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Revisiting Roadside Attractions: A "Deep Dive" into Florida's Weeki Wachee Springs

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REVISITING ROADSIDE ATTRACTIONS:
A “DEEP DIVE” INTO FLORIDA’S WEEKI WACHEE SPRINGS

by

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B.A. Eckerd College, 2014

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ABSTRACT

This digital public history project explores one of the oldest and longest running of Florida's roadside attractions, Weeki Wachee Springs, during the years considered to be the park's heyday, the 1950s through the mid-1970s. With the 75th anniversary of the park approaching in 2022 and preliminary discussions of a new or expanded mermaid museum, there is a growing need to document the experiences of aging former employees and preserve park-related ephemera from that period.

For this project six oral histories of former mermaids and former employees have been recorded, transcribed, and made publicly accessible through RICHES, the University of Central Florida's free-to-access digital archive, along with hundreds of documents and images related to the park. This newly discovered material uncovers the lived experiences of the mermaids and other employees interviewed, some of whom have never been written about previously.

Historiographically, the park has attracted little attention from scholars. The few popular works devoted to Weeki Wachee Springs fail to place the attraction within the context of Florida's social or political climates in any meaningful way. Using oral histories of the park's employees recorded for this project, archival material uncovered during the research stage, and existing interviews from one of the only books written about the park (Lu Vickers' *Weeki Wachee: City of Mermaids*, 2007), this study combines a digital archive with scholarly interpretation informed by women's studies, social and cultural history, and oral history theory.

Dedicated to Melanie Beaton, whose influence rendered me a better woman and whose passing shaped my graduate career. And to my parents, whose sacrifices allowed me the privilege of higher education; whose unconditional support and encouragement helped ease my ever-circulating anxieties and self-doubt.

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Furthermore, thanks to the May family for allowing me to visit the May Museum of Natural History in Colorado Springs, Colorado for several days. Specifically, thanks to R.J. Steer for spending those days searching through a very cold attic identifying the ephemera associated with Weeki Wachee Springs. I am also very thankful for the graciousness of Carla May Harris and Louise Nan Steer for opening their homes to me and allowing me to interview them. The ephemera collected during my visit shed light on never before studied subjects that deeply impacted this thesis; their graciousness is very much appreciated.

Additionally, a huge thanks to my committee, Dr. Scot French, Dr. Barbara Gannon and Dr. Vladimir Solonari, as well as Dr. Connie Lester and Geoffrey Cravero for all their assistance throughout this project. As I have a penchant for disorganization and biting off more than I can chew, their guidance helped keep me grounded. I am grateful to my thesis advisor Dr. French,

who encouraged me to explore this topic, helped set up an internship at Weeki Wachee, spent hours in meetings answering my questions and gave me confidence in my academic abilities.

Finally, I would like to thank my friends, family and significant other for listening to the thousands of anecdotes about this topic without complaint. To my parents, Alex, Hilary and Mckenzie, thank you for comforting me through tears, giving me company during panic attacks and always answering those late-night phone calls. A pile of treats and endless pets to the most demanding cat, Jack, for sitting with me through all-nighters and forcing me to take breaks by sitting on my notes.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION —DIVING BEYOND POPULAR HISTORIES' ACCOUNTS OF WEEKI WACHEE SPRINGS

Weeki Wachee Springs State park, opened in 1947 and located in Brooksville, Florida, is one of the last existing remnants of the roadside attractions era of Florida tourism history. The famous mermaid performances drew customers in by the thousands before theme parks took over as the prominent tourist attractions of Florida. From the 1970s until the attraction became a state park in 2008, Weeki Wachee struggled to stay in business. Scholars that write about Weeki Wachee, as well as former employees who give interviews about Weeki Wachee, argue that the construction of theme parks, Disney World in particular, and highways killed Weeki Wachee's prosperity. However, historians of Florida tourism attribute the decline of roadside attractions to a wide host of different variables, such as the rise of air travel and extensively planned vacations, as well as the failure of roadside attractions to conform to the theme park model. This thesis takes an interdisciplinary approach, connecting scholarship on Florida tourism, roadside tourism, American automobility, and gender studies to analyze how the different owners of Weeki Wachee ran the attraction throughout the years and how the on-site employees experienced the various owners and the owner's alterations to performances, attractions, architecture, and company policies. This thesis offers an original interpretation that goes beyond what the popular histories write about Weeki Wachee through an approach that draws from several disciplines as well as from a repertoire of original evidence collected and digitized specifically for this project. Six oral histories of former mermaids and former employees have been recorded, transcribed, and uploaded to The University of Central Florida's (UCF) online archive, RICHES along with a selection of documents and images related to the park. This newly discovered material uncovers

the lived experiences of the mermaids interviewed and other employees as well, some of which have never been written about previously.

The two primary research questions this study seeks to answer are:

- What new insights can an interdisciplinary study of Weeki Wachee reveal both about Florida's roadside tourist industry and how it changed from the 1940s through to present day and the experiences of the those owning, working at, visiting, Weeki Wachee Springs?
- Why do former employees remember Weeki Wachee the way they do?

Through a “deep dive” into the park's history framed around a sociological, cultural, women's studies, and racial history, using oral histories of the park's employees that created for this thesis, archival material I uncovered and existing interviews from one of the only books written about the park, titled *Weeki Wachee: City of Mermaids*, this study fills a gap in the historiography of Weeki Wachee.

The archival material shows that racial discrimination and possibly racially fueled violence occurred at Weeki Wachee Springs, employees were given low wages, few vacation days, and were subject to dangerous working conditions, and the mermaids were subject to strict rules that controlled their appearance and activities outside of their job. Conversely, these incidents are minimized or ignored in previous scholarship written about Weeki Wachee and in several of the oral histories collected for this study. Why is there a gap in information between the claims of other histories of Florida, archival material, and with how former employees of the attraction recall their time at Weeki Wachee Springs? This thesis highlights the experiences, perspectives, and memories of those interviewees in both its written and digital portions in order

to help readers understand both the functions of nostalgia psychologically as well as historically in order to give agency to the narratives of the women interviewed as well as further current oral history theory. Furthermore, by placing Weeki Wachee in the context of broader trends in leisure, urban growth, automobility, racial tensions, gender relations, and Florida's political climate, Weeki Wachee can be placed into a wider context of Florida history, rather than treat the attraction as an insular and separate piece of history that other works have done.

Brief Site History

In order to understand the specific incidents and personal experiences former mermaids and employees of Weeki Wachee laid out in later chapters as well as this study's analysis of them, a basic outline of the history of Weeki Wachee Springs is necessary to provide. The springs are located about fifty miles away from Tampa, located on U.S. 19. Newt Perry, an entertainment swimmer who gained recognition performing stunts underwater at Silver Springs, opened the underwater attraction at Weeki Wachee in October of 1947. In the 1940s, Weeki Wachee Springs and the surrounding area were nearly completely undeveloped. As Newt Perry was an Ocala native and performed stunts and help film movies at the nearby Wauchula Springs, Weeki Wachee and its clear water provided a perfect location for the creation of a tourist attraction. Newt Perry, along with several investors, built a small underwater theater, trained women to perform underwater and opened Weeki Wachee to the public before the completion of the construction of other attractions.

In 1950, Newt Perry sold his interest in Weeki Wachee. Over the next ten years the owners added an orchid garden, a bug museum, an "abandoned" Seminole Village exhibit, a train ride through the surrounding forest, a petting zoo, and a gift shop. As the popularity of the

park exploded, the American Broadcasting Company (ABC) purchased Weeki Wachee in the late 1950s. ABC added a bird of prey attraction, built a bigger underwater theater, remodeled the entrance of the park, filmed advertisements and played them in ABC-owned theater across the United States, drastically upped the production value of the mermaid performances, hosted movie premieres and brought celebrities to the park, and hired many more employees. In the late 1960s a nearby development created a manmade lake that put tons of sediment into the water source for the springs, making the mermaid performances impossible to see as the spring's water turned cloudy.

The star attraction of the Springs have always been the underwater performances. The theater is located in the basin of the spring. Stairs lead down into a submerged theater with glass panels that allow the Springs to act as a stage. In the early years of the attraction, the performances were mainly a compilation of different underwater stunts. The performers, more commonly called mermaids, would execute synchronized ballet, eat bananas, drink sodas, and perform a deep dive which entails swimming into the depths of the springs. The mermaids remain underwater for the entire performance, receiving oxygen from hoses connected to external air compressors. An announcer stood in the theater and explained the routine to the audience while music played in the background. After ABC bought the attraction, the performances became plays which changed annually. Some of the plays included The Little Mermaid, Alice in Waterland, The Wizard of Oz, and Peter Pan. New technology allowed music to be piped into the Springs, meaning the mermaids were able to coordinate their performances more accurately and a higher production budget brought elaborate props and costumes into the performances.

In the early 1970s, many of the mermaids, gift shop, and gardening employees went on strike, demanding better pay, vacation time and insurance. ABC sold the attraction to Florida Leisure Attractions Inc., around this same time. Florida Leisure Attractions built a water park on site in order to appeal to the theme park crowds. Throughout the next three decades, the park switched hands several times, and fell out of popularity and into disrepair. Many of the smaller attractions disappeared, and over the years, the parks went through several rounds of downsizing. In the 1990s, the owners of the land's lease took the owners of Weeki Wachee to court as they failed to keep up with paying the lease. The owners donated the land to the City of Weeki Wachee and the surrounding community created a fundraiser called "Save Our Tails" in order to fix the structural issues that made the lease owners threaten to close the attraction. The battle to save the park raged on, until the state of Florida took over the attraction and made it a state park in 2008. The state completed many of the necessary renovations over the past decade and drew up a budget plan for an overhaul of the entire attraction thanks to the help of the support organization Friends of Weeki Wachee Springs State Park. Weeki Wachee Springs continues to draw hundreds of thousands of visitors each year, from all over the world.

Evidence

Objects from the archive at Weeki Wachee Springs as well as the archive at the May Museum of Natural History in Colorado make up the majority of the primary sources used in this study. I have distilled the findings I have digitized into a set of documents that are used alongside the oral histories collected as evidence of my claims. Six of the eight oral histories collected were transcribed and are cited in this thesis; four of those interviews are of former mermaids, while the other two are of the daughters of John May. I scanned a total of 445 pieces of

ephemera from the archives of the May Museum of Natural History and 81 from the Weeki Wachee archives.

All scans have been given to RICHES, The University of Central Florida's free to access online archive; however, only a portion are referenced in this study. RICHES is dedicated to preserving the history of Florida that has "remained unnoticed and under researched," making this archive an ideal host for the primary sources collected for this project.¹ I have completed the required metadata for the seventeen pieces of archival ephemera and the six oral histories referenced in this study in order for this evidence to be uploaded to RICHES as quickly as possible in order for anyone interested to view.² The strict metadata guidelines require that items donated are accompanied with detailed information about the item in order to, among other things, ensure the preservation of context. The choice to host my research on the internet is based in the arguments made by Daniel Cohen and Roy Rosenzweig's book, *Digital History: The Guide to Gathering, Preserving, and Presenting the Past on the Web*. They contend that through the use of the internet, historians "can do more, reach more people, store more data, give readers more varied sources; we can get more historical materials into classrooms, give students more access to formerly cloistered documents, hear from more perspectives."³ In an essay, "Scarcity or Abundance? Preserving the Past in a Digital Era," Rosenzweig argues that it is pertinent for historians to take advantage of all the internet can provide for preservation because it is and

¹ "RICHES," *The University of Central Florida's History Department*, accessed June 15, 2018 <https://riches.cah.ucf.edu/>.

² All metadata completed is according to RICHES guidelines, which can be viewed here: <https://riches.cah.ucf.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/RICHES-Metadata-Guidebook-5.4.pdf>. The full collection can be viewed here: <https://richesmi.cah.ucf.edu/omeka/collections/show/63>

³ Daniel J. Cohen and Roy Rosenzweig, *Digital History: A Guide to Gathering, Preserving, and Presenting the Past on the Web* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 2006), introduction, accessed September 24, 2018 <http://chnm.gmu.edu/digitalhistory/introduction/>.

always has been the responsibility of historians and archivists alike to focus on preservation alongside research.⁴

There are thousands of photos floating around the internet of Weeki Wachee Springs, many accompanied by incorrect or sparse captions. The blogs and other websites hosting ephemera of the park, not held to the standards of historians, are the public's main source of information about the attraction. In addition, as the May Museum of Natural History is only focused on showcasing the insect collection, the hundreds of documents and letters relating to Weeki Wachee Springs are sitting in boxes in an attic untouched. What use are artifacts and research if they sit in archives, or are hidden behind journal paywalls, or are thrown away altogether? In order for the history of the attraction to be preserved, institutions and archives need to make these materials accessible to the general public. The most convenient and far-reaching method for accomplishing this goal is to use the internet. The objectives of this thesis go beyond creating additional scholarship on Weeki Wachee Springs, which is why a significant portion of this project has been dedicated to traveling across the state of Florida and the country to conduct interviews and scan documents, as well as to the transcribing and creating of metadata for each object and interview used for this study. Creating a project out of this study rather than writing a traditional thesis jumpstarts the preservation of Weeki Wachee's history, which this study urges other scholars to invest their time in. The wealth of information newly discovered through the research for this study displays the opportunities awaiting other historians; there are more former mermaids to interview and more documents, photos, letters and videos yet to be studied in archives and in the personal effects of former employees.

⁴ Roy Rosenzweig "Scarcity of Abundance?: Preserving the Past in a Digital Era," *The American Historical Review* 108, no. 3 (June 2003): 38.

A major portion of the evidence used are set of oral histories created specifically created for this thesis as well as quotes from women interviewed by Lu Vickers for her aforementioned book and the methodology for using them follows in the footsteps of current oral history theory. The reliability of oral histories is a debate that has been going on for decades. While oral histories are unreliable in part because memory is fallible, interviewers and interviewees are biased, and because narratives change as perceptions change, theorists have made the point that oral histories provide useful information not found in other sources. In the case of Weeki Wachee, oral histories fill in the gaps left by a lack of written documentation. Because there were multiple bonfires on Weeki Wachee property over the years that the different park owners used to burn old props, photos, costumes, documents, and other ephemera, very little physical evidence exists that tells about the day-to-day aspects of working at the attraction.⁵ However, the oral histories are never used as the sole evidence for any claim made in this study. Oral historian Donald Richie makes the point that oral histories and any other sources should never be “trusted completely, and all sources need to be tested against other evidence.”⁶ Using oral histories to supplement other evidence ensures that arguments do not hinge on the level of reliability of the interviewer or interviewee. Moreover, rather than using the interviews solely for facts about Weeki Wachee, this study focuses heavily on analyzing what is and is not said in the interviews to theorize about why the women perceive the park and their role in it the way they do. As Lynn Abrams, another oral historian, posits in her book *Oral History Theory*, it is impossible to create a truly unbiased narrative; so rather than viewing resources such as oral as oral histories, autobiographies, diaries, and letters as holding objective truths, studying the social “constructions and language available” that were used to create the narratives gives a wider

⁵ Bonnie Georgiadis, interview by author, Tarpon Springs, FL, September 21, 2016.

⁶ Donald Richie, *Doing Oral History: A Practical Guide* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2015), 10.

understanding of culture and people as well as avoids that argument over the reliability of oral histories altogether.⁷

This study builds on the current trends in the historiography of oral history theory, embracing the subjective nature of memory and storytelling. The motives, biases, cultural constructs, and discourses drawn upon by the women interviewed as well as by the authors who wrote about Weeki Wachee Springs are unpacked. There are many layers of discourse and social constructs that go into the narratives these women weave. Using oral history “offers up insights into the interplay between self and society, between past and present and between individual experience and the generalized account; in addition it will often provide emotional content that a written version of the same story will not.”⁸ The women interviewed for this study call upon the gender norms they grew up with, living in the rural Florida town of Brooksville in the mid-1900s, some comparing and contrasting them with the gender norms of the present day. Similarly, several women look back at the segregated town they lived in through the lenses of an idealized past, modern views on race relations, as well as with a blind unfamiliarity that comes with living life in a white majority town.

With the intention of best presenting the primary sources, I have organized this study into four sections. The first section goes into the historiography of tourism in Florida as well as of Weeki Wachee Springs, detailing the trends in scholarship as well as the gaps that this study aims to fill in and what methods are used to accomplish this goal. The second section looks at Florida, Hernando County, and Weeki Wachee Springs during the 1950s through to the mid-1960s to explore the evolution of the tourist industry, the transition from segregation to

⁷ Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Theory* (Oxon: Routledge 2010), 57.

⁸ Ibid, 81.

integration, as well as the memories former mermaids and employees divulged about these years. The bulk of the section covers how segregation affected Weeki Wachee Springs and how former employees recall race relations at the park and beyond. The third section delves into the ABC era of the attraction, from the 1960s through the 1970s. There is overlap between the second and third section because the park's transition from being vendor-owned to ABC-owned took several years; while it did not take that long for ABC to purchase Weeki Wachee, the changes and consequences of those changes brought by the corporation took years to fully develop. The third section revolves around the "golden years" of the springs leading into the park's decline, again calling upon trends in Hernando County, Florida, and beyond to discern why Weeki Wachee did not stay in the top Florida destinations for very long. As the years ABC owned the park were the years where production value of the underwater performances was at its highest and the advertising the most widespread, meaning the women who worked as mermaids were broadcast more frequently and to more people than ever before, much of this section is dedicated to discussing gender relations and why the former mermaids describe their experiences as employees of the park and women coming into adulthood during these years. The final section is the conclusion which looks to the future of the park and future opportunities for research of Weeki Wachee.

Historiography

Scholars agree that tourist attractions in Florida significantly influence the state's political leanings, government policies, socioeconomic trends, as well as local culture. Whether discussing Florida's industrialization, desegregation and the civil rights movement in Florida, roadside attractions, automobility, Florida's environment, or Disney, historians include a discourse on the major changes that occur all over Florida due to the state's tourist industry.

However, few academics have connected the history of Weeki Wachee Springs with a larger discussion of Florida tourist trends. With its focus on the atmosphere surrounding Florida that made Weeki Wachee possible as well as the effects that Weeki Wachee as a roadside attraction had on the Florida tourist industry, this project stands as a synthesis of Florida tourist history trends and the relevance of those trends to Weeki Wachee.

Only since the rise in popularity of cultural history in the 1970s and 1980s have historians written about Florida's tourist industry at length. Within the past twenty years, scholars have created a discussion on the marketing of Florida. Historians discover the origins of marketing Florida as a paradise contending that while the land boom of the late 1940s created modern Florida tourism, the myths and hyperbole surrounding the state dates back to the writing of explorers and settlers of Florida in 1500s.⁹ The Chicora legend, dating back to 1521, is an exaggerated mythos of the riches of a tribe named Chicora that supposedly lived on the eastern coast of America that explorers and slavers used to convince rulers to settle this land.¹⁰ The tall tales of abundant resources and rich Indians drove many explorers to create settlements in Florida, who reproduced these myths that stayed alive over several centuries until becoming drawing points for advertisers of Florida in the late 1800s.¹¹ Andrew K. Frank brings the discourse into the nineteenth century in his article in *Destination Dixie* by arguing that the drainage of the Everglades in the early 1900s created a belief that the Seminole tribes would

⁹ See for example: Margot Ammidown "Edens, Underworlds, and Shrines: Florida's Small Tourist Attractions," *The Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts* Vol. 23 (1998), 238-259; Maurice O'Sullivan, Jr. and Jack C. Lane eds., *The Florida Reader: Visions of Paradise from 1530 to the Present* (Sarasota: Pineapple Press, 1991). For a wider history of United States tourism that follows the same trend, see John F. Sears, *Sacred Places: American Tourist Attractions in the Nineteenth Century* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998).

¹⁰ Paul E. Hoffman, "The Chicora Legend and Franco-Spanish Rivalry in *La Florida*," *The Florida Historical Quarterly* Vol. 62 No. 4 (1984), 419-438.

¹¹ Margot Ammidown, "Edens, Underworlds, and Shrines: Florida's Small Tourist Attractions," *The Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts* Vol. 23 (1998), 240-243.

disappear from Florida, which in turn made Native American themed tourist attractions popular.¹² These works agree that the mythos of Florida as a paradise with abundance of resources, wild nature, and expansive majesty date very far back in the region's history. This study bases its discussion on the themes of Weeki Wachee's attractions (the mermaid performances, the "abandoned" Seminole village, the exotic bug museum, the petting zoo, the birds of prey show, etc.) on the conclusions from these works; published studies of Weeki Wachee fail to delve into the original investor's reasonings behind the creation of the mermaid show apart from Newt Perry's background in underwater entertainment.

The same way historians have linked the history of the early Spanish settlers of Florida to Florida's modern tourism practices, so have southern historians recently related the evolution of Florida's political climate to the population boom that the state went through because of its tourist industry. Authors argue that Florida lost its traditional southern politics and culture because of the influx of Northerners to the state.¹³ For example, David R. Colburn's book, *Government in the Sunshine State: Florida Since Statehood*, frames Florida before World War II as a state with a deeply Southern culture, filled with Florida natives, dominated by racism and agriculture. Colburn argues that, along with other factors, the rise of tourism brought a vast variety of people to Florida which brought along with it fights for civil rights, industrialization, and economic prosperity.¹⁴ Several scholars take these conclusions and relate them specifically

¹² Andrew K. Frank, "Authenticity for Sale: The Everglades, Seminole Indians, and the Construction of a Pay-Per-View Culture" in *Destination Dixie: Tourism and Southern History* (Gainesville: The University of Florida Press, 2012), 287-289.

¹³ For scholarship specifically focusing on Florida's change from traditional Southern culture see: David R. Colburn and Lance DeHaven-Smith, *Florida's Megatrends: Critical Issues in Florida* (Gainesville, FL: The University of Florida Press, 2010); Richard D. Starnes ed., *Southern Journeys: Tourism, History, and Culture in the Modern South* (Tuscaloosa, AL: The University of Alabama Press, 2003).

¹⁴ David R. Colburn and Lance DeHaven-Smith, *Government in the Sunshine State: Florida Since Statehood* (Gainesville, FL: The University of Florida Press, 1999).

to the Jewish and African American Civil Rights Movements. Several works argue that the vast migration of Northerners to Florida, specifically discussing the diverse city Miami, allowed for an alliance between Jewish and African American civil rights activists who created significant changes in Miami race relations, despite the strong hold the Ku Klux Klan had over the city.¹⁵ While this study does not focus much on the politics of the state, an understanding of Florida's cultural background is imperative to the discussion of Weeki Wachee's local employees as well as the analysis of why the community pushed for the state takeover of the park.

The scholarship about the evolution of Florida's political landscape touches on a wider trend popular with many historians, that of the land boom occurring after the conclusion of World War II. Authors argue this land boom marks the beginning of modern Florida tourism. This widely agreed event serves as the starting point for numerous publications.¹⁶ Whether writing about the different eras of Florida tourism or detailing a comprehensive history of Florida, scholars nearly always frame their arguments of Florida in terms of pre-World War II and post-World War II. While works on the history of roadside attractions establish the land boom as the reason these attractions became popular, very few historians discuss the significance of the land boom in regards to Weeki Wachee, even though the park opened in 1947. Authors are

¹⁵ For books on the relationship between Florida's tourist industry and its civil rights movements, see: Raymond A. Mohl, Matilda "Bobbi" Graff, and Shirley M. Zoloth, *South of the South: Jewish Activists and the Civil Rights Movement in Miami, 1945-1960* (Gainesville, FL: The University of Florida Press, 2004); Gregory W. Bush, *White Sand Black Beach: Civil Rights, Public Space, and Miami's Virginia Key* (Gainesville, FL: The University of Florida Press, 2016); Marvin Dunn, *Black Miami in the Twentieth Century* (Gainesville, FL: The University Press of Florida, 1997).

¹⁶ See: Nixon Smiley, *Yesterday's Florida* (Miami, FL: E.A. Seeman Publishing, 1974); Michael Gannon ed., *The History of Florida* (Gainesville, FL: The University Press of Florida, 1996); Tracy J. Revels, *Sunshine Paradise: A History of Florida Tourism* (Gainesville, FL: The University Press of Florida, 2011); Gary R. Mormino, *Land of Sunshine, State of Dreams: A Social History of Modern Florida* (Gainesville, FL: The University Press of Florida, 2008); Tim Hollis, *Dixie Before Disney: 100 Years of Roadside Fun* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1999); Tim Hollis, *Florida's Miracle Strip: From Redneck Riviera to Emerald Coast* (Jackson, MS: The University Press of Mississippi, 2004); David Nelson, "When Modern Tourism was Born: Florida at the Worlds Fairs and on the World Stage in the 1930s," *The Florida Historical Quarterly* 88, no. 4 (2010): pp. 435-468; Gary R. Mormino, "Sunbelt Dreams and Altered States: A Social and Cultural History of Florida, 1950-2000," *The Florida Historical Quarterly* 81, no. 1 (2002): 3-21.

more inclined to attribute the attraction's popularity to the entrepreneurship skills of Newt Perry and the apparently inherent popularity of mermaids; this thesis expands the discussion using the aforementioned works in order to give a broader explanation to the initial growth of the park.

Criticisms of the industrialization of Florida and the growth of tourist attractions in Florida are as abundant as the scholarship on the post-World War II land boom. Many historians argue the detrimental effects that Disney and other attractions have on Florida's environment, government, and citizenry in response to scholarship that portrays Florida tourism in a very positive manner. In *Finding Florida: The True History of the Sunshine State*, T.D. Allman argues among many other things, the less than ethical methods companies under the Spanish crown used to strip Native Americans from their land and later convince U.S. courts to allow them to keep the land without having to pay anything, the extreme development of the "Redneck Riviera" that contributed to receding shorelines, as well as NASA's disregard of safety practices at Cape Canaveral.¹⁷ Carl Hiaasen's exceedingly scathing critique of Disney's presence in Florida in his book *Team Rodent: How Disney Devours the World*, dissects the fabrication of reality Disney creates with its parks and how it takes away from Florida's natural landscape as well as how the conglomerate manipulates Florida government.¹⁸ Other works focus solely on Florida's continuing record as one of the nation's fastest growing states, arguing that local and state governments are focusing more on promoting the "progress" that comes with urban growth, rather than the destruction of rivers, springs, swamps, and other habitats and threats to native plant and animal species.¹⁹ Many works on Weeki Wachee are overwhelmingly positive,

¹⁷T.D. Allman, *Finding Florida: The True History of the Sunshine State* (New York, NY: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2013), 387-401.

¹⁸ Carl Hiaasen, *Team Rodent: How Disney Devours the World* (New York, NY: Ballantine Books, 2010).

¹⁹For works on how urbanization is destroying Florida's environment, see: Bill Belleville, *Losing it all to the Sprawl: How Progress Ate My Cracker Landscape* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2006); Michael

minimizing the negative aspects of the attraction, creating a need for scholarship that does not fear an inclusion of less than desirable events. While significant because they document the general timeline of the attraction's history, often times these books fail to engage with historiography and theory in a way that traditional academic histories do.

Microhistories of specific tourist attractions, apart from works on Disneyland and Disney World, have only become more prevalent in the past fifteen years. Because of the lack of specific site analysis, several of these works group types of roadside attractions together. While grouping allows for a wider discussion of tourist attractions that have not been discussed, this method does not allow for in-depth analyses of any of the attractions. For example, Tim Hollis' book *Glass Bottom Boats and Mermaid Tails: Florida's Tourist Springs* gives a brief history of each of the most popular of Florida's natural Springs, as well as a cumulative chapter on the lesser known springs. Readers learn the most basic events that surround these places but works such as this rarely include an academic analysis of Florida's tourist attractions.²⁰ Several other works detail many different tourist attractions as well as brief histories of the cities the attractions are located in by organizing the attractions along where they lie on Florida's highway system. This method gives more context to the tourist attractions, but unfortunately still is only able to dedicate a paragraph or two on each location.²¹ A few works have combatted this trend by publishing scholarship on single attractions, which more effectively creates an academic discourse on the

Grunwald, *The Swamp: The Everglades, Florida, and the Politics of Paradise* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 2006).

²⁰ Tim Hollis, *Glass Bottom Boats and Mermaid Tails: Florida's Tourist Springs* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stockpole Books, 2006).

²¹ Scholarship organized around Florida's highways, Douglas Waitley, *Florida History from the Highways* (Sarasota, FL: Pineapple Press, Inc., 2005); Herbert L. Hiller, *Highway A1A: Florida at the Edge* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2005).

sites themselves.²² Dorothy Mays' article, for example, discussed in more detail in the methodology section of this proposal, serves as the model for this thesis because of its success in analyzing the roadside attraction Gatorland.²³ Additionally, Stephan E. Branch argues that Dick Pope is the creator of theme parks, not Disney as many historians argue. His article "The Salesman and His Swamp: Dick Pope's Cypress Gardens" is partially a biography of Dick Pope, but mainly an analysis of the history of Florida's oldest and now closed attraction Cypress Gardens. By focusing on a smaller tourist attraction (small in relation to Disney World, Sea World, Busch Gardens, etc., not small in significance), Branch is able to delve into the many complex reason why roadside attractions failed.²⁴

Discourse about Weeki Wachee sprang from the historiographical trend of tourist microhistories. However, several of these works cannot be considered academic because of their lack of citation and failure to engage with academic debate. Pictorial based books, unprofessional websites, and countless news articles all frame Weeki Wachee Springs similarly and with an equal level of shallowness. These works discuss the rise of the park from Newt Perry's original idea to the selling of the park to ABC, the golden age of the park that intertwined with the end of the studio era of classic Hollywood and the decline of the park due to the construction of new highways and theme parks. Also, authors wrote much of the works before or right after the springs became a state park in 2008, meaning almost a decade of history is undocumented. For example, the 2006 pictorial work by Maryann Pelland and Dan Pelland,

²² For other single site analyses, see: Cory Gittner, *Miami's Parrot Jungle and Gardens: The Colorful History of an Uncommon Attraction* (Gainesville, FL: The University Press of Florida, 2000); Lu Vickers, *Cypress Gardens, America's Tropical Wonderland: How Dick Pope Invented Florida* (Gainesville, FL: The University Press of Florida, 2010).

²³ Dorothy Mays, "Gatorland: Survival of the Fittest among Florida's Mid-Tier Tourist Attractions," *The Florida Historical Quarterly* 87, no. 4 (2009), 509-539.

²⁴ Stephan E. Branch, "The Salesman and His Swamp: Dick Pope's Cypress Gardens," *The Florida Historical Quarterly* 80, no. 4 (2002).

Images of America: Weeki Wachee Springs, only contains about a page of history per decade before the pictures that take up the majority of the book. In the chapter prefaces, the authors discuss how the land boom after World War II cemented Florida as a tourist destination, how celebrities flocked to Weeki Wachee in the 1950s and 1960s, how Disney World negatively affected roadside attractions starting in the 1970s, and how the park is struggling to survive in the present day.²⁵ Sometimes lengthy captions accompany the photos and superficial prefaces, with much of the information in these captions coming from marketing material as well as interviews. While informative, the chapter prefaces and picture captions are not linked together to form any critical analysis and many of the names listed in the photographs are incorrect.²⁶

Glass Bottom Boats and Mermaid Tails: Florida's Tourist Springs, written by Tim Hollis and published in 2006, a book whose title promises an in-depth analysis of Weeki Wachee only dedicated twenty seven of its 149 pages to the city of mermaids. This chapter, "Weeki Wachee Springs: The Tail of the Mermaids, only summarizes the major events in Weeki Wachee's history. Focusing solely on the owners of the park, Newt Perry, ABC, Florida Leisure Attractions and the City of Weeki Wachee, and the mermaid shows. Again, the narrative follows the same patterns, only diverting to briefly discuss smaller tourist attractions nearby the park. Scholars not only overlook the smaller exhibits accompanying the mermaid performances, but also labor strikes, lawsuits, and segregation perhaps in favor of perpetuating the myth of Florida as a paradise and a getaway.²⁷ All these works were published shortly before the park became a state park, during the time Weeki Wachee's fate was unknown. The road to becoming a state park was

²⁵ Maryan Pelland and Dan Pelland, *Images of America: Weeki Wachee* (Mount Pleasant, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2006).

²⁶ Bonnie Georgiadis, interview by author.

²⁷ Henry Knight, "'Our' Tropical Lands: Reinventions of California and Florida after the Civil War" in *Tropics of Hopes: California, Florida, and the Selling of the American Paradise, 1869-1929* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2013), 18-47.

not smooth and perhaps the authors of these works stuck to the same narrative so as to bring attention and therefore possible donations to the at-the-time dying park and as well prove to the state how important the attraction is to Florida history. The state park system saved the park ten years ago and scholarly attention to the attraction has since waned; a study with a different perspective in a new era of the park that does more than tell interesting anecdotes is necessary.

Daniel C. Knudsen, Jillian M. Rickley, and Elizabeth S. Vidon, geography and tourism historians, argue in their article “The Fantasy of Authenticity: Touring with Lacan” that “tourism is constructed as the symbolic opposite of our everyday” and is founded on ritualized sightseeing.²⁸ In other words, vacations are perceived as a break from ‘reality’, a break from the troubles and stressors of the everyday. Sightseeing and other tourist activities are the modern, secular equivalents to religious pilgrimages, as vacations “happen periodically to help people reconcile with life’s challenges, much the same way devotees do during a religious pilgrimage.”²⁹ Middle Eastern and Asian Studies scholar Timothy Mitchell furthers these assertions by analyzing the European displays of Egypt in his article, later expanded into a book, “The World as Exhibition.” Mitchell argues that the creators of the Egyptian exhibit at the World’s Fair in the late 1800s labeled their recreations of Egyptian culture authentic, leading travelers to discover those aspects in person. Once in Egypt, travelers documented only what the exhibitions presented as a representation of Egypt rather than reality in the form of artwork, academic works, and traveling logs. These initial works were then cited by other writers until a mass of scholarship supporting the Paris exhibition’s perspective grew, giving weight to that

²⁸ Daniel C. Knudsen, Jillian M. Rickley, and Elizabeth S. Vidon, “The Fantasy of Authenticity: Touring with Lacan,” *Science Direct* 58 (2016), 33-45.

²⁹ Yingong Wei, “The Sense of Ritual in the Tourism Experience: Diverse Cultures and Native Concepts in a Two-Nation Comparison.” (paper presented at the Tourism Travel and Research Association International Conference, Vail, CO, June 15-17, 2016), 2, accessed September 8, 2018, <https://scholarworks.umass.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1248&context=ttra>.

perspective. The exhibit representations and the travelers' "representations of representations" gave each other authority and legitimized the exhibition's claims of authenticity. The authority of these claims then outweighed the criticisms of them by Egyptians because of how cemented they were in the Western World. This then led to Egypt taking on some of the stereotypes presented at the exhibition in order to satiate the Western traveler's wants. Weeki Wachee's representations of Florida and the representations of Weeki Wachee in scholarship fall into the same flaws as early Egyptian tourists.³⁰

For many decades, advertisers have sold Florida as an exotic locale that contains treasures of mythological proportions, such as the fountain of youth, waiting for discovery. Tourist attractions recreate these themes, such as the mermaid shows at Weeki Wachee, to further legitimize the claims of advertising and fit the attraction into the mold of tourist attractions serving as an escape from everyday life.³¹ These representations of Florida as mystical, exotic, and carefree label scholarship on Weeki Wachee authentic at the same time that scholarship labels Weeki Wachee as authentic. This is because works on Weeki Wachee also represent the site as a magical destination of endless wonder only negatively affected by exterior forces. Scholarship on Weeki Wachee is a 'representation of a representation' because authors skim over mundane struggles such as lawsuits, labor strikes, and business decline, minimize wrongdoings such as discrimination and objectification, and rarely critically analyze Weeki Wachee through a lens of preexisting scholarship on tourism or Florida history.

³⁰ Timothy Mitchell, "The World as Exhibition," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 31, no. 2 (1989), 217-236.

³¹ Margot Ammidown, "Edens, Underworlds, and Shrines: Florida's Small Tourist Attractions," *The Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts* 23 (1998), 238-240.

Above all, this thesis' objective is to break away from current historiographical trends. To accomplish these goals, an interdisciplinary lens is implemented to analyze primary sources to come to conclusions. Two articles stand out as models for this endeavor, with the first being Dorothy Mays' "Gatorland: Survival of the Fittest among Florida's Mid-Tier Tourist Attractions." She provides the reader with arguments as to why roadside tourism became popular in Florida and why theme parks overtook roadside attractions through a case study of roadside attraction still in business. Mays' case study explores the post-World War II land boom in Florida, the life of Gatorland's founder and what drew him to open the attractions and his business model, what made roadside tourism successful, why the attraction stayed in business when the majority of others closed their doors, and what made theme parks more attractive to visitors than roadside tourist spots. Mays' discusses the successes and failures of Gatorland, citing the popularity of the kitschy gator mouth entrance and the decline of popularity after the park started charging admission at the doors. While *The City of Mermaids* does discuss business practices, like the use of celebrity visitations to spark interest in Weeki Wachee, there is no analysis of tourism statistics or trends, very limited arguments about why theme parks took Weeki Wachee's business, and very little attention paid to the struggles the park has gone through. Furthermore, the scholarship on Weeki Wachee does not give an adequate portrayal of how it felt running and working at Weeki Wachee the way Mays does in "Gatorland: Survival of the Fittest among Florida's Mid-Tier Tourist Attractions." There is a realistic aspect missing from *City of Mermaids* because of the degree of romanticism of Weeki Wachee; Mays' approach

realistically addresses the history of Gatorland without losing the mysticism, kitsch, and nostalgic factor of Gatorland and roadside tourism which makes it a great model for this study.³²

The second article integral to this study focuses more on the performers than owners, making it a great addition to a study attempting to join a top-down and bottom-up approach. Jennifer A. Kokai's article "Weeki Wachee Girls and Buccaneer Boys: The Evolution of Mermaids, Gender, and 'Man versus Nature' Tourism" takes the discussion of the Weeki Wachee mermaids further by analyzing the intrinsic gender notions the underwater mermaid shows espouse. In a rare critical analysis of Weeki Wachee, Kokai describes how the traditional myth of the mermaid as hideous and monster-like transformed into the myth of the beautiful, graceful, and pure mermaid more common today as well as how the creators of Weeki Wachee used these themes when creating the underwater shows.³³ Kokai uses newspaper articles, promotional material, and Vickers' book to show how the creators exploited the female body for selling tickets and how the park's audience drove this exploitation. The central argument in Kokai's article is that though the park advertises its attractions as "fun for the whole family", the mermaid shows perpetuate white heterosexuality and at the traditional gender roles of women. This study seeks to further Kokai's analysis by including oral histories of former mermaids and through a greater use of promotional material.

While Weeki Wachee to this day perpetuates traditional views of women and is still marketed as an "escape from reality," the attraction does to a degree reflect the changes in race and gender happening in the "outside world." While a seemingly obvious statement, the

³² Dorothy Mays, "Gatorland: Survival of the Fittest among Florida's Mid-Tier Tourist Attractions," *The Florida Historical Quarterly* 87, no. 4 (2009), 509-539.

³³ Jennifer Kokai, "Weeki Wachee Girls and Buccaneer Boys: The Evolution of Mermaids, Gender, and 'Man Versus Nature' Tourism," *Theater History Studies* 31 (2011), 69.

argument needs to be made because of how the park is still being portrayed in scholarship on the subject. Advertisers propped up the myth of Florida as being “away from it all,” while tourists went in search of that mythos and ignored contradictions. Aside from a select handful of outliers, the majority of published works on the park have perpetuated the accepted representation of Weeki Wachee while ignoring inconsistencies. Focusing on the inconsistencies to highlight how Weeki Wachee reflects continuities and changes in race and gender opens avenues to study how Florida as a whole experiences and reacts to broader social and cultural shifts. Florida’s economy relies heavily on tourism, and Floridians in many areas rely on tourism and hospitality industry positions for their livelihood. Because tourism has been a significant industry in the state for so long, vacation spots and roadside attractions like Weeki Watchee are noteworthy to study when tracking Florida’s social and cultural history.

CHAPTER TWO: TENSIONS BUBBLING UP — RACE AND POWER STRUGGLES DURING THE CO-OP ERA, 1950-1964

The Culture of Tourism: The Shallow Nature of Roadside Attractions

Following the trends of the time, a focus on driving, nature and small business, Newt Perry and other later owners/managers created and shaped the attraction around perceptions of Florida rather than “reality”. The perception around which Weeki Wachee was created matured in the two decades after World War II. These twenty years cemented Florida as a vacation destination. While the rise of “middle class tourism” began after the first World War³⁴, “the transformation of leisure into consumption” completed after World War II.³⁵ This is due to several factors, with the major ones being the rise of the automobile, the standardization of companies giving employees paid vacation time,³⁶ and another being the societal shift to allow young people to travel without a chaperone.³⁷ Technological advances also impacted Florida’s tourist industry. The increasing affordability of air conditioning in the 1950s made the Florida humidity bearable³⁸ and the invention of “jet planes and pressurized cabins” during World War II allowed for “package air tours that offered transportation, lodging, and various kinds of sight-seeing excursions, all for a single price” to become a popular choice for Florida tourists.³⁹ Vacations were becoming the norm, and Florida was quickly joining Hawaii and California as one of the top vacation destinations in the United States.

³⁴ Gary R. Mormino, *Land of Sunshine, State of Dreams: A Social History of Modern Florida* (Gainesville, FL: The University Press of Florida, 2008) 90.

³⁵ Ibid 77.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Tracy J. Revels *Sunshine Paradise: A History of Florida of Tourism* (Gainesville, FL: The University Press of Florida, 2011) 102.

³⁸ Mormino *Sunshine Paradise*, 83.

³⁹ Ibid, 103.

The economic prosperity after the war also created a second land boom in Florida (the first happening in the years after World War I) mainly due to the over sixty military bases created in Florida throughout the war.⁴⁰ While many of these bases closed postwar, a handful stayed open creating a need for permanent housing; additionally, many of the soldiers who trained in Florida either vacationed in the state after or moved to Florida permanently.⁴¹ According to *Paradise for Sale: Florida's Booms and Busts*, Florida's population grew over forty percent between 1940 and 1950, partially because of the training bases. The housing market grew so much that companies offered programs where prospective buyers only needed "\$10 Down and \$10 a Month" to own a home in Florida.⁴² The rush of former servicemen vacationing with their families or moving their families to the state suddenly changed Florida from being "southern, except for a few spots in Cypress Gardens"⁴³ into a family friendly destination. By 1950, "66% of all American families planned to travel, and 23 million had already traveled."⁴⁴ This shift in perception was caught on by advertisers and the coalition to rebrand the state began.

Families were traveling by plane and by automobile primarily for relaxation purposes; the tourists of the '50s and '60s were passive travelers on the hunt for family owned places where they could relax and view the wonders of Florida. For the many visitors traveling by car, a vacation to Florida meant meandering along the newly built highways, exiting at whatever roadside attraction caught their eye. "Between 1946 and 1954, over thirty new major attractions

⁴⁰ Nick Wynne and Richard Moorhead, *Paradise for Sale: Florida's Booms and Bust* (Charleston, SC: History Press, 2010), 170.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Gary R. Mormino, *Land of Sunshine, State of Dreams: A Social History of Modern Florida* (Gainesville, FL: The University Press of Florida, 2008), 47.

⁴³ Revels, *Sunshine Paradise*, 101.

⁴⁴ Patricia Moiney-Melvin, "Harnessing the Romance of the Past: Preservation, Tourism, and History," *Public Historian* 13, (Spring 1991): 37, quoted in Revels, *Sunshine Paradise*, 102.

opened in Florida, and countless minor ones sprang up from local imaginations.”⁴⁵ Weeki Wachee Springs counted as one of the thirty major attractions to open, and through hosting a collective of local entrepreneurs, Weeki Wachee Springs became a roadside attraction that captured all the major themes of the time. While most of the other attractions were single-idea, family run operations (i.e. Jungle Gardens drew upon the exotic theme, marketing its botanical theme and parrots, while Gatorland promoted the ‘wild, albeit tamed nature of Florida with their gator wrestling attraction), Weeki Wachee Springs was a cooperative made up of several vendors that paid rent to an overarching management team. Every attraction was priced separately, meaning the attractions competed with each other and often tried to pin down the attendance rates of their “rivals.”⁴⁶ This sense of mutual assistance and competition drew vendors and customers to the Springs; with each attraction attempting to outperform the others, Weeki Wachee quickly became the top contender for most popular roadside attraction in Florida, eventually catching the eye of ABC. Figure 1 is an example of this competition. The photograph shows one of the attractions, The May Museum of the Tropics, placing a giant metal sculpture of a Hercules Beetle on Weeki Wachee premises as a way to attract customers to both pull into the parking lot of the Springs and to visit the museum in particular to view the insects inside.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 107.

⁴⁶A hint of this competition can be viewed later in this chapter, in Figure 4. The last page of the letter in Figure 4 is dedicated to comparing the attendance other attractions received that week and wondering how to boost ticket sales at one particular attraction.



Photograph of May Museum's Hercules Beetle Sculpture, *May Collection*, May Museum of

Figure 1 May Museum of Wonders Installs Hercules Beetle Sculpture

Natural History, Colorado Springs, Colorado, United States.

While the style of management made the attraction unique, as stated previously much of the allure of the park was the unique way in which the park portrayed the top tourist trends of the time. Tracy Revels details the five major themes of Floridian roadside attractions as: “botanical, aquatic, zoological, historic, or novelty.”⁴⁷ Figure 2 displays the botanical aspect of Weeki Wachee Springs, an enclosed orchid garden. Figure 3 is a postcard showing the famous Weeki Wachee mermaids lounging in front of the park’s original underwater theater, advertised as the “World’s Only Aquatic Zoo,” which could be referring to either the underwater theater or the glass bottom boat tour that took visitors along Weeki Wachee River, as shown in Figure 4. Figure 4 is a photograph of part of the riverbank that the jungle cruise passed; the riverbank was lined with cages that held animals such as the baboon shown in Figure 4 as well as panthers, boars and deer.⁴⁸ The naturalist John Hamlet gives a demonstration of the trained boars in Figure 5 in the section of the park called the “Abandoned” Seminole Village; this section of the attraction was a series of structures built to resemble the living quarters of the Seminole Tribe. Finally, the novelty aspect of Weeki Wachee is portrayed in Figure 6, which is a photograph of a trained raccoon opening a present in order to find the treats inside. Families could travel to Weeki Wachee and receive the full Florida experience they were promised in advertisements, all in one place. These major points of interest were not necessarily representative of Florida, but rather were created to meet the needs of the millions of tourist families visiting the state in the postwar years.

⁴⁷ Revels, *Sunshine Paradise*, 107.

⁴⁸ Carla May Harris, interview by author, Colorado Springs, CO, November 16, 2016.



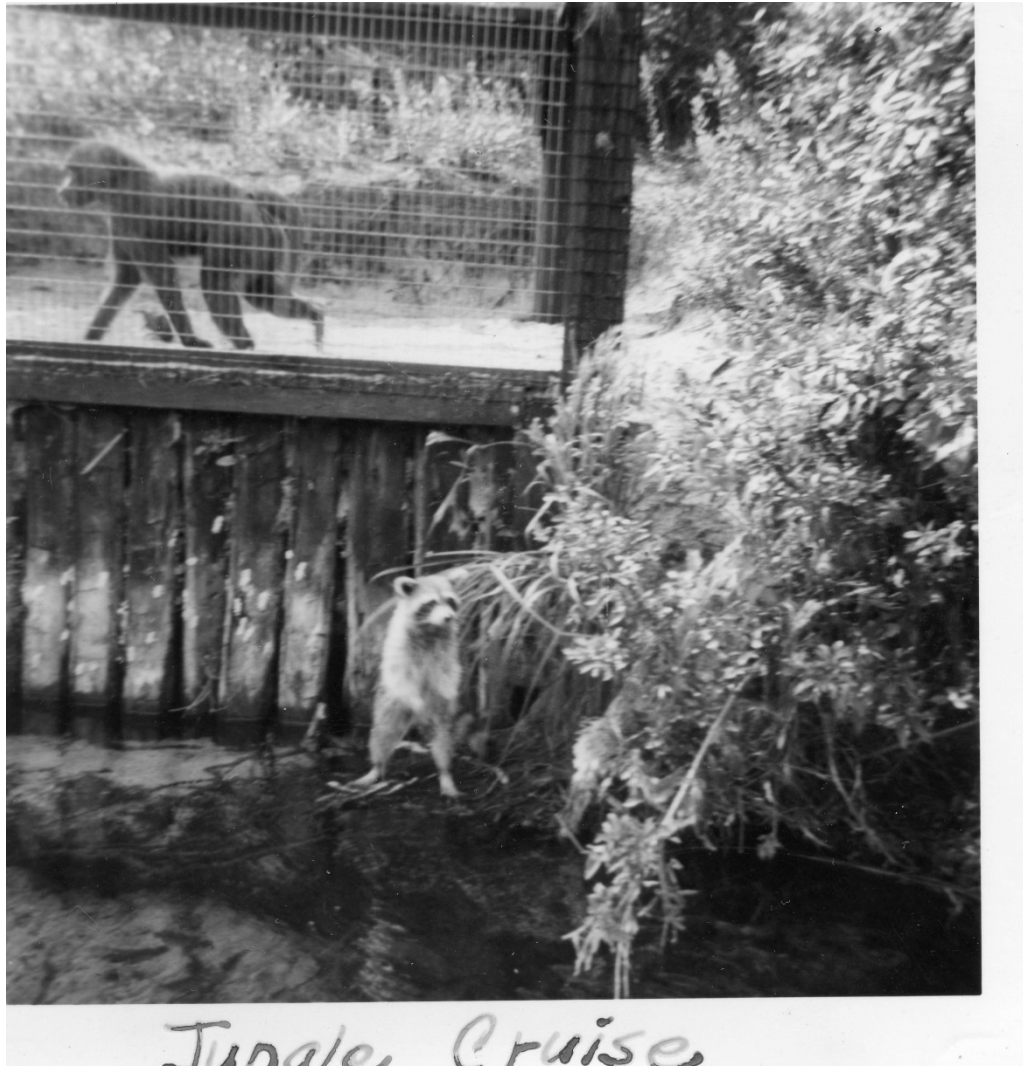
Orchid Gardens at Weeki Wachee, *May Collection*, May Museum of Natural History, Colorado Springs, Colorado, United States.

Figure 2 Orchid Garden at Weeki Wachee Springs



Postcard for Weeki Wachee Springs, *May Collection*, May Museum of Natural History, Colorado Springs, Colorado, United States.

Figure 3 Postcard of the Original Underwater Theater



Raccoon and Baboon on the Banks of Weeki Wachee River, *Weeki Wachee Collection*, Weeki Wachee Springs State Park, Brooksville, Florida, United States.

Figure 4: Raccoon and Baboon on the Banks of Weeki Wachee River



John Hamlet Training Boar, *Weeki Wachee Collection*, Weeki Wachee Springs State Park, Brooksville, Florida, United States.

Figure 5 John Hamlet Training Boar



Trained Raccoon Opening Gift to Find Treat, *Weeki Wachee Collection*, Weeki Wachee Springs State Park, Brooksville, Florida, United State.

Figure 6 Trained Raccoon Opening Gift to Find Treat

The Social Climate: The Ebb and Flow of Race Relations

The family friendly climate that Florida took on could only do so after tourist boosters scrubbed the existing image of Florida from the American consciousness; this was primarily accomplished through whitewashing the Seminole Indian Tribe. In order for Florida to become a “safe” places for visitors, the perception of the “unconquered” Seminoles needed changing. Up until the late 1800s, the tribe “had long been associated with runaway slaves, racial mixture, and defiance of government authority, and therefore did not ‘fit’ into the racial ideology espoused by proponents of the New South.”⁴⁹ In order to strip the Seminoles of their “danger” as well as agree with popular opinion, advertisers ignored the history of the tribe’s acceptance of runaway slaves, connected the tribe to the Everglades to romanticize them as “the original inhabitants of an ancient terrain,”⁵⁰ as well as pushed the image of the Seminoles as “primitive” and “pure” as a way to separate them from the Native Americans on reservations who were seen as lazy and living off the government.⁵¹ Changing the image of the Seminoles not only made Florida seem like a safer place, but also capitalized on the growing trend in the United States in the 1950s of preserving the “Vanishing Indian.”⁵² In this way, Native Americans were not seen as a threat because of their so called dwindling numbers, and tourist boosters could then create attractions centered around preserving that way of life. For example, companies sprang up that took groups of white tourist men hunting native species of Florida and compared the hunts to those done by the Seminoles, whose men were touted as “the most perfect type of physical man.”⁵³

⁴⁹ Henry Knight, “‘Savages of Southern Sunshine’: Racial Realignment of the Seminoles in the Selling of Jim Crow Florida” *Journal of American Studies* 48, no. 1 (2014): 252.

⁵⁰ Andrew K. Frank, “Authenticity for Sale: The Everglades, Seminole Indians, and the Construction of a Pay-Per-View Culture” in *Destination Dixie: Tourism and Southern History*, edited by Karen L. Cox, (Gainesville, FL: The University of Florida Press, 2012), 286.

⁵¹ Henry Knight, “‘Savages of Southern Sunshine’: Racial Realignment of the Seminoles in the Selling of Jim Crow Florida” *Journal of American Studies* 48, no. 1 (2014): 269.

⁵² Ibid, 252.

⁵³ Ibid, 268.

Additionally Seminoles were often hired “to sell tickets to specific tourist venues and the region in general.”⁵⁴ The tribe itself often took part in this new form of revue, even though it often meant acting as stereotypes; in the 1950s the Bureau of Indian Affairs built “a tourist center and craft outlet at the Seminole Hollywood Reservation.”⁵⁵ The Miccosukee Tribe, primarily located in Northern Florida, took advantage of the rising popularity of the native population by tourists in Florida in order to become federally recognized by the United States government. Miccosukee leaders made headlines by meeting with Fidel Castro; the U.S. government agreed to recognize the tribe as sovereign and give them nearly 200,000 acres of land if they agreed to cease contact with Castro.⁵⁶ In order to uphold the view of Florida’s native population as “timeless” and “pure” to the millions of tourists visiting Florida every year, the connection with communism had to be squashed.

The way tourist boosters portrayed the Seminoles as an ancient and pure race of people fit in quite well with the Jim Crow ideology of the South; other people of color unfortunately did not experience the same kind of non-violent racial discrimination in Florida’s tourist industry. Conversely to how the Miccosukee’s demands for land and recognition were given only after they reached out to Fidel Castro, segregationists in 1950s Miami actively “worked to associate... disparate local movements for desegregation with communism” as a method of discrediting any activism that occurred.⁵⁷ Additionally, in 1951 “escalating tensions over black expansion into adjacent white areas resulted in a spate of bombings that targeted African Americans, Jews and

⁵⁴ Knight, *Destination Dixie*, 286.

⁵⁵ Dennis Wiedman, “Global Marketing of Indigenous Culture: Discovering Native America with Lee Tiger and the Florida Miccosukee,” *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 34, no. 3 (2010): 8.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 9.

⁵⁷ Gregory W. Bush, *White Sand Black Beach: Civil Rights, Public Space, and Miami’s Virginia Key* (Gainesville, FL: The University of Florida Press, 2016) 121.

Catholics.”⁵⁸ Fights over rights to leisure space, like wade-ins where people of color would go to white-only beaches and stand in the ocean together, were popular forms of civil rights activism in Florida. The number of wade-ins grew exponentially after the Supreme Court extended the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision to include leisure spaces in 1955 when they declared that, “racial segregation in recreational activities can no longer be sustained as a proper exercise of the police power of the state.”⁵⁹ As many Florida businesses were not often held accountable for breaking the new extensions of *Brown v. Board of Education*, many stayed segregated for as long as possible. According to *Land of Sunshine: State of Dreams*, in 1960 a reported “60% of Ft. Lauderdale hotels still maintained odious discriminatory policies.”⁶⁰ However, Florida was lax in its enforcement of segregation when tourist dollars were on the line. Chanelle Rose argues in her article “Tourism and the Hispanicization of Race in Jim Crow Miami, 1945-65” that because of the millions of dollars in revenue Cuban tourists were bringing to Miami, “Cubans had attained a degree of whiteness that appeared unparalleled to their Hispanic counterparts in other parts of the South.”⁶¹ Because of the vague nature of Jim Crow laws, who was considered white and non-white changed whenever white southerners could benefit from doing so.

Why is Segregation at Weeki Wachee Remembered the Way it is?

Hernando County, the county in which Weeki Wachee resides, mirrors the state at large in its treatment of people of color and its loyalty to upholding Jim Crow laws of segregation. Because of the postwar land boom, Florida (Hernando County included) became less diverse;

⁵⁸ Rose, Chanelle N. “Tourism and the Hispanicization of race in Jim Crow Miami, 1945-1965,” *Journal of Social History* 45, no. 3 (Spring 2012): 742.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 130.

⁶⁰ Mormino *Land of Sunshine, State of Dreams*, 96.

⁶¹ Chanelle N. Rose, “Tourism and the Hispanicization of race in Jim Crow Miami, 1945-1965,” *Journal of Social History* 45, no. 3 (Spring 2012): 746.

Hernando County grew from being 77% white to 79% white in 1960 and grew to 85% white in 1970.⁶² The job opportunities were segregated as well, with the top three jobs for men of color being laborers, farm laborers, and operatives, while the top professions for white men throughout 1950-1970 were primarily as craftsmen, managers and professionals.⁶³ Women of color were primarily employed either by the service industry or by private households to work as nannies or maids.⁶⁴ White women were hired primarily for clerical positions or by the service industry. However, in the 1970 census, for the first time, one of the top job categories for both white women and women of color was as professionals.⁶⁵ Besides the differences in job opportunities for different races, the citizens of Hernando County were infamous for instigating other forms of discrimination and violence. In 1948, for example, Brooksville (the town in which Weeki Wachee resides) passed a “zoning law that forbade mixed-race neighborhoods.”⁶⁶ More sinister than supporting segregated neighborhoods, Hernando is the county with the second highest “per-capita rate of lynchings in the U.S. and highest in the state of Florida.”⁶⁷ According to a report

⁶² U.S. Department of Commerce, Census Bureau, Table 42. Florida, General Characteristics of the Population, for counties: 1950-con., 10-94; U.S. Department of Commerce, Census Bureau, Table 28. Florida, General Characteristics of the population, for counties: 1960-con. 11-108; U.S. Department of Commerce, Census Bureau, Table 119. Florida, Social Characteristics for counties: 1970-con.

⁶³ U.S. Department of Commerce, Census Bureau, Table 43. Florida, Economic Characteristics of the population, by sex for counties: 1950-con. 10-107; U.S. Department of Commerce, Census Bureau, Table 82. Florida General Social and Economic Characteristics of the population, for counties: 1960-con. 11-228; U.S. Department of Commerce, Census Bureau, Table 121. Florida Employment Characteristics for counties: 1970-continued.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Dan DeWitt, “Brooksville’s cry of foul rings hollow when it comes to racist past,” *Tampa Bay Times* last updated May 16, 2016, accessed September 19, 2018 <https://www.tampabay.com/opinion/columns/dewitt-brooksvilles-cry-of-foul-rings-hollow-when-it-comes-to-racist-past/2279047>. Exclusionary zoning laws based on race were deemed unconstitutional in 1917, meaning the law DeWitt mentions would not have been able to include any mentions of race. The ordinance was most likely worded in a way that did not explicitly segregate neighborhoods but included policies that effectively made people of color unable to purchase homes in certain neighborhoods. This method of zoning is still practiced today, with policies forbidding the construction of apartment complexes, smaller homes, and duplexes as well as designating price floors on homes in certain neighborhoods. More information about this topic can be found here: https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2017/09/25/snob-zoning-is-racial-housing-segregation-by-another-name/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.c4d3eee9e09c.

⁶⁷ Dan DeWitt, “DeWitt: Time to mark Hernando’s history of lynchings with a monument,” *Tampa Bay Times* last updated February 26, 2015, accessed September 19, 2018 <https://www.tampabay.com/news/publicsafety/dewitt-time-to-mark-hernandos-history-of-lynchings-with-a-monument/2219223>.

put out by the Equal Justice Initiative, ten lynchings were committed in Hernando county between 1877 and 1950.⁶⁸

I have seen through my research that former employees of Weeki Wachee Springs do not usually offer up many experiences about instances of discrimination at Weeki Wachee Springs. Two typed sources directly addressing the enforcement of segregation at Weeki Wachee were found during my research trip to the May Museum of Natural History that supplement the topic's absence in interviews. Figure 6, an excerpt from the May Museum Employee Handbook, and Figure 7, a letter written from May Museum employee Myrtle Colson to owner John May, prove that at least during the years that the museum existed on Weeki Wachee property, discrimination and possibly racially charged violence was occurring. Under the "Do's" in Figure 7 is a rule stating that employees should "admit colored people, everyone except drunks." In an interview with Carla May Harris, John May's daughter, she noted that the difference between Florida and Colorado were stark, partially because Jim Crow laws did not extend to Colorado and that her father made a point to his employees to allow anyone into the museum; that rule was put in place because of the active discrimination occurring at the park.⁶⁹

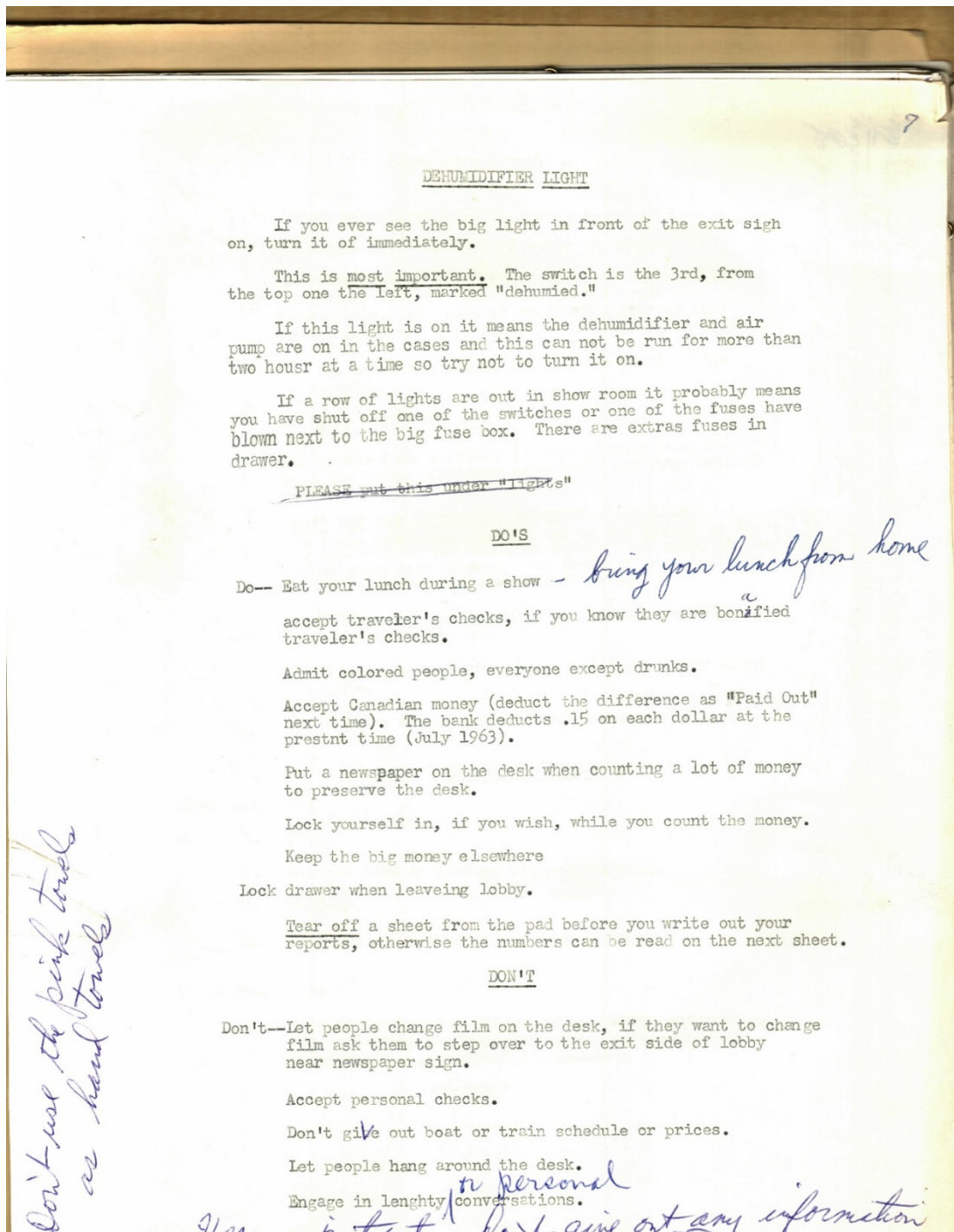
Myrtle Colson's letter to May in March 1956, as seen in Figure 8, is about an incident where Colson followed that instruction. Colson tells May how she allowed a couple into the museum who were people of color and was later reprimanded by the manager of Weeki Wachee Springs, Joe Seltzer. He told her allowing anyone who is not white into any attraction at the Springs is a violation of the park's contract with St. Petersburg. In an example of how business owners would choose not to follow segregation laws when the situation meant they would lose

⁶⁸ "Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror Third Edition," *Equal Justice Initiative*, 2017, accessed October 26, 2018 <https://lynchinginamerica.eji.org/report/>.

⁶⁹ Carla May Harris, interview by author.

money, Colson mentions to Seltzer at time he allowed people of color to watch a performance in the underwater theater when the group's bus driver demanded a refund if the group were forced to leave and also referred to the Supreme Court decision that extended the end of segregation in recreational facilities one year prior to this incident.⁷⁰ Seltzer acknowledges that the Springs cannot stop anyone from entering the restaurant or gift shop, but also adds that, "Mr. Charlie has his own way of dealing with the situation in the restaurant" and further states that "the ruling does not apply to the Springs!!" While this only one documented case, and Colson notes in a handwritten section that the couple she allowed in is the first situation like this that she has experienced while working at the museum, there are implications in this letter that show signs that discrimination was a normal occurrence.

⁷⁰ This cannot be proven from the one sentence about a bus tour from this letter, however upon reviewal of digitized collection of *The Negro Motorist Green Book*, a AAA-like guide that ran from 1930s-1960s listing restaurants, gas stations and motels that were safe for people of color to visit, the closest towns to Weeki Wachee Springs with safe hotels and restaurants were Lakeland (1.5 hours away), Tampa (one hour away) and St. Petersburg (one hour away). Did most people of color on vacation rely on bus tours to get to attractions like Weeki Wachee Springs with no nearby amenities verified to be safe for them to visit? All digitized issues can be viewed by visiting: <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/collections/the-green-book#/?tab=about>.



May Museum Employee Handbook, *May Collection*, May Museum of Natural History, Colorado Springs, Colorado, United States.

Figure 7 May Museum Employee Handbook

Brooksville, Fla.
Mar. 28, 1956

Dear John,

Today a little incident occurred about which I think I should write you.

When you were here I asked you what I should do if a negro tried to buy a ticket to the Museum and you told me that I should sell the ticket. This morning a negro man and woman came in so I sold them tickets to the Museum and they went through it quietly and did not stay long. It so happened that there was no one else in the Museum at that time. They asked about taking pictures at the Orchid Garden and I told them I knew nothing about the Gardens.

Later in the ~~day~~ day I was talking to Mr. Seltzer and mentioned having sold the tickets to the negroes. He said that it was a violation of your contract with him and I must not do that again. I told him that I had asked you about it when you were here, but he seemed a bit upset about it. Then he said he wished I had not done it as it might make other negroes think they could attend things at the Springs. In the course of the conversation, however, he told me that recently one of the bus company tours brought 2 negro women on the tour. Mr. Seltzer told the driver that it was against the policy to allow them to attend the show and the driver said if they were not allowed to attend the show, the bus company would have to refund their money. So Mr. Seltzer let them go in the back way and stand to see the show. So you see, they allowed negroes in too. He wrote the bus company not to sell any more tickets to negroes for things at the show.

He says that they cannot prevent negroes from going into the restaurant or the gift shop, but they are not to be allowed to go to the Museum, the Orchid Gardens, or the Underwater Show. He says that evidently you did not know this was prohibited and he is writing to all concession owners about it. He says that the contract with the City of St. Petersburg limits attendance to members of the Caucasian race. He also told me to have a sign made saying that we reserve the right to refuse admission to any one. I told him I would write you and if you wished the sign made, I would try to have it done. Also, He said that Charlie has his own way of dealing with the situation in the restaurant--I did not ask what that is.

Perhaps this seemed like "much ado about nothing", but I must have your instructions about the situation. I reminded Mr. Seltzer that the Supreme Court ruled differently, but he said that ruling does not apply at the Springs!! Personally I am not concerned, but I told him that if I refused admission to one and he brought suit

I have a sign like that at the Sun-Style. I put up a grand sign to that effect, but they would not let it. I told him I would try to have it done. Also, He said that Charlie has his own way of dealing with the situation in the restaurant--I did not ask what that is.

against you for refusing to admit him, then we would have trouble. Mr. Seltzer very probably will write to you in regard to this. I shall be glad to do whatever you wish, of course, and certainly wish to avoid trouble in every way.

Please let me hear from you right away.

The crowds are still good at the Spring, but the people simply are not coming over to the Museum at all. Business is off this week. Do you suppose that all those dead bushes that look so bad around the Museum are causing people not to be interested in coming over? All the plants at the south end are dead, they are just bare brown branches now. If you wish, I could have them taken up. It would look better if nothing were there than to have those things.

I will write more when I send the report this weekend. Mrs. Slayden suits me just fine, and she sells well, I think.

Regards to all the family,

Myrtle Colson

P.S. I put up the ^{red} curtains & they are

quite pretty!!

Serena will be at home this week & I'll do my best about her S. S. number.

A like situation may not occur for a long time - this is the first time since I have worked at the Museum.

Letter from Myrtle Colson to John May, May Collection, May Museum of Natural History, Colorado Springs, Colorado, United States.

Figure 8 Two-Page Letter from a Ticket Clerk to May Museum Owner Concerning Admission Policies

With documented cases of racial discrimination and violence throughout the Florida tourist industry, in Hernando County in general, and at Weeki Wachee Springs specifically why do former employees of Weeki Wachee and former mermaids deny or downplay instances of Jim Crow laws being enforced at the attraction? For example, Rita King, who worked at Weeki Wachee from 1963-68, mentions in her interview that Weeki Wachee was never affected by racism, while during the same discussion mentioning a lynching that occurred during her lifetime in New Port Richey as well as the discrimination she faced in school for looking like a Japanese-American:

I had a lot of it directed at me, but it was totally different, it was because uh my— kids thought I was Japanese because their parents were always talking about just getting over the second world war, which I'm Native American, not Japanese, but, kids don't know when you're different and you just kind of mimic what their parents think, but I never felt any discrimination or any difference here at the park ever.⁷¹

Another former employee, a woman of color who worked in the restaurant in the late 1960s, Ann Bennet, pointed out in *Weeki Wachee: City of Mermaids* that while segregation had to be enforced, Weeki Wachee allowed people of color to work in certain areas of the park, so things were not that bad: “You could work in somebody’s house... It was kind of rare for a black lady to have a job as a waitress back then.”⁷² There is a disconnect between how the former mermaids and employees remember their experiences and with what primary and other secondary sources depict.

Sociologist Kristen M. Lavelle argues in her book, *Whitewashing the South: White Memories of Segregation and Civil Rights*, that there is a trend of white southerners dismissing,

⁷¹ Rita Jane King, interview by author, Brooksville, FL, October 4, 2016.

⁷² Lu Vickers, *Weeki Wachee, City of Mermaids*, 187.

normalizing, and justifying actions and experiences during segregation: “Collective memories help make possible a certain set of explanations for the status quo, enabling dominant groups to justify systematic inequalities from which they benefit.”⁷³ When analyzing the interviews done for this study, similar responses come up mentioned in Lavelle’s book. For example, Lavelle discusses one common refrain from southerners, “that’s just the way it was.”⁷⁴ By accepting the “racial status quo” without question, white people who lived through segregation cut themselves off from fully empathizing with people discriminated against by that system and fully critiquing the norms and values they were brought up with.⁷⁵ Former mermaid and 35-year employee of Weeki Wachee Bonnie Georgiadis followed this trend in her response to a question about segregation at Weeki Wachee: “We were not aware of it [segregation] because we did not have any, uh, minorities.”⁷⁶ Refusing to acknowledge the racial divide in segregated society is due to, according to Lavelle, an investment “in a positive portrayal of themselves and of white society generally.”⁷⁷ Georgiadis’ reasoning that she did not know anything besides a white society is contradicted when she discusses the aftermath of Jim Crow at the attraction: “We, we tried to— After Jim Crow was over, uh, Genie tried to interest some black girls into becoming mermaids, but no one ever came to try out.”⁷⁸ To at once claim ignorance of the experiences of people of color, or of the existence of people of color in her community altogether, contradicts her later reasonings behind why there was and still is an absence of black female mermaids in employment at the Springs.

⁷³ Kristen M. Lavelle, *Whitewashing the South: White Memories of Segregation and Civil Rights* (London, UK: Rowman and Littlefield, 2015), 192.

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, 88.

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 58.

⁷⁶ Bonnie Georgiadis, interview by author.

⁷⁷ Lavelle, *Whitewashing the South*, 94-5.

⁷⁸ Bonnie Georgiadis, interview by author.

Georgiadis' statement that a fellow mermaid tried to encourage women of color to apply at Weeki Wachee, but no one ever tried out, seems to mirror a phenomenon Lavelle calls "white protectionism." Lavelle noticed a theme running through many of her interviews, people would name actions done by family members as racist, but eventually backtrack their accusation or explain away the incident.⁷⁹ This maneuver allows people to "acknowledge systematic racism and still assert the family's immunity." Many former mermaids described working at Weeki Wachee as like a family, still describing themselves as still being deeply connected to their former position as mermaid. Perhaps this is an example of applying white protectionism to a group other than blood relatives. Another former mermaid, Vicki Smith, who said that her high school was still segregated when she graduated in 1957, used similar statements as Georgiadis, first when she described growing up in segregation and then when describing the lack of diversity within the cast of mermaids:

I went to a segregated high school. And, and, and, segregation was in effect when I graduated in '57. And um, we- I say I was not prejudice, and I want to believe that, but we were never exposed and never, and never, we weren't really aware that our surroundings were segregated because it always was. And when I came to work at Weeki Wachee, um, two, we had two African American women working in the gift shop, and my mother was a manager of the gift shop, and the, and so I got to know these two ladies and they were sweet, sweet, wonderful, wonderful women. And I've often wondered, uh- And you know, they have their own stories to tell, I never saw them eating at the restaurant with us, um, I never, I, I never I don't know that any young black lady, woman person has ever tried out to be a mermaid, I don't know why they couldn't be, you know. That was is so clear you'd certainly see 'em, even though their skin might be darker than ours.⁸⁰

By choosing not to dissect how her life and experiences were shaped by segregation, she loses the ability to empathize with young women of color who would have felt unsafe applying

⁷⁹ Lavelle, *Whitewashing the South*, 34.

⁸⁰ Vicki Smith, interview by author, Brooksville, FL, September 22, 2016.

for a position as a public figure at an attraction that is in a town still following Jim Crow laws; without that consideration, she can only think that the only reason women of color would not want to apply is because they are afraid their complexion is so dark that the audience would not be able to see them.

Weeki Wachee City of Mermaids does not take full advantage of the interviews created for the book because there is a lack of theory applied to the quotes used; Vickers treats the experiences of the interviewees as fact without asking why her subjects described their experiences the way they did. For example, Vickers explains that Weeki Wachee began employing people of color as groundskeepers and waitresses and ends the discussion on employment by placing a quote from Ann Bennett, a woman of color who worked as a waitress at Weeki Wachee's patio restaurant, whose reasoning behind why Weeki Wachee did not hire any women of color as mermaids was, "Hey, it was the sixties. Even if the local black girls had wanted to try out, they probably wouldn't have hired them."⁸¹ On the previous page Vickers briefly discusses the flexibility of segregation when explaining that a neighboring roadside attraction, Silver Springs, employed people of color to pilot their glass bottom boats since 1946.⁸² Knowing other Florida attractions hired people of color a full decade before *Brown v. the Board of Education* while accepting the excuse that "it was the sixties" for why Weeki Wachee did not hire any women of color as mermaids minimizes the discrimination going on at Weeki Wachee Springs while also missing an opportunity to discuss standards of beauty for women

⁸¹ Vickers, *City of Mermaids*, 187.

⁸² Ibid, 186.

during this time period.⁸³ Additionally, Vickers loses the opportunity to analyze memory by not questioning why Ann Bennett minimizes discrimination.

No interviews from people of color who worked at Weeki Wachee have been obtained for this study and only a few quotes from people of color explicitly about racial relations are included in *Weeki Wachee City of Mermaids*, so an in-depth analysis on their experiences cannot be accomplished at this time. I hesitate to draw many conclusions from the few quotes available without the full transcripts from Vickers' interviews. However, Barbara Shircliffe's article "'We got the best of that world': A Case for the Study of Nostalgia in the Oral History of School Segregation" comes to conclusions based on recurring themes in interviews taken for the study that could make some sense as to why there are no outright complaints from people of color about Weeki Wachee's segregation policies in *Weeki Wachee City of Mermaids* (assuming that complaints were not left out by the author). In the essay, Shircliffe studies interviews from black students and teachers who attended or worked at segregated schools in Hillsborough County, Florida. The "value of black school traditions devalued by a school segregation plan" as well as a use of nostalgia to critique the modern day are some of the reoccurring themes Shircliffe found in her interviews.⁸⁴ Interviewees opened up about the positive aspects of segregation, not with the intention of defending the discriminatory policy, but instead to highlight the "communal bonds" between students, their parents and their teachers that disappeared during the integration process "which was largely and painfully designed to accommodate white interests."⁸⁵ In *Weeki*

⁸³ Shinko Akasofu, a Japanese woman who worked as a mermaid in the late 60s and early 70s, and Rita King, a Native American woman adopted by white parents, are, as far as my research suggests, the only nonwhite women to work as mermaids to this day. However, as the roster of mermaids changes quite frequently, and a list of former mermaids is not available, I cannot say with certainty that other people of color have not be hired as mermaids. The current roster of mermaids can be found by visiting: <https://weekiwachee.com/mermaids/mermaid-roster/>.

⁸⁴ Barbara Shircliffe, "'We had the best of that world': A Case for the Study of Nostalgia in the Oral History of School Segregation," *The Oral History Review* 28, no. 2 (Summer-Autumn 2001): 60.

⁸⁵ Ibid, 68 and 60.

Wachee City of Mermaids, woman of color Martha Delaine discusses the community created while working at Weeki Wachee multiple times, once when detailing how all nine or ten of the black Weeki Wachee employees helped each other get to work every day by all stuffing into one or two vehicles until all saved enough money to buy a Volkswagen bus.⁸⁶ Delaine later expresses a longing for that community saying, “I miss it all. A lot of mermaids I miss, because everybody was like one family. Everybody worked together and helped one another. If the mermaids or waitresses or anybody got to where they needed help, they helped each other.”⁸⁷ Delaine acknowledges the limitations of living under segregation when she mentions that people of color could not eat at the patio restaurant, nevertheless her main focus, at least from the quotes provided, is on the community atmosphere present at Weeki Wachee.⁸⁸ Delaine’s focus on the positive and Bennett’s excusal of discrimination from Weeki Wachee employers as being of the times could be a means of remedying the harsh experiences of segregation as Shircliffe also notes in the article “‘We got the best of that world’” that “individual and collective memory works to heal the wounds of history” and thus nostalgia towards segregation needs to be dissected so as to avoid minimizing the damage segregation had on people of color.⁸⁹

Weeki Wachee City of Mermaids, as well as several other books cited in this study, is a part of The Florida History and Culture Series created by the University Press of Florida.⁹⁰ The goal of this series is to satiate the “great deal of popular interest in the state’s past, present, and future.”⁹¹ The books in this series are aimed towards a wide audience, so the language used is

⁸⁶ Vickers, *Weeki Wachee City of Mermaids*, 120.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid, 121.

⁸⁹ Shircliffe, “‘We got the best of that world’,” 74.

⁹⁰ For a full list of works in this series, visit http://upf.com/seriesresult.asp?ser=The_Florida_History_and_Culture_Series.

⁹¹ Vickers, *Weeki Wachee City of Mermaids*, xi.

meant to be accessible to the layman. Popular histories such as this one sell many copies and give readers a deeper sense of the past but largely leave out historiography and theory. Stephen Tatum defines the problems of popular history in the article “The Problem of the ‘Popular’ in the New Western History”:

The presence of myths, symbols, and romances associated with narratives of adventure in the popular culture means a space for critical reflection is absent; absent a space of critical distance, one becomes the prey of the ideological construction of reality promoted by the dominant class, who controls both the economic and symbolic means of production; the powerful presence of the dominant class' ideological version of reality means the presence of a partial version of experience and the absence of a true grasp of the complex, multicultural history of the American West.⁹²

Tatum specifically writes about the problem with popular histories of the American West, however romanticizing the past and excluding critical analysis are issues with most popular histories, including those in the University Press of Florida's series on Florida history. Gordon Wood argues that historians avoid writing popular history because “monographs have become so numerous and so refined and so specialized that most academic historians have tended to throw up their hands at the possibility of synthesizing all these studies, of bringing them together in comprehensive narratives.”⁹³ Writing towards the perceptions of popular culture deceives the general public in the same manner that the French government deceived the public into believing that their “recreation” of an Egyptian street in the 1889 World's Fair was faithful to reality. The social history of Florida tourism is often left to writers of popular history because the subject is comprehended as whimsical in nature, seen not necessarily as inconsequential, but as not requiring deeper analysis. Leaving out thoughtful discourse of race and gender from Weeki

⁹² Stephen Tatum, “The Problem of the ‘Popular’ in the New Western History,” *Arizona Quarterly* 53, no. 2 (Summer 1997), 160-61.

⁹³ Gordon Wood, “The Art of History: In Defense of Academic History Writing,” *Perspectives on History: The Newsmagazine of the American Historical Association* published April 1, 2010, accessed October 24, 2018 <https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/april-2010/in-defense-of-academic-history-writing>.

Wachee's history suggests that places of leisure are excluded from the struggles of everyday life, which both diminishes the hardships of women and minorities in the past and fails to address the lingering inequalities of the present.

CHAPTER THREE: EVOLVING ECOSYSTEMS — HOW THE SHIFT IN GENDER NORMS AND TOURIST TRENDS AFFECTED THE ABC ERA, 1960-1975

The Culture of Tourism: Shifting Currents

ABC took over Weeki Wachee in the late 1950s, but officially started making their mark on the attraction in 1964 with the closure of the May Museum and the construction of a new underwater theater. Taking over the Springs was initially profitable for ABC, though that success would not last more than a decade. Over the next several years after ABC's purchase, tourism in Florida and the culture of leisure in the United States would shift away from supporting the family owned roadside attractions and oddities that dotted the state in favor of more predictable, planned, and insular vacation destinations. Tourists gradually lost their interest in taking extended road trips across Florida's highways and visiting the oft-secluded attractions along the way, instead choosing to plan their vacations around one or two specific destinations. Gary Cross, a social historian, attributes the attitude change to drastic price hikes of healthcare and housing that occurred in the 1970s.⁹⁴ This spike in the cost of living accompanied with the rising number of job opportunities for women created many dual-income households, meaning vacations now had to be coordinated around the jobs of two employees, the school schedules of children, as well as a tighter budget.⁹⁵ Florida historian Tracy J. Revels adds that by the 1960s, tourists were already becoming restless with the abundant "array of zoos, gardens and springs"⁹⁶, partially due to the wonders that were able to be seen on television every night.⁹⁷ Exotic birds and natural springs could no longer keep the attention of a population that watched the moon

⁹⁴ Gary Cross, *A Social History of Leisure Since 1600*, (State College, PA: Venture Publishing Inc., 1990), 220.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Tracy J. Revels, *Sunshine Paradise: A History of Florida Tourism*, (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2011), 106.

⁹⁷ Ibid, 113.

landing in real time. “Whereas earlier visitors arrived in Florida seeking health, sports, society, investments, or simply a place to avoid winter chills,” now tourists took on a more active role when vacationing, demanding excitement and movement rather than rest and relaxation.⁹⁸

Florida tourism shifts did not necessarily occur at the whims of visitors. Similar to how the tourist industry advertised an image of Florida as exotic and untamed that post-war visitors came to expect, the shift to active vacationing was also pushed by the industry. Whether this shift in image ran parallel to the desires of tourists or preempted and influenced their desires is yet to be seen. Revels seems to argue both options, by naming the addition of rides and activities to attractions in the 1960s as a response to the effects of television on the public, but also listing the laws and innovations put in place in Florida in the 1950s that paved the way for the modern theme park. The rise in use of air conditioning throughout the state, the common practice of hiring celebrities to endorse attractions, the efforts to control and diminish the mosquito population, the growing affordability of air travel, and the “fence law” put in place to free roadways of cattle, are all methods the tourist industry used to attract customers.⁹⁹ These improvements do not on their own prove a shift in perception. However, viewed in context with another major upgrade, the construction of interstates, the aforementioned developments appear to be indicative of change. Revels argues that interstates drove visitors away from roadside attractions by the mid-1970s. The United States Department of Transportation Federal Highway Administration contradicts this claim as “one of the earliest [interstates] was the opening of I-4

⁹⁸ Ibid, 103.

⁹⁹ Revels, *Sunshine Paradise*, 102.

in Florida between Orlando and U.S. 27 on July 7th, 1961.”¹⁰⁰ Already by the early 1960s tourists were being drawn away from smaller roadside attractions and toward bigger cities.

Many historians erroneously place the blame for the death of roadside attractions and the beginning of the theme park era on the opening of Disney World, when in reality, The Walt Disney Corporation built upon the infrastructure that already existed in Florida and in the minds of tourists. Florida has a history of being promoted in a way that bends reality, spanning back hundreds of years to its “discovery” by the Europeans. Weeki Wachee Springs and most of roadside attractions were created out of this exaggerated image of Florida. Disney World is that exaggeration taken to its limits, separating itself entirely to a fantasy world. The interstate infrastructure was already people directly to Orlando and soon to other major cities. Additionally, the population was enamored with the fantasy of sitcoms as well as footage of foreign countries, space, and the prospects of technology and the future. Finally, there were years of trial and error to look upon to determine what attractions and activities drew in the most customers gleaned from roadside attractions as well as from Walt Disney’s first park, Disneyland, Walt Disney was able to create Disney World. Walt Disney did exactly what Newt Perry did when creating the underwater show and Weeki Wachee Springs. He built on traditions, followed trends, but put a creative twist on the norm to be able to stand out in a crowd. Weeki Wachee and other roadside attractions were put at a disadvantage by losing the automotive traffic to interstates, however several of these attractions including Gatorland and Busch Gardens survived and even thrived due to the opening of Disney World because they adapted. ABC, on the other hand, stagnated creatively; the corporation focused their money on bolstering the park’s

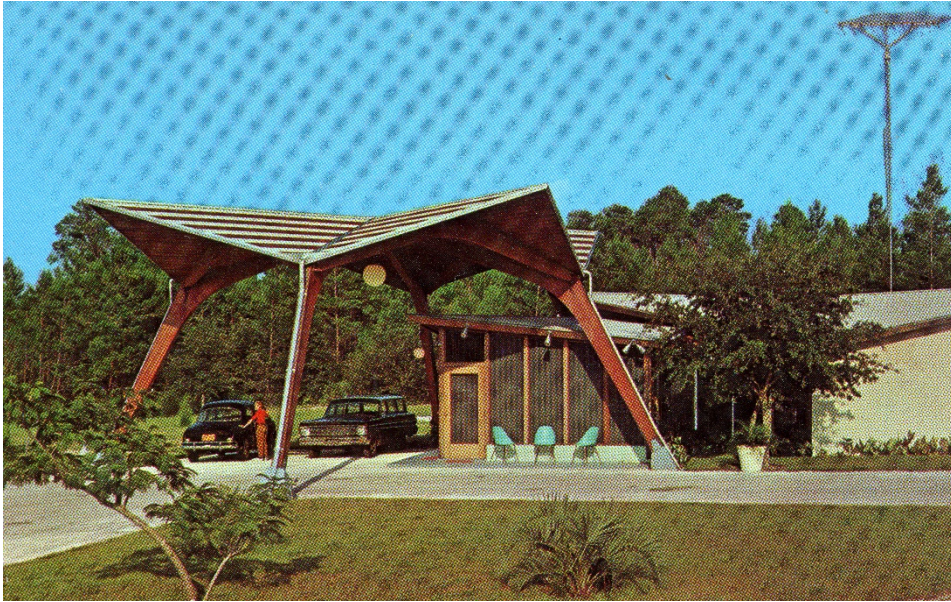
¹⁰⁰ “The Greatest Decade 1956-1966: Celebrating the 50TH Anniversary of the Eisenhower Interstate System,” U.S. Department of Transportation Federal Highway Administration, last modified June 27, 2017, accessed September 19, 2018, <https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/infrastructure/50interstate2.cfm>.

existing attractions rather than adding other activities. And the new aspects they did introduce to the park were not in line with the changing times, but rather more of the same.

In the 1960s, the improvements and additions ABC made to Weeki Wachee and those Brooksville made to the town around Weeki Wachee were initially successful, as the park saw its highest visitor counts during this decade. The “million-dollar theater” as the bigger performing space ABC built for the park was named, marked the beginning of changes made to the attraction towards the grandiose and kitschy. Alongside the new theater with the shell shaped roof, Weeki Wachee received a new and larger parking lot, a new front entrance, a building that served as a locker room, break spot, and tanning area for the mermaids and a nationwide advertising platform to promote the attraction. ABC held movie screenings at the underwater theater, brought in celebrities like Don Knotts, Esther Williams and Elvis to bring prestige to the attraction and elevate the mermaids to near celebrity as well as poured money into props, costumes, and choreographers to enhance the mermaid’s performances. The surrounding area underwent changes as well. As seen in Figures 9, 10 and 11, corporations bought up Brooksville. The locally owned and operated Mermaid Motel directly across the street from Weeki Wachee Springs was bulldozed and turned into a Holiday Inn. Keeping up with the kitschy feel of the shell-shaped theater, Sinclair Oil opened a gas station down the road from the park built in the shape of their mascot, a dinosaur. Housing changed as well with the selling process for the first suburban community homes starting in 1967.¹⁰¹ The population more than doubled within twenty years; according to census records, less than 7,000 people resided in all of Hernando County in 1950, and that number grew to over 11,000 in 1960 and over 17,000 by 1970. The

¹⁰¹ Dan DeWitt, “As Spring Hill turns 50, longtime residents contemplate its future,” Tampa Bay Times, April 27, 2017, accessed September 18, 2018, <https://www.tampabay.com/news/growth/as-spring-hill-turns-50-longtime-residents-contemplate-its-future/2321560>.

rural county that previously mainly offered jobs in the agricultural sector shifted to a growing city whose economy relied more on the service industry than its citrus groves.



Postcard of Mermaid Motel, *Weeki Wachee Collection*, Weeki Wachee Springs State Park, Brooksville, Florida, United States.

Figure 9 Mermaid Motel



Postcard of Holiday Inn, Weeki Wachee Collection, Weeki Wachee Springs State Park, Brooksville, Florida, United States.

Figure 10 Holiday Inn



Postcard of Sinclair Oil Gas Station, *Weeki Wachee Collection*, Weeki Wachee Springs State Park, Brooksville, Florida, United States.

Figure 11 Sinclair Oil Gas Station

The Social Climate: The Rising Tide of Teenagers

Socially, Hernando County as well as the wider United States were undergoing their own transitions in the 1960s. Most pertinent to this study is the growth of what sociologist Michael J. Rosenfeld calls the “independent life stage”. The independent life stage refers to the time in young adulthood when young adults move out on their own, but before they begin the next stage in life, marriage. During this period young adults gain a measured level of independence; they are out on their own, but rely on their parents for support, most commonly for financial support.¹⁰² Before the 1960s, moving out of the family home for a reason other than marriage was rare.¹⁰³ The instatement of the G.I. Bill post-war made higher education accessible, for the first time in the United States, for more than just the upper class.¹⁰⁴ Going to college rapidly became the other option alongside marriage for young adults seeking independence to choose from. This greatly impacted gender norms for women, as gaining a college degree opened opportunities to work. Additionally, it was becoming much more common for women and high school students to have jobs, as mothers had to work when their fathers left to fight in World War II and children inherently gained more independence with the absence of a father and a mother who was no longer a housewife.¹⁰⁵ In other words, World War II permanently affected family life and the post-war economic boom allowed for the rise of the middle class which led to more options for many people after high school.

The independent life stage emerged in Hernando County in the 1960s as well but presented itself in a way unique to Brooksville. During an interview with the former mermaid Vicki Smith,

¹⁰² Michael J. Rosenfeld, *The Age of Independence: Interracial Unions, Same-Sex Unions, and the Changing American Family*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 2.

¹⁰³ Ibid, 55.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, 188.

¹⁰⁵ Cross, *A Social History of Leisure Since 1600*, 210.

she reflected on her young adulthood in Hernando County stating, “When you graduated from high school, Hernando High School in Brooksville, Florida, you had three options. You could either go off to the university and go to college, uh, you could get married, or you became a mermaid. And many of us became mermaids.”¹⁰⁶ While the county grew substantially throughout the 1950s, 60s, and beyond, the area remained relatively small and rural compared to the closest major city, Tampa, which was also home to the closest state university. Gaining independence by going to college seemed much less enticing when the closest university took a two-hour drive to get to, especially while similar opportunities of independence were offered much closer at home, at Weeki Wachee Springs. Many young women auditioned within weeks of graduating high school, and many left the position after getting married or when they made the decision to start a family.¹⁰⁷ Working at the attraction also offered education prospects for some mermaids; Figure 12 shows mermaid Bonnie Georgiadis excavating artifacts during a university run archeological dig on Weeki Wachee property. Additionally, there were cottages on Weeki Wachee property for mermaids to live in and a mobile home park a mile away that rented to mermaids. While Vicki and many mermaids never moved from their parent’s homes while working at Weeki Wachee, all mermaids experienced the independent life stage as most of their time was spent away from home working and practicing. In 1950 only 27% of the workforce in Hernando County was female, by 1970 that rate rose to 35.3%.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁶ Vicki Smith, interview by author.

¹⁰⁷ “How to Photograph a Mermaid,” *Tampa Bay Tribune*, December 8, 1957.

¹⁰⁸ U.S. Department of Commerce, Census Bureau, Table 43. Florida, Economic characteristics of the population, by sex for counties: 1950-con. 10-100; U.S. Department of Commerce, Census Bureau, Table 122 Florida Occupation and Earnings for counties: 1970-continued.



Bonnie Georgiadis Excavating Artifacts, *Weeki Wachee Collection*, Weeki Wachee Springs State Park, Brooksville, Florida, United States.

Figure 12 Bonnie Georgiadis Assisting in an Archeological Dig at Weeki Wachee

The 1960s to mid-1970s were the best performing years for Weeki Wachee Springs. ABC changed just enough at Weeki Wachee that the park became one of the most desirable vacation destinations in Florida, although more change loomed with the opening of Disney World in 1971. Furthermore, Weeki Wachee added women to the workplace, but more opportunities were becoming available to women in the workforce with the passing of each year. Under the surface, however, discrimination was rampant. Similarly, women interviewed about this decade express the glamour and grandeur of working at Weeki Wachee while hinting at a darker reality.

Why Do Former Mermaids View Weeki Wachee the Way They Do?

Weeki Wachee Springs and the underwater mermaid performances were not created in a cultural vacuum; trends in film, fashion, and female athleticism informed Newt Perry's as well as ABC's decisions regarding the attraction. The first twenty years of the twentieth century saw major advancements socially and technologically. Most pertinent to this study are the changes in gender norms and the advancement of film. While seemingly disparate topics, they merge around the silent film star and renown swimmer, Annette Kellerman. Born in 1886 in Sydney, Australia, Kellerman rose to fame through winning competitions at "newspaper and swim clubs sponsored long distance swimming events."¹⁰⁹ There she earned the nickname the "Australian Mermaid" and later moved to the United States to work in vaudeville and later, in 1911, the film industry playing mermaids in a host of silent films.¹¹⁰ Most significantly to Kellerman's legacy are her disruptions of traditional gender roles. Kellerman scorned the restrictive bathing outfits of the time, instead opting to wear a suit "she adapted from a male one-piece, [that] made her a more efficient swimmer in the water and allowed for a 'healthy' athleticism."¹¹¹ Peter Catapano argues that at the time female athleticism was downplayed, as can be seen in the comparison of Kellerman to a mermaid; her body is sexualized, while her skills and accomplishments as an athlete come second. These ideas of athleticism and gender played into how the public perceived her innovation in swimwear. Newspapers highly publicized the arrest of Kellerman at a Boston beach for indecency in 1908 because of the one-piece she wore.¹¹² Despite the criticism, her

¹⁰⁹ Peter Catapano, "'The Perfect Woman:' Annette Kellerman and the Spectacle of the Female Form," *Proteus* 25, no. 2 (Fall 2008): 24.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 23-24.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹¹² *Ibid.*

bathing suit became standard swimwear for women, paving the way for the creation of the bikini in 1946.

Additionally, Kellerman's legacy lived on post-war through the rising popularity of the underwater film star, Esther Williams. Studios made the connection between Kellerman and Williams, as Esther was cast to play Annette in the 1952 film *Million Dollar Mermaid*. The connections between the two women further extend as Williams was similarly compared to a mermaid. Catharine Williamson argues that the rise in popularity of underwater scenes in films is because they "offered an excellent opportunity to display the female body in various stages of undress, while the wholesomeness of the narrative deflected any possible reprisals."¹¹³ The same argument is made about the rise of Annette Kellerman as a star in Catapano's work, that her underwater ballet performances were masqueraded as being family friendly, but were underlaid with sexual objectification.¹¹⁴ The athleticism of both women stood as proof of man's subjugation over nature, because they represent "such a successful negotiation of contradictions (of the natural/the cultural, masculine/feminine, organic/synthetic)."¹¹⁵ In Esther Williams' case, Williamson argues, advertisements glorified her body more intensely than those of other female actors of the time, showcasing the conflicts between sexuality and athleticism that began in Annette Kellerman's time.¹¹⁶ Consuming female athleticism was conflicting for the American public as "those traits which competitive sports supposedly foster — strength, independence, competitiveness — directly contradict traditional gender roles assigned to women- weakness, dependence, passivity."¹¹⁷ Kirsten Pullen describes how these contradictions played out on

¹¹³ Catherine Williamson, "Swimming Pools, Movie Stars: The Celebrity Body in the Post-War Marketplace," *Camera Obscura* 13, no. 2 (Spring 1996), 5.

¹¹⁴ Catapano, "The Perfect Woman," 24.

¹¹⁵ Williamson, "Swimming Pools, Movie Stars," 7.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

screen, stating that because of her physical strength, characters created for Williams often exhibited the traits traditionally held by men: “Generally, Williams’ heroines pursue personal and professional goals, rejecting romance in order to swim the English Channel, join the Navy, or manage their careers as swimsuit designer, theme park manager, water ballet star, or bullfighter.”¹¹⁸ At the price of her body and athletic abilities being sexualized, Williams accomplished portraying independence, a feat during the 1950s resurgence of traditional gender roles.

Creator of Weeki Wachee Newt Perry, born in the same year that Annette Kellerman was arrested in Boston, 1908, came to age during this tumultuous upheaval of social norms and opened Weeki Wachee the same year Esther Williams portrayed a bullfighter in the film *Fiesta*, 1947. He created the mermaid show with a similar mindset of those who viewed Kellerman and Williams as being beautiful rather than athletic. Therefore, being a mermaid at Weeki Wachee Springs meant weaving through the same contradictions between femininity and athleticism as well as between athleticism and objectification that Kellerman and Williams experienced. In fact, on more than one occasion Esther Williams visited Weeki Wachee Springs. Jennifer Kokai delves deeper into the idea that part of the commodification of these women as mermaids comes from a place of conquering nature stating that “using women performers located this spectacle as both natural and unnatural, public and private, civilized and uncivilized, sexual and chaste.”¹¹⁹ The underwater theater is lauded as a feat of progress and human innovation, while the natural spring keeps the mystique of the exotic, wild nature of Florida alive; the glass that separates the performers from the audience “gave the audience the frisson of being voyeurs”; the performances

¹¹⁸ Kristen Pullen, “More than a Mermaid: Esther Williams, Performance, and the Body,” *Women’s Studies* 39 (2010), 889.

¹¹⁹ Kokai, “Weeki Wachee Girls and Buccaneer Boys,” 73.

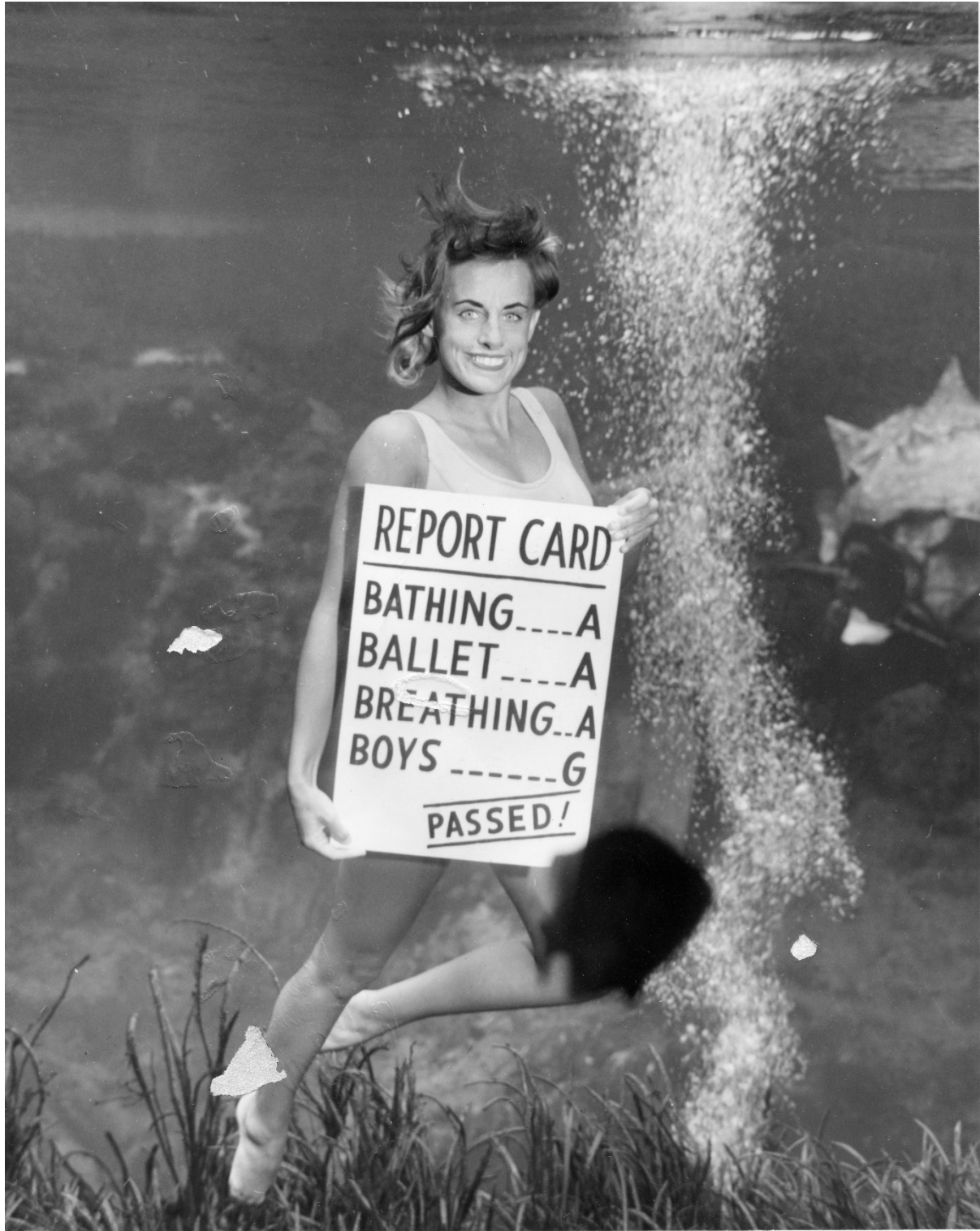
are advertised as family friendly while inherently sexualizing the women through the connection to mermaids, the rules placed on their appearances (as will be discussed later), as well as the costumes used in the shows.¹²⁰ Making banana eating a part of the performances gives credence to the innuendo that came with this position.

Kokai also points out that the lack of male performers in the early years and the sparse mermen in more recent years, none of whom wear tails, further accentuates the sexual aspects of the attraction. In our culture, “the mermaid is always female, and the mermaid tail inherently signifies female” because “the cultural signification of mermaids in general, their dual role as seductress of male sailors and as chaste, childlike women who can never actually engage in heterosexual penetration.”¹²¹ A visual example of this duality is shown in Figure 13, which is a publicity photograph for Weeki Wachee of a mermaid posing underwater with a sign. The sign is a report card, with the mermaid receiving ‘A’'s in the categories of bathing, ballet, and breathing, receiving a ‘G’ for boys, and a nod of approval as the bottom is ‘stamped’ with the word “passed!” The mermaid receiving a grade lower than an F in the category of boys highlights the chaste nature the park wanted their performers to be imbued with, representing “a safe, domesticated femininity and sexuality.”¹²²

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Ibid, 78.

¹²² Ibid, 83.



Mermaid posing with "Report Card", *Weeki Wachee Collection*, Weeki Wachee Springs State Park, Brooksville, Florida, United States.

Figure 13 Mermaid Posing With "Report Card"

Management at Weeki Wachee were not the only source of this sexualization. The media often focus on the women's bodies over their ballet and swimming skills. Ed Hayes interviewed a mermaid for an article published in the Orlando Sentinel in 1976 titled, "Jennifer's All Wet — And Likes It." Besides the less than subtle innuendo in the headline, Hayes immediately draws his readers to the mermaid's "desirability" by beginning the article with a description of the mermaid's body: "Not everybody wants to be a mermaid. But Jennifer Banfield, single, blonde, and 22 does."¹²³ While describing her experience interviewing for the position, he again mentions her looks by writing, "Ah, yes, and at 5 feet 2 and 108 pounds she also looked good in the water."¹²⁴ While the majority of the article consists of quotes from Jennifer describing the challenges of perfecting breathing and performing ballet underwater, her feats in athleticism that helped her gain one of the few coveted spots as a mermaid at Weeki Wachee as well as excel during the training process are immediately undercut by Hayes. These two examples are culled from the thousands of pieces of media coverage on and photographs of the mermaids that portray the repetition of this treatment.

Weeki Wachee served as a place to live out the post-war growth of the independent life stage; for many being a mermaid was the only opportunity available to have these experiences, making any objectification or restrictions over appearance and action tolerable. Complaining would not only jeopardize their standing with management, but also taint their newly gained independence. Vicki Smith, a former mermaid who left the job after becoming pregnant with her second child, describes her times as a mermaid as carefree despite the expectations on her body:

We had a private uh sun bathing area, we had our own private mermaid villa that had our showers, our locker rooms, we had a kitchen, we had a living room, and on the back was that what we call our sun porch and they even had a ladder up to the roof of the villa to

¹²³ Ed Hayes, "Jennifer's All Wet – And Likes It," *Sentinel Star*, March 3, 1976.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

where we could- Because we were supposed to be brown and tan, I mean we were mermaids! So um, we'd spend a lot of time sun bathing and acting silly and having fun. We were just young! We were young, we were all seventeen maybe twenty, twenty-one years old and we were just uh, we were like sisters giggling and having fun all the time.¹²⁵

Figure 14 is a photograph of the mermaid villa mentioned by Smith. Newly built after ABC's takeover, the villa acted as a dressing room, locker room and break room for the mermaids. Mermaids would apply their stage makeup in this villa, don their costumes, shower post-performance, eat in-between shows and, as Vicki mentioned, sun tan. While several mermaids lived in the cottages on Weeki Wachee property, so naturally spent more time with each other, the villa is where the mermaids were able to bond with their co-workers in the few moments of their day spent in privacy. Figure 15 is an excerpt of the training manual given to all mermaids that goes over rules and restrictions. Rules E, F, G, I and J give more insight into what the villa meant to the girls and how they participated in the independent life stage. Rule E warns the mermaids to "wear clothing to and from sundeck...or crawl out--people can see you" and rule F explains that keeping the noise level down on the sundeck and tube room is important because of how sound travels; the young women took advantage of their free time to tighten the bonds between each other and express themselves. Other rules highlight the adolescence of the mermaids. G asserts that the "fine" for leaving personal items out of assigned lockers is ten cents per item, rule I reminds mermaids not to "sit on or put shoes on counters" and J chides the mermaids for not cleaning up after themselves through listing off examples of what needed to be picked up ending with "and a million other things your mother always did for you." The mermaids were perceived as loud, messy, irresponsible kids.

¹²⁵ Emilia 'Vicki' Smith, interview by author, Spring Hill, September 22, 2016.



Mermaid Motel, *Weeki Wachee Collection*, Weeki Wachee Springs State Park, Brooksville, Florida, United States.

Figure 14 Mermaid Villa

- D. Practices or rehearsals are also listed on daily schedule. Normal procedure is to be dressed for dry practice during showtime before going in water.....It's only common sense that you should watch as many rehearsals as possible.

3. CLOTHING AND MAKEUP

- A. The uniform of the day is established by the supervisor. Girls are to be in uniform at all times-other than when swimming-this includes hostesses and announcers-including last show of the day.
- B. Wear complete day-time makeup, uniform, nametag, smile and have hair combed at all times.
- C. Specified shoes only are to be worn with uniforms-use common sense or ask supervisor. Rubber shower shoes are not appropriate!!!!
- D. You are responsible for the care of your issued belongs - i.e. uniform - learn how to launder properly....and often!
- E. Uniforms are not to be worn home or off grounds.
- F. Show makeup should always be used in shows. It is much more exaggerated than daytime makeup, in proportion and color... for instance-long, thicker eyebrows; darker blushes and lipsticks. Orange is excellent.
- G. Under no circumstances, is anyone allowed to cut hair short or change it's color without permission. Anyone doing so without permission, is subject to dismissal.
- H. Do not keep posing suits in lockers. Others need them too. Please wear panties under posing suits, for your own protection as well as that of others wearing the same suits.
- I. Your personal clothing worn to and from work is a reflection on the people you work for and with. Please dress accordingly. If you have any questions, please ask your supervisor.
- J. We are proud to have you as a Weeki Wachee Mermaid, please act like you're proud to be one.

4. CONDUCT ON GROUNDS AND THEATRE

- A. No husbands or boyfriends are to be in Villa, or visiting you on premises during working hours. All mermaids are watched and judged by our visitors.
- B. Only immediate members of your family are eligible for passes,

- C. Do not allow friends or relatives to use Company equipment, such as face masks, flippers, or clothing.
 - D. No smoking where public will see you.
 - E. Always use walks. Never cut across lawns or flower beds.
 - F. Always remember that it is insurance ruling that there should be proper lighting on for incoming guests and always remind guests to watch the steps, remove dark glasses, no smoking and no eating.
 - G. Let it be known to any guest entering after curtain rises that their ticket can only be used for one (1) show and inform them how much of the show they have missed.
 - H. Tube room door should be kept shut and when done so, shut it quietly.
 - I. Hostess should sit in a position where they can see ticket booth for any late comers.
 - J. No practical joking during talking or during the announce for the show.
 - K. Should not intertain friends while on duty in the theatre. Also, do not do arts and crafts or read.
 - L. Announcers check on performers at all times, do not do arts and crafts or read or have friends in control booth.
 - M. Announcers and hostess report any problems in show to underwater personell or whomever it concerns directly after show.
 - N. Trainees and girls just watching the show should keep volumes (voice) very low. If room - sit with audience, not in foyer.
 - O. If training or trying out an applicant, make sure there is an underwater diver available in case of any trouble.
 - P. Girls should not do any type of modeling or posing without first checking with supervisor and marketing department.
5. VILLA
- A. No visitors (friends or relatives) using any facilities in building other than possibly waiting in living room. Avoid all day company!!!
 - B. No pets or babysitting for children in Villa.
 - C. Be decently dressed and dry at all times downstairs.

- D. Keep any lights or electrical appliances off when not in use. Special reminder to tape-recorders.
- E. Wear clothing to and from sundeck...or crawl out--people can see you.
- F. Keep your voices (any noise) very low in tuberoom and sundeck. Sound carries very well thru-out entire building.
- G. Any belongings not kept in locker or assigned cubbyhole (laundry room), will be locked up. Cost is 10¢ per item for its return. This includes make-up carriers left on counter.
- H. Stockroom and sewing room are off limits--ask Bonnie or Genie if you need something.
- I. Don't push beanbag chairs against wall heaters. Don't sit on or put shoes on counters. Don't sit on any furniture or benches naked. Don't wear others clothing (especially tights or any garment worn next to your body).
- J. Each girl is assigned a Villa duty, and the chart is posted in locker room, however you are expected to clean up after yourself. This includes used tissues left on counters, drinking glasses, ash trays, crumbs and left-overs from meals and a million other things your Mother always did for you.

Villa duties are divided up into rooms; all rooms with tiled floors should be swept every morning before first show. All carpeted rooms should be vacuumed at least once weekly. All counters (kitchen, locker room, bathroom) should be sponge-cleaned daily. All trash cans emptied when needed.
- K. All clothing, towels and costumes, directly pertaining to work, have top priority in using washers and dryers. All resident personal laundry must be done during working hours. All non-residents should do their laundry elsewhere.
- L. All company issues, i.e. uniforms, masks, flippers, suits, etc., must be turned in before you receive your last paycheck. Also, any debts incurred - rent, telephone bills owed to the girls - must be paid in full before leaving.

Three-Page Excerpt from Mermaid Employee Handbook, *Weeki Wachee Collection*, Weeki Wachee Springs State Park, Brooksville, Florida, United States.

Figure 15 Three-Page Excerpt from The Mermaid Employee Handbook

Opposite the page listing the expectations of mermaids in the villa is a section of rules dedicated to the appearance and actions of the women in and outside Weeki Wachee. Women are told their spouses or boyfriends are not allowed to visit them at the attraction or in the villa as “all mermaids are watched and judged by our visitors.” “Under no circumstances, is anyone allowed to cut hair short or change it’s [sic] color without permission. Anyone doing so without permission, is subject to dismissal.” Mermaids are supposed to have long, flowing hair and no matter how well a woman performed underwater, if her hair did not match the mythological ideal she could lose her job. Bonnie Georgiadis, one former mermaid interviewed for this study, brought up an experience that calls into question the firmness of this rule: “One girl really did get a very short haircut just like mine is right now, um, which I’m starting to regret. But, [*laughs*], they called her cabbage head after that. But she was brought in, into the main office and spoken to, but what are you gonna’ do? You can’t put it back! She was not fired, she kept her job.”¹²⁶ Other rules on the list dictate attitude and non-uniform clothing. There are no written rules in this booklet about conduct outside of Weeki Wachee, however former mermaid Beverly Sutton brought up that mermaids “were not allowed to go in any bars around here locally, I remember that part of it.”¹²⁷ Any conduct breaking the illusion would not be tolerated.

Nevertheless, none of the women interviewed for this study expressed any concerns over how their bodies were controlled while working at Weeki Wachee. Rules over appearances are laughed off, the unwanted advances of male fans are minimized or not mentioned at all and the strike started to fight for fair pay is tiptoed around. Why do the women of Weeki Wachee view and express their experiences the way they do? The powerful force of nostalgia and the absolute

¹²⁶ Bonnie Georgiadis, interview by author, Tarpon Springs, FL, October 21, 2016.

¹²⁷ Beverly ‘Bev’ Sutton, interview by author, Spring Hill, FL, June 22, 2017.

world-as-exhibition perception does factor in to the disconnect between events recorded in physical ephemera and the mermaid's recollections of the past, but do not tell us why they use these mechanisms to filter their experiences through. Breaking through the haze of an idealized past to look past what is being said and focus on how and why experiences are recounted the way they are tells us the different functions working at Weeki Wachee served. The oral histories compiled for this study along with the selections of interviews in *Weeki Wachee: City of Mermaids* give us a peek into the ways in which women navigated through limitations placed on them to create an identity partially based on the tight-knit all female community of Weeki Wachee mermaids.

Working as a mermaid is so idealized in many women's minds because the position offered opportunities of creative expression that were regarded highly, an appreciation for their bodies that was separate from the ways in which they were objectified, deep bonds of camaraderie with other adult women before becoming devoted to a family, as well as status that was based on their looks and abilities rather than on the success of their husbands. Their refusal to acknowledge objectification, discrimination, the pressures of motherhood, or even events that portrayed Weeki Wachee negatively is not done out of a desire to minimize and erase the hardships women endured, but rather to protect their own self-image and the establishment that granted them freedoms they otherwise might not have experienced. However, there is a possibility that other factors play into the testimonies of the former mermaids.

As discussed previously, historians have been conflicted over the use of oral histories as the drawbacks incline some to view oral histories as unreliable evidence. Analyzing how things were said and what was not said is how this study is using oral histories, rather than as standalone evidence to back up a claim, the motives, biases, and relationships present around the

testimonies' collection deserve attention for the sake of transparency. As the interviews collected for this thesis are being uploaded onto the RICHES digital archive, several women presented a hesitancy before the date of the interview. One woman asked for questions in advanced, more than one woman brought notes to the interview, and yet another former mermaid barely meandered off the "script", that is, her narrative mirrors other interviews she's given. As several of the interviewees are still connected with Weeki Wachee either through swimming performances as the Legendary Sirens or working with the park's archive to document Weeki Wachee's history, there is a possibility that the bias towards protecting the image Weeki Wachee gives to the public influenced the interviews. Additionally, as there were several interviewees that I only had one or two email and/or phone conversations with prior to the interview, my lack of rapport with several the subjects could have also determined the information presented at the interview. Nonetheless, the biases do not hinder analysis but rather strengthen the claim that deeper reasons behind the heavy use of nostalgia exist.

Former mermaids would have a motive to protect the park's image as working at Weeki Wachee Springs would have been one of the first, and for some only, opportunities for women to express their full independence. An article published in December 1957 in *The Tampa Sunday Tribune* gives a glimpse at the trajectory of many women's lives when stating, "Weeki Wachee normally employs [sic] 16 mermaids and is constantly seeking new ones. Marriage is the principal cause of the girls quitting the show."¹²⁸ Based on census records the article's offhand observation rings true as throughout 1950-1970, 71% of people aged fourteen and up were married. Additionally, the percentage of Hernando County women aged fourteen and over in employment only rose ten percent in 30 years, to 35% in 1970, showing little overlap between

¹²⁸ "How to Photograph a Mermaid," *Tampa Sunday Tribune*, December 8, 1957.

married and working women.¹²⁹ As women often lived with their parents until moving after marriage as well as quit their jobs to start a family, choosing a unique position that offered travel experience, media attention, and the independence to live on their own must have drawn many local women to audition.

This is not to imply that women were opposed to marriage and motherhood; the interviewees that left Weeki Wachee with the purpose of raising children spoke of that decision as the natural next step in life. Sociologists Henrietta O'Connor and John Goodwin studied the transition from school to work for women in the UK in the 1960s and came to the conclusion that while motherhood was generally viewed as a certainty, women still cared a great deal about the job they took immediately after school and before marriage, "and generally the type of work available in the city did not match those career aspirations they held."¹³⁰ Young women from all over the United States clamored to join the mermaids, which comes as no surprise considering the most common positions offered to women at the time were clerical, in the service industry (waitressing, nursing, custodian), and in private households (nannies and maids).¹³¹ Weeki Wachee Springs gave many young women the rare opportunity to avoid settling for the handful of similar positions usually available for women and be able to fulfill their high hopes before beginning the next chapter in their lives. "It just was the whole idea of being underwater and

¹²⁹ U.S. Department of Commerce, Census Bureau, Table 43. Florida, Economic Characteristics of the population, by sex for counties: 1950-con. 10-94; U.S. Department of Commerce, Census Bureau, Table 83. Florida, Education, Employment status and selected labor force characteristics of the population, for counties: 1960-con. 11-234; U.S. Department of Commerce, Census Bureau, Table 121 Florida, Employment Characteristics, for counties: 1970-continued.

¹³⁰ Henrietta O'Connor and John Goodwin, "'She wants to be like her Mum?' Girls' experience of the school-to-work transition in the 1960s," *Journal of Education and Work* 17, no. 1 (2004), 101.

¹³¹ U.S. Department of Commerce, Census Bureau, Table 43. Florida, Economic Characteristics of the population, by sex for counties: 1950-con. 10-94; U.S. Department of Commerce, Census Bureau, Table 83. Florida, Education, Employment status and selected labor force characteristics of the population, for counties: 1960-con. 11-234; U.S. Department of Commerce, Census Bureau, Table 121 Florida, Employment Characteristics, for counties: 1970-continued.

smiling and waving at you and it just was, was like magical, you know,” former mermaid Rita King explains, “like a fairy tale kind of thing I guess, when you're a little girl that's what you look at, you know.”¹³² Finally securing that position, becoming a mermaid, came with a sense of fulfillment that could be reflected on for years to come. Jennifer Banfield mirrors this sentiment during the aforementioned interview with Ed Hayes in *The Orlando Sentinel* when she said, “You’re proud of your job, that’s the big part. It’s something, when you’re older, you can say, ‘I’ve done it.’ There’s satisfaction.”¹³³ Independence and a unique position weren’t the only reasons Weeki Wachee was an attractive employment opportunity.

Banfield expresses the devotion and excitement to sportsmanship that accompanied the position of mermaid earlier in the same interview when discussing the deep dive done during performances: “It’s the last thing you learn...and I’m looking forward to it. It’s a challenge.”¹³⁴ The basin of the springs is where the mermaids perform, and the cave from which water is pumped in is where the mermaids perform the deep dive; during this performance, the mermaids descend a total of 117 feet and ascend back up into view all without the aid of an air hose.¹³⁵ This is the last display performers are taught because of the level of skill it takes to achieve and the dangers associated with performing the dive incorrectly, such as decompression sickness.¹³⁶ Banfield expresses the excitement of taking on the challenge and former mermaids Rita King and Vicki Smith convey the competitive opportunity the deep dive provided. According to King, she and her co-workers would “go through these competitions of who could hold their breath the

¹³² King, interview by author.

¹³³ Hayes, “Jennifer’s All Wet – And Likes It.”

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Bert Woodson, “My Date with a Weeki Wachee Mermaid(s),” *Feminine Collective*, accessed September 17, 2018, <http://www.femininecollective.com/date-with-weeki-wachee-mermaid/>.

¹³⁶ Brent Gilliam, “The Hazards of Freediving,” *Diver Editorial*, October 27, 2014, accessed September 17, 2018 <https://diveremag.com/the-hazards-of-freediving/>.

longest, you know, and do the deep dive. So, I got the record for that during that time period [laughs].”¹³⁷ Not only would the mermaids compete with each other, but they would also compete with themselves, always trying to out-do their last performance. Vicki describes the ascension following the deep dive, beginning with the narration of the person narrating the performance:

Oh there she is! She's coming up, but look, she not going straight back to the airlock to get, to breath, she's going to perform ballet for you.’ And then the girl would do a pulling arabesque and one and a half- And she did do a lot of ballet, uh, but you notice that we're exhaling as we come up, 'cause the air expands in your lungs. You have to exhale, or your lungs explode. So we exhale and we pause in our swan, and now we're ready for air, but we have no air hose. We have got to swim over to the dome, the air lock, but we decide just to push ourselves to do a little bit more ballet before we go in and by the time we go into the dome we're going [*hold hands to heart*], we're gasping, we're ready for air.¹³⁸

The mermaids pushed themselves athletically, and in the present, place much more emphasis on their swimming skill, whereas advertising focused mainly on the mermaid’s figures and looks. As seen in Figure 16, a promotional photograph for the attraction, advertisements did emphasize the ballet training of the mermaids, however not to highlight their performer’s athleticism but instead to allude to the women’s grace, femininity, and looks.

¹³⁷ King, interview by author.

¹³⁸ Smith, interview by author.



Mermaids Practicing Ballet, Weeki Wachee Collection, Weeki Wachee Springs State Park, Brooksville, Florida, United States.

Figure 16 Mermaids Practicing Ballet

The closeness the mermaids had towards each other to ensure smooth performances and everyone's safety underwater created unique bonds that they longed for after leaving the position. Psychologist Gary Senecal posits that the deep camaraderie forged between teammates due to the "unique aspects" of their roles that encourage "trust, sacrifice, resilience, fitting a specifically defined role, blunt honesty, and singular closeness" is rarely able to be recreated

once an athlete is transitioned out of sports.¹³⁹ Senecal goes on to argue that the transition out of sports¹⁴⁰ can be traumatic to athletes because of the sudden loss of solidarity along with the realization of the near impossibility of recreating that camaraderie in different careers.¹⁴¹ Idealizing the past is a symptom of the loss of camaraderie and the absence of similar relationships in everyday life after leaving Weeki Wachee. Vicki Smith describes the bond mermaids have with each other and to the position as a permanent part of her identity: "We were all comrades, we were all sisters, we were all mermaids. And even today, if you move away and you hear the word mermaid, your eyes, your ears, you pick it up immediately and you want to know who in this room of people I don't know is saying that 'cause they must have been a mermaid at Weeki Wachee Springs." Smith seeks the closeness that working at Weeki Wachee provided that any mention of the word compels her to seek that connection. The mermaid's desire to recreate the communal experience (as well as a drive to preserve history) led the park to establish a troupe of former mermaids, called the Legendary Sirens, to perform monthly at Weeki Wachee Springs. Vicki Smith, Rita King and Beverly Sutton are members of the Legendary Sirens.

The longing for camaraderie and the sense of accomplishment that came with the athleticism of being a mermaid is not often overtly stated in interviews, however what former mermaids refuse to discuss speaks volumes of the impact working at Weeki Wachee had on so many women. For example, Vicki, the only woman interviewed who addressed male fans, declined to go into detail about dangerous men because of how safe she perceived feeling working at Weeki Wachee Springs: "Although we have had some stalkers at Weeki and they

¹³⁹ Gary Senecal, "Solidarity and camaraderie-A psychological examination of contact sport athletes' career transitions," *Cogent Business & Management* 4, (2017), 2.

¹⁴⁰ Vicki Smith, interview by author.

¹⁴¹ Senecal, "Solidarity and camaraderie," 8.

were watched too, they were watched. So they weren't allowed around the girls, but that's- we don't talk about things like that much, 'cause really Weeki Wachee is a very safe place and safety is their utmost, of utmost importance. The safety of the swimmers and the mermaids, go beyond, they go above and beyond.”¹⁴² Similarly to how discrimination was rarely acknowledged in interviews, addressing the negatives of the position and the dangers of being a mermaid would threaten the view of Weeki Wachee as a place of freedom for women. Jennifer Helgren discusses the glaring differences in her study of oral histories of women who grew up in the 1950s and 1960s. She noticed that women were both describing their childhood as a safe and protected place, while also detailing the ways in which they navigated life so they avoided violence. Just as Vicki minimized incidents of stalking in favor of discussing the joy they experienced being a mermaid, Helgren noticed how women in her study were using nostalgia to make uncomfortable memories secondary to picturesque ones. While noting more research needs to be conducted in this area, she makes the point that, “the contradictions suggest that nostalgia operates to obscure the profound loss of the hoped-for freedom to roam as girls came to accept limits.”¹⁴³ Her subjects idealized their childhood by boasting of their “freedom to roam”¹⁴⁴, while contradictorily mentioning the places they were told not to go and the activities they were barred from in order for them to stay safe. This ideation “masks the gender-related work of maintaining safety” and makes any dangerous experiences exceptions, which in turn allows the women to distance themselves from their trauma and normalize the restrictions placed upon them.¹⁴⁵ As Weeki Wachee made a profoundly positive impact on the mermaid’s lives and as the “world-as-

¹⁴² Smith, interview by author.

¹⁴³ Jennifer Helgren, “A ‘Very Innocent Time’: Oral History Narratives, Nostalgia and Girls’ Safety in the 1950s and 1960s,” *The Oral History Review* 42, no. 1 (2015), 66.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

exhibition” perception portrays the attraction as an escape from reality, any information that contradicts and challenges these positions is minimized in order to protect that vision. Because many of these women still closely identify themselves as mermaids, nostalgia could further serve as a way to protect their own self-image.

No one interviewed for this study would speak on camera about the near drowning of two mermaids, and only one former mermaid gave up any information on the incident, only doing so through hushed whispers. “We don’t talk about that,” replied Bonnie Georgiadis after an inquiry into an incident in the 1969 that nearly led two novice mermaids to their death and spurred a strike to start in 1970.¹⁴⁶ *Weeki Wachee: City of Mermaids* along with newspaper articles helped to fill in the blanks. The Tampa Bay Times reported that on September 14, 1969, during a performance, Karen Dutcher and Susan Sweeney entered an airlock underwater that was filled with “stale” air and subsequently passed out; another mermaid and crew member noticed the women did not come out and both rushed to help. The women were taken out of the water and “administered respiration until an ambulance arrived.”¹⁴⁷ Immediately the attraction deflected responsibility, as the public relations manager Jack Mahon told the Tampa Bay Times a day later that the accident happened due to “human error”: the women were not following procedure and “floundered in the ensuing rescue attempt.”¹⁴⁸ Several days later, on the 17th, Mahon minimized the women’s injuries, stating, “the last time I visited the girls in the hospital they were having a pillow fight.”¹⁴⁹ This accident led to unionization as in the following months, “The International Laborers Union and the American Guild of Variety Artists visited Weeki Wachee, and the

¹⁴⁶ Georgiadis, interview by author.

¹⁴⁷ “2 Mermaids Injured at Weeki Wachee,” *Tampa Bay Times*, September 14, 1969.

¹⁴⁸ “Mermaids Reportedly ‘Doing Well’,” *Tampa Bay Times* September 15, 1969.

¹⁴⁹ “Weeki Wachee Performers Recovering,” *Tampa Bay Times*, September 17, 1969.

mermaids voted to join the union to seek better working conditions, including better pay.”¹⁵⁰ No one interviewed for this study would discuss the near drowning, but the vote to unionize hints that the accident and other dangers of the job were more serious than Mahon made them out to be in the media.

The decision of the mermaids and Holiday Inn employees¹⁵¹ to unionize was not received positively by Weeki Wachee management, resulting in a strike that lasted nearly the entire month of July, 1970.¹⁵² Mermaids were sent to ABC headquarters in New York to picket, while mermaids at Weeki Wachee picketed outside the attraction; both groups conducted the strike in bikinis.¹⁵³ In the end, employees were issued a pay increase, two to three paid holidays a year and a “hospitalization insurance policy” with premiums paid by the attraction. Management also agreed to hire back strikers, but only those whose positions were not filled during the strike; as 120 people joined the strike and the attraction hired 60 people during the strike, presumably half of those people striking lost their jobs.¹⁵⁴ Beverly Sutton stated that, “they [the strikers] claimed that it [the strike] was for safety, because we had, um, it was not that big a deal, but sand coming out of some of the air hoses and stuff [*laughs*].”¹⁵⁵ Later in the interview Sutton opens up more about the strike, corroborating what newspaper articles of the time reported as the driving reasons for the strike being “paid holidays, insurance and leaves of absence”¹⁵⁶:

That was a long six weeks, standing in the hot sun, gettin' horns blowed at you in support and birds shot at you not in support [*laughs*]. The mermaids did it mostly for safety reasons. We, I think we were paid pretty well, it seems like we were, never needed money back then [*laughs*], but uh, the other, it was also the grounds workers at the motel

¹⁵⁰ Vickers, *City of Mermaids*, 176.

¹⁵¹ The Holiday Inn directly across the street from Weeki Wachee Springs was operated by Weeki Wachee management.

¹⁵² Jim Pidgeon, “Weeki Wachee Strike Ends; Most of Demands are Met,” *The Tampa Tribune*, July 25, 1970.

¹⁵³ Vickers, *Weeki Wachee*, 177-8

¹⁵⁴ Pidgeon, “Weeki Wachee Strike Ends; Most of Demands are Met.”

¹⁵⁵ Sutton, interview by author.

¹⁵⁶ Richard Morgan, “Weeki Wachee Employees Strike Called ‘Inevitable’,” *St. Petersburg Times*, July 1, 1970.

across the street, and they were going for more money, for sick days, for vacations, stuff like that, so we just all supported each other. And they were all out there, but they said they couldn't do it without the mermaids, because people would just not go to the restaurants and stuff, but they'd come to the mermaid shows. So we did it in support of them...¹⁵⁷

Bonnie Georgiadis, who did not participate in the strike, gave yet another perspective of the strike: “I didn't understand, didn't really understand why they were on strike, and I did not know that at that time people who worked in the gift shop and the boat captains did not get a vacation, um, we did. Mermaids got a vacation, I didn't know they didn't.”¹⁵⁸ Sutton hints at but as well minimizes the safety issues at Weeki Wachee. Both Sutton and Georgiadis suggest that gift shop workers, grounds workers and hotel employees, who were mainly people of color, were being discriminated against and the newspaper articles report that “the company engaged in unfair labor practices”¹⁵⁹. The initial injuries and the resulting strike highlight many of the difficulties of working at the attraction, which makes the two events taboo subjects for many former mermaids. Both Sutton and Georgiadis lean heavily on the strike happening in support of other workers, rather than the near death of their co-workers, allowing them to distance themselves from the events. By perceiving the strike to have fought mainly for updated equipment and better conditions for other employees, they can avoid contradicting themselves when describing their years as a mermaid as fun and carefree.

These women attach their memories of freedom, independent expression, and solidarity as being inextricably linked to Weeki Wachee, but either deny, minimize, or describe violence, discrimination, objectification, and limitations as happening away from Weeki Wachee. Being a

¹⁵⁷ Sutton, interview by author. There is an inconsistency here about how long the strike lasted. Newspapers report that it occurred throughout July, but Sutton stated the strike lasted six weeks. perhaps a month in the heat felt like a month and a half, so that is how she remembers the events.

¹⁵⁸ Georgiadis, interview by author.

¹⁵⁹ Morgan, “Weeki Wachee Employees Strike Called ‘Inevitable’.”

mermaid positively impacted their lives through friendship and sportsmanship, allowed them to avoid gender normative jobs at a formative time in their lives (most interviewed joined immediately after high school), and garnered them respect from men and women alike; the ways in which their appearance and actions were limited, the steps they took to mitigate fear, as well as the male-gaze they had to endure in order to feel the positive impacts are easily left out of narratives and replaced by idealized recollections.

By taking an interdisciplinary approach to dissecting oral histories and nostalgia, the complex ways in which women and minorities navigate limitations to create fulfilling lives is revealed. Although these interviews, documents, and photographs help piece together these experiences, the sample size and scope of this project are far too limited to make wider claims about Florida's tourist industry and women's roles within the system. As the only major publication that compiled oral histories from people who worked at Weeki Wachee, *Weeki Wachee: City of Mermaids*, is so outdated that the author does not have the tapes her interviews were recorded on any longer and only retains a fraction of the transcripts of the interviews, quite a bit of work is still required in order to strengthen the claims made in this study as well as make any further about Weeki Wachee.¹⁶⁰

¹⁶⁰ Lu Vickers, telephone conversation with author, September 24, 2016.

CHAPTER FOUR: CONCLUSION: “SAVE OUR TAILS”

The park reached its tenth anniversary of being controlled by the state in 2018; closure is no longer a threat; nevertheless, time is still running out for saving Weeki Wachee’s history. As revenue from ticket sales is distributed between all state parks, the only extra contributions for renovations come from the donations Friends of Weeki Wachee receive and any grants given to the park. These donations are not enough to accomplish all of the preservation goals of the attraction in a timely manner. As of 2018, the state of the archive is dismal. The archive is in one of the homes built on Weeki Wachee property that were once used to house mermaids. This choice of storage location presents its own troubles as the nearly seventy-year-old structure is outdated with only a wall air conditioning unit to attempt to keep items cool; besides being unable to keep the archive at a consistent temperature throughout the building, at least once the air conditioner failed, leaving the archive partially flooded and warm.¹⁶¹ The methods of storing are also problematic for long time use. Firstly, there are two refrigerators full of film reels that reek of vinegar due to disintegration from improper storage. Storing film reels in refrigerators is safe for a period but is not a long-term solution. Additionally, while the archive at Weeki Wachee is equipped with dozens of archival grade acid-free boxes, there are not enough to accommodate all the artifacts. A closet full of rolled up blueprints, from the several times the park has undergone renovations, lie in stacks yellowing and becoming more brittle and shelves filled with photographs, documents, and other ephemera sit in plastic bins on shelves waiting for more protective materials to be purchased. In 2016, I spent a semester in the archive working to store properly what I could; in the time allotted to me, I used all the archival grade photograph sleeves and labels available to aid the organizational process along. Years earlier Friends of

¹⁶¹Conversation with staff member at Weeki Wachee Springs, FL, July, 2016.

Weeki Wachee purchased a slightly newer computer for the archive, but still one old enough that it does not have the capability to connect to Wi-Fi, but until my semester at the archive no one switched computers over. My goal was to create a repository of scans to create a log in the archival software PastPerfect, however the task of organizing the archive was so massive that I did not fully finish that step. Fortunately, volunteers —two former mermaids interviewed for this study Bonnie Georgiadis and Vicki Smith —are also working in the archive to try and caption as many photographs as they can with proper names, dates and events. Though these women are only able to volunteer their time a few times a month, and Bonnie will not be able to volunteer for much longer as her eyesight is deteriorating.¹⁶²

The lack of proper attention to the Weeki Wachee archive is not a sign that the park, the state, or visitors are ambivalent about Weeki Wachee's past. In the summer of 2014, the park was able to secure \$120,000 to uncover the underwater theater's original shell roof that was originally covered up in the 1974.¹⁶³ The news release discussing this renovation published by the parks department stated, "The goal is to once again expose the glowing white seashell and allow it to return to its right position as a beacon for the park's mermaids and once again play a role in Florida's living history."¹⁶⁴ Besides restoring the theater to its original glory, the attraction also has a master plan to build a "museum and interpretive center" that is estimated to cost "\$1.5 million."¹⁶⁵ Unfortunately, the park noted in 2014 after releasing its master

¹⁶² Bonnie Georgiadis, conversation with author, Brooksville, FL, September, 2016.

¹⁶³ Geoff Fox, "Weeki Wachee to unveil original shell roof," *Tampa Bay Times*, last updated July 12, 2014, accessed September 10, 2018 <https://www.tbo.com/Local/CommunityNews/park-to-unveil-original-shell-roof-20140712/>.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ Tony Marrero, "Plan lays out \$8.7 million in improvements at Weeki Wachee Springs State Park," *Tampa Bay Times*, last updated January 7, 2014, accessed September 10, 2018 <https://www.tampabay.com/news/growth/plan-lays-out-87-million-in-improvements-at-weeki-wachee-springs-state-park/2160033>.

improvement plan that “some [improvements] are years from becoming a reality,” and as of 2018 the planned museum has yet to start construction.¹⁶⁶

The infrastructure for an archive is partially in place and the museum is eventually going to be built, so why still fear that the past of Weeki Wachee will disappear? Besides the continued deterioration of the items in the archive, the bulk of information about the attraction is already slipping away. While the archive holds thousands of photographs, hundreds of items, and a handful of old props and costumes, a larger part of ephemera related to the park is scattered across the world. As previously mentioned, the various owners of the attraction held several bonfires throughout the years that burned whatever materials related to Weeki Wachee that mermaids had not taken. Not only did this destroy most of the documentation of the park prior to the 1970s, but it also made mermaids forever cautious about trusting the park owners. For example, former mermaid Dottie Mears made her family promise that after she passed her Weeki Wachee related ephemera would not be donated to Weeki Wachee Springs because she feared that her contributions to preservation would as well be lost.¹⁶⁷ She is not the only former mermaid fearful of trusting the park owners; when asked why efforts to scan personal photos of Weeki Wachee had not happened at mermaid reunions, Georgiadis reported that a handful of the formers had tried to save the history in this way, but many people received their scrapbooks back with missing photographs.¹⁶⁸ There are hundreds of former mermaids across the United States and beyond that have old costumes, props, programs, photographs, souvenirs and more that must be feeling a similar way.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁷ Bonnie Georgiadis, conversation with author, Brooksville, FL, August 2016.

¹⁶⁸ Bonnie Georgiadis, conversation with author, Brooksville, FL, August 2016.

The most jarring case of indifference I came across through my research happened in Colorado Springs. Several of the books written about Weeki Wachee discuss the insect museum and the archive has photographs and postcards with the museum in the background. Upon my visit, I learned that one of John Mays daughters, who in her youth worked at the museum at the Springs during the summer, had in her possession one of the red one-piece swim suits that many mermaids wore in photoshoots in the 1950s. I commented that the park would love to have one of the earliest swimsuits used, and I was told that they would love to donate the bathing suit, but had never been contacted by anyone at the attraction.¹⁶⁹ While former mermaids might be more difficult to track down, no one is even trying to contact a well-documented museum still in existence that is easily searchable for its information about Weeki Wachee's past.

As the museum is still years from coming to fruition, Weeki Wachee Springs and scholars need to take a proactive approach in saving what we can before it is too late. Many of the original mermaids are getting older, their memories and materials are going to disappear before a museum can be built unless something is done. The \$1.5 million needed for the construction is daunting, however a much less expensive method for preservation is available with community effort, something Friends already does. The 75th anniversary of Weeki Wachee is coming up in 2022, there is time to plan and secure funds for a preservation event and I believe UCF, RICHES, Weeki Wachee Springs, Friends and the Florida State Parks and Recreation Department have the responsibility to take advantage of this opportunity. UCF and RICHES have worked with historical societies and local businesses to hold events that encourage community members to bring their items of historic importance to be scanned, to be interviewed by public history graduate students and faculty and to agree to allow their donated items to be

¹⁶⁹ Louise Nan Steer, conversation with author, Colorado Springs, CO, November 15, 2016.

hosted on the RICHES website. As UCF and I have been working with Weeki Wachee for years and as the Friends of Weeki Wachee has partnered with the community of Brooksville since the 1990s, all of the professional relationships are established, leaving only the planning process. With four years of planning available, the same type of event can be planned for and hosted at Weeki Wachee Springs as a part of the reunion celebration. With this much time to plan, positive relationships can be fostered with former mermaids who plan to travel to Florida in order to gain their trust, making them more open to allow their items to be scanned and hosted at the RICHES website. I have assisted the process of gaining trust from the former mermaids with this study; giving interviews and scanning items was done not only as a way to kickstart the preservation process, but also to start fostering community trust.

From published works to preservation attempts, Weeki Wachee has been subject to less academic attention than other areas of Florida's history, or even other areas of Florida's tourist history. As more and more roadside attractions closed, Weeki Wachee became viewed more as a quirky piece of kitsch left over from the era of roadside attractions rather than one of the last existing icons of the dying era that created the modern Floridian tourist industry. Because Weeki Wachee has been always been advertised as a peaceful, innocent place set outside of time, even scholars gave in to this perspective that is nothing more than a "world-of-exhibition." Just as early Egyptologists sought to preserve and experience the falsified views of Egypt created by the Western World shown in the World's Fair, so too have historians sought only to preserve the glitz and glamour and kitsch of Weeki Wachee Springs. In *White Sands Black Beach*, Gregory Bush argues against allowing Miami to turn into this veneer of a location created only for tourists seeking what advertisers have told them to look for. When public spaces become tourist destinations that are "petrified, that do not show people involved in manual labor...that exclude

visible evidence of poverty, and that give people opportunities for entertainment and officially sanctioned fun” the erasure of the fight for public space by people of color happens.¹⁷⁰ Historic beaches, parks, community spaces that disappear to make way for new stadiums or any corporate-built attractions only compound to an already “eroding sense of place.”¹⁷¹ Weeki Wachee won that battle ten years ago when the attraction became a state park and yet alive still are the anxieties over losing Weeki Wachee. The experiences of people of color and women are often the most marginalized, which astoundingly has been proven to be true even when looking at the treatment of a business that relies on women to function. Asking how it felt meeting Elvis over and over again,¹⁷² treating interviews with former mermaids only as opportunities to pull quotes about unusual situations, and not giving these women or the attraction the respect to apply theory to their stories erases their significance and adds to the fear of losing identity. The women interviewed for this study would barely divulge any negative experience at attraction partially due to how dearly they cling on to their memories of Weeki Wachee Springs. Time and time again these women have tried to take the preservation of the attraction into their own hands and have fallen short; not because they are inept, but rather because there is very little professional support given to them for their attempts to be successful.

I have created this infrastructure by creating a connection between scholars and Weeki Wachee. The relatively small, compared to all that is out there, database of ephemera and interviews collected for this study prove that there are opportunities to uncover ways in which

¹⁷⁰ Susan F. Fainstein and Dennis R Judd, “Cities as Places to Play,” in *The Tourist City*, edited by Dennis R. Judd and Susan F. Fainstein (New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, 1999), 268-69 quoted in Gregory Bush, *White Sands Black Beach: Civil Rights, Public Space, and Miami’s Virginia Key*, (Gainesville, FL: The University Press of Florida, 2016), 250.

¹⁷¹ Ibid, 147

¹⁷² Former mermaid Vicki Smith met Elvis the day he visited the springs in the 50s and is a question she is asked constantly in interviews centered around her time working there.

changes in race relations and gender norms manifested themselves in Florida and Weeki Wachee that have not been significantly researched prior to this study. My focus only spanned a narrow group of topics and sources; there is much more to be gained from Weeki Wachee's past, even in the small sample size of the materials collected. How the mermaids fought for environmental protections in the 1960s, the differences in culture between the North and the South, leadership and structure of roadside attractions, the ways in which male owners interacted with female employees, the fight between small and big once ABC took over, the list goes on.

This research cannot stop with me and has no reason to. There is time to plan with the park and Friends to gain funds, recruit businesses to donate time, equipment, and employees as well as time to write grants. There are willing and eager former mermaids that can help encourage their former coworkers to be involved. There is a partnership between UCF, RICHES, and the Springs that can help student and faculty volunteers and make the oral histories and ephemera available to the public through online exhibits. The only reason to allow this opportunity to pass would be due to negligence.

**APPENDIX:
DETAILS OF COLLECTED CONTENT**

The first part of this project entailed collecting and digitizing a number of oral histories and ephemera for use at UCF's free to access archive, RICHES. After the gathering process, I curated a sample of the collection to include in the written part of this portion. Finally, I created metadata for the curated collection that meet the requirements of RICHES. Below is a list detailing the contents of the collection that I created as well as links to the images and oral histories used for this project.

The May Museum of Natural History	Weeki Wachee Springs State Park
I scanned 445 pieces of ephemera. Multiple paged letters and documents are counted as separate scans.	I scanned ninety-five pieces of ephemera. Multiple paged letters and documents are counted as separate scans.
I conducted oral history interviews of Carla May Harris and Louise Nan Steer.	I conducted oral history interviews of John Athanason, Delee Perry, Rita Jane King, Emelia Vicki Smith, Bonnie Georgiadis, Beverly Sutton.
Of the 401 pieces digitized I created metadata for thirteen. Multipage documents were condensed into single PDFs.	Of the ninety-five scans, I created metadata for fourteen of them. Multipage documents were condensed into single PDFs.
I transcribed and created metadata for both oral histories.	I transcribed and created metadata for the interviews of King, Smith, Georgiadis, and Sutton.

To access the collection visit this site: <https://richesmi.cah.ucf.edu/omeka/collections/show/63>

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