

# H-Net Reviews

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Canter Brown, Jr. *None Can Have Richer Memories: Polk County, Florida 1940-2000*. Tampa: University of Tampa Press, 2005. xii + 368 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-879852-36-5.

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## The Heart of Florida

It would probably take a moment or two for most readers of this listserv to name a town in Polk County if asked to do so.[1] And most would likewise view the arrival of a new history of said county in the same spirit that they would view the arrival of other “local history” publications: nice for the locals, but of little relevance to most Florida historians. But upon closer inspection, the seemingly hyperbolic claim by historian and Florida A&M University professor Canter Brown that Polk County represents “the heart of Florida” is not far from the truth. Throughout the twentieth century, Polk County has led the state in citrus and cattle ranching, and the nation in phosphate mining—three of the state’s largest industries. And tourism, the county’s contribution to the state’s prime industry, includes Cypress Gardens, Circus World, and Bok Tower, which one writer has called the state’s first roadside attraction.[2] And add to that the first Publix supermarket, former Secretary of State Katherine Harris, Agriculture Commissioner Bob Crawford, three Florida governors, and three U.S. Senators, and Polk County’s vital in Florida’s history quickly becomes apparent. Situated in between the rural Pork Chop Gang politics of North Florida and the urbanization and sandy beaches of South Florida, landlocked and sparsely populated Polk County provides an effective canvas on which to sketch out the past sixty-five years for the “other Florida.”[3]

In this nicely organized and well-written (although not perfect) follow-up to his first volume of the history of Polk County—published in 2001 by a different press and which ended with the Great Depression—Brown provides a useful case study of Florida’s (and the South’s) tremendous social, economic, and political changes during the second half of the last century.[4] In what can be seen as a localized companion piece to Gary Mormino’s recently published (and much anticipated), *Land of Sunshine, State of Dreams: A Social History of Modern Florida* (which covers roughly the same time period) Brown goes beyond the

mandate of most local historians by investigating the role of race, gender, and class in the county’s often checkered past.[5] And although funded in part by the Polk County Historical Association, Brown does not shy away from Polk’s less flattering aspects, which run the gamut from political corruption, rising crime rates, pervasive Klan rallies, and polluted water sources. (Novelists Carl Hiassen and Elmore Elwood could easily transfer their stories to Polk County without missing a beat.) Brown provides a model for other Florida historians who delve into “local history” by transcending many of the pitfalls inherent in the genre: overattention to minutia, lack of connections to larger themes, and triumphant narratives that please only the local chambers of commerce.

Brown divides his book into thirteen chapters, each covering five-year intervals, which span from 1940 through 2000. The opening chapter, a snapshot of Polk County in 1940, is one the book’s best. The portrait of Florida in the midst of the Great Depression and on the brink of war is one of the best that Florida historians will find. Brown’s past work on Florida race relations and social history serves him well here.[6] Over the next several chapters, Brown traces the effects of the Second World War and the postwar boom on the central Florida county. These chapters are well executed but break little new ground for those familiar with Florida’s past. But by the 1960s, matters grow more interesting. Here, Brown offers a case study for the racial, economic, and political issues all of Florida faced at mid-century. Polk County’s industries began booming, as did urban development and population growth. Brown vividly demonstrates the results of poor urban planning, such as Polk’s failure to pass adequate zoning regulations in the face of a local “bulldozer revolution.” Brown also illuminates the county’s inability to look past immediate goals and benefits in its decisions and actions. After a meteoric economic boom, complete with new tourist attractions, businesses, residential communities, and scores of new resi-

dents throughout the 1970s, Polk County came to an inevitable but still cataclysmic bust in the 1980s. During the supposedly roaring eighties, Polk County suffered skyrocketing unemployment and crime rates. (In 1981, Polk County was home to the nation's second highest unemployment rate.) The situation worsened as the phosphate mines bottomed out, and a citrus canker breakout along with two devastating freezes slammed the citrus farmers. By the turn of the century, Polk County had begun recovery, but was still far from the glory years of the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Throughout his narrative, Brown never loses sight of larger social issues that affected Polk County. Included in his analysis are the Korean, Vietnam, and Gulf wars, the struggles over integration, the women's movement, the rise of the Christian right in the 1970s and 1980s, environment consequences of urban and industrial development, and the several cultural wars over the influx of Northern residents and retirees, local mores over adult entertainment, and the plight of the poor. The catalyst for much of the latter century's boom and bust in Polk County was the construction and opening of Walt Disney World in adjoining Orange County. Brown's descriptions of the trickle-down effects of Disney's transformation of Florida are some of the book's most fascinating sections.[7]

There are some lapses in his narrative, however. One of the largest, surprisingly, involves two of the county's most prominent residents: Spessard Holland (Florida Governor, 1941-1945; U.S. Senator 1946-1970) and Lawton Chiles (U.S. Senator 1970-1990; Florida governor 1991-1999). Incredibly, there is very little text devoted to them. While Brown should be commended for not wallowing in "great men" clichés befalling so many local studies, the reader is left with many unanswered questions. How did Holland and Chiles affect Polk County from the state and national level? Did local matters guide their leadership at large? How was it that Polk County succeeded in sending three of its own to the U.S. Senate in addition to the state's executive office? (Here, I am of course also including Park Trammell—Florida Governor, 1913-1917, and U.S. Senator, 1917-1936—featured in Brown's earlier volume.) Such answers would have provided Brown opportunity to further connect Polk County's story with the state's and nation's larger narrative.

But his silence upon Chiles and Holland outside of their limited county experiences illustrates the book's one major flaw. A constant lament by Florida scholars over the past decades has been over the relative scarcity

of archival resources for the state (often resulting in mediocre studies and the inattention—or even outright dismissals—by non-Florida historians.) Therefore, it was particularly disappointing to see the absence of many state and federal archival sources, in part because so many are indeed available for the topics at hand. While I plead ignorance at the outset of the funding and time limits under which Brown must have labored, the lack of in-depth archival research was nevertheless noticeable. Some easily accessible state government collections, to offer but one example, that sprang to mind while reading the study include Chiles's gubernatorial papers, records of the Florida Department of Natural Resources, minutes of the Florida Citrus Commission (an agency which, ironically, was for many years based in Polk County's own Lakeland), and the Florida Livestock Board, all of which are housed at the State Archives of Florida. Too often, the chapters consist of newspaper articles linked together by the occasional oral history from the Florida Southern College collection. While no scholar can ever look at every record available for a given topic, one should still expect in an academic publication a more holistic approach in the research, especially for such a tightly constructed topic as that offered here. While the book more than accomplishes its goals of offering an in-depth history of Polk County, more time in the state's archives and special collections would have elevated the success of the study even higher.

That criticism aside, I want to recommend this work wholeheartedly to anyone working in twentieth-century Southern, Florida, urban, and/or social history. Brown makes obvious that there was a need for such a history of Polk County. Only Duval, Dade, and Hillsborough counties, perhaps, could rival Polk for relevancy to the state's recent past. And for the time being, Brown has satisfied that need. One can only wish that Florida's other sixty-six counties will one day receive similar treatment. Florida scholars could not be better served.

#### Notes

[1]. For those of you unable to do so, Polk County includes Winter Haven, Lakeland, Fort Meade, Lake Wales, Frostproof, Polk City, Bartow, Eagle Lake, Mulberry, Haines City, and Old Chicora.

[2]. Ken Breslauer, *Roadside Paradise: The Golden Age of Florida's Tourist Attractions, 1929-1971*, (St. Petersburg: RetroFlorida, 2000), pp. 10-12, 37-38.

[3]. My apologies to author Gloria Jahoda, who originally coined that phrase in her 1967 book of the same name.

[4]. Canter Brown Jr., *In the Midst of All That Makes*

*Life Worth Living: Polk County, Florida to 1940* (Tallahassee: Sentry Press, 2001).

[5]. Gary Mormino, *Land of Sunshine, State of Dreams: A Social History of Modern Florida* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2005).

[6]. See Canter Brown Jr. and Larry E. Rivers, *For A Great And Grand Purpose: The Beginnings Of The AMEZ Church In Florida, 1864-1905* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2004); Canter Brown Jr. and Larry E. Rivers, *Laborers in the Vineyard of the Lord: The Beginnings of the AME Church in Florida, 1865-1895* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2001); with Can-

ter Brown Jr. and James Denham, *Cracker Times and Pioneer Lives: The Florida Reminiscences of George Gillett Keen and Sarah Pamela Williams* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2000); and Canter Brown Jr., *Florida's Black Public Officials, 1867-1924* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1998); plus his many smaller publications with the Tampa Bay History Center.

[7]. See Richard E. Foglesong *Married to the Mouse: Walt Disney World and Orlando* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001) for more on Disney's effects upon Florida.

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