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The Florida Room: From “Redneck Riviera” to “Emerald Coast”: A Personal History of a Piece of the Florida Panhandle

by Harvey H. Jackson III

There wasn't much to Seagrove Beach the first time I saw it. I'm not even sure how my Grandmother found out it was there. Maybe she heard through friends who were part of the "Dixie Art Colony" that briefly met in the old hotel back in the 1930s. But the Depression ruined the colony, the hotel was torn down, and by the time my family rolled in that summer of 1954, a little store, a cluster of tourist cottages, and a few houses were all there was.

And, of course, there was a real estate office, where Grandma Minnie found the man who sold her a lot and built her a house.

Seagrove was one of a number of coastal communities clustered along the shore between Panama City and Destin. There was no beach highway then, so to go from one to the other required a roundabout drive that really wasn't worth the effort. You got where you were going and you stayed.

Our neighbors were like us—part of the lower South's rising post-World War II white middle class who wanted a vacation cottage away from the hustle and bustle of the resorts. Seagrove's

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developer pitched his project to appeal to our budding bourgeois sensibilities and prejudices. Touting the site as “where nature did its best,” he drew up a covenant promising that “no trailer, tent, shack, outhouse or other temporary structure” would be allowed to threaten property values, and that “no noxious activities, offensive noises or odors, nor any nuisance [would] be permitted” to shatter our seclusion. He also assured buyers that lots in the development would not “be sold, leased, or rented to or occupied by any person or persons other than the caucasian race.”

Now if you wanted “noxious activities or offensive noises,” you could find a few in Destin (about an hour to the west) or Panama City (same distance, other direction). But in the 1950s, Destin, “the luckiest little fishing village in the world,” was mostly charter boat wharves, a handful of motels, the usual tacky souvenir shops, and a few seafood restaurants. Panama City and its beaches offered a bit more, but not much. Truth was, visitors didn’t want much, and they only wanted it in the summer. The weeks between Memorial Day and Labor Day were a cash cow for merchants, but once September rolled around tourists rolled away and “the coast was clear”—as Jimmy Buffett reminisced.

I never heard the term “Redneck Riviera” back then, though it could have been applied without insult. Visitors were mostly from Alabama (like us) or southwest Georgia, with a few from Mississippi. In those days the route was indirect, the roads were rough, and the trip was long, especially with kids—which everyone seemed to have. This lower south demographic was easily recognized by the newspapers (the *Montgomery Advertiser* was a particular favorite) and exploited by enterprising entrepreneurs like the one who named his bar the “Little B’ham.” Natives, influenced by similar post-war circumstances, weren’t that much different from the tourists, so when they mingled it was hard to tell one from the other. Together they and we turned this stretch of beach into a comfortable, inconspicuous, and slightly decadent place for southern folk to unwind.

Then things began to change. Mark down 1960 as the critical date. That year Hollywood put out “Where the Boys Are,” a movie about Spring Break in Fort Lauderdale. Now Spring Break had never been much along the northern Gulf. Most schools in surrounding states only got a couple of days off and besides, March on the Panhandle could be downright cold. Why drive all that way to shiver in the dunes? “Where the Boys Are” changed everything.

Spring Break at the beach took on a whole new meaning, and since the Gulf coast was close, that was where Dixie baby boomers went. Motel owners had to decide if what they earned from the spring surge was worth the hassle and the damages. And as local businessmen would do from that day forward, they chose the money. It seemed that all the world was young and had Daddy's check-book.

Spring Break spilled over into summer, and college kids came back grown up with children of their own. The beach became the middle-class southerner's playground, and more motels were built to accommodate them. Constructed on much the same plan, they were two or three stories at the most, with a restaurant or bar or both, and close to something for the kids—goofy golf for little ones, a "hangout" complete with juke box for the teenagers. And if you were a little older there were the "clubs"—roadhouses really—which featured entertainers such as white comic "Brother Dave Gardner" who delighted audiences with off-color, politically incorrect, good ol' boy humor, and black groups like the Tams, to whose music beach lovers danced a local variation of what Atlantic coast folks call the Shag. If you looked hard enough you could find expressions of 1960s counterculture in the dress and the attitudes of vacationers, but marijuana never replaced beer as the drug of choice, the sexual revolution only confirmed what had been going on already, Lynyrd Skynyrd and the Allman Brothers were heard more than Big Brother and the Holding Company, and shrinking bikinis were considered a part of the natural evolution of beachwear, not a statement of liberation.

Through the 1960s and into the 1970s the good times rolled. Better roads and a booming economy brought more and more visitors, and into the mix came affluent southerners from the region's growing suburbs. Always looking for investments, they found what they wanted in the region's still inexpensive and relatively unexploited real estate. So more cottages were built and "summer at the beach" became a status symbol of sorts. Yet, on the whole, things weren't much different from what they had been in the 1950s, except there was more of it.

Then, in September of 1975, just after a wildly successful summer season, nature unleashed its fury on Florida's Gulf Coast. Hurricane Eloise, with 130 mph winds and a massive storm surge, roared ashore and leveled everything in its path. Cottages were washed from their foundations, motels collapsed, buildings old

and new were left a pile of rubble. Even the “Little B’ham” was gone. It was a sad scene.

Surveying the wreckage, developers quickly realized that storms did not destroy so much as they cleared the way for new construction, and soon speculators were buying property, drawing plans, and laying foundations. Contributing in no small way to the success of their efforts was a decision by the Florida Department of Transportation. Over the bitter protests of folks like my grandmother, the DOT built a beach route—Highway 30A—between Panama City and Destin, right through our once remote Seagrove Beach. This made the places builders wanted to build more accessible, and before long the sounds of construction were heard all along the coast.

Soon there were more motels, restaurants, and amusement outlets than ever before. To fill all these available rooms with people who would spend enough to keep the economy afloat, Chambers of Commerce aggressively promoted their product, which was, well, whatever you wanted it to be. “Wanna make money—invest here. Wanna relax—stay here. Wanna party—come here.” And in this atmosphere of economic opportunism, freewheeling speculation, and hell-bent hedonism, the term “Redneck Riviera” was coined.

The originator, Howell Raines of *The New York Times*, wasn’t even talking about the Florida Panhandle when he came up with it. Raines was writing about the Alabama coast, where All-Pro quarterback Kenny Stabler and his friends held court. Over there, between Orange Beach and Gulf Shores, was as fine a collection of beach bars and roadhouses as one could hope to find anywhere. And there Stabler and crew committed most of the excesses associated with redneckery. The term quickly caught on however, and soon northern journalists who loved cute, condescending things to say about the South, were using “Redneck Riviera” to describe everything from Port St. Joe, Florida, to Bay St. Louis, Mississippi. Panhandle promoters didn’t like it much, claimed it wasn’t so, but all you had to do was spend a socially insensitive evening in a Destin bar listening to the “Trashy White Band” sing “I’ll Be Glad When You’re Dead You Sum Bitch You” plus a couple of other “hits” that prominently featured the “N-word,” and there would be little doubt that Raines was on to something.

But even as redneckery in all its raunchiness was going full-tilt, a demographic and cultural shift was beginning, one that would

eventually banish Bubba from the beach—or at least my part of it. It was all a matter of timing. As the coast was being cleaned up, and investors lined up, the first wave of Baby Boomers who had made the Panhandle their playground in the 1960s and early 1970s were coming of age. Since those halcyon days they had graduated from college, gotten good jobs, married, had kids, weathered the Ford-Carter recession, and were beginning to feel a middle-age yearning to recapture the magic of Spring Break without sleeping ten to a room. Then came the Reagan Revolution. Banks had money to lend. Boomers were ready to borrow. Developers sprung into action. High-rise condominiums, which until then had been considered part of the South Florida scene, began to crop up along Panama City Beach and in Destin. Prosperous professionals, looking to recapture youth and make a little money in the process, saw in them the opportunity to own a piece of the coast which, when they weren't there, could be rented out to pay the mortgage.

But for some, a condominium wouldn't do. Their image of beach life did not include cold concrete, elevators, and a tiny balcony high above a crowded strip of sand. They wanted something else, something more, and just west of Seagrove, along that beach route that promoters had begun calling "Scenic Highway 30-A," they found it. There right next door to our place, Robert Davis, an Alabama boy with an Ivy League education, took about eighty acres of sand and scrub that he had inherited from his grandfather and built the town of Seaside. Before long, *Time* magazine was calling it "the most astounding design achievement of its era."

What Davis set out to do was create a community based on the simple way of life that existed (so he believed) before money hungry-developers and predatory politicians took over. With a head full of urban planning theories and a eye for the form and function of Florida's vernacular architecture, Robert Davis set out to build what he described as a "new old-fashion village," complete with wooden houses, tin roofs, screened porches, and picket fences, all within walking distance of the town center and grassy common. But it didn't turn out that way. After a couple of articles in *Southern Living* and an architectural award or two, Davis's dream of 1940s-style beach bungalows along oyster shell streets was taken over by Dixie Yuppies who were ready to pay top dollar to indulge their midlife fantasies. New, bigger houses were built. The streets were paved with bricks. And the stores in the village, which had

once stocked stuff for the handyman working on his cottage, began to cater to the weekend recreational shopper. Soon it was latte and Italian ices instead of beer and pickled eggs, the Florida Ballet instead of the Trashy White Band, croquet instead of crabbing, and a wine tasting festival in the bargain. The *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal* were delivered daily. Folks who bought a Seaside home, or rented one for a week or so, had many different inclinations, but redneckery wasn't one of them.

Quickly Seaside spread. New developments with pickets, porches, and colors never found in nature, began to pop up. And once again, local folks had to decide whether or not to cater to the tourists coming for the show, or try to retain at least a semblance of what used to be.

I, myself, witnessed the struggle, and the disaster that followed.

Late in the 1980s we invited friends down to our place for a week. One of them brought with him a lady who arrived in her Seaside uniform—a J. Crew cotton sweater, Lands' End shorts, and coordinated Espadrilles, all accessorized with a Dunen Burke handbag that cost more than most folks make in a week. Despite her obvious preference for Davis's development, that night I took the group to a back road café to drink a little and put a dent in the crustacean population. We got there, pulled tables together, and settled in. Then the waitress appeared:

"Whatcha drinking?"

We all ordered something on draft, except the still-fashionable lady who looked perplexed, then asked.

"Do you have Chardonnay?"

The waitress paused, equally perplexed, then responded.

"Honey, we don't serve no foreign beer here."

It was a great moment.

Then things began to come apart. A month or so later I returned for lunch to find a wine list. OK, it was written on a chalkboard and it said, "We have wine. Red. White. Pink."—but there it was. I could see the future and it wasn't pretty. Soon business began to suffer. So they started serving appetizers. Nothing helped. The place was too trendy for the old crowd and not trendy enough for the new. A year later it closed.

You reap what you sow.

Which is what this piece of the Panhandle is doing today—sowing and reaping.

When Seaside's first "cracker cottages" were built, some "con-

cerned citizens of Walton County" wrote the developer to protest the "slung up" appearance of things and to ask why he did not construct something "with a bit of distinction and class" like the "outdoor gazebo . . . near the Destin East Trailer Park"—as clear a reflection of local tastes, redneck tastes, as you could hope to find. Today, however, such a statement—if it were made, which is unlikely—would be greeted with howls of derision. Along what local boosters are trying to get people to call "Florida's Emerald Coast," cracker cottages and shacks vernacular have been, or are rapidly being, replaced by created communities planned and patterned after Seaside—Rosemary Beach, Watercolor, and most recently Watersound. To these come Dixie's new elites, down from the northside of Atlanta, the southside of Birmingham, and a host of other status-defining enclaves, to purchase a place and the prestige that goes with it.

This new wave of settlers is redefining the coast, a process that those of us who defined it the last time find both interesting and unsettling. Where will their efforts lead? Hard to say. But this much is certain. Along that stretch of the beach the Redneck Riviera is history. Though bits and pieces remain to be identified and enjoyed, it was a phenomenon of time and place that will not likely be seen again—at least not there. And those who today are creating the coast in their own image are hardly aware that it ever existed.