

Senior Times

Remembering Paradise Park

The History of Segregation at Silver Springs



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INSIDE

VETERAN DANIEL KEEL
Challenges Faced by a Tuskegee Airman

ART FROM THE HEART
Unique Funding for Early Education

An Invisible Line

Remembering Paradise Park

STORY BY PEGGY MACDONALD
PHOTOGRAPHY BY BRUCE MOZERT

An invisible line once separated black and white visitors to Silver Springs in Marion County. Blacks and whites rode in separate glass bottom boats, picnicked in separate parks, and swam in separate parts of the Silver River.

In reality, the same glass bottom boats were used to carry black and white passengers along the river, and blacks and whites swam in the same water. All of the boat captains were black, but they were not allowed to take their friends or families to the Silver Springs theme park, which was reserved for white patrons.

Paradise Park was designed for African American visitors to Silver Springs during the Jim Crow era. At the time no admission was charged to enter Silver Springs, but African American visitors who tried to purchase tickets for the boat rides or Ross Allen's shows were not permitted to do so and were instructed to visit Paradise Park instead.

Segregation at Silver Springs is the focus of a new exhibition at the Appleton Museum of Art in Ocala. "Paradise Park Remembered: Photographs by Bruce Mozert and Others" features approximately 100 photos by Bruce Mozert, who was the official photographer for Silver Springs and Paradise Park. Other images included in the show range from park tickets to brochures with Silver Springs on one side and Paradise Park on the other, courtesy of private collectors and the Marion County Black Archives. The Appleton Museum of Art, College of Central Florida, partnered with Silver Springs State Park, Friends of Silver Springs and the Marion County Black

Archives to produce this new show.

The Appleton exhibition complements a new book that is the first to examine Silver Springs' little known sister park, Paradise Park, which was open from 1949 to 1969. Lu Vickers and Cynthia Wilson-Graham co-authored "Remembering Paradise Park: Tourism and Segregation at Silver Springs," which the University Press of Florida published in 2015.

"Silver Springs is nice, but it was nothing like Paradise Park. I miss it because it was like family."

"Remembering Paradise Park" unveils the complex origins and demise of Silver Springs' separate theme park for African Americans. Vickers said Paradise Park began as a competing park in the 1920s. Dubbed Silver Springs Paradise, this early version of Paradise Park was decidedly anti-African American. A park brochure contrasted the Silver Springs Paradise Park Company's white boat drivers with Silver Springs' black captains. "OUR BOAT GUIDES ARE ALL INTELLIGENT WHITE MEN," the brochure stated.

After a series of legal challenges Silver Springs' owners, Carl Ray and Shorty Davidson, eventually prevailed over the owners of Silver Springs Paradise Park and purchased the property. Ray and Davidson, who were white, later hired Silver Springs boat captain Eddie Vereen to create and manage Paradise Park. This extension of the original park was

Lottie Donaldson, a dance teacher at Howard High School, and Nathaniel "School Boy" Thomas, one of the first lifeguards at Paradise Park, are featured in one of the few underwater pictures taken at the park.



DON'T MISS PARADISE PARK
For Colored People Only, Featuring Class Bottom Deals Over SILVER SPRINGS, Swims, Near OCKLA, FLORIDA



Looking Thru Glass-Bottom Boat into 80 Feet of Water
Paradise Park on Silver River near Ocala, Florida



Feeding the Tame Deer
at Paradise Park on Silver River
near Ocala, Florida



The Popular Beach at Paradise Park
On Silver River near Ocala, Florida

developed to provide African American patrons with access to Silver Springs. However, Silver Springs' owners did not have purely altruistic motivations.

"They wanted to make an extra buck," Vickers said in a recent telephone interview.

Vickers described Bruce Mozert as the only professional photographer who was allowed to take pictures of Paradise Park. She had approached Mozert about his photographs several years ago after his underwater images appeared in Gary Monroe's book, "Silver Springs: The Underwater Photography

of Bruce Mozert" (University Press of Florida, 2008). Vickers developed a personal relationship with Mozert while doing research for some of her earlier books, which include "Weeki Wachee, City of Mermaids: A History of One of Florida's Oldest Roadside Attractions" (University Press of Florida, 2007) and "Weeki Wachee Mermaids: Thirty Years of Underwater Photography" (University Press of Florida, 2012).

Vickers asked Mozert about his Paradise Park photographs and he showed her the original negatives, which were bundled together with a rubber band. She convinced him to let her

*Ross Allen's Reptile Exhibit
at Paradise Park on Silver River
near Ocala, Florida*



produce enlargements of the proofs of the Paradise Park images for her book and the Appleton exhibition.

Vickers visited Mozert in the hospital last fall and presented him with a copy of "Remembering Paradise Park." He planned to attend the exhibition as well, Vickers said, but his health declined. Mozert died in October 2015, about a month before he would have turned 99 years old.

Mozert's images of Paradise Park reveal the complexities of segregation. The park was a vital cultural center for African Americans in Marion County and across the state. Children were baptized in the cool waters of Silver Springs, young women competed in Labor Day beauty contests, churches held picnics and Santa Claus handed out gifts at Christmas. Still, the sting of segregation was felt by all who worked and played at Paradise Park.

Roosevelt Faison has been a glass bottom boat captain since 1956, a year after "Revenge of the Creature of the Black Lagoon" was filmed at Silver Springs. When he started ferrying passengers up and down the Silver River 60 years ago, he was not permitted to enjoy the Silver Springs theme park because of the color of his skin. Like all of the other boat captains, Faison was unable to give his family a tour of Silver Springs unless they boarded a boat at the Paradise Park dock. On breaks, Faison and the other boat captains had to use separate bathrooms and water fountains designated for "colored" staff and visitors.

In 1962 Ray and Davidson sold Silver Springs and Paradise Park to ABC Leisure Attractions, a subsidiary of the American Broadcasting Company (ABC), for \$7.5 million. Park manager Eddie Vereen retired in 1967. Vickers suspects that Vereen knew the park's days were numbered. After ABC took over operations at Paradise Park it seemed to lose a piece of its soul and took on more of a corporate feel, Vickers reports.

"Gone were the choirs and the preachers who led the sunrise services," she writes. "Gone were the beauty queens,



Clockwise bottom left: Paradise Park's lifeguards with Howard Academy's class of 1955. Thousands attended the Miss Paradise Park beauty contest each Labor Day. Carrie Johnson Parker-Warren (front) is crowned Miss Paradise Park. Young women pose next to azaleas blooming on the grounds of Paradise Park. A cooking contest in one of the pavilions at Paradise Park.

and Santa Claus, and the children who searched for eggs the Vereen family had prepared and hidden."

After the Civil Rights Act of 1964 outlawed segregation in public facilities and integration gradually became the norm, African Americans were eventually allowed to visit Silver Springs but the stain of segregation remained.

"It didn't go away just because all the signs were removed," Faison told Vickers in a 2013 interview. "It left scars."

In 1969 Paradise Park was quietly closed and obliterated, Vickers writes. The pavilion and picnic tables were knocked down and the dock was dismantled.

"Nobody knows who bulldozed the buildings," Vickers said, adding that some boat captains suspect it was ABC.

Many African Americans who made memories at Paradise Park remain bitter to this day about its closure.

"Paradise Park was our roots," Brenda Vereen told Vickers

in a 2013 interview. "Silver Springs is nice, but it was nothing like Paradise Park. I miss it because it was like family."

Roosevelt Faison has mixed emotions about the closure of Paradise Park.

"[It] put us all together as one in the place of being divided," he explained to Vickers. "It's got its place in history, but I was glad to see it go because it meant we weren't divided anymore, and black people could come up here and see what we had, which was more than what we had down there."

The story of Paradise Park remains shrouded in mystery and is seldom integrated into the mainstream narrative of Silver Springs.

"It's a very complicated story," Vickers said. Roosevelt Faison told Vickers that in the late 1990s and early 2000s park manager Bob Gallagher discussed adding the history of Paradise Park to the boat drivers' narratives. The idea never



materialized, however.

“When you start talking about race relations, that’s a real touchy situation,” Faison told Vickers. “It is history, but there are a lot of things we’ve done in the course of history that we don’t really want to face up to anymore.”

The state is considering featuring the history of Paradise Park in a room in the little strip mall that is adjacent to the boat launch. The Paradise Room, Vickers explained, might include photographs and exhibits on the history of Paradise Park.

Vickers would like the state to make the history of Paradise Park more visible at Silver Springs.

“It would have been really nice if they would have reconstructed some of the buildings down the river,” Vickers said.

For now Paradise Park is just a memory, but Bruce Mozart’s beautiful images and Lu Vickers’ piercing prose bring it back to life in “Remembering Paradise Park.” ■



PARADISE PARK REMEMBERED

runs through April 24 at the Appleton Museum of Art, located at 4333 E. Silver Springs Blvd., Ocala. A complementary exhibition at Silver Springs State Park features a display of vintage memorabilia and photographs from Paradise Park in its Education Center. Paradise Park boat captain David Faison shares stories from his 58 years of service every Tuesday through Saturday at 11 a.m., 12:30 p.m. and 2 p.m.

The Appleton will host the following events in February. All events are free and open to the public.

Thursday, Feb. 18, from 6-7 p.m.

Cynthia Wilson-Graham will discuss the history of Paradise Park at the Silver River Museum, located at 1445 N.E. 58th Ave., Ocala. There will be an open house before the presentation.

Thursday, Feb. 25, 6-8 p.m.

Panel discussion on the history of the segregation of Florida’s beaches with “Remembering Paradise Park” co-authors Lu Vickers and Cynthia Wilson-Graham, along with Enid C. Pinkney on Virginia Key Beach and Marsha Dean Phelts on American Beach.

The Appleton Museum of Art is open from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday, noon to 5 p.m. Sunday and closed Monday. Daily admission to the Appleton Museum of Art is \$8 for adults; \$6 for Seniors; \$5 for students 19 and over; \$4 for youths ages 10-18; and free for members. College of Central Florida students, children age 9 and under, active military personnel and their immediate families are free.

Daily admission to Silver Springs State Park is \$8 per vehicle (limit 2-8 people per vehicle); \$5 for single-occupant vehicle or motorcycle; and \$2 for pedestrians, bicyclists, extra passengers and passengers in a vehicle with a holder of an Annual Individual Entrance Pass.

Silver Springs State Park and its Education Center are located at 5656 E. Silver Springs Blvd., Silver Springs.