

THE FIGHT TO SAVE THE FAKAHATCHEE

by Franklin Adams

- 1913: The Lee Tidewater Cypress Company, a division of the J. C. Turner Lumber Company, purchased 127,000 acres including all of the Strand for the sum of \$1.4 million.
- 1922: Henry Ford, who was a winter resident of Fort Myers, visited the Fakahatchee and was impressed with its virgin wild beauty. He wanted to purchase the Strand and donate it to the State of Florida. The Lee Tidewater Cypress Company gave Ford an option to purchase their holdings for \$2.25 million. This was the first known attempt to preserve the Fakahatchee in its pristine unlogged splendor. The State of Florida refused the offer. The State already had enough 'swamp land' and this would remove the Fakahatchee from the tax rolls.
- 1932: Conservationists, primarily garden clubs, began a movement to protect the Strand as a result of the removal and sale of the Royal Palms from the Fakahatchee. They were not successful.
- 1944: The Lee Tidewater Cypress Company begins logging at the south end of the Fakahatchee. Their headquarters was established at Copeland. Oddly enough, the Federal government, which wanted the cypress for war time construction of wood boats, brought in California Redwood to construct the large frame locomotive barn and machine shop.
- 1947: Mounting public concern about the destructive logging of the old-growth Bald Cypress in the Fakahatchee began to emerge in the media. Everglades National Park was being dedicated by President Harry S Truman in Everglades City nearby. There was a last minute movement to include all the Fakahatchee in the final boundaries as part of Everglades National Park.
- 1948: The National Parks Association finally brought the attention of the National Park Service to bear on the Fakahatchee. Its report found "the area to be worthy of preservation". It also noted that the logging was advancing relentlessly north, destroying the once-pristine Fakahatchee ecosystem. Dan Beard, who became the first Superintendent of the new Everglades National Park, was sent to do a field inspection of the Fakahatchee. Beard strongly recommended that

the Fakahatchee be included in Everglades National Park's boundaries. The recommendation was tabled due to lack of authority and funds.

- 1957: By April 1957 the Fakahatchee had been totally logged out except for Big Cypress Bend, a few remnant trees, and a bird rookery swamp which had been saved at the eleventh hour by the National Audubon Society and is now known as Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary.
- 1962: An orchid lover named Melvin Finn, a Miami attorney, founded the Florida Nature Conservancy. His primary goal soon became the purchase of the Fakahatchee Strand to save it from land speculators, in particular, the Gulf American Land Company. Time was running out on the Fakahatchee once again. Mel Finn attempted to raise money through pledges and contributions to save the cut-over Strand but regrettably the Lee Tidewater Cypress Company sold their Fakahatchee holdings to the Rosen brothers of Gulf American. They paid \$100 per acre on paper and sold lots in the Fakahatchee for \$2500 for an acre and a quarter. They called the area Remuda Ranch Grants and constructed the building now central to Port of the Islands as part of the development plan.

Undaunted, Mel Finn and the new Nature Conservancy tried to get the State to purchase the Fakahatchee with funds from the newly passed 'Florida Outdoor Recreation Act'. Politics prevented the purchase.

- 1966: Congressman Paul Rogers introduced a bill to have the Fakahatchee declared a National Wilderness Monument by the Department of the Interior. Biscayne National Monument, now Park, was chosen instead. Gulf American began digging drainage canals on the west side of the Fakahatchee. Also in 1966, Gulf American Land Corporation, owner of Remuda Ranch Grants (the Fakahatchee), was cited by the State of Florida for illegal dredge and fill at Cape Coral, another of its developments, in Lee County.

Mel Finn continued the fight to somehow preserve the Fakahatchee.

1970, April 30: Mel Finn & Franklin Adams met George Gardner (Special Assistant for the Environment for the State), Joel Kuperberg (director of Caribbean Gardens and co-founder of Collier County Conservancy), Ken Alvarez (biologist at Florida Division of Recreation & Parks), Nathaniel Reed, and Ney Landrum in Everglades City. The purpose of the meeting was for the group to visit the interior of the Fakahatchee in hopes that Governor Claude Kirk would support saving the Fakahatchee. Nathaniel Reed was Special Conservation Advisor to Governor Kirk and the aim was that he and Ney Landrum, who was head of the Florida Parks, would recommend to the Governor the acquisition of the Fakahatchee after they had seen its beauty. The following morning on May 1 the group entered the Fakahatchee with the exception of Franklin Adams whose mother had passed away during the night. The visit was a success, convincing all that the Fakahatchee was indeed worthy of preservation.

1971: Mel Finn has heart surgery. Complications two weeks later lead to the unexpected death of the "Father of the Fakahatchee".

1972: State of Florida agrees to resolve litigation against Gulf American Land Corporation (GAC) over illegal dredge and fill at Cape Coral. GAC agrees

to pay damages to the State by turning over their remaining holdings in the Fakahatchee.

1972: Florida passes the Land Conservation Act (chapter 259, F.S.) to purchase environmentally unique and irreplaceable lands. Later that year Florida voters approved a bond issue of \$240 million which began Florida's first major land acquisition program. The program was known as the Environmentally Endangered Lands Program (EEL). It was administered by the Division of Recreation & Parks in the Department of Natural Resources.

1974: The first purchase of Fakahatchee land was made in June, 1974. The optimum boundaries discussed at that time were about 80,000 acres.

1999: Nathaniel Reed, Joel Kuperberg, and others arranged for a memorial to Mel Finn. Finally, on April 24, 1999, a dedication ceremony for the monument that stands in front of the Park office in Copeland was attended by about 50 people including Fran Mainella, director of the Florida Park Service, and some early Friends of Fakahatchee. The monument memorializes Mel Finn's many years of devotion to his beloved "Fahkahatchee", as he spelled it.

"FATHER OF THE FAHKAHATCHEE"

**Mel Finn
1916 - 1971**

Georgia native, adopted son of Florida, U. S. Army Air Corps veteran, U. of Miami graduate, attorney, founder of the Florida Nature Conservancy, member of Tropical Audubon, South Florida Orchid Society and self-trained field biologist, he criss-crossed the cutover Fahkahatchee, identified 45 varieties of orchids, nine found nowhere else.

Mel was the Fahkahatchee's voice, dogged, persistent, abrasive, whatever it took; he badgered nature groups, led chest-deep field trips, wrote appeals to preserve this once mightiest of South Florida cypress strands. An ailing hear took him before his dream was realized but he had made his point. Florida funded acquisition, a buy-back program still underway.

Today, because of Mel Finn's vision and persistence, you enjoy the recovering Fahkahatchee, main artery in the circulatory system of Southwest Florida. Outgrowth of Mel's dream, a wilderness greenway now stretches fifty miles from the southeast corner of Lee County to the waters of Florida Bay. Gulf of Mexico Greenway links are Corkscrew Regional Ecosystem Watershed, Florida Panther National Wildlife Refuge, Fahkahatchee State Preserve and the Ten-Thousand Island National Wildlife Refuge.

Mel, you made believers out of the rest of us and
were a pioneer in Florida's land conservation efforts.

Friends of Mel Finn - 1998



The rock on which the Mel Finn plaque is mounted was picked out by former Park Manager Greg Toppin and moved to this location in front of the park office in Copeland by Don Harmon of Harmon Brothers' Rock Company.

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To explore Fakahatchee Strand Preserve State Park today, please visit

www.orchidswamp.org

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