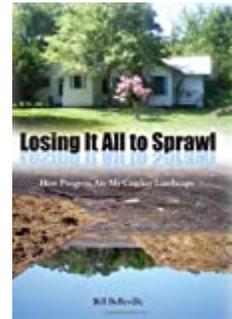




Bill Belleville. *Losing It All to Sprawl: How Progress Ate My Cracker Landscape.* FL: University Press of Florida, 2006. xx + 199 pp. \$24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8130-2928-3.



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A “Shard of the Real” amidst All the Sprawl

In *Losing it All to Sprawl*, acclaimed journalist, documentary filmmaker, and environmental activist Bill Belleville chronicles his experiences living in a Cracker farmhouse in Seminole County, Florida. Part of the University of Florida’s Florida History and Culture Series, Belleville’s work sweeps together the last two centuries of Florida’s past with the millennia of Native American occupation, capped by his personal fifteen-year history of life among the plants and animals on Sewell Road and the memories of the Crackers who came before him. Part environmental history, part memoir, and part muckraker journalism, *Losing it All to Sprawl* illustrates how, although others had successfully coexisted with the harsh and delicate Florida environment before the 1960s, the present short-sighted reliance on land development as Florida’s economic engine and a lack of political will make any moves toward greater sustainability and reversing negative environmental impact as the Sunshine State grows nearly impossible.

Belleville offers less an analysis of the ecological or sociological impact of sprawl in central Florida than a first-person observation of sprawl in action. Drawing in-

spiration from the writings of naturalist William Bartram and novelist Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, Belleville seeks to provide an updated description of central Florida that is both a naturalist’s log and a focused and sympathetic celebration of locality. As a journalist, Belleville has traveled the world, and in this work he describes his many adventures with like-minded friends visiting nature preserves and National Forest areas to explore the tangled, beautiful, and unique drainage basins of the Wekiva and St. John’s Rivers. He expresses a zealot’s passion for the environment and a child’s wonder for discovery through stories of seeking new and uncharted springs deep in the woods and at times diving into their depths. Coupled with this exploration of wild central Florida ecosystems is his own intimate observations of life from a house that was intentionally built to be adaptive to the subtropical climate.

In a style that moves back and forth between daily journal and narrative, Belleville shares each detail of his Cracker home built in 1928 and the yard that evolved over generations of loving care—his little preserve of old Florida landscape, complete with cochina fish pond and

sabal palms pock-marked with woodpecker holes. The Sewell Road neighborhood lies between rapidly expanding Orlando and Sanford, the former agricultural center that long resisted, though ultimately unsuccessfully, the suburbanization taking place in the rest of central and southern Florida. With only a few Cracker houses on the street, the neighborhood was still basically rural when Belleville bought the home in 1990 from a family that had lived there for nearly six decades. Soon after he moved in, however, the first shopping mall in the area was built near his new home and before long most of the neighborhood fell into slums, and the fields that used to graze cattle or grow celery and the overgrown citrus groves were replaced with chain restaurants and gas stations. “Nonetheless,” Belleville states, revealing one of his intents in writing, “there is still a shard of the real alive here, and I find an increasingly urgent need to capture all of it I can” (p. 74).

Once development began, Belleville and his neighbors became spectators as the inescapable process of sprawl engulfed them. Most of the original homeowners left the area as gradually more itinerant renters moved in and all of the trees disappeared, while Belleville and a few other holdouts resisted the attempts by speculators and landlords to buy them out. He witnessed outside his own front window how sprawl is changing all of Florida, encouraged by political and civic leaders. Operating through tax subsidies to land developers, de facto taxpayer underwriting through lax enforcement of environmental statutes and government funding of infrastructure construction, and opaque rezoning procedures and frequent ordinance amendments, Florida’s “pro-growth” approach at the local, county, and state levels has depleted or polluted the once abundant fresh water and permanently altered the natural and cultural landscape of the state. Belleville seeks both to decry the corruption and ineptness of the government-sponsored, unsustainable growth and lament the destruction of the places he has grown to love under the crush of development whose momentum is now irreversible after years of political giveaways and the warping of the state’s economy.

Belleville’s recollections are poignant, and his research, combining numerous ecological and economic studies of sprawl with past writings of historians, naturalists, and devoted citizens, while not original, thoroughly grounds his own anecdotal evidence and provides an unobtrusive factual framework for the brief and deeply personal text. However, the timeline of the narrative is confusing, as it vacillates between present-day prose and a chronological account of his stay in the house that employs both reminiscences and in-the-

moment, diary-like entries, and chapter divisions seem chosen more as prominent positions for particularly good quotes than for any overarching structural or thematic reasons. Whether intentional or not, the construction of the book echoes the “haphazard development” of sprawl as defined by one Orlando reporter Belleville cites (p. 105). Belleville’s impressions and emotional connections with the house and its natural surroundings are effective and essential to the work, but in the instances that they veer into other areas such as musings on personal relationships, they become cumbersome.

An attuned sense for irony, which if Belleville did not have before moving to Florida, he certainly acquired afterwards, seems helpful when seeking to understand how sprawl happens and to convey why its impact can be so tragic, whether looking at economic growth models that actually cause long-term depression or green-spaces mandated by local ordinance which can only be affordably implemented by developers through clearing all the existing trees and planting new ones to fulfill a quota of replacement. One of the starkest examples of the irony of sprawl Belleville relates is his description of Altamonte Springs, the nineteenth-century tourist spot and lumber center turned suburban boom town where Belleville first lived when he moved to Florida (himself one of the millions of yearly immigrants who have helped fuel the state’s exponential growth). The city’s namesake spring was paved over years ago, but now that the groundwater has dropped so precipitously throughout central Florida, new sinkholes—windows into the aquifer below like the springs before them—open frequently, destroying the very structures that replaced the springs.

That sprawl is pervasive in Florida and destroys both ecosystems and vernacular culture is nothing new. And Belleville does not need to convince ecologists and historic preservationists of sprawl’s impact, but what he suggests with his observations is both more compelling and more dire: that the situation is intractable. Indeed, by the end of the book Belleville has sold his own beloved “Cracker landscape.” Recognizing a discomfiting parallel between himself and the homeless panhandlers who had camped in the woods behind his home for several years before the tract was bulldozed for an apartment complex, Belleville sees that his own attempt at forming a permanent connection to place has been unsuccessful and he becomes yet another itinerant Floridian. The sprawl “obliterated the temporary place” where the homeless lived. But then that’s true of everyone in Florida, he realizes: everyone is homeless “because all of the landscape in central Florida [is] temporary, no permanent sanctuary to be had” (p. 144).

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