

## Swamp Peddlers

A review by Christopher F. Meindl, *University of South Florida*

*The Swamp Peddlers: How Lot Sellers, Land Scammers, and Retirees Built Modern Florida and Transformed the American Dream*

By Jason Vuic

Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press

254 pp, maps, photographs, index, 2021

Jason Vuic has had quite the path as a writer. His Serbian grandparents immigrated to the U.S. more than a century ago, so it is not surprising that Vuic developed a love of eastern European history, eventually earning a Ph.D. in the subject, and teaching for a time at Bridgewater College in Virginia. After moving to Fort Worth, Texas with his spouse (who teaches at TCU) several years ago, Vuic has written a handful of books. His first monograph detailed the Yugo, sometimes derided as one of the worst cars ever made, and his second book is a history of the 1984 winter Olympics in Sarajevo. No surprise there. Yet Vuic grew up in Punta Gorda, an old southwest Florida town turned retirement haven, and he clearly “still has sand in his shoes.” Accordingly, his third book examines the first awful years of the Tampa Bay Buccaneers pro football team (*The Yucks!*), and this, his most recent title, *The Swamp Peddlers*.

Vuic’s latest book consists of a brief introduction, seven mostly chronological chapters that address the sordid history of land subdivision and sales throughout peninsular Florida from the 1950s into the 1970s, plus a brief epilogue. Vuic builds on previous scholarship that details big, often unethical, land selling and development schemes.<sup>1</sup> Thirty pages of end notes contain hundreds of references to investigative reporting in newspapers as well as a handful of other documents plus several interviews. There are nearly two dozen illustrations and four very useful maps. Indeed, one map identifies more than 20 of the largest “communities” established by swamp peddlers in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. Vuic discusses many of these although he devotes more attention to southwest Florida.

*The Swamp Peddlers* title is a bit of a misnomer. It accurately describes the book's discussion of land sales in several places, but much of Vuic's story ranges far beyond wetland environments to include discussion of several high, dry, and sandy patches of the Sunshine State. The volume focuses on what historian Gary Mormino calls Florida's Big Bang: the time period when Florida's population exploded from 2.7 million in 1950, to 9.7 million in 1980. (Our state has more than 22 million people today.) Several land companies capitalized on, and drove, the avalanche of humanity moving to Florida by buying huge tracks of land (often former cattle ranches), and then subdividing and selling millions of individual homesites—some of which remained under water for much of the year, and many of which were purchased (until 1968) through a mail order installment plan, sight unseen. If this story line sounds familiar, it should: Florida went through a similar period in the 1920s when unscrupulous hucksters sold wet land in the Everglades and elsewhere "by the gallon."

Vuic begins with the Miami-based Mackle brothers (Elliott, Robert, and Frank Jr.), who had been building houses in suburban south Florida since the 1940s. They soon discovered that selling empty lots was even more lucrative, so they added a mail order land selling scheme to their business, ultimately creating General Development Corporation (GDC) in 1954. General Development bought big chunks of land and sold it off, one small home site at a time. According to Vuic, the Mackels bought land by the acre and sold it by the foot. They eventually built roads, drainage canals, and even some utilities—although most of the houses in these developments depended on septic tanks to dispose of household wastewater. More than two hundred less-than-scrupulous players entered the fray including Jack and Leonard Rosen and their Gulf American Land Corporation. After some initial cooperation with the Rosens, the Mackles shed GDC in the 1962, partly because they objected to high pressure and unethical sales practices and partly because they wanted to build houses and "communities." One can use many different adjectives to describe these sprawling blobs of development throughout peninsular Florida, but "community" is not one of them. Because land companies marketed property (and dreams) to retirees, for many years, there were few if any jobs in these places: just miles and miles of roads (and sometimes canals) with relatively few houses on them. The title of Vuic's chapter six summarizes this neatly: Generally Defective Communities. You don't have to take Vuic's word

for it. Drive though southwest Florida's Cape Coral, North Port, Rotonda West, and Golden Gate; or venture forty miles north of Tampa to see Spring Hill for yourself; or, on Florida's east side, wander through Palm Coast, Port Malabar/Palm Bay, and Port St. Lucie. Sure, there are schools, strip malls, and shopping centers galore, but no real "town center." Moreover, as Nicholas Foreman reminds us in a recent issue of this journal, development of places like Cape Coral did irreparable environmental damage.<sup>2</sup>

It is easy to be outraged by the cast of shady characters who used half-truths and outright lies to sell land (some of it unusable) to hundreds of thousands of people—but Vuic correctly suggests that there is blame to go around. First, Florida's elected officials did virtually nothing to stop the worst abuses until the 1970s. Second, Vuic points out that swamp peddlers succeeded by tapping people's greed and gullibility. Many Florida land dealers thought their customers were suckers, and they were. They were often average folks who believed sales pitches claiming that they too could become well off by purchasing a lot they never saw in a new community that did not exist, and then accepting as fact that their "investment" would quickly grow in value. Except this is not what happened to many Florida land buyers in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. Many people paid greatly inflated prices for unusable land that years later they still could not use or sell for anything close to their original purchase price.

Jason Vuic does not break significant new ground in modern Florida history with this book. Rather, the real value of *The Swamp Peddlers* lies in exposing the depth and breathtaking scope of Florida land hawkers in the few decades after World War II. Their activities contrast sharply with several of Florida's more recently developed new urbanist communities that attempt to embrace principles such as compact development, walkability, town centers, several public parks and open spaces, and so forth. Indeed, southwest Florida's Babcock Ranch bills itself as the state's first solar powered community. As peninsular Florida fills with people, hope springs eternal that the less developed northern and western portions of the state will develop in a more orderly fashion. Yet if *The Swamp Peddlers* is any guide, I'm not holding my breath.

## NOTES

- 1 Morton C. Polson, *The Great Land Hustle* (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1972); Leslie Allen, Beryl Kuder, Sarah L. Oakes, *Promised Lands Volume 2: Subdivisions in Florida's Wetlands* (New York: Inform, 1976); Eileen Bernard, *Lies that Came True: Tall Tales and Hard Sales and the Making of Cape Coral, Florida* (Fort Myers: Press Printing, 1991); David E. Dodrill, *Selling the Dream: The Gulf American Corporation and the Building of Cape Coral, Florida* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1993); Douglas Waitley, *The Last Paradise: The Building of Marco Island*. (Cocoanut Grove, FL: Pickering Press, 1993); Jack Alexander, *Rotonda: The Vision and the Reality*. (Mineral, VA: Tabby House, 1995); Dennis Covington, *Redneck Riviera: Armadillos, Outlaws, and the Demise of the American Dream* (New York: Counter-point 2004).
- 2 Nicholas Foreman, "The Owl and the Monitor: Nature Versus Neighborhood in the Development of Southwest Florida," *Journal of Florida Studies*. 9 (2021): 1-27.