



# The Ghost Writer

Newsletter of the Friends of Fakahatchee

## A Retrospective on Four Years as President

By Francine Stevens



One of my favorite quotes is “*When the student is ready the teacher will appear.*”

I was introduced to the Fakahatchee Preserve by a friend from upstate New York who shamed me for living here and not knowing about the Fakahatchee. An avid birder and explorer, he gave me my first visit to the Big Cypress Bend Boardwalk and numerous rides down Janes Scenic Dr. — to this day I credit and blame him for what was to become six years of feverish commitment to support the Friends of Fakahatchee (FOF) mission.

I watched the FOF from a distance, went to the Safari; eventually at an FOF dinner I decided this was the kind of group I could connect with —

no fancy gowns and high heel, no suits and ties — just what I was looking for. I signed up my membership with Marya Repko at Port of the Isle dinner.

Soon after, it was election time for Board members, and I nominated myself. At the FOF picnic Allan and Elsie Caldwell gave me the warmest welcome; I didn’t know a soul and it made a big impression on me.

In April 2011, when Tom Maish was ending his President term on the Board and Howard Lubel was elected president, I volunteered to be Secretary, not knowing a thing about a CSO and having never served on a Board. I figured my 25 years of experience in training and managing should be of some help.

Fast forward to April 2017, I still consider myself “the student.” Because I have a curious mind and want to understand how things work, I often take on a lot of responsibilities just to learn the ropes, and assess the situation so I can be in a position to help make progress in collaboration with the people that surround me.

### **A sample of six years of collaborative progress looks like this:**

- It all begins with pursuit of a better understanding of the FOF Mission, its role as a CSO, and the Park’s Unit Management Plan. Education begins with the Board.
- In 2012, the Board approves launch of an Annual fundraiser earmarked for Direct Park Support. The fundraiser has generated nearly \$50,107 to date, thanks to the generosity of our members.
- In 2013, FOF borrows a tram from Lovers Key to determine if tram tours guided by FOF naturalists are feasible. The tours program is established with the Park Manager, resulting in \$108,678 to date in tour sales. Efforts to address the FOF mission to educate the public about the Preserve increase significantly.
- Development of a comprehensive budget, with a 60% budget increase for Direct Park support.
- FOF provides fiscal support for the Orchid restoration project with \$5,880.00 to date.

- Several grants are received, totaling a little over \$50,000.00.
- Acquired a better understanding of the Oil Well Road Trust Fund, received \$17,495 to date for the management of the OWR parcel.
- Increased support for the Volunteers in the field; better equipment and vehicles keep them safe and show appreciation for their efforts.
- Host Volunteer Appreciation picnics to recognize the average of 10,000 volunteer hours yearly from volunteers who drive to the Park from Miami, Fort Lauderdale, Naples, North Fort Myers, as well as our resident volunteers.
- Support a “Tour de force” by the Boardwalk Vision committee:
- Deceleration lane completed at the new Parking site
- Secure approval from Donald Forgione, State Parks Director, to build the Education Pavilion on the other side of the canal instead of next to the Parking lot.
- Creation of a Master Interpretation Plan for the new Boardwalk experience
- \$150,000 generated for Architects, Surveys, and sign interpretations.
- Created our beautiful [www.orchidswamp.org](http://www.orchidswamp.org) website that was cited as one the best CSO Website at the Annual CSO convention in Orlando.

The list goes on. Since 2012 the FOF has recorded nearly \$180,000.00 in Direct Park support; this was achievable through the collaboration of the Directors on the Board who kept their focus on the Mission of the CSO.

I am particularly happy that we were able to improve our relationship with (then) State Parks Director Donald Forgione. There is no doubt in my mind that the weekend he spent at my request with the Board, Park staff, and the fellowship at the picnic in the Fakahatchee in Dec 2014, facilitated the progress of the Boardwalk Expansion project and improved communications between Florida State Parks District 4 and FOF as we continued to move the project along.

As I end my six year term, and an unprecedented four years as president, apparently I should be relieved. But because it has been a most gratifying six years, I leave with pride of accomplishment, mostly proud of all the Board members and volunteers who served the FOF by my side, and extremely grateful for the generosity of time from our volunteers, as well as the generosity of all our members and donors.

Very best success to the new Officers and Board members and congratulations to elected President Patrick Higgins; his leadership will continue to elevate the Mission of the FOF as the forecast for the years ahead brings many projects finally to fruition. Patrick’s contagious positive “can do” attitude combined with impressive communication skills provides a leadership essential at this point in time when the organization is embarking on the execution phase of important projects that have been on the drawing table. I look forward to supporting the Board in a different capacity and wish them the same rewarding experience serving the Friends of Fakahatchee brought to me.

Sincerely,

Francine Stevens  
Past President, Friends of Fakahatchee

## News from the Strand

### Annual Dinner Celebrates Service to the Fakahatchee



On April 8 the Friends of Fakahatchee gathered for their annual dinner at the Everglades Adventure Center in Everglades City.

*Outgoing President Francine Stevens gets in line to dine with Friends Board Member, Past FOF President, and Fak-a-hacker Howard Lubel.*



*Naturalist Kevin Sandel from the Conservancy of Southwest Florida discussed Florida's "Alien Invaders" and the research techniques used by biologists to track invaders like the Burmese python.*



*Attendees discovered how so many exotic plants and animals have invaded Southwest Florida and the threats they pose to our native species.*

### 2017 Mel Finn award goes to Dino 'Chainsaw' Barone

In honor of Mel Finn, the Friends of Fakahatchee regularly present an award bearing his name to a member whose efforts on behalf of the park best represent Mel's dedication to it. In fact, the plaque awarded reads "For reflecting the spirit of the Founding Father of the Fakahatchee Strand Preserve."

From 2011 through 2016, this year's recipient, Dino 'Chainsaw' Barone, volunteered an astonishing 3,334 hours to the Fakahatchee Strand Preserve State Park. *Continued...*





*2017 Mel Finn award Continued...* Dino is a long time member of the FOF and has served as Treasurer and on our Board of Directors. He has also participated in scientific research surveys to document the park's botanical diversity, as well as to locate exotic and invasive species. Throughout the year Dino works to eliminate the invasive plants Brazilian pepper and caesar weed from the park.

Dino has worked as a volunteer on FOF swamp walks guided by Bill Mesce. He also has guided walks of his own as a treat for our trail maintenance volunteers. He has participated in, or was a leader on, all major FOF trail clearing endeavors including the opening of both the East and South Main Trams. He has cleared miles of trails in the remote northwest section of the park so that exotic control teams could gain access. He has worked at the East River and Big Cypress Bend Boardwalk to improve visitors' experience.

Dino founded Fearless Fak-a-Hackers and has served as "Fearless Leader" since its inception. Even in the most climatically inhospitable times of the year, he's often working in remote and difficult terrain. He has led the "Hackers" clearing trails and building bridges over washouts so that the park's visitors have the safe access they need.

In addition to his seemingly tireless trail work, Dino Barone offers public outreach, education and visitor services every day he is in the park, so that visitors are able to learn, to understand, and to support the Fakahatchee, as did Mel Finn. Congratulations, Dino!



## **Park Staff honors Fak Volunteers at Annual Picnic**

The annual Friends of Fakahatchee volunteer appreciation picnic was held on March 18. More than 50 FOF volunteers gathered on the shores of Lake Harmon for a meal of barbecued burgers and sausage. There was plenty of praise from park officials, including visiting Chief of Parks for District 4, Valinda Subic.

"We couldn't run this park without you," Subic said. "The 10,000 volunteer hours you donated last year are the equivalent of six full time employees in a park that has a full time staff of five."

*Continued...*



*The Friends and Park Staff welcome Valinda Subic, Chief of Parks for District 4 (Center, in red shirt). Subic recognized the volunteers for taking on critical roles at the park.*

Park staff arranged the picnic and recognized volunteers who had logged the most hours. Park Manager Steve Houseknecht distributed hand-crafted cypress knee awards and plaques to a score of top volunteers, including FOF officers Francine Stevens and Patrick Higgins, plus Faka-Hacker Dino Barone.

"The picnic is one of my favorite Fakahatchee events," said Janet Bunch as she munched another chocolate chip cookie. "The setting is beautiful and the food is great. It's a wonderful time to relax and catch up with what everybody's been up to during another busy season."

You too can Volunteer at the Fakahatchee! [Click to Learn How.](#)

### ***"Tram Tour/Swamp Walk - Fun and Educational!"***



*"Friends of the Fakahatchee have wonderful volunteers who support this unique Florida State Park. The history of the park and natural characteristics were enthusiastically shared by our guide.... He told interesting stories while we traveled by tram, walked in drier prairie areas and sloshed our way through the swamp."*

— Visitor, Cooper City, FL

## **A Big Thank You to all our guides, drivers and greeters —**

Dave Boesche, Dee Leonard, Dick Brewer, Don Leonard, Glen Stacell, Howard Lubel, Jim Winger, John Kaiser, Linda Koreny, Mike Duey, Mike Owen, Patrick Higgins, Patti Boesche, Sam Peters, Ted DeGroot, Tom DesFosses and Tom Maish, all of whom helped make our season such a success.

Our tour program from November through April generated approximately \$24,400. This is not quite as high as last season because we had to cancel our combined tram tour/wet walks and swamp-walks a month early this year due to the lack of water. The latter are our most lucrative programs.

We may also have been hit slightly by a commercial operator's pop-up ad that appears next to Fakahatchee's reviews on TripAdvisor. They seem to be cashing in on FOF's rave reviews. The ad redirects visitors to an unrelated commercial tour site, possibly skimming some of our potential attendees.

While we may have fallen short on tour numbers, we certainly made up on new member recruitment. Tours are not only an important revenue source but also help fulfill our mission of educating the public about the unique ecology and cultural heritage of the park.



*Glen Stacell is an expert Fakahatchee interpreter for visitors on tram rides on Janes Scenic Drive.*



## **“Wonderful Experience, Educational, Very interesting, Great Park Guides, New Friends!!”**



*"The Fakahatchee Strand Preserve State Park "Swamp Walk" was probably the most exciting and memorable experience of any Florida sight seeing trip or event I have participated in over the last 10 years. I never thought I would be wading through the swamps of the Florida Everglades..not in my wildest dreams! But on this particular day I did and it will be a memory I will have forever... Just wading through the swamp not knowing what you were stepping on, snakes coiled up snugly in the base of old cypress trees and stumps, many types of waterbirds*

*flying above, orchids growing throughout the wilderness of the swamp, and even saw an american gator slowly gliding around the edge of the swamp watching these odd intruders trample through their habitat. The Park staff/ guides were the best! "*

— Visitor, Highland, Michigan

## **FOF forges links with The Naples Garden Club and benefits from a major grant**

FOF's Francine Stevens and Patrick Higgins attended Naples Garden Club's April 3rd meeting where they received a \$13,000 grant from the Club's President, Sandy Lasch. The Naples Garden Club awarded some \$80,000 of grants this year, and FOF was fortunate to receive one of the largest.



The grant is to build a 14 x 20 ft Chickee structure in the clearing at the base of our Big Cypress Bend Boardwalk. It will serve as an outdoor classroom and rain shelter and will be able to accommodate up to twenty on flexible seating. The grant also covers the provision of two custom interpretive panels at the site. The Chickee will be the focus of some new educational program offerings next season.

We have received tremendous support from the Naples Garden Club this year. In February the Club booked two private tram tours on Janes Scenic Drive for their members. Each was at full capacity. The participants were great sports, and in nicely tailored trousers and Gucci shoes they spontaneously took advantage of the early dry-down to penetrate a few hundred feet into Six Pipe Slough. One of the groups was greeted by a cottonmouth right where they stepped off the tram! Undaunted, their members are already arranging a proper swamp walk for November.

*Continued...*

In March FOF was one of only 4 invited educational exhibits in the Club's annual Flower Show, held over 2 days at the Naples Botanical Garden. The show attracted over 15,000 visitors and was a wonderful opportunity to introduce many new faces to the Fakahatchee.

Special thanks must be given to the Club's President-Elect, Sudie Minamyier, who arranged the tour program and encouraged FOF to participate in the Naples Flower Show, plus apply for the grant. Dee Leonard also deserves recognition for putting our grant application together.



Help us do more. [Donate to the Boardwalk Expansion](#)

## FOF receives \$2500 LCEC Grant

Dee Leonard spearheaded another successful grant application for \$2,500 to the Friends to improve the park's visitor center on Janes Scenic Drive. It will be used to purchase a display cabinet, interpretive panels, collection jars, supplies, and for the production of a trail map. Congratulations to Dee for another job well done, and thanks to Lee County Electric Cooperative for their generous support.

## New restroom facilities in place at the ranger's station!

At long last, new restroom facilities were moved into place at the ranger's station at Copeland. Several trucks arrived with everything needed to install the new restrooms. The building was unloaded from the truck, amid much excitement, breath-holding, and many crossed fingers. Now that the plumbing and electric are connected, this new 'comfort station' will be enjoyed by all!



## Seem Around the Strand

### *Tour the Fakahatchee with Facebook @orchidswamp*



Visit us on <https://www.facebook.com/orchidswamp/> and enjoy this fun video of the Fakahatchee biologist, Mike Owen. Thanks to Ted Hall ([tedhallphotography.com](http://tedhallphotography.com)) for filming this. You never know the next thing you may see on your trip to the Fakahatchee Strand Preserve SP!

## Nature's Clean-up Crew



*Vulture shots and profile courtesy of Dee Leonard.*

We often get asked, "What are those big black birds?" They are nature's clean-up crew, helping to eliminate toxic bacteria and diseases from dead animals. If you look closely you will see 2 different kinds: the red-headed Turkey Vulture and the more wrinkled black-headed, Black Vulture.

The two help each other. Turkey Vultures have a highly developed sense of smell and can locate food from high above. They are the first to arrive. The Black Vultures are what you often see soaring near a Turkey Vulture, waiting for them to locate food. Once food is found the Black Vultures are usually first to eat as they have stronger jaws.







*Chris Evans really captured the dryness of the Fakahatchee Strand in April, 2017. "It's great to have access to the deeper areas of the Fak."*



*Photo from Patrick Higgins of the rare Everglades Mink. The Fakahatchee Preserve State Park is home to some of the rarest animals and plants in North America.*

## Membership News

### FOF welcomes 2017-2018 Board of Directors

Thank you to all FOF members who voted to elect our new Board of Directors! The results are in, and these are the 2017-2018 Officers, Board Members, and Committee Chairs. Congratulations and many thanks to everyone who stepped up to serve on the FOF Board!

#### 2017-2018 Board Members

President – Patrick Higgins  
Vice-President – John Kaiser  
Secretary – Ken Shapiro  
Treasurer – Scott Geltemeyer  
Jinny Ball  
Ted DeGroot  
Chris Gair  
Donald Leonard  
Howard Lubel  
Tom Maish  
Gayle Norton  
Glen Stacell  
Stacey Wolfe

#### Committee Chairs

Boardwalk Vision – Tom Maish  
By-Laws – Ken Shapiro  
Communication/PR – Bruce Bunch  
Events/Member Dinners/Volunteer Picnic – Francine Stevens  
Finance/Treasurer – Scott Geltemeyer  
Fundraising – Chris Gair  
Membership – Jinny Ball  
Nominating – Ted DeGroot  
Tours/Education/Interpretation – Gayle Norton

## Welcome New Members

Since our last report, we have five new "Friends" memberships including John and Beth Courtright, Carol Gowing, David and Mary Ann Chase, Emily Whiteley and Mary Sanders.

### *Thanks to our lifetime and business members!*

#### **Lifetime Preservers**

Bruce & Janet Bunch

#### **Lifetime Individual Members**

Rita Bleasdale

Warner Blow

Elsie Caldwell

Peter Haffenreffer

Don Harmon

Patty Huff

James Nici

Wendy Becker Payton

Ken Shapiro

Carol Vartanian

#### **Lifetime Family Members**

Tom & Judy Maish

Noel Nation

Van & June Sayler

Glen & Laura Stacell

#### **Business Patrons**

North American Canoe Tours  
(Ivey House B&B)

Shurr Adventures

#### **Become a Friend of the Fakahatchee**

Visit <http://orchidswamp.org/support/memberships/>

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