

Selling Sunshine: How Cypress Gardens Defined Florida, 1935-2004

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SELLING SUNSHINE: HOW CYPRESS GARDENS
DEFINED FLORIDA, 1935-2004

by

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B.A. University of Central Florida, 2005

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the relationship between Cypress Gardens and the state of Florida. Specifically, it focuses on how the creator of the park, Dick Pope, created his park after his own idealized vision of the state, and how he then promoted both his park and Florida as one and the same. The growth and later decline of Cypress Gardens follows trends in Florida's growth patterns and shifts in tourism.

This study primarily uses a combination of newspaper sources and promotional pictures and other media from the park to explain how Pope attempted to make Cypress Gardens synonymous with Florida. In doing so, this paper presents a history of the park during the Pope family ownership (1935-1985), while also looking at the legacy of the park until 2004.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER I: HISTORY OF FLORIDA TOURISM FROM FLAGLER TO GATORLAND.....	7
CHAPTER II: BEYOND ROADSIDE ATTRACTIONS: CONEY ISLAND, SILVER SPRINGS, AND THE THEME PARK.....	20
CHAPTER III: POPE AND THE CREATION OF CYPRESS GARDENS.....	26
CHAPTER IV: SOUTHERN BELLES AND WATER-SKI SHOWS.....	36
CHAPTER V: PROMOTION.....	46
CHAPTER VI: EXPANDING FLORIDA, EXPANDING CYPRESS GARDENS.....	58
CHAPTER VII: DISNEY AND EVENTUAL DECLINE.....	65
CHAPTER VIII: CYPRESS GARDENS AFTER POPE.....	77
CHAPTER IX: THE RE-CREATION OF CYPRESS GARDENS: WHAT IS FLORIDA?.....	84
CONCLUSION.....	95
REFERENCES.....	97

INTRODUCTION

Since its opening in 1936, the theme park Cypress Gardens attracted tourists to the state of Florida with its themes of botanical gardens, pretty girls, and water-skiing. The creator of this park, Dick Pope, succeeded in making his park synonymous with Florida through the marriage of the image of Cypress Gardens and the state, so much so that the state and the park shared a common history, influencing each other over time. As Florida evolved from a semi-frontier land, traveled by few, into a tropical getaway, Cypress Gardens attempted to emulate this change as well, transforming semi-swampland into idyllic gardens. Similarly, as Cypress Gardens added exotic plants, beautiful young women and water skiing to its attractions, Americans began to define Florida in these same terms.

Cypress Gardens established itself not only as one of Florida's most recognizable attractions but also as a nationally recognized tourist destination. A 1963 *Sports Illustrated* article noted that "in a random survey of 446 persons" taken in spring of the same year, "some 44% of those interviewed said they had been to Cypress Gardens anywhere from two to six times."¹ Cypress Gardens obtained this national appeal by asserting that a visit to Florida and a visit to his park are the same.

By establishing Cypress Gardens, Richard Downing "Dick" Pope, a businessman born in Iowa, helped to define his adoptive state through his theme park. He was so successful in fusing his park with the state that when the park eventually closed in 2003, a statewide argument arose over whether the state should purchase the park using funds normally reserved for environmentally critical or culturally significant lands. When the state did intervene and aid in

¹ William B. Furlong, "Babes in a Swampland," *Sports Illustrated* 19:17 (1963): 73.

the preservation of the park, officials cited as one of their main reasons that the park was quintessential Florida.

This paper shows how Dick Pope created and sold Cypress Gardens as Florida's theme park. The rise and decline of Cypress Gardens depended upon the visionary founder of the park, Dick Pope, and his idea of Florida as a theme park. The sale of Cypress Gardens as Florida and the novelty of the park and the state proved to be a formula for success. As Florida lost its exotic otherness and became just another state in the Union, Cypress Gardens became just another theme park in state with dozens of other parks. Pope's vision for his park mirrored the Florida in his mind. To Pope, Florida was tropical, Southern, and a place for adventure. He designed a park that embodied each of these aspects.

While this paper will present a history of Cypress Gardens, it is not this paper's goal to be a comprehensive history of the park. Instead, the history presented will attempt to highlight the development of this park as it pertains to the Pope family, their vision of Florida and how Cypress Gardens evolved over time. The paper will achieve that primarily through an analysis of the contemporary newspapers, photographs, and movies that covered or presented Cypress Gardens. The majority of the newspapers are from Winter Haven, the city in which the park is located, or from the surrounding towns. This paper also utilizes regional and national newspapers to strengthen arguments related to the park's growth and influence.

Prior to this paper, historians such as Richard Starnes, J. Mark Souther, Jack Davis, Patsy West, and David Nelson, who have written about tourism in the South, have explored the idea of a created or re-imagined past. In these books, communities have come together to define their culture through a created history similar to how Cypress Gardens created its own version of

Florida. These histories typically evolved from a factual past but over time changed to meet the expectations of tourists. These historians helped me better understand Cypress Gardens and how the park defined Florida.

In the introduction to Starnes' edited collection of southern tourism histories, he attempted to establish a historiography of this emerging field. In doing so, he acknowledged how only in the last ten to fifteen years have historians started to look at tourism as something more than "a casual force in history."² As Starnes introduced the various essays collected in his book, he called attention to the fact that southern tourism is a created effort, not only created by the local citizens but also by outsiders and neo-citizens.

Also in the introduction, Starnes groups southern tourism into three categories: environmental, destination, and cultural or heritage. Tourism often began as visitors sought out nature's attractions such as springs or mountains. Later, destination tourism arose as entrepreneurs created sights or attractions to lure in tourists. Developing alongside destination tourism, communities took notice of visitors who traveled to see the South's past. These communities responded by drawing greater attention to their past while often embellishing proud aspects and omitting less pleasant aspects.

Cypress Gardens falls into all three categories. It began as an environmental destination with botanical gardens attracting tourists. The park later developed both destination and cultural tourism through the addition of the water ski shows and southern belles, respectively.

² Richard D. Starnes, *Southern Journeys: Tourism, History, & Culture in the Modern South* (Tuscaloosa, Alabama: The University of Alabama Press, 2003), 3.

Jack Davis, J. Mark Souther, and Patsy West each explore this last type of tourism in their respective books. In Davis's look at Natchez, Mississippi, he explored the created and edited past that locals established, primarily through the Pilgrimage. Similarly, Souther analyzed New Orleans and how the city transformed itself after the Great Depression from a growing urban city into a caricature of the city's French Quarter. Finally, Patsy West wrote on the Florida Seminoles and how through alligator wrestling, created "Seminoles Villages," and Indian weddings, the Mikasuki Seminoles recreated their culture in order to survive economically in the twentieth century.

David's Nelson's dissertation on the Civilian Conservation Corps, Florida Park Service, and their contribution to Florida tourism's growth added to this thesis by pushing for a closer look at New Deal era Florida. Nelson's argument that modern Florida tourism begins not in the post World War II period but instead during the Great Depression contributed to a reevaluation of Cypress Gardens' formative years. Unfortunately, as Nelson also laments, the archival records of Works Progress Administration money in Florida are largely unavailable as are the park records.³

So what is this Cypress Gardens theme park? Moreover, what even is a theme park to begin with? A theme park by its most simple definition is a park with themes. Given that simple definition, what themes are present at Cypress Gardens? There is a garden theme, a pretty girl theme (sometimes mixed in with an Old South theme), and a water ski theme. Yet, how do these themes coalesce into a unified vision of "Florida?" The answer lies with Dick Pope and his ideal

³ David Nelson, "Florida Crackers and Yankee Tourists: The Civilian Conservation Corps, the Florida Park Service and the Emergence of Modern Florida Tourism" (Ph.D. diss., Florida State University, 2008), 4.

Florida. To Pope, Florida was a tropical garden primed to be cultivated, a land of pretty girls and southern culture ready to be shared, and a place for fun in the sun just waiting for a motorboat and a water-skier.

Prior to the park closing in 2003, the three themes listed were the main (and often only) attractions in the park. After the reopening in 2004, the new owner added roller coasters, thrill rides and a water park to entice younger and more adventurous visitors. A modern tourist learning this fact may wonder why tourists would have visited such a park before this reopening and renovation. Before 2004, there was not much to do at Cypress Gardens, unlike its central Floridian competitors. At Disney World in Orlando, at Universal Studios in Orlando, and at Busch Gardens in Tampa, there were rides and games that attracted millions of tourists each year. At Cypress Gardens, there were no rides except for a large lift that brought tourists high in the sky and gave them a rotating panoramic view of the area. Visitors to the park viewed the park. You could view the gardens, view the southern belles, or view the ski show. You could not play in the gardens, dress up as a belle, or strap on a pair of skis yourself. It was not that kind of park. So again, to address the modern tourist who does not yet understand the appeal of Cypress Gardens, the simple explanation is that this was a park built around spectacles and the viewing and photography of such spectacles.

The park would evolve over the years. The first and only thing to view initially was the botanical garden. A few short years later, young women dressed southern belles and a water ski show became part of the park's sights. For the most part, the park would survive on the three themes of gardens, girls and skiing for the next sixty-seven years. Of course, other additions came and went but the mainstays of the park were those three aspects. Visitors came to see and

to photograph the sights at the park. The role of photography in Cypress Gardens cannot be understated. This park was literally designed through the lens of a camera.

Cypress Garden, a park of spectacles, artificial Floridian spectacles, holds a special place in both Florida history and the history of tourism. According to most newspaper sources and Cypress Gardens itself, it is Florida's first theme park. Created during and, in part, because of the Great Depression, the park illustrates an important turning point in Florida's history. Before Cypress Gardens, Florida was a state visited by the country's wealthy elite and then by tin can tourists who traveled the state with no set destination in mind. Cypress Gardens ushered in an era in which non-Floridians would travel hundreds of miles to see one or more particular places. To highlight this shift, by the end of 1941 Cypress Gardens even appeared in travel cruise advertisements in the *New York Times*.⁴ Five years after opening its doors, both the Florida Circle Tour and the Tauck Tours, two tours that advertised to wealthy New Yorkers, included Cypress Gardens as a stop along the tour. The Tauck Tour was a personally guided ten-day tour with travel around Florida via "private air-conditioned parlor motor coach[es]." The other destinations on these tours were typically the major beaches, Miami and Daytona and natural formations such as Silver Springs.⁵ To understand the historic role of Cypress Gardens, this paper will first establish the state of tourism in Florida prior to Cypress Gardens.

⁴"Florida Circular Tour," Advertisement *New York Times* November 23, 1941

"Florida Circular Tour," Advertisement *New York Times* November 30, 1941

"A Christmas Week Tour Around Florida with Tauck," Advertisement *New York Times* December 7, 1941

⁵ Ibid

CHAPTER I: HISTORY OF FLORIDA TOURISM FROM FLAGLER TO GATORLAND

Florida tourism depended upon the wealth and entrepreneurship of Gilded Age businessmen, a land boom coupled with newspaper boosterism and the development of good roads to overcome the hazards that previously impeded Florida travel. Today it is hard to imagine Florida without tourism and travel, but one-hundred and fifty years ago, pleasurable travel to Florida was just as hard to imagine. Although the city of St. Augustine can trace its history back to 1565, Florida was not a destination spot until the late nineteenth century. In the centuries between, most Floridians lived on the strip of land running from Pensacola to Jacksonville and along the coasts. Even after Florida became a state in 1845, for much of that time a trip to the sunshine state promised a dangerous adventure at best.

The challenges that botanist Samuel Botsford Buckley encountered on his expedition into the heart of Florida exemplify the hazards of Florida travel.⁶ Buckley traveled from Palatka along the St. John's River as far south as Lake Jessup and Fort Gatlin near present-day Orlando in 1842, less than a year after the end of the Second Seminole War. Constantly on the watch for potentially hostile Indians, Buckley's group found their most constant enemies were swarms of mosquitoes. In a July 2 letter, Buckley enumerated the hardships facing the mid-summer interloper. Buckley complained of attacks by "unfriendly and rascally mosquitoes," barefoot hikes across "scorching sands," blistering sunburns, frequent rainstorms, and a "horrible burning

⁶ Laurence J. Dorr, "That Land of Flowers, Swamps and Alligators': S. B. Buckley's 1843 Trip Up the St. Johns River, Florida," *Brittonia* 44:1 (1992): 4.
Traveling "up" the St. John's River is the same as traveling south because the river flows south to north

fever.”⁷ Adding to his misery, Buckley eventually contracted malaria. Perhaps understandably, the young botanist never returned to Florida.⁸

Travelers to antebellum Florida faced a wide variety of problems ranging from insects, wild animals, harsh terrain, extreme weather and disease. Insects such as mosquitoes, ticks, wasps, hornets and yellow-jackets bit, stung and even infected visitors to the state. At the same time, alligators, crocodiles, panthers, and wild boars presented larger threats. Florida travelers had to traverse swamps, lakes, rivers, and palmetto filled forests to reach their destinations while also contending with summer temperatures in the high nineties, torrential thunderstorms and the possibility of tornadoes and hurricanes. Additionally, the common hookworm parasite also presented a deterrent to potential travelers. While unknown at the time, the effects of this parasite resembled malaria and greatly amplified Northern fears of journeying to the state.⁹

At the same time as Buckley’s expedition, visitors began traveling to Florida to visit the recently developed health spas. During the 1840s, owners of land containing freshwater springs began to improve these springs by adding walkways, seating, lodging, and other comforts to entice visitors seeking therapeutic bathing and drinking.¹⁰ The successfulness of these spas

⁷ Dorr, 4-5.

⁸ Ibid, 6.

⁹ In the article, “The Decline in Southern Agricultural Output, 1860-1880,” economic historian Garland L. Brinkley argued that the hookworm was prevalent across the Deep South states, including Florida. This parasite affected tens of thousands of southerners with effects ranging from lethargy to “physical and mental retardation.” Brinkley was making an economic argument in his article, but it is relevant to this paper in revealing the large number of “malarial fevers.” Brinkley argues that many of these fevers were due to the hookworm and not malaria.

¹⁰ Vanderbilt, Burke G. “The Historic Spas of Florida,” *Geographic Perspectives on Southern Development*. 12 (June, 1973): 59.

depended upon their proximity to railroad stations and their ability to convince the public that their spa could cure ailments.¹¹

Apart from these historic spas and some exceptions, such as Silver Springs, until Henry Flagler and Henry Plant made their mark on Florida, travel to the state contained too many perils for most Northerners. Most Americans saw Florida as wilderness, remote and untamed until the late 1800s when Henry Flagler and Henry Plant opened the state to wealthy Northerners by building railroad lines down Florida's western and eastern coasts. Flagler and Plant opened Florida to tourism by making it accessible via their railroads and by bringing the Gilded Age to Florida, thereby transforming the state from frontier wildness to resort havens for the Northern elites.¹²

Through their hotel and railroad networks, Flagler and Plant introduced Northern tourists to Florida. Of the two men, Flagler had a greater impact. Flagler's Florida East Coast Railway ran along the entire eastern coast of Florida from Jacksonville to Key West linking nine hotels along the coast into a network scholars have dubbed the Flagler System.¹³ Additionally, Flagler operated a steamship line that connected the state to his two hotels in Nassau, Bahamas. Plant operated a similar network of eight hotels joined by a railway along Florida's west coast. Both sets of hotels included luxury winter resort hotels that truly brought the Gilded Age and tourism to Florida.

The lasting importance of these two men's accomplishments was the sale of Florida, not just the sale of a ticket or a room. Flagler and Plant brought people to Florida, sold them train

¹¹ Ibid, 72.

¹² Susan Braden, *The Architecture of Leisure* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2002), 1.

¹³ Ibid, 5

tickets, booked them in hotel rooms and marketed land for living or farming.¹⁴ Tourists booked rooms for months, not just for one night or one week; thereby making Florida their winter home.

The luxury resorts succeed in bringing tourists to Florida because they were self-sufficient. The hotels were cities unto themselves. Flagler and Plant built the infrastructures, brought in the staff from the North, and supplied the hotels independently via the railroad lines. Unlike urban hotels in which the drawing factor was the surrounding city, their hotels became “independent destinations in their own right, offering golf, tennis, and other sports as well as social activities directly on the hotel grounds.”¹⁵ Flagler and Plant succeeded in creating destinations in Florida that tourists visited and relished being seen at these resorts. In effect, both men were responsible for making Florida fashionable. Both men created a luxury class tourism that was not available to the masses. These hotels were suited for the wealthy by creating an “aura of blatantly conspicuous (often decidedly feminine) luxury on a scale previously unknown in Florida.”¹⁶

The deaths of Flagler and Plant mark the beginning of mass tourism in Florida. The two businessmen brought tourism to Florida at the end of the nineteenth century with their railroads and resort hotels by selling Florida as a place where wealthy travelers could enjoy conspicuous consumption in the sun. The era of these two men ended shortly after Flagler’s death in 1913. By this time, efficiency took precedence over enchantment. Modern and generic designs replaced the historical and personal touches of Flagler and Plant.

¹⁴ Seth Bramson, “A Tale of Three Henrys,” *The Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts*, 23 (1998): 113.

¹⁵ Braden, 13-14.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 11.

As the era of luxury hotels ended, a land boom in Florida began to gain momentum. Historians William Frazer and John J. Guthrie, Jr. argue that World War I led to the land boom of the 1920s and that it extended back as far as 1915.¹⁷ As World War I began in Europe in 1914, the United States began to increase its military presence in Florida. As more men trained in Florida, the money they spent created more jobs in the state. In turn, Americans moved down to take these newly created jobs and in turn drove up demand for housing.¹⁸ At the same time, because tourist travel to Europe was no longer an option after 1914, wealthy Americans began to depend upon the United States instead of Europe for winter retreats.¹⁹

The Florida land boom of the 1920s redefined tourism in Florida through the influx of new Floridians and the national interest in the state that arose due to the advertising associated with the boom. These new residents provided the customer base for businesses like Cypress Gardens. While tourist attractions obviously bring in tourists from elsewhere, they must draw upon a significant local population. According to the publicity generated, in Florida a person could make easy money through real estate while living in paradise. Even those who did not actually buy land in Florida during this period became more cognizant of the state because of the boom.

During the Florida boom of the 1920s, land speculation ran wildly throughout coastal Florida. Land booms begin with speculation, in which people buy land with the intent of selling it within a short period for a profit. The southeastern and later southwestern coasts of Florida experienced such a phenomenon in the first half the 1920s. The boom in Florida peaked in 1925

¹⁷ William Frazer and John J. Guthrie, Jr., *The Florida Land Boom: Speculation, Money, and the Banks*. (Westport, CT: Quorum Books, 1995), xiv.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 6.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, xiv.

and proceeded to bust in 1926. This land bust combined with banking failures in Florida to push the state into an economic depression four years before the rest of the country.

As historian Jane T. Tolbert explains, Florida became an “American Riviera.”²⁰ Tolbert notes that following the war, northern businessmen envisioned the development potential in Miami.²¹ Florida activist and environmentalist Marjory Stoneman Douglass described the early boom by recalling the “men who’d come back from the war, men who remembered how delightful it was down here in training camps.”²² She wrote of the “men who’d come back from the war, men who remembered how delightful it was down here in training camps.”²³

Promoters of Florida real estate emphasized the state’s Spanish heritage and exotic otherness to sell more land during the boom. Florida architecture in the 1920s attempted to capitalize upon the long history of Spain’s ownership of Florida. Promoters “claimed that the state’s architecture was more Spanish than anything in Spain; that Miami banks looked like ‘Alhambra pleasure palaces’... and that Florida represented a new El Dorado abundant in wealth and opportunity.”²⁴

Adoption of the Eighteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution also contributed to the boom. Florida’s thousand-mile coastline and its proximity to the Bahamas, Cuba and other still-wet Caribbean nations made Florida a bootlegger’s paradise. Florida had “the dubious honor of being one of the leakiest spots on the country’s dry border.”²⁵ Because the state placed no limits

²⁰ Jane T. Tolbert, “Plowing Gold from the Wasteland: Media Portrayal of South Florida’s Boom, 1920-25,” *Journalism History* 33:2 (2007): 112.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Frazer and Guthrie, 1.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 23.

on bank deposits at this time, banks quickly accumulated large sums deposited by these rumrunners. These large reserves encouraged the banks to adopt risky lending policies that eventually led to the boom's collapse.

Jane T. Tolbert argues that the media also played a major role in drawing northerners to Florida by inflating stories of successful real estate ventures. Florida historian Mark Derr notes, "Recognizing the profit in good publicity, the state's newspapers joined in an undeclared but no less real agreement to suppress or downplay bad news, while accentuating the positive, meaning growth."²⁶ The Miami papers were notorious for running stories about land prices rising so quickly that they created immediate profit. National papers reprinted these stories of Floridians becoming overnight millionaires.²⁷ Florida newspapers pushed stories of over-night millionaires onto Northern and Western newspapers. Tolbert explains, it was more profitable for newspaper publishers to simply print whatever promoters sent them, and subsequently charge a fee for advertising, than to pursue investigative journalism.

Tolbert identifies three main themes the mainstream media used during the early 1920s: "a vision of paradise, the Everglades as a cornucopia, and easy money on the last frontier."²⁸ Articles in papers such as the *Christian Science Monitor* that described the flora, beaches and climate of Florida pushed the paradise theme. Although some of these articles described natural Florida, many of them were in fact describing a "created" Florida.

²⁶ Mark Derr, *Some Kind of Paradise: A Chronicle of Man and the Land in Florida*, (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1998), 183.

²⁷ Tolbert, 113.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 114.

Headlines such as "Triumphant Florida" in the *New York Times* and "Conquering the Everglades" in the *Christian Science Monitor* stressed the technical domination of nature.²⁹ The cornucopia of Florida depended upon the draining of the Everglades. Land promoters saw no intrinsic value in the Everglades, only exploitable nature. All of these articles encouraged the draining of the Everglades in order to change this "wasted land" into another fertile "Nile Valley." Furthermore, the *Chicago Daily Tribune* described these once "vast and dismal swamps" as now "civilized" with roads and drainage programs."³⁰

The theme of "easy money on the last frontier" explains the simplest reason why northerners flocked to Florida. Promises of easy profit from land sales or even for being a land promoter drew northerners looking for an easy dollar. Newspapers compared Florida to previous gold rushes and oil finds except for the key difference that those booms required some investment of labor. "There are no ores to be mined, no wells to be sunk, only land to be sold and resold," wrote the *New York Times* in 1925."³¹ According to the newspapers, the savvy entrepreneur could turn Florida land into profit without breaking a sweat.

Miami epitomized the Florida boom city. Between the 1910 and 1920 U.S. Censuses, Miami grew by 440%, totaling 25,571.³² A local survey in 1923 showed a fifty-five percent increase over the 1920 population, placing Miami's population at over 45,000. The boom reached its peak in 1925. During that year, a special census taken of Miami estimated at least 70,000 residents.

²⁹ Ibid, 115.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid, 116.

³² Paul S. George, "Brokers, Binders, and Builders: Greater Miami's Boom of the Mid-1920s," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 65:1 (1986): 27-43.

Millionaire Carl Fisher was one of the men who made automobile travel into Florida possible. Fisher originally envisioned Miami Beach as a tourist destination that visitors would arrive at via railroad. In 1914, Fisher decided to open up south Florida to car travel as well. The road he financed and planned became the Dixie Highway, which began in Sault Sainte Marie, Michigan, and ended in Fisher's Miami Beach. The Dixie Highway consisted of both a western route and an eastern route. The two began and ended at the same locations, but, in between, crossed entirely different parts of the country.³³

Florida also had its share of temporary migrants. Tin Can Tourists, named for the debris they discarded came by the score.³⁴ These tourists packed most of their belongings into their automobile along with their children and the family pet and set out for Florida. The development of highways leading to Florida made it possible for these families to explore the sunshine state. The Dixie Highway, the Tamiami Trail, which connected Tampa and Miami, and the Orange Blossom Trail, which cut through the center of the state's vast orange groves and ran from Tennessee to Miami, made Florida accessible via automobile.³⁵

Tin Can Tourists popularized Florida travel despite the hardships in their way. During the 1920s and 1930s, Florida's roads had some paved sections but for the most part travelers found

³³ Tim Hollis, *Dixie Before Disney: 100 Years of Roadside Fun* (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 1999), 5.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 6.

Later these roads adopted the standardized highway numbering system. U.S. 41 replaced or covered most of the western Dixie Highway and U.S. 1 replaced the eastern route. The Orange Blossom Trail is now part of U.S. 441 and U.S. 17. Hollis, 7-8.

U.S. 27 which was created in 1926 would become the North-South artery used to travel from Tennessee to Miami and also passed within a few miles of Cypress Gardens.

"North - South US Highways with daughter routes: From US 1 to US 101," <http://www.us-highways.com/> (accessed April 30, 2009).

“hard-surfaced highways.”³⁶ These early Tin Canners found washed-out roads, choked trails, or even wildlife blocking their travel. Often they had to plot their own course through the state, creating their own maps along the way. Drivers encountered all of these problems during 1909 Tampa-Jacksonville Endurance Run, the first cross-state automobile tour. During the tour, drivers faced the challenge of finding their own roads, preferably ones suitable for automobiles.³⁷

Despite these risks, or perhaps because of them, Tin Canners came by the thousands. They came to escape the winters of the Midwest and North. Just as important, a trip to Florida meant a break from the everyday.³⁸ “Tin can tourists knew that whatever route they took, they would escape the tedium of daily life and enjoy the adrenaline rush of exciting new places.”³⁹ Florida’s unknown, untamed nature had an intrinsic appeal to many tourists.

Tin Can tourists did not book hotel reservations before departing, nor did they have one set destination in mind. The journey itself was the goal. These tourists camped wherever they could find space with water.⁴⁰ Instead of hotels or motels, automobiles served as sleeping quarters. “From simple tarpaulins draped over an automobile to more substantial tents the size of small houses, Tin Canners used a variety of shelters” while touring Florida.⁴¹ As for choosing a campsite, when Tin Canners saw something of interest, they would simply set up camp nearby. A little open land and a fire pit was all they needed to transform the roadside into a temporary

³⁶ Nick Wynne, *Tin Can Tourists in Florida: 1900-1970* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Press, 1999), 7.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 12,15.

⁴¹ Ibid, 39.

home.⁴² At the Tin Can tourist camps that arose in the 1920s, strangers who would typically never have interacted with each other would cook together and converse willingly.

As the Tin Can tourists grew in numbers, Floridians invented ways to profit from these snowbirds. Roadside “Mom-and-Pop” stores soon opened near popular Tin Can campgrounds.⁴³ Some owners of produce and citrus stands added novelties, souvenirs, and displays of exotic animals to entice extra travelers to stop and shop.⁴⁴

The travel trailer, reliable mapped paved roads, and the shift to more permanent cabins and eventually motels brought an end to the Tin Can Tourist. The Tin Can Tourists of the World (TCT) association existed from 1919 to 1977, but the phenomenon had declined significantly by the 1950s.

Tin Canner’s left a lasting mark on Florida tourism history through the roadside attractions that catered to them. Entrepreneurs created these sights with the Tin Cannery in mind but many survived for years after the Tin Can tourist declined.⁴⁵ These small roadside businesses served as precursors to Cypress Gardens and provided a contrast to the multi-themed parks such as Cypress Gardens that followed.

At the turn of the century, only a few sights beckoned brave motorists to visit. Fifty years later, motorists could not travel more than twenty or thirty miles of Florida highway without

⁴² Ibid, 25, 38.

⁴³ Ibid, 21

⁴⁴ Ibid, 35.

⁴⁵ Historians have not given much attention to the history of roadside attractions in Florida. To date, two books crack the surface of this under analyzed topic. Tim Hollis’s *Dixie Before Disney: 100 Years of Roadside Fun* focuses on roadside attractions across the South but as the author admits it is not “scholarly or academic approach to southern roadside history.” Hollis’s book contains summary information for these hundred attractions, eateries, and hotels. Gary Mormino’s 2005 book *Land of Sunshine, State of Dreams: A Social History of Modern Florida* has a more analytical approach but unfortunately only one chapter is devoted to Florida tourism: “Tourist Empires and the Invention of Florida: B.D. (Before Disney) to A.D. (After Disney).”

passing a roadside attraction. While driving, tourists encountered roadside sites such as McKee Jungle Gardens, Sunken Gardens, Marineland, and Gatorland. These locations possessed two main elements: a highway or well-traveled road ran directly in front of them and they typically had only one sight or type of attraction. Many of these businesses opened during the Great Depression. After the 1929 stock market crash and the collapse of the banking industry, the nation plunged into an economic recession that did not end until the beginning of World War II. Most roadside attractions opened during this economic collapse, after the influx of the Tin Can phenomenon and boom times.

Two of the early Depression-era roadside attractions used gardens to entice passing motorists and make a profit. These attractions displayed exotic, non-Floridian plants in their gardens. McKee Jungle Gardens opened in 1932 near Vero Beach and sold tourists a tropical flora experience of “gru gru palms, Madagascar screw pines, Amazonian lily pads...., and the greatest concentration of orchids in North America.”⁴⁶ Similarly, George Turner, previously a plumber, transformed a four and a half acre sinkhole into Sunken Gardens by planting imported tropical flora. Although started in 1903 by George Turner, did not begin charging tourists until midway through the Depression, in 1935.

Marineland, opened in 1938 as a “motion picture facility for studying and filming sea specimens in an enclosed, oceanlike environment,” brought in a half million customers a year once the owners shifted the emphasis of the oceanarium towards tourism.⁴⁷ It featured an animal show with dolphins performing tricks for audiences. In addition to having unique aquatic

⁴⁶ Gary Mormino, *Land of Sunshine, State of Dream: A Social History of Modern Florida* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2005), 86.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 91.

performances (such as a dolphin pulling a poodle on a surfboard), Marineland drew in large crowds because of its location on A1A between St. Augustine and Daytona Beach, “perfectly situated to snag Miami-bound travelers.”⁴⁸

Gatorland appealed to tourists’ darker interests. Gatorland, whose history stretches back to 1940 when Owen Godwin purchased fifteen acres of land south of Orlando on U.S. 441, enticed tourists with the prospect of viewing frightening reptiles instead of the beauty of a garden or playful animal show. Initially, like George Turner, Godwin shared his venue without charging tourists. Visitors paid a voluntary admission fee and seasoned tourist trade dried up in the summer, Godwin toured Florida’s East Coast with “a hand-fashioned cypress trailer and his favorite gator, a 12-foot specimen named Cannibal Jake.”⁴⁹

These parks used exotic plants and animals to present tourists with a created Florida. In the case of Gatorland, he displayed an authentic Florida while Sunken Gardens and McKee Jungle Gardens showed tourists an imported artificial one. As roadside attractions grew both in popularity and profitability another change occurred to Florida tourism. The theme park began to replace roadside attractions as the main draw for northerners.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 86.

CHAPTER II: BEYOND ROADSIDE ATTRACTIONS: CONEY ISLAND, SILVER SPRINGS, AND THE THEME PARK

In contrast to the single sight roadside attractions, theme parks gave tourists a varied experience that led to high attendance and repeat visits. The collection of parks at Coney Island defined the theme park through its development of rides, sights and sounds. The thrills at Coney were unique in their role of audience participation and in their replay value. Similarly, in Florida, Silver Springs exemplified the full-day attraction through a different type of entertainment. At Silver Springs, the beauty of the springs and the awe of looking through crystal clear water via glass-bottom boats brought in tourists. Created after both, Cypress Gardens desired to have the national appeal and name recognition that Coney possessed while thematically resembling a place more akin to Silver Springs.

Coney Island and Silver Springs differed greatly in the entertainment they provided but were similar in that they both provided amusement that could last throughout an entire day. Daylong attractions such as amusement parks and theme parks, unlike roadside attractions, were destinations unto themselves and invited repeat visits. Unlike roadside attractions, these parks had enough appeal to be placed away from a major highway and still attract tourists.

Coney Island represented a shift in America from Victorian to modern sensibilities, from parks designed to uplift citizens, to parks that existed primarily to entertain.⁵⁰ Historian John Kasson has noted that Coney drew upon the Midway and its machines such as the Ferris Wheel at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition held in Chicago.

⁵⁰John F. Kasson, *Amusing the Million: Coney Island at the Turn of the Century* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), 4, 26-27.

The Midway, unlike the rest of the Exposition, existed for the masses, not the elite. It was “a colossal sideshow, with restaurants, shops, exhibits, and theaters...” and an “extraordinary panorama of the world’s peoples” staffed it.⁵¹ At the Midway, the main attraction was not an artistic work or an architectural masterpiece like those that a visitor might find in the rest of the Exposition. Instead, a mechanical wheel dominated the landscape and interests of visitors. Fifty cents bought a person two revolutions on the Ferris Wheel, an invention designed just for the Columbian Exposition.⁵²

If Coney reflected the Midway, Cypress Gardens mirrored the Exposition’s White City. The crowds at the White City viewed its exhibits and the architecture instead of directly interacting with them as they did with the Midway machines. The White City consisted of buildings covered in white stucco illuminated by electric light at night. According to the *New York Times*, these buildings, which served as exhibition halls, resembled palaces that in the sunlight “shone like marble.”⁵³

These three main parks at Coney Island do not represent different themes of one coordinated park but instead are independent amusement parks with their own attractions and visions.⁵⁴ Sea Lion Park built in 1895 by Captain Paul Boyton with its famous water slide, Shoot-the-Chutes, was the first of these independent, enclosed amusement parks. George C. Tilyou soon followed Boyton’s example and constructed his own park, Steeplechase Park, in 1897. Tilyou named his park for the “elaborate mechanical racetrack that ringed its borders.”⁵⁵

⁵¹ Ibid, 23-24.

⁵² Ibid, 26.

⁵³ “Opened by the President,” *New York Times* May 2, 1893.

⁵⁴ Kasson, 26.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 34.

Boyton's park sold in 1903 to Frederic Thompson and Elmer "Skip" Dundy who together created a new amusement center, Luna Park. One year later William H. Reynold's Dreamland opened across the street from Luna Park and imitated many of its attractions.

Coney Island changed the role of the audience. Until amusement parks such as those at Coney, the public sought entertainment usually as spectators. Baseball, football, boxing contests, vaudeville shows, and movie theaters all placed the public in the role of spectator and not as participant. John F. Kasson argues that "customers participated intimately in the spectacle about them" at these new amusement parks.⁵⁶

Coney Island offered a contrast to "conventional society, everyday routine and dominant cultural authority."⁵⁷ At Coney, New Yorkers sought to escape the sense of rigidity and social attentiveness that dominated life in the city. Just as with Tin Can tourists, Coney's visitors "displayed open interest in one another's activities..." and where "strangers frequently fell into conversation."⁵⁸

Coney Island made amusement possible for more than just the wealthy. Coney's parks typically charged ten cents per individual attraction but bargain passes also existed if a customer bought in bulk. For example, twenty-five rides for twenty-five cents at Steeplechase Park in 1905.⁵⁹ By 1900, the working class would have to save money in order to visit Coney but it was definitely not beyond their reach.

The decline of Coney Island experienced bears a resemblance to the rise and fall that Cypress Gardens went through decades later. While fires and financial problems affected all

⁵⁶ Ibid, 8.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 41.

⁵⁸ Ibid, 42.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 38.

three parks, ultimately Coney Island died due to a lack of novelty and to the inability of the parks to maintain a full day's worth of entertainment. Steeplechase Park, Luna Park, and Dreamland Park all depended on ever newer and greater spectacles in order to bring in new and, most importantly, return customers. Edward Tilyou, who took over Steeplechase after his father died in 1914, "found it necessary to take increasingly forceful measures to keep customers entertained and to ward off boredom."⁶⁰ Much of Coney Island's appeal was the contrast it provided to the rest of New York City and the rest of America, for that matter. However, by the 1920s, the unique nature of Coney could be found elsewhere.

In contrast to Coney's noisy fun, Silver Springs in Florida lured tourists in with peaceful glass-bottom boat rides and the quiet beauty of nature. Silver Springs as predates both Flagler and Plant's hotel systems with Civil War veterans visiting this natural attraction. From approximately 1865 to 1880, tourists traveling down the Ocklawaha River via steamboats provided the only source of visitors for Silver Springs. In the 1880s, Ed Carmichael purchased the land around the springs and introduced gasoline-powered boats to the area. This new faster method of travel effectively put the Ocklawaha steamboat lines out of business. The effects of World War I hurt Carmichael and by 1919, tourism to the springs had virtually dried up.⁶¹ He upgraded the boats with cushioned seats and canopies, thereby adding to the time visitors would comfortably enjoy the tour, but the effort was not enough to save the park.

In 1924, Silver Springs truly began to draw in tourists. William Carl Ray and W.C. "Shorty" Davidson saw potential in the park and purchased the land from Carmichael in that

⁶⁰ Ibid, 112.

⁶¹ Ibid.

year. Carmichael had started to turn Silver Springs into a tourist attraction but the Ray and Davidson partnership ushered in the park's tourism era.⁶²

For the next four decades, Ray and Davidson controlled Silver Springs and turned it into the one of the state's most famous tourist attractions. The introduction of electric powered glass-bottom boats helped to draw in thousands of tourists during the 1920s and 1930s. During the 1930s, Colonel Tooley, a concessionaire began operating the Jungle Cruise boat ride which featured an island of rhesus monkeys that Tooley introduced. Tooley, not realizing that rhesus monkeys swim and could escape the island, inadvertently introduced wild troops rhesus monkeys to Silver Springs and the Silver River.⁶³

Silver Springs added other sights and shows to the park in order to establish themselves as a full-day attraction. The park also attracted tourists by playing host to six of the original Tarzan movies, between 1932 and 1942. Also during the 1930s, other attractions such as Ross Allen's reptile shows and a replica Seminole Indian village further added to the park's daylong appeal. The park continued to prosper for decades beyond the 1930s. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, Silver Springs continued to attract national attention through one hundred episodes of the show *Sea Hunt* shot at the park. In 1962, Ray and Davidson sold the park to the American Broadcasting Company after establishing Silver Springs as one of Florida's most recognizable attractions.

While Silver Springs positioned itself as one of Florida's best-known tourist destinations, Dick Pope moved closer to carving out Cypress Gardens from the swamp-like shores of Lake

⁶² Tim Hollis, *Glass Bottom Boats & Mermaid Tails* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 2006), 8.

⁶³ Silver Springs, "Historical Timeline" <http://www.silversprings.com/heritage.html> (accessed on April, 27, 2009)

Eloise in Winter Haven, FL. Whereas Silver Springs' beauty came naturally; Pope had to create his own. Ultimately, Pope sold images of botanical gardens, beautiful girls (both as southern belles and as beauty pageant queens), and water ski shows and simultaneously promoted his beloved adopted state.

CHAPTER III: POPE AND THE CREATION OF CYPRESS GARDENS

From the beginning, Dick Pope saw a connection between the creation of his garden themed park and the promotion of Winter Haven and, by extension, Florida. In a 1959 interview, Pope explained his original vision for the park. He recalled the conversation he had with his wife, Julie Pope, “We talked it over and said ‘someday we’ll build a Garden, so I could be president—and attract visitors to Winter Haven.’”⁶⁴

Dick Pope learned to promote and sell land from his father, a skill Pope used throughout the rest of his life as a salesman and advertiser for his park. Pope’s father, L. Walker Pope was a real estate broker and developer who moved to Winter Haven in 1912 to capitalize on central Florida’s land boom.⁶⁵ At the age of twelve Pope began to help out around his father’s office, and even sold a piece of property in his father’s absence.⁶⁶ After the land bust, Dick and his wife, Julie, could not rely on the real estate business that Pope inherited from his father and instead had to find an alternative business.

Pope applied his skills as a salesman and promoter to another industry. He fell back upon an early love of boating and sought out a job in publicity for Johnson Outboard Motors. Johnson had not offered Pope a job but upon hearing that the company was about to begin a publicity campaign, Dick Pope took his wife to the company headquarters in Waukegan, Illinois in the hopes that he could become involved in this upcoming advertising promotion. Along the way to

⁶⁴ Nancy Garnett Hardy, “Personalities of the Week: Dick and Julie Pope,” *Winter Haven Herald*, March 6, 1959 located in the binder *Cypress Gardens* at the Polk County Historical & Genealogical Library, Bartow, Florida (hereafter referred to as CGPCHGL), 376-377.

⁶⁵ “Lake Wales Salutes the Dick Pope,” *Lake Wales News*, October 17, 1957 in CGPCHGL, (not numbered, located between pp. 343 and 344.

⁶⁶ *Ibid*

Illinois, Pope continually sent telegrams to the company saying, “Hold all publicity plans until I get there, your problems are solved!”⁶⁷ Johnson hired Pope as their public relations man for the campaign and paid him \$1,000 a month.

At Johnson Motors Pope developed the basics of the ski show that would later become a centerpiece of Cypress Gardens. He and his brother Malcolm set up boat races and ski shows featuring Johnson’s new SeaHorse outboard motor. Pope promoted these races and ski jump shows through the newsreels that covered these events. After the Johnson campaign, Pope left the company to pursue two other public relations jobs in Chicago and later in New York. Shortly after arriving in New York, Pope’s career in advertising came to an end in October 1929 when the stock market crashed on Black Thursday and five days later on Black Tuesday. This event, like the Florida land bust earlier in his life, forced Pope to change careers once again. In 1931, Dick Pope developed the idea for what would become Cypress Gardens.

The idea for Cypress Gardens was not unique. Pope read a 1931 *Good Housekeeping* article about a South Carolina banker and plantation owner who opened his home and gardens for public tours. According to the article, the man (possibly C. Norwood Hastie of the famous Magnolia Gardens and Plantation in Charleston, SC) named his plantation and gardens Magnolia Gardens and had made over \$36,000 in three months.⁶⁸ After discussing the possibility of creating his own garden with his wife, Dick Pope moved his family back to Florida.

⁶⁷Ibid

Bob Gernert, interview by author, Winter Haven, Florida, April 9, 2007.

⁶⁸ Nancy Garnett Hardy, “Personalities of the Week: Dick and Julie Pope,” *Winter Haven Herald*, March 6, 1959 in CGPCHGL, 376-377.

While none of the sources name the owner of the gardens, if Pope was referencing the famous Magnolia Gardens of Charleston, SC, C. Norwood Hastie was the owner during the 1930s.

Unlike Magnolia Gardens, Pope had no great mansion or plantation to show the public. Pope decided to entice visitor to Winter Haven by building a tropical garden. Pope selected a section of the shoreline of Lake Eloise, one of the area's largest lakes, as the location for his tropical paradise. Pope explained in an interview that he chose that particular piece of land “simply because the cypress trees, far out in the water, were a bit of scenery that all of us in Winter Haven had loved.”⁶⁹

In addition to the sentimental and aesthetic value, the land held for Pope, he also chose one of Winter Haven’s lakeshores because of the appeal of Polk County and its roads. During the 1920s, Pope’s father and other business leaders in Polk County formed the Good Roads movement that secured a one-and-half million-dollar bond for road improvement.⁷⁰ The movement used the bond money to pave hundreds of miles of roads across Polk County. These smooth asphalt paved roads made the county an ideal location for a tourist destination.⁷¹

Additionally, the county possessed an economic base found in few other Floridian counties. In 1924, Polk County ranked third in the state in the number of registered automobiles and the county’s citrus industry constituted one-third of the state’s entire production. Also at that time, a fifth of the world’s phosphate was mined in the county. Valued at nineteen million dollars, these mines provided a considerable economic base to Polk County.⁷²

⁶⁹ Hardy in CGPCHGL, 376-377.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Kendrick, Baynard. *Florida Trails to Turnpikes, 1914-1964*. (Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, 1964), 22-23.

⁷² Ibid, 21-22.

The development of roads continued to be an important issue to Pope. Four years after opening his park, Pope met with representatives of the Orange Blossom Trail association, Route 19 association, and the Scenic Highlanders to discuss how to influence the state to build north-south roads through the center of the state. These roads would route traffic by Silver Springs, Highlands Hammock, Cypress Gardens, Bok Tower, and other points of interests before ending in Miami.

Pope faced considerable hurdles in securing financing for the construction of the park. The initial purchase of the land itself proved to be the easiest step. In 1931, he purchased the thirty-seven acres of semi-swampland with his own savings.⁷³ After he purchased the land, Pope faced the problem of how to finance the development of this land into something tourists would pay to see.⁷⁴ Dick Pope owned semi-swampland on a lake. To build Cypress Gardens would require a large sum of money to convert the land into something that tourists would pay to see.

The funding for Cypress Gardens came from Pope's friends, banks and even federal money. Pope convinced the Canal Commission, the Federal Emergency Relief Association (FERA), and the Lake Region Board Canal District to help him develop Cypress Gardens. Pope later told how he convinced FERA "that instead of having men raking leaves at a dollar a day, we could beautify and rebuild the canals and chain of lakes."⁷⁵ In addition to the canal project, he proposed adding a hanging garden to Lake Eloise's shore. This hanging garden became the Cypress Gardens that Pope had previously envisioned with his wife. Pope told the Canal Commission, the Federal Emergency Relief Association (FERA), and the Lake Region Board Canal District that his proposed gardens would charge admission but would be publically owned. Under this proposal, Pope would serve as the administrator of the gardens but the profits would go into government coffers. With the help of wealthy Winter Haven local John Snively, Sr., Pope convinced the Chamber of Commerce, and the project began shortly afterward.

The first project that led to Cypress Gardens was the beautification of the area's canals. Initially, the Canal Commission spent \$1,500 on cleaning up the canals. This stimulus program

"Highway Groups To Meet Sunday Noon At Cypress Gardens," *Winter Haven Herald* November 1, 1940

⁷³ Burt Lacey, *Cypress Gardens 60th Anniversary Celebration*, (Cypress Gardens, Florida, 1996), 10.

⁷⁴ Ibid

⁷⁵ Hardy in CGPCHGL, 376-377.

also encouraged boaters to travel along the series of lakes in Winter Haven, which are connected by canals, and visit the proposed Cypress Gardens.⁷⁶ Shortly after cleaning up the canals, the Commission agreed to pay \$2,000 to begin the work on Cypress Gardens itself. In 1933, when it became clear that Pope intended to retain ownership, FERA withdrew its support.⁷⁷

By the summer of 1933, public sentiment began to turn against the Cypress Gardens project. The more vegetation workers removed from the lakefront land, the worse it looked. Pope's only constant supporter was his friend John Snively.⁷⁸ The two men paid the Canal Commission a \$500 down payment and extended a three-year note for the balance to repay all the money that had been put into the project. Pope formed the Florida Cypress Gardens Association, Inc. with himself and Julie as the owners and had the ownership of the park transferred from the Canal Commission to the Florida Cypress Gardens Association once the Commission decided to withdraw from the project. At this point Pope hired dollar-a-day laborers to dig the canals needed to drain the swamp. Later, Pope boasted that on a typical day he toiled alongside his twenty or thirty workers. The majority of the work involved clearing or creating paths, planting exotic flora, digging small artificial canals, lakes and lagoons, and building wooden arched bridges to span the bodies of water. When the Popes ran low on funds to pay the workers they often called upon George Jenkins (founder of Publix Supermarkets) to give them grocery vouchers valued at \$1.25 in order to pay the workers.

⁷⁶ Presently there are two chains; the south chain contains fourteen lakes including Lake Eloise, where Cypress Gardens is located and the north chain has seven lakes.

⁷⁷ "Lake Wales Salutes the Dick Pope," *Lake Wales News*, October 17, 1957 in CGPCHGL, (not numbered, located between pp. 343 and 344.

Hardy in CGPCHGL, 376-377.

⁷⁸ The friendship of Pope and John A. Snively, Sr. extended back to land boom. Snively along with Dick Pope, Pope's father and other prominent Winter Haven real estate businessmen created the Haven Villa Corporation. Nancy Garnett Hardy in CGPCHGL, 376-377.

John A. Snively and his family are best known for their role in the citrus industry of Florida.

Before the park opened, Pope saw the need for the park's future expansion. Pope added forty-eight acres to the area under development by signing a ninety-nine year lease with John Snively. Under this agreement, Snively received ten percent of the park's profits.⁷⁹

By 1935, Pope opened the park to the public for special events. He set the formal opening of the park for December 22, 1935 but had to push it back to New Years Day 1936. When Cypress Gardens opened its doors in 1936, the park's sole attraction consisted of the winding paths through the gardens with arched bridges that led visitors over the canals and ponds. Within the first few years, Pope added electric boats to the park's lagoons and canals that carried tourists silently through the gardens, but the attraction of Cypress Gardens was still the beauty of the gardens.

Garden attractions had become a mainstay of Florida tourism in the 1920s. Historian, Margot Ammidown listed and described such attractions as Dupree Gardens, north of Tampa; Rainbow Tropical Gardens in West Palm Beach; Oriental Gardens on the St. Johns River; Sunken Gardens outside of St. Petersburg; Sarasota Jungle Gardens; and Bok Tower located near Lakes Wales. These gardens offered idyllic beauty and some went as far as to refer to the biblical Garden of Eden through their use of tropical plants and a peaceful atmosphere. Dupree Gardens obtained this effect by playing soft music throughout the gardens while Bok Tower presented a more explicit reference, with images of Adam and Eve adorning the brass door to the tower itself.⁸⁰

⁷⁹ Furlong, 74-75.

⁸⁰ Margot Ammidown, "Edens, Underworlds, and Shrines: Florida's Small Tourist Attractions," *The Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts* 23 (1998): 250-251.
Bok Tower Gardens, "The Tower," <http://www.boktowergardens.org/the-tower>

From the start, Cypress Gardens exhibited exotic trees, bushes and other plant life, but its main draw has always been flowers. Even before its public opening, flower shows attracted guests to the still-unfinished park. Flower-related events—and the reportage about them—built excitement for Cypress Gardens’ grand opening. The seventh annual Winter Haven Garden club held a flower show at Cypress Gardens on March 27, 1935. This non-competitive exhibit featured “86 classifications of six-stalk annuals, bulbous plants, roses, flower arrangements, potted plants and ‘shadow boxes.’”⁸¹ A few days later on April 5, the *Winter Haven Herald* reported the blooming of gardenias at Cypress Gardens that they boasted to be largest planting of this flower in the country.⁸² The newspaper articles leading up to the December 29, 1935 opening of Cypress Gardens depicted the floral sights and emphasized the park's natural beauty.

After the opening of the Cypress Gardens, the park’s gardens and canal-linked lagoons lured tourist to the attraction. These plants and lagoons represented what Cypress Gardens was. It was a series of gardens; and, more importantly, it was exotic, floral Florida. *The Winter Haven Herald* provided detailed descriptions of the park at its opening as well as providing pictorial evidence. The park during the first two years of operation consisted of flower or flowering bush lined trails that curved and wound their way through the existing cypress trees. These trails either reconnected to another trail or ended at a clearing dominated by one particular flower. In addition to these paths, several wooden bridges spanned the canals of the park that linked “sand bottomed lagoons” to Lake Eloise.⁸³

⁸¹“Annual Flower Show at Cypress Gardens” *Winter Haven Herald*, March 22, 1935 in CGPCHGL, 4.

⁸²“Gardenias Are Blooming at the Cypress Gardens,” *Winter Haven Herald*, April 5, 1935 in CGPCHGL, 5.

⁸³ “Cypress Gardens to Open Sunday P.M.,” *Winter Haven Herald*, December 27, 1935 in CGPCHGL, 13.

Dick Pope chose not to have paved or even mulch-covered trails. Instead, he opted to cover his mile long winding trails with wooden blocks. Pope had a sawmill installed at Cypress Gardens and during the clearing of the land near Lake Eloise, the park's employees cut the removed Cypress trees into small wooden blocks and laid them along the park's trails as bricks. Contemporary accounts noted the effect was both a "rustic touch as well as lending convenience to the visitors" of the park.⁸⁴

The *Herald's* coverage of Cypress Gardens from 1935 to the early 1970s appears to have consisted of reprinting the park's press releases. The articles never mention a reporter nor are they written from a reporter's point of view. The *Herald* often devoted entire articles to cover the planting of azaleas, gardenias, and canna lilies in terms that seem more likely to come from a park employee than from a journalist.

For the first two years of the park's operation, the gardens existed as the only regular sight to see at Cypress Gardens. Periodically special events came to the park including the Gardenia Festival of 1937 that featured the dancing of ballerina Gail Armour, the filming of a two-reel "spotlight" movie that included racing boats and aquaplaning, and the visit to the park of sixteen airplanes from Florida and Georgia during the Aviation Week Tour.⁸⁵ Excluding those special events, the theme of botanical gardens was the only attraction to bring in tourists.

In November 1937, Pope added a fleet of electric boats to Cypress Gardens. The park already had several manufactured canals and lagoons and the electric boats offered a new way to

⁸⁴ "Section of Winding Cypress Garden Trail," *Winter Haven Herald*, December 20, 1935 in CGPCHGL, 12.

⁸⁵ "Will Dance in Gardenia Festival at Florida Cypress Gardens," *Winter Haven Herald*, March 12, 1937 in CGPCHGL, 24.

"Local Talent Now Making Spotlight at Cypress Gardens," *Winter Haven Herald*, April 2, 1937 in CGPCHGL, 27.
"Pilots Visit City on Tour During Aviation Week," *Winter Haven Herald*, June 25, 1937 in CGPCHGL, 28.

view the gardens. Additionally, Pope raised the bridges that extended over the canals to allow the boats to travel below. These electric boats could hold from four to eleven passengers and were essentially silent in operation. A trip along the mile long tour of the park cost visitors twenty-five cents. Trained operators working for Colonel F.S. Tooley, who also ran the famous Jungle Cruise at Silver Springs, drove these electric boats.⁸⁶

Even during Cypress Gardens' early years, Pope conflated Florida and his park—by visiting one a tourist was sure to visit the other. A January 14, 1938 *Winter Haven Herald* captioned photograph made sure to publicize not only the new electric boats but also the state. “From these boats the beautiful scenery of this show place is presented to the visitor as a moving panorama displaying the natural beauty of Florida, ‘the land of sunshine and flowers.’”⁸⁷

Newspaper articles covered the gardens in terms that appealed to garden enthusiasts. When thirteen hundred visitors from Tampa and Ybor City toured the park in 1938, the *Herald* reported, “The guests enjoyed the flowers, rode in the electric boats and walked the trails among the tropical flora for hours. It was a most pleasant occasion.”⁸⁸ Papers gave special attention to the addition of new flowers, especially when rare specimens bloomed. Long articles that seem to be written more for the gardener were common during the early years of Cypress Gardens.

The Gardens are, indeed, lovelier than ever, as anyone will attest who has seen them recently. At this season, too many interesting and beautiful things are to be seen. Bougainvilleas are favorites with all Floridians, but the new orange and pink varieties will be of particular interest to those who are seeking a new color note in their garden decoration. Poinsettias are in full bloom—red and white. And, “believe it or not,” Winter

⁸⁶“Cypress Gardens to Hold Open House for Havenites Sunday,” *Winter Haven Herald*, November 5, 1937 in CGPCHGL, 30.

⁸⁷“Electric Boats Glide Through Canals at Cypress Gardens,” *Winter Haven Herald*, January 14, 1938 in CGPCHGL, 33.

⁸⁸“Tampa and Ybor City Were Sunday Guests at Cypress Gardens,” *Winter Haven Herald*, September 2, 1938 in CGPCHGL, 36.

Haven gardeners, petunias – Celestial Rose, and the great double and ruffled, are in full bloom, ready for the winter season. Punk trees are white and fragrant, with their bottle-brush flowers, and conventions of bees and butterflies are holding forth about each tree.

The *Herald* and Cypress Gardens during this early period wanted to attract the tourist interested in seeing idealized nature—and there was special attraction for gardeners. With the addition of two new themes in the 1940s, Cypress Gardens sought to broaden its appeal. The next chapter will explain how the addition of these two themes changed Cypress Gardens from a park with a single draw to a theme park with much more to offer a visitor planning to stay the day.

CHAPTER IV: SOUTHERN BELLES AND WATER-SKI SHOWS

Cypress Gardens' history as just a garden attraction was short-lived. Within five years of opening, the park added two major attractions that fundamentally transformed its image. Girls dressed as hoop skirted antebellum southern belles became integral to Cypress Gardens and shortly after this addition, regular water ski shows solidified water based sports as a main aspect of the park. The addition of the belles and water ski provided the park its fundamental formula. With these three attractions—gardens, girls, and water skiing—Cypress Gardens now had a core set of sights that the tourist could view, watch and photograph.

The development of Cypress Garden's main features highlights an important distinction between the woman who created much of Cypress Gardens and the man who promoted it. Dick Pope always positioned himself as Cypress Gardens' creative genius but Julie Pope designed the gardens before Dick knew the difference between an azalea and a bougainvillea. Julie also created the belles in Dick's absence and, when Dick went to war, she developed the ski shows. With each of these themes, Dick Pope made later improvements and modifications, but Julie Pope deserves the historical credit for the invention. The ways in which he advertised and marketed his wife's creations show Dick Pope's genius.

The addition of a southern theme arrived as an invention born of necessity. The new theme came from Julie Pope's quick thinking improvisation instead of any planning on Dick Pope's behalf. This Old South theme brought in images of the pre-Civil War South that included Southern belles and large plantation mansions. The birth of the southern belles at Cypress Gardens appears to have come from the combination of the possible influence of Natchez,

Mississippi's Pilgrimage and popular novel and movie *Gone with the Wind*. These two different factors seemed to have influenced the Pope family's decision to institute and keep the Southern Belles at Cypress Gardens. Stephen E. Branch's article, "The Salesman and His Swamp: Dick Pope's Cypress Gardens," retells the creation myth of the southern belles. In the winter of 1940, a severe freeze damaged the flame vines (*Pyrostegia venusta*) that decorated the park's entrance.⁸⁹ In an effort to prevent guests from believing the frost damaged the park's flora, Julie Pope created a quick diversion. She instructed a few of the park's secretaries to dress in antebellum hoop-skirt dresses that the park had left over from a promotional photograph and to stand in front of the damaged plant life. They had further instructions to stand at the park's gate and "flirt with everybody who comes in," and assure them that the plants sustained only minor damage. After seeing the success of this act, Dick and Julie Pope decided to keep the "southern belles" as part of the park, with the intent that they would be the "goodwill ambassadors" of Cypress Gardens.⁹⁰

Branch's article does not expand upon this interesting dimension of Cypress Gardens. Branch briefly explains away the belles as "sex appeal" and the "sort of exotica [that] was long a staple of many Florida advertisers."⁹¹ While Florida advertisers commonly used "exotic" to promote the state, they typically did not use southern motifs. Cypress Gardens is located in central Florida, four miles outside of Winter Haven, an area not known for either antebellum

⁸⁹ Sources mention simply "flame vines" which are *Pyrostegia venusta*. Other flame vine varieties include the Mexican flame vine, *Senecio confusus* and the Orange Flame vine, *Combretum fruticosum* Dan Culbert "Colorful Flame Vines," University of Florida: IFAS Extension <http://okeechobee.ifas.ufl.edu/News%20columns/Flame%20Vines.htm> (accessed April 15, 2009)

⁹⁰Stephen E. Branch, "The Salesman and His Swamp: Dick Pope's Cypress Gardens." *Florida Historical Quarterly* 4 (2002): 492.

⁹¹Branch, 493

plantations or southern belles. Pope, the Iowan, did not refer to Florida as southern until after the inclusion of the belles. By 1940, two popular forces most likely influenced the Popes: Natchez, Mississippi's Pilgrimage and Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind*.

The similarities between Cypress Garden's southern belles and Natchez's Pilgrimage are easily apparent. Both have similar creation myths, and both attracted tourists interested in the Old South. According to popular myth, the Natchez Garden Club created the Pilgrimage in 1931 out of necessity. The second annual convention of the Mississippi State Confederation of Garden Clubs had selected Natchez as the host city, but an untimely frost forced Natchez Garden Club President, Katherine Miller, to improvise. Because the frost damaged many of the treasured blossoms, Miller decided to "substitute tours of Natchez's antebellum mansions for the garden excursions."⁹² The mythical part of the story lies in the fact that for over two weeks before the convention, Miller and others had planned a tour of the mansions and that this was not a last minute improvisation. Whatever the circumstances, the convention went over well and convention attendees recommended to Miller that next year they should open up the tour to the public and charge admission. The following year, she added six more mansions to the twenty mansions open for the tour in 1931. Miller added to the Old South aura of Natchez by convincing the "homeowners and hostesses greeting guests to wear hoopskirts."⁹³

These hoopskirts evoked a real, if glorified, part of Natchez's history. During the 1931 tour of homes, homeowners and hostesses told stories about the mansions' history as well as their own family histories. In general, these histories presented a glorified past. The past in this

⁹²Jack E. Davis, *Race Against Time: Culture and Separation in Natchez Since 1930*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001), 55.

⁹³ *Ibid*, 56.

case was not the South since the Civil War, but the antebellum South, which the residents saw as a grand “vanished culture.”⁹⁴ In this way, the tour of homes soon became more about the Old South than about architecture or gardens. Given the style and age of the homes in Natchez, this shift in emphasis is logical. In contrast, Cypress Gardens’ display of hoop-skirted girls that appeared to have come from the antebellum plantation house has no historical basis in Winter Haven, Florida.

Polk County residents and other tourists displayed interest in these belles and the Old South beyond the initial improvisation due to the popularity of the *Gone With the Wind*. Margaret Mitchell’s popular novel and later movie, *Gone With the Wind* created an interest in the antebellum South that otherwise did not exist in central Florida. Mitchell completed the novel in early 1936 and by its official release date of June 30, 1936, it had already pre-sold fifty thousand copies due to the positive reviews it received. The book went on to receive the Pulitzer Prize in 1937. Three years after the book’s publication, David Selznick produced the movie *Gone with the Wind*, which won Best Picture in 1939.⁹⁵ With this much publicity and success, it is certain that Dick and Julie Pope drew upon the mass appeal of both the book and movie. The freeze crucial to the southern belles’ myth happened in December 1940, well enough after *Gone with the Wind* that it is easy to conclude that Margaret Mitchell’s fictional Old South heavily influenced the Old South that the Popes created at Cypress Gardens.

It is not clear whether Dick and Julie Pope had originally intended to keep the southern belles, but publicity and success made the belles permanent attractions in themselves. Regardless

⁹⁴Ibid, 62.

⁹⁵ Christina Lewis, “Margaret Mitchell, *Gone with the Wind*” http://www.literarytraveler.com/literary_articles/margaret_mitchell_gonewiththewind.aspx (accessed April 20, 2009)

of the Cypress Gardens myth's accuracy, the public and the newspapers latched onto the southern belles and quickly helped to make them a defining feature. By February 7, 1941, the *Winter Haven Herald* began to describe Cypress Gardens in southern terms with the article "Southern Flowers at Cypress Gardens" using the term "Old South" for the first time when describing the park.⁹⁶

The addition of water-skiing as the third theme of Cypress Gardens had a historical basis given the park's long past of water-based sports. Although the water-ski show did not become a part of Cypress Gardens history until 1941, water-related events occurred irregularly since 1937. One of the first prominent aquatic sports moments in Cypress Gardens' history occurred in 1937 with the filming of the short film *Aquabats*, featuring aquatic stuntmen, including Dick Pope's brother Malcolm among other aquatic stuntmen.⁹⁷ The majority of this film covered the sport of Aquaplaning. This sport involved a person riding on a wide wooden board that had a rope connecting the front of the board to the back of the motorboat. Riders stood on the board, leaning back while holding on the second rope. This sport would eventually lead to water tobogganing and water-skiing.

In 1938, Fox Movietone released *What the Well Dressed Aquatic Star Will Wear*. The newsreel shots included "Miss [Betty] MacCalla aquaplaning, skiing, and tobogganing. In the toboggan scenes Miss Marie Balliet and Miss Peggy Tibbets are also featured."⁹⁸ This is the first

⁹⁶ "Southern Flowers at Cypress Gardens," *Winter Haven Herald*, February 7, 1941 in CGPCHGL, 46.

⁹⁷ "Aquabats," Filmed at the Cypress Gardens, at Ritz Sat. to Mon." *Winter Haven Herald*, July 30, 1937 in CGPCHGL, 29.

For most of the park's existence Malcolm Pope, Dick's half-brother, drove the boats, both the electric tour boats and the gas powered ski boats. As the park grew, he oversaw the boating aspect of the park.

⁹⁸ "Fox Movietone is Completed Wednesday at Cypress Gardens," *Winter Haven Herald*, July 29 1938 in CGPCHGL, 35.

mention of female skiers at Cypress Gardens. The first available image of Cypress Gardens' aquatic female performers came in a May 1942 captioned picture. Misses Barbara and Sylvia Chambliss water tobogganed behind an unseen boat.⁹⁹

Water-ski shows at Cypress Gardens eventually used all women or predominately female teams of skiers. Later, Pope successfully capitalized on the combination of pretty girls and water-skiing, but initially, male skiers performed alongside the female aquatic stars. The first all-female cast appeared in September 1943 when twenty- seven "Winter Haven girls" appeared in a Technicolor sports short shot at Cypress Gardens that was later provided to nearby stationed servicemen. An article in the *Winter Haven Herald* reports: "Several convoys of soldiers have been sent from various fields to assist in making the picture, which will also include close-ups of the girls and Cypress Garden flowers."¹⁰⁰

It is no coincidence that Cypress Gardens began to shift the emphasis of the ski shows more towards the aquamaids by the years of 1942 and 1943 when increasing numbers of U.S. servicemen began to visit the park. Dick Pope enlisted in the Army, and during the war, Julie Pope ran the park. These tourists visited the park in enough numbers that Julie Pope began to pay serious attention to them. In addition to the tourists who actually came to the park, Julie Pope also presented images of female water skiers to soldiers overseas via newsreels and short films. These female skiers sold well to the military men in the park, and Julie Pope realized that by advertising to overseas soldiers, she would have thousands of eager tourists once the men

⁹⁹ Captioned Photograph, *Winter Haven Herald*, May 22, 1942 in CGPCHGL, 62.

Captioned Photograph, *Winter Haven Herald*, June 26, 1942 in CGPCHGL, 61.

¹⁰⁰Captioned Photograph, *Winter Haven Herald*, September 10, 1943 in CGPCHGL, 71.

returned.¹⁰¹ In 1945, newspapers called the girls “aqua-maids” for the first time. The term stuck and for the majority of Cypress Gardens’ history, the park calls its female Cypress Gardens’ skiers aquamaids while the male skiers have no title.

The famed ski show’s creation story bears some similarities to the southern belles’ creation at Cypress Gardens. As with the belles, Julie Pope created the water-ski show with quick thinking and improvisation. During World War II with Dick enlisted in the Army, Julie Pope wanted to entertain the servicemen stationed throughout Central Florida. She had promotional photographs taken of Dick Jr. and his high school friends waterskiing with Cypress Gardens in the background. Shortly afterwards, military men appeared at the park asking what time the show began. Katy Turner, a park secretary, picked 3:30 p.m. and after Dick Jr. and his friends got out of school, they put on an improvised show.¹⁰² *The Winter Haven Herald* announced that Julie Pope scheduled the first public ski show performance for Sunday April 18, 1943, and indicated that this was to be a special showing, most likely a one-time event.¹⁰³

While Dick Pope served the Army overseas, Julie Pope ran the ski-shows until husband returned from the war. The ski show cast consisted of Dick Pope, Jr. and his high school friends as well as park employees. A typical performance included ski jumps off ramps, doubles and Topside Tandem rides.

Julie invented the ski-show, and Dick promoted it. Within a few years of his return, in 1949, Dick Pope began to advertise the ski show nationally by sending Cypress Gardens ski teams to various cities to perform their show. These shows would generate interest in the park

¹⁰¹ Lacy, 17, 23-24.

¹⁰² Hardy in CGPCHGL, 376-377.

¹⁰³“Cypress Garden Show Scheduled to Appear Here,” *Winter Haven Herald*, April 16, 1943 in CGPCHGL, 66.

and potentially drew new tourists into Florida and Cypress Gardens. The length and number of ski shows continued to increase during this period until by 1955 they performed four ski shows each day: at 11am, 1pm, 3pm and 4:30 pm.¹⁰⁴ The ski shows also began to include more than just the impressive ski jumps and trick performances. After the release of the 1953 film, *Easy to Love*, starring Esther Williams, Pope added a “Clown Act” to the daily ski shows.¹⁰⁵ This Clown Act even featured the same suit that Williams wore in the film.

In addition to the ski shows, the park attracted and kept visitors in the park by hosting ski tournaments. Cypress Gardens routinely hosted annual tournaments such as the Dixie Ski Tournament, World Water Skiing Championship, All American Ski Tournament, and others. The 1957 World Water Skiing Championship was held at Cypress Gardens on September 13, 14, and 15. Each day the park pulled in an estimated sixty thousand visitors. This tournament, for example, had four hundred participants compete from twenty-six different nations.¹⁰⁶ Additionally, the Cypress Gardens team often represented the entire United States at international water ski tournaments. In 1955, the Cypress Gardens team flew to Lebanon to participate in the World Water Ski Tournament.¹⁰⁷

A 1958 *National Geographic* article attempted to explain the phenomenal growth of waterskiing as a sport and how Cypress Gardens helped to accelerate its growth. His article, “The Booming Sport of Water Skiing,” states that by 1958 three million Americans had participated in this new sport. The American Water Ski Association reported on over seventy

¹⁰⁴“Pair of Pretty Skiers,” *Winter Haven Herald*, October 21, 1955 in CGPCHGL, 282.

They may have actually increased to four shows earlier than this, but the first mentioning of four shows in my sources is from October 1955.

¹⁰⁵“Just Clowning Around,” *Winter Haven Herald*, July 30, 1954 in CGPCHGL, 253.

¹⁰⁶“60,000 Guests Expected at the Gardens,” *Winter Haven Herald*, September 13, 1957 in CGPCHGL, 338.

¹⁰⁷ “Garden Ski Team Flies to Lebanon,” *Winter Haven Herald*, August 12, 1955 in CGPCHGL, 273.

water ski tournaments in that same year. Additionally by the late 1950s, several colleges had added the sport to their athletic programs and, in one academic semester before Garrett wrote this article, more than four hundred students joined the ski club at the University of Miami, Florida. After Garrett illustrated the growth of this sport, he explained that it owed much to Cypress Gardens. “Perhaps the biggest single boost to water skiing was the starring role Cypress Gardens played in the first Cinerama production in 1952, *This is Cinerama*. On the curved screen millions of people saw beautiful girls flashing beneath moss-hung cypress trees, and athletic young men hurtling through thin air on skis.”¹⁰⁸

In the article, Dick Pope offered his own ideas as regarding water-skiing’s popularity. Pope cited the increasing sales of outboard motors when asked, “Why is the sport booming?” Pope further explained, “Skiing has been around for a long time, but it used to be the polo of water sports. Only a few could afford the big cruisers needed to pull skiers.”¹⁰⁹ Pope then proceeded to take credit for the second main reason for the sport’s growth. He said professional shows such as the ones at Cypress Gardens led the way for amateurs. “Champion performers here and in other shows around the country have inspired spectators to try.” Pope understood that his park stood on cutting edge of a new sport and its appeal was twofold. His park and its traveling water ski show motivated audiences to try out the new sport. Additionally, those who already partook in the sport traveled to Cypress Gardens to see professionals effortlessly complete stunts they could only dream of performing.

¹⁰⁸ Wilbur E. Garrett, “The Booming Sport of Water Skiing,” *National Geographic Magazine* 114 No. 5, (November, 1958): 70.

Cinerama was a widescreen movie filming and display process. Showing a Cinerama movie required three projectors and a wide curved screen. The filming process also involved three cameras that captured a widescreen image simultaneously but at slightly different angles.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid*, 70.

By the 1960s, Cypress Gardens and the Dick Pope name had become virtually synonymous with water-skiing. In 1956, Pope invested in Tourney Skis, a ski manufacturer in Lakeland, Florida. He later purchased the entire company, moved the plant to Winter Haven, changed the company's name and branded the skis with the Dick Pope name.¹¹⁰ By the late 1970s, profits from the ski production business exceeded four hundred thousand dollars and helped to further link Pope's park to the sport.

¹¹⁰“Richard Downing Pope, Jr.,” Water Ski Hall of Fame
<http://www.waterskihalloffame.com/pages/Bios/Richard%20Pope%20Jr.htm>. (accessed on April, 27, 2009)

CHAPTER V: PROMOTION

Gardens, girls, and water-skiing provided Cypress Gardens with the basic formula for success that Dick Pope would promote for the rest of his life. Through promotion, Pope married the image of Cypress Gardens with Florida, making them one and the same. He defined Florida on his own terms thereby creating a state of exotic tropical flora, beautiful females, and water-skiing fun. Pope promoted his park using any available visual medium: pictures, newsreels, movies, or television. Because of Pope's efforts in the 1950s and 1960s, Cypress Gardens gained household name recognition and increased its sales greatly.

Through visual media, Pope merged Cypress Gardens with Florida in the minds of Americans. Images of his park appeared in newspapers, family picture albums, magazines, and postcards. Florida-themed merchandise also bore images of Cypress Gardens. Postcards, t-shirts, coffee mugs and other Florida souvenirs included the name or images of the park. Florida souvenir shirts and postcards commonly featured a map of the state with symbolic images represented the state's major cities. Located in the state's center, an image of a hoop skirted or waterskiing girl stood for Winter Haven and Cypress Gardens.

Photography provided the lifeblood of Cypress Gardens. Dick Pope wanted to present vistas that tourists would desire to photograph. The role of pictures featured heavily into Pope's plan for the park. Pope designed the park to be seen through a camera's lens. Photography served two roles for Cypress Gardens: both as a means of direct publicity and an activity for tourists. In order to capture the attention of new and larger audiences, professional photographers employed by the park took thousands of pictures a year to inundate newspapers (local and national) and

magazines with images to print. In 1962, Pope claimed that he spent \$230,000 on photography-related expenses compared with \$280,000 for maintaining the gardens.¹¹¹ Simultaneously, park visitors who took pictures and showed them to friends and family also generated publicity.

Cypress Gardens from the end of World War II in 1945 to the Pope's sale of the park in 1985 hinged upon photography for its success. By the 1950s, the park established itself as a photographer's playground with taking pictures serving as a park activity. The newspapers understood the importance of photography to the park—Pope designed Cypress Gardens to attract amateur photographers. An April 12, 1957 *Herald* article described the park as a “Fairyland of Flowers and a virtual photographer's paradise.”¹¹² At one point in time during the 1960s, Cypress Gardens sold more Kodak film than anywhere else in America.¹¹³ In 1962 alone, Pope sold \$300,000 in film.¹¹⁴

The photographs park visitors took provided essentially free advertisement for Cypress Gardens and the state of Florida. Pope dubbed this form of free promotion “OPM₂—Our Picture Material plus Other People's Money.” Dick Pope sold Kodak film in the park and even rented out cameras. The visitors went home, developed their film, and showed their friends and family the sights at Cypress Gardens. Tourists also promoted the park by purchasing souvenirs that prominently mention Cypress Gardens (\$500,000 worth in 1962) and by driving their Cypress Gardens bumper-stickered cars. By the early 1960s, Pope employed three full-time employees to paste bumper stickers on visitor's parked cars.¹¹⁵

¹¹¹ William B. Furlong, “Babes in a Swampland,” *Sports Illustrated* 19:17 (1963): 68.

¹¹²“Dixie Ski Tournament to Start Here Today,” *Winter Haven Herald*, April 12, 1957 in CGPCHGL, 322.

¹¹³ Lacey, 17.

¹¹⁴ Furlong, 69.

¹¹⁵ Furlong, 69.

Dick Pope made photography central to each of the three themes of Cypress Gardens. With the botanical gardens, he placed special emphasis on the layout of the flora to create a perfect photo. Next, for pictures of pretty girls, he selected young pretty girls to dress as southern belles; he crowned beauty queens in the park; and he invited models and movie stars to be photographed. Lastly, for water-skiing, he added special equipment, boats, and piers to the ski show to obtain shots unique to Cypress Gardens. Each area of Cypress Gardens presented exceptional images worthy of a photograph or two. While the main themes of the park—gardens, girls, and waterskiing—appeared to have little in common, they shared a common design. Pope planned each of the three aspects of the park in relation to photography.

Pope wanted the botanical gardens arranged so that any tourist could easily take a near perfect picture. To accomplish this task, Pope employed photographer Robert Dahlgren to ensure “the grounds would be photogenic.” For these services, Pope paid Dahlgren ten percent of the park’s profits.¹¹⁶ By the early 1940s, after Dahlgren left the park, Pope hired Robert Eastman as the head of photography at Cypress Gardens. Because of this quest for the perfect picture, even the planting of new trees and flowers required the consultation of the expert photographer. By the 1940s, “every plant, flower, and tree was placed in position after he had viewed the spot through a camera viewfinder. Each path was laid out with composition, color, and beauty in mind and was specially designed to take advantage of light.”¹¹⁷ Lighting is a key factor of all good photographs and Cypress Gardens paid close attention to this detail. The park even went as far as posting a sign near the entrance of the park that showed guests the best light settings at

¹¹⁶ Furlong, 68.

¹¹⁷ Lacey, 16.

speed they should set their cameras on to achieve the best show. Park employees updated this sign at least daily but as often as hourly depending upon the weather conditions.¹¹⁸ Cypress Gardens also started to give guided tours that included specific instructions as to where to take the best photographs and what time of day was ideal for certain locations.¹¹⁹

Even before the park opened, the garden theme began to draw attention through photography. A December 13, 1935 *Winter Haven Herald* article stated, “the gardens are receiving nationwide publicity at present since the booklet of the National Florida exhibit which is being distributed at [the] Rockefeller Center carries two full-page illustrations of beauty spots of the garden. Only three other full page illustrations are contained in the booklet.”¹²⁰ The *Herald* often printed full-page pictures of the park with captions such as a January 14, 1938 shot of electric boats gliding among Cypress trees or a December 18, 1936 article showing the newly planted Angle Trumpet tree at Cypress Gardens. Both of those photographs illustrate the peaceful nature of the garden theme.

The theme of pretty girls pervades Cypress Gardens’ photographs. Beauty queens, southern belles, waterskiing Aquamaids, and Hollywood actresses posed for pictures at the park, both for professionals and for the amateur. Pope wanted images of these girls to appeal to both female and male audiences. While, at the most basic level, the pictures contained beautiful young women they generated broader interest through the girls’ activities within the photos.

The *Polk County Democrat* was fond of publishing pictures of the many beauty queens that Dick Pope crowned in his park. A November 15, 1946 article from the *Democrat* shows the

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Lacey, 17.

¹²⁰“Formal Opening of Cypress Gardens 22nd,” *Winter Haven Herald*, December 13, 1935 in CGPCHGL, 11.

Tangerine Queen contestant, Mary Kay Gumm. Similarly, a January 21, 1947 *Democrat* picture showed the “Lovely Louise Burrell, a Southern College Co-ed from Eustis [who] was crowned Florida’s Camellia Queen in a colorful ceremony of music and flowers at Cypress Gardens...”

Cypress Gardens attracted amateur photographers by having models and movie stars available in the park. Jessie Stough who had recently starred in the Paramount short *Strange Occupations* visited Cypress Gardens and made herself available for photographers in April of 1941.¹²¹ A July 7, 1944 *Herald* picture caption mentioned national coverage for Cypress Gardens through another such model. “Charlotte Cook, one of Florida’s photogenic girls is featured in here cowboy costume in a picture story on the famed Cypress Gardens models in this month’s *Click Magazine*...”¹²²

Life Magazine displayed more pictures of Cypress Gardens’ girls to America than any other single magazine. In February 1945, Pope impressed *Life* enough that the magazine ran Cypress Gardens on the cover along with two-and-half pages of pictures. The *Winter Haven Herald* attributed the magazine’s interest in the park to “the ingenious ability of Dick Pope to pick photogenic feminine charm and stage it in a background of enchanting floral beauty.”¹²³

Pope advertised Polk County alongside Cypress Gardens for the next *Life* photo shoot. The following February 1946 *Life* published pictures of Cypress Gardens as well as pictures of Lakeland, FL and Lake Wales, FL. Originally planned as a weeklong stay at Cypress Gardens for “noted ace photographer” Eliot Eliofsen and *Life*’s research editors, Irene Saint, Dick Pope suggested the inclusion of Lakeland and Florida Southern College. The pictures taken at Florida

¹²¹ “Florida Cypress Gardens Are One of Major Assets,” *Winter Haven Herald*, April 25, 1941 in CGPCHGL, 52.

¹²² Captioned Photograph, *Winter Haven Herald*, July 7, 1944 in CGPCHGL, 79.

¹²³ “Dick Pope Gets Publicity for Florida,” *Winter Haven Herald*, February 16, 1945 in CGPCHGL, 82.

Southern College dealt mainly with “seven attractive co-eds.”¹²⁴ Pope stated that these pictures would “depict the pleasant life and privileges and advantages that girls from other states enjoy at a modern co-educational college in our Land of Sunshine and Pretty Girls.”¹²⁵ A February 14, 1947 *Polk County Democrat* captioned photograph of Nance Stilley, “18-year-old AquaMaid and photographic model” mentioned that she became the second Cypress Gardens girl to appear on the cover of *Life* in two-years time.¹²⁶ Images of Cypress Gardens appeared in *Life Magazine* three times in 1951 alone.¹²⁷

Dick Pope introduced non-Floridians to Cypress Gardens’ and the state by traveling with images of the park’s beautiful girls. At the 1940 World’s Fair in New York, Pope showed Florida to Fair visitors with a color film featuring Winter Haven and Cypress Gardens.¹²⁸ Later in 1955, Pope sent Citrus Queen Sally Ardrey and three other “Cypress Gardens beauties” as well as a team of Aquamaids to Detroit, Michigan for a citrus promotion. At the opening of new supermarket, “largest in the world,” these “beauties” promoted Florida citrus followed by a water ski show.¹²⁹

Waterskiing provided Cypress Gardens with unique material to photograph. While pictures of gardens and young women existed elsewhere, Dick Pope waterskiing photographs had no equal. To achieve the pictures he desired, Dick Pope constructed a photo pier on the shore of Lake Eloise for park visitors to take up close-up shots of the ski show. A professional

¹²⁴ “Life’ Makes Pictures Here,” *Winter Haven Herald*, November 30, 1945 in CGPCHGL, 101.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ “Life Cover Girl,” *Polk County Democrat*, February 14, 1947 in CGPCHGL, 126.

¹²⁷ Lacey, 16.

¹²⁸ “Winter Haven Movie Will Be Shown at N.Y. Exhibit,” *Winter Haven Herald*, July 19, 1940 in CGPCHGL, 43.

¹²⁹ “Aquamaids to Stage Citrus Promotion in Detroit, Mich., Area,” *Winter Haven Herald*, July 15, 1955 in CGPCHGL, 268.

photographer posted on the pier advised guests on the best camera settings to use and when to click the shutter for the perfect shot of a passing skier. A June 20, 1941 photograph showed Malcolm Pope (Dick Pope's half-brother) in midair as he jumped an outboard boat over a fifty-foot tall barricade set up on Lake Eloise. Roughly, a year later, a May 22, 1942 picture showed Barbara and Sylvia Chambliss aquaplaning behind a boat.¹³⁰

To make pictures of the ski-show more appealing, Pope had special photo boats designed to take action pictures of skiers in action. As the ski shows grew so did these specialty boats. In 1968, Pope added a 41-foot photographic boat to his fleet. Pope "christened [the boat] with a champagne bottle filled with fresh orange juice," and named it *Miss Cover Girl 5*. Pope equipped this specialty boat with "special photographic towers, aluminum arms for towing skiers, a public address system, and a ship to shore radio."¹³¹

Pope understood how to generate newspaper attention in his park. It simply required the sending of a few pictures to the local paper. If a few pictures generated media attention, Pope decided that a few thousand must generate more attention. A 1954 *Tampa Tribune* article estimated, "that each day of the year an average of 100 newspapers were carrying photographs of skiers, bathing beauties and other activities sent out by Cypress Gardens."¹³² An October 17, 1957 *Lake Wales News* article noted that in 1956, Cypress Gardens spent \$500,000 on publicity while the entire state only spent \$1,000,000.¹³³ This article also stated that Pope's eight full time photographers average 40,000 pictures a year, many of those being used for postcards. In 1956,

¹³⁰ "Metro Films News Reels at Gardens Sun.," *Winter Haven Herald*, May 22, 1942 in CGPCHGL, 62.

¹³¹ "Photographic Boat in Use," *Winter Haven Herald*, March 28, 1968 in CGPCHGL, 459.

¹³² Lacey, 24.

¹³³ "Lakes Wales Salutes the Dick Pope," *The Lake Wales News*, October 17, 1957 in CGPCHGL, (not numbered, located between pp. 343 and 344.

Cypress Gardens sold 8,000,000 postcards. In 1963, Pope boasted that in fifty-two week period his publicity shots appeared forty-eight times in the *Chicago Tribune*—"with credit."¹³⁴ While his tactic of bombarding newspapers with images of his park worked for most newspapers, by the mid-1960s the *New York Times* and the Associated Press declined to print his pictures.¹³⁵

In addition to photography, Cypress Gardens also obtained national focus with newsreels, movie shorts and full-length movies. The portrayal of Cypress Gardens and Florida as tropical outdoor fun with beautiful women served as the common thread among the movies and newsreels.

The newsreels captured the three aspects of the park, the gardens, girls, and water sport themes of Cypress Gardens. In 1938, Fox Movietone released *What the Well Dressed Aquatic Star Will Wear*, which featured aquaplaning, skiing, and tobogganing scenes. Two years later, in May 1941, Paramount released a newsreel that focused on the garden and beauty queens. It included an "unusually long" scene showing "the gardenia court showering white blossoms on the new queen as she drifted along one of the Garden canals in an electric boat."¹³⁶ Cypress Gardens' first role in a full-length movie followed the newsreels and movie shorts.

Cypress Gardens served as the background for some of the scenes of *Moon Over Miami*, starring Don Ameche, Betty Grable and Robert Cummings. In this 1941 film, doubles portrayed the actors and actresses at Cypress Gardens, and the filmmaker took close-ups of the actors in Hollywood and edited them in. In explaining the role of Cypress Gardens, the *Winter Haven Herald* stated that, the stars of the movie aquaplaned and all of the love scenes were "shot

¹³⁴ Furlong, 76.

¹³⁵ Ibid

¹³⁶ "Cypress Gardens Pageant is Featured in Newsreel," *Winter Haven Herald* May 30, 1941 in CGPCHGL, 53.

through special lenses to create [the] effect of moonlight.”¹³⁷ The two sequences, that featured the park, showed readily recognizable landmark areas. The credits at the end of the movie listed Cypress Gardens as a filming location. This advertising in a Hollywood movie with well-known movie stars helped to advertise the park nationally.¹³⁸

World War II provided new film material and a new audience for Cypress Gardens. In 1943, twenty- seven Winter Haven girls” appeared in a Technicolor sports short shot at Cypress Gardens that featured shows, water sports, and other activities that the park provided for nearby stationed servicemen. An article in the *Winter Haven Herald* reported: “Several convoys of soldiers have been sent from various fields to assist in making the picture, which will also include close-ups of the girls and Cypress Garden flowers.”¹³⁹ In 1945, three movie shorts featuring Cypress Gardens included the use of United States soldiers on leave that were visiting the park. Filmmakers shot the short films “GI Fun,” “Soldier’s Paradise,” and “GI Joe” all at Cypress Gardens.

The other full-length movies filmed at Cypress Gardens shared similar qualities with *Moon Over Miami*, featuring exotic sceneries, love scenes, and lots of dancing. Released in 1953, *Easy to Love* epitomized Cypress Gardens’ films. Featuring Esther Williams, this movie used Cypress Gardens as both a background and as the basis for the plot. Williams stars as a water skier who chooses between three potential men in her life, the manager of her ski show, another male skier and a nightclub singer. The film shows many ski show performances mixed in with the light plot. Essentially this movie served as direct publicity for Cypress Gardens. For one

¹³⁷ “Movie Company Begins Cypress Garden Scenes,” *Winter Haven Herald* February 21, 1941 in CGPCHGL, 48.

¹³⁸ Walter Lang, dir., *Moon Over Miami* (Winter Haven, Florida: Twentieth Century-Fox Film Corporation, 1941).

¹³⁹ Captioned photograph, *Winter Haven Herald* September 10, 1943 in CGPCHGL, 71.

scene in the movie, Pope constructed a swimming pool in the shape of the state of Florida that still exists today.¹⁴⁰

These movies presented Americans with images of Cypress Gardens and Florida. To non-Floridians, the park and the state appeared to be synonymous. The shots of Cypress Gardens featured the tropical flora alongside lakes and lagoons. To northerners, Cypress Gardens and Florida could easily be conflated. Former Orange Bowl and Citrus Queen, Marian Ettie, described *Easy to Love* as a “135 minute commercial about Florida.”¹⁴¹ Other films such as *On an Island with You* used Cypress Gardens primarily for outdoor “exotic” scenes. *On an Island with You*, in particular, only used shots of Lake Eloise and the Cypress trees in front of the park with Cypress Gardens itself never making it clearly into the frame.

To further enhance Cypress Gardens’ appeal as a movie set, Pope artificially made Cypress Gardens more exotic through the additional of islands to his park. Pope constructed ten islands near the canal between Lake Summit and Lake Eloise. Workers used a forty-foot dragline boom and a bucket to chisel out a series of peninsulas from an area that was previously swampland. They then landscaped these peninsulas with giant palm trees before they separated the peninsulas from the mainland and thus created new islands. Pope did not create these islands with tourist activity in mind as much as he created them for photo and movie shoots.¹⁴² In December 1956, Pope opened these islands for filmmakers calling them, “The Tropical Isles of Movieland.”

¹⁴⁰ Furlong, 68.

¹⁴¹ “Cypress Gardens Beauty Describes Publicity Value,” *St. Petersburg Times*, July 29, 1954.

¹⁴² These islands were not accessible to the public and could only be seen from a distance.

Pope used the medium of television to promote Cypress Gardens and Florida nationally. In 1956, NBC filmed a portion of its show *Wide, Wide World* at Cypress Gardens. Out of the ninety-minute show, Cypress Gardens AquaMaids and shots of the park filled twenty minutes of it with an estimated thirty million Americans watching at home.¹⁴³ The following year, a *Winter Haven Herald* captioned photograph announced that Cypress Gardens and the Aquamaids were to appear on the Ed Sullivan Show and that in the past year the skiers “have brought fame to all of Florida by appearing on such popular shows as Steve Allen, Garry Moore, Wide Wide World, Arthur Godfrey, Dave Garroway’s, Today Talent Scouts, and many others.”¹⁴⁴

Pope Florida through his support of rival tourist attractions because he believed that “more tourists will be tempted to drive to his region if they can see three or four attractions instead of only one.”¹⁴⁵ Within the Cypress Gardens souvenir shop, Pope posted a mileage chart showing distances to his competitors, Parrot Jungle, Monkey Jungle and Bok Tower. Pope gave his strongest support to Bok Tower through four million pamphlets and postcards that glorified both parks. In 1955, a fire destroyed the ticket office, gift shop, and other buildings at Silver Springs. When the park reopened, Pope advertised, “They’re open again” within his Cypress Gardens.¹⁴⁶

Additionally, Pope promoted Cypress Gardens by increasing Florida’s advertising budget. Pope resigned in 1955 from his position as vice-chairman of the State Advertising

¹⁴³ “Cypress Gardens Program Televised Sunday Afternoon,” *Winter Haven Herald*, January 27, 1956 in CGPCHGL, 290.

¹⁴⁴ “Aquamaids on Sullivan Show,” *Winter Haven Herald*, June 21, 1957 in CGPCHGL, 329.

¹⁴⁵ Furlong, 79.

¹⁴⁶ Furlong, 79.

Commission.¹⁴⁷ While serving in this position, Pope doubled the advertising budget for the state through a million dollar appropriation bill. Later, in 1957, Pope traveled for thirty days in South America, trying to convince presidents and officials to visit Florida. While Pope undoubtedly mentioned his park during this tour, the *Herald* article mentions his only mission as the promotion of the state.¹⁴⁸ In November 1958, the Hall of Fame of the Florida Public Relations Association voted in Pope for his public relations work.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁷ “Dick Pope Resigns from State Post,” *Winter Haven Herald*, January 21, 1955 in CGPCHGL, 261.

¹⁴⁸ “Pope on Tour of S. America For State CC,” *Winter Haven Herald*, April 19, 1957 in CGPCHGL, 324.

¹⁴⁹ “Pope Elected To Florida’s Hall of Fame,” *Winter Haven Herald*, November 28, 1958 in CGPCHGL, 369.

CHAPTER VI: EXPANDING FLORIDA, EXPANDING CYPRESS GARDENS

As Florida grew during another land boom in the 1950s, Cypress Gardens expanded upon the themes that Pope developed during the park's first five years. Similar to the boom of the 1920s, this land boom again aided tourism. Cypress Gardens benefited from the post-war growth through the greatly expanded the state's population and through the increased national interest in Florida. This surge in Florida's population had a direct effect upon Cypress Gardens and it is useful to understand the factors behind the boom.

The end of World War II, air conditioning, the pesticide DDT, interstate highways, and aggressive sales tactics led to Florida's enormous growth during the 1950s. During this period, the state went through a massive building boom. To see how much the state expanded in the post war decade, one needs only to look at the age of the buildings in Florida. "Only 6 percent of the state's dwellings at the end of the twentieth century were standing in 1950, and only 3 percent of those constructed prior to 1940 remained by 2000."¹⁵⁰

World War II had an even greater impact than World War I on Florida migration. Thousands of soldiers stationed in Florida during the war returned to the Sunshine state. These soldiers, often from Rust Belt states, became Floridians during this growth of what is now commonly called the Sunbelt.¹⁵¹ The Sunbelt refers to the regions of the South, Southwest and West that experienced massive population growth during the post-war period. These areas attracted northerners with their moderate climate, modern transportation improvements, and

¹⁵⁰ Mormino, 48.

¹⁵¹ Ibid, 11-12.

growing economies. During the 1960s, Cypress Gardens best decade, Florida gained 1,721,538 new residents, a growth of 35 percent.¹⁵²

New innovations had also brought solutions to the region's age-old scourges of summer heat, mosquitoes, and inaccessibility. Florida's summer weather normally consists of daytime high temperatures of at least ninety degrees Fahrenheit and with afternoon humidity ratings of at least fifty percent.¹⁵³ Widely available air conditioning made Florida a more appealing state to live in year round rather than only during the winter months. By 1970, over sixty percent of Floridians air-conditioned their homes compared to twenty percent a decade earlier. The growth of the 1950s and 1960s corresponds to the growth in availability of climate control.¹⁵⁴

Insect control, specifically mosquito control, cut down a longstanding nuisance. Florida widely used DDT or Dichloro-Diphenyl-Trichloroethane as a pesticide to control the mosquito population. At the end of World War II, DDT, used by the U.S. government during the war, became a readily accessible pesticide for the state of Florida to use. Since the 1920s, mosquito control districts had worked to limit the mosquito population. Beginning in 1949, these districts began massive aerial and ground applications of DDT in an effort to kill mosquitoes and their larvae. Initial results indicated success and, at the time, officials believed that DDT answered Florida's mosquito control problems.¹⁵⁵ Later studies found that DDT did not have long lasting effects because the mosquito population gained immunities to the pesticide. Additionally, Rachel Carson's 1962 book *Silent Spring* revealed the environmental risks of DDT.

¹⁵² Ibid, 13.

¹⁵³ "Florida Weather Statistics," My Dream Florida, <http://www.mydreamflorida.com/weatstat.asp> (accessed May 13, 2008).

¹⁵⁴ Mormino, 234-241.

¹⁵⁵ "Florida Mosquito Control," Florida Medical Entomology Laboratory, http://mosquito.ifas.ufl.edu/Florida_Mosquito_Control.htm (accessed May 13, 2008).

New highways made travel to the sun-state easier. The Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956 provided federal money for a network of high-speed roads linking the state's cities to the rest of the country. Interstates 75 and 95 ran down Florida's west and east coasts, respectively. Interstate 10 linked Jacksonville to Pensacola, and Interstate 4 connected Tampa and Daytona. This last route proved crucially important to Cypress Gardens, as it runs only a few dozen miles away from Winter Haven and Cypress Gardens. The interstate highways, DDT and air conditioning are all forms of modernity transforming Florida into a real estate salesman's gold mine. The state was ripe to be sold and with clever, persistent and often forceful sales techniques, Florida land sales exploded during the 1950s.

Real estate prices skyrocketed as new communities virtually sprang up out of nowhere. "Developers converted goat farms, garbage dumps, and lemon groves into low-cost, middle-class homes in the sun."¹⁵⁶ The real estate companies developed the communities of this era. These developers created cities of tens of thousands residents where none had existed previously. The communities of Lehigh Acres and Miramar exemplified this phenomenon. Lehigh Acres' developer, Lee Ratner chose an unlikely area for a city: far from a main highway, lacking a downtown and even a body of water. Despite this, Lee Ratner, manufacturer of D-Con rat poison, transformed 62,000 acres of the Lucky Lee Cattle Ranch into a profitable venture, and by 1959, he sold 40,000 lots in the newly dubbed Lehigh Acres. Similarly, Abraham L. Mailman created Miramar out of a Broward County dairy farm. "By the 1960s," notes Gary Mormino, "Miramar was welcoming two families a day, becoming Broward's fastest-growing suburb."¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁶Mormino, 48.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid, 48.

A 1965 growth study of Orange and Seminole counties explains other factors contributing to the boom. The Orange-Seminole Joint Planning Commission implemented this study which analyzed the decades leading up to the publication date as well as proposed planning for future growth. In analyzing the period the study called the “Space Boom: 1950-1965,” the study listed ease of transportation, growth of the citrus industry and proximity to Cape Canaveral as the three major factors for these counties’ growth. Road improvements and the construction of the Florida Turnpike and Interstate 4 made Orlando the “highway crossroads of Florida.”¹⁵⁸ Additionally, Orlando’s international airport, McCoy International, was the “air traffic center for about a third of the peninsula.”¹⁵⁹

Cypress Gardens shared in the state’s prosperity, and by the 1960s, park attendance reached record highs. Cypress Gardens had become a household name. On the park’s thirtieth anniversary, January 2, 1966, it broke all previous attendance records. Pope reported that on two consecutive days the number of park guests exceeded ten thousand.¹⁶⁰ In fact, 1966 would prove to be one of the park’s most successful years. In December of that year, Dick Pope reported a ten percent increase in tourism.¹⁶¹ In 1966, park attendance exceeded a million visitors.¹⁶²

Cypress Gardens and Dick Pope were able to capitalize on the growth of the Sunbelt. As the Sunbelt grew, Pope’s park was able to attract new visitors. As these new Floridians settled into their new state, they sought out entertainment and perhaps something authentic to the state.

¹⁵⁸White, Arthur W; Orange-Seminole Joint Planning Commission. *History of development in Orange and Seminole counties: growth patterns of urban form in the Orlando metropolitan area* (Orlando, FL: East Central Florida Regional Planning Council, 1965), 30.

¹⁵⁹Ibid.

¹⁶⁰“Gardens Attendance Breaks All Records,” *Winter Haven Herald*, January 13, 1966 in CGPCHGL, 441.

¹⁶¹“Fall Session Set for Gardens,” *Winter Haven Herald*, December 8, 1966 in CGPCHGL, 448.

¹⁶²“Mike Douglass Show Goes Color for First Time,” *Winter Haven Herald*, February 16, 1967 in CGPCHGL, 449-450.

Cypress Gardens presented these new tourists with a park that could provide enjoyment for the whole family and also provide a sense of authentic (albeit created authenticity) Florida.

Pope saw his park's success tied to the growth of Polk County. On January 7, 1964, Pope went before a highway commission that oversaw the construction of the new Sunshine Parkway (now Florida's Turnpike) to fight for a twenty-two by forty-four foot billboard. Pope wanted this billboard to feature Cypress Gardens or other Polk county destinations. Many Polk county residents feared that this new super highway would divert tourists and potential future residents away from Polk. The billboard Pope successfully fought for would advertise Polk County and was to be located south of Yeehaw Junction.¹⁶³ Four months later, Pope again argued with state transportation officials over Polk County's economic importance after the state decided that there would be no billboards along this new turnpike.¹⁶⁴

In 1962, Dick Pope retired from Cypress Gardens, giving Dick Pope, Jr. control over the park as president. Dick Pope, Jr. saw the need for expansion to the almost thirty-year-old park. The next major expansion effort of Pope's was not a change to Cypress Gardens itself. Instead this was an addition located just outside the park entrance. In 1963 Pope began the planning phase of a five story multi-million dollar resort hotel. Pope designed the hotel for park guest to stay the night before or after visiting Cypress Gardens and to host conventions and other gatherings.

¹⁶³ "Telling People About Polk," *Unidentified Newspaper* January 8, 1964 in CGPCHGL, 425.

¹⁶⁴ "Toll Road Screening is Protested by Dick Pope, Others at Meeting," *Winter Haven Herald*, May 22, 1964 in CGPCHGL, 431.

Through this hotel, Pope sought to make Winter Haven “the convention hub of Polk County.”¹⁶⁵ The hotel which opened its doors in 1966 would change hands and change names several times but throughout its long history (currently named the Admiral’s Inn and part of the Best Western franchise), it has almost always been a place to spot national figures ranging from television and movies star to media personalities to politicians. According to George Ogburn, also known as the radio personality George Prescott, the first guests of the Cypress Gardens Sheraton hosted were Mike Douglas and his crew who were all at the park for a filming of his popular television show. One of the show’s guests was Michael Landon - best known for his roles on *Bonanza* and *Little House on the Prairie*¹⁶⁶

Constructed at the same time as the Cypress Gardens Sheraton, Fantasy Valley opened at Cypress Gardens in 1965, ushering in the next major expansion to the park itself and the Popes’ first attempt at an animal themed attraction. Pope created Fantasy Valley for the children attending the park with their parents. This area featured an “animal theme complete with...statues and other special touches.”¹⁶⁷ This addition kept families in the park for longer portions of the day.

The Old South theme expanded in 1969 when Cypress Gardens purchased the adjacent Snively property and mansion. Dick Pope purchased the mansion with the intent of using it immediately and the thirty acres in order to expand the park later. Pope anticipated the need to expand the park with the opening of Walt Disney World looming ahead. Pope redesigned the

¹⁶⁵Mike Zotti, “5-Story Resort Hotel Planned at Cypress Gardens” *The Tampa Tribune*, June 13, 1963 in CGPCHGL, 420.

¹⁶⁶Danielle De Pari, “Admiral’s Inn has Celebrity-Filled History” *Winter Haven News Chief*, June 21, 2006.

¹⁶⁷ Lacey, 24.

Snively house to look like the Tara Plantation House from the movie *Gone With the Wind*. This house eventually became the home to Faye Bell's *Gone With the Wind* Memories shop.¹⁶⁸

This boom era of the 1950s and 1960s for Cypress Gardens eventually ended. Several factors led to the decline of Cypress Gardens as the premier Florida attraction but foremost is the Mouse. Mickey Mouse came to Florida in 1971 with the opening of Walt Disney World near Orlando, Florida. The Walt Disney Company completed and opening this park after Walt Disney died in 1966.¹⁶⁹ The Orlando park and its predecessor, Disneyland in Anaheim, California, provides a contrast to the type of entertainment that Dick Pope sold at Cypress Gardens.

¹⁶⁸ "Holidays in Bloom – Cypress Gardens Celebrates the Season," *Orlando Sentinel*, December 9, 1999 sec. Visitor Guide p. 1.

¹⁶⁹ Walt Disney Corporation "The Day Walt Died"
<http://disney.go.com/disneyatoz/familymuseum/exhibits/articles/waltspassing/index.html> .

CHAPTER VII: DISNEY AND EVENTUAL DECLINE

By the late 1960s, Cypress Gardens had grown into the definitive Florida theme park. Cypress Gardens' sales experienced continual growth as the park grew both in the size of its attractions and the extent of its promotion machine. The Walt Disney World's opening in 1971, coupled with a slowing national economy, rising fuel prices, and structural problems caused a sharp decline in Cypress Gardens' attendance. Within five years of Disney World's opening, Dick Pope's park faced plummeting ticket sales. Disney World differed greatly from Cypress Gardens both qualitatively and quantitatively. From its opening, Disney World presented tourists with decidedly different themes compared to Cypress Gardens and, at the same time, presented significantly more options than Pope's park. Disneyland in California preceded Walt Disney World in Florida. The distinctions between the Disney parks and Cypress Gardens explain how Pope's park fell so quickly from Florida prominence.

In designing Disneyland, Walt Disney wanted a mixture of history, fiction, the future, the exotic and a quaint slice of turn-of-the-century America. With each of these areas, Disney's strove to show his vision or, more precisely, to tell a story. Disneyland can be interpreted as a series of narratives each culminating in an attraction at the end of the story or, literally, at the end of the road.¹⁷⁰ Filmmakers, not architects, built the park. These filmmakers calibrated the park's appearance to achieving a desired emotional effect. Form followed function in Disneyland.¹⁷¹

¹⁷⁰ The term weenie comes from filmmaking. In a movie involving dogs, the director held out a weenie to guide the dog to the desired location.

¹⁷¹ Karal Ann Marling, "Disneyland, 1955: Just Take the Santa Ana Freeway to the American Dream," *American Art* 5:1 (1991): 197.

Walt Disney's love for transportation, history, and storytelling guided his creation of Disneyland. Looking at Disneyland in 1955, his love of trains and transportation becomes abundantly clear. Along the perimeter of the park ran the Santa Fe and Disneyland Railroad with the different themed lands located within the boundary established by the rail line. Beyond this, Disney's fascination with transportation manifested itself in many of the rides. Arguably, transportation is a central part of Disneyland's fantasy world. "Ensnared in a sea of giant parking-lots in a city devoted to the automobile," notes Reyner Banham, "it provides transportation that does not exist outside—steam trains, monorails, people-movers...not to mention pure transport fantasies such as simulated space-trips and submarine rides."¹⁷² It is fitting that this park would rely so heavily on transportation as an overarching theme because it was at the Chicago Railroad Fair of 1948 that Walt Disney decided to combine his earlier interest in model railroading with his desire to have an amusement park that would be both: more than a behind-the-scenes tour of his animation studios and a family park unlike "old Coney Island-style amusement park[s]."¹⁷³ Disney said publically that he first started thinking about opening a park when he took "his two young daughters out for fun on the weekends and found that existing kid's parks and fairs were often dirty, sleazy, money-grubbing places."¹⁷⁴

By 1951, Disney's interest in American history and models spawned another source of inspiration for Disneyland, Disneylandia. With Disneylandia, Walt wanted to educate American children and show them a vision of the past that they could not receive in two dimensions. Walt's plan for Disneylandia called for a "traveling, small-scale exhibit of scenes from American

¹⁷²Reyner Banham, *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies* (NY: Harper & Row, 1971), 109.

¹⁷³Marling, 175.

¹⁷⁴ Steven Watts, *The Magic Kingdom* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1997), 384.

history that featured miniature mechanical people moved by tiny pulleys and gears.”¹⁷⁵ For this project, Disney recruited the illustrator Harper Goff. While attempting to recruit Goff for the project, Walt said, “I’ve got a little thing up my sleeve that I really want to do. It’s sort of a ‘Kiddieland,’ and I want it to be called ‘Walt Disney’s America.’ I don’t want to just entertain kids with pony rides and slides and swings. I want them to learn something about their heritage.”¹⁷⁶ Disney added studio artist Ken Anderson to the project that he renamed “Disneylandia.” Disneylandia was to consist of twenty-four peep-show views of important scenes of American’s past, “enlivened by little figures that could actually talk and gesticulate.”¹⁷⁷

The Disneylandia project ultimately collapsed before completion, but prior to its death it provided Walt with the inspiration for Main Street USA, another combination of history and storytelling. Disney built Main Street USA, one of the themes of Disneyland and the entryway to the rest of the park, as a scale model of the past. To be precise, the ground floor of each building was seven-eighths the size of a “real” turn-of-the-century commercial structure and the second story was in five-eighths scale. Disney used turn-of-the-century Kansas Street in Marceline, Missouri as the primary inspiration for Main Street USA.¹⁷⁸ He also looked to Olvera Street, a permanent sort of world's fair “village” constructed in the historic heart of downtown Los Angeles in 1929 as a Mission-period pedestrian mall lined with more than seventy shops,

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷⁶ Marling, 191.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid, 194-195.

cantinas, and stalls full of souvenirs for influence and ideas.¹⁷⁹ It combined “history, exoticism, and shopping,” the main elements of Main Street USA.¹⁸⁰

While Cypress Gardens used gardens, girls and waterskiing to sell tickets, Disneyland told stories through its themes and attractions. Walt Disney defined his park by its five themes of Fantasyland, Frontierland, Tomorrowland, Adventureland, and Mainstreet USA with each theme telling a different story to the tourist.¹⁸¹ The story Disney told tourists through his park contained frontiers, historical, modern, futuristic, and even fanciful. Frontierland presented a Disney’s version of how the West was settled. Adventureland with its main attraction, Jungle Cruise, represented the untamed lands of modern times, jungles, and rivers of Africa, Asia, and South America. Tomorrowland told the story of the future frontiers both through technology in America and later through space travel. Finally, Fantasyland explored the frontiers of imagination as told through Disney’s animated movies.

In Fantasyland, the tourist became the protagonist. “Each Disneyland visitor thus becomes an actor in a drama arranged, like a movie, in an edited sequence of sights and sounds.”¹⁸² The park visitor became a cast member on a movie set while he or she was told the story of that ride. One of the opening rides, “Snow White’s Adventure,” followed this model. The park visitor became Snow White during this ride in which he or she followed the course of the movie’s adventure.

Two problems with Disneyland encouraged Disney to build a second park. The physical surroundings presented both image control problems and expansion limitations while the

¹⁷⁹Ibid, 185.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid, 187.

¹⁸¹Ibid, 169.

¹⁸²Ibid.

geographic location hindered many Americans from visiting his park. Shortly after the Anaheim park opened, “motel operators, fast-food franchises, and tacky souvenir shops” opened along Harbor Boulevard, the road perpendicular to the park’s entrance.¹⁸³ The tawdry environment that came to surround Disneyland infuriated Walt Disney. He wanted control of the landscape around his park but the physical landscape of his Anaheim park prevented growth and therefore any control over the park’s surroundings. In addition to growth concerns, “the company knew from market surveys that only two percent of Disneyland’s visitors in California traveled from east of the Mississippi, where three-fourths of the nation’s population resided.”¹⁸⁴ The search for a second suitable site for the park began in 1959 and ended in late 1963 after Disney rejected the primary location of St. Louis, Missouri because August Busch, Jr. had made an insulting remark to Walt Disney.¹⁸⁵ He instead chose the alternative site of Orlando, forever changing the history of central Florida and Florida tourism.

Disney chose Disney World’s placement based on ease of transportation, control of surrounding land and real estate prices. Walt Disney decided upon Orlando after flying over the city on November 2, 1963. During the flight, Disney simply stated, “That’s it.” When asked why he chose Orlando he said, “The freeway routes, they bisect here.”¹⁸⁶ What Walt saw and what he referred to was the intersection of the Florida Turnpike and the newly completed Interstate 4. Disney saw the importance of transportation and how northerners would access a theme park in Florida. Orlando appeared to have the best transportation network, better than the next potential

¹⁸³Eve Zibart, *Inside Disney: The Incredible Story of Walt Disney World and the Man Behind the Mouse* (New York: Wiley Publishing, 2002), 10.

¹⁸⁴Richard Fogelson, *Married to the Mouse: Walt Disney World and Orlando* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), 1.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 15.

site in Ocala. Additionally, McCoy Jetport had already announced that it would no longer be a combined military-civilian airbase but would instead change over to an entirely civilian international airport. Orlando also appealed to Disney because it offered 360-degree growth. He ruled out coastal cities in Florida because of the limiting factor of the Atlantic Ocean or Gulf of Mexico. The price of land became the final factor. By buying tracts of land secretly in order to avoid land speculation, Disney purchased most of the land used for Disney World for less than \$200 per acre. Within months, land surrounding Disney's was selling for \$40,000 an acre, "with prime tracts going for five or six times that."¹⁸⁷

Construction of Disney World began shortly after Walt secured the land. In 1967, the Florida legislature "agreed to roll back state and local regulation of building construction, land use, and so forth, in return for Disney's promised \$600-million investment."¹⁸⁸ The park opened its doors in November 1971 and by December of that same year, no one doubted that Disney World would eclipse all of Florida's other theme parks. Disney parks easily cast a shadow on Cypress Gardens with regards to the size of the attraction. In 1955, when Disneyland opened in California, it sat on over one hundred sixty acres of land compared to Cypress Garden's opening size of thirty-seven acres.¹⁸⁹ Walt Disney World's size made both Disneyland and Cypress Gardens pale in comparison. The Walt Disney Corporation owned a total of 27,500 acres of land outside of Orlando and used 2,500 acres to build the Magic Kingdom, the central and original Walt Disney World Park.¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁷Zibart, 16-17.

¹⁸⁸Fogelsong, 11.

¹⁸⁹ Thomas M. Pryor, "Land of Fantasia is Rising on Coast," *New York Times*, May 2, 1954.

¹⁹⁰ Robert A. Wright, "Disney: A World of Show," *New York Times*, February 21, 1971.

Established theme park operators anxiously watched Walt Disney World's opening. Initially, some park owners took an optimistic outlook. They believed that a Disney park in Central Florida would have a spillover effect, boosting tourism to the surrounding parks. Hearing of Disney's plan for a second park near Orlando, Dick Pope said, "Anyone who is going to spend \$100 million near is good, and a good thing."¹⁹¹

Newspaper writers echoed Pope's forecast. In a November 17, 1968 *New York Times* article, C.E. Wright predicted "other well-established attractions in this area will undoubtedly profit from the influx" of tourists. Wright listed Cypress Gardens as well Kennedy Space Center, Busch Gardens, Silver Springs, and Rainbow Gardens as the attractions that stood to have the largest increases in tourists because of Disney World.¹⁹² In the "Traveler's World" special to the *New York Times*, Paul J.C. Friedlander analyzed Walt Disney World's potential impact on Miami Beach and tourism south of Orlando. While Friedlander acknowledged that some feared that Disney would divert tourists away from previously established attractions, he stated that "other observers of Florida's tourist trade—and better established resident authorities on the subject—think otherwise, and with obviously better cause."¹⁹³ Similarly, Jon Nordheimer in a special to the *New York Times* wrote on September 24, 1971, just a week before the opening of Walt Disney World, that while parks like Cypress Gardens and even Six Flags in Atlanta, Georgia were anxiously watching the Mouse, Miami Beach might be Walt Disney World's biggest victim.¹⁹⁴

¹⁹¹Mormino, 105.

¹⁹²C.E. Wright, "Awaiting a Brave New (Disney) World," *New York Times*, November 17, 1968.

¹⁹³Paul J.C. Friedlander, "Miami: Worries About Disney World," *New York Times*, April 4, 1971.

¹⁹⁴Jon Nordheimer, "Disney World Opens on Friday in Florida with Operators Set to Turn Away Excess Visitors" *New York Times*, September 24, 1971.

The size of Walt Disney World and its proximity to major roadways helped it survive the problems that drastically hurt Cypress Gardens. During the first five years of Disney World, Pope's optimism appeared to be well founded. Cypress Gardens did not experience a decline in tourism until after 1976. Except for minor increases, a downward trend existed for the park from 1976 to 1985, when Dick Pope, Jr. sold Cypress Gardens.

By the mid-1970s, Cypress Gardens faced stiff competition from both Disney World and Sea World, which opened in 1973.¹⁹⁵ The once exclusive ski show had competition through shows at Sea World and Disney's Bay Lake.¹⁹⁶ Throughout the second half of the 1970s the park's attendance dropped steadily. In 1976 the attendance was 1,674,000, by 1977 and 1978-1,365,000 and 1,372,000, a slight increase, but then in 1979 down to 1,293,000 another slight increase in 1980 to 1,366,000 and then in 1981 down to 1,216,000.

Cypress Gardens also suffered from rising gas prices and lumber prices also negatively affected Cypress Gardens in the 1970s. While Sea World and Disney World lay near major interstates and the Orlando International Airport, Cypress Gardens presented tourists with a significant drive from Interstate 4, the Turnpike, and Orlando International.¹⁹⁷ Rising gas prices directly increased the cost of travel to the park. Cypress Gardens also made a significant portion of its profits from the sale of water skis. Profits from water skis dropped from \$429,000 to

¹⁹⁵ Busch Entertainment Corporation "Ask Shamu" <http://www.seaworld.org/ask-shamu/faq.htm>. (Accessed September 4, 2008).

¹⁹⁶ Bob Gernert, Interview with author, April 9, 2007.

¹⁹⁷ Cypress Gardens to Interstate 4 is approximately a twenty-two mile drive. Cypress Gardens to the Orlando International Airport is approximately a fifty-six mile Drive. The same drives for Disney World are two miles and twenty-two miles, respectively. Distances provided by www.maps.google.com (accessed June 20, 2009).

\$202,000 between the years 1977 and 1978. Dick Pope, Jr. attributed much of this loss in profits to the thirty-six percent jump in the price of lumber.¹⁹⁸

Dick Pope, Jr. attempted to increase attendance and park profits through the Gardens of the World in 1974, the largest expansion effort to the park since the 1965 Fantasy Valley addition. This expansion doubled the size of the park and contained themed gardens representing different regions of the world. In the Mediterranean Region, “Formal Italian fountains” shot water twelve feet in the air and were surrounded by multi-tiered pools with handmade tiles. Additionally in the region, the new Mediterranean Falls pumped seven thousand gallons of water per minute over rock ledges and along a plant-lined winding river that looped back to the top.¹⁹⁹ Overlooking Lake Eloise, Pope constructed a Grecian stage. Pope used the stage primarily for filming the weekly television show “Day of Discovery” which often used the stage’s columns, urns, and other classical features. Another regional garden used the Netherlands as the basis for its theme. A fifty-foot tall Dutch windmill surrounded by native plantings stood as the landmark for this area. The All American Rose Garden represented America, and the All American Rose Selections Committee designed this area and chose the roses contained within.²⁰⁰

The Oriental Gardens region survives to this day. This area featured a twelve-foot tall Buddha of Kamakura, a teahouse, dry riverbed, and “authentic” oriental lanterns.²⁰¹ Additionally the South American gardens imitated a rainforest with its dense collection of important ferns. Australia influenced the last of the regionally themed gardens. This area boasted important trees

¹⁹⁸Lauren Ritchie, “Cypress Gardens Profits Plunge as Attendance Dips,” *Orlando Sentinel Star*, January 1982.

¹⁹⁹*Florida Cypress Gardens*, (Winter Haven, FL: Cypress Gardens, 1974), 6-7.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid*, 8.

²⁰¹ *Ibid*, 9.

from Australia and a “lifelike” kangaroo (most likely a statue although the sources do not specify).²⁰²

In 1980, Pope opened the Living Forest and Southern Crossroads expansions. The Living Forest featured a variety of animals shows and demonstrations such as Critter Encounter, an animal petting area for children, Hug Haven, an animal nursery open to the public, and Gator Alley, an Alligator habitat.²⁰³

The Southern Crossroads expansion further developed the Southern theme of Cypress Gardens and helped to solidify the park as a full-day attraction. The fourteen acre addition resembled a small ante-bellum town, featuring shops, restaurants, theaters, amusement areas and a bandstand with daily jazz concerts.

“One of our problems is that we are a half-day attraction,” Dick Pope, Jr. said in a 1978 interview with the *Orlando Sentinel Star* newspaper. “People visit us for half a day and go on. We will become a full-day attraction with the expansion.”²⁰⁴ Dick Pope Jr. also recognized that to stay a full-day attraction an area of the park would have to be safe from the weather. Historically, the quick-passing but often heavy central Floridian rainstorms decreased park attendance. The Southern Crossroads addition featured covered walkways and gave visitors an area to wait out passing rainstorms.

These additions were ultimately not enough to save Cypress Gardens. From 1980 to 1985 the park’s attendance declined significantly. In 1980, annual attendance at the park reached a high point of 1.36 million visitors, but by 1984 that number had slipped to 1.04 million.

²⁰²Ibid.

²⁰³“Tourists Easy Prey for Cuddly Cypress Gardens Animals,” *Orlando Sentinel*, April 26, 1987 sec. Calendar p. 20.

²⁰⁴ Kenneth Michael, “Cypress Gardens—new life in sun” *Orlando Sentinel Star*, 1978.

Additionally, profits shrunk considerably; 1984 profits decreased 25% compared to the previous year. The *Orlando Sentinel* from April 12, 1985 gave more details on the park's financial situation, "Standard and Poor's has reported that the Cypress Gardens profit as a percentage of its revenue has fallen from 17.2 percent in 1975 to 5.9 percent in 1983, and that its return on equity has fallen from a high of 23.1 percent in 1975 to 5.3 percent in 1983."²⁰⁵ Cypress Gardens' future looked bleak and it appeared that Dick Pope, Jr. lacked the ability to rejuvenate the park.

In 1972, Pope issued common stock for the first time with an opening price of \$11.50 a share but by 1985, shares fluctuated between \$3.50 and \$4.00. Pope, the chairman and head of the park, along with park president Kenneth C. Smith, felt increasing pressure to drive up revenue, profits, and most importantly stock prices. Stockholders were upset and demanded action.²⁰⁶ Vocal shareholders such as Harold I. Lieberman ran newspaper ads that were "designed to embarrass management and force it to get more aggressive and start running the company for the benefit of the stockholders."²⁰⁷ Lieberman and other stockholders succeed in their efforts to change the park.

By 1985, Sea World's parent company, publishing company Harcourt Brace Jovanovich (HBJ), expressed interest in merging with Cypress Gardens. Stockholders such as Lieberman saw this as advantageous for two reasons. First, stockholders could make an instant profit because each share of Cypress Gardens stock would now be worth 0.16 a share of HBJ common

²⁰⁵Vicki Vaughan, "Deal is on at Cypress Gardens" *Orlando Sentinel*, April 12, 1985 A.1 and A.14.

²⁰⁶Ibid.

²⁰⁷Dick Marlowe, "Gadfly stockholder savors the sale of Cypress Gardens," *Orlando Sentinel*, April 14, 1985 C.1.

stock worth about \$8.12 a share because HBJ stock traded for \$50.75 a share.²⁰⁸ Secondly, many who wanted to retain their stock in Cypress Gardens/HBJ believed that HBJ possessed the assets and expertise needed to make the park a premier attraction again.

The Cypress Gardens/HBJ merger went from nothing to a formal agreement within weeks. In early March 1985, Jack O. Snyder, president of Sea World Enterprises and an executive vice president at HBJ, visited Cypress Gardens for the first time. Shortly after this visit, Snyder proposed the idea of a partnership with Dick Pope, Jr. On April 11, 1985, Pope formally announced the merger.²⁰⁹ By this point, Snyder and Pope had agreed upon how Cypress Gardens stock would be exchanged for HBJ stock and how the union would take place. Pope would stay on as a consultant to HBJ and Cypress Garden's president, Kenneth C. Smith, would retain his position. The biggest change would be the addition of Jan Schultz, the marketing director of Sea World in San Diego.²¹⁰ Initially, Snyder said that Schultz would remain in San Diego and advise Cypress Gardens from across the country. A May 6, 1985 news brief from the Central Florida Business section of the *Orlando Sentinel* states that Jan Schultz had set up residence around Winter Haven. The article speculates, "the move could mean that HBJ has some very big plans for the Winter Haven tourist attraction..."²¹¹

²⁰⁸Vicki Vaughan, "Deal is on at Cypress Gardens" *Orlando Sentinel*, April 12, 1985 A.1 and A.14.

²⁰⁹"Florida Cypress Gardens" *Orlando Sentinel*, May 29, 1985 B.1.

²¹⁰Vicki Vaughan, "Deal is on at Cypress Gardens" *Orlando Sentinel*, April 12, 1985 A.1 and A.14.

²¹¹ "Taking Over," *Orlando Sentinel*, Central Florida Business report, 2. May 6 1985.

CHAPTER VIII: CYPRESS GARDENS AFTER POPE

The change in ownership of Cypress Gardens ushered in an era of nostalgia instead of innovation for the park. HBJ added shows that emphasized the park's past and not its future. The merger, due to be completed on July 22, 1985, generated newspaper speculation of how the publishing company would change the park.²¹² The answer came sooner than the newspapers first speculated. Two new water shows debuted at the park on the June 29 1985 weekend. The first of these shows, "Aquacade 85" featured "one-of-a-kind swimming, diving and skiing spectacular, featuring champion competition divers." This show ran four times a day, every other hour from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. "The Golden Years at Cypress Gardens" show ran on the off hours of the "Aquacade 85" show. This new act included highlights from the Cypress Gardens ski shows through the years.²¹³ These changes to the ski show came not from Cypress Gardens itself but instead from Sea World employees which, by July 1985, already oversaw the park's marketing decisions.²¹⁴ Sea World entertainment producer Ken McCabe faced the problem of how to create distinct shows at both Sea World and Cypress Gardens but have them equal in their appeal to audiences. McCabe, commenting on this problem, stated that Cypress Gardens' ski-show used to be more straight skiing and too traditional but the new show featured specially designed costumes, a new original music score and more high tech stunts.²¹⁵

²¹² "Florida Cypress Gardens" *Orlando Sentinel*, June 20, 1985 sec. B.1.

²¹³ Betty Beehive "Cypress Gardens Makes Waves with Two New Water Shows," *Orlando Sentinel*, June 23, 1985 sec. Calendar p.18.

²¹⁴ Vicki Vaughan, "New Terms for Cypress Gardens," *Orlando Sentinel*, July 3, 1985 sec. B1.

²¹⁵ Lauren McFaul, "Tourist Traditional Cypress Gardens Show Is Pure Florida History," *Orlando Sentinel*, July 14, 1985 sec. CALENDAR p. 18.

The ski shows were not the only major changes that HBJ quickly made. In November 1985, HBJ announced plans to renovate two existing restaurants and to build a third while also expanding the park's fast-food options. This change was partially due to the damage done to the Gardens Plaza restaurant by a sinkhole that had developed beneath the eatery. Besides trying to compensate for the damaged Gardens Plaza, HBJ wanted to expand the number of park visitors that could eat comfortably in an air-conditioned restaurant. County Fare, an open-air restaurant in the Southern Crossroads section of the park, was to have a glass enclosure added and the Southern Mansion would play host to a new one hundred-seat restaurant. The last major attraction added was the Ice Palace, a 750-seat ice skating venue renovated from a rarely used theater at the park. This planned expansion cost roughly \$1 million and included the opening of sales offices in Orlando, Tampa, and Miami. These satellite offices were designed to make it easier for groups or individuals to buy tickets to Cypress Gardens.²¹⁶

By December 1985, the \$1 million renovation plans that mainly focused on the dining areas of the park comprised only a small part of the park improvement plan. The plan called for \$5 million dollars to be pumped into the park (including the \$1 million dining plans and the renovations to the ski shows) by the end of the year. In order to boost the attendance of the park, which had been slipping since 1980, Jan Schultz and Ken Smith sought to expand the appeal of the park to Central Floridians. Attendance, which was at 1.36 million in 1980, had fallen to 1.04 million in 1984 and had fallen to a worse low of 800,000 by 1985. To correct these numbers, Schultz and Smith launched a new advertising campaign. Schultz and Smith aimed the revised

²¹⁶Vicki Vaughan, "The Million-Dollar Plan Enovations Will Give Cypress Gardens More Flexibility," *Orlando Sentinel*, November 4, 1985 sec. Central Florida Business p. 14.

advertising campaign at both local Floridians and also tourists to the state that stayed only near the Orlando attractions. In the new advertising, HBJ advertised Cypress Gardens in conjunction with Sea World. While marketed together, the two parks retained their distinct features (even while some elements such as flower shows and a penguin exhibit would be shared by the two parks).²¹⁷ Within a three-month period of 1985, HBJ spent more on advertising for Cypress Gardens than Cypress Gardens had spent in 1983 and 1984 combined. The early efforts at expansion appeared to be working according to Schultz: “Attendance was up 17 percent over the same period a year earlier until Labor Day weekend, when a hurricane forced the park to close for two days. The forced closing ‘hurt badly.’”²¹⁸

Despite these efforts, by 1986, the shadow of Walt Disney World was impossible to escape. Newspaper articles related to tourism focused on Disney for the majority of the article, then on the runners up: Busch Gardens, Sea World, Daytona and Miami beaches, and finally the “third-tier attractions” such as Cypress Gardens, Circus World, the Miami Seaquarium, Marineland of Florida, Silver Springs and Weeki Wachee Springs.²¹⁹ While tourism was doing well across the state, Cypress Gardens even under HBJ could never again regain its stature as a premier theme park in Florida.

Due largely to the fear of terrorist attacks in Europe after the April 5, 1986 West Berlin disco bombing along with lower gasoline prices domestically, Florida tourism experienced a

²¹⁷ To clarify: attractions like the penguin exhibit would be shared between Cypress Gardens and Sea World of San Diego, CA not Sea World of Orlando, FL.

²¹⁸ Vicki Vaughan, “Cypress Gardens Spruces Up, Adds Shows Owner Harcourt Brace Pumps \$5 Million Into Improvements,” *Orlando Sentinel*, December 2, 1985 sec. Central Florida Business p. 29.

Lauren McFaul, “Ice, Snow Join Show at Gardens,” *Orlando Sentinel*, January 12, 1986 sec. Calendar p.1.

²¹⁹ Vicki Vaughan, “Still an ‘E’ Ticket Turnstiles Keep Spinning as Tourism Shows No Sign of – Wavering,” *Orlando Sentinel*, January 12, 1986 sec. Central Florida Business p. 96.

significant growth. By May 1986, Cypress Gardens was up thirty-five percent, year to date.²²⁰ Cypress Garden's rise during 1986 also was due to an increased investment by HBJ. In 1986, HBJ invested five million dollars into capital improvement such as renovating the animal areas, including one million dollars in upgraded food facilities and new night-time show. The following year HBJ renovated the Southern into a lounge and restaurant.²²¹

An April 1987 article in the *Orlando Sentinel* revealed both the accomplished result of the expanded animal area and the many shortcomings of Cypress Gardens. The article described the "obstacle course of minor hitches" that prevented some tourists from venturing to the park or from returning. These "hitches" included a sluggish park staff, a lack of good eating establishments and longer than usual wait lines. To the writer, the appeal of the animal attractions eventually overcame the park's annoyances. The expanded animal area, collectively called the Animal Forrest, included Critter Encounter, where children (and adults) interacted directly with select animals; the Fly Free Aviary, where exotic birds lived in a simulated natural environment, the Everglades Theatre, an alligator demonstration show, and Hug Haven with infant animals on display for park visitors. Newspaper articles such as this one are excellent examples of how HBJ's investment was showing results but how basic park issues such as staff and food still prevented the park from achieving its full potential.²²²

Despite having potential, Cypress Gardens was still a troubled park with an uncertain future. By November 1987, Cypress Gardens' spokeswoman Vicki Mottice expected the park's

²²⁰Vicki Vaughan, "Area Tourism Benefits from Overseas Terror Americans Forgo Risks for Domestic -Vacations," *Orlando Sentinel*, May 5, 1986 sec. Central Florida Business p. 11.

²²¹"What's New, What's Coming Busch Gardens 1986: 1,200- Seat Moroccan Palace – Theater; 1.5 Acre, \$1 Million Asian Elephant Display Area; Nairobi Field – Station Petting Zoo. 1987: None Announced Church Street Station," *Orlando Sentinel*, January 11, 1987 sec. Special Section p. 109.

²²²"Tourists Easy Prey for Cuddly Cypress Gardens Animals," *Orlando Sentinel*, April 26, 1987 sec. Calendar p. 20.

attendance for the year to break 1.4 million which would put the park back where it was in 1980.²²³ Despite the steadily increasing attendance at Cypress Gardens and the other parks owned by HBJ, in December 1987 the publishing company announced the possibility of a sale of all six parks for 2.5 billion dollars. HBJ chairman William Jovanovich listed among his reasons a concern about what he termed “negligence” in safety procedures at one of the Sea World parks. Additionally, earlier in the year HBJ spent \$2.9 billion on a takeover defense to fend off a hostile bid by British publisher Robert Maxwell.²²⁴

The \$2.9 billion spent to recapitalize HBJ ultimately led to their sale of Cypress Gardens. In August 1988, the company announced the end of its high-profile television advertising campaign for Sea World, Cypress Gardens, and Boardwalk and Baseball in the Orlando and Tampa markets. This cut in advertising was at the recommendation of a taskforce that HBJ formed to investigate where costs could be cut from each of the six parks owned by the company. In interviews, HBJ indicated that “nothing dramatic will be cut, and instead the company will trim excess, perhaps unnecessary expenditures -- such as advertising -- to pare costs.”²²⁵ Within three weeks, management issued more drastic cuts. In addition to the normal seasonal layoffs, HBJ announced in late August that 343 jobs would be cut from the Central Florida parks including sixty jobs at Cypress Gardens. “The length of service of the employees

²²³Vicki Vaughan, “Tourism Heads for the Top Despite Market’s Decline,” *Orlando Sentinel*, November 11, 1987 sec. Business p. B1.

²²⁴Susan G. Strother, “HBJ Theme Parks on Block? Jovanovich Looks at Selling All 6 for \$2.5 Billion,” *Orlando Sentinel*, December 16, 1987 sec. A p.A1.

²²⁵Vicki Vaughan and Susan G. Strother, “HBJ Cancels Theme Park Ad Campaign,” *Orlando Sentinel*, August 3, 1988 sec. Business p.C1.

laid off ranged from several months to more than 15 years.”²²⁶ By the end of February 1989, HBJ announced a net loss for the company in 1988 of \$126.5 million. The main reason for this loss was not a decrease in overall sales (overall sales were actually up by 17 percent) but instead the interest due on the \$2.9 billion borrowed for the recapitalization of 1987: that interest for 1988 equaled \$313.7 million.²²⁷

These financial problems directly affected Cypress Gardens and its staff. For 1988 and most 1989, the impact was the loss of 60 employees. No further news came until a surprise announcement on June 20, 1989 in which HBJ said it was looking to sell its theme parks. After this public statement, most employees interviewed claimed they had no foreknowledge of this decision except for pure speculation.²²⁸

Although Cypress Gardens operated for nearly fifty years under the ownership of the Pope family, it would only stay a part of Harcourt Brace Jovanovich for four years. In 1989 HBJ ultimately sold the park to Busch Entertainment Corporation, a subsidiary of Anheuser-Busch Companies, Inc in 1989. Busch Entertainment held the park until 1995 when it sold Cypress Gardens to a private partnership composed mainly of ex-Busch managers. This partnership controlled the park until its closing in 2003.

Apart from the financial hardships that occurred while under HBJ ownership, the failure to bring in new and younger audiences ultimately hurt park attendance. In fact, from 1985 to 2003, each of the park’s new owners failed to attract families and instead catered to an older

²²⁶Vicki Vaughan and Susan G. Strother, “HBJ Cuts Hundreds of Jobs at Parks Central Florida Layoffs Hit 343 -- Publishing Not Affected,” *Orlando Sentinel*, August 24, 1988 sec. A p.A1.

²²⁷Susan G. Strother, “HBJ Reports Loss Despite Higher Sales,” *Orlando Sentinel*, February 28, 1989 sec. Business p.B1.

²²⁸Adam Yeomans and Vicki Vaughan, “For Sale’ Surprises Some But Others Saw It Coming,” *Orlando Sentinel*, June 21, 1989 sec.A p.A7.

population that still remembered Cypress Gardens' exciting past. In the years preceding the park's closing, "94 percent of Cypress Gardens' attendance came from retirees rather than young families that are the backbone of theme park audience."²²⁹

The final blow to Cypress Gardens came after September 11, 2001. After the attacks on the World Trade Towers in New York and the Pentagon in Washington, D.C., tourism declined rapidly due to both a fear of traveling and an overall nationwide economic slowdown. The travel industry suffered in general, but older sites like Cypress Gardens felt the hit especially hard. "If 9/11 had not have happened, we would still be here," William C. Reynolds Jr., director of operations in 2003, said. "The cash flow had dropped, and the owners decided to stop the bleeding." During the last eight years of operation, the park had lost \$6 million.²³⁰ With losses mounting, Reynolds, along with the other owners, closed the park. The question of what would happened to the closed park hung over Winter Haven for months while a debate raged both in Polk County and in Tallahassee, FL where lawmakers and the Governor considered intervening. The story of Cypress Gardens does not end with its closure. In fact, the next year it reopened with a new name, a new owner and a new look.

²²⁹Mark Albright, "Theme Park Closing; Cypress Gardens Bows Out," *St. Petersburg Times*, April 11, 2003, sec. Business, p. 1E.

²³⁰"Theme Park in Florida is Nothing but a Memory," *The New York Times*, April 14, 2003, sec. A, p. 17.

CHAPTER IX: THE RE-CREATION OF CYPRESS GARDENS: WHAT IS FLORIDA?

The Cypress Gardens Adventure Park that opened its doors to the public in 2004 was a substantially different park than the Cypress Gardens theme park that operated from 1936 to 2003. Park enthusiasts questioned which aspects would be kept the way they remembered them. Returning tourists saw both elements of the past as well as new additions that took the park in different directions than the original owners ever envisioned. Fans of the botanical gardens were pleased to find that they had been preserved along with the quiet and sanctity that they had previously possessed. Returning visitors saw that the girls of Cypress Gardens, the Southern belles, still roamed the park and posed for pictures. Finally, tourists wondered about the preservation of the world famous ski show. It survived as well.

The new owner, Kent Buesher held the grand reopening of Cypress Gardens on December 9, 2004, and officially renamed the park, Cypress Gardens Adventure Park. The three hurricanes that crisscrossed Florida and Polk County in 2004 delayed the reopening. Hurricanes Charley, Frances, and Jeanne each came within miles of Winter Haven and Cypress Gardens. The hurricanes substantially damaged the park, costing Buescher an addition \$10 million.²³¹ Kent Buescher, who also owned Wild Adventures theme park in Valdosta, Georgia, invested a total of \$50 million and his own reputation into rebuilding and renovating Cypress Gardens. He spent approximately \$32 million of this investment on long-term park debt and the rest on

²³¹ Christopher Elliott and Kari Haugeto, "Cypress Gardens Renews, Revs Up and Rebounds?" *Boston Globe*, December 12, 2004, sec. Travel, p. M5.

restoring older areas of the park and adding new thirty-eight new carnival style rides—including four new roller coasters.²³²

On December 9, 2004, visitors saw a mixture of both old and new at Cypress Gardens. Park guests saw Southern belles in hoop skirts roaming the park just as they had since 1939, but in the background, they heard the screams of adventurous park guests riding the new Triple Hurricane roller coaster, named in reference to the three hurricanes that tore through the park during the year before this re-opening. The world's tallest spinning rapids ride and themed shows at the Royal Palm Theater made sure that there was entertainment for the entire family during this reopening.²³³ Buescher changed the old Southern Crossroads dining area's name to Jubilee Junction but it still offered food and specialty shops for park guests to enjoy while they chose which direction to take. The Jubilee Junction stood as the physical intersection of old and new at the park. It sat between the new thrill ride area and the original botanical gardens.

The grand re-opening generated figures that indicated a financial success. Even with the huge debt that Buescher owed on the park, the numbers looked promising. Keeping ticket pricing low (\$29.95 for an adult ticket, and free second day admission to the park) helped the park exceed the anticipated number of visitors during the first month of operation.²³⁴ “It's been an overwhelming first month,” said Alyson Gernert, spokeswoman for Cypress Gardens and daughter of Bob Gernert, Executive Director of the Winter Haven Chamber of Commerce.

²³²“Cypress Gardens Back in Bloom,” *St. Petersburg Times*, December 9, 2004, sec. Weekend, p. 36W.

²³³Meaghan Forbes, “Cypress Gardens Adds Adventure,” *St. Petersburg Times*, December 24, 2004, sec. Brandon Times, p. 3.

²³⁴“Cypress Gardens Back in Bloom,” *St. Petersburg Times*, December 9, 2004, sec. Weekend, p. 36W.

“We've been drawing about double what we anticipated.”²³⁵ During the park's last full year operation, only six hundred thousand guests visited the park. To just break even for year one, Buescher needed Cypress Gardens to break the one million mark. During the first month of the re-opening, he averaged six thousand guests a day, which, if he could keep that number, would put the first year attendance at 1.8 million. The situation at Cypress Gardens looked very good during after the re-opening.²³⁶

The public responded positively to Buescher's changes to the park. Buescher targeted Floridians and avoided competition with Disney, Universal Studios or Busch Gardens for national or international tourists. The strategy appeared to work: “This seems like a local park,” said Mike Kusack, who was visiting his son in Lake Mary and visited the park during a trial opening last month. “A little more than a country fair, maybe?”²³⁷ Children agreed that new version of the park surpassed their expectations, especially because compared to large Orlando or Tampa parks the queue lines were very short. Jessica Jessup, 11, of Winter Haven, said she rode the Triple Hurricane five times on a recent morning, and didn't have to stand in a single line. Even those who could compare this park to the old park thought well of it, “They've done a beautiful job in bringing the things back that they could bring back and replanting what they could,” said Colleen Smith, of Winter Haven, who surveyed the restored gardens just before the grand opening. She was quick to add, it was not the place she remembered, but it was well on its way to a comeback.²³⁸ Fortunately, for Buesher, the newspapers covered the reopening

²³⁵ Mark Albright; Dave Gussow; William R. Levesque; Jeff Harrington; Louis Hau, “Reopened Cypress Gardens' attendance exceeds expectations,” *St. Petersburg Times*, January 10, 2005, sec. Business, p. 3D.

²³⁶ Ibid

²³⁷ Christopher Elliott and Kari Haugeto, p. M5.

²³⁸ Ibid.

extensively and in a tone that bordered on boosterism. Not only did the Florida papers report on the event, but the *Boston Globe*, *Houston Chronicle*, *Toronto Sun*, and even the *London Sunday Times* covered Cypress Gardens' rebirth.²³⁹

The Cypress Gardens Adventure Park that opened in 2004 attempted to preserve the past while embracing a future that would attract more and younger park visitors. Prior to this opening there was anything but consensus as to what should be the fate of the failed park. Buescher's idea won out but not after a long fight that focused on two major questions: should the state of Florida help the failed park and what business plan would guide this new park?

The effort to save Cypress Gardens started before the park had officially closed its doors. Local residents feared that land developers would purchase Cypress Gardens in order to build condominiums or houses. Winter Haven Chamber of Commerce Executive Director Bob Gernert was at the head of the movement to preserve Cypress Gardens and keep the land out of the hands of developers. In 2002, Gernert wrote William C. Reynolds Jr., director of operations at Cypress Gardens, with a plan to save the park. In his letter, he expressed concern that Cypress Gardens might not survive and therefore he proposed a plan to save at least the original thirty-seven acres of botanical gardens.²⁴⁰ After the park officially closed, Gernert and others at the Winter Haven Chamber of Commerce fielded more than one hundred telephone calls and read hundreds of e-mails. "You should see the letters I'm getting—they would make you cry," Gernert said. "It is

²³⁹Ibid.

Paula Crouch Thrasher, "New adventures at old park; Cypress Gardens adds thrill rides and concerts to its water-ski tradition," *Houston Chronicle*, January 2, 2005, sec. Travel, p. 5.

"Storms Spawn Adventure," *Toronto Sun*, January 12, 2005, sec. Travel, p. 42.

Susan d'Arcy, "Cypress Gardens," *Sunday Times (London)*, December 5, 2004, sec. Travel, p. 4.

²⁴⁰Mary Toothman, "Park Chief Focusing on Dignified End; Cypress Gardens' Bill Reynolds Vehemently Denies Rumors that Attraction is Already Sold," *Lakeland Ledger* April, 122003, sec. News, p. A1.

indeed a sad day for Winter Haven, to realize the loss of Cypress Gardens,” he said. “Many, many people are interested in exploring the feasibility of preserving the original botanical gardens of Cypress Gardens as a park. To be sure, its historic value to our city, county and state are immeasurable.”²⁴¹

Seven days after the park closed its doors for what appeared to be the last time on April 13, 2003, Florida Governor Jeb Bush began to consider the idea of saving Cypress Gardens. As news of the park’s closing spread, phone calls, letters, and emails began to flood the Governor’s office, asking to save Cypress Gardens. On April 20, Bush requested that the Florida Department of Environmental Protection Deputy Secretary Bob Ballard to meet with Cypress Gardens’ owner Bill Reynolds to discuss buying the park through the Florida Forever program. Ballard drove to Cypress Gardens and walked the two hundred acre grounds with Reynolds while talking about the possibility of preserving the attraction.²⁴²

While their motives may have been driven by local boosterism, Polk county residents from around Winter Haven argued for the historical importance of this park. Politicians from towns and cities surrounding Winter Haven pleaded their case to the State. In a letter to Governor Jeb Bush, John Fitzwater, chairman of the Lakeland Chamber of Commerce, said the chamber offered its “full support” and “encouragement” in approving funding to save Cypress Gardens. “These beautiful gardens have tremendous historical, cultural, recreational and environmental value to our state and should be protected as one of Florida's most important treasures,” he

²⁴¹ Ibid.

²⁴² Cheryl Blackerby, “Can this Park be Saved?” *Palm Beach Post* April 20, 2003, sec. Travel, p. 1H.

wrote.²⁴³ The Greater Bartow Chamber of Commerce also supported the preservation of the botanical gardens portion of Cypress Gardens. “Recognizing the historical and cultural significance of Cypress Gardens to the people of Polk County and the state, the chamber endorses efforts to preserve this historical landmark,” said Jeff Clark, the chamber’s executive director. He went on to say, “It is Polk County history, as well as Florida’s first theme park.”

The preservation effort passed its first hurdle in June 2003 when the state Acquisition and Restoration Council voted unanimously to add the 233-acre Cypress Gardens tract to the state’s land-buying list. Gov. Jeb Bush and the Florida Cabinet still had to vote on the recommendation in August of 2003, but Floridians who had been fighting for the state to intervene since April considered this a major milestone. The Department of Environmental Protection Secretary David Struhs, who was chairman of the acquisition panel, labeled Cypress Gardens “a cultural icon.” “Cypress Gardens is a piece of Florida’s modern history,” Struhs said, “There can be no better way to continue its tradition than through the Florida Forever program.” The Florida Forever program is the state’s ten-year, three billion dollar program to buy environmentally critical or culturally significant land.²⁴⁴

Opinions varied as to what Cypress Gardens should become if saved. Public officials, concerned residents and businessmen looking to reopen the park had varying interpretations of the kind of park Cypress Gardens should become. Former state senator Rick Dantzler (Dick Pope Jr.’s son-in-law) and Winter Haven Chamber of Commerce Executive Director Bob Gernert

²⁴³Elizabeth McCormick, “Chambers Rally to Save Gardens,” *The Lakeland Ledger*, April 23, 2003, sec. Business, p. E6.

²⁴⁴Lloyd Dunkelberger, “Panel Backs Cypress Gardens Purchase,” *Sarasota Herald-Tribune*, 7 June 2003, sec. B, p. BM7.

fought save at least the original thirty-seven acres of botanical gardens but preferred for the whole park to be saved.

Among the concerned residents, Burma Davis Posey made herself the most visible with the argument that, “Cypress Gardens really is Florida.”²⁴⁵ She formed the “Friends of Cypress Gardens” group to advocate the preservation of the park. Two businessmen, Kent Buescher, owner of the Wild Adventures theme park in Valdosta, Georgia and David Siegel, an Orlando investor both expressed interest in purchasing the park and reopening it. Buescher’s plan called for him to purchase the park and operate it on his own. Under Siegel’s plan, the state of Florida would purchase the entire two hundred acre park and then lease it to Siegel. In a May 2003 proposal letter to Governor Jeb Bush, Siegel explained how he turned other failed central Florida areas into profitable locations such as the River Ranch dude ranch near Lake Wales, FL and the Grenelefe Golf Resort near Haines City, FL. Posey’s Friends of Cypress Gardens organization offered their endorsement of this plan.²⁴⁶

Many Floridians did not share the view that the state should purchase the failed tourist attraction. While there was a precedent of the state buying and preserving tourist attractions, many argued that it did not apply in the case of Cypress Gardens. The state of Florida owns Weeki Wachee Springs, Silver Springs, Homosassa Springs, and Rainbow Springs. The state owns Weeki Wachee and Silver Springs and leases them to the operators of the attractions. In the cases of Homosassa and Rainbow Springs, the state owns and operates both springs.²⁴⁷ These

²⁴⁵ Ibid.

²⁴⁶ Mary Toothman, “Siegel Would Lease Park from State,” *The Lakeland Ledger*, May 6, 2006, sec. Business, p. E1.

²⁴⁷ Bill Rufty, “Dantzer to Lead Efforts to Save Cypress Gardens; Greater Winter Haven Chamber of Commerce,” *The Lakeland Ledger*, April 18, 2003, sec. News, p. A1.

parks all differ from Cypress Gardens in that all of those locations are springs, natural land formations which fall clearly into the scope of the Florida Forever program. Conversely, Dick Pope constructed a man-made park built on the shore of a lake. Before the final decision was made as to the fate of Cypress in August 2003, it had become apparent by at least June of that year that the state wanted to preserve at least the original thirty-seven acres of land created by Dick Pope.²⁴⁸ Beyond that, lawmakers debated over how much money the state could ultimately afford to spend on the park and therefore how much land beyond those thirty-seven acres could be saved. Some conservationists expressed concern for the idea of using Florida Forever money because that would simply be less money the state would have to use towards nature restoration and conservation.²⁴⁹

The debate on the preservation of Cypress Gardens can also be seen as a debate over what is Florida. One possible answer is: Florida is tourism. The largest source of income for the state comes from its tourist industry. Economically, in 2003 tourism accounted for \$51.5 billion of the state's income. In that same year, the state collected \$3.1 billion in taxes from tourism, and the tourist industry employed 874,700 individuals.²⁵⁰ If Florida is tourism, then the conservation of tourist attractions should be a high priority. Rick Dantzler and Bob Gernet often used this argument to justify using Florida Forever funds to save Cypress Gardens.

As the day of decision, August 20, approached, Posey's Friends of Cypress Gardens began to apply increasing pressure on the state to purchase the entire park. Posey's organization

²⁴⁸ Bill Rufty, "Politics of Cypress Gardens Beauty Can Get Ugly and Confusing; Politics," *The Lakeland Ledger*, June 16, 2003, sec. Metro, p. B1.

²⁴⁹ Dave Nicholson and Deborah Alberto, "Governor Suggesting A Lifeline for Gardens," *Tampa Tribune* April 16, 2003 sec. Nation/World p.1

²⁵⁰ "Florida Tourism," Visit Florida <http://media.visitflorida.com/about/research/> (accessed on April 4, 2008)

had placed its support behind Seigel's plan for the park. Posey also added her suggestions for what Cypress Gardens should include if and when it reopens. "She proposed creating several museums there, including one for sports, one for Gone with the Wind memorabilia and a pageant museum with gowns from former Miss America and Miss Universe winners."²⁵¹

Posey displayed her disagreement with Dantzler and Gernert publically through an article she wrote for the Alachua Post on May 20, 2003. In this article she attempted to portray Dantzler and Gernert's belief that only part of Cypress Gardens could and should be saved as representing only a small minority of those who want to save Cypress Gardens. In this article, she asserts that her view of complete preservation represented the will of the people.

On August 20, 2003, Governor Jeb Bush and his cabinet heard the testimonies from more than a dozen advocates who urged the state to save Cypress Gardens. During this meeting Siegel and Buescher both announced their plans for the park. In a videotaped message, David Siegel outlined his plans to reopen Cypress Gardens as "the Smithsonian of the South." He said he could draw more visitors to the park by bringing in popular exhibits and collections, ranging from Gone with the Wind memorabilia to a sports hall of fame.²⁵²

On the day of decision, supporters of Cypress Gardens received an unanticipated decision. On August 26, Bush and his cabinet voted to place Cypress Gardens on the Florida Forever list. While this yes vote was not unexpected, the size of the land saved was. Bush and members of the Cabinet voted to place all 176 acres of the attraction on the list. The question now present was who would step in to buy and operate Cypress Gardens. Governor Bush made it

²⁵¹ Dinha Voyles Pulver, "Grassroots Effort Pushes to Save Slice of Florida History," *The Daytona Beach News-Journal*, May 17, 2003, sec. State and Regional.

²⁵²Ibid.

clear that the state did not want “be in the amusement park” business and that a private individual or company would have to own and operate the park.²⁵³

In order to speed up the process of getting Cypress Gardens into the hands of someone who could breathe new life into the park, the Trust for Public Land purchased the park from the previous owners. The size of the purchase was 142 acres, much larger than the 107 acres that was originally discussed a month before September purchase. It included most of what people identified with the park: the original botanical gardens, the water ski arena, the Southern Crossroads including the Snively Mansion, the butterfly conservatory and the entertainment arena.²⁵⁴

In late 2003, instead of consensus and peace, a war of words still raged over who should run Cypress Gardens and what kind of park should it be. The Trust for Public Land had a deadline to sell the park by February 24, 2004, but in the months preceding that approaching date, the fighting between Friends of Cypress Gardens President Burma Posey and Rick Dantzler and Bob Gernert raged on.²⁵⁵ Posey publically accused Dantzler and Gernert unfairly favoring Kent Buescher. Posey saw Buescher’s plan, which called for keeping the original aspects of Cypress Gardens the same while adding new thrill rides, unacceptable. In her view, his plan would cheapen the image of the park and would create what she called “a permanent state

²⁵³ Gary Fineout, “State Agrees to Help Save the Gardens; Gov. Bush, Cabinet Put the Park on a List of Sites to Preserve,” *The Lakeland Ledger*, August 27, 2003, sec. News, p. A1.

²⁵⁴ Bill Rufty, “Cypress Gardens Deal All but Done; \$22 Million Sales Agreement Reached; Yet Gov. Bush, Local Leaders Want More Details; Encompasses 142 Acres,” *The Lakeland Ledger*, September 26, 2003, sec. News, p. A1.

²⁵⁵ Lloyd Dunkelberger, “3 Possible Gardens’ Owners Emerge; Plans for Revival,” *The Lakeland Ledger*, November 15, 2003, sec. News, p. A1.

fair.”²⁵⁶ The disagreement over the fate of Cypress Gardens eventually turned into a series of personal attacks with each side leveling charges of ulterior motives and improper conduct.

Ultimately, Buescher presented the most feasible plan for reopening Cypress Gardens. The Trust for Public Land had until February to close a deal on the park but the deadline for potential owners to turn in bids was on November 14, 2003. Three formal bids were submitted: one unknown bid, one bid from a Pennsylvania company that suggested creating an indoor snow-skiing facility, and Buescher’s bid.²⁵⁷ Finally, by December 2003 the Trust began working with Buescher and his Wild Adventures theme park in Valdosta, Georgia. Buescher’s offer to buy the park and not lease it eventually won out as did his plan to keep the old Cypress Gardens as it was and to add thrill rides in other areas of the park in order to attract younger park visitors.

Buescher’s purchase of the park and the reopening that followed mark the end of an era for Cypress Gardens. The history contained between the park’s two openings illustrates that during the years the Pope family ran the park, Cypress Gardens successfully capitalized on selling a “created” Florida and by presenting novel spectacles related to the state. From Buescher to present, the history of the park contains a different story. This new park’s story deals more with how to honor the vision of Dick Pope than how to continue his efforts. With this transition in the park’s focus, the history of the Pope’s Cypress Gardens concludes.

²⁵⁶Bill Rufty, “Cypress Gardens Still Reeling in Controversy; Politics,” *The Lakeland Ledger*, September 29, 2003, sec. Metro, p. B1.

²⁵⁷Lloyd Dunkelberger and Gary Fineout, “Gardens Deal Gets Closer; A Georgia Theme Park May Buy and Preserve Historic Cypress Gardens; Working to Save Attraction,” *The Lakeland Ledger*, December 17, 2003, sec. News, p. A1.

CONCLUSION

The themes of gardens, belles, and water skiing display how Dick Pope saw Florida. To Pope, Florida was a tropical paradise of flowers, a land of Southern hospitality, and a land of water based adventure upon the lakes of the land. From his youth until his death, Pope was a salesman and promoter. Whether Pope was selling land, boat motors, or theme park tickets, he was still always selling his dreams. The land he sold was the land of his dreams; the boats were vehicles of excitement upon the lakes of his dreamland; and the park tickets were admission passes to Dick Pope's vision of Florida.

The conclusions of this paper were developed through establishing the historical context of tourism in Florida by first presenting a brief history of Florida tourism and its development from Gilded Age leisure class luxury resort hotels to roadside attractions. To better understand Cypress Gardens' place within the national historiography of tourism, this paper then presented a history of Coney Island, Silver Springs, and the development of the theme park. After this emphasis on historical background, the paper's focus on Dick Pope and his vision for Cypress Gardens displayed the connection between Pope and his beloved state. Developing this further, an in-depth analysis of the major additions to the park, southern belles and waterskiing, followed. Finally, the paper explored the ways in which Cypress Gardens advertised itself and how this related to Pope's vision and the theme of Florida.

The significance of these findings lies largely in the significance of Cypress Gardens to both twentieth century Florida and the United States. Cypress Gardens, founded in the 1930s, became a household name in the 1960s, but faded into obscurity and irrelevance by the 1990s.

The two thirty-year-old periods, one of triumphant success and the other of slow decline, follow both the history of Cypress Gardens and also the history of Florida. The history of Florida during this sixty-year span contains the transition from semi-frontier land to Sunbelt growth and the shift from postwar boom Florida to post-Disney Florida. These considerable shifts for the state corresponded with the growth and decline of the park that defined itself at Florida's park, Cypress Gardens.

By utilizing both newspaper and advertising sources, this paper showed more than just what Cypress Gardens did. Cypress Gardens was botanical gardens, southern belles, and water skiing. The park explicitly presented those three themes to tourists. Using promotional sources including visual media, this paper presented the vision of Dick Pope, how Pope saw his own park and how he thought the park should be sold to the public. This paper concludes that story of Cypress Gardens from 1935 to 2003 is the story of Dick Pope's vision for the park and how he sold his park to tourists by simultaneously selling Florida.

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