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CHILDREN AT PLAY IN FLORIDA:
A PHOTOGRAPHIC ESSAY

Children may well be one of the last frontiers for historians. While pathbreaking studies of slavery, immigration, and women have appeared, children are still largely absent from the historical record. Historians, as one scholar has put it, "are typically guilty of child neglect."¹ Numerically, and quite naturally, children have been a significant part of the population. In 1850, 42 percent of Americans were under the age of fifteen. A century later they composed 27 percent of the total. In 1900, the number of children under fifteen was more than double the foreign-born population of the U.S.

Historians and anthropologists argue that the very concepts of childhood and adolescence are invented traditions. Indeed, it is rare to find children depicted as children before the Renaissance. Children over the age of seven were represented as small adults, wearing adult clothes. When children appear in history books, they are often represented as passive objects, being reared, educated, and even exploited by adults. They are seldom depicted as active participants who had any measure of influence.

By the twentieth century, children’s greatest influence perhaps centered around their roles as consumers of mass-produced goods, especially toys. Although children continued to play with homemade toys and still turned objects into playthings, they increasingly looked to the marketplace and department stores to satisfy new desires. Of course, adults - including manufacturers, retailers, and parents - also had some say over supply and demand, but children themselves often decided which store-bought toys would become popular and which ones would remain on the shelves.

Like their parents, children, of course, represented a diverse collection of groups. As a result, differences of gender, class, race, ethnicity, and even region shaped lives and decisions, including those about consumption. In addition, items like clothes and toys were also used by parents to reinforce adult perceptions of gender and class. In the most obvious example, parents bought dolls for girls and guns for boys. Nevertheless, children themselves decided what to play with, and only they knew the fantasies constructed around play. The difficulty for historians is trying to reconstruct the worlds of children.

As with many groups generally missing from the pages of history, children have left few records to document their past. However, historians have begun the process of reconstructing the lives of children by using traditional, as well as unusual, sources. In addition to records from schools, churches, and various government agencies, scholars have explored indirect evidence, such as memoirs and material culture, that evoke childhood experiences long after the fact.

Photographs are also a rich and voluminous source for documenting the history of children. As any parent knows, children are the most common subject in family photos. Susan Sontag observes, "Not to take pictures of one’s children, particularly when they are small, is a sign of parental indifference."² Many photographs, taken by both parents and professionals, have found their way into archives, where historians have ready access to them. "Through photographs," one
historian has noted, "we can look into the eyes of children who never kept a diary or wrote a letter. We can see them at play, at work, at home, at their mother's breast, at their father's knee; we can see what kind of clothes they wore; we can see to some extent what they and their world looked like. By seeing in this way we can gain an understanding of children and their lives that would otherwise be closed to us."³

Thanks to the efforts of Joan Morris of the Photographic Collection of the Florida State Archives in Tallahassee, the editors of *Tampa Bay History* offer the following photographic essay, organized around the theme of children at play. The pictures cover the period from the 1880s to the 1950s. Like other records of the past, these photographs do not speak for themselves. They can be "read" to reveal some meaning, but answers to many questions remain elusive. Nevertheless, combined with information from other sources, these pictures can tell us something about children's play.

These frozen images provide a powerful and sometimes haunting look into the past. Even if we cannot fully comprehend the moment captured on film, we can gain some understanding of children and their material culture, especially their toys. However, the captions are meant to be suggestive rather than definitive. The editors invite readers to write and share their own thoughts and reminiscences about children at play.
Children in the Tampa Bay area have always had diverse ethnic, racial, and class backgrounds, and their experiences have varied accordingly. Posing next to the Tampa Bay Hotel early in this century is D.J. Jenkins' Orphans Band, composed of African-American children. Orphans represented an enormous social problem in the nineteenth and early twentieth century due to the early death of parents, especially mothers.

Photograph courtesy of Florida State Archives.

The Tampa Bay area attracted large numbers of immigrants and their children from Cuba and southern European countries such as Spain, Italy, and Greece. Many parents tried to preserve some ethnic identity in their children, even those born in this country. "Dress-up" provided one means of combining play and education in ethnic customs. These Cuban-American children gathered at Tampa’s Cuban Club for some patriotic occasion in 1912.

Photograph courtesy of Florida State Archives.
Masaryktown in Hernando County was settled by immigrants from Czechoslovakia, who named their new town after a Czech patriot. These two unidentified girls were dressed in traditional costumes for a 1958 festival in Masaryktown.

Photograph courtesy of Florida State Archives.

Americanization was long considered a primary function of public schools, even in areas which had few immigrants. These kindergarten children in Bartow (Polk County) wore star-spangled costumes for a national holiday in 1932.

Photograph courtesy of Florida State Archives.
During World War I these two Bartow children played at being a nurse and a wounded soldier.

Photograph courtesy of Florida State Archives.
Clark Knight’s clothes and musical taste stamped him as a member of an elite Tampa family in the 1880s.

Photograph courtesy of Florida State Archives.
For adults, play could serve as a means of initiating children into the rituals of society. Tea parties offered a traditional nineteenth-century form of play, allowing children a chance to act like adults. This photograph from the 1880s shows Helen Wilson and Olive Smith, both of Bartow.

Photograph courtesy of Florida State Archives.

Tea parties often included boys, who also had to be socialized. This 1931 photograph shows three Tampa children: Blanche Joan and Mary Pat Weedon and their cousin, Frederick Renfro Weedon, Jr.

Photograph courtesy of Florida State Archives.
At the turn of the century, the favorite toy of girls was dolls. In an 1899 survey of children, girls under twelve mentioned dolls more often than any other toy or form of play. However, by the 1920s, surveys showed that play (tag, bicycling, hide and seek) was more important to girls than dolls. This photograph shows Jessie Ruth Stokes of Arcadia (De Soto County) with her dolls in 1902.

Photograph courtesy of Florida State Archives.
This portrait from the 1890s reinforces the perception that girls and boys had different playthings. Tampa’s Floss Knight holds a doll while her brother Jules cradles a "real" pet.

Photograph courtesy of Florida State Archives.

Boys also played with stuffed animals not "dolls." However, this 1925 photograph of Sarasota’s Frederick Keith suggests a certain distance between the boy and his "Petey Rabbit."

Photograph courtesy of Florida State Archives.
Prior to the twentieth century, handmade toys were common. This undated photograph shows Tampa’s Leslie Washington Weedon, posing at sixteen months of age, with what appears to be a handcrafted cart.

Photograph courtesy of Florida State Archives.
Despite the increasing popularity of store-bought toys, unique homemade playthings could still be found. This goat-drawn wagon carried Lakeland children, Mary Nancy Sammon and Paul Jones, in 1931.

Photograph courtesy of Florida State Archives.

Among middle-class Americans in the late nineteenth century, gift giving for holidays and special occasions became a form of conspicuous consumption that encouraged parents to shower toys on children. This 1915 photograph of Ted Mack of Bartow shows a child with several toys, including a toy horse he was clearly too small to mount by himself.

Photograph courtesy of Florida State Archives.
Edson Keith posed with his son Frederick at a Sarasota beach in 1925. The impressive toys appear more important to the proud father than to the boy whose attention is focused elsewhere.

Photograph courtesy of Florida State Archives.

In this picture, Timmy Keith of Sarasota seems more bewildered than amused by his mechanical dog.

Photograph courtesy of Florida State Archives.
Bicycles first appeared in the late nineteenth century, but they required skill and the outdoors. This undoubtedly made them more popular with children than with protective parents. This unidentified Sarasota boy posed indoors with a tricycle in the 1880s.

Photograph courtesy of Florida State Archives.
Both girls and boys engaged in cycling, and it is not clear in this picture from the 1890s whether the tricycle belonged to Rossie or Ted Evans of Fort Myers.

Photograph courtesy of Florida State Archives.
A Tampa boy on tricycle (c. 1915).

Photograph courtesy Florida State Archives.
Abbie Laura Lyle of Bartow had her bike decorated for some kind of festive occasion in 1906.

Photograph courtesy of Florida State Archives.
These Fort Myers boys, hanging out at the corner of Main and Hendry streets in the 1910s, reflect the kind of freedom and independence that bicycles could give children.

Photograph courtesy of Florida State Archives.
This turn-of-the-century photograph of two Tampa brothers, Frederick Renfro and Harry Lee Weedon, shows the type of physical—even violent play often encouraged among boys. In this case, an adult would have had to assist by lacing up the gloves for the mock boxing match.

Photograph courtesy of Florida State Archives.
Unlike many parents, children considered games more significant than toys in their play, because many games, like tag and hide and seek, do not require any special objects. Although baseball requires some equipment, it was the singular most popular form of play among boys in several surveys between 1900 and 1925. This baseball team posed around 1900 with their principal at a school in Alva (Lee County).

Photograph courtesy of Florida State Archives.
One of the most candid photographs in this collection shows two of the happiest looking children. These two Seminole boys appear to be truly enjoying the outdoors in the 1930s, even though they have no playthings except the stone one boy is proudly displaying for the photographer.

Photograph courtesy of Florida State Archives.
NOTES


3 Ibid., 168.