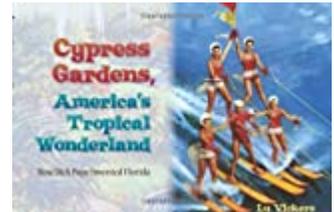


Lu Vickers. *Cypress Gardens, America's Tropical Wonderland: How Dick Pope Invented Florida.* Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2010. 358 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8130-3499-7.



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Southern Charms and Snake Oil Salesmen

Was there a place called Florida before Disney World? Is Florida a state, a state of mind, a vacation destination, or a figment of an advertiser's overactive imagination? Is tourism saving Florida or destroying it? In this hybrid book, part coffee-table illustrated stroll through the past and part serious history of the important topic of Florida tourism and its relationship to the state's environment, Lu Vickers attempts to answer these questions by examining Cypress Gardens in Winter Haven. Once Florida's premier vacation destination, it could not survive Disney's theme park onslaught, and after undergoing a series of changes and closures in the past decade, it will re-brand itself as LegoLand Florida, slated to open in October 2011. But throughout much of the twentieth century, Cypress Gardens represented Florida to millions of Americans. Dick Pope, its founder and owner, was primarily responsible for making Cypress Gardens into a premier vacation spot. Though it seems hard to believe today, in 1963, American travel editors placed Cypress Gardens in a tie with the Grand Canyon as the nation's top tourist destination. In examining the rise and fall of this uniquely Florida attraction, Vickers vividly evokes a lost world of kitsch and Americana, where no visit to the Sunshine State was complete without a trip to Cypress Gardens to experience the natural beauty of the state, the

ballet-like precision of the world famous water-ski show, and the glamor and elegance of the southern belles.

Born at the turn of the twentieth century in Iowa, Pope moved with his family to central Florida in 1911. His father, J. Walker Pope, became the quintessential Floridian—part booster, part huckster, always understanding the need for promotion in providing the key to economic growth. A key figure in Polk County's participation in the 1920s Florida real estate boom, the elder Pope, with Dick in tow, oversaw the development of Winter Haven while serving as one of the chief brokers of the Haven-Villa Investment Company. However, by the end of the decade, the Florida real estate market had collapsed, the nation was in the midst of the Great Depression, and young Dick Pope was married and working in Chicago for the Johnson Outboard Motor Company. At this big city job, Pope combined his love of boats with his genius for public relations. The job would provide the basis for his development of Cypress Gardens in Winter Haven as a tourist attraction based on water shows, the unique natural environment of Florida, and relentless promotion.

Returning to Florida in 1931, during the depths of

the Depression, Pope and his wife Julie hatched a plan to develop a tourist attraction on the shores of Winter Haven's Lake Eloise. "The WPA supplied him with workers and paid them a dollar a day to dig canals, clear the underbrush, and lay the walkways. The men worked in the swamp for five months before the money ran out" (p. 41). After three years of stop and start building, the attraction opened on January 25, 1935, with Pope and his wife spending much of their time and money to get the park up and running. But the attraction was always about promotion as much as the exhibits themselves. Less than a year after the opening, "the Gardens had already achieved national fame with a two-page spread in a booklet for the National Florida exhibit at Rockefeller Center" (p. 57). With the support of city, county, and state boosters, as well as a national marketing strategy highlighting photographs, brochures, and wholesome comely young women, Cypress Gardens was an instant success, praised in a 1938 AAA guide as "a destination neither words nor pictures can describe ... a wonderland of tropical and natural beauty" (p. 65).

The 1940s brought dramatic changes to both Cypress Gardens and the state of Florida more generally. Pope worked in conjunction with Hollywood film studios to showcase his subtropical natural wonderland. Using the gardens as a backdrop, movies featuring box office stars like Betty Grable and Don Ameche projected the image of Florida as a vacation paradise. Pope also worked with state tourism officials to market Florida citrus throughout the nation. Vickers is especially good at tying Pope to these broad marketing schemes—making Cypress Gardens, and its idealized vision of Florida's environment, synonymous with the state itself. Pope called this strategy OPM squared—Our Picture Material, Other People's Money—and it became the underlying marketing strategy for not only Cypress Gardens, but other Florida tourist destinations as well. Vickers argues that the attraction's success was significantly based on Pope's uncanny ability to understand both what Americans wanted and the various methods needed to entice them to "come on down." Julie Pope, however, was the chief architect of the two things Cypress Gardens became best known for—the water-ski show and young women dressed up as southern belles. Developing these during World War II while her husband was erecting telephone poles for the army, Julie used these devices to entice thousands of military personnel to come to the gardens on their off days. Soldiers, sailors, and airmen would return to Florida again and again after the war, making sure to stop at Cypress Gardens with their families in tow.

The 1950s and 1960s proved the heyday of Cypress Gardens tourism. Vickers provides both great oral history stories and wonderful evocative pictures of this halcyon time, when Florida really entered the nation's imagination as a unique and special environment. Gracing the covers of *Life* and *Look*, images of Cypress Gardens enticed tourists with a vision of a subtropical Eden. Who would not be enchanted by the gardens's newly built Florida shaped pool, surrounded by trees draped in Spanish moss, and bordered by dozens of bathing suit clad beauties?

And then came Mickey. The 1971 arrival of Walt Disney and his very different vision of tourism changed both Florida and Cypress Gardens forever. Vickers is especially good at explaining how an elderly Pope struggled to adapt his Florida attraction to the changing exigencies of a world (Disney World!) transformed dramatically by the arrival of Disney. Optimistically betting that the influx of tourists to Walt's artificial world would bring more people, Pope expanded his attraction significantly in the 1970s. But the double whammy of Disney and the economic downturn of the 1970s, with increased gas prices severely curtailing automobile trips that provided the lifeblood of Cypress Gardens, put the attraction in a long tailspin from which it could never recover. Forced to rely increasingly on gimmicks, like "a new roller-skating parrot joined by a water-skiing scarlet macaw," Cypress Gardens saw steadily declining attendance figures and a revolving stream of new owners after Pope's death in 1988 (p. 246). By the first decade of the new century, the gardens, this time hurt by the post-9/11 tourist contraction and the devastation of the 2004 hurricane season, opened and closed twice. Even the help of a public-private grant administered through the Trust for Public Land could not keep Cypress Gardens from morphing into LegoLand, a theme park based on the Danish children's blocks. With that change, "Cypress Gardens ceased to exist in name as an attraction almost 75 years to the day it was created" (p. 323).

Vickers tells the Cypress Gardens story in a breezy affectionate manner. Her obvious fondness for both Cypress Gardens and the Florida it represented comes through on every page. She ends with an ode to the joys of the type of natural tourism represented by Cypress Gardens: "One can only hope Cypress Gardens persists in Legoland Florida, if for no other reason than to remind us there was a time when water-skiers and flowers were enough" (p. 328). And the wonderful color pictures of movie stills, water-ski shows, and promotional materials make this a very visually appealing book. That

said, there is real substance beneath the glitzy format of the book. Vickers has much to say about the changing nature of tourism in the Sunshine State and the importance of Cypress Gardens in that story. While Disney obviously provides much of the contemporary story of Florida tourism, Pope really did it first; as he developed a symbiotic relationship between his personal business and the governmental agencies of Florida at all levels. Pope took Florida and marketed it in a way it had never been done before. Vickers tells readers that newsreels defined Americans as a people in the time from 1930 to 1960. And Pope used them to convince Americans that

they were a nation of water-skiers. With the advent of television, Pope used that medium to showcase the natural and feminine beauty of Florida, allowing Mike Douglas and Johnny Carson to broadcast live from Cypress Gardens. Vickers also explains how the rise of Disney-centered tourism marked the demise of Florida tourism—Disney World could have been anywhere, while Cypress Gardens was organically a part of Florida and could have existed nowhere else. This book tells that story both thoughtfully and beautifully. Pope would have been proud of it.

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