



Views of Royal Palm State Park [Paradise Key]

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PARADISE KEY

BY

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PARADISE Key! The name is an inspiration, as thrilling and charming as the forest covered, palm dotted island to which it was given many years ago. I have been over all the warmer part of Florida including the lower keys, thruout the length and breadth of Cuba, the Republic of Haiti, the entire island of Jamaica and quite a little of Spanish Honduras. I have sailed thru the lovely Bahaman Archipelago and landed on several of its islands, I have visited the Bermudas and cruised again and again thru the entire Mediterranean and down the West coast of Africa, but my eyes have never rested on any spot on earth as beautiful as Paradise Key. It is absolutely unique; it is a picture of unsurpassed beauty set in a wonderful frame; the dome of the blue atmosphere forming the upper part of it; the wide expanse of the Everglades its lower part. The whole effect is glorious beyond the power of description; the dark broad leaved vegetation which forms the irregularly outlined mass of the forest is crowned here and there by noble royal palms, singly or in groups which cut the sky line with charming effect. The whole hammock, seen from any point seems as tho it was the great work of some master landscape

gardener, and so it is; it was designed and executed by NATURE. As I gaze with awe and rapt admiration on this work of the Great Master I feel that it is perfect, as beautiful as it is unique and my heart swells with pride and patriotism because of the fact that Florida possesses such a grand tropical forest—that it belongs to Dade County.

All honor to the noble women who have so faithfully and successfully labored to have this forest reserved for the use of the public as a park, a recreation ground, an example of nature's choicest hand-work forever. There should be a tablet prepared and set up in a conspicuous place in the park containing a brief statement of what they have done and the names of every one of them in order that the living and those who are to come may know who to honor for this great blessing.

But there is a fly in the ointment. Man is a strange creature, civilized or savage. He is possessed with the idea of the necessity of making a change, he always believes that by his knowledge and skill he can make things a little better than they are. No matter how beautiful any work of nature is our people are possessed with a desire to "improve it." They must "clean up a little," they must add to or

take away, or change or absolutely destroy the finest piece of landscape it has taken nature ages to produce. The desire to get hold of an axe and chop down or mutilate trees seems to be second nature to all mankind. We destroy the lovely hammock in order to plant rows of Australian pines and Chinese Hibiscus, one alternating with the other, or Coconut palms and a few other trees and plants without any harmony or beauty of arrangement and when this is done and the owner of the land has put up a hideous residence patterned largely after some other one in the North which was equally hideous, we say he has made a fine improvement.

One of the things which we are positively insane about is to thin out all the small and crooked trees in a hammock and clean the ground up until it is smooth and level. A large number of those who visit my home suggest that I do this with my hammock, which I have left almost wholly in a state of nature. There was a lovely piece of hammock within a mile of my home which I have occasionally visited and admired, especially for the wonderful beauty and vigor of its sword ferns. The other day I happened to be near it and went over to enjoy it. Two Negroes were cutting out everything in the shape of trees but a few of the larger ones, and a well dressed white man had a scythe and was mowing down sword ferns as high as his head. I couldn't hold in and asked him what he was doing it for, and I talked to him as a father would talk to a son who had been stealing apples.

"Well," he said, as he shifted about uneasily, "I bought the hammock and I hadn't anything to do so I thought I would clean it up a little."

Down south of Miami a piece of magnificent hammock was given to the public for a park. It is located in the finest forest in lower Florida, the oldest and most finished hammock in the entire

region. It is nothing short of a crime that this magnificent piece of nature's handiwork was not kept un-spoiled for a public reservation in its entirety. It would have made a park which would have been the glory of Miami and Dade County forever if it could have been preserved. Well, whoever was in charge of the small park, "improved it" after the customary fashion by cutting everything out but the large trees and polishing up the ground. It stands today a melancholy wreck, a patch of crowded, black tree stems overshadowed with a crown of foliage so dark that one may wander around it and contemplate this unspeakable folly in a sort of twilight. Most of our splendid hammocks are either utterly wiped out or mutilated in just such fashion as this. And if any right thinking person can refrain from anathemas on those who thus despoil our fairest possessions perhaps he may be able to say; "Father forgive them for they know not what they do."

This is a long prelude to what I would say about Paradise Key. The desire to improve it, to change, to mutilate and destroy seems to be rampant. The name has been changed, to begin with, to "Royal Palm Hammock" or "Royal Palm Park." Now we have in lower Florida to my certain knowledge not less than six royal palm hammocks, a magnificent one back of Cape Romano containing some five hundred royal palms and which has borne the first of the above titles for many years and is entitled to it by priority of name. There is another considerable royal palm hammock on Roger's River and a third on Harney River, these three on the southwest coast of the state. There is another between Flamingo and Coot Bay, and one back of Sawfish hole on the South coast and the one of which I am writing. All of these are equally entitled to the name which has recently been applied to our new reservation and the first mentioned

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pre-eminently so. We already are burdened with duplicate geographical names in lower Florida such as Mangrove Points, Palm Points, Long Keys and the like; why should we coin any more? What is the sense in applying an inferior new name to replace a perfect old one? The only answer is the desire for change.

It has been proposed to erect a rock wall around the entire hammock, to fence it in with an atrocious barb wire fence; there is a scheme to plant a cordon of cocoanut palms entirely around the forest and in that case we would have in the course of a few years an artificial screen of palms, which are as common in South Florida as sandburs, to shut out absolutely the matchless glory and beauty of this wonderful forest. All the charm of the entire thing would be obliterated; the native royals which rise out of the hammock and cut the sky line with unspeakably beautiful effect would be completely hidden. One might as well paint the rose with cheap Venetian red or, if possible, put up a flaunting advertisement of somebody's patent medicine against the glories of a sunset scene.

It is the same insane desire to do SOMETHING, ANYTHING to improve, to make a change, to push in with our supposed knowledge, to rectify the failings of nature. It has been suggested that roads be cut thru it, that a considerable space be cleared out for a sort of recreation ground, that a part at least should be thinned out after the manner of the Miami park, in fact I have heard many suggestions for its improvement or in other words mutilation.

It is my honest belief that the proper thing to do, for the most part, may be summed up in just three words; LET IT ALONE. The more of this there is done the finer hammock we will have in twenty years, the more we will be thanked by future generations, who will, it is hoped, have some sense and taste about such

matters. Already much damage has been done; a wide straight road has been cut out entirely through it and a hideous eyesore made by blasting out rock to one side of it. Parties have chopped into the great oaks which stand along this road and cut off a lot of magnificent lianes which clothed them with beauty. I understand that the contractors for the Cape Sable Road are to be permitted to blast and take rock for it from the hammock and if they are allowed to do so in all probability a considerable amount of it will be destroyed.

Many years ago the United States government and the City of Washington obtained a large tract of broken land in the immediate suburbs of the city. For the most part the surface was so broken that it had defied the efforts of the real estate men to level it up and make lots out of it. It was largely covered with primeval forest and thru it a considerable stream, Rock Creek, tumbled and roared down over granitic rocks to the Potomac river. Suggestions were made by various parties to clear out the forest, level up the ground and plant it after the manner of an ordinary city park, all kinds of schemes were proposed for improving it. But those who had charge of it had the rare good sense and taste to preserve the forest and all the natural features with very little change. They cut out and built such roads as were needed to show the beauties of the land to those who passed along them; they allowed the young timber to spring up and grow where the forest had been cleared away. Here and there in somewhat open spaces resting places were provided with seats and necessary buildings. The result is that Rock Creek Park is one of the great attractions of Washington, ranking with the Capitol, the Library of Congress and the National Museum. Trolley lines, jitneys and sight-seeing cars run to it and the poorest people in the city can go there

and be benefitted by the lesson of its beauty, and there is no reason to doubt that it has contributed not a little towards the aesthetic and moral uplift of the city. Had it been treated as the little Miami park has been it is probable that a considerable part of Washington's inhabitants would have been criminals or in the lunatic asylum before now.

There is not the slightest doubt that within a limited number of years Miami will be a city of a hundred thousand inhabitants. It will be the winter home and a tourist resort for many thousands more, including a great number of people of genuine taste and refinement. With a fine road this park will be less than two hours distant by auto. We have it in our power to make, or rather leave it a thing of beauty or to turn it into an eyesore and a disgrace; to call forth the approval of the best element that comes here, or their anathemas.

I would suggest that as little change be made in the park as possible. Unfortunately the road has been cut thru it instead of carrying it around the hammock as it should have been done but that cannot be remedied now. It will be necessary to build a lodge for the caretaker or warden and this presumably will have to be located on the road. It should be of simple design and large enough for the comfort of a family and the accommodation of a few guests. Botanists and other scientists will visit the key and the adjacent region and there ought to be some accommodation for them. Hundreds will want to picnic there or camp out and some kind of a pavillion should be erected for their shelter at night and in case of storm. It should be provided with tables and some kind of seats. All this should be done with as little cutting or destruction as possible.

The warden is now clearing out a set of narrow trails which will lead to the most interesting localities in the hammock but

these will be made with as little damage to the vegetation as possible. At one or two places the rock might at some future time be blasted out to below the water line in places where but little injury would be done to the forest and around their banks native ferns and shade loving plants could be set, the whole after the manner of some of some of the marvellously beautiful pools in the hammocks of the Homestead region. A few rustic seats of native rock might be built in appropriate places.

There is a considerable open area about midway across the hammock thru which the road is carried. If the road contractors must be allowed to take rock from the key one or more pits might be made in this space. The vegetation is low and scrubby with little beauty or value. If the pit or pits were excavated to below the permanent water line they might be made into ponds or lakes of great beauty. Their sides should be made as irregular as possible; additional soil might be added here and there to the banks on which native trees could be tastefully planted. Many native aquatics and attractive shrubs and plants could be worked in to add to its beauty. The great pit already made for the purpose of obtaining rock near the eastern entrance of the hammock might be deepened and treated in some such way, or it might be filled and used as a site for one of the buildings.

It has been suggested that at some future time a scenic road be built around the entire key at some distance from it to enable those who visit it to have a fine drive and see the beauty of it from the outside. If this could be laid out by some one in sympathy with the wonderful attractiveness of the island I think it would be a fine thing. It would also act as a fire guard to some extent. I do not believe that any carriage or automobile road should be cut thru the hammock. It would be impossible to do so without

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destroying a large amount of its finest vegetation, perhaps trees that are not duplicated elsewhere in the forest. The region is visited occasionally by very severe hurricanes and the openings made by cutting out for roads would give the wind a chance to work terrible destruction. The hammock is not so large but what all of its parts can easily be visited by the trails.

There are probably some sixty or more species of trees growing wild in this hammock and a considerable number of shrubs. But there are many more in Dade County which are not found in it. The hammocks in which they now grow are being rapidly destroyed and it seems to me that it would be a fine idea to have specimens of these taken up and planted, perhaps in some outlying part of the forest where but little vegetation would need to be sacrificed. By this means a number of trees and shrubs found nowhere else in the United States could be preserved from extermination. The present warden, Mr. Charles Mosier, has an excellent knowledge of the native trees and shrubs of Dade County and should at once be instructed to bring in and plant such as are not found on the key.

It seems to me that this beautiful hammock is something that should appeal to the pride and patriotism of every citizen of Dade County, in fact to the people of

the whole State and those who have winter homes here or are interested in this part of the country. In order to properly care for it a considerable amount of money will be needed. It is to be hoped that the legislature will make suitable appropriations for its maintainance, but in the meantime funds will be needed to build a lodge and for other purposes. I appeal to all those who are in any way interested in this noble work to contribute liberally towards it. I understand that a number of wealthy men have large holdings of land to the south and west of this park which will be enhanced in value by its development, and it seems to me that it would be a gracious thing if they would help out in a financial way in the the proper development of this reservation.

Any one wishing to contribute to the development and upkeep of the park may send money to Mrs. John Gifford, Coconut Grove, Florida, who is Chairman of the State Park Committee.

And lastly let me appeal to all who visit the park to respect it, to commit no act of vandalism or robbery. Let us feel that it is our park, a gift from nature of priceless value as unique as it is beautiful, that all that is fine and attractive in it should belong to our children and grandchildren, to generations that are yet unborn as well as to ourselves.

