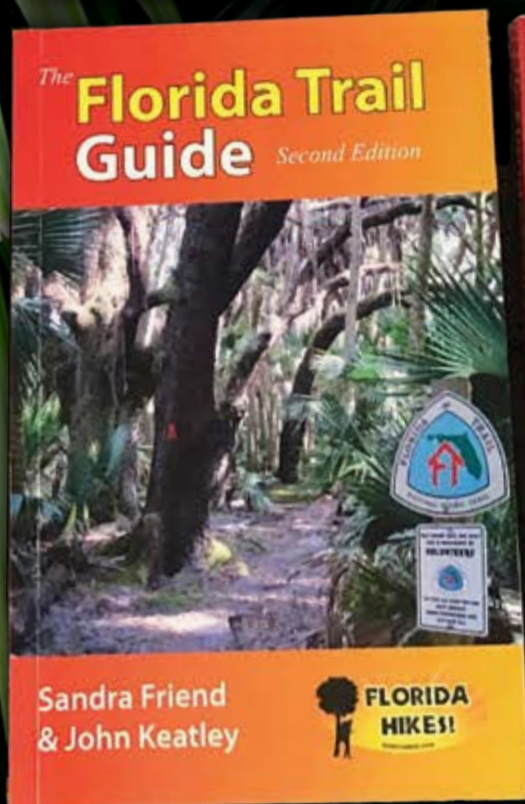
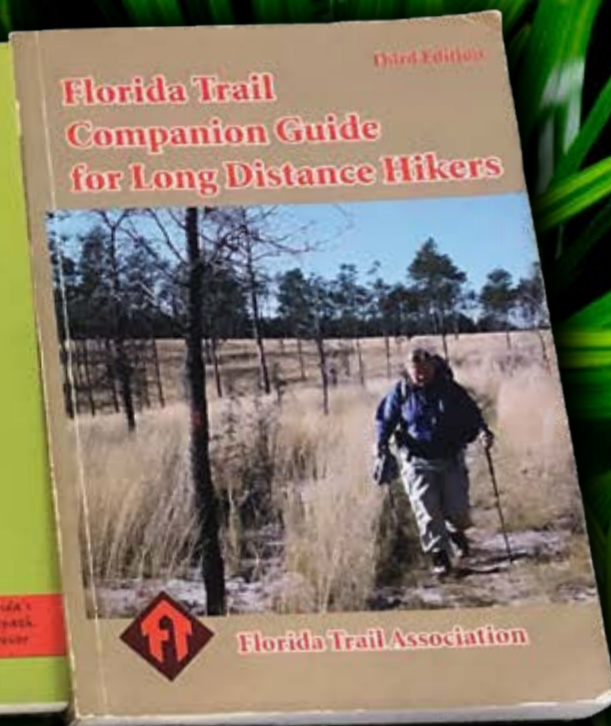
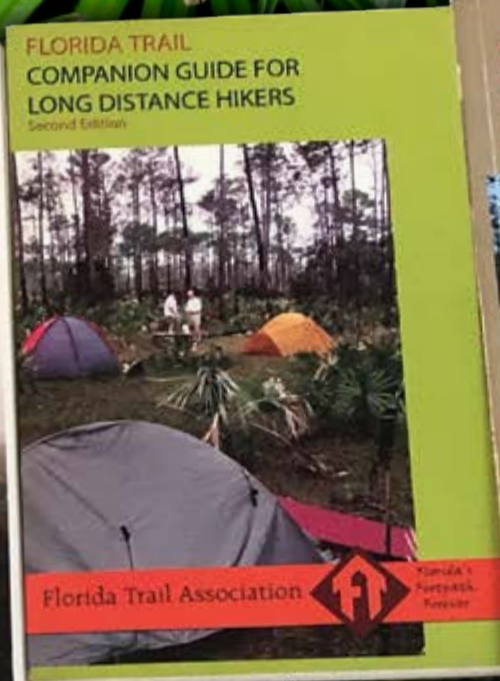
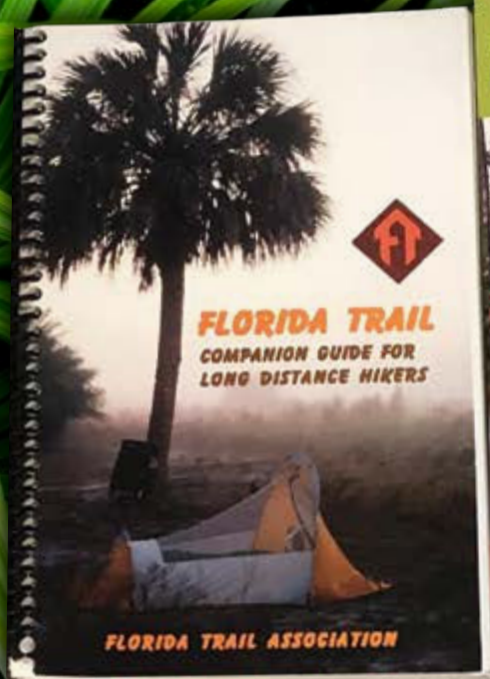
A synergy exists between trail information and hikers, just as between trail maintainers and hikers. Without hikers, there’s no point building and maintaining trails. Without information, few people in those pre-Internet days would stumble across the Florida Trail. Now I see a half-dozen or more Google Alerts on the phrase “Florida Trail” daily. The synergy has come full circle with hikers reporting maintenance issues real-time in online groups and in the comments of the FarOut Guides app, one of many Florida Trail information sources I helped develop over the course of completing my own end-to-end hike. Knowledge of the Florida Trail lingered in the hands of too few for its first twenty-five years. For the past twenty-five years, both trail usage and our hiking community have flourished. Nourished now by hikers telling their own stories through online journals, videos, blogs, and social media channels and the support of the Florida Trail Hikers Alliance, the FT long distance hiking community continues to grow.



PHOTOS

- 88 1980s FT overview map.
- 89 WTFT flyleaf
- 90 1974 Dorothy, Ned and Cecil's first hike
- 90 1981 Paul Tourigny
Photo courtesy of Pam Hale
- 90 WTFT v2 flyleaf
- 91 1980-90s Pete and Cecil
- 91 1987 Jon Phipps and Damon Stuart
- 91 WTFT v2 Bulow Creek Map
- 92 1988 Jean and Ernie Baldini with Kent Wimmer
- 92 1988 Winston Lumsden
- 92 WTFT v1 Aucilla Sinks Map
- 93 1989 Chet Fromm Oasis
- 93 1989 Steve Sheridan first thru-hiker
- 93 HGFT flyleaf
- 94 1997 Joan Hobson and Rick Gushe
- 94 Cecil Kirkham
Photo courtesy of Margaret Scruggs
- 94 1999 Susan Roquemore and Joan Hobson
Photo courtesy of Bruce Hobson
- 94 HGFT Bull Creek - Deseret-3
- 95 2000 Land Bridge Sandra and Joan
- 95 2003 Sandra Friend research Seashore section
Photo courtesy of Millie Buffington
- 96 Florida Trail Guides





Hiking the FNST Before A Thru-Hiker Bubble Existed

by Misti Little, 2011 FT Thru-Hiker and host of Orange Blaze: A Florida Trail Podcast



The first time I remember seeing an orange blaze and learning there was something called the Florida Trail I was searching for a geocache with my husband Chris somewhere near the Jane Green campsite in Bull Creek Wildlife Management Area, circa 2003. We'd only lived in Melbourne, Florida for a year or so at that point, and geocaching had taken us to new parks and trails in central Florida. Chris told me the mysterious orange blazes lined the length of the state and allowed people to hike it in one go if they wanted to. Later, we bought a copy of Sandra Friend's 2004 release *The Florida Trail: The Official Hiking Guide* which we used to find new places to hike when we went camping or geocaching. To me the Florida Trail was a mythical being and I couldn't fathom trekking across the entire state of Florida all at one time. *Who would do such a thing?*

A move to Miami-Dade county got us into the heart of the Everglades and Big Cypress National Preserve. Five days a week, my job took me into Big Cypress and the

Everglades Water Conservation Areas, and I often passed the Oasis Visitors Center. I would see the sign denoting the crossing of the trail at U.S. 41/Tamiami Trail and wonder about this mysterious Florida Trail. Driving down Loop Road, I often stopped to look at what was then the southern terminus of the trail along that remote, potholed road. The mysteries of the Florida Trail, combined with the allure of the Big Cypress swamps, enticed us to explore more of the interior of the national preserve, and the Florida Trail allowed us to do that.

I'd also begun sporadically reading from TrailJournals.com about the hardy soul or two who would chronicle their journal along the Florida National Scenic Trail every hiking season. I've long forgotten which journals I read but they told tales of muddy swamps, rain, and difficulties finding water to drink, as well as describing wonderful scenes in parts of the state we hadn't visited. By this point we'd done our share of swamp walking in Fakahatchee Strand Preserve State Park and other

cypress domes in Big Cypress, but those had all been day hikes and we'd been able to wash the swamp off every evening after we came home. Eventually we tested our mettle and used very vintage Kelty's to do an overnight at Kissimmee Prairie Preserve State Park, which at that time the Florida Trail did not traverse. Once the baptism of the backpacking trip was complete, the desire to spend more nights on the trail strengthened and we began planning short overnight hikes, starting in Big Cypress.

The notion we were section hiking or doing the trail in any sort of ordered manner escaped us. We were just hiking, exploring the Florida Trail and seeing the hidden parts of south Florida that we were interested in. Our first overnight hike on the Florida Trail was from the Oasis Visitors Center to I-75 in April 2007. Still using those vintage Kelty's, we traversed the miles through Big Cypress in an enchanted and curious state, wandering through bone dry cypress domes and crusty swamp buggy trails. This was not the swamp! We'd overpacked water knowing it was the dry season but soon found out that we would be rationing water unless we could find water to pump in a cypress dome. We found a mud pit with a small puddle of water to filter from, which promptly clogged our filter. Quickly, we turned our leisurely four day trek across Big Cypress into two days and a short morning, and learned a lot of lessons about hiking the "swamp" in mid-spring!

From there we completed the Loop Road to Oasis section as a long day hike, and later used several other sections of the Florida Trail, including the Ocean to Lake Trail, as training grounds for our 2010 Appalachian Trail thru-hike. It was those multi-night hikes and our fondness for Florida that led us back to the Florida Trail after our AT thru-hike, to pursue an end-to-end completion of the Florida Trail. In 2011, we were at the closing point of an era on the FT that we didn't know at the time, the era of quiet, and within five or six years the trail would become more known and attract more thru-hikers.

For much of our thru-hike we were the only hikers we would see on any given day on the trail. We came across hunters and fishermen well before we came across anyone hiking, even day hikers. With no smartphone, we relied on phone calls to our parents every few days to gauge upcoming weather events. A friend helped us out in two areas south of

Orlando with difficult resupply options, and we went 10-14 days between showers because options were limited in most areas. Trail Angels or Trail Magic as seen on the AT was practically unheard of on the FT but we did have a few instances of serendipity from fellow trail evangelists that boosted our morale. Eventually in Orlando we caught up to a small group of hikers we knew had been about a week ahead of us and enjoyed the camaraderie of our fellow hikers for a few hours while eating a delicious dinner of pizza from some of those trail evangelists.

A hiking friend from the AT was among those we met up with in Orlando and he joined us on and off throughout the rest of our thru-hike and the three of us completed the trail at Fort Pickens together on March 3, 2011. At that time there was no special monument at either of the main termini and so we celebrated at an information kiosk the accomplishment of walking the length of Florida over the course of two months. There was no instant posting to social media to share our joy with the world, only the patience to wait for a computer to post to Facebook or write on my blog.

In the years after our hike I did my best to spread the word online and with other hikers about the Florida Trail and how wonderful and diverse the habitat is that it traverses. Sparked by a new guidebook, *The Florida Trail Guide*, published by Sandra Friend and John Keatley in 2013, the trail community coalesced into a deep network of trail angels and other volunteers to help the thru-hiker numbers take off in the last six to seven years. And with the help of smartphones and the inclusion of the FNST in the Guthook (now FarOut) app, the booming social media presence allows hikers to share their hikes in almost real time. Will the Florida Trail ever see the number of hikers, the trail towns and hostels, and culture that the Triple Crown trails see? I don't know, but I'm excitedly awaiting to see what unfolds for the Florida Trail in the coming decades.







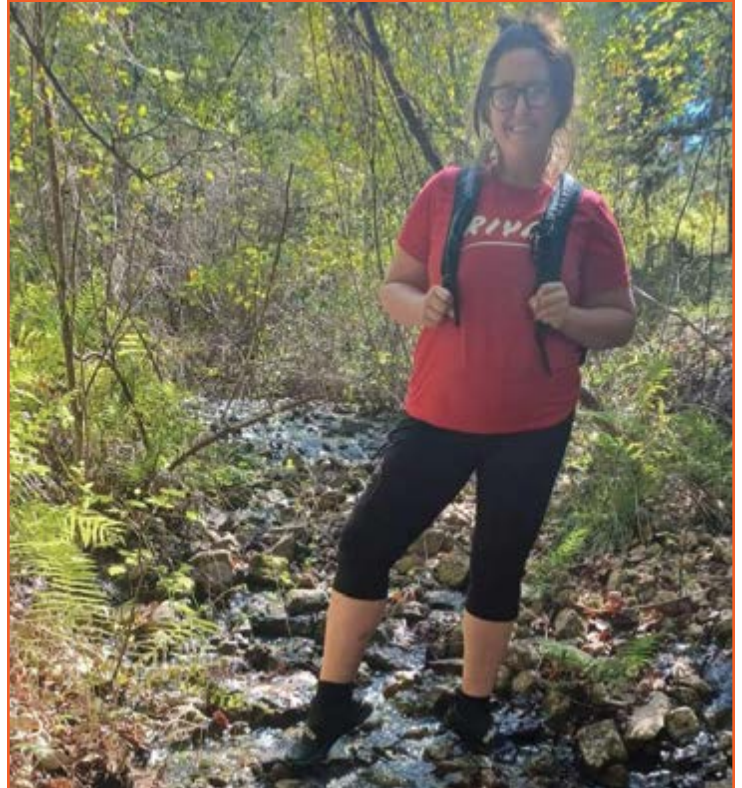
PHOTOS

- 98** Misti Little during the 2007 hike through Big Cypress.
- 99** Misti Little crossing a muddy Roberts Lake Strand on the original Florida Trail between Loop Road and the Oasis Visitors Center in 2007.
- 99** Chris Little holding up the trail magic green bean haul from a truck driver near the Everglades Agricultural Area.
- 100** Chris and Misti Little crossing I-4 on their Florida Trail thru-hike.
- 100** Chris and Misti Little posing at the northern terminus of the Florida Trail at Fort Pickens on March 3, 2011, the end of their thru-hike.
- 101** Chris and Misti Little posing at The Senator at Big Tree Park in 2011, which was the biggest and oldest bald cypress in the world before it was burned down in 2012.

Photos courtesy of Misti Little

Connecting People and Places

by Megan Copping



Megan hiking along the Florida Trail near the Bell Springs trailhead along the Suwannee River

The Florida Trail is a magical place. It takes you to the real Florida, the wild Florida. December 31, 2021, I decided to leave an abusive relationship and get clean after years of abuse to my mind and body. I've always enjoyed hiking, but never really had the self-confidence to go out on my own. This past year changed all of that. After giving birth to my daughter in July 2022, I decided to start hiking again.

For the first time in my adult life, I feel like I've finally started to live. I've seen a lot of amazingly beautiful parts of our state that most people don't even know exist. The Florida Trail is a getaway for my soul - getting out on the trail allows me to recharge mentally. Staying healthy mentally and physically is a major component of my sobriety. In return, I am able to be an even better mom to my daughter, a better sister, a better daughter, a better friend.

In addition to helping me stay sober, the trail has also been a key foundation in building my self-confidence and self-worth. For many years, I was terrified of being alone and surrounded myself with people who often didn't have the best intentions. I'm now at peace with being on my own, which has vastly improved the quality of my mental health. I have, however, met a fantastic community of hikers on social media and have met many new friends along the way.

My ultimate goal in the next couple of years is to undertake a thru-hike of the trail, and I now have the faith and determination to actually do it. The Florida Trail is not only magical, but it helps facilitate miracles. I am grateful for all the blood, sweat, and tears that have been poured into the trail, for it has played a part in saving my life.

FTA Chapters

ALLIGATOR AMBLERS CHAPTER

Charlotte, Collier, and Lee
Debra Taylor 978-732-6336

APALACHEE CHAPTER

Franklin, Gadsden, Jefferson, Leon,
Liberty, and Wakulla
Elwood McElhaney 850-878-4389

BIG CYPRESS CHAPTER

Miami-Dade and Monroe
Susan Bennett-Mans 305-213-1500

BLACK BEAR CHAPTER

Flagler, Putnam, and Volusia
Ed Riskosky 315-374-6500

CENTRAL FLORIDA CHAPTER

Orange, Seminole, and Osceola
Bill Turman 407-413-2950

CHOCTAWHATCHEE CHAPTER

Walton and Okaloosa
Tim Crews 850-826-3605

FISHEATING CREEK CHAPTER

Hendry and Glades
Bill Roy 813-416-6451

HAPPY HOOVERS CHAPTER

Broward
Lynn Thompson 954-372-7480

HEARTLAND CHAPTER

DeSoto, Hardee, Highlands, and Polk
Jan Wells 863-608-2046

HIGHLANDERS CHAPTER

Lake and Sumter
Gene Bouley 352-360-3722

INDIAN RIVER CHAPTER

Brevard and Indian River
Bill Alexander 321-693-7369

LOXAHATCHEE CHAPTER

Palm Beach
Janet Miller 561-422-2189

NORTH FL TRAILBLAZERS CHAPTER

Baker, Bradford, Clay, Duval, Nassau,
St. Johns, and Union
Ron Fish 904-504-4359

PANHANDLE CHAPTER

Bay, Calhoun, Gulf, Holmes, Jackson,
and Washington
Christine Doucette 772-285-5221

When you join the state-wide Florida Trail Association you automatically become a member of your local chapter based upon your zip code. However, members may attend the activities of any chapter and may transfer to any chapter they wish simply by informing the FTA Office.

Florida Trail activities are organized by our local chapters and are led by authorized volunteer activity leaders. Many of our activities are open to the general public so you can get to know us before you join. Activities can be found online at floridatrail.org. Click on "About Us" then click on the "Upcoming Events" button on the left. Local activities are usually also listed on the chapter websites, Facebook pages and Meetups. Click on "About Us" then "Our Chapters" for links to local chapter sites.

Participants in activities must sign an Assumption of Risk form and agree to accept personal responsibility for their safety and the safety of accompanying minors. Always contact the activity leader in advance for more information, to let them know you are attending, to find out any special requirements or equipment for the activity, and to check for any last minute changes.

For more information about chapters and links to websites/meetups/photos go online to FloridaTrail.org/about-us/chapters/ then select the chapter



SANDHILL CHAPTER

Alachua, Levy, Gilchrist,
and Marion
352-378-8823
Karen Garren 352-316-3453

SUNCOAST CHAPTER

Citrus, Hernando, Hillsborough,
Manatee, Pasco, Pinellas and Sarasota
Sue Bunge 727-504-8574

SUWANNEE CHAPTER

Columbia, Dixie, Hamilton, Lafayette,
Madison, Suwannee, and Taylor
Vacant

TROPICAL TREKKERS CHAPTER

Martin, Okeechobee, and St. Lucie
Jim Couillard 772-425-8367

WESTERN GATE CHAPTER

Escambia and Santa Rosa
Christine Hale 850-723-5112



*(L to R) Adrian Wilson, Adam Fryska, Austin Burton, Royce Gibson and Bill Turman
Adrian and Austin are members of the FTA Next Generation Coalition.*

LOOKING FORWARD

Over the decades we have pieced together a unique outdoor recreation experience. But we have miles to go and many acres to secure before we have a completely protected trail. With the population growing like it is in Florida, we need you to help us save the wild spaces in our state. We need your voices at all levels of government to amplify our calls for a permanently protected trail in the public domain. Let's leave a lasting legacy from one generation to the next.

The Florida Trail Association and the Florida National Scenic Trail would not exist except for the volunteers and members who have built, maintained, and protected them over the years. Every year hundreds of you spend thousands of hours keeping the Florida Trail ready and welcoming for the hundreds of thousands of users who visit. Thank you for your dedication, your time, talents, and treasure.

