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Requiem for the Fort Gates

Ferry Road

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Dr. Archie Carr

Micanopy, FL

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Dear Archie:

Forty-five years ago, you took a group of us new UF graduate students on a Community Ecology class field trip to the Ocala National Forest. Along the way, we stopped in the town of Salt Springs for soft drinks and gas. While standing in the parking lot, in front of our caravan of vehicles, you wove a story about John and William Bartram and their travels on the St. Johns River, in the mid-1700s. You talked about Bartram's biographer, Francis Harper, and Bartram's descriptions of fountains of erupting spring water; you described the unique scrub habitats, with their yellow-flowered tree cacti, scarlet-flowered coral bean, scrub lizards, sand skinks, short-tailed

snakes, and the area's Pleistocene history. At that time, I was a 29-year old from Baltimore. The only thing I knew of the Bartrams was their name, as the label applied to the zoology building on the University of Florida campus. We spent every Tuesday afternoon that quarter in Bartram Hall attending your class; Thursdays were field trip days...the best part of the class. Archie, I know you passed from this world almost thirty years ago now, but your spirit and words have burned brightly within me all this time.

I continue to return to the Ft. Gates Ferry Road. With each visit, I am amazed by the diversity of plants and plant communities, the accessibility of rare scrub animals, and the rich cultural heritage. Surprises always await the traveler along this sand road...be it a chance-encounter with mama Florida black bear and her cub, or cat tracks in the sand along the

road shoulder (too big for a bobcat), and, Archie, you were exactly right... the Ft. Gates Ferry Road was and continues to be a very special place.

I have learned much more about the Bartrams and their contributions to Florida natural history since that in the forest. I studied John's field notes from their first trip to the St. Johns River in 1765-1766, William's travelogues from his solo second trip in 1774 (published in his Travels in 1791), pondered WB's drawings, and read the Bartram correspondence with notable plant enthusiasts on both side of the Atlantic. I have even published a book with Thomas Hallock, Matt Jackson, and Dean Campbell about the Bartrams on the St. Johns River.

This spring, a group of local naturalists joined together to honor this wilderness. We began an inventory of its plants, animals, and cultural resources in March 2015. Together, we hope to document rare species and experience this landscape. I have included an edited version of our field notes from this adventure. I thought you might find some useful information among these ramblings...these findings are another piece of your many continuing legacies. Thank you, Archie.

Best Regards,

Chico

A Disturbance in the Force...

"We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect." Quote from Aldo Leopold, Foreword to A Sand County Almanac: And Sketches Here and There (1949).

I am troubled... my mind frets over an article that appeared in this morning's Palatka Daily News (15 May 2015). I pace while I wait for our group of naturalists to make the 10-minute ferry crossing from the east side of the River. I can't believe the news that Putnam County commissioners want to asphalt Ft. Gates Ferry Road in southern Putnam County. This sandy trek slices through northeastern part of the Ocala National Forest, from US 19 to the ferry landing, an area still unimpeded by urban sprawl. This area may have even felt the foot-falls of William Bartram, as he searched beyond the Salt Springs basin in 1774. Paving FR 29 with asphalt is a bad idea that will forever change this road's unique character, and we will lose another piece of our rural heritage.

The surrounding forests along the Ft. Gates Ferry Road are homes to indigo snakes, scrub jays, and red cockaded woodpeckers (all Federally-Listed Threatened species), Florida sandhill cranes, short-tailed snakes, gopher tortoises (all Florida-Listed Threatened species), Florida gopher frogs, Florida mice, scrub lizards, Bachman and savanna sparrows, Florida black bear,

and bobcats (all Vulnerable wildlife). We believe that paving the road will lead to increased wildlife road mortality and produce a significant rise in ambient vehicular noise, particularly when large caravans of motorcycles, wander this road. Excessive noise will impact wildlife visibility, interrupt species behavior, and affect hunting efforts. Rainfall runoff can also leach toxic chemicals from the asphalt into sensitive wetlands and Lake Laura, thereby impacting the viability of these unique wetlands. The proposed road development can potentially damage unlocated historic sites and impede the U.S. Forest Service's abilities to use fire as a forestry management tool. The bottomline... these environmental impacts will compromise the quality of this rural legacy.

I am standing at the shoreline. My attention continues to float with the transparent water of the St. Johns River as it laps against the shore. The rippled sand bottom shows through the strong tea-color river water, while a light breeze stir the surface out beyond the protected shallows. I just can't believe that Putnam County will receive 2.2 million dollars from the state of Florida to develop of this backwoods byway, with the notion that a new hard-surface road would bring more tourist dollars to southern Putnam County. Nonetheless, my beliefs run counter to this perception! I bet touring people are more apt to travel an unimproved road at their

own pace through wild Florida, than to drive lickity-split down yet another paved county road, with little chance of encountering the area's local wild charm.

My wait ends as I spot Jim and Carol's Sage-Green Sienna van atop the small ferry as it approaches about mid-stream. The primitive-looking water craft, pushed by a small tugboat named Too Wendy, lands about five minutes later. The push boat, a converted 18-foot Sharpie sailboat, built about 1910, is attached to the rusting barge by a unique umbilicus that looks much like a boat trailer hitch. The hitch swivels as the two crafts meet the dock, allowing the push craft, with its diesel inboard, to shift position in order to face in the opposite direction for the return trip. After pulling off the barge, Jim parks his van near the Florida Black Bear Scenic Byway marker, while his two companions, Carol Mac and Steve, walk ashore. We assemble to make plans for today's adventures, and of course, our usual promise to break at noon for lunch at the Square Meal in Salt Springs.

History of the Ft. Gates Ferry

The site of the ferry crossing was first established as an outpost by the British on the west side of the St. Johns River in 1780, just a few years after William Bartram's 1774-visit to the St. Johns River country. Another fort was supposedly established near this landing in 1837 by General Thomas S. Jessup, as part of the

territorial defenses during the Second Seminole War. However, there are questions based on early maps and newspaper accounts as to their precise positions. The Indian fort was named for Lieutenant Colonel William Gates, a veteran of the War of 1812, War with Mexico, Second Seminole War, and later the Civil War.

Ferry operations began here in 1854. The ferry was later used by the Confederates to transport soldiers and supplies across the river. The South's occupation of the site ended in March 1865, with the capture of the ferry crossing and the burning of the nearby Marshall Plantation on Heather Island, by Union troops of the 48th New York Infantry Regiment, stationed at Palatka.

The current ferry began functioning in 1914 and is now the oldest still in operation in Florida. The landings are located between Lake George and Little Lake George near Fruitland Cove. The ferry is currently operated by the Ft. Gates Ferry-Gateway Fish Camp on the east side of the River, with the current Captain Dale having guided his improved Sharpie across the St. Johns for more than a decade. The ferryman is fascinating... Engaging him, on one of our trips across, we learned that the push-boat is powered by a large diesel Chrysler inboard. He tells us that it sank during Hurricane Gladys in 1968 and as a result, it was out of commission for months. The ferry resumed operation after the boat was refloated and has

been in regular service since then. It operates daily except for Tuesdays (and windy days) at a cost of \$10 per vehicle. The remote route between Salt Springs and Pomona Park with its quaint ferry was branded the "World's Worst Commute" in a contest, promoted by a brand of motor oil, won by a Salt Springs resident in 2009. Even Paul Newman, the actor, was brought to this out-of-the-way place in a 1982 photo-shoot for a car commercial.

Ft. Gates Ferry Road Transect

Let's get acquainted... we are Carol (Mac) and Jim Macdonald from Satsuma, Sandy and Jack Kokernoot from Palatka, Steve Hale from San Mateo, Dave Hall from Gainesville, and Dick Franz (alias Chico, in Archie's lingo) from Putnam Hall. Carol Foil (F), a keen birder from Satsuma, joined our little group, on the 29 April 2015 trip, to check for scrub jays and other birds along our route. She brings to our little group an incredible knowledge of the local avifauna. We are the Gang of Seven who have the same affliction: wandering wild places looking for native plants and animals, and discovering cultural artifacts that speak to an area's past land use practices. Spouses, Jim and Jack, are sporadic field participants and are encouraged to bring books and lawn chairs...just in case. Both Carol Mac and Sandy are keen observers, noticing often the tiniest blossoms on some obscure plant, or a pigmy rattlesnake coiled in the leaf litter

under that rare plant. Sandy our group's photographer, who chronicles our passage through the pinewoods. Her splendid photographic talents document the plants and beasts who find themselves in our path. The fourth member of this entourage is Steve, a retired archaeologist from Georgia Southern University, who acts as our reminder of past histories of the area, and who is an excellent naturalist in his own right. Our botanist-friend, David, has had decades of field experiences and is our go-to person for plant IDs. Dave's fully illustrated book (with two other collaborators), *Flowering Plants of Florida and the Southeast*, is our constant companion in the field. Dave, a busy forensic botanist, wanders with us as his schedule permits. And finally Dick, that's me, the recorder for this enterprise...a retiree from the Florida Museum of Natural History in Gainesville. Together, we are an ardent gang of Florida naturalists... like the Brother Gardeners in Bartrams' day.

The group's current efforts center on a 7.2 mile stretch of the Ft. Gates Ferry Road (FR 29) in the Ocala National Forest. This sand road exemplifies a continuous transect through three prominent pineland landscapes that the Bartrams experienced during their treks in North Florida. We start at the river's edge, barely 5 feet above sea level, and follow it as it ascends sand ridges to about 100 feet near the town of Salt Springs. This journey takes us through some remaining wild lands in

the state, albeit not pristine. We travel the graded sand road by foot and vehicle through habitats of river-side hammocks, low pine flatwoods, wetlands, longleaf pine sandhills, successional and mature Florida scrubs, and eventually the Salt Springs basin (Bartram's Six-mile Spring), a National Forest Recreation Area.

The following notations are edited excerpts from my field notes taken during several visits to Fort Gates in March-July, 2015. Each field account is dated and the mileages (in both directions) and elevations are recorded to anchor our natural history observations in an appropriate geographic context. The field notes are organized from the lowest elevation at the river, uphill to the highest elevations in the vicinity of US 19. My writing style attempts to reflect those of William Bartram in his *Travels* and Gilbert White, *The Natural History of Selborne*.

From My Field Scribbles....

0.0/7.2 mi, 5 feet el (14 April 2015). The ferry landing structure on the west bank of the River consists of a 25-foot plank ramp and a 12-foot metal plate that together protrudes out into the St. Johns River where it greets the incoming ferry. A wooden bulkhead along one side of the ramp extends out into the River beyond the ramp for at least another 25 feet, which allows the incoming barge to align itself with the landing structure. A hand-cranked wheel and its

attendant cables raise and lower the plate, which provides a safe approach and get-away for barge traffic. The barge, push boat, and landing structures are ingenious contraptions, well worth the trip just to experience this piece of historic inventiveness.

Looking north, or down-river, we see a house with its yard stacked high with brand-new orange crab traps with their buoys, being readied for the next harvest. Blue crabs, like several other marine creatures, venture up the River to at least Volusia Blue Springs. Just south of the landing (up-river) lies Ft. Gates, a small village with its large vintage homes, along the river's edge, in stark contrast to the modest fishermen homes at the landing. The Ft. Gates village portrays its roots with its Victorian architecture with most of the houses well cared for. In the yard of one house there are the village's old school house and a large bell purported to have been wrung to alert the ferry operators on the other side of the River that people at Ft. Gates needed their services. Part of the village sets on a large ancient shell midden, which is across the St. Johns River from the Mt. Royal and Drayton Island mounds that the Bartrams visited during their excursions on the river.

At the landing, shrubs of false indigo, willows, and wax myrtle crowd the natural shoreline; red maples, Florida elm, water oaks, and sweet gum growing farther up the bank shade their at-shore botanical brethren. We

intercept a small male common snapping turtle on the landing headed downhill toward the river. Each of us examine its formidable gapping mouth, strong front and hind legs, and long tail. I insisted on searching its 6-inch carapace and underside for leeches before allowing its final plunge into the river. The turtle leech fauna is not well studied here in Florida, and several parasitic leech species are possible. The body is declared Leech Free! Upon release, it immediately scoots away from us heading for the water. Common snappers are numerous in the River and surrounding wetlands, but not so the larger alligator snappers, which do not occur in the St. Johns drainage.

0.3/6.9 mi, 15 feet el. (28 May 2015). Junction of FRs 29, 66, and 74G. Possible site of historic Ft. Gates. A pair of Florida sandhill cranes leisurely cross in front of us on FR 29, just west of the crossroads. They head into a recently burned pine area on the south side of the road. Turning north on FR 66, we encounter several grassy ponds and loblolly bayheads. One of the ponds encroaches upon the edge of the road, presenting its garnish of flowering loblolly bays, pink-flowered sabatia (or rosegentian), Leconte's flatsedges, and hatpin mats.

1.2/5.8 mi, 16 feet el. (14 April 2015). Grassy ponds are common across the flatwoods habitats on both sides of FR 29 within a mile of the River. John Bartram remarked that geese occurred only in these grassy ponds

up in the pinelands, while ducks were seen along the river. No geese today, probably none for decades. Geese stopped wintering routinely in Florida in the 1800s, when farmers in Maryland, Virginia and North Carolina began leaving considerable amounts of corn in their fields during the fall harvest. This novel source of grain meant plenty of winter forage for these birds, so they had no further need to venture into Florida.

Parking at Lake Laura, Jim and Jack are left to their own devices. Jim promptly steps in fresh poop...not from coyote, bear, or panther, nothing exotic...just plain, old, grain-fed dog poop! So, Jim has much to do cleaning off his white shoes, while we traipse off following Sandy's lead into THE BUSH. She follows an animal trail through charred slash pine trunks and nearly continuous growths of knee-high shrubs, rekindled to vivid green vitality, since a controlled fire burnt through here, probably within the last several months. Sandy takes us also through open patches in the otherwise ubiquitous shrub cover. These open spaces sponsor regrowth of bunchgrasses, particularly wiregrass, as well as blackroot and other native plants. These spaces harken back to the original grassy landscapes with scattered pines of the more primeval flatwoods that William Bartram described as "perfectly level plain which appears...as a charming green meadow, thinly planted with low spreading Pine trees (*Pinus palustri*)."

Carol Mac, moving slowly in front of

me, turns to ask "these blooms... are they a kind of *lyonia*?" Yes, indeed they are! But what species? The large bell-shaped flowers are porcelain-white and crowd as singles or small clusters along the new stem. They are certainly not *fetterbush*, which grow all around us, parading their smaller pink to rose-colored blooms, but maybe one of the *staggerbush* species. (Dave Hall, where are you when we need you!) These are the plants that WB called "Andromeda" in his *Travels*. Moving on, Carol's next shrub inquiry has pale bluish green leaves...with undersides of the leaves having tiny golden resinous droplet. She thinks *sparkleberry* since they sparkle in the sunlight. But no, consulting Wunderlin and Hanson (2011), we deem them to be dwarf *huckleberries*. We also encounter *gallberries* in flower and shiny *blueberries* with ripening fruits (with a quick scribble in my notes reminding us to return here in a couple of week for the harvest). As we approach the pond, we are greeted with a cacophony of odd sounds clicking cricket frogs, roaring bullfrogs, and deep grunts of pig frogs.

We push through the dense stands of fringing saw palmettos to reach the open margins of the grassy depression. Fortunately for us, the palmettos, like the other shrubs on that side, are stunted by recent fires. Upon entering the intimacy of the pond space, Sandy immediately sinks to her ankles in the mushy soil to photograph the carpet of white-topped

hatpins, growing in profusion along its margins. In amongst the hatpins are scores of dwarf and pink sundews, both in bloom, and patches of contrasting green sphagnum moss. Sundews are insectivorous plants that capture their arthropod prey with viscid, glandular, bug-catching hairs, distributed along the top surfaces of their leaves. The bugs provide added nutrients to supplement the plants' needs in these mineral-poor acidic soils. Maidencane grass spreads from the shoreline out across the pond except in areas of deeper water toward the center in what appears to be flooded alligator holes. White waterlily blossoms float on the open water. Animal trails crisscross the flooded maidencane, probably paths of Florida round-tailed muskrats, although we do not see any nests or feeding platforms. Scattered black gums and an occasional stunted slash pine stand with their feet wet along the margins of the pond. Steve is the first to notice the occasional broken Herty terra-cotta turpentine pot and an old cat-faced tree stump along the pond margin, evidence for previous turpentine activities at the site. None of the live slash pines in this stand show any cat-face scarring. But, these artifacts obviously document a-once-prosperous naval stores industry here in the distant past. As we move along the western edge of the pond, we discover a second pond, smaller in size, also circular, with a similar vegetable content. Reaching the other side of the two ponds, we find a mature stand of longleaf pines with a

carpet of wiregrass. This distant pine forest is separated from the ponds by a dense fringe of mature saw palmettos, more than head high. What a treat for me to be in such majestic forest landscapes.

1.3/5.9 mi, 19 feet el. (14 April 2015). We walk back across FR 29 to the parking area at Lake Laura where we have left the vehicles. Meeting up, we are at once amazed at Jim's brilliant white sneakers. "So what did you boys do while we were gone?" Sandy inquires. Turning to Jim, Carol Mac asks, "Did you get bored?" Both men assured us, "No Way! We had a great time...telling stories of past adventures growing up in Miami and Ft. Lauderdale."

Lake Laura is a different sort of place from the grassy ponds we just left on the other side of the road. Round in its shape, deep enough to be mostly open water, and maybe four or five hundred feet across, obviously a sinkhole pond. We wonder who Laura is anyway! Had she lived by the pond in some distant past? One possibility, so Steve discovered, is Mrs. Laura Monroe Taylor Pope, who had her winter home "The Palmettoes" in Ft. Gates. She and her husband, J. Monroe Pope, a wealthy manufacturer from Syracuse, New York, bought the house from the original owners, Margaret and Sebra Hammond in 1887. Mrs. Pope passed away at The Palmettoes in 1922, at the age of 85. The house, which still stands, has become an iconic Victorian home in

this tiny village. The house continues to present a spectacular manifestation of late 1800s affluence. This unique edifice on the river compels river-goers to slow-down and move closer to the shore for a better look.

The flatwoods surrounding the lake had been burned within the last month or so of our first visit. The shrubs have not time to regrow, although the saw palmettos have already responded to the fires with a massive flower display. The tiny 3-petaled white flowers of the palmetto, borne on long branched spikes, will produce drupes of large black fruits that are food for wildlife. These fruits are also purported to have healing properties by the alternative herbal medicine community.

1.7/5.5 mi, 20 feet el. (11 June 2015). Returning to Ft. Gates, Dave and I decide to drive the road one more time. There are a number of plants that I had seen on a previous trip and I wanted Dave's IDs. We descend the upland ridges onto the plain, we hear pinewoods treefrogs calling from the flatwoods. Their distinctive er-er-er rain-calls resounds throughout the slash pine forest. My troublesome plants begin appearing in the wet roadside ditches. The ones giving me the most difficulty are two kinds of sandworts: one is low-growing, about 18 inches, with dense masses of yellow flowers and extremely short, needlelike leaves, and the other is taller with fewer yellow flowers. Parking along the

edge of the road, Dave and I emerge rather stiffly from the Honda. Dave puzzles over them for a minute, then pulls out his tattered copy of an early version of Wunderlin, which he has been annotating for decades. "Dick, the shorter one is Atlantic St. Johnswort, and the taller one, Roundpod St. Johnswort." I am familiar with the first, but not this particular growth-form. Walking along the ditch, we see extensive patches of Leconte's flatsedges, coinwort, and pale meadow beauty. To our astonishment, we also encounter a single salt-marshmallow plant, with its 2-inch, delicate pink flowers, growing also in the ditch. After this brief diversion, we predictably end up at the Square Meal in Salt Springs for taco-salad.

2.3/4.9 mi, 25 feet el. (24 May 2015). Steve returns to FR 29 on his own to drive a jeep trail that veers to the south of the ferry road. This track follows the 25-foot contour that wraps around the edge of a large wetlands that connects with Muddy Cove on the St. Johns River. Steve is interested in exploring the scarp boundary between scrub and the adjacent wetlands. He is also searching for Heather Island and the extinct town of Syracuse Island. I wonder if this town name has anything to do with the Popes who were from Syracuse, New York. By the way, islands, in the jargon of the locals, are patches of sandhills or hardwood hammocks in an otherwise sea of scrub or flatwoods. Steve notes that the area south of FR 29 is "very different" from the places we have

seen farther uphill. He reports "large mats of the ubiquitous gopher apple with their distinct green leaves" in the scrub areas, as well as large areas of big-flowered pawpaw that form understories under live oak trees. Steve also hears the sounds of scurrying Florida scrub lizards and is able to "...focus on where the noise stops. There he spots them. The lizards seem to dart real fast and then freeze." The scrub lizard is an endemic reptile that occurs only in scrub habitats of central Florida and in some coastal scrubs along the lower east coast.

FRs 16, 16A, and 47 (5 Jun2015). Steve and I meet at Square Meal, where I leave my car, and we take off in his 4-wheel drive, to retrace his previous jeep trip on May 24th. It had rained a few days earlier, and there are puddles in the low spots on the road. We stop at a pond in a flatwoods near Salt Springs run. It is a small pool with white waterlily blossoms in its center. The grassy shores are thick with pale meadow beauty, large-flowered rosegiant, and a yellow 5-petaled sandweed. The next stop is at a small pond basin in a recently burned area, the pond is dry and covered in a fresh growth of maidencane. A lone loblolly bay stands in its middle, dropping white flowers. Next, we stop at a bayhead that crosses the muddy track. Trees are mostly loblolly bays, including a true giant of at least 15 inches in diameter. The bayhead stream had stopped flowing weeks before, but there

remains a series of isolated pools, thick with flooded sphagnum moss. We turn around at this point and back-track to FR 16, which brings us up onto higher ground. We stop at what appears to be an old hog shelter or maybe a hog trap. The map lists this place as Syracuse Island, but other than the pig pen we see no evidence of the old town. This is the site where Steve previously reported scrub lizards, gopher apples, and large-flowered pawpaws. As he noted, we find all three here in great abundance! We advance farther toward the ferry road, pushing the jeep through thick scrub, and for the first time we see substantial numbers of scrub hickories. We finally pop out on the jeep road that connects at the FRs 29 and 62 cross-roads.

2.9/4.3, 35 feet el. (29 April 2015). We locate a steep-sided sinkhole depression on the USGS 7.5 min Quad Map immediately along the NW side of FR 29. This small pond basin is embedded in a sandy slope that rises out of the flatwoods plain. This sandy slope with the pond is vegetated with Florida scrub vegetation, much of which has been recently cut-over and site-prepared. The remainder of the scrub site is recovering from a previous harvest and is slowly growing back to sand pine scrub cover.

We had originally targeted this stretch of road on the first trip in mid-April as a site for future exploration because of the pond and its associated successional scrubs. On this initial

trip, Steve and I thought we saw a Florida scrub jay fly across the road and into the roadside coppice. Florida scrub jays are federally threatened species and restricted to early successional scrub and scrub-like habitats in central Florida. Finding them in this scrub would be no great surprise, but we suspect that they have not been reported previously from along this section of the road.

But first the pond... After parking along the road shoulder at the pond edge, Jim and I push our way into a thicket of small trees, shrubs, catbriers, and grape vines to gain access to the pond's interior. We descend the steep embankment to the water's edge. Steve and Carol M follow us down the slope, while Carol F moves amongst the surrounding underbrush, where she reports the presence of Great-crested Flycatcher, Eastern Towhee, White-eyed Vireo, and Northern Parula. The pool of water at the bottom of the depression is about 20 feet across, its margins marshy, its bottom mucky, and its depth not probed. Like the grassy ponds, lily pads and their accompanying white blossoms adorn the open-water portion of the pool, suggesting a water depth of several feet. The first dip with the net at the water's edge produces handfuls of mosquito fish, transforming leopard and gopher frog tadpoles, and lots of predatory insects. The mosquito fish probably were deliberately introduced into this pond to control the perceived threat of mosquitoes. Because none of

us are prepared for immersion, we choose to stay dry, and come back another time prepared for more radical dipping. The pond habitat looks also perfect for rare striped newt larvae. Jim says, "Next time, let's bring boots and a seine," is duly noted.

Back up on the road, we gather for a moment to reckon, then spread out along the road, with some members of the group watching for scrub jays and other birds from the road edge. Jim and I push back into the scrub vegetation looking for rare plants. This landscape mirrors observations offered by WB in his descriptions of the Florida scrub about Salt Springs "...an endless wild desert, the upper stratum of the earth of which is a fine white sand, with small pebbles, and at some distance appears entirely covered with low trees and shrubs of various kinds, and of equal height..."

Our first discoveries along the road include scrub hollies in bloom, flowering tree cacti, sandhill beargrass with 5-foot tall flower stalks and developing buds, several lupine plants with maturing seed pods, Florida rosemary, garberia, lyonias with ochre-colored terminal leaves, a black racer, and numerous six-lined racerunners (lizards) dashing over the hot sand. The tree cacti hold a special attraction for me. It was part of Archie's conversation with us students a long time back. The tree cactus was also described by WB in Travels (at Salt Springs), "The Cactus opuntia is

very tall, erect and large, and strong enough to bear the weight of a man: some are seven or eight feet high: the whole plant or tree seems to be formed of great oval comprised leaves or articulations; those near the earth continually encrease, magnify and indurate as the tree advances in years, and at length lose the bright green colour and glossy surface of their youth, acquiring a ligneous quality....nearly destitute of aculei, or those fascicles of barbed bristles which are in such plenty on the common dwarf Indian fig." WB further commented that, "The large polypetalous flowers are produced on the edge of the last years leaves, are of a fine splendid yellow, and are succeeded by very large pear shaped fruits, of a dark livid purple when ripe..." Wunderlin and Hanson do not recognize this morphological form of *Opuntia* cactus as a valid species, but in our minds it is quite distinct, not only by its upright stature, but also by the bark-like scales on their lower pads and unique flowers.

We note a second WB plant, a woody aster, common name garberia, which he found at Salt Springs. This Florida endemic is common along the shoulders of the Ft. Gates road. WB called this species, *Cacalia*, and provided this detailed description, "...evergreen shrub about six or eight feet high, the leaves are generally somewhat cuniform, fleshy and of a pale whitish green colour...ascendent branches terminate with large tufts or corymba of rose-coloured flowers."

Francis Harper considered WB's *Cacalia* to be *Garberia heterophylla*, a perennial that blooms in late fall. The fact that WB found it in bloom suggests that he had been at Salt Springs in late October or early November, which runs counter to some historic accounts of his time in Florida. When in-flower, this woody bush is a major butterfly attractor.

The birding group, walking the road, encountered four Florida scrub jays, apparently a family unit, occupying this patch of successional scrub. Steve and I guessed right on that earlier jay sighting. I am so grateful to have Carol F on this trip to verify our suspicions. Not bad for a snake guy and an archaeologist, both of whom spend their time staring at the ground. (As ornithologist JC Dickinson, former Director of the Florida Museum of Natural History, once quipped, "DAMMIT FRANZ! DON'T YOU EVER LOOK UP?")

Scrub Jays were first reported by WB on his trip on the Trader's Path across the interior of Florida. He did not report them around Salt Springs. Harper noted that WB's site for the jays was a small patch of scrub, surrounded by "...extensive, level, hard, wet savanna..." (WB: 172), near what today is the site of the former lumber-town of Rodman (on SR 310), north of the Ocklawaha River. WB commented concerning his sightings, "In such clumps and covarts are to be seen several kinds of birds, particularly a species of jay; they are

generally of an azure blue colour, have no crest or tuft of feathers on the head, nor are they so large as the great crested blue jays of Virginia.” (WB: 172)

3.0/4.2 mi, 67 feet el. (9 May 2015). On our third visit to the upland pond two weeks later, we wander the clear-cut on its back side. This area had been site-prepped by roller-chopping, following the initial sand pine removal. This cut-over scrub is fascinating...it seems like we had stepped into the path of an EF5 tornado that blasted most everything out of existence. Based on previous experiences, however, we know that this condition is temporary and that the scrub would return. Clear-cutting with control-burning or roller-chopping in scrub mimics the effects of a catastrophic fire, all of which resets the clock for scrub succession. However, roller-chopping can have devastating effects on ground-nesting birds and unique upland amphibians, reptiles, and invertebrates, when bulldozers drag huge rollers with cutting blades, chopping and crushing everything in their path.

We want to search in more depth the cut-over to investigate the occurrence of recolonizing scrub plants and the return of scrub animals. As we stroll through this open landscape, we become aware of the numerous scrub plants that had already begun to re-sprout from subsurface root-stock: oaks, staggerbush, hollies, and garberia. Sand pines, all about a foot

tall, were coming back in great profusion on the site. The area shows no signs of recent burns, so we can only assume that the sand pine seedlings are not the result of seed expulsions from heated serotinous cones, the normal condition following fires. The presence of neatly spaced plants also suggests that the pine plants were intentionally planted or from seeds by forestry managers. We see no birds, gopher tortoises, snakes or lizards, except racerunners and very few arthropods.

3.4/3.8 mi, 65 feet el. (9 May 2015). We stop at a jeep trail just north of the junction with FRs 29 and 62. This jeep track continues north whereas FR 29 turns abruptly east. This trail passes through mature sand pine scrub habitat, which after a few hundred yards join the clear-cut that we experienced earlier. Sandhill plants, in particular blooming gopher apples, grow in profusion along the road margins where they presumably receive more direct sunlight and more open soil. Beyond the forest edge, mature even-aged sand pines dominate the canopy. The trunks of sand pines, with DBHs greater than 15 inches, all lean in the same direction, presumably responding to the direction of the strongest prevailing winds. Within the forest, the shrub vegetation becomes quite dense, making our penetration next to impossible; sparse ground-cover, primarily reindeer lichens and some struggling sedges, persist among the shrubs. We wonder why WB did not

mention mature sand pine scrubs in his wanderings about Salt Springs. Maybe this condition with mature sand pine is not natural, but an artifact of active fire suppression and/or forest management practices.

(28 May 2015, 6:05 PM). A female Florida black bear and her cub ambles across FR 29, near the junction with FR 62 in front of my car and disappears into the shrubs. She stands up, peers back at me for an instant and then she is gone.

4.7/2.5 mi, 75 feet el. (30 April 2015). As we ascend the road toward Salt Springs, we encounter a jeep trail that runs east and west from FR 29. This track extends in both directions through maturing longleaf pine forests. This sandhill habitat area is marked with red signs that designate it as a Firewood Cutting Area, which allows citizens to cut hardwoods growing amongst the pines for firewood. This management practice serves to reduce the densities of oaks and improve the pine stand.

When we pull into the jeep road and parked, the group splits up. The two Carols and Steve head east, I go west. Both sides are rolling hills-and-dales, dominated by longleaf pine and wiregrass. WB provided the following description of the sandhills about Salt Springs, "I came to the open forests, consisting of exceeding tall, strait Pines (*Pinus palustris*) that stood at a considerable distance from each other, an almost unlimited plain of grassy savanna... (p. 162)." Then, later when

traveling in the interior of Florida, "...entrance of the extensive Pine forests, in parallel chains of low swelling mounds, called the Sandhills...(p. 174)" We find the Salt Springs' sandhills with tree cacti, bear grasses, big flowered pawpaws, and blackroots, all still with buds or in flower, scattered over the landscape. One species that WB listed for the sandhills around Salt Springs was coontie, "...in open pine forests in tufts or clumps, a large conical strobili disclosing its large coral red fruits, which appears singularly beautiful, amidst the deep green fern-like pinnated leaves (p. 162). None of us find coontie in the sandhills now. As I walk west, I do see a few scattered gopher tortoise burrows beyond the track. I join up later with Carol F and the others who report the great news, "We found Bachman's Sparrows and Pine Sparrows on the other side of the road." These birds, longleaf specialists, have become quite uncommon, a result of intensive forestry practices, particularly conversion to commercial pine plantations and fire suppression.

7.2/0.0 mi. (30 April 2015). Driving out of the forest, we stop at the junction of US 19, SR 316, and NE 142 Place (FR 29), waiting for a break in the stream of north-south bound traffic. To our left (south) of the stop sign, we spy the Salt Springs National Forest Campground with its abundant Airstreams and other RVs. The area to the north is disturbed woodlands...but obviously at one time a well-

developed scrub, probably the area where WB wandered. We need to cross this busy intersection to enter the spacious parking lots of the Dollar General and the Salt Springs strip-mall, where our destination---the Square Meal---and lunch await us. I pull up in front of the restaurant to find Steve conversing with one of the locals....asking who might be a good source for local history. The fellow suggests that we talk with a woman who lives at Norwalk, a tiny community north of Salt Springs (but that needs to wait 'til another trip to the Springs).

Our group walks into the restaurant. All of the tables in the front room are occupied, and we are shown tables in the adjoining dining area. Pushing tables together to accommodate our sizeable crew, we seat ourselves and begin poring over the lunch menu. Soon, a second local gentleman approaches us, seating himself, wanting to support the previous informant's opinion, concerning the Norwalk lady's knowledge of local history. But he quickly comments that when you go see her, make sure to bring extra "hearin-aide" batteries for her. He also reminds us that Lake Laura is full of brown bullhead catfish. And further acknowledges the local legend that Confederate-vintage canons had been dumped into the lake in 1865 by Union soldiers.

We finish our meals and are about to leave, when Jim, with a sparkle in his eye, ever the expert on local carrot

cake and cobbler, suggests, "What about some peach cobbler with ice cream for the road?" We all look at each other...the next thing we knew all of us has cobbler in front of us. Carol F and I, smugly, refrain from the topping of ice cream. We are now ready for the rigors of the next stop...or maybe a nap.

A Dip in Bartram's "Six Mile Spring." (Salt Spring pool elev. 5 feet) (2 July 2015). Our final destination: Salt Springs basin. The entrance to recreation area is located across from Square Meal. This is the same area where Archie introduced me so long ago to John and William Bartram. The Gang's intent this time is to botanizing some, swim a little, have a picnic lunch and relax. We came here to this Ocala National Forest Recreation Area for our final outing, the grand finale, so to speak, to celebrate the termination of the Ft. Gates Road project. We carry Harper's A Naturalists Edition of Travels (published in 1958) and Dave Hall's book as our guides.

Salt Springs has changed since my first visits here in 1971. Gone was the wildness of the surrounding terrain. Wild tangles are replaced by mowed grass, delineated plant beds, sidewalks, fancy restrooms, large parking lot, and an RV Park. The picnic tables are still there, scattered under mature magnolia and oak trees. Cement walls now line the perimeter of the spring pool; the eroding shell midden banks are no longer visible.

The boil seem to lack the forceful energy of yesteryear, snail and mussel populations appear diminished, and an introduced thiarid snail (*Melanoides turricula* from the Philippines) has snuck into the spring run during my absence. This exotic snail is shaped much like the native pleurocerid snail (*Elimia floridensis*), which also occurs at Salt Springs, but longer in length, more robust, reddish spiral bands, less knobby, and very abundant. Large mullet schools, however, still course through the spring pool, popping in and out of the deeper vents, while a few sizeable largemouth bass hang in the vegetation or hid in the shadows of sheltering bedding plane cracks in the limestone floor, waiting to ambush smaller fish. There appears to be more hydrilla and less tapegrass, growing on the rocky substrate; the tapegrass leaves seems more burdened with algal growths than I remember. Things have changed in my 45 years visiting here, which makes me wonder what kinds of changes have occurred since the Bartram stopovers 250 years ago.

My wife, Melanie and I emerge from the cool 72-degree spring water to begin the trek uphill to where the Gang has set up for our noontime repose. Food on the table, ice tea being sipped, lawn chairs are scattered our Gang comfortable and already talking. The conversations drifts slow as Mel and I step into the circle. When were the Bartrams here? Did anyone see flowers or seed pods on the yellow anise shrubs on the

north side of the picnic area? What a perfect day! Dick, check out the exoskeleton of that huge shrimp...what is it? (An alpha male *Macrobrachium* shrimp, I suggest.) I later chime in, with Ft. Gates with churning in my brain, "I wonder how far Billy Bartram penetrated into the surrounding scrublands above the head spring...he must have gotten to at least the edge of the sandy-lands to find coontie, coral bean, beautyberry, tree cacti, garberia, and Hercules Club." We check with Harper: it fits...

All of us had speculations too about a large frame house that stood in a wooden area just beyond the picnic and swimming area at Salt Springs. Is that house part of the park? What's it doing there? Beautiful, but abandoned and quickly becoming dilapidated. It's a shame to see it unused. With a quick online search, we discovered that Daniel Morgan constructed this spacious framed house of heart pine and cypress at Lake Kerr in the early 1900s. Later, Columbus Townsend, after Mr. Morgan's death, purchased the place and moved it overland to the south side of Salt Springs. It was a huge effort... apparently involving felling large pine trees and laying them in front of the house. The pines acted as rollers, which enabled teams of oxen and cattle to pull the 10-room structure to the Salt Spring site, where it still stands...a little haunted looking.

We finish our lunch and pull back from the table. So ends a delightful morning and lunch with our adventurist friends. But before splitting, we all had one question in mind, "so where do we start next?" "More wildlands and rural byways to explore..." we all chime in. Carol Mac suggested, "Dunn's Creek State Park..."

The End of the Road

Roads mean access. They promote travel from one place to another. They often lead to a destination. Roads connect families and friends, insure routes to work places, enable commerce, and fuel our economy. They can be two-, four-, or more lanes to move traffic quickly, and hopefully safely. They have purpose...

But, what about roads that pass through the rural countryside or wildlands? These roads have a very different demeanor. They may or may not be paved with asphalt. These byways often end up at someone's home or farm, at a crossroads in a small community, or a recreation area. Rural roads have restorative powers to calm the maddening crowd. They are an alternative to faster roads and faster life styles.

Ft Gates Ferry Road is one of these restful rural routes. It passes through a section of an extensive wildland in the Ocala National Forest between Salt Springs and the River. It is a sand road with no development, no houses,

or no conveniences. The road ends at the St. Johns River bank and the quaint village of Ft. Gates, with probably less than a dozen homes. Travelers have two options at this point, turn around and retrace their trip back to U.S. 19, or wait for the ferry to retrieve them. It is a quiet drive, except for calling eagles, scrub jays and crows, the sound of breezes in the pines, and the occasional thumps of vehicles negotiating washboard sections of the road. All of these factors slow people down, allowing them time to appreciate the scenery, the unforgiving character of this wonderful dirt road, and the wildlife that may cross the road in front of them.

What happens if this backwoods road is paved? First, traffic will increase, vehicle speeds will escalate, noise levels will surge, and most importantly the contemplative experience will be greatly diminished. Faster roads kill more wildlife, too. Many wildlife species that occur along the road are considered rare and protected by state or federal regulations. Do we want another road where people will speed, or one that slows our pace? It is up to you. Make your wishes known to the Ocala National Forest manager and the Florida and Putnam County DOTs. A letter to your legislators in Tallahassee might also be a good idea.



Map by Melanie Wegner