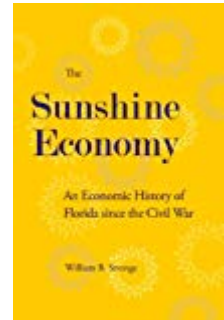


William B. Stronge. *The Sunshine Economy: An Economic History of Florida since the Civil War.* Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2008. xxi + 334 pp. \$34.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8130-3201-6.



Reviewed by David Lee McMullen

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Commissioned by Jeanine A. Clark Bremer (Northern Illinois University)

William B. Stronge, professor emeritus of economics at Florida Atlantic University, has recorded the essential economic history of Florida in his book *The Sunshine Economy*, and I am confident that the book will be a beneficial resource for those who want to know more about Florida from a business, economic, and historical perspective. In the preface, the author explains that his “book is aimed at the general reader, avoiding complex economic analyses that belong more properly in scholarly journals” (p. xx). This is certainly a formidable task for someone writing an economic history. For an economist, the challenge is to make the numbers interesting, and for a historian it is to breathe life back into people and events long past. Stronge, it must be noted, does a yeoman’s job at both tasks.

Here are the details of the early businessmen who played a major role in shaping modern Florida—men like Hamilton Disston, Henry Plant, Henry Flagler, and others. Here is an explanation of how the railroad developed throughout the state, bringing visitors and investment dollars into the

state, while transporting natural resources and agricultural products to the North. Here readers can discover the individuals who helped to lay the groundwork for the transition of Florida from a Deep South “southern cracker” backwater, to a trendsetter in the development of the New South, and ultimately an international economic powerhouse.

Stronge recounts the rise of tourism from the late 1860s, when a medical doctor published one of the first guidebooks about the state, noting the health advantages of Florida’s mild winters. Such advice and publicity helped to attract such important early visitors as Harriet Beecher Stowe, John Astor, and John D. Rockefeller, tourists who, in turn, helped in the birth of some of Florida’s earliest resort destinations. By the 1920s, men like Henry Ford and Carl Graham Fisher, became involved with helping promote tourism to Florida, as long distance highways began to allow automobiles to replace the train as the primary mode of transportation for the vacation traveler. Stronge also traces the citrus industry, Florida’s best-

known agricultural crop, from the “warm southern slopes of the Himalayas in northeastern India,” and provides details concerning the development of the citrus and fruit and vegetable industries in the state in the years before 1900 (p. 55).

A state known for economic peaks and valleys, World War I brought a decline in Florida’s population, as African Americans joined the Great Migration North in search of industrial employment. The Great Depression caused massive economic decline for the nation, and while Florida suffered, Stronge says that “the state economy held up better during the economic contraction than the national economy did” (p. 128). In fact, by the end of World War II, Florida almost closed the gap in per capita income, rising from 74 percent of the national level in 1930 to 95 percent in the final year of the war. Postwar Florida saw a brief economic decline, as well as decreases in the population. Major hurricanes during the late 1940s also contributed to declines in agricultural production. However, by the 1950s the state’s economic fortunes were on the upswing.

“By 1960, Florida’s population of 5 million made it the tenth most populated state in the country,” second only to Texas among all the southern states (p. 165). Stronge notes that “agriculture, tourism and retirement had become the dominant part of the state’s economic base” (p. 184). The 1960s and 1970s also saw the rise of new industries in the state, many related to the space program, just as large developers created new communities for the growing number of retirees headed to the state. As a result, housing construction became an important part of the sunshine economy.

By 1980, Florida had a population of almost ten million, making it the seventh most populous state, with rapidly changing demographics. At that point, only “half of the state’s population had been born in southern states, including Florida, and half had been born outside the state” (p. 202). During this time, Florida’s tourism industry began

reshaping itself around the newly created Walt Disney World, and benefiting from the rapidly growing cruise ship business. The 1990s saw declines in manufacturing and military spending, as the Cold War ended, while Latin American populations, especially in Miami-Dade, continued to increase. “By 2000, Florida was a major economy,” with a population of sixteen million (p. 238). Its citizens, older than the national average, reflected Florida’s position as a key retirement state, a distinction that dramatically influenced the state’s economic policy decisions. Looking toward the future, Stronge concludes, “the ability of Florida to improve the skills of its workforce and to develop new technologies will determine the extent to which the population further increases in its standard of living. The future will not be the same as the past” (p. 268).

While *The Sunshine Economy* offers great insights into the business perspective of Florida history, Stronge shortchanges the reader on some of the difficult challenges confronted by the state, especially the environmental issues that have long plagued the Florida economy. And, although the author gives passing mention to the role of government and the politicians who were involved in these economic events, his primary focus is on the entrepreneurs who developed the state and the evolution of the industries they created. As such, at least from the perspective of a historian, the book neglects half the story. Ideally, for academic study, this book should be paired with a political history of the state.

Without question, Stronge’s book will be a meaningful addition to the reading list of every upper division and graduate level course in Florida studies, and an interesting addition to courses in southern studies, where it will provide a uniquely different perspective on the economic development of the Deep South. It will also be invaluable to business school courses focused on Florida.

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