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WITHLACOOCHEE, A NEW DEAL LEGACY:
A PHOTO ESSAY

by Lewis N. Wynne and Guy Porcher Harrison

The Depression created many difficulties for all Americans, but no single group experienced the depths of poverty reached by rural populations in the South and Southwest. For most of the people in these areas, the difficulties of the 1930s were merely continuations of the problems of the previous decade. Overproduction, drought, erosion, falling farm prices and the boll weevil produced a stagnant farm economy and an impoverished rural population. South Florida, like the rest of the South, experienced the Depression early and with devastating ferocity.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt, elected to the presidency in 1932, described the South as “the nation's number one economic problem” and moved quickly to relieve the region’s distress. Among the first relief measures passed by Congress was the Agricultural Adjustment Act, which created the Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA) under the aegis of the Department of Agriculture. Secretary of Agriculture Henry A. Wallace, a firm believer in government action in economic and social matters, was as concerned about the rural poor as FDR. Within the administrative framework of the AAA was the Division of Program Planning, which included a Land Policy Section (LPS). The LPS sought to create programs that would upgrade land use, and it worked closely with the National Resources Committee (NRC), a privately funded organization with the same goals.

In 1934, after surveying sites in several southern states, the LPS-NRC selected south Florida as a prime area for the creation of a land management pilot program. John Wallace, brother of Secretary Wallace, was among the survey group, and on January 9, 1935, he was named the project manager for what would ultimately become the Withlacoochee Land Use Project. After establishing his headquarters in Brooksville, Wallace and his team of engineers, surveyors, foresters and lawyers began the task of acquiring land for the program, which became part of the Department of Agriculture’s Resettlement Administration. Initial plans called for the purchase of 250,000 acres in Pasco, Hernando, Citrus and Sumter counties in west central Florida, but two congressional budget revisions reduced the amount of money available so Wallace was able to secure only 113,000 acres.

The selection of south Florida as the site of a Land Use Project was based on three factors. First, the area had a high rate of unemployment and economic distress. Within the four county area that constituted the Withlacoochee area, more than fifty percent of the population was on some form of relief, while within the actual project area, the rate was even higher. Of the land purchased for the project, ninety-five percent was in the process of being foreclosed by state and county authorities for nonpayment of taxes. Federal purchase of the land would provide at least a modicum of financial relief for individuals and regional governments.

The second determinant in selecting the Withlacoochee tract was the perceived opportunity for federal land use planners to develop and refine new techniques for land management. The
previous use of the land by private owners had dramatically altered the environment of the area. Phosphate mining, truck farming and heavy timber cutting had depleted the soil fertility and had largely eliminated the habitats of wild animals, which resulted in the disruption of the whole ecology of the area.

The third factor considered in the selection process was the proximity of Withlacoochee to the heavily populated areas of Tampa, St. Petersburg and Gainesville-Ocala. The proposed project would involve hiring hundreds of individuals from the local area and would pour thousands of dollars into the local community in wages. A large urban population would also be able to take advantage of the area when restoration was completed.

The three factors which focused federal attention on Withlacoochee also determined the direction and scope of corrective programs. In order to achieve the greatest results in the area, a comprehensive land use program was developed. This plan, which stressed rehabilitation and restoration of the environment, also provided for the relocation of displaced families, the creation of hundreds of new jobs for area residents, the restocking of depleted or extinct wild animal populations and the development of public access areas for recreation and hunting.

Within weeks of the establishment of the Withlacoochee Land Use Project, Manager Wallace and his staff started to put parts of their program into operation. In January 1936, a temporary tree nursery was established. By the beginning of winter that year, over 330,000 slash and longleaf pine seedlings were planted, and an additional 913,000 were planted by March 1937. To ensure that the seedlings would have every chance of surviving, 23,000 acres of land were cleared of competing oak and brush stands. Wallace also supervised the construction of 357 miles of fire breaks and the erection of four fire towers, each 100 feet high.

New Deal planners at Withlacoochee sought to improve land uses in various other ways as well. In keeping with their plan of integrated land usage, Wallace and his subordinates seeded hundreds of acres of range land with carpet and dallis grasses. Although improved seeds were used in this effort, no attempt was made to disrupt the natural environment of Withlacoochee, and local cattlemen were authorized to continue their practice of open-range grazing. Cattle grazing produced secondary benefits of importance to the Withlacoochee experiment. First, cattle feeding on open ranges tended to reduce the hazards of forest fires by consuming patches of high grass and underbrush, and second, fattened cattle provided a source of revenue for their owners.

Critical to all the efforts of the Withlacoochee planners was the restoration and maintenance of the ecology of the project area. In order to rebuild the natural food chain, a separate wildlife and game management program was established. A herd of twenty white-tailed deer, protected by law, was introduced to replace the deer population depleted by extensive hunting. Food areas, seeded with grain crops, were established and fenced to keep out predators. Quail, wild turkeys, ducks and other game birds were counted in 1936 and each year afterward to ensure a constantly increasing population. Annual censuses of fur-bearing animals – raccoons, squirrels and otters – were also conducted. To support the growing population of these animals, over 3,000 cuttings of wild blackberries, wild plums and mulberry trees were planted in protected nesting areas created.
by project workers. Finally, game fish fingerlings were introduced into the numerous ponds, sink holes and phosphate pits in the area. In 1936 alone, over 75,000 bass fingerlings were released.

Public recreation was also an important part of the Withlacoochee project. Labor from the Works Progress Administration and the local Civilian Conservation Corps camp was utilized to construct several recreation areas. McKethan Lake, named after a prominent Brooksville native, was the centerpiece of the area, and picnic shelters, camping facilities and swimming and boating areas were constructed. The architecture used was similar to the “national park” style of log cabins and pole shelters. This genre of construction was adopted by federal agencies because of the simplicity of design, easily erected by unskilled labor, and the use of materials available from the project area. The result was a durable, low cost and highly practical building.

One of the major attractions of the Withlacoochee recreational area was an enormous magnolia tree. This tree, approximately 110 feet in height and 58 inches in diameter, was reported by many forestry experts to be the largest known.

Keenly aware of the racist attitudes of white southerners in the 1930s, Withlacoochee planners constructed separate recreational facilities for blacks. John Wallace’s 1937 report on the progress of the Withlacoochee project noted the capitulation of the federal government to local folkways without a single comment. “As there is a large negro population in some portions of the project area, one recreational development will be assigned to negroes for their use. This area will include picnic shelters and a baseball diamond.”

The development of Withlacoochee had an enormous impact on the economy of Pasco, Hernando, Citrus and Sumter counties. During the first two years of the project's existence, hundreds of men found employment with the various programs. In December 1935, 166 men were employed, and by March 1936, the number had risen to 899. One year later, the figure had fallen to an average of 500 a month, but federal employment brought a total of $261,307 in wages into the local economy.

The involvement of the United States in World War II changed the strictly conservation and restoration functions of Withlacoochee. The vast open areas of grazing land and relative isolation of much of the project provided an excellent location for gunnery practice for pilots of the Army Air Force. A firing range was established in the area near Dade City in Pasco County, and pilots from nearby airbases made regular runs to improve their combat proficiency. A control tower and makeshift tarpaper barracks for troops were constructed on the Dade City range.

Troops from the Army’s Chemical Warfare branch found another use for Withlacoochie. The heavy growth of some of the more remote parts of the project approximated the jungle growth of combat areas in the Pacific theater of operations, and chemical defoliants were tested before their actual use in combat. With the end of World War II, Withlacoochee returned to its primary mission.

After passing through the hands of several federal agencies, Withlacoochee finally came under the control of the state of Florida. In 1954, it was placed under the administrative umbrella of the U.S. Forestry Service. In 1958, the United States Forestry Service sold Withlacoochee to the
state of Florida. Appraisers estimated the value of an average acre of land in the Withlacoochee project at $77.92, a far cry from the average price of $4.20 an acre paid for it in the 1930s. Withlacoochee State Forest, once made up of almost worthless land about to revert to the state for nonpayment of taxes, had come full circle. The interim quarter century had seen, however, major changes in land use and value. During the quarter century of federal control the forest returned in wages, pleasure and a healthier environment more than can be reduced to figures. Withlacoochee remains a living legacy from the New Deal.

John Wallace, the director of the Withlacoochee Resettlement Project. Wallace, the brother of Henry A. Wallace, then Secretary of Agriculture, later retired in St. Petersburg, Florida.

John Wallace, standing next to a giant magnolia tree in the Withlacoochee Project area.
Headquarters for the Withlacoochee Resettlement Project on Highway 41 north of Brooksville. This building, constructed with WPA labor, currently serves as the headquarters building for the Withlacoochee State Forest.
WPA and CCC workers who developed the Withlacoochee Project. Such projects provided work for thousands of unemployed workers during the depression.

A group of New Deal planners, led by John Wallace (back row, far right), waiting to board a Ford Tri-Motor for an aerial survey of the proposed Withlacoochee Project.
One of the major purposes of the Withlacoochee Project was to revitalize the land. Erosion was a major problem, and New Deal planners imported the “miracle” plant, kudzu, from Korea to halt the problem. Here an unidentified worker stands in the middle of a patch of kudzu, deliberately grown for the purpose of transplanting on eroded land.

Unemployment in the Withlacoochee Project area approached 95 percent, and individuals took whatever work they could find. Here two older individuals “rive” cedar and cypress shingles.
The Withlacoochee Resettlement Project encompassed thousands of acres. Within its boundaries, hundreds of families were moved off their farms and relocated elsewhere. As a result, the project area was temporarily dotted with abandoned houses.

Despite the general poverty of the farm families in the area of the Resettlement Project, some families maintained neat homesteads. The lack of electricity and money precluded luxuries, such as running water and lights. Yards were kept free of grass by “sweeping” them with bundles of gallberry bushes.
The poorest families in the area lived in crude log cabins, with few windows and only the rudest amenities. Sometimes families would convert these early log cabins to smokehouses for curing and storing meat, once they were able to build a better house.

The principal livelihoods of residents of the Withlacoochee Project area were farming and logging. Here a fairly affluent farmer operates a peanut thrasher.
Small sawmills dotted the area, and loggers relentlessly cut the virgin pines and hardwoods with little thought to the environmental consequences.

Like the pyramids of Egypt, sawdust piles, rusty pieces of wornout machinery and warping lumber marked the brief existence of a center of activity. Such sights were, and still are, common in the isolated forests of Florida.
Loggers and their families followed the saw mills. Small one- or two-room cabins were built in clearings in the woods and occupied by workers until the timber was exhausted. “Skidding” trails – rough trails for moving trees – often passed within feet of the cabin doors. Here, oxen are being used to “skid” trees to the mill.

Small phosphate mining operations were also part of the economy of the Withlacoochee area. Today, hundreds of pits dot the area – mute testimony to the exploitation of the land in past generations.
Following the acquisition of the Withlacoochee property by the federal government, WPA workers constructed public recreation areas. This shed is typical of the log-and-rock style of WPA architecture for parks.

A young deer, part of a larger herd, being released. In addition to opening areas to the public for recreation, the federal government sought to restore wildlife populations, depleted by hunters and a destroyed natural environment. Forests were replanted, environmental restoration projects undertaken and wildlife reintroduced.
During World War II, the U. S. Army used parts of the Withlacoochee Project Area as a bombing gunnery range and as an area to test chemical weapons. Because of the thick jungle-like growth in the area, defoliants were tested for possible use in the Pacific theater of operations.

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