

Memories of Everglades City

...by The Idiot Who Wore Shorts

By Carol Child

Naples, Fla., June 11, 1998 – Ten miles southeast of the Gulf of Mexico and the heart of Naples, Florida, I passed the last strip mall and golf course and crossed through the last busy intersection where the highway narrowed to two lanes and I plunged alone into the Everglades. The fierce June sun seared like the eye of a panther set on the flank of a deer. The rainy season hadn't begun. I drove my little, unair-conditioned Hyundai east across the Tamiami Trail, through the oppressive heat and humidity, palmetto palms and cypress trees, and the *zzizzing* of a zillion insects. The dense brush and trees thickened, grew taller and closer to the edge of the road, and the *zzizzing* intensified. I wiped the sweat from my brow with the back of my hand and took another tepid swig from my bottle of water.

Thirty miles in, nearly halfway to Miami, I turned south on Highway 29 towards Everglades City. Insects made the only sound. The eight miles of mangroves pressing in on both sides of the shoulderless two-lane county road finally surrendered to the river banks offering a sparse catch of houses on stilts, occasional net-casting fishermen, a Circle K and a café, and at the head, a New England-style town circle embracing a small green. Anchoring the circumference, commanding broad, green lawns from beneath the cool shadows of ancient live oaks, palmetto palms and cypress, stood an abandoned jail, the jagged, broken windowpanes gaping hopelessly; a functioning 1880s white, pillared courthouse; and the 1864 Rod & Gun Club, a restaurant—an Old-Florida style building, polished brown wood inside, white shingled outside, a series of broad steps up the front to the deep veranda complementing three sides and screened on the back overlooking the river, where you can dock your boat and come in and eat.

This is Everglades City. The town natives,



perhaps sixth-generation locals, all 800 of them, like things the way they are. That's the way things have always been. They're not fixin' for Yankees to jump in and rock their boat. Sure, the boat leaks, but they plug it. In 1947 the establishment of Everglades National Park there banned commercial fishing from local waters. The sudden uncongenial climate snapped the anchor chain of their subsistence. Townsfolk tell that after that many of the locals went away to "college" for a few years. It's where they were sent when they got caught ferrying "square grouper" imported from South America to drop points in the Gulf. Their unexpected flurry of fine new homes and fancy cars shot up a flare to the Feds. It's rumored that some of the locals have money buried somewhere there, and that when the statute of limitations expires, they'll dig it up and spend it.

This is Everglades City, founded more than a century ago as a fishing village and established as a city in the 1920s when the railroad came, bringing in tourist fishermen and taking out fish to sell on the commercial market. Barron Collier, a New York millionaire, arrived in 1923 and bought up the land. He bought the Rod & Gun Club, too. There he hosted foreign dignitaries and U.S. presidents.

The newly arrived traveled a lot between Tampa and Miami and they soon realized they needed more than a couple of sand ruts upon which to drive. So, federal funds in tow, they set up their supply depot at Everglades City and, beating their way through the jungle with machetes, shovels and fly swatters, set to work building a road connecting the two cities. When the federal government ran into a snag, Collier offered to finish the road in return for the new county being named after him. He made Everglades City the Collier County seat. The new road, the Tamiami Trail, opened to great fanfare in 1928.

Everglades City is Ernest Hemingway's Florida. It is Key West and the Keys fifty years ago. Hurricane Donna struck in 1960, ripping out the torso of the town, which was older than Naples and too weak financially to rebuild. Everybody conceded that Naples, just up the Gulf and also begun as a fishing village, was the more important trade location at which to build. Coursing the same trail of blood, in 1993 Hurricane Andrew rose from the sea and raged across the southern peninsula of Florida, shredding the land, devouring the crops. Everglades City was left a skeletal carcass lashed to the Gulf of Mexico. Now they don't grow anything there. Except...

My arrival at Everglades City unfortunately coincided with the hatching of the season's first clutches of salt marsh mosquito eggs. As I climbed out of my car tens of thousands of mosquitoes attacked me – big sturdy, black mosquitoes, the kind that when you swat them don't stay flat, they spring back. Bloodsuckers are why people living in the Everglades wear long pants and long sleeves even when it's 98 degrees and 98 percent humidity. Clouds of mosquitoes mounted to near thunderhead status and swarmed outside screen doors, waiting to storm in with me as I entered stores and homes. Inside they'd swarm all over my arms and legs and especially my neck, following me all around, boring into me with their extra-wide-gauge stingers. Everywhere people had placed mosquito coils and incense sticks in desperate attempts to deter the blood-sucking monsters.

I had driven down there to see about a job as the reporter for the local weekly newspaper. The newspaper was one among a string of weeklies put out by a publisher in Naples. I left my car at the Circle K and rode around all day with Jillian, the current reporter, in her air-conditioned Nissan SUV. The mosquitoes swarmed into her car with me. They didn't bother her. In fact, I was more or less introduced as *The-Idiot-Who-Wore-Shorts-on-Her-First-Trip-Ever* to Everglades City. "She's new. The mosquitoes love her." I was merely on an exploratory mission to see if I'd take to the job, not on the first day of my job. I didn't get paid for this. But the mosquitoes took to me, and they feasted.

Jillian bought me lunch at the Rod & Gun Club. She said, "Let's eat outside on the porch overlooking the river." I said, "Okay," but quickly changed my mind when the giant, black marauders ambushed me the instant I stepped onto the screened porch. We chose to eat in the dining room where the mosquitoes weren't quite so dense.

We entered a deep umber vastness of rich, polished paneling, boards and beams outfitting walls, floor and ceiling. The floor of the huge old room heaved and rolled like a deck exposed to years of hot sun, floods and hurricanes. The bronzed arms of the ceiling fans suspended above us silently slipped through the air, and even though the floor-to-ceiling glass doors forming the back wall overlooking the river were closed, the dining room was

remarkably cool and I had drawn my iced tea to a low ebb before I realized there was no air conditioning. The great place sat up high, its high ceilings raising a toast to tropical breezes. The doors to the spacious kitchen were open and no one was in there, nothing was cooking, reminding me of stately homes turned restaurants I had visited in Mexico: we'd hang out for an hour and a half, until five waiters wearing wide grins in dark faces would appear at our table bearing a lavish feast.

After lunch we stood at the huge hotel-type desk in the entrance hall where Jillian paid our bill. The owner took the cash, depositing it into what must have been Barron Collier's original cash register. On one side of the entrance hall a polished wood staircase beckoned as it gracefully arced to a closed door at the top. A draft grazed the back of my neck as it passed along the hall traversing from one screen door to the other at the opposite end. Something got dredged up. Just there at the desk a feeling of *déjà vu* washed over me. I was trying to remember something, but it slithered darkly out of reach. A scene from the movie *Key Largo*: I am waiting for the hurricane to blow in, the river to roil and the palm trees to bend and reach straight out, when we hustle to board up the row of glass doors, run up the sensually-curved staircase and down the hall and enter a back room to find Bacall poised on the edge of a bed, and Bogie, a short man casting a long shadow as he stands over her. Jillian said nobody she knew had ever been up there, that she thought the owner's mother lived up there. I wondered. The feeling gripped me. I couldn't shake it. I half-saw Ernest Hemingway, once a guest there, rise from his fishing boat out of the dark river, saunter across the veranda and right past us to the bar, not knowing he'd been at sea more than a morning, the screen door banging shut as the wind wheeled and shot at his back.

We left the way we came, through the hallway, faded photographs casting sidelong glances at yellowed news clippings hanging about the walls, whispering stories of earlier days. We stepped outside the screen door and across the porch into a sun shower as we descended the broad front steps and crossed the wide lawn to the car.

We distributed newspapers and that evening went to the city council meeting in

the old courthouse, where I nearly dozed off. The mosquitoes, however, kept me awake. The council room was closed and air conditioned, yet was full of the dreaded creatures. "We set 'em free and now we can't round 'em up and get 'em back," said a town official, a white-haired man in his 50s who looked easily persuaded to bend an elbow, who looked more like the persuader, and who allegedly yanked out the asbestos from the old jail building, which he bought and was now trying to sell, and threw the asbestos into the river. Jillian was investigating him.

I got home about 10:30, driving through mosquitoes so thick in the Everglades I couldn't tell whether it was raining or just bugs. I got home in the nick of time, because I could barely see out the windshield. The next morning I found the front of my car plastered completely black with mosquitoes. I took it to the car wash.

The publisher called me and offered me a weekly wage to render even a mosquito searching empty pockets at the grocery checkout. I didn't know whether to be insulted or what. His low valuation of my writing talent left me stunned; I said I'd think about it. I still am.

Jillian wanted out of the reporter job. She had bigger fish to fry. On my plate stood indefatigable mosquitoes, late nights and long drives, and low pay. On the side steamed a stew of small-town politics and a river seasoned with asbestos served up in a smoking cannabis blind of good ol' boys. I sensed my journalism jaunt could cast a long shadow onto future tables, mainly my own. I liked a white cloth.

I'd sure like to stumble into Ernest at the bar, though. I'd pull up a stool next to him. Was he privy to what the walls whisper, what went on upstairs? A coupla drinks and he might tell.

Everglades City remains lurking in my veins, on my mind and in my senses: the old buildings that smell faintly of mildew and orange blossoms; the cast of the place, those scents mingling with the heat and humidity and mosquitoes, the soft air, the gentle breezes, linger with me, hauntingly, like a sweet refrain shared with a long-ago lover. From over my shoulder its shadow looms before me still. ■