

12-1-1979

***The Forgotten Frontier: Florida Through The Lens of Ralph
Middleton Munroe* by Arva Moore Parks**

Gloria Jahoda

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/tampabayhistory>

Recommended Citation

Jahoda, Gloria (1979) "*The Forgotten Frontier: Florida Through The Lens of Ralph Middleton Munroe* by Arva Moore Parks," *Tampa Bay History*. Vol. 1 , Article 11.

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/tampabayhistory/vol1/iss2/11>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Open Access Journals at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Tampa Bay History by an authorized editor of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact scholarcommons@usf.edu.

BOOK REVIEWS

The Forgotten Frontier: Florida Through The Lens of Ralph Middleton Munroe. By Arva Moore Parks. (Miami: Banyan Books, 1977, XV, 178 pp. Preface, Introduction, Epilogue, and Index, \$25.00)

The Forgotten Frontier is that rarity in book art, a photographic essay accompanied by a text in which nothing has been done that is wrong. Text and photographs are so harmoniously matched, indeed, that the reader is carried back into the compelling world that was the frontier of southern Florida, especially Miami, the Everglades, and the Keys. The author, Arva Moore Parks, is a young protegee of Dr. Charlton W. Tebeau, recommendation enough in itself ; she also has a surprisingly long record of activities in historic preservation, especially in the Coral Gables area. She is past President, also, of the Historical Association of Southern Florida.

The amateur photographer whose work she chronicles and interprets is Ralph Middleton Munroe, “a successful, educated, Easterner with an affinity for Emerson and Thoreau.” We are given 230 of his best photographs (and splendid they are, technically as well as artistically) from the 1880’s to 1900. When the reader has finished the Moore-Parks depiction of the southern Florida that was and will never be again, he will be left with shame at the tawdriness of man the developer. The world of Munroe was almost Eden—except, of course, for the bugs, the snakes, the heat, and the fevers.

He had carefully preserved his negatives, we are told, until the present publication and they stayed undisturbed in the attic of his home, The Barnacle, which in 1973 the State of Florida purchased as a historic site and museum in Coconut Grove and which is now open to the public. Arva Parks rightly compares Munroe’s camera to the canvas of Frederick Remington. What is especially noteworthy about this book is its extent of historic detail—whose house stood where, what store sold what, what ships sailed the Florida Straits—and at the same time its capacity to enchant. The local historian, the general reader, and the dreamer are all satisfied.

The panoply is large: Dr. Perrine's sisal plants on Indian Key; the “piney” (pineapple) fields at the hamlet of Newport originally settled by Conchs from the Bahamas; a wild, coconut-fringed Matecumbe Key; Cape Florida and its abandoned lighthouse of 1825; giant air plants which, by comparison, dwarfed men in a small rowboat on the river beneath; the forks of the Miami River with their swirling waters; a crocodile sprawled in the sun on what is now Miami Beach. There are early hostelries (none of them sporting signs saying “Have Your Next Affair Here”) ; the entrance to the trading post of William Brickell; a coconut plantation where a dog track now stands; homesteads and lonely graves; frontier animals hung up after a slaughter; black men and women in their Sunday finery and their daily garments of toil; washed-up manatees; picnics where shirtwaisted ladies demurely sat under the palms beside their properly-hatted menfolk. It was, and it was not, a Victorian world. Interiors had their beloved clutters of memorabilia, but outside there were mysterious waters, impenetrable hammocks, and Seminole Indians. The Seminole photographs are especially interesting, as they show the evolution of the Seminole costume from its nineteenth century splendor into the shirts and trousers of a later age. History, Arva Parks reminds us, did not begin with white men. It did not even begin with Seminoles, or with Tequesta or Ais, not even with the royal palm. It began, perhaps, with God and from

wilderness to the dawning twentieth century Ralph Middleton Munroe recorded it with painstaking care and perceptive love.

This book belongs in the libraries of caring Floridians, schools and universities, and, by extension, caring Americans. It is to be hoped that its distribution will not only be statewide but national. Certainly it is worth every penny of its cost.

Gloria Jahoda

Yesterday's Fort Myers. By Marian Godown and Alberta Rawchuck.(Miami: Seeman Press, 1975. 127 pp. Photographs, \$7.95)

When Mrs. Alice McCann sat at her fifty-drop switchboard, the first in Fort Myers in 1900, she was kept busy while kids “spooned over the wire”. This writer’s neighbor for many years, Mrs. McCann related other adventurous and sometimes disastrous stories which appear in *Yesterday's Fort Myers*.

This book is outstanding. It is a fast-moving account of early Fort Myers from the Caloosa Indians to the tourist boom of the 1950’s. The city's history is broken into four major categories which lead the reader easily from one phase of growth to another. These segments are lavishly illustrated with photographs. The photographs, many of them aerials and panorama views, do not merely show the town, they make it come alive. They depict people in action, rough cowboy bands, 600-pound fish, Indians, trail blazers, and resourceful pioneers. Much local color is then added to the illustrations by the accounts, sometimes stories in themselves, that the authors provide with each photograph. Together they give a well-written and arranged pictorial history of the area.

The book goes a little farther than merely passing as a pictorial history, however. It acquaints the reader with an area that was literally carved out of wilderness by the people who settled and lived there, who all knew each other, where there was no frost, and growth seemed to come in accidental bursts.

It is far beyond that now, but even in the 1950’s, as the book shows, this little city on the doorstep of the Everglades, was still delivering a portion of its mail by boat. One knew a hurricane was on the way when the red hurricane warning flag flew on the Ireland dock and tourists were few.

Thomas Edison and Henry Ford were neighbors and are pictured as they candidly chat at their winter homes on McGregor Boulevard. Not too many years ago Edison was a regular customer at one of the local machine shops.

Mrs. McCann and Mr. Edison would certainly appreciate this book because it recreates that small town, adventurous, neighborly feeling that is Fort Myers, but they would be amazed if they could see their little village now.

Greg Fulton