H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Kathryn Ziewitz, June Wiaz. *Green Empire: The St. Joe Company and the Remaking of Florida's Panhandle.* Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2004. 432 pp. $34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8130-2697-8.

Reviewed by Jack E. Davis (Department of History, University of Florida)
Published on H-Florida (May, 2004)

When I was ten years old, my family moved to the Florida panhandle near Destin. Memories of those days in the late 1960s belie the overgrown area of today. Destin was a sedate beach community, best known as the deep-sea fishing capital of the world. For $2,000, my mother invested in a waterfront lot along a finger inlet on the Gulf side of Highway 98. Except for a couple of beachcomber motels, the Destin beachfront was as quiet and barren as a desert. The roads were empty enough for my older sister to learn how to drive a car. Even I, at twelve, got behind the wheel. Soon after, my mother sold her property and broke even.

I also remember that when the wind was just right and blowing from the east, a faint sulfuric stench drifted down the panhandle. Friends told me that I was smelling the St. Joe Paper Company more than a hundred miles away. I lacked the critical faculties to understand the smell as that of corporate power, working-class jobs, and an environmental health hazard. But I was very much aware that between us and Port St. Joe was a mountain range of sand dunes training along the coast, broken up occasionally by small fishing villages and rompish Panama City. On the north side of Highway 98, which followed the sand-dune range, were mostly piney woods. The trees towered in perfect posture. Crowded together they formed a dark and Gothic-like interior that reminded me of a storybook setting. Nature was never so tangible to me as when I was around those woods. The panhandle environment stirred the childhood of the famous ecologist E. O. Wilson in a similar fashion.

In many instances, however, I was fooled by the scenery. Much of the woodlands were actually commercial forests, managed and owned by the St. Joe Paper Company. In the 1990s, the trustees of the conglomerate controlling the paper business sold the mill, reconstituted their concern into the St. Joe Company, and with great fanfare entered the business of real estate and land development. Run by former Disney executives who style the company as an environmentally friendly New Urbanist developer, St. Joe owns roughly one million acres of unmortgaged property in Florida and Georgia.

This is the Green Empire about which journalists Kathryn Ziewitz and June Wiaz write so eloquently. Most of St. Joe's land is in the Florida panhandle, representing over twenty percent of the privately owned real property in ten counties. Forty miles of it front rivers, lakes, and the Gulf of Mexico. The twelve miles of beachfront property in the company's portfolio were bought for $11 an acre back in 1925. The person who masterminded that deal was Ed Ball, a "gnome-like" man who was wont to raise a glass of bourbon and proclaim, "Confusion to the enemy!" (pp. 5, 38).

Although an FBI agent once described Ball, a potential informant to and an admirer of J. Edgar Hoover, as "vindictive," Ball had too many friends in high places to give much worry to his enemies (p. 73). He was also too busy running the Green Empire. For over six decades, Ball commanded the conglomerate, acquiring land and businesses–from banking to sugar cane. In the 1940s, he bought Henry Flagler's old Florida East Coast Railway. The acquisition led to a trust investigation in which Nevada Senator Pat McCarran claimed that Ball's power over the economic affairs of Florida was greater than that of the state government. When Ball died in 1981, at age ninety-three, a three-jet escort transported his body from Jacksonville to Wilmington, Delaware, where he was buried alongside his sister and brother-in-law. Ball had amassed a personal fortune worth $200 million, and the conglomerate had grown to more than $1 billion dollars in assets.

Ball had always been a man obsessed with making money (he once prospected for gold in Alaska). He was unable to fulfill his need, however, until a marriage formed a strategic union, not his own but his sister's. After Jessie Ball married Alfred I. duPont, of the wealthy Delaware gunpowder family, Alfred put his new brother-in-law in charge of Florida investments. The move was a smart one. When nearly everyone else was invest-

ing in property in south Florida during the land boom of the 1920s, Ball began buying up cheap real estate in the Florida panhandle. Neither he nor duPont knew how the land would be converted into profit until they laid plans for a pulp mill in Port St. Joe, an economically languishing fishing village with a deepwater harbor. The mill opened in the middle of the Great Depression, but it still turned an instant profit. It gave working people some of the best-paying jobs in the region, and it invigorated the local economy.

The economic windfall also changed the local environment. The mill filled the panhandle air with sulfurous exhaust, and the bleaching process–a breakthrough in the manufacture of white paper products–released dioxin, a dangerous toxin. By the 1950s, the mill was pumping 35 million gallons of water a day out of the ground, significantly lowering the water table. Seeking a new water source, St. Joe Paper cut an eighteen-mile canal to the Chipola River. St. Joe's greatest impact, however, was wrought on the land. To feed the mill's voracious appetite for wood, the paper company engaged in silviculture, the practice of sustaining commercial woodlands. After clearing thriving indigenous forests, St. Joe Paper turned much of the diverse panhandle into a monoculture of slash pine, leading to the loss of plant and animal species and wetlands. Once the grand sentry of the panhandle ecology, the longleaf pine was reduced to "2 percent of its former range," compelling the Department of the Interior to designate parts of the region a Critically Endangered Ecosystem (p. 32).

St. Joe's environmental record reflected the attitude of the man who ran the company. After Ball bought the beautiful Wakula Springs (now a state park) near Tallahassee for himself, for example, he dynamited parts to open the way for boats coming to a resort he built for his rich friends. He then fenced off the water passage to keep out the riff-raff.

Ball was equally insensitive about humanitarian issues that interfered with profit making. DuPont had envisioned a corporate sponsorship that would lead to improved health care and public education in the Port St. Joe community. Yet Ball never turned that vision into a reality. When duPont died in 1935, his will stipulated that his Florida businesses be operated to support charities through the newly formed Nemours Foundation. By the 1970s, the trust was paying out a 1 percent contribution when standard contributions required of organizations receiving a charity tax status was 5 percent. Over the years, St. Joe had also benefited tremendously from its so-called greenbelt status, which gave a sizeable tax break to commercial agricultural property, a benefit not extended to land set aside for preservation. Although Ball recognized a public purpose in taxes, he wanted to ensure that corporations and the rich were not overburdened with them, and in 1948, he fully supported the implementation of the state's regressive sales tax. Unlike taxes, he balked at giving even tempered recognition to the value of labor unions, with whom he found himself in frequent scrapes. The paper company maintained a rigid racial division of labor at the mill, and United Farm Workers' Cesar Chavez charged that the conglomerate's sugar plantation in the Everglades was keeping workers in peonage.

Ziewitz and Wiaz could have ended their story with Ball's death. But even without its colorful leader, St. Joe in the late twentieth century entered a phase with a new kind of dynamism. It evolved into a company "focused on real estate instead of smokestacks," and one that took on a greener image (p. 120). After the opening of Walt Disney World in 1971, the state embarked on a new era of unprecedented development, and St. Joe poised itself to be at the forefront. The company sold off most of its industrial operations, even parting in 1996 with the anchor of those operations, the paper mill. Reaping invaluable publicity, St. Joe closed a deal with the federal government for the purchase of its sugar business as part of Everglades restoration. Florida Audubon responded by honoring St. Joe with its highest award for corporate responsibility, even though the business had been regarded as the worst environmental offender among south Florida's sugar planters and even though its land remained in cultivation. The company netted a cool $40 million from the sale, and did so after negotiating permission to use the land for another five years. That move brought in $19 million from rental contracts with other sugar growers.

Some of St. Joe's most lucrative deals came from selling conservation land to the state, nearly 90,000 acres at more than $182 million. (George Wilson, the man who brokered some of those deals as head of The Nature Conservancy in Florida, went to work for St. Joe in 1999.) A good portion of the land sales were consummated during the governorship of Lawton Chiles, but the company quickly formed a cozy relationship with the pro-growth administration of Jeb Bush, who once sat on the board of a development firm, Codina, that St. Joe acquired. The authors describe the Bush administration's relationship with St. Joe as resembling a partnership, one that has included Bush appointing St. Joe executives and directors to numerous state boards and commissions.

Another strategic move of the reincarnated St. Joe

Company was to hire Peter Rummel as its new chief executive officer. St. Joe had lured him away from Disney, where he had been president of that conglomerate's development company. He brought with him a thick portfolio of resort and up-scale housing developments. He had begun his career with the firm that initiated Hilton Head Island's transformation into a resort, and then moved on to its Amelia Island (Florida) Plantation project. He eventually took a position with the premier Florida developer Arvida, and then relocated north to the Rockefeller Management Corporation. He next returned to Arvida, which had been bought by Disney. At Disney, Rummel helped develop Euro Disney and headed up the failed attempt to locate Disney's America in historic Haymarket, Virginia. One of his most notable accomplishments was the development of Disney's New Urbanist community, Celebration, in central Florida.

New Urbanism represented St. Joe's new vision, and Rummel added to that a complementary Disneyesque flair. The inspiration for St. Joe was the precursor to the movement, Robert Davis's panhandle community, Seaside, which broke ground in the year of Ball's death. The centerpiece of St. Joe's New Urbanist development is the highly profitable WaterColor, located in south Walton County around Seaside. Still in phase development, WaterColor has emphasized low-density residences; old Florida, Caribbean, and "Louisiana-Creole" architectural styles; foot over automobile traffic; and lush native vegetation surrounding all. St. Joe has taken considerable steps to protect, even rejuvenate, the population of the Choctawhatchee beach mouse, whose critical habitat WaterColor potentially threatens. Indigenous ecological features are central to St. Joe's marketing scheme, and the company can ill afford to destroy that vital commodity. Local citizen-activists expecting to face a traditionally obstinate developer with a bulldozer mentality have been generally surprised by St. Joe's sensitivity to their concerns.

St. Joe is selling nature, or as an anonymous golfer in John Sayles's irreverent film *Sunshine State* puts it, "nature on a leash." Rummel belongs to a school of developers who create high-end projects and who know that next to waterfront property, a golf course is the greatest attraction to their clientele. St. Joe's current development and future plans include premier golf courses, integrated with natural features. To quote again a John Sayles character, nature–that is, raw and wild nature–is "overrated" if it is too raw and wild. To this end, part of St. Joe's targeted customer base demands high-end gated communities, advertised by the company as an escape from the outside world. Like Disney, St. Joe's developments are the real world–with its human and non-human elements–made over to conform to certain class expectations.

This is the central concern of Ziewitz's and Wiaz's book: how St. Joe will itself, and by its influence through other developers, make over the Florida panhandle. St. Joe has been unabashedly frank about its desire to transform the region. With its upscale projects for well-heeled customers, St. Joe's vision is selective, and current and ongoing projects indicate that the transformation will be as much social as it is ecological. St. Joe caters principally to "buyers from the drive-in southern market, which would include Atlanta and Birmingham," who are interested in retreating to a luxurious vacation home or investing in profit-making seasonal rental property (p. 166). As has been the case on Hilton Head Island and Amelia Island, rising property values and taxes will likely force out working-class families who have lived in the same location for generations. That prospect seems fated given that beachfront lots at St. Joe's The Retreat sold briskly at $400,000 each in early 2000 (a far cry from my mother's purchase and sale down the road in Destin).

Affordable housing has already emerged as a problem in some parts of the panhandle, which for a century was one of the least expensive places to live in Florida. This is an issue to which St. Joe, like its former self during the Ball years, has not been particularly sensitive. Affordable housing does not generate profit to the extent that exclusive residential property and even nature add to the bottom line. In the Green Empire, accessibility to environmental amenities seems to be growing less egalitarian.

Sorting out the complexities in St. Joe's history is an enormous undertaking. It is one that raises many questions about new dimensions in environmental justice, nature as resource and commodity, the evolution of utilitarian conservation, the visionary legacy of professional planners, changing attitudes toward nature, historical continuity in Florida's growth and development, and the Green Empire's place in the history of planned developments. Ziewitz and Wiaz's book is less historical than investigative journalism, depending more on newspaper and secondary sources than on historical documents for its research. It therefore leaves many historical questions unanswered. This statement is meant to be an observation, however, rather than a criticism.

The authors tell their story well. Although the choice of their topic reveals their sympathy for the natural environment, their narrative voice remains objective. Their book is fact-driven and informative. They present a con-

temporary story, but their chief concern is with the future. The literary importance of *Green Empire* lies in its thought-provoking look at an unfolding chapter in the history of a state and country that have always equated growth with progress and a narrowly defined quality of life. For good or bad, American culture has historically designed to control nature, usually for profit and almost always with environmental and social costs.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Jack E. Davis. Review of Ziewitz, Kathryn; Wiaz, June, *Green Empire: The St. Joe Company and the Remaking of Florida's Panhandle.* H-Florida, H-Net Reviews. May, 2004.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=9301

Copyright © 2004 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.