

Economic Transformation and Historical Identity: A Case Study of Osceola County,
Florida

By

Sarah Fry

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Thesis Committee:

Dr. Brenden Martin, Chair

Dr. Susan Myers-Shirk

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ABSTRACT

Over the past five decades Central Florida has experienced dramatic demographic and economic changes. The catalyst for this change began with the opening of the Walt Disney World theme park. Before this, the area consisted of small towns dependent on agriculture. Once Walt Disney World opened however, the character of Central Florida shifted dramatically. Drawing millions of tourists year-round, the pace of life quickened, and the promise of hospitality industry jobs lured new residents into the area at unprecedented rates. In the midst of all this change, long-time residents struggled to reconcile this emerging identity as a major tourist destination with their pioneer heritage. This is especially pronounced in Osceola County, where the county seat of Kissimmee is one of the fastest growing cities in the state. Examining how the population and economy of Osceola County has changed and how these changes have been incorporated into historical interpretation will demonstrate the difficulties of developing a historical identity in the midst of a fast changing tourist economy.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES.....	v
INTRODUCTION.....	1
OSCEOLA COUNTY – SETTLEMENT THROUGH WORLD WAR II.....	3
POPULATION CHANGES AND DEVELOPMENT IN FLORIDA.....	9
TOURISM AND PUBLIC MEMORY.....	13
CONCLUSION AND METHODOLOGY.....	19
CHAPTER ONE: THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE OSCEOLA COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY, 1949-2010.....	22
CHAPTER TWO: TOURISM COMES TO CENTRAL FLORIDA.....	35
TOURISM IN CENTRAL FLORIDA FOLLOWING WORLD WAR II.....	38
OSCEOLA COUNTY’S SHIFTING DEMOGRAPHICS AND LANDSCAPE.....	47
CHAPTER THREE: BIG TOURISM COMES TO TOWN.....	52
CENTRAL FLORIDA WELCOMES DISNEY WORLD.....	52
OSCEOLA COUNTY POPULATION GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT, 1970-1990.....	59
COMMUNITY DIVISION AND ECONOMIC UNCERTAINTY.....	67
CHAPTER FOUR: OSCEOLA COUNTY TODAY – INCORPORATING THE NEW CENTRAL FLORIDA INTO HISTORICAL INTERPRETATION.....	75
CONCLUSION.....	85
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	88
APPENDICES.....	94
APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL FORM.....	95

LIST OF FIGURES

FIGURE 1: MAP OF OSCEOLA COUNTY..... 11

FIGURE 2: ORANGE BLOSSOM TRAIL ASSOCIATION PAMPHLET..... 42

FIGURE 3: ENTRANCE TO GATORLAND..... 44

FIGURE 4: *KISSIMMEE GAZETTE* – CITY OF KISSIMMEE ADVERTISEMENT..... 56

FIGURE 5: OSCEOLA COUNTY WELCOME CENTER AND HISTORY MUSEUM
ENTRANCE..... 76

FIGURE 6: OSCEOLA COUNTY PIONEER VILLAGE – BUILDING MARKER..... 81

FIGURE 7: OSCEOLA COUNTY PIONEER VILLAGE – BUILDING SITES..... 82

INTRODUCTION

In December 2014 the United States Census Bureau announced that Florida had become the third most populous state in the United States, passing New York with a population of 19.9 million people. With a growth rate of 1.49 percent, Florida was the sixth fastest growing state in the country from July 2013 to July 2014. Rapid growth is not a new phenomenon for the Sunshine State. Since the 1950s Florida's population has steadily increased, largely due to people moving into the state from elsewhere. Highlighting the rapid rate of population growth during the last half of the twentieth century, historian Gary Mormino refers to this time period as "Florida's Big Bang." The influx of new residents has led to dramatic demographic changes throughout the state, particularly in Central Florida.¹

The catalyst for much of this growth was the transformation of the region into a popular tourist destination. Tourism began to play an important role in Florida's development in the early 1800s, but it was not until the years following the end of World War II that the state really began to transform into the leisure destination it is today. Americans began traveling more during this time period, and with its sunny beaches, Florida made for an attractive vacation. While the growth of the tourist industry during the 1950s and 1960s was significant, it was the opening of Walt Disney World in 1971 that helped Central Florida to become one of the most visited tourist

¹ United States Census Bureau, *Florida Passes New York to Become the Nation's Third Most Populous State*, *Census Bureau Reports*, 2014, accessed June 9, 2015. <http://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2014/cb/14-232.html>.; Gary R. Mormino, *Land of Sunshine, State of Dreams: A Social History of Modern Florida*, (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2008), 2.

destinations in the world. As the theme park brought in more visitors, the region began to adjust to meet the needs and expectations of the incoming tourists. Located in the heart of Central Florida, Osceola County in particular saw significant changes, transforming from a sleepy agricultural county to a crowded tourist destination.²

As the tourist industry continued to grow and transform the social, economic, and environmental conditions in the state, it became even more difficult for residents to reconcile the reality of living in a service-industry oriented location with this perceived life of leisure. This has been an issue for Florida since before the rise of mega tourist sites. Efforts to market the state have “claimed [Florida] to be a kind of hologram of Paradise, a place where the most ancient, Edenic memories of the race are somehow re-invented in the form of contemporary fantasies.” Ray Arsenault proposed the term “Florida dreamscape” to describe how Florida is “a cultural backdrop capable of inspiring a variety of dreamlike images and expectations.” Outsiders viewed Florida as an exotic escape and associated the state primarily with leisure. This perception persisted, even though it was not necessarily a true representation of life for actual Floridians.³

² Tracy J. Revels, *Sunshine Paradise: A History of Florida Tourism*, (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2011), 6, 8; Mormino, *Land of Sunshine, State of Dreams*, 28. For a more general look at Florida history see Michael Gannon, *Florida: A Short History*, (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2003) and Michael Gannon, ed., *The New History of Florida*, (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1996).

³ Stephen J. Whitfield, “Florida’s Fudged Identity,” *The Florida Historical Quarterly* 71, no. 4 (April 1993): 413, accessed March 11, 2013. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30150390>; Raymond Arsenault, “Is There a Florida Dream?” *Forum* 17, no. 3 (Summer 1994): 25, accessed August 2, 2015. <http://hdl.handle.net/10806/7263>.

In catering to tourists, Tracy Revels argues that Floridians are often complicit in this muddling of Florida's identity. Revels, a native of Florida, points out that in the process locals "have come to feel like strangers in their own land, confused by the distorted image of fun, sun, and eternal youth that is projected onto them." Additionally, the new mega theme parks did not exhibit any real ties to Florida. Before Disney, the majority of theme parks in Florida emphasized Florida's natural beauty and capitalized on the uniqueness of the state. As Dorothy Mays puts it: "Disney created a homogenized environment that cobbled together the most attractive features of environments from around the country." The homogenization that was evident throughout the park began to seep out into the community in the form of suburbs, fast food restaurants, and shopping malls. Given the rapid pace of these changes in Florida, it is unsurprising that developing an inclusive public memory is difficult.⁴

Osceola County – Settlement through World War II

The image of Osceola County as a leisure destination is a far cry from the difficulties of the region's early settlement. The first European settlers to the area did not appear until the 1830s. Prior to this time most settlement in Florida had occurred along the coast and in North Florida. The area was already home to the Seminole Indians. As more settlers came into the area, tension between them and the Seminole people continued to rise. This was exacerbated by the Seminoles' willingness to harbor

⁴ Revels, *Sunshine Paradise*. 4; Dorothy Mays, "Gatorland: Survival of the Fittest among Florida's Mid-Tier Tourist Attractions," *The Florida Historical Quarterly* 87, no 4 (Spring 2009): 526, accessed June 11, 2014. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20700250>.

runaway slaves, inciting Andrew Jackson to retaliate in a series of conflicts known as the Seminole Wars beginning in 1817. The conflict was also part of the effort to force the Seminoles to move west of the Mississippi.⁵

In order to meet the Seminole resistance, U.S. troops erected a string of forts across the interior of Florida. Many of these later served as the basis for new civilian settlements. One of the prominent leaders of the Seminole resistance was a man named Osceola. As part of the conflict he was drawn in under the pretense of a truce and captured by U.S. troops. Osceola was imprisoned for a short while at the Castillo de San Marcos in St. Augustine before being transported to Fort Moultrie in South Carolina. He died there later due to illness. In 1887 Florida government officials took land from Orange and Brevard counties to form a new county that they named after Osceola. The Seminoles were never completely driven from Central Florida, although most of the Seminoles that remained in Florida retreated to the Everglades. Conflicts with the Seminoles tapered off after the Third Seminole War ended in 1858.⁶

⁵ For more on the Seminole Wars see John Missall and Mary Lou Missall, *The Seminole Wars: America's Longest Indian Conflict*, (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2004); John Campbell, "The Seminoles, the 'Bloodhound War,' and Abolitionism, 1796-1865," *Journal of Southern History* 72, no. 2 (May 2006): 259-302; Larry Eugene Rivers, *Rebels and Runaways: Slave Resistance in Nineteenth-Century Florida*, (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2012); John K. Mahon, *History of the Second Seminole War, 1835-1842*, (Gainesville, University Press of Florida, 2010).

⁶ Patricia Riles Wickman, *Osceola's Legacy* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1991), 143-150. For more on Florida's role in the Civil War see Irvin D. S. Winsboro, *Florida's Civil War: Explorations into Conflict, Interpretations and Memory* (Cocoa, FL: Florida Historical Society Press, 2007); Canter Brown Jr., "The Civil War, 1861-1865," in *The New History of Florida*, edited by Michael Gannon (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1996); Jim Robison, *Kissimmee: Gateway to the Kissimmee River Valley* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2003), 15, Nook; Robison, *Kissimmee*, 93.; "Origin of the County Names in Florida," *The Florida Historical Quarterly* 1, no. 3 (October 1908): 33, accessed September 26, 2013. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30138226>; Robison, *Kissimmee*, 29.

Conflict with the Seminoles hampered European settlement in Central Florida, but many people stayed away simply because the harsh, swampy land made for difficult living conditions. After the Seminole Wars were over, the government began offering generous land grants to individuals willing to settle the area. While some farming did take hold, the landscape made farming very difficult. Most settlers turned to raising cattle as their primary source of income. When Florida finally entered the Civil War, one of their major contributions was beef for Confederate rations. Union forces pushed into Central and South Florida seeking to disrupt the supply of cattle. At the urging of Tampa resident Captain James McKay, Secretary of War James A. Seddon authorized the formation of a unit to combat the Union efforts. Known as the Cow Cavalry, the unit was charged with protecting and driving Florida cattle to Confederate camps in desperate need of food. The Cow Cavalry was reminiscent of similar efforts to thwart attacks during the Seminole Wars. When the Civil War finally ended, the economy of Florida continued to revolve around agriculture.⁷

The settlement of Allendale was the largest settlement in the Osceola County region at the time and served as a staging point for cattle herders in the interior of Florida looking to ship their cattle to other places. The advent of the steamboat made this development possible. It was much easier to reach the remote spaces of Central

⁷ Robison, *Kissimmee*, 32; The Seminoles still represented a threat in the region and McKay was concerned that they may take advantage of the chaos caused by the military action. Although the Seminoles were not sympathetic to the Union, McKay feared that they may retaliate for past conflicts. Robert A. Taylor, "Cow Cavalry: Munnerlyn's Battalion in Florida, 1864-1865," *The Florida Historical Quarterly* 65, no. 2 (October 1986): 197-198, accessed November 3, 2013. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30146741>; Robison, *Kissimmee*, 37.

Florida by boat, and by the 1870s developers began to dredge canals to allow for easier steamboat passage. These efforts began in earnest in the early 1880s when a wealthy businessman from Pennsylvania named Hamilton Disston took an interest in the development of Florida. The position of Allendale right on the shores of Lake Tohopekaliga made it the ideal place for Disston to set up his operation. He encouraged the development of steamboat travel as well as sugar cane crops, especially at the St. Cloud sugar plantation. Ultimately the plantation failed, and eventually the land was purchased and converted into a retirement community for Civil War veterans. In 1883 the settlement of Allendale was officially incorporated and renamed Kissimmee. When Osceola County was created four years later Kissimmee was named as the county seat.⁸

Just as steamboats opened the interior of Florida for agricultural shipments, they also opened up the area to people who wanted to visit the Florida frontier. When the railroads came to the area in the late 1800s, this made it even easier for the first snowbirds to take shelter from northern winters in Florida. Kissimmee saw its first downtown hotels meant to serve the many people who came to Florida for the warm climate and the natural beauty. In particular the Tropical Hotel sought to serve wealthy visitors to Kissimmee. The area gained a reputation as an outdoorsman's paradise, especially to those interested in fishing. Visitors were also fascinated by alligators, which many saw as an animal left over from the prehistoric days. This fascination persisted as

⁸ Robison, *Kissimmee*, 62; Pat Dodson, "Hamilton Disston's St. Cloud Sugar Plantation, 1887-1901," *The Florida Historical Quarterly* 49, no. 4 (April 1971): 356-369, accessed November 4, 2013. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30140626>; Interestingly this community was marketed to Union veterans. The large number of veterans that moved to St. Cloud helped give the city the nickname "Soldier City." Mormino, *Land of Sunshine, State of Dreams*, 127.

Florida tourism evolved, and eventually became part of the inspiration behind one of Central Florida's most eccentric tourist attractions, the Florida Wildlife Institute. Renamed Gatorland in 1954, this is still a popular attraction in the area today. Although the economy remained dependent upon agriculture through the beginning of the twentieth century, early development laid the groundwork for the tourist economy to come.⁹

During the 1920s Florida experienced a land boom that helped to grow the population of the state significantly. Although the number of residents in Osceola County remained small during this period, it did experience growth. Between 1920 and 1930 the population of Osceola County grew by 48.7 percent, but the total number of residents was still under 11,000 people. By 1926 the land boom was starting to wane. It was brought to an abrupt end in 1926 when a devastating hurricane plowed through the state, scaring away potential investors and tourists alike. There was little time to recover before Florida took another hit with the beginning of the Great Depression. In Osceola County the population had actually declined by 1940. World War II further hampered growth, with only a 12.7 percent population increase between 1940 and 1950. Still, the advent of World War II helped Florida's economy recover from the effects of the Great Depression. The Sunshine State proved to be an excellent location for military training camps, and by the end of World War II boasted more than forty major military

⁹ Revels, *Sunshine Paradise*, 33, 110; Robison, *Kissimmee*, 79-80; For an interesting look at how this access shaped Florida travel writing see Jesus Mendez, "From Adventure Travel to Leisure Tourism: The Florida Letters of William Drysdale in the New York Times, 1884-1893," *The Florida Historical Quarterly* 89, no. 4 (Spring 2011): 437-468; Gatorland is actually the third name that Owen Godwin chose for his theme park. Before settling on Gatorland he considered calling it the Snake Village and Alligator Farm, but was worried this would scare away women. Mays, "Gatorland," 510.

installations. The influx of servicemen helped to keep Florida's hotels filled and gave business leaders some breathing room to aggressively promote the tourist industry in anticipation of the end of the war.¹⁰

The tourist industry in Florida had already begun to recover from the effects of the Great Depression before World War II was over. The trend continued through the 1950s and 1960s due to a growing middle class and increased prosperity in the United States. Thanks to policies enacted as part of the New Deal, vacation time became more common for the average worker. More people had the time and the money to seek out leisure activities, and Florida was in a prime position to give them what they wanted. Promoters marketed the state as an exotic playground, virtually abandoning any ties to Florida's Southern heritage with the belief that this identity would not help grow the tourist economy. Jim Crow was in effect throughout Florida however, and the experiences of African American tourists differed greatly from the advertisements that drew them to the state in the first place. Floridians wrestled with the desire to maintain segregation while also wanting to bring in as many tourist dollars as possible, creating a confusing blend of welcoming advertising and hostile attitudes.¹¹

¹⁰ William W. Rogers, "Fortune and Misfortune: The Paradoxical Twenties," in *The New History Of Florida*, ed. Michael Gannon (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1996); Tommy R. Thompson, "Florida in American Popular Magazines, 1870-1970," *The Florida Historical Quarterly* 82, no. 1 (Summer 2003): 6-9, accessed July 14, 2015. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30149273>; *U.S. Census of Population: 1920, Vol 1. Number of and Distribution of Inhabitants*, 98; *U.S. Census of Population, 1930, Vol. 1 Number and Distribution of Inhabitants*, 197; *U.S. Census of Population: 1940, Vol. 1 Number of Inhabitants*, 213; *U.S. Census of Population: 1950, Vol 1. Number of Inhabitants*, 10-1; Ben F. Rogers, "Florida in World War II: Tourists and Citrus," *The Florida Historical Quarterly* 39, no1. (July 1960): 34, 37, accessed July 14, 2015. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30139069>.

¹¹ Revels, 104; Lamar York, "Post-bellum Florida: Southerly, but Not Southern," *Southern Studies* 9, no 1 (Spring 1998): 75; There were efforts to highlight racial issues in Florida during the 1950s and 1960s, but

The burgeoning tourism industry lured investors to Florida who were willing to spend money on improvements to the infrastructure throughout the state in an effort to maximize tourist spending. Interstates revolutionized the way that people travelled throughout the country, but this had a particularly significant effect in Florida, giving rise to an era of tourism largely consisting of small roadside attractions. The majority of these attractions capitalized on the natural beauty of Florida's tropical landscape, similar to early efforts to entertain travelers. The growth of the tourist industry during this time period represented a significant shift in Florida's economy away from agriculture. Still, these attractions were generally considered stops along the way to somewhere else, most likely the beach. Central Florida was more of a way station than a true tourist destination.¹²

Population Changes and Development in Florida

While the growth of the tourist industry was a boon for the economy, as more people flocked to the state it brought challenges to long-time residents. Roadside attractions that catered to tourists began popping up along Florida's highways, transforming both the physical and cultural landscape of the state. In addition to the tourists, new residents began moving into the state at a rapid pace. Between 1950 and 1960 Florida's population jumped from 2.7 million to 5 million, a staggering 78.7 percent increase. Although growth slowed in the following decade, it remained one of the

historian Tommy R. Thompson argues that they were largely ignored by those outside of the state who chose to focus on Florida's image as a leisure destination. See Tommy R. Thompson, "Florida in American Popular Magazines," 13-15.

¹² Revels, 102; Mays, "Gatorland," 510.

fastest growing states in the nation. With so many immigrants and migrants moving into the state, Florida's already distant relationship with Southern culture was even further strained.¹³

Osceola County grew at an even greater rate during this time period. In 1950 the total population in Osceola was 11,406 people. By 1970 it had jumped to 25,267, more than doubling the number of inhabitants. Even with this growth Osceola County remained small, and most of the population still lived in rural areas and worked in agriculture. The cities of Kissimmee and St. Cloud were the only urbanized areas in Osceola. The surrounding counties were much more heavily populated and developed. Compared to Orange County's population of 344,311 in 1970, Osceola was practically the frontier.¹⁴

¹³ Mormino, *Land of Sunshine, State of Dreams*, 13.

¹⁴ *U.S. Census of Population: 1950, Vol 1. Number of Inhabitants*, 10-12; *U.S. Census of Population, 1970, Vol. 1 Characteristics of the Population, Part 11 Florida*, 11-18, accessed July 10, 2015, http://www2.census.gov/prod2/decennial/documents/19701_fl1-01.pdf.

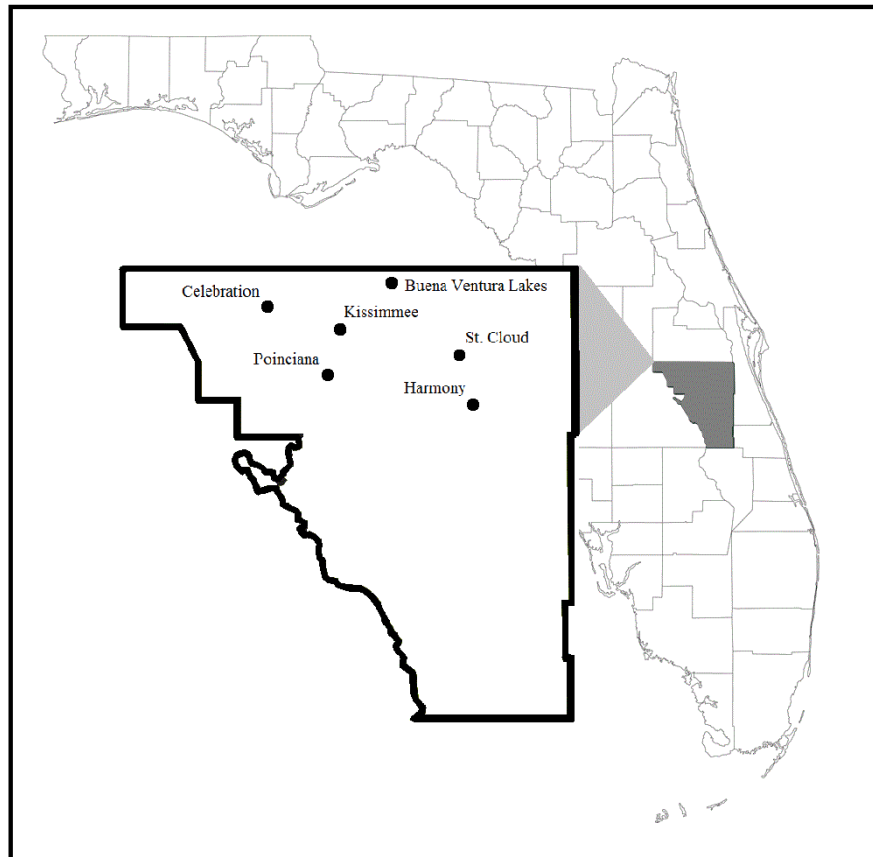


Figure 1: **Map of Osceola County:** This map shows where Osceola County is situated in Florida. The only two incorporated cities are Kissimmee and St. Cloud. The other locations are the largest unincorporated towns and subdivisions in the county. The majority of the current population in Osceola County is clustered around these locations.

When Walt Disney announced plans to build a new theme park just outside of Orlando in 1965 he heralded the beginning of Central Florida's status as a tourist mecca. Initially many operators of smaller attractions in Central Florida thought that the theme park would help their business. They expected that the increase in the number of visitors specifically travelling to Central Florida would raise their own attendance rates. Additionally, at this time Florida tourism was still mostly seasonal and the number of visitors to the state trickled to almost nothing during the summer months. Tourism

promoters expected that to change once Disney World opened. Although initially it seemed that they, might be correct, the success of Disney World lured other large theme parks to the area and it was not long before many of the smaller attractions had to shut their doors. The opening of large-scale theme parks fundamentally changed Florida tourism in ways that reverberated throughout the state, setting the stage for significant cultural and economic changes.¹⁵

Although the major theme parks put many small tourist attractions out of business, they also brought new jobs to the area. Lured by the promise of work in the growing tourist industry, people began moving to Florida from out of state. Central Florida especially felt the effects of this influx of new residents. Local communities struggled to cope with the increased population, and found themselves in a constant state of construction to address clogged roadways and housing shortages. In the process, suburbs and shopping centers began popping up in what once were rural areas of Florida. Mormino points to the homogenizing effect of suburbanization as a threat to Florida's traditional lifestyle.¹⁶

The implementation of the concept of New Urbanism in planned communities, such as the Town of Celebration, further altered the social and cultural fabric of Central Florida, essentially creating pockets within the region that were insulated from the larger community. The ethnic make-up of the state also went through a transformation. Although there had been a significant Hispanic population in South Florida and along the

¹⁵ Mays, "Gatorland," 526-528.

¹⁶ Mormino, *Land of Sunshine*, 32-33.

Gulf coast before this time period, during the 1980s it began to grow in Central Florida at a rapid pace. Puerto Ricans comprised much of the increase due in part to targeted marketing campaigns. According to Jorge Duany and Patricia Silver, “the Orlando-Kissimmee area became increasingly attractive, as the growing service industry there provided entertainment for some and employment for others.” Local communities struggled to incorporate this growing population. For example, in Osceola County as of 2009 nearly a quarter of the population indicated Puerto Rican origins, yet they were and continue to be significantly underrepresented in the electoral process.¹⁷

Tourism and Public Memory

Tourists come into a place with their own expectations about the culture that do not necessarily reflect the reality of life for residents. This is particularly true in the South, and although Florida is distinct from the South, many of the cultural issues there are similar. Tourists may come seeking authentic experiences, but that does not mean they want to confront the difficult aspects of Southern history. Additionally, in many cases, locals would prefer to present themselves in a certain light, minimizing controversial aspects of their past. It is difficult to develop authentic interpretations of

¹⁷ Hugh E. Bartling, “Disney’s Celebration, the Promise of New Urbanism, and the Portents of Homogeneity,” *The Florida Historical Quarterly* 81, no. 1. (Summer 2002): 66, accessed October 9, 2013. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30147614>; Jorge Duany and Patricia Silver, “The ‘Puerto Ricanization’ of Florida: Historical Background and Current Status,” *CENTRO Journal* 22, no. 1 (Spring 2010): 17, 7, 26, *Academic Search Premier*, EBSCOhost (accessed April 2, 2015).

Southern history while trying to meet the expectations of tourists and balance the concerns of locals.¹⁸

Efforts to incorporate more controversial topics into the interpretation offered at heritage sites have been fraught with controversy. Tourism promoters question whether a site that deals with the horrors of slavery in an honest way will be able to draw in tourists who are out to soak up sun and have a good time. Ted Ownby points out that it is good to be concerned, and that heritage sites do not need to try to be all things to all people. He states that “such an approach often seems too grim to attract those who don’t want grimness on their vacations, and sometimes it seems too safe and reassuring to be both honest and significant.” Still, he argues that it is worth the effort to try to bridge the gap when it is possible to do so in an authentic and sensitive way.¹⁹

This raises the question of what qualifies as authentic when it comes to the commodification of heritage. When heritage can be shaped to meet specific goals, who determines what is authentic? Although this can be a sticky question, some historians do not see a problem with using heritage in this way. Gregory Ashworth argues that heritage is inherently a contemporary product that plays an important role in creating place identity, and historians should embrace the opportunity to interpret that heritage in a way that will influence the future. In his model, heritage tourism is the way that this interpretation is brought to the public. Ashworth’s model places much of the control of

¹⁸ Karen L. Cox, “Introduction,” in *Destination Dixie: Tourism and Southern History*, ed. Karen L. Cox (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2012), 4.

¹⁹ Ted Ownby, “Nobody Knows the Troubles I’ve Seen, but Does Anyone Want to Hear about Them When They’re on Vacation?” in *Southern Journeys: Tourism, History, and Culture in the Modern South*, ed. Richard D. Starnes (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2003), 245.

heritage in the hand of those creating the interpretation and leaves little room for the influence of tourist expectations. In reality, many places shape their interpretation to fit what tourists want to see. That does not mean that tourists have all the control, but it does mean that to a certain extent outsiders have some say in shaping a community's identity. In some cases this can be a good thing, forcing locals to deal with difficult aspects of their own past. For example, in her essay "One Hundred Years of Tom Sawyer at the Mark Twain Boyhood Home," Hillary Iris Lowe discusses how during the 1990s visitors to the Mark Twain Boyhood Home and Museum in Hannibal, Missouri, expected the site to deal with slavery and race relations in the South based on the history of the town and the prominence of those topic in Twain's writing. Although the community was reluctant to address such sensitive topics, they eventually incorporated them into the site's interpretation, forcing the community to at least acknowledge them as a part of the community's identity. Regardless of whether or not the effect is positive, it is clear that the heritage tourism industry has the power to influence public memory.²⁰

As David R. Gold and Howard N. Rabinowitz point out "Florida, of course, is different." Although to many people Florida seems set apart from the rest of the South, this only serves to magnify many of these issues. While the rest of the South was experiencing a period of convergence during the second half of the twentieth century, the influx of outsiders and the diverse population in Florida led to a more disjointed

²⁰ Gregory J. Ashworth, "Heritage, Tourism and Europe: a European Future for a European Past?" in *Heritage, Tourism and Society*, ed. David T. Herbert (London: Printer, 1997): 70; Hilary Iris Lowe, "One Hundred Years of Tom Sawyer at the Mark Twain Boyhood Home," in *Destination Dixie: Tourism and Southern History*, ed. Karen L. Cox (Gainseville: University Press of Florida, 2012), 30.

identity. It is impossible to discuss the formation of a Floridian identity without looking at the effects of tourism.²¹

Florida has a long history as a tourist destination. Long before Walt Disney decided to open a theme park in Central Florida, wealthy Northerners travelled south to Florida to get away from the harsh winters up north. There were also many who believed that Florida's tropical climate was beneficial for the treatment of different illnesses, leading to the establishment of health resorts throughout the state. In many cases the marketing for these resorts made fantastical claims about their healing capabilities. Early tourism to Florida also centered on the environment, drawing in those fascinated by the tropical landscape as well as adventurous hunters looking for more exotic prey. Fantasy continued to play a role in tourism marketing as theme parks became more common. Florida became associated with an image outside the concerns of everyday life. By making every effort to court tourists, residents played a part in creating disconnect between the idea of living in Florida and reality. This was compounded by how quickly the demographics of the state changed.²²

Historical societies are in a unique position to help communities work through these types of issues. It is common to see the formation of historical societies in communities undergoing change. There is a natural inclination to want to preserve what is familiar in the face of uncertainty. In the United States the early efforts to create

²¹ David R. Goldfield and Howard N. Rabinowitz, "Epilogue: The Vanishing Sunbelt," in *Searching for the Sunbelt: Historical Perspectives on a Region*, ed. Raymond A. Mohl (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1990), 226.

²² Goldfield and Rabinowitz, "Epilogue," 226; Revels, *Sunshine Paradise*, 10, 32.

historical societies were aimed at preventing the loss of historical documents that were facing destruction at an alarming rate. Historical societies began popping up all over the country, and by 1945 more than 800 existed in the United States. While the mission of each of these institutions varied to some degree, they all saw collecting and preserving items of historical significance as a part of their identity. Additionally, as communities began to diversify, these societies were seen as one way to use the past to create a unified identity. Prior to the 1970s, the staff of many local historical societies consisted of amateur historians, but a shortage of academic jobs led to a wave of professionalization in the field when recent graduates of history programs started filling these positions. Historical societies began to focus more on education and public outreach rather than straightforward collecting and preservation.²³

In 1949 Osceola County joined in the movement with the establishment of the Historical Association of Osceola County. Even though tourism played a relatively small role in the local economy at this time, residents sought to preserve Osceola's frontier image in the face of development. There were some successful tourist attractions

²³ Leslie W. Dunlap, *American Historical Societies: 1790-1860* (Philadelphia: Porcupine Press, 1974), 10; Bertha E. Josephson, "How Can We Improve Our Historical Societies?," *The American Archivist* 8, no. 3 (July, 1945): 194, accessed November 3, 2013, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40288454>; Gary B. Nash, "Behind the Velvet Curtain: Academic History, Historical Societies, and the Presentation of the Past," *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 114, no. 1 (January, 1990): 5-6, accessed November 3, 2013, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20092433>; Barbara Franco, "In Urban History Museums and Historical Agencies," in *Public History: Essays from the Field* eds. James B. Gardner and Peter S. LaPaglia (Malabar, Florida: Krieger Publishing Company, 1999), 313. For more on the history of historical societies see Clifford L. Lord, ed., *Keepers of the Past* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1965); Barbara Clark Smith, "The Authority of History: The Changing Public Face of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania," *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 114, no. 1 (Jan. 1990), accessed November 2, 2013. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20092434>; Charles F. Bryan Jr. "In State Historical Agencies, Museums, and Societies: A Constant State of Change," in *Public History: Essays from the Field* eds. James B. Gardner and Peter S. LaPaglia (Malabar, Florida: Krieger Publishing Company, 1999); Carol Kammen, *On Doing Local History* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2003).

nearby prior to the arrival of Walt Disney World, and business leaders were eager to get a piece of the tourism pie. Still, through the 1960s, agriculture remained the primary economic driver. In the 1940s Kissimmee was known as the “cow capital of the state.” That image persisted until the arrival of Disney, which completely changed perceptions of the county. Osceola became one of the fastest growing counties in the state and the local economy quickly became dependent on tourism. The shift to a service-oriented economy that developed as a result of Disney’s arrival signaled the beginning of dramatic changes. As the population grew, both the physical and cultural landscape of Osceola County changed to accommodate the needs of tourists and new residents alike. These newcomers were increasingly distanced from the image of Osceola County as a pioneer settlement. Long-time residents clung to this image, and that is reflected in the development of the local historical society during this time period.²⁴

The Historical Association of Osceola County was renamed the Osceola County Historical Society during the 1960s when the organization was reinvigorated as residents prepared for the influx of people expected in the wake of Walt Disney’s announcement. The activities of the Osceola County Historical Society during this time were guided by a desire to preserve as much of the county’s heritage as possible while much of the area was undergoing huge transformation. Efforts at interpreting Osceola County’s history emphasized its frontier image, focusing on the agricultural economy and lifestyle that remained prominent until the establishment of Disney World. As new residents moved

²⁴ Mormino, *Land of Sunshine, State of Dreams*, 178.

into the area it became more and more difficult to connect this image with the hustle and bustle associated with a hospitality-oriented community.

Conclusion and Methodology

In a state that has so many meanings to so many people, where can residents go to gain a better understanding of community identity? Historical organizations may offer some guidance. Local history museums engage in the process of creating identity for the community and presenting it to the public. According to Tammy Gordon, local history museums are primarily concerned with interpreting history from the perspective of local residents and are less concerned with larger themes of change. The continuity of the community identity is the most important thing, and this is reinforced by having those who lived the history participate in curating these exhibits. In times of change this approach can help to keep a community connected and the historical society can function as a place for groups from different backgrounds to come together and discuss issues that they all face. Robert Archibald argues that in order to use history to create community and bring together people from different backgrounds, different perspectives must be represented. Public historians must work to create narratives that include these differences. Acknowledging differences and working through them can be the first step to creating a shared understanding. This is especially important in areas

where suburbanization has resulted in communities that are spread out and without a central gathering place.²⁵

The development of the Osceola County Historical Society demonstrates many of the key issues facing historical societies in the United States in the twenty-first century. Situated in one of the fastest growing regions of Florida, Osceola County is a changing community that has struggled to come to terms with its own identity. The tourist economy of today bears little resemblance to the agricultural origins of the area. Early efforts by the Osceola County Historical Society to preserve the history of the county emphasized the “pioneer” identity of the early settlers. This remains an important part of the history of Osceola County, but the growth and diversification of the population resulting from the opening of Walt Disney World has irreversibly altered what it means to be an Osceola County resident. In order to develop strong ties with the community it is necessary to address how the population has changed and ensure that these new viewpoints are represented in the way that history is interpreted. The Osceola County Historical Society is in a position to address these issues and contribute to the community building effort.

This study will focus on changes in Osceola County since the 1950s. Census records will help to illustrate the demographic changes in the region while also providing a touch point for an analysis of how these changes are represented in the

²⁵ Tammy S. Gordon, *Private History in Public: Exhibition* (Lanham, MA: AltaMira Press, 2010), 35; Amy K. Levin, ed., *Defining Memory: Local Museums and the Construction of History in America's Changing Communities*, (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2007), 263; Robert Archibald, *A Place to Remember: Using History to Build Community* (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 1999), 96; Robert Archibald, *The New Town Square: Museums and Communities in Transition* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2004), 44.

historical interpretation at historical sites in the county. The primary sites that concern this study are the Osceola County Pioneer Village and the Osceola County Welcome Center and Museum. Interviews with volunteers and staff members of the Osceola County Historical Society supplement this analysis with background information. Local newspaper articles provide the context of the social and economic development of the county along with the holdings of the Osceola County Historical Society. Chapter one introduces the Osceola County Historical Society and the early history of the organization up to the most recent efforts at expansion. Chapter two details the growth of the tourist industry in Osceola County, and Central Florida as a whole more generally as necessary for context. Chapter three demonstrates how the arrival of major theme parks has shaped growth in Osceola County. This includes a discussion of the changing demographics in the region and the conflict between popular perceptions of Central Florida as a leisure paradise with the reality of living and working in service-oriented economy. Chapter four looks at how local historical organizations (primarily the Osceola County Historical Society) are currently interpreting the history of Osceola County and their reactions to demographic changes in the area. Examining the way that local historical organizations have dealt with these changes should be a useful case study for other locations experiencing similar issues.

CHAPTER ONE

The Development of the Osceola County Historical Society, 1949-2010

The Osceola County Pioneer Village sits just off Highway 192 in Kissimmee, Florida. In a sea of flashy tourist traps, the Pioneer Village stands out for its simplicity. Consisting of a few structures gathered from around the county that date to the late 1800s, the site attempts to capture a vision of Central Florida that is virtually impossible to see in the local landscape anymore. The earliest European settlers to the area found land that was really only suitable to cattle grazing, which led to the rise of the cattle industry that Osceola County was initially built on. Tourism eventually took the place of agriculture as the primary economic force in the area and brought about significant changes, both in the people and the landscape of the county. Throughout these changes the Osceola County Historical Society has sought to preserve the “pioneer” history of Osceola County.

As Central Florida began to grow, there was an increased awareness of the need to document local history. This was a trend that was beginning to take hold in Florida as a whole. As the local population began to grow along with increased tourism there was a fear that local history might be lost forever. In 1949 a group of Osceola County residents took it upon themselves to create a historical society “to discuss, collect, and preserve materials of historical interest relative to Osceola County.”¹ The newly formed

¹ “Now Is the Time,” *The Florida Historical Quarterly* 28, no. 3 (January 1950): 212, accessed September 9, 2013. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30140580>. The tone of this article demonstrates the urgency that those

Historical Association of Osceola County was established and began holding meetings in St. Cloud to discuss matters concerning the history of the county. Unfortunately it doesn't appear that much came of this initial effort. The organization did not have a location to store a collection, and as a result the Osceola County Historical Society does not have any records pertaining to this period in its history. Things began to change somewhat in the early 1960s when the society did engage in some collecting of small items, such as pictures and documents, as well as oral histories. However, lack of a formal space continued to be an issue that plagued the society until the late 1980s, when local residents Carl and Ruth Spence donated a piece of land on which to construct the Pioneer Village and Museum. During this time it appears that the society functioned more as a social club, continuing sporadic meetings in St. Cloud and Kissimmee to discuss the history of the county. There was very little effort to reach out to the community through other events or publications. The society did, however, provide a starting place for early local historians such as Elizabeth Cantrell who later wrote a book on Osceola County that is still used by the society to research for new exhibits.²

in the historical community of Florida felt regarding the need to preserve local history. The author points out that Osceola County is "late, as is every other locality in Florida in preserving their history," and that "they will find that much of what was once around them is gone forever and the remainder is steadily disappearing." (213)

² When I visited the OCHS I found that they had very little regarding the early days of the organization. The earliest records available dated to the 1960s when the society was reincorporated for the first time, and even these records were sparse; Anza Bast, interview by author, March 2, 2016. Anza Bast is a former board member of the OCHS and a current volunteer. Her family has been involved with the organization since the 1980s. She was invaluable in piecing together the early history of the OCHS; "Historical Society to Meet Monday," *Kissimmee Gazette*, November 8, 1962.

The year 1965 was the beginning of major change in Central Florida. After his secret campaign to purchase large chunks of land south of Orlando was uncovered, Walt Disney officially announced that he planned to open a new theme park in Central Florida. Government officials saw this as a tremendous opportunity for economic growth and encouraged the development of the park by granting Disney a significant amount of control over the purchased land with little government oversight. They expected the new theme park to lead to growth in the already established tourism industry, creating jobs and economic growth for the local residents. Government leaders also saw this as a great marketing ploy to lure new residents to the State of Florida. In 1960 the population of Florida was 4,951,560. By 1980 after the Magic Kingdom had been open for nine years the population had grown to 9,746,324. In Osceola County this growth was particularly evident. Between 1960 and 1980 Osceola County had grown from 19,029 residents to 49,287. Not only was there a surge in the population, but the landscape of Osceola County began to change as well. Where there had been cow pastures and orange groves, hotels and restaurants began popping up. Land was in such a demand by developers that property values skyrocketed. Those with large land holdings saw an opportunity to cash out and sell their property for significant profit. This opened the door for further development.³

³ Revels, *Sunshine Paradise*, 124-125; *U.S. Census of Population, 1980, Vol. 1 Characteristics of the Population, Florida*: 11, accessed October 30, 2013, http://www2.census.gov/prod2/decennial/documents/1980a_flABCs1-01.pdf. ; Revels, *Sunshine Paradise*, 126-127.

It was in this climate that the Kissimmee Chamber of Commerce felt the need to form the Osceola County Historical Commission. This group was established separately from the Osceola County Historical Society, but the two organizations appear to have essentially functioned as one unit. Up to this point, the Osceola County Historical Society had been very limited in what it could collect as they did not own a space to house or exhibit a collection. The Historical Commission made finding space one of their top priorities. Almost immediately the Commission began actively campaigning for funds to create a local history museum. This effort was backed by the Kissimmee Chamber of Commerce whose members saw a local history museum as an excellent tourist attraction, especially considering the public curiosity surrounding the Native American history in the area.⁴

In 1967 William Dummer, then the president of the Osceola County Historical Society, proposed joining with the Osceola County Art and Culture Center in order to raise funds for a building to house both organizations and include a museum. According to Dummer, he and the other members of the Historical Society saw this as long overdue. In an interview published in the *Kissimmee Gazette*, Dummer remarked “it is a

⁴ “County Considers Historical Society,” *Kissimmee Gazette*, April 30, 1964, accessed October 31, 2013, University of Florida Digital Collections; The minutes from the Osceola County Historical Commission’s meeting on September 29, 1965 seem to support that the two organizations worked closely. “...the by-law committee recommended no by-laws be established, rather a method of procedure be adopted, that the Osceola Historical Society and the Commission work together for the common purpose of collecting, preserving and presenting historical artifacts to the public.” This is also the first time that the records reflect the name change of the society from the Historical Association of Osceola County to the Osceola County Historical Society. Minutes of the Osceola County Historical Commission, September 29, 1965, Papers of the Osceola County Historical Society, Osceola County Historical Society, Kissimmee, Florida.; Robert L. Berlinsky to Henry Allen of the National Humanities Endowment, August 15, 1966 Papers of the Osceola County Historical Society, Osceola County Historical Society, Kissimmee, Florida.; “Historical Museum of Osceola County Would be Big Tourist Attraction, Chamber Believes,” *Kissimmee Gazette*, April 16, 1964.; “A Museum,” *Kissimmee Gazette*, April 16, 1964, accessed October 31, 2013, University of Florida Digital Collections.

shame that here in one of the last pioneer sections of the country, things of incalculable historical value are being lost and destroyed because there is no place to house and display them... We have had to confine activities to small items, to pictures and taping recollections of survivors of the pioneer days." There just was no place to store larger artifacts, which resulted in the loss of these items, either to other cities such as Orlando or to private individuals. In addition to a need to save these artifacts, there was also a desire to have a space to meet with tourists.⁵

Rather than having an influx of tourists show up and just visit Disney, Dummer saw the opportunity to engage these visitors with Osceola's past. He observed "When Disneyland brings its expected thousands of visitors, do we want them to hurry through the older established areas(sic) of the county or stop and visit with us for a while?... The addition of a Historical Museum, open to the public, showing the exciting history of our area would be one more reason to stop a while." Members of the Osceola County Historical Society wanted to make sure that the visitors expected to pour into the area got a true picture of Osceola County and its longtime residents. Business leaders also hoped that it would encourage tourists to venture further into the heart of Osceola County, where their spending would have a greater impact. It took some time, but eventually Dummer realized his dream. By 1970 the society had officially teamed up with other local cultural organizations to form the Osceola County Art and Culture Center. The historical society established an exhibit space, albeit a small one, in the

⁵ "Historical Society May Join Art Center," *Kissimmee Gazette*, March 2, 1967.

same building as an arts complex with a performance space. Although space was still limited, this at least established an official space that the Society could use to exhibit what items it did have and to begin to collect new items.⁶

Another project that the Historical Commission took on was the creation of a master map of Osceola County to indicate all of the landmarks, past and present, that were important to the history of the county. The Historical Society had already been working on a similar project, so this was a continuation of efforts already begun. During this time there was significant change occurring in the landscape of Osceola County. Building was booming, and the wide-open cow pastures that had once characterized Osceola were starting to disappear. It was hard to see the pioneer heritage of the area amidst the strip malls and hotels. The map served as one way to combat the loss of these pioneer spaces, if not in physical form than at least as a picture.⁷

After six terms as the president of the Osceola County Historical Society, William Dummer stepped down. Longtime resident Margaret Bast was elected as the new president, and she sought to grow the presence of the society in the county even further. The establishment of an exhibition space increased the visibility of the historical society in the community, and it was not long before efforts were underway to expand further. As early as 1972 efforts were underway to secure funds for a new building. In

⁶ “Historical Society May Join Art Center,” *Kissimmee Gazette*, March 2, 1967; “Margaret Bast Historical Group Head,” *Kissimmee Gazette*, May 28, 1970.; A local theater troupe called the Footlight Theater Guild first initiated the idea of creating the Osceola Art and Culture Center. The other organizations besides the theater troupe and the historical society that joined the group included the Civic Orchestra, Art Association and the Choral Society. Catherine W. Beauchamp, *Look What’s Happened in Osceola County* (Kissimmee, FL: Osceola Art and Culture Center, 1983) 77.

⁷ “Historical Comm. Plans Large Map,” *St. Cloud News*, September 23, 1965; “Historical Map to Show Earlier Osceola County,” *Kissimmee Gazette*, September 23, 1965.

anticipation of the 1976 Bicentennial, in July of 1974 the Art and Culture Center board applied to the state for matching funds to build two new buildings, one for a history museum and the other for an art building. Although it does not appear that a new building was constructed, by 1976 the Historical Society did have a newly renovated wing for exhibits. This remained the home of the Society for the next decade, during which Osceola County continued to undergo significant changes.⁸

Spurred by the growth of the tourism industry, the population of Osceola County continued to expand, and by the 1980s the ethnic makeup of Osceola began to change significantly as well. This shift began when land developers initiated a marketing campaign in Puerto Rico designed to lure residents to Central Florida. The campaign was effective, and Puerto Ricans began moving to Osceola County at a rapid pace. According to the 1980 census, 2.1 percent of residents identified themselves as Hispanic. By 1990 that percentage had risen to 11.9 percent. As the county diversified, residents also spread out. Planned communities popped up throughout the county, and suburbanization was in full swing. The process of suburbanization resulted in congested traffic, increased pollution, and a disconnected community. In the midst of this growth, downtown Kissimmee was passed over and did not see the economic benefits that had been expected when Disney announced it was coming to town. In 1977 Osceola County passed a resort tax to help promote tourism. Local officials hoped increased tourist

⁸ Jim Killip, "Margaret Bast Historical Group Head," *Kissimmee Gazette*, May 28, 1970; "Historical Society's Flea Market's Needs," *Kissimmee Gazette*, February 10, 1972; Peggy McLaughlin, "Historical Museum, Art Unit in Bicentennial Plans," *Sentinel Star*, July 10, 1974; "History Buffs Work In Museum," *Kissimmee Gazette*, October 21, 1976.

traffic would generate enough funds to allow for redevelopment downtown. Over the course of the 1980s, downtown businesses made an effort to renovate buildings that were in disrepair and to market downtown Kissimmee as another stop for tourists.⁹

The Osceola County Historical Society did make an effort to reach out to new residents and tourists. Two publications sponsored by the society during this time period stand out. The first was Catherine Beauchamp's *Look What's Happened in Osceola County*. Published in 1983, the book primarily consisted of anecdotes from Osceola County residents from the days before Walt Disney World opened. The final two pages provide some insight into the motivation behind the publication of this work. Addressing Walt Disney World for the first time, Beauchamp mentions the frenzied development in the area, along with the loss of homes and farmland to businesses catering to tourists. She comments, "Disney World and the other Worlds that followed made a different world in Osceola County." Speaking directly to the reader, she goes on to point out that "many of you who read this booklet came to Osceola County first because of Disney." Rather than being a comprehensive history of the county, the work was intended as an introduction for new residents and visitors to a side of the county that was disappearing.¹⁰

The second work was a collection of articles originally authored by Aldus and

⁹ Mormino, *Land of Sunshine, State of Dreams*, 292; *U.S. Census of Population, 1980, Vol. 1 Characteristics of the Population, Florida*, accessed October 30, 2013, http://www2.census.gov/prod2/decennial/documents/1980a_flABCs1-07.pdf.; *U.S. Census of Population, 1990, CP-1, Florida*, 27, accessed October 30, 2013, <http://www2.census.gov/library/publications/decennial/1990/cp-1/cp-1-11-1.pdf>.; Robison, *Kissimmee*, 122.

¹⁰ Beauchamp, *Look What's Happened in Osceola County*, 79-80.

Robert Cody and published in the *Osceola News-Gazette*. Sponsored by the First Florida Bank, the articles highlighted different aspects of Osceola County's past. Unlike Beauchamp's work, these articles dealt with some of the changes that occurred after Walt Disney World opened, although that coverage was limited. In 1987 the Cody brothers worked with the Osceola County Historical Society to gather these articles and organize them into a single book-length work entitled *Osceola County: The First 100 Years*. The content of these articles was less anecdotal and had a much more formal tone. The Codys went into greater detail about how the county developed and where it appeared to be headed.

While the county was undergoing a period of redevelopment so was the Osceola County Historical Society. Expansion efforts were underway again beginning in 1986. Carl and Ruth Spence donated 3.2 acres of land for the Historical Society to have a place of their own. The Spence's home on the property was converted into offices and the rest of the property was to be used to re-create a late 1800s pioneer settlement. The first structure acquired for this settlement was the Lanier House, an 1895 pioneer home. The Laniers did own cattle, the primary industry of Osceola in the late 1800s, as well as citrus groves. The house still functioned as a family residence right up until it was moved to its new location in 1987. Known as a "Cracker House," it is held up as an example of a form of architecture unique to Florida. "Cracker" is a term that shows up repeatedly throughout the exhibits of the Osceola County Historical Society. While the origins of the term are still contested among scholars at the Pioneer Village and at the history museum, visitors learn that the term refers to the noise made by the whips that cow

wranglers carried for herding cattle. While historically the term has negative racial connotations (generally associated with poor whites and often used to imply that a person is a bigot), many Southerners, particularly in Florida, have embraced the word as a part of their cultural heritage. Various other buildings followed, including a museum space on the property. Additional adjacent land was donated by Elizabeth V. Steffee in 1987 to be used as a nature preserve where people could learn about Florida's natural vegetation and how early settlers used it to survive.¹¹

In 1989 the Osceola County Historical Society was re-incorporated to account for the new responsibilities associated with caring for the new property. The donation of the land by the Spences proved to be a double-edged sword. While the organization now had a place to call its own, the responsibility to care for the property left the organization strapped for cash. When David Snedeker took over as President of the society in 1995 his primary goal was to keep the organization afloat. He was originally inspired to join the historical society after viewing the history exhibits at the Osceola Center for the Arts. The donation of the land by the Spences came with a clause that if the society was ever to dissolve, the land would revert back to a family member. Faced with a dwindling income, limited visitation, and a mountain of debt, Mr. Snedeker put

¹¹ *Spence – Lanier Pioneer Center* (Kissimmee, FL: Osceola County Historical Society, 1991); Bast, Interview.; For more information on the history of the term “cracker” see Dana Ste. Claire, *Cracker: The Cracker Culture in Florida History* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2006).

all of his efforts into keeping the society solvent. At that time there were no paid staff members and only about six or seven steady volunteers.¹²

The first order of business was to improve the financial standing of the society. Mr. Snedeker appealed to the county government for funding. While his goal was to establish permanent funding, at that time he was only able to secure grant funds from the county. This did enable the society to stay afloat while additional funding was sought. Despite the difficulties, the society did have some community support, and this is what sustained the society during the lean years. Mr. Snedeker instituted new programs to encourage more community participation. One of the more successful programs was Collectors Day, where residents with items pertaining to Osceola's history were encouraged to come to the Pioneer Village and show those items to each other. While this program was initially successful, it only lasted for about five years before it was discontinued due to lack of participation.¹³

As the historical society gained a better financial footing, the organization's focus shifted toward expanding the collection. Mr. Snedeker acquired several new items, including a Native American canoe. The new acquisitions also included historical buildings to add to the Pioneer Village. The list of buildings acquired included a one-room school house, general store, water tower, and citrus packing plant. Some of these buildings were originally built for other purposes, but the historical society remodeled

¹² *Articles of Incorporation of Osceola County Historical Society*, November 7, 1989, Papers of the Osceola County Historical Society, Osceola County Historical Society, Kissimmee, Florida; David Snedeker, interview by author, March 7, 2016.

¹³ Snedeker, Interview.

them to make a more complete village. The general store, for instance, was the former home of the Tyson family. The one-room structure was converted to appear as a general store and post office from the late 1800s. The new structure helped round out the Pioneer Village and museum staff hoped to see increased visitor traffic as a result. According to Mr. Snedeker, the majority of visitors received during this time were tourists.¹⁴

After successfully managing to keep the doors of the Osceola County Historical Society open, Mr. Snedeker stepped down as president in 2010. He was involved in choosing Donnita Dampier as his successor. One of his goals while working with the society was to establish the organization as a part of the county government in order to ensure a steady source of funding. While this did not happen during his time as president, within a year after his departure, the historical society was brought under the umbrella of the county government. This partnership enabled the administration of the historical society to dream about expanding to offer even more programs to the community.¹⁵

The Osceola County Historical Society was founded due to a perceived need to preserve county history in the face of an increasing population and development. In the years leading up to World War II, Osceola County officials began actively seeking out new residents to settle in the area. They also encouraged the growth of the tourist

¹⁴ According to published advertising of the Osceola County Historical Society this structure was acquired in 1990 before Mr. Snedeker became president. He may have been involved in the acquisition as a volunteer. *Spence – Lanier Pioneer Center* Kissimmee, FL: Osceola County Historical Society, 1991; Snedeker, Interview.

¹⁵ Snedeker, Interview.

industry in Central Florida. Although the most drastic changes to the county occurred after Walt Disney World opened in 1971, these early efforts opened the door for Disney's future development.

CHAPTER TWO

Tourism Comes to Central Florida

The nature of tourism in Florida began to change in the 1920s. During the first part of the decade, middle-class workers began to see more regulated working hours and vacation time become more common. The U.S. economy was booming and American attitudes toward spending on entertainment were changing. It became more common to see people travelling simply for fun rather than health or personal betterment. Additionally, automobiles became more common, making travel much more flexible for middle-class Americans. Improved road systems were necessary to grow the tourist industry. In Florida, government officials and developers spent the first part of the twentieth century working to make the state more accessible by automobile. Between the improved roads and American's increasing leisure time, developers saw an opportunity to market the state as the "must visit" destination in the country.¹

The automobile helped to revolutionize tourism throughout the United States. As automobiles became more common, travel became less rigid. Travel by rail was constrained by a strict schedule and social conventions. Auto travel allowed Americans to go where they wanted, when they wanted. With an automobile, some camping supplies, and an adventurous spirit anyone could pick up and travel across the country.

¹ For more on the democratization of travel due to the proliferation of the automobile see John A. Jackle, *The Tourist: Travel in Twentieth-Century North America* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985); For more on road building in the South during the first part of the twentieth century see Tammy Ingram, *Dixie Highway: Road Building and the Making of the Modern South, 1900-1930* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2014); Revels, *Sunshine Paradise*, 64.

Auto camping became very popular with families as a more economical way to vacation. Florida lawmakers saw the potential to draw in these tourists and made a push to improve the road system throughout the state. This encouraged “tin can tourists” to venture deeper into the state, even if it was only as a means of reaching another destination.²

Increased auto travel led to the rise of roadside attractions. Small businesses that catered to these families, including local restaurants and motels, began popping up along Florida’s roadways. Situated in the center of the state, Central Florida was in a prime position to capitalize on this trend. Motorists on their way to Miami and Florida’s other tourist hot spots were enticed to stop along the way and enjoy Florida’s natural beauty at small mom and pop establishments. In the midst of this, Florida experienced significant population growth. Changes in attitudes towards leisure and aging combined to draw new residents to Central Florida, along with tourists. In Osceola and the surrounding counties this led politicians and business leaders to encourage the development of new infrastructure. This development played a key role in setting up Central Florida as a future tourist destination.³

In Osceola County, local officials welcomed the growth and encouraged people to move to the area. Kissimmee and St. Cloud, the only two incorporated settlements in the county, wound up competing for new residents. Both cities formed a board of trade

² John A. Jakle and Keith A. Sculle, *Motoring: The Highway Experience in America*, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008), 105; Revels, 67-69.

³ Revels, 106-107.

in 1910 with the goal of attracting new residents to the area while promoting the growth of local businesses. The Kissimmee Board of Trade, later renamed the Kissimmee Chamber of Commerce, was aggressive in its marketing campaign, sending copies of the local newspaper out of state. Even as the tourist industry was starting to grow, members of the Kissimmee Board of Trade were still trying to attract people with the promise of agricultural jobs. The efforts were relatively successful, and the county population grew by more than 90 percent from 1910 to 1930. As the end of the 1920s neared, local businesses began staging elaborate events to generate publicity. In January 1927 Kissimmee hosted a massive picnic that brought in an estimated 3,300 people. Later in the year Kissimmee and St. Cloud competed against each other in a life-sized game of checkers.⁴

The tourist boom of the 1920s was short-lived. A devastating hurricane in 1926 kept tourists away, and then the stock market crash of 1929 curtailed travel for most Americans. While the loss of tourist dollars hit the state hard, Florida lawmakers saw tourism as the way out of the Depression. State officials went to great lengths to remake Florida's image into one based on escapism and fantasy. Their efforts helped to create "Florida's modern image as a natural paradise and the nation's playground." This set the stage for the rise of roadside attractions throughout the state. While the outbreak of World War II complicated efforts to revive the tourist industry, it did not

⁴ Robison, 100-101; Chris Carey, "Chamber Got Its Start Trying to Lure Settlers," *The Orlando Sentinel* February 1, 1987.; The *St. Cloud Tribune* took a similar approach to marketing the city. Aldus M. Cody and Robert S. Cody, *Osceola County: The First One Hundred Years*, (Kissimmee, FL: Osceola County Historical Society), 65; *U.S. Census of Population: 1910, Vol 1. Number of and Distribution of Inhabitants*, 308; *U.S. Census of Population, 1930, Vol. 1 Number and Distribution of Inhabitants*, 197.

obliterate it. Several training facilities were opened across the state, which brought an influx of U.S. military personnel. Operators of resorts and tourist attractions scrambled to adapt their facilities for these potential customers. Promoters also lauded vacations as a way to maintain morale at home, essentially pitching tourism as a way to aid in the war effort.⁵

Kissimmee was one of the many locations the Army chose to establish a military base. The Army converted Kissimmee's airport into an army air base that operated throughout the war. The Kissimmee Chamber of Commerce, long responsible for the promotion of tourism to the area, was somewhat overwhelmed by the influx of visiting service members. In order to meet the needs of all the new people coming to the area, the organization expanded, adding an executive to oversee everything in 1948 and requiring members to pay dues. By the time World War II was over, the tourist industry in Florida was already on the rebound, and a new breed of tourist was introduced to the state.⁶

Tourism in Central Florida Following World War II

During the years following the end of World War II, Florida saw tremendous growth in the tourism industry. Increased leisure time coupled with a burgeoning middle

⁵ There was some criticism in popular magazines of people who did decide to vacation while American soldiers were overseas, but Floridians were mostly unconcerned and lawmakers continued to promote tourism throughout the war. Ben F. Rogers, "Florida in World War II," 34-35; Revels, *Sunshine Paradise*, 83. David Nelson, "When Modern Tourism Was Born: Florida at the World Fairs and on the World Stage in the 1930s," *The Florida Historical Quarterly* 88, no. 4 (Spring, 2010): 435-436, accessed July 14, 2015. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/29765121>.

⁶ Aldus M. Cody and Robert S. Cody, *Osceola County*, 73-75.

class meant more Americans had the time and money to spend on vacations.

Additionally, more families were able to afford an automobile, spurring the construction of new roads throughout the country. While Florida's reputation as a tourist destination was already well established, before the 1950s, the majority of people visiting Florida were wealthy Northerners seeking refuge from harsh winters. After the war, more middle and working class families began visiting the state. Service members who had spent time in Florida for training wanted to bring their families and show them around. While the beach was the primary destination for many tourists during this time period, attitudes towards leisure were changing, and families began seeking other sources of entertainment while on vacation.⁷

Enterprising Floridians capitalized on this shift by opening small roadside attractions along major highways. These attractions blended a focus on Florida's natural landscape with fantasy. Places such as Weeki Wachee Springs, which showcased the springs while featuring young women dressed as mermaids, took Florida's natural environment and added an element of whimsy. New attractions catered to the changing desires of tourists who were simply looking for a good time. The most difficult task for theme park operators was to entice tourists to stop. In her article examining the development of the Gatorland theme park, Dorothy Mays argues that, "in order to be

⁷ Marguerite S. Shaffer, *See America First: Tourism and National Identity, 1880-1940* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001), 314-316. Although Florida may have arguably benefited the most from the increased automobile travel, communities throughout the South pushed for improved roads as a means of encouraging scenic tourism. Daniel S. Pierce "The Great Smoky Mountains," in *Southern Journeys: Tourism, History, and Culture in the Modern South*, ed. Richard D. Starnes (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2003), 199.

successful, a roadside attraction needed to be inexpensive, visible from a well-traveled road, and have an eye-catching entrance.” The last two are particularly key, as roadside attractions remained secondary entertainment, and for most were just a stop along the way to somewhere else.⁸

Central Florida embraced the roadside attraction trend. Due to the larger distance from the beach, most of the tourists who came through Osceola County and its neighboring counties did not stay long. The attractions had to be enticing enough to make people want to linger. One of the most well known attractions in Central Florida was Cypress Gardens. Dick Pope opened the park in 1936, but it was his efforts to draw tourists in during World War II that really put it on the map. Attendance had plummeted once the war started, but Pope and his family improvised, developing a flashy water skiing show to attract service members undergoing training nearby. These shows became the centerpiece of the park’s success. In 1940 the Popes added young women dressed up as Southern Belles to the entertainment. Dressed in large hoop skirts, the women’s costumes had very little to do with Central Florida’s pioneer history, but it appealed to tourists, which was more important than accurately portraying the region’s past. These two aspects of the park remained a staple throughout its operation.⁹

The other major attraction in Central Florida was Owen Godwin’s Gatorland.

Originally called the Florida Wildlife Institute, Gatorland became one of the most

⁸ “Springs Offers Unusual Clear Underwater Show,” *The Kissimmee Gazette*, November 8, 1962, accessed July 13, 2015, University of Florida Digital Collections; Mays, “Gatorland,” 512.

⁹ Stephen E. Branch, “The Salesman and His Swamp: Dick Pope’s Cypress Gardens,” *The Florida Historical Quarterly* 80, no. 4 (Spring 2002): 483, 491-493, accessed July 13, 2015. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30146373>.; Revels, *Sunshine Paradise*, 108.

successful family-run tourist attractions in the state. Although technically in Orange County, its proximity to Kissimmee meant that Gatorland had a greater impact on Osceola County. An Osceola County resident himself, Godwin saw great potential for a theme park along the Orange Blossom Trail, which cut through both Orange and Osceola counties before heading further south. He purchased land in Orange County along the Osceola county line, just outside of Kissimmee. Godwin considered himself an outdoorsman and was enamored of exotic wildlife. This included many of Florida's native species, particularly alligators and other reptiles. He felt that tourists wanted to have an authentic Florida experience when on vacation. Getting an up-close encounter with one of Florida's more exotic creatures was a thrilling way to achieve that goal.¹⁰

¹⁰ Mays, "Gatorland," 510, 519.



Figure 2. **Orange Blossom Trail Association Pamphlet:** This pamphlet was produced by the Orange Blossom Trail Association to promote the attractions and businesses along the Orange Blossom Trail. Although OBT ran directly through Kissimmee, the town itself did not receive its own mention, unlike other towns along the route. Instead, the Silver Spurs Rodeo was listed, followed by the few amenities available in Kissimmee during 1959. Images courtesy of the University of Central Florida's RICHES of Central Florida.

Godwin opened his attraction in 1949. Throughout the 1950s he managed to find a delicate financial balance that kept the doors open. He decided that charging an

admission fee was too much of a deterrent and only asked for donations. To supplement the park's income, Godwin headed north during the slow summer months with an alligator that he put on display to local crowds for a small donation. Using this model Godwin was able to keep the park open and even expand it. Over the course of two decades, the Godwins managed to adapt to the many changes that occurred in Central Florida, in particular the continued development of the road system. As more people visited the state, lawmakers built larger highways that often bypassed long-standing family attractions. Where some folded, Godwin adapted by introducing eye-catching advertising in the form of alligator shaped billboards. The most successful change was to the entrance, with the 1962 addition of giant alligator jaws that visitors had to walk through to enter the park. Visible from the road, the jaws became an iconic part of the park and featured prominently in its advertising. Both Gatorland and Cypress Gardens were a part of the Orange Blossom Trail Association, an organization that promoted businesses and attractions along the Trail and the surrounding areas.¹¹

¹¹ Mays, "Gatorland," 513-514; The alligator mouth entrance is still considered an iconic feature of Central Florida. Dewayne Bevil, "Gatorland's Big Mouth Turns Big 5-0," *Orlando Sentinel* December 19, 2012; Joy Wallace Dickinson, "Tourist Trail Blossomed in Era of Postwar Roadside Adventure," *Orlando Sentinel*, April 27, 2014.



Figure 3. **Entrance to Gatorland:** The iconic Alligator mouth entrance to Gatorland. Photo courtesy of the State Archives of Florida.

While individual attractions were forced to come up with catchy, original advertising, the state as a whole got a makeover. Print advertisements emphasized the exotic nature of Florida and implied that inhibitions were lowered in the Sunshine State. Television ads showed glamorous people enjoying the beaches in Miami and showcased how popular the location was with celebrities. There was virtually no connection between these advertisements and Florida's history. The already tenuous connection that Florida shared with the South became even more strained.¹²

Tourism promoters believed that emphasizing Southern heritage in Florida would not do anything to increase tourist numbers. Historian Lamar York has argued

¹² Revels, *Sunshine State*, 102, 106.

that this disconnect with the South began much earlier than during the tourism boom of the early twentieth century. According to York, the geographical position of Florida coupled with the difficult nature of travel during the nineteenth century meant that, “Florida was never truly admitted to sisterhood among the Southern states.” Additionally, he has suggested that Southerners resented the fact that the only three coastal defenses in the South that remained in Union control were in Florida. This resentment spilled over into the twentieth century, separating Florida from the rest of the South just as the state was beginning to embrace the tourist industry more fully. The development of the tourist economy in Florida also played a significant role in distinguishing the state from the rest of the South. This was in part due to the transient nature of the population, which became more pronounced as the tourist industry drew more people from out of state to settle in Florida.¹³

For residents it was a struggle to adjust to this new image of Florida. In an effort to appeal to as many people as possible, Florida embraced a more fanciful image that played on the idea of escaping from regular life. While this approach proved successful in growing tourist numbers, it ignored many of the real issues facing people who actually lived in Florida. The explosion in growth that occurred in the post-war period disrupted the rhythm of life in many of Florida’s communities. Winter was always the busy time of the year, the summer heat discouraging tourists from coming to the state. This began to change as air conditioning became more common. Communities that had previously all but shut down during the summer started to see more and more people

¹³ York, “Post-bellum Florida,” 75.

visiting year-round. Although summer tourism was still limited, any tourism at all during the summer was a big change for some communities. Despite the additional income, some residents were upset at how this affected their daily life.¹⁴

Florida also faced significant social challenges that were obscured by tourist marketing. Communities struggled with the same social issues as those in other Southern states, while having to also work to make tourists feel comfortable. This is particularly evident in the treatment of African Americans, both residents and tourists. Concerned with bringing as much money into the state as possible, tourism promoters invested in advertisements specifically aimed at African American families. Once those families arrived in Florida however, they were only welcome at attractions and other facilities that were run specifically for African Americans. This unequal treatment was not reserved for tourists. African American residents were relegated to low paying, back-of-the-house jobs at resorts. Just as it was throughout the South, Jim Crow was in effect. Though it may not have been evident to those who lived outside of Florida, these incongruous images led to conflict that forced racial issues to the forefront in Florida. African Americans staged wade-ins on Florida's beaches and participated in other activities that disrupted the tourist economy. It became increasingly clear that segregation and Florida's brand of tourism were at odds with one another.¹⁵

¹⁴ Revels, *Sunshine Paradise*, 102-103; In addition to adjusting the rhythm of the tourist season, Gary Mormino argues that air conditioning caused Floridians to abandon the long-held practice of adjusting their routines to match "the rhythms of nature" by allowing them to close their windows and not rely on natural methods of staying cool. Mormino, *Land of Sunshine, State of Dreams*, 239-210.

¹⁵ Thompson, "Florida in American Popular Magazines," 8; Revels, *Sunshine Paradise*, 104-105.

Many of these issues were not as pronounced in Osceola County during this time, as tourism remained a small part of the local economy. No area in Florida was completely unaffected by the tourism boom, but Osceola County's location meant that people were not coming to visit there specifically. The small population also limited the type of amenities that residents could provide. Tourists did not stay, they just passed through. While this was enough for some attractions such as Gatorland to thrive, it was not a major factor in the community's economy.¹⁶

Osceola County's Shifting Demographics and Landscape

During the post-war period Osceola County remained largely rural and sparsely populated despite significant growth. In 1960 Osceola's population was only 19,029 people. As late as 1970 there were only 25,267 people living in Osceola County's 1,313 square miles, making it the least populated county per square mile in Central Florida. Compared to some nearby counties the difference was staggering. To the north, Orange County had 344,311 residents in 910 square miles, and to the west Polk County had 227,222 residents in 1,858 square miles.¹⁷

Even more telling was the split between urban and rural residents. The rural populations in Orange and Polk County were 16.8 percent and 39.1 percent, respectively. In Osceola that number was 51.9 percent, one of the highest in Central Florida. The population was growing at a similar rate, but the impact was not nearly as

¹⁶ This was the case for most of Central Florida before the opening of Walt Disney World. Mays, "Gatorland," 524.

¹⁷ *U.S. Census of Population: 1960, Vol 1. Number of Inhabitants*, 11-11.

significant because it was so much smaller to begin with. It was easy for Osceola County residents to recognize and identify with the area's pioneer heritage. With the exception of modern conveniences, life in Osceola County was remarkably similar to the early settlement. Cattle ranches and orange groves were still the primary economic drivers, with tourism providing only a small supplement despite efforts to grow the industry. Osceola County eased into the tourist trade even though Florida as a whole was changing quickly.¹⁸

Tourists and those seeking hospitality jobs were not the only people moving to Florida in the post-war period. Just as American's views on leisure were changing, so were their attitudes towards aging. People were living longer and staying healthy into their old age. Florida, with its warm weather and affordable prices, became very appealing to an aging generation seeking leisure and comfort in their retirement years. According to Gary Mormino "a new notion of retirement transcended merely quitting work... retirement was becoming a process, a season rather than an event." As the elderly descended upon Florida, new communities sprang up specifically designed to meet their needs. Osceola County was no exception. Orange Gardens was the first retirement subdivision in Kissimmee. Founded by Orange Gardens, Inc., construction began in 1954, and the subdivision opened to residents the following year. The site chosen was close to Kissimmee's downtown in order to encourage residents to take advantage of the amenities there, and the homes were designed to be easy for the

¹⁸ *U.S. Census of Population: 1960, Vol 1. Number of Inhabitants*, 11-11.

elderly to live in and maintain.¹⁹

The “silver migration” represented a huge demographic shift for the state and made it an anomaly in the Sunbelt. Up until the 1950s, the average age of Florida residents was below the national average. That changed with the 1950s census, with Florida’s average age reaching 30.9 compared to the national average of 30.2. It continued to rise, further widening the gap between Florida and the rest of the nation. Drawn by the calculated image of Florida as a paradise land full of palm trees and leisure, retirees came to the state and made the dream their own. In the process they developed significant political clout that helped to influence further development throughout the state.²⁰

The 1960s brought even more development, particularly to the highway system. President Dwight D. Eisenhower signed the Federal Aid Highway Act in 1956, which provided federal funding for the construction of the Interstate Highway System, setting aside twenty-five billion in federal funds to build 41,000 miles of highways across the country. Florida lawmakers understood the importance of a well-built road system to the success of the tourist industry in the state. In 1954, while the Highway Act was still being debated in Congress, Orlando officials drafted a proposal for an interstate highway that would bisect the city. The proposal was approved, and construction on

¹⁹ Mormino, *Land of Sunshine, State of Dreams*, 128; Beauchamp, *Look What’s Happened in Osceola County*, 72; Michael E. Hunt, ed., *Retirement Communities: An American Original* (New York: Haworth Press, 1984), 139-143.

²⁰ Mormino, *Land of Sunshine, State of Dreams*, 128-130; Godefroy Desrosiers-Lauzon, *Florida’s Snowbirds: Spectacle, Mobility, and Community Since 1945*, (Montréal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2001): 237-283.

Interstate 4 was largely completed by the mid-1960s.²¹

This was just part of a long list of highway expansion projects during the late 1950s through the 1960s, including the establishment of the Florida turnpike, which cut through Central Florida on its way to Miami. Many existing tourist attractions were bypassed by the new roads, inciting panic among those affected. Some businesses decided to pack up and move closer to the interstate, while others simply folded underneath the pressure. A few were able to adapt, and continued to operate in their original location. Central Florida's Gatorland is an example of a theme park that was able to adjust to the new challenge. Frank Godwin, Owen Godwin's son, convinced his father that it was a good investment to pay for billboards along the interstate to advertise the theme park. The effort was successful, and they eventually expanded their advertisements beyond the local community. Overall though, the advent of the Interstate system spelled doom for many of Florida's traditional roadside attractions.²²

The push by Orlando leaders to establish a more robust road network in the area proved to have even bigger implications than they originally intended. When Walt Disney began scouting Florida for a location for a new theme park, one of the crucial pieces was a developed road system. The decision about where to build the park came down to Orlando or Ocala. Orlando won out in large part due to Interstate 4 and the Florida Turnpike. Osceola County was set to benefit as well because the road cut

²¹ Shaffer, *See America First*, 314; Mormino, *Land of Sunshine, State of Dreams*, 244; Richard E. Foglesong, *Married to the Mouse: Walt Disney World and Orlando* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 26-32.

²² Foglesong, *Married to the Mouse*, 22-26; Mays, "Gatorland," 520-521.

through the northwest corner of the county, near the city of Kissimmee. The majority of the land in this area was undeveloped swamp, ready to be snatched up by an investor willing to spend the money to make it usable. The large amount of cheap land available and good weather were enough to get Walt Disney interested in the Central Florida location, but the improved road network was what sealed the deal, setting the stage for a new kind of Florida tourism.²³

²³ Revels, *Sunshine Paradise*, 122.

CHAPTER THREE

Big Tourism Comes to Town

In 1965 at a crowded press conference at the Cherry Plaza Hotel in Orlando, Walt Disney officially announced plans to build a new theme park in the heart of Central Florida. News that Disney had purchased massive tracts of land leaked before the official announcements, but it still caused a great deal of excitement when he confirmed that he was building a new attraction in the area. Although tourism was already a growing industry in Central Florida, nothing could have prepared the region for the changes that a major theme park would bring. Most of the land purchased by Disney was located along the Orange-Osceola county line, just outside the Kissimmee city limits. Government officials and residents in Osceola County knew that although a large portion of the development was planned for Orange County, the proximity meant they would likely see an economic boost as well. Business leaders saw an opportunity to grow Osceola County's economy beyond orange groves and cattle ranches.¹

Central Florida Welcomes Disney World

The owners of small roadside attractions also saw an opportunity. Florida tourism at this time was still primarily a winter phenomenon, especially in Central Florida. Although some attractions found ways to stay connected to potential tourists during the summer months, most saw their attendance drop dramatically. Disney's new

¹ Steven Watts, *The Magic Kingdom: Walt Disney and the American Way of Life*, (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2001), 423.

park represented the potential to lure visitors to Central Florida year-round. Throughout the region operators of existing tourist attractions were hopeful that Disney World would complement their business rather than detract. Walt Disney Productions sponsored an independent study that bolstered this hope, stating that “minimum net gains in attendance at any existing attraction should be at least 10 percent.” The report suggested that high quality attractions would see an even greater increase.²

These projections also encouraged developers to invest in the region, leading to a land rush in Osceola and Orange counties. One of Disney’s biggest complaints about Disneyland was how crowded and kitschy the area immediately surrounding the park became as it grew in popularity. Businesses that offered tacky souvenirs and discount hotels filled in all of the available land, hemming the park in and creating what Disney considered a terrible eyesore. With Disney World, he saw an opportunity to correct this mistake. He purchased huge tracts of land with the goal of keeping these types of establishments at bay. While he managed to keep them away from the gates of the park, there was no stopping the growth of new businesses. They just set up shop further out from the boundaries of Disney World, spreading the impact of the park.³

Osceola County was the recipient of much this spillover. Hotels, restaurants, and souvenir shops began popping up along Highway 192, all the way up to the edge of Disney property. The mad dash to purchase land in the area began almost as soon as the

² Revels, *Sunshine Paradise*, 116; E.R.A Economic Research Associates, “Economic Impact of Walt Disney World, Florida,” January 1967, Harrison “Buz” Price Papers, University of Central Florida, report p. I-4.

³ Steven Watts, *The Magic Kingdom*, 423.

park was announced, driving land prices and property taxes to new heights. Elderly residents who had moved to the area because of its affordability faced tax increases that made it virtually impossible for them to stay. The promise of a large payday for their land also proved to be a big temptation for many. In some places the land value more than tripled, driven up by the projected influx of tourists. Between 1965 and 1972 roughly 20,000 new hotel rooms were either built or under construction. This was more than the total population of Osceola County in 1960.⁴

Osceola County residents and businesses eagerly awaited the grand opening of the Magic Kingdom. The September 30, 1971 issue of the *Kissimmee Gazette* was almost entirely devoted to articles and advertisements related to Walt Disney World. Several of the largest businesses in Osceola County, including Tupperware and the Bank of Osceola, purchased advertisements welcoming Walt Disney World to the area. The City of Kissimmee took out a full-page ad that also welcomed Walt Disney World and highlighted how much the city was growing. The ad touted Kissimmee as the “Opportunity Center of Florida.” The majority of the articles focused on different features of the park and generated a sense of excitement about what it planned to offer. Still, it was evident that there was some apprehension among residents. In the article “Sentiments Expressed on Walt Disney World,” David Stone gathered comments from residents that demonstrated a cautious hopefulness. One resident remarked “opportunities will be really good for Kissimmee, but it will cause an increase in the crime rate, and some precautions should be taken.” Another expressed concerns that

⁴ Revels, *Sunshine Paradise*, 126-128; Mormino, *Land of Sunshine, State of Dreams*, 178.

Walt Disney World would change the character of Kissimmee: “It will be okay, but there will be too many people. I like small towns.” Overall though, residents were excited about the potential for increased recreational activities and economic growth.⁵

⁵ David Stone, “Sentiments Expressed on Walt Disney World,” *Kissimmee Gazette*, September 30, 1971.

Osceola County, Sept. 30, 1971, Page 1

The City Of Kissimmee

"OPPORTUNITY CENTER OF FLORIDA"

WELCOMES

Walt Disney World

"ENTERTAINMENT CENTER OF THE NATION"



Great Things Happening

Progress in our community is a continual happening, new retail complexes being constructed, industries of every type and size mushrooming forth, better roads being built and excellent schools opening. Our skilled and dedicated citizens are constantly planning for the future. We are proud to be a part of this growth and progress.



Figure 4. *Kissimmee Gazette* – **City of Kissimmee Advertisement**: Advertisement for the City of Kissimmee that appeared in the September 30, 1971 issue of the *Kissimmee Gazette*. Image courtesy of the *Osceola-News Gazette* and the Osceola County Historical Society Archives.

When the Magic Kingdom opened in 1971 tourist numbers in Central Florida jumped rapidly. In one year 11 million people visited the Magic Kingdom, compared to the 3.5 million tourists that visited all of Central Florida in the previous year. Osceola County's infrastructure was not equipped to handle the sudden influx of people. Highway 192, the main highway that crossed through the county, also served as the entrance road to Walt Disney World. When the park was full, this road backed up for miles, causing some tourists to look elsewhere for entertainment. One local attraction that benefited from this was Frank Godwin's Gatorland. Initially Gatorland's attendance increased after Disney World opened, in part due to the limited capacity at the new park. Additionally, the entertainment at Magic Kingdom was geared more towards young children, leading some tourists to seek out attractions that focused more on adults. This bump in attendance at local theme parks helped to confirm the ERA's economic impact projections.⁶

Unfortunately for these small attractions, the boost was only temporary. The success of the Magic Kingdom led other investors to see the potential in Central Florida for further development. Just two years after the Magic Kingdom opened, on December 15, 1973, SeaWorld, Orlando opened. This was the third SeaWorld theme park to open in the United States and helped cement Central Florida as a major tourist destination. The arrival of mega theme parks signaled a major shift in the nature of Florida tourism. People still came to enjoy the beaches and warm weather, but for many the primary

⁶ Mormino, *Land of Sunshine*, 104-105; Mays, "Gatorland," 527. Attractions throughout Central Florida saw an initial increase in attendance. Revels, *Sunshine Paradise*, 126.

destination became Central Florida.

Throughout the 1970s Disney World added new rides and other entertainment while expanding the capacity of the park. Between Disney World and SeaWorld there was enough to see to keep tourists entertained for most of their visit. As tourists spent more of their time at mega theme parks, smaller roadside attractions saw their attendance decline. In the first ten years that Disney World was open, more than 20 notable Florida attractions closed their doors. Florida's tropical gardens and other Florida-themed parks could not compete with the slick and polished entertainment offered at the mega theme parks.⁷

The new theme parks were a major departure from the types of attractions that made Florida popular in the first place. One of the differences was the lack of emphasis on Florida culture. While many older attractions focused on some aspect of life in Florida, the entertainment at the Magic Kingdom had virtually no connection to Florida's history or culture. Essentially it was a reproduction of Disneyland, which was modeled after Walt Disney's professed home town of Marceline, Missouri. Meant to evoke nostalgia for turn-of-the-century, small-town America, Disney World had no connection to its physical location and could have existed anywhere. As the parks continued to develop, they became even further removed from local history and culture.⁸

The loss of these parks impacted the formation of a Floridian identity in more

⁷ Mays, "Gatorland," 529.

⁸ Watts, *The Magic Kingdom*, 22.

ways than one. The generic atmosphere of the mega theme parks insulated tourists from experiencing local culture. This was further exacerbated by the proliferation of national chains. Additionally, the roadside attraction itself had become a part of Florida's heritage. Tourism was integral to Florida's identity, and with the proliferation of the automobile, roadside attractions had become a staple of the tourist economy. As attendance declined and small theme parks closed their doors, Floridians were faced with losing a piece of their culture.

Osceola County Population Growth and Development, 1970-1990

The abundance of hospitality jobs that became available as the tourist industry expanded and enticed many people to move to Central Florida. By 1980 the number of residents in Osceola County had risen to 47,619, an 88.5 percent increase from the 1970 census. Additionally, more than 35,000 residents indicated that they were born outside of Florida, either in another state or in another country. More than half of the county residents originated outside of Osceola County. The rapid growth of Osceola County's population during the 1970s further strained connections within the community.⁹

This trend continued into the 1980s as a result. The changing characteristics of the population began to alter the social fabric of the community. Historically a primarily white community, during the 1980s the number of Hispanic residents increased dramatically. Over the course of the decade, the Hispanic population increased by more

⁹ *U.S. Census of Population, 1980, Vol. 1 Characteristics of the Population, Florida*: 11, accessed October 30, 2013, http://www2.census.gov/prod2/decennial/documents/1980a_flABCs1-01.pdf; Revels, *Sunshine Paradise*, 126-127; *U.S. Census of Population, 1970, Vol. 1 Characteristics of the Population, Part 11 Florida*, 11-18, accessed July 10, 2015, http://www2.census.gov/prod2/decennial/documents/19701_fl1-01.pdf.

than 1,100 percent, growing from 1,089 to 12,866 residents. Much of this initial growth can be attributed to the efforts of developer Landstar Homes to market to Hispanics, specifically Puerto Ricans. They created a new subdivision named Buenaventura Lakes, carved out of former pastureland. Despite this growth, Hispanics comprised a small portion of Osceola County's population by 1990 (only twelve percent), but residents took notice of the changes, particularly in regards to their cultural and linguistic differences. One local newspaper suggested that residents might want to learn Spanish to meet the needs of the growing Hispanic population. Businesses began to stock Spanish products, and schools started printing forms and report cards in both English and Spanish. There was some pushback against this trend toward bilingualism, highlighting the struggle for longtime residents to come to terms with the changing population.¹⁰

The influx of so many new residents along with the increasing number of tourists to the area also took a financial toll on the residents of Osceola County. Land valuations soared, driving up taxes and the price of homes. Between 1971 and 1972 the total value of assessed property in Osceola County increased by seventeen percent. Long-time residents and newcomers with low incomes were effectively squeezed out of the housing market. They were not the only ones to feel the pain. Cattle ranches, which had

¹⁰ José E. Cruz, "Barriers to Political Participation of Puerto Ricans and Hispanics in Osceola County, Florida: 1991-2007," *Centro* 22, no. 1 (Spring 2010): 247, *Academic Search Premier*, EBSCOhost (accessed April 2, 2015); Mormino, *Land of Sunshine*, 292; Phil Fernandez, "Hispanic Population Surges in Osceola," *Osceola Sentinel*, March 9, 1991; Simone Delorme, "The Latinization of Orlando: Language, Whiteness, and the Politics of Place," *Centro* 25, no. 2 (Fall 2013): 69-10, *Humanities Full Text (H.W. Wilson)*, EBSCOhost (accessed April 3, 2015).

long dominated the landscape of Osceola County, saw a hike in their property taxes. Coupled with rising supply costs and declining cattle prices, by 1974 many cattlemen were forced to reconsider whether they could continue to operate in Osceola County. Development spread out and suburban sprawl began to take over where pastures and orange groves once sat.¹¹

The growth did not show any signs of stopping. In 1979 the Walt Disney Company began construction on a second theme park as part of the Walt Disney World Resort. The Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow (EPCOT) was originally conceived by Walt Disney as an experiment in city design and intended for people to live and work there. When he proposed building a Disney park in Florida, this was what he had envisioned. But his death on December 15, 1966 complicated matters. Disney executives, including Roy Disney, thought it was too risky to build Walt's experimental community. They decided to stick with what they knew and built the Magic Kingdom first, but the idea for EPCOT was not completely abandoned. Although Disney died long before construction began, investors still saw potential for a second park in Central Florida.¹²

In the end, EPCOT resembled very little of Disney's original plans. Rather than being a functioning city with residents and a business district, it became another theme park loosely based around some of Disney's ideas. Corporate sponsors played a large

¹¹ Alma Hetherington, *The River of the Long Water* (Chulota: Mickler House, 1980), 211-212.

¹² Foglesong, *Married to the Mouse* 64-65.

role in the development of the park and expected representation in the different attractions. The plan consisted of two different sections to the park, one at the front near the entrance and the other at the back. Named Future World, the front section focused on human accomplishments through communication and technology. Here the influence of sponsors was particularly evident in the theme of the various rides and shows. The back section of the park, called the World Showcase, was designed with different pavilions fanned out along the perimeter of a lake. Each pavilion was themed after a different country and was very reminiscent of the types of exhibits at the World's Fair.¹³

EPCOT's emphasis on technology and world culture was even further removed from Florida's culture than the Magic Kingdom. Whereas the Magic Kingdom at least had the nostalgic connection to small town America, EPCOT's design was unlike anything seen in Central Florida. It was an odd mixture of futuristic looking buildings and replicas of famous historical sites that cobbled together the themes of technology along with history and world culture. Progress was the central theme that held everything together. Early attractions, particularly in Future World, highlighted the technological achievements of man from pre-historic times to modern day. This was not the only place that addressed history though. The American Adventure, an animatronic show, took visitors through a brief history of the United States, highlighting the pioneering

¹³ Revels, *Sunshine Paradise*, 128-130; Walt Disney's Carousel of Progress also explored many of these themes. Debuting in 1964 at the New York World's Fair, the attraction consisted of an animatronic ride that allowed visitors to sit while the room revolved around different scenes set during various time periods of American history. After the World's Fair the ride was moved to Disneyland and then later to the Magic Kingdom at Walt Disney World in 1975, where it continues to operate. Watts, *The Magic Kingdom*, 414-415.

spirit of Americans and the push towards progress. The overall approach emphasized feelings of nationalism over regionalism, and left no room for any connections to the local culture.¹⁴

EPCOT was the third mega theme park in the Greater Orlando area, making the location an even greater draw for tourists and new residents. Even before the announcement of EPCOT, this explosive growth put tremendous strain on county infrastructure. Lawmakers recognized that they needed to work harder to meet the demands of growth in the area. The problem was finding the funds to make the needed improvements to infrastructure and services. Increased property tax revenue helped, but it was not enough to keep up with the rising number of residents and tourists. In 1977 the county voted to approve a two percent resort tax, one of the first counties in the state to do so, but these funds were earmarked specifically for expenditures directly related to tourism. In January 1979 local leaders appealed to Florida legislators to allow them to use some these funds to improve services, including emergency services and schools. Unfortunately their request was denied when state legislators claimed that the entire state faced budgeting issues and they could not find additional funding for Osceola. County officials were left on their own to figure out ways to generate

¹⁴ EPCOT was somewhat reminiscent of the failed INTERAMA attraction in Miami, but there is no indication of a connection between the two. INTERAMA was intended to be a “permanent bazaar, combining the features of an amusement park, world’s fair, and trade show.” Lack of financing and public disinterest prevented INTERAMA from becoming a reality. Michael Hoover, “Before Disney Arrived: Florida’s Ill-Fated Attempt to Build INTERAMA,” *The Florida Historical Quarterly* 86, no. 4 (Spring, 2008): 445-469, accessed August 2, 2015. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25594647>. For further analysis on the historical interpretation in the American Adventure see Mike Wallace, *Mickey Mouse History and Other Essays on American Memory* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996), 149-153.

additional funding.¹⁵

Part of the funding issues for Osceola County was tied to local officials' reluctance to impose any kind of taxes on developers. For most of the 1980s Osceola County did not have any kind of impact fee for developers despite the rapid pace of growth. New businesses and subdivisions popped up all over the county, straining the already overcrowded roads. As early as 1986 the county commission considered enacting an impact fee based on the increasing traffic, but the idea was rejected. Two years later, with the county road system busting at the seams, the county commission revisited the idea. The Buenaventura Lakes subdivision was held up as an example where the developer should have been required to help fund much needed road improvements to serve the new community. The impact fees were finally approved in 1989, but funding remained an issue. Additionally, the county received very little in the way of corporate taxes from the Walt Disney Company. Even though the land purchased by the company straddled the Orange-Osceola county line, the majority of development occurred in Orange County. This included the third Walt Disney World theme park, Disney-MGM Studios, which opened on May 1, 1989. Through the 1980s Disney's land in Osceola County was relatively untouched and undertaxed.¹⁶

Residents struggled to adapt to the changing economic landscape of Osceola County. While lawmakers initially believed that Osceola County's economy would

¹⁵ Maria Cone, "Legislators Face Osceola Problems," *Kissimmee Gazette*, January 31, 1979.

¹⁶ "Time for Action," *Osceola News-Gazette*, April 21, 1988; Charles E. Connerly, Timothy Stewart Chapin, and Harrison T. Higgins, *Growth Management in Florida: Planning for Paradise* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007), 291; Richard E. Foglesong, *Married to the Mouse: Walt Disney World and Orlando*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 146.

benefit from the presence of Disney World, the reality was far more complicated. The tourist industry may have brought jobs, but most of these were poorly paid service industry jobs. The growing cost of living in the area also created difficulties for residents, especially those who faced increased property taxes. In January of 1980 residents began to push for property tax reductions for those facing extenuating circumstances. The intent was to provide some relief for those feeling the pinch, but the county needed this revenue to continue to provide services and make infrastructure improvements.¹⁷

Local businesses also struggled, especially those in downtown Kissimmee. The proliferation of chain restaurants and stores along U.S. 192 pulled a lot of business away from the downtown area. Set off the main road, many tourists did not even realize that there was a downtown area apart from what they saw on the highway. Represented by the Downtown Business Associates, merchants struggled with the best way to market their businesses to tourists and to residents who did not know about the area. The historic buildings that comprised most of Kissimmee's downtown were a revolving door for failed restaurants and shops throughout the 1980s.¹⁸

Local officials and business leaders were working to market and make improvements to the downtown area when their efforts hit a major stumbling block. On December 30, 1988 a fire broke out in one of the historic buildings. By the time the fire was extinguished, three historic buildings were gone, directly impacting eleven

¹⁷ Revels, *Sunshine Paradise*, 132-133; Bill Dixon, "Exemptions Total \$50 Million," *Kissimmee Gazette*, January 10, 1980.

¹⁸ Lydia Villalva Lijo, "Downtown – A Fight for Survival Restauranters, Business People Say Kissimmee Commerce Dies After 5 P.M.," *The Orlando Sentinel*, July, 22, 1988.

businesses. While the fire was devastating for the businesses involved and the loss of the buildings was a blow for downtown as a whole, it did create an opportunity for businesses and residents to weigh in on how to rebuild. The *Osceola Sentinel* called for residents to write in with their ideas on how to deal with the damage while revitalizing the area. Some of the ideas seemed like more of an effort to transform downtown into another kitschy tourist attraction. One resident wanted to “bring the old West back” with new buildings that had “upstairs railings for Western ‘shootouts,’ complete with cancan girls, Western music and ‘cowboys’ roaming the streets.” Most residents favored a more practical approach, including rebuilding in a way that highlighted the small town feeling and historic nature of the area, as well as developing the lakefront area just off the main street. Funding for these improvements remained an issue though, and some of the fire damaged buildings remained an eyesore into the 1990s.¹⁹

After years of funding difficulties, officials in Osceola County eventually decided that it was time for Disney to shoulder some of the burden for improvements. For years the Walt Disney Company had received an agricultural classification for the land that they held in Osceola County, limiting their tax liability. In 1989, Osceola County Property Appraiser Bob Day decided to deny the company’s request for this classification. He took the position that only land that was intended for agricultural use was eligible for this classification. According to Richard Foglesong, Day felt that the Walt Disney Company was abusing the “agricultural classification as a ‘tax dodge,’ burdening Osceola

¹⁹ Tom Schroder, “Kissimmee Hit By Fire, Explosions,” *The Orlando Sentinel*, December 31, 1988; “Readers Share Their Dreams for Downtown,” *The Osceola Sentinel*, March 12, 1989.

County's infrastructure and services with their theme-park operations in Orange County while avoiding their fair share of Osceola taxes." Eventually Day settled with Disney, agreeing that the company would pay \$600,000 in taxes for 1989 and 1990 each, and changing the tax structure for the Disney's land along U.S. 192 and I-4. Disney also planned to build a shopping center on the land. While Day did not achieve his initial goal, successfully reaching a settlement that benefitted Osceola County proved that the county could exercise some muscle against the entertainment giant.²⁰

Community Division and Economic Uncertainty

New theme parks continued to make their way to Central Florida in the 1990s. Encouraged by the success of Walt Disney World and SeaWorld, Universal Studios decided to open their own park in Orlando. Universal Studios Florida opened on June 7, 1990, bringing the total number of mega theme parks in Central Florida to five. Despite the new parks, Central Florida was still affected when the U.S. entered a recession in late 1990. Economists predicted the region would not be impacted too harshly based on how the area weathered the 1981-82 recession. Unfortunately they underestimated the effects, and as tourism revenue fell, Central Florida's unemployment rate began to rise. While the local economy began to rebound quickly, the downturn reinforced local opinions that dependence on tourism was detrimental to Osceola's economy and that

²⁰ Foglesong, *Married to the Mouse*, 148, 150; Lawrence J. Lebowitz, "Disney, Day Compromise on Tax Bill The Settlement Ends a 2-Year Dispute Over Agricultural Classifications that Cut Disney's Tax Bill," *Osceola Sentinel*, May 31, 1991.

there needed to be an effort to diversify local businesses.²¹

In Osceola County the economic recovery was bolstered by the Walt Disney Company's announcement of plans to finally develop the land south of U.S. 192. The land that Bob Day had refused to classify as agricultural for tax purposes was finally going to generate tax revenue for Osceola County. The original plans for a retail shopping center were scrapped for a more ambitious undertaking. In 1991, Disney CEO Michael Eisner announced that the company planned to build a planned residential community inspired by Walt Disney's original dream for EPCOT. Named Celebration, developers designed the community using the concepts of New Urbanism, an approach meant to foster a greater sense of connectedness among residents. The price range for housing in Celebration covered a wide range, and the town featured its own walkable downtown area and plenty of open green space. The intent was to provide people with spaces to gather and create a sense of community. Disney had created their own little square of small town America, complete with actual residents.²²

From the start, there was a sense of separation between Celebration and the rest of the county. Although it fell under the governance of Osceola County, the self-

²¹ Gene Yasuda, "Unemployment Up In Central Florida," *Orlando Sentinel*, December 28, 1990; James R. Hagy, "It Could Have Been Worse," *Florida Trend* 34, no. 12 (April, 1992): 87, *Student Resources in Context*, EBSCOhost (accessed July 13, 2015); Mary Beth Regan, "Searching for Major Employers: Tourists, Agriculture Economic Boon – But Osceola Needs to Diversify," *Orlando Sentinel*, March 4, 1990.

²² Internally, Eisner was reported as considering any possible connection to EPCOT a negative, but this was not reflected in the promotional material released by the Walt Disney Company. Bartling, "Disney's Celebration," 61; Celebration was not the first large-scale community in Osceola and surrounding areas, but they had been met with mixed success. See Mildred Graham, "Urban Living with the Frills: Town-Sized Communities with All the Everyday Conveniences are in Vogue in Six Central Florida Counties," *Orlando Sentinel*, November 3, 1991; Foglesong, *Married to the Mouse*, 150-151; Foglesong, 159.

contained design of the community effectively segregated it from civic engagement outside the town. The upper-middle class image of the town helped to alienate it from the more working class communities across the county. Celebration residents did try to enter into Osceola County politics, most notably in ways connected to the school system, but their efforts were met with resistance from those living elsewhere in Osceola.²³

The development of Celebration also represented a pushback against the trend of suburban sprawl that had overtaken Osceola County. In the years after the opening of Walt Disney World, “the landscape of Osceola and Orange counties changed from one characterized by small farming communities with vibrant small-town city centers... to an undifferentiated suburban sprawl marked by chain hotels and restaurants and tourist strips malls.” This was occurring all over Central Florida, but the change was particularly evident in Osceola County. New developments began popping up along the edges of existing communities, and they continued to spread out. There was almost solid development along U.S. 192 between the cities of Kissimmee and St. Cloud, making it difficult to tell where one city ended and the other began. For longtime residents the overwhelming pace of development disconnected them from the landscape. In a statement given to the *Orlando Sentinel*, Osceola County board chairman Jim Swan stated, “The county is changing so rapidly... I’m not sure anyone knows what Osceola is. We were the seventh-fastest growing county in the U.S. in the last ten years. Anything

²³ Bartling, 61-62.

that grows at that speed has an identity problem.” People who had grown up surrounded by orange groves and grazing lands found it difficult to maintain their sense of place.²⁴

As the landscape continued to change, so did the county demographics. By the 2000 census the Hispanic population had grown to 50,727, comprising 29 percent of Osceola’s total population of 172,493. This increased even more dramatically by the 2010 census, when more than 45 percent of Osceola County’s population reported their ethnicity as Hispanic. Adjusting to the changing ethnic make-up of the community proved difficult and racial tensions flared. This was most evident in the school system. When violence broke out at Gateway High School, students indicated that it was a lack of understanding and respect between Hispanic and non-Hispanic students that caused the issue. Administrators claimed that the incident was blown out of proportion, but when further violence broke out among students off campus, it became clear that they needed to address the racial tension.²⁵

Part of the difficulty in addressing the issue stemmed from the geographical make-up of the county subdivisions. Despite the continuous suburban sprawl that

²⁴ Bartling, 64-65; Charles Fishman, “Compounding Osceola’s Identity Crisis: Disney’s Plans Could Cause as many Changes in the Next 20 Years as the Development has Caused in the Past 20 Years,” *Osceola Sentinel*, September 29, 1991.

²⁵ *2000 Census of Population and Housing: Profiles of General Demographic Characteristics*: 49, accessed October 4, 2015, <http://www.census.gov/prod/cen2000/dp1/2kh12.pdf>.; “2010 Census Interactive Population Search,” accessed October 4, 2015, <http://www.census.gov/2010census/popmap/impmtxt.php?fl=12>; Susan Jacobson, “Gateway Squelches Fights, Rumors: Administrators at the High School Say the Incidents Thursday were Blown Out of Proportion,” *Osceola Sentinel*, September 19, 1992; Susan Jacobson, “More Fights Break Out Off Campus,” *Osceola Sentinel*, September 23, 1992.

covered the northern part of Osceola County, residents understood that there were clear divisions that fell along racial lines. This grew out of some of the initial efforts by home builders to market certain subdivisions to Hispanics, such as Buena Ventura Lakes. This trend continued as new residents sought out communities that already had a significant Hispanic population. Despite this residential segregation, during the early 2000s, Hispanic culture began to gain more prominence in Central Florida, producing a backlash from longtime residents. In 2005, an Orange County teacher penned a letter to Congress disparaging the impact of Hispanics on the education system in Central Florida. Although the teacher resigned from her position, many non-Hispanics in the community voiced support for her opinions.²⁶

In the middle of this cultural backlash, residents were also struggling with the economic hardships of a tourism-based economy. Despite years of attempts to diversify the types of businesses in Osceola County, the low-wage service jobs remained the norm. In some instances this generated resentment against the tourist industry. Journalist Mike Thomas put it bluntly when he wrote that “tourism is flat-out destroying Osceola County.” Part of the resentment stemmed from seeing nearby Orange County reap the benefits of mega theme park tax dollars while also attracting more high-wage technology jobs. Thomas asserted that Osceola was getting the short end of the stick, noting that “if Central Florida were Europe, Osceola would be Bosnia.” Not all residents

²⁶ Maria T. Padilla, “Ethnic Groups Lead Separate Lives,” *Orlando Sentinel*, April 11, 2001; Victor Manuel Ramos, “Tensions Mount Over Hispanics,” *Orlando Sentinel*, August 29, 2005; Mary Shanklin, “Teacher Who Wrote Letter Resigns,” *Orlando Sentinel*, August 31, 2005.

felt this way however, and the Osceola County Chamber of Commerce was quick to point out recent gains in high-wage jobs.²⁷

The fragile nature of the tourist industry was put to the test with the events of the early 2000s. Bolstered by the success of the 1990s, business leaders were expecting that the next decade would bring even greater growth to the area. Then the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 occurred. While the entire country was trying to come to grips with the terrible tragedy, it quickly became clear to Floridians that the tourist industry would be significantly impacted. In the immediate days after the attacks, air travel came to a halt, forcing many people who had planned vacations to Florida to cancel. When flights resumed, many people were too scared to fly. Additionally, although it was clear new airport security measures were needed, the new regulations made air travel even more difficult and stressful.

It was unclear how much of a hit the tourist industry would take, but initial estimates for Florida were grim. One study suggested that the unemployment rate might rise as high as 6 percent by the summer of 2002, an increase of almost 2 percent in less than a year. The actual impact was not as severe, largely due an intense advertising campaign the blanketed regional markets. Governor Jeb Bush encouraged Floridians to become tourists themselves by visiting local attractions. Central Florida was one of the least impacted areas, with hotel occupancy only off by roughly 2 percent less than a year after the attacks. This steady occupancy came at a cost though, with hotels

²⁷ Mike Thomas, "Tourists Con Osceola Out of Its Future," *Orlando Sentinel*, April 10, 2001; Mike Horner, "Bright Future for Osceola County," *Orlando Sentinel*, April 13, 2001.

dramatically dropping their rates in an attempt to entice visitors. As a result, many of the budget friendly hotels that comprised Osceola's hospitality industry found themselves in competition with the more well-known chains found in Orange County. Many of the independent hotels along 192 were forced to slash their rates and lay off workers to account for the loss in revenue.²⁸

Central Florida had another set-back during the summer of 2004 when the state was hit by four hurricanes, three of which passed directly over Central Florida. The first two, Charley and Frances, passed through within two weeks of each other. The major theme parks in Orlando closed for three days to deal with the damage and insurance rates skyrocketed. The property damage was severe, and some residents were without power for weeks. The cleanup effort was a lengthy one, but surprisingly tourism to the area was not significantly diminished. According to a report by Florida TaxWatch, the number of tourists visiting Florida reached a new record of 85.8 million people in 2005. The hurricanes did little to scare away visitors.²⁹

The economic downturn of 2008 was not as forgiving. When the bottom fell out of the housing market, Florida was hit hard. In 2008 Osceola County had the highest foreclosure rate in Central Florida at 9.6 percent, and by 2009 the county also had the

²⁸ Tom Stieghorst, "Economists: State's Jobless Rate to Grow," *Orlando Sentinel*, September 20, 2001; Barry Flynn, "Orlando Jobless Rate Creeps Higher: Good News is Economists Think Local Unemployment Rate has Nearly Maxed Out," *Orlando Sentinel*, July 20, 2002; Revels, 145; Lance Davis, "Tourism Industry Slowly Rebounds" *Nation's Cities Weekly* 26, no. 44 (November 2003):3; Lisa Glass, "Rates Plunge, But Motels Sit Half-Empty," *Orlando Sentinel*, July 22, 2002.

²⁹ Revels 146; *The Impact of Tourism on Florida's Economy: Telling a More Complete Story*, Tallahassee: Florida TaxWatch, 2006, accessed October 3, 2015, www.floridataxwatch.org/resources/pdf/tourismresportmarch2006.pdf.

highest poverty rate in the region at 15.9 percent. As result, Central Florida saw its first slow-down in population growth in decades. The reliance on tourist dollars to fund virtually every aspect of Osceola County’s economy left residents in a vulnerable position. Despite this, as the region finally began to come out of the recession local officials still put an emphasis on tourism development. As the economy improved, the Osceola County Historical Society turned to county government to secure funding to revitalize and expand its operations.³⁰

³⁰ Jerry W. Jackson, “We’re Number 7 – Unfortunately, It’s In National Foreclosure Rate,” *Orlando Sentinel*, January 15, 2009; Jeff Kunerth and Kate Santich, “Struggling, Uninsured: More are Living On Edge,” *Orlando Sentinel*, September 29, 2010; Jeff Kunerth and Linda Shrieves, “‘Shocking’ Reversal for Region: Central Florida is Shrinking,” *Orlando Sentinel*, August 20, 2009; “Hoping to Accelerate on the Road to Recovery,” *Orlando Sentinel*, January 14, 2013.

CHAPTER FOUR

Osceola County Today – Incorporating the New Central Florida into Historical Interpretation

The opening of Walt Disney World forever altered the course of Osceola County's development. The rapid growth, coupled with the drastic changes to the characteristics of the population in the county, made it challenging to create a cohesive sense of community. These changes have made it increasingly difficult to connect new residents to the pioneer history of Osceola County. As changes have occurred, the Osceola County Historical Society has worked to preserve this history while serving an increasingly diverse population. By the late 2000s, it became clear that the society needed additional space and funding to create new exhibits that better served the needs of the community. After successfully creating a partnership with the Osceola County government, the Osceola County Historical Society entered a period of significant expansion in 2010. Funding from the county government allowed the historical society to undertake two large projects. The first was to create a new museum, and the second was the relocation and expansion of the Pioneer Village.

The museum represents the most prominent addition to the Osceola County Historical Society. Opened in 2012, the Osceola County Welcome Center and History Museum was designed to function as an information center for tourists as well as a history museum. Just about a mile away from the original location of the Pioneer Village, the museum sits on U.S. 192 and is housed in a building that used to be a

Roadhouse Steakhouse. The restaurant closed years ago, and the building sat vacant for a long time, something that is not uncommon since the economic downturn. Although the museum is somewhat removed from other attractions in Osceola County, the availability of an existing building, coupled with the close proximity to the existing facilities of the Osceola County Historical Society, made the location a good fit for the museum.¹



Figure 5. **Osceola County Welcome Center and History Museum Entrance:** Front entrance to the Osceola County Welcome Center and History Museum. Photo by author.

A joint project of Osceola County government and the Osceola County Historical Society, the funds for the development of the facility came from the county, and the county also owns the building. The historical society was contracted by the county to

¹ "Pioneer Spirit," *Osceola News-Gazette*, November 15, 2012, accessed October 30, 2013, <http://sunpubnews.com/digital/ONG/ONGAsection111512/>; I visited both the Pioneer Village and the Welcome Center and History Museum, October 20, 2013.

develop the exhibits and staff the facility. This type of public-private partnership is not unheard of among local history museums. What sets this one apart is the addition of the Welcome Center. Staff must be prepared both to answer questions regarding the history of Osceola County and aid tourists who want to make plans for their vacation.²

Based on this arrangement, one might expect the “Welcome Center” portion of the facility to be the main component, but that does not appear to be the case. The majority of the building is dedicated to exhibits, along with a small gift shop located inside a replica of an 1880s steamboat. The only section that is obviously dedicated to vacation planning is a small display at the entrance that holds pamphlets for the various tourist attractions throughout Central Florida. Despite this, there are elements of the exhibits that are specifically geared towards tourists.

One of the goals of the county is to encourage the growth of eco-tourism. This goal appears to have heavily influenced the development of some of the elements of the exhibit. Each of the four major types of habitats found in the county (pine forests, oak hammock, swamp, and lakefront) is displayed in interactive exhibits. Additionally, the county offers charging stations for electric vehicles in the parking lot. Eco-tourism is definitely growing, and with an economy based on tourist dollars, Osceola County cannot afford to leave this resource untapped. In a sense this is a return to the original roots of the tourist industry in Osceola County and Florida as a whole. Part of the exhibit includes quotes from naturalists who visited Florida in the late 1800s, including John Muir, characterizing the wilderness as unspoiled. These comments are included in the

² Bast, Interview.

same section of the museum that addresses the history of the Seminole people in Osceola County, drawing a connection between the untamed landscape and the Native Americans that inhabited it. Here the exhibits try to come to terms with the way in which the Seminoles were forced off of their land. For its size, the museum offers a large amount of information, particularly regarding the Seminole Wars and the later efforts of Kissimmee residents to make amends by helping Seminoles obtain the rights to the lands from which they had been driven.³

Much like the Pioneer Village, the historical exhibits focus primarily on the early history of the county as an agricultural center. Several displays address the importance of the cattle industry as a key factor in the development of Osceola County, especially in Kissimmee. These exhibits were designed to be as engaging as possible. Many of them include interactive components, consisting mostly of i-pads with additional pictures and questions to consider. A “cracker” camp sits in the middle of the exhibit, complete with a simulated campfire, a saddle for children to sit on, and a bullwhip to examine. This is not the first history museum in the area to take this approach. Residents and tourists alike are accustomed to high quality entertainment. In order to bring visitors in and keep them engaged, the Orange County Regional History Center also worked to create interactive exhibits.⁴

³ Bast, Interview; Heidi Waldrop Bay, “Eco-Tourism: Everybody’s Doing It,” *Meeting News*, March 10, 2008, accessed November 3, 2013, Proquest.

⁴ Bob Beatty, “Legacy to the People: The Civic Origins of the Orange County Regional History Center,” *The Florida Historical Quarterly* 81, no 1 (Summer 2002): 39, accessed June 2, 2012, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30147613>.

The final section of the exhibit addresses the beginning of the tourist industry in Osceola County. In particular the exhibit highlights some of the early resorts that catered to individuals who travelled to Florida for sport hunting and to see the natural landscape. The exhibits also highlight the connections to Osceola County as an eco-tourism destination. Considering the impact of tourism in the development of Central Florida, especially over the last fifty years, this section would be more complete if the time period covered extended beyond the early 1930s. According to Anza Bast, who assisted with the research for these exhibits, this cutoff date was chosen in part so as not to delve into the more recent past, including the arrival of Disney. No doubt the limited space also factored into the decision. The exhibit space is already completely full, with the exception of a small space reserved for temporary exhibits. The limited collection may have played a part as well. The society does not have many artifacts in its collection from the 1960s or later. It is not uncommon for a historical organization to discount the value of collecting items from recent history, but in this case a huge part of the history of Osceola County is not adequately documented in the collection. When Walt Disney chose Central Florida as the location for his new theme park, he opened the door for tremendous growth and the resulting changes should be documented. This includes demographics changes, especially the growth of the Hispanic community, which is absent from the permanent exhibit. Additionally, given the connection of its own history to the tourist industry, the society would benefit from keeping this information in their own records.⁵

⁵ Bast, Interview. According to Bast, part of the reason Disney's influence is not as documented as

The second project that the Osceola County Historical Society began during this time period was the relocation and expansion of the Pioneer Village. The original location was situated off the main highway, on the same property donated by the Spences in the 1980s. The property also housed the main offices and collection storage facility for the society. After several buildings were added to the site during the 1990s, there was no more room to expand at that location. With funding from the county government, the society prepared to move all of the historic structures the roughly one and half miles across U.S. 192 to the new location of the Pioneer Village. The difficult task of moving the historic buildings took years of planning and the actual relocation did not begin until the summer of 2014.

Moving put stress on the historic structures, many of which were already in a state of disrepair. They required a good amount of restoration before the village could open to the public. The Osceola County Historical Society worked to get the buildings ready through the summer and into fall of 2014. The grand opening of the new Pioneer Village coincided with the society's 23rd annual Pioneer Days. In the past, this event featured period-dressed re-enactors and pioneer-themed activities designed for families. Typically the biggest event of the year for the society, it received extra attention thanks to the recent move.

After the move was completed and the existing buildings were opened to the public, the society switched gears and turned towards adding buildings to create a more

Osceola's earlier history is due to the fact that most of Disney's property is in Orange County. She indicated that the Orange County Regional History Center collects and documents items pertaining to Disney and the other area theme parks.

complete village. Organized in a grid-like pattern, the layout of the Pioneer Village allowed for a generous amount of room between each structure. Several spaces were left open for planned additions. As with the previous location, the buildings were staged to recreate a late 1800s settlement. Visitors could walk up to the buildings and look inside, but they were not permitted to enter them. This was a change from the previous location where the majority of the buildings were open and visitors could wander through unattended. The new village also featured informational panels for each building (including the ones yet to be built) that provided background information on how the building was connected to Osceola County history.



Figure 6. **Osceola County Pioneer Village – Building Marker:** Example of one of the building markers at the Pioneer Village. Each building location currently has a marker, even if the building is not in place yet. Photo by author.

The new Pioneer Village is still a work in progress and there are several open spaces throughout site. Divided into three phases of development, only a portion of the funding needed for the planned expansion was provided by local government. Those

funds were used to move and restore the buildings. Efforts are currently underway to raise the funds needed to construct the new replica buildings included in the overall expansion plan. Some of the planned additions include a saw mill, church, train depot, and a school. The sites have already been established and the informational markers are in place, they just need the buildings.



Figure 7. **Osceola County Pioneer Village – Building Sites:** The sections of fence mark the planned location for the replica building of a local general store. Note that at the bottom of the image the informational marker is already in place. Photo by author.

The development of both the museum and the Pioneer Village demonstrate how professionalization has influenced the approach to historical interpretation at the Osceola County Historical Society. After Donnita Dampier took over as the executive

director in 2010, the society hired a professionally trained curator, Liz Stemm, for the first time in the organization's history. Hired in 2012, Stemm came in just in time to help with the finishing touches on the museum and to work on the new Pioneer Village. She also worked on the temporary exhibits that were featured at the museum, including one entitled "The Florida Project: How Walt Disney Transformed Osceola County." The exhibit was a brief overview of tourism in Osceola County and covered from the county's early days as a destination for sportsmen through 2011. Although the exhibit acknowledged how Walt Disney World changed the image of Osceola County, it did not delve into any of the social and economic issues faced by residents. Although the exhibit was put together in a professional manner, omitting these issues was a missed opportunity to connect more directly with residents affected by the changes in the community.⁶

It is important to note that while the expansion of the historical society was underway, the population of Osceola County continued to grow. After the initial slow-down following the 2008 recession, the growth rate rose dramatically. The U.S. Census Bureau estimated that Osceola's population increased by 15.5 percent between 2010 and 2014. This far surpassed Florida's overall population growth of 5.8 percent for the same time period. In 2014 *Forbe's* magazine identified Osceola County as the tenth fastest growing county in the country. Much of that growth occurred within the Hispanic

⁶ The OCHS also developed its first ever collections policy in 2010. This was done in part to curtail acceptance of donated items that did not fit with the organization's mission. Bast Interview; Liz Stemm, "Meet Liz Stemm: OCHS Curator," *Osceola County Historical Society Blog* February 27, 2015, <http://blog.osceolahistory.org/meet-liz-stemm-ochs-curator>; Stemm left the Osceola County Historical Society in early 2015. Since her departure Kari Whaley has acted as both the curator and programs director.

community. By 2014, Hispanic residents made up an estimated 49.7 percent of Osceola's population.⁷

In general the diverse nature of the current population of Osceola County is difficult to see at the society's museum. The majority of the demographics changes in the area occurred much later than the time period covered in the exhibits. Still, the organization is making an effort to become more inclusive. Some of the changes were initiated after feedback from granting agencies called for more diversity in the programming and governance of the society. This has led to several changes, including displaying temporary exhibits in both English and Spanish. In 2014 the society celebrated Hispanic Heritage month for the first time. Since then the nominating committee of the board of directors has worked on developing ties with leaders in the Hispanic community in an effort to gain their participation.⁸

Even with these changes, there is still room to improve. Although there have been temporary exhibits that have highlighted the Hispanic community, these focused primarily on Spanish settlement and Cuban immigration. The majority of Hispanic residents in Osceola County are Puerto Rican, making it difficult to connect their experiences. The board of directors is overwhelmingly white, and does not reflect the diversity of Osceola County's population. Since 2010 most development efforts have

⁷ U.S. Census Bureau <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/12/12097.html>; Ken Jackson, "Forbes: Osceola 10th Fastest Growing County," *Osceola News-Gazette* March 7, 2014, accessed September 7, 2015. <http://www.aroundosceola.com/forbes-osceola-10th-fastest-growing-county/>.

⁸ Margaret Wallis "Celebrate Hispanic Heritage Month with the OCHS," *Osceola County Historical Society Blog* August 29, 2014, <http://blog.osceolahistory.org/celebrate-hispanic-heritage-month-with-the-ochs>.

gone towards the expansion of the museum and pioneer village. As the society begins to settle into its new spaces, staff members can shift their focus towards community outreach. One of the goals of the Osceola County Historical Society is to increase its relevance to the community. Ensuring that all different segments of the population are represented and feel welcomed is a great step towards achieving that goal.⁹

Conclusion

Osceola County has a complex relationship with tourism. Initially the industry was slow to take hold, but once the Magic Kingdom opened tourist numbers exploded. The success of the mega theme parks brought a steady supply of jobs and tax revenue to the area. It also brought years of unchecked development that resulted in congestion, pollution, and suburban sprawl. Almost overnight the county transformed from a small, agriculture-based community into an international tourist destination. Additionally, increasing diversity led to racial tensions as a growing Hispanic population gained greater influence in the region. The dizzying speed of the transformation left residents confused about how to connect Osceola's past with its present.

The Osceola County Historical Society is in a prime position to help residents deal with these issues. By acknowledging how the county has changed over the past four decades, the society can help build connections with local history and foster relationships amongst community members. In order for this to be successful though, there needs to be an effort to document and interpret the experiences of Osceola

⁹ "Osceola County Historical Society, Inc.: Central Florida Foundation Profile," *Central Florida Foundation*, accessed January 8, 2016, <http://cffound.guidestar.org/nonprofit.aspx?orgId=1052112>.

County's diverse newcomers. This will require addressing some of the more divisive aspects of Osceola's past. Considering that the many of the visitors to the historical society's facilities are tourists, this approach may prove difficult, but is necessary to remain relevant to the local population.

The Osceola County Historical Society is very fortunate to have the financial support of local government. In an era when non-profits of all types have seen this type of support dwindle, the society still has a steady supply of money coming in. This source of revenue has allowed the society to expand while organizations in other parts of the country have had to scale back. Still, the majority of this funding is generated by tourist tax dollars. The events of the early 2000s demonstrated the fragility of the tourist economy, highlighting the need to ensure that other funding avenues are open, including outside granting agencies. As the society's experience shows, in many cases that funding is contingent upon meeting the needs of community members. In Osceola County, this means reaching out to a population that is heavily influenced by tourism industry trends. For better or worse the survival of the Osceola County Historical Society is tied to the tourism industry in more ways than one, much like the county itself.

It is an exciting time to be a part of the Osceola County Historical Society. For the first time in its history it has a professional, full-time staff. New programs are in development and there is a strong desire to connect with the community. If they want to capitalize on the recent success, more needs to be done to include residents in the development process. Drawing locals in and telling their stories is one way that everyone can feel represented and connected. Perhaps it can also serve as a starting

point for residents to come together and understand one another better, from those that descend from the earliest pioneer families to those enticed to the area by the fantasy land promise of Disney World.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

IRB Approval Form

November 18, 2015

Sarah Fry

Protocol Title: **Economic Transformation and Historical Identity: A Case Study of Osceola County, Florida**

Protocol Number: 16-2094

Dear Investigator(s),

The MTSU Institutional Review Board or its representative has reviewed the research proposal identified above. The MTSU IRB or its representative has determined that the study meets the criteria for approval under 45 CFR 46.110 and 21 CFR 56.110, and you have satisfactorily addressed all of the points brought up during the review.

Approval is granted for one (1) year from the date of this letter for **10** participants. Please use the version of the consent form with the compliance office stamp on it that will be emailed to you shortly.

Please note that any unanticipated harms to participants or adverse events must be reported to the Office of Compliance at (615) 494-8918. Any change to the protocol must be submitted to the IRB before implementing this change.

You will need to submit an end-of-project report to the Office of Compliance upon completion of your research. Complete research means that you have finished collecting and analyzing data. Should you not finish your research within the one (1) year period, you must submit a Progress Report and request a continuation prior to the expiration date. Please allow time for review and requested revisions. Failure to submit a Progress Report and request for continuation will automatically result in cancellation of your research study. Therefore, you will NOT be able to use any data and/or collect any data.

According to MTSU Policy, a researcher is defined as anyone who works with data or has contact with participants. Anyone meeting this definition needs to be listed on the protocol and needs to complete training (there is no need to include training certificates in your correspondence with the IRB). If you add researchers to an approved project, please forward an updated list of researchers to the Office of Compliance (compliance@mtsu.edu) before they begin to work on the project.

All paperwork, including consent forms, needs to be given to the faculty advisor for storage. All research materials must be retained by the PI or faculty advisor (if the PI is a student) for at least three (3) years after study completion and then destroyed in a manner that maintains confidentiality and anonymity.

Sincerely,

Paul S. Foster, Ph.D.
Associate Professor
Psychology Department