

Ballyhoo, Broward, and Kenneth Roberts

by JOE KNETSCH

The Jazz Age, Age of Ballyhoo, the Roaring Twenties, call it what you will, was just beginning when Kenneth L. Roberts received instructions to travel to Florida. He had been engaged by George H. Lorimer to do a series of articles on Florida for *The Saturday Evening Post*. Since Roberts had just completed a series of articles on European immigration (later published in book form as *Why Europe Leaves Home*), the assignment appeared to be a natural follow-up. Many Americans had just begun to go south for the winter, and Lorimer, being the sharp editor that he was, decided to have Roberts investigate why.

What Roberts found was not especially inspiring. As he told it, "the vacationers in Florida at that time were so few that Miami Beach was a desert waste of pumped-in sand, a checkerboard of unpopulated avenues, spotted here and there by three or four hotels and a few score houses."¹ There was not much to report on in Florida in 1921, but Bobbs-Merrill Company decided to put Roberts' articles into book form and publish them under the title of *Sun Hunting*. It sold a whopping 4,790 copies. As Roberts noted, "So I had three books on the shelf, though nobody knew it."²

Roberts was not impressed with Florida, but was looking for a place to escape so as to begin his career as a novelist. He had reached the reporter's political pinnacle, the Washington, D.C. beat, but found it frustrating. He found covering the Harding administration, and Harding himself, to be boring. Pleading for a break from "that font of fat-headedness," Roberts got his wish, via another trip to Florida. Lorimer once again asked him to "scrutinize the distractomaniacs of Florida."³

As editor of the Cornell University humor magazine, Roberts had shown a witty pen. The humor which readers found in the 1924 Florida articles proved he had not lost his touch. Every page is filled with hyperbole, puns, and snappy one-liners. However, the wit served to

emphasize the truth about Florida of that time. The facts that he reported concerned the famous land boom of the 1920s. "The real estate boom in South Florida has now been underway for several years, during which time nearly everyone who has had the slightest idea what he was buying has profited when he bought in the vicinity of established cities and resorts . . . In the winter the Floridians occupy themselves almost entirely in selling to visitors from the North. In the summer, when the tourist tide has receded, the Floridians sell their real estate to one another just to keep their hands in."⁴ The exaggeration is in good fun and the point well taken.

If a Floridian wasn't selling land, he was clearing it and building on it. "Building sites, however, are plentiful and Florida contractors have so developed the business of building a house that it seems more like a natural force than a human

operation. The feverish speed with which a mushroom emerges from nothing and reaches maturity is almost being rivaled by the indecent rapidity with which Florida houses attain their growth. A Florida house builder runs some cement out on the ground to serve as a foundation, slams up a framework to which he nails black paper with a chicken-wire attachment, slaps two or three layers of cement on the chicken-wire, and thus apparently obtains a full-grown and highly successful residence in the time that a Northern contractor or builder occupies in getting the blueprints unrolled." And this finished residence could be had for "8 percent all over Florida."⁵

Visiting Fort Lauderdale, Hollywood, and Miami Beach and reporting back to Lorimer, Roberts took time out to head toward Palm Beach. There he ran into an old friend, Frank Rane, one-time state forester for Massachusetts. Crusty, tight-



Kenneth L. Roberts, 1930s.

fisted, and frugal as Roberts was proclaimed to be, he did not control the urge to loosen the pocket book and purchase land in Palm Beach. As Rane sold Roberts on the idea of escaping to Florida, he also arranged for Roberts to have his dream home built by a local contractor. The little piece of paradise was purchased for \$5,000 (a corner lot — one tenth of an acre) and the home constructed for a modest \$12,000. "I just didn't have a chance to say NO, and so I signed on the dotted line and went to Arizona."⁶ He was to return to his sunny homeland very soon thereafter.

The author of *Northwest Passage*, *Arundel*, *Lydia Bailey*, and *Rabble in Arms* has never been accused of extreme modesty. His description of why Lorimer sent him to Florida in 1925 is glaring proof of this point:

America became conscious of an unprecedented mass movement from Northern states to Florida. Whole towns in Maine, Massachusetts, Vermont were loading their belongings in flivvers, trailers, trucks, limousines, and migrating to sunshine and oranges, almost as inexorably as birds each August flit southward before approaching snow and ice.

*When news of this movement reached Lorimer, he called me to Philadelphia. 'As near as we can make out,' he said, 'those Florida stories of yours were responsible for this migration. There'll be a land boom there because of it, and the suckers rushing to Florida may lose every penny they've got unless we can stop 'em or show 'em up. I want you to travel along with 'em, find out how they're treated, what sort of run they're getting for their money, how many are being robbed, how much of this real estate ballyhoo is crooked, what the good real estate men down there think about it. We'll have to get this stuff in print fast, or there'll be one of the biggest bust-ups America has ever seen. Every boom has to end some time; and the sooner this one ends, the better for Florida and everyone else.'*⁷

The resulting articles were published in 1926 under the book title *Florida*.

It sold 5,000 copies and, like his previous efforts, did not reach the top of the best sellers list.

Florida has a lot to say about Broward County. One whole chapter is devoted to Joseph W. Young and the development of Hollywood. Roberts places Young at the forefront of the development movement alongside of George Merrick and the Mizners. Roberts informs his readers that Young's schemes were so wild that many predicted he would "soon be residing permanently in the poor house." Such chiding would not deter



Hollywood Boulevard looking east from 20th Avenue toward the Hollywood Hotel in 1925, the year that Roberts visited Hollywood.

the likes of Joe Young. Young took "an unpleasant looking tract of flat land" and made it grow into something other than a tomato patch. Though some called it "South Hell," Young impressed everyone with his energy, and Hollywood continued its phenomenal growth.⁸

What impressed Roberts about Young was the latter's drive and dreams. Roberts noted that Young had spent "between thirty-five and forty millions of dollars" from 1921 to the winter of 1925 to build his dream community. Further, "nearly every cent that had been received from sales had been put back into the property in one way or another and Young has stated that 1928 must probably come and go before a cent of dividends can be taken out of it."⁹ That kind of drive appealed to Roberts the individualist.

Roberts, on this visit, saw a Hollywood "grown down to the ocean" with hotels, casinos, and lagoons. But it was the vision that Young had that was to inspire Roberts' fascination. Young had built Hollywood from nothing into a showplace, had hired General Goethals, of Panama Canal fame, to build "what threatens to be one of the finest harbors in America," and planned the largest tourist hotel in the world. What other visions could Young have?

From the manicured portion of Hollywood an electric railway will run back into the rich farm lands of the interior for at least a hundred miles; and on each side of the railway Young proposes to develop thousands of ten-acre farms and in effect

to guarantee their purchasers against loss, provided they follow the farming advice which the developer will provide for them.

Agricultural experts will determine the crop which the soil of each farm is best suited, and instruct the farmer in the methods to use. If, after using these methods, the farmer does not get a crop that shows a profit, Young proposes to buy back the farm at the purchase price plus 6 per cent interest.¹⁰

Young was going to copy the technique of Henry Flagler and Henry Plant. His vision had a strong basis, and Young had the business acumen to push it to fruition.

For Roberts, Young had fit the mold of a "good real estate man" that Lorimer had asked him to seek out. Young seemed to care about people and was not out to play every sucker for all he had. Young's faith in Florida was impressive and constant. He had researched why people had come to the state, and he felt confident in its future. "One man built a house here in 1922, and as a result of this one contented resident, Young declares, fifty-eight other families have purchased homes in Hollywood. Each contented resident, he says, brings an ever widening circle of people to the state. Consequently, he believes that there will be a constant and ever-increasing stream of cold-dodging Northerners pouring into Florida."¹¹ So much faith did Young possess that he refused to sell the electric light plant, despite some very attractive offers. He needed the plant to maintain service to the residents of his city on his terms, not those set by an outsider.

Fort Lauderdale, too, caught the eye of the *Saturday Evening Post's* roving reporter. As a rugged individualist, outdoorsman from Maine (fond of wild geese and chopping wood for exercise), and avid fisherman, Roberts was impressed with the New River and its bountiful waters. He was also taken aback by the city's dramatic growth.

Fort Lauderdale slumbered peacefully and pleasantly for years on the banks of the peculiar winding, water-filled gash, ninety feet in depth, that is known as New River.

Late in 1924 the town had a population of some 5,000. It then awoke tumultuously, traffic jams became matters of hourly occurrence on its main street, and within one year's time its permanent population was being placed by its most expert climbers at nearly 20,000.

The tourist who saw the town lying quietly in the sun in 1924, rejoicing in its excellent schools and its seven churches, and the silver hordes of giant tarpon that rolled up New River in the tarpon season, returned in 1925 to find a nine-story department store, a five-story mercantile building, two large apartment houses, a Masonic temple, various other business structures, and countless homes in the process of noisy and feverish construction.¹²

Roberts noted that 100,000 people were expected to call Fort Lauderdale home by the year 1935.

Some of Broward's smaller developments did not escape the trained reporter's eye. He was quite sure of the prospects for Floranada. "The success of this development's elaborate plans are assured by the fact that they are backed by such people as Mrs. E. T. Stotesbury, Mrs. Horace E. Dodge, and James H. R. Cromwell."¹³ Kenneth Roberts was not always the best of prognosticators.

One prediction of the local soothsayers that Roberts reported has come to fruition. The time sequence may be off, but the ultimate truth of the forecast we know first hand. "In ten years, say these modest predictors, the seventy-five-mile strip along the ocean from Miami to Palm Beach will be solidly populated. One community will merge so completely into its neighbor that no dividing line can be distinguished; and the population of this seventy-five-mile city will be 5,000,000."¹⁴ In 1925 this may have seemed to be so much ballyhoo, but we know the truth today.

Florida only sold 5,000 copies. Roberts found the cause for this in the printing delays of the Brothers Harper and the fact that the boom had expired. Why had it expired? Roberts tells us that it was because *The Satur-*

day Evening Post had published his articles and that they had discouraged enough people to bring on the collapse. Roberts now had four books on the shelf and an inflated ego to keep them company.¹⁵

Roberts, as a reporter, got only one more assignment in Florida. On September 18, 1926, the Great Hurricane struck the southeast coast of Florida, and Roberts was given the task of reporting the details. He did not arrive on the scene until a full three weeks after the storm. But his reporting is valuable from the perspective of the clean-up and the effects the storm had on the development of the community.

It was not until one reached the little town of Pompano . . . that one entered the so-called destructive zone of the hurricane. In Pompano great trees had been snapped off at right angles . . . Beyond Pompano, at Floranada, Colohatchee, and Progresso, great Australian pines and telephone poles had been slammed across the road in windrows.

In these towns the small stucco houses stood unhurt but the flimsily built wooden ones with which they were sprinkled were overturned and bent and warped and twisted in every imaginable manner . . .

In these towns, too, some structures made of concrete blocks had gone down in dusty-looking heaps, as though an energetic child had busied himself erecting elaborate walls from a great number of toy blocks and then petulantly pushed them over and gone away and left them . . . The tourist will never see the mess that existed on the Fort Lauderdale waterfront immediately after the storm.¹⁶

Roberts also reported on the great steel barge that was thrown across New River inlet and on the damage done to many of the fine residences. However, he also made sure that the efforts of Broward's citizens in cleaning up the mess did not go unnoticed. He stressed the fact that Hollywood was cleaned up in two weeks time and that the hotel clerks in Fort Lauderdale were in the lobbies already gossiping about the few guests within a mere three weeks. Thus, Broward did a fast turnaround to get back into business.

Roberts still had a good word for the accomplishments of his developer friend, Joe Young. The major buildings of Hollywood had stood the test of the storm. The Hollywood Beach Hotel had come through the storm well and "structurally, the hurricane did next to no damage to it."¹⁷ As for Young's vision, Roberts said nothing.

What the hurricane did demonstrate to Roberts was the need for stronger building codes. Contrary to his earlier impression of Florida stucco homes, he now praised their storm worthiness. The builder who knows his stuff, he said, and the architect who develops good, solid plans will build homes that can come through anything. The homes he saw destroyed in Broward were almost all made of wood and tarpaper. Only a few of the block homes were destroyed, and almost none of the stucco homes suffered any damage. His message to his readers was clear, but the boom was over, and the hurricane had sealed its fate. South Florida was to be a long time in recovering from the big blow.

Roberts went on to a highly successful career as a writer of historical fiction. His fabled penchant for accuracy became his major trademark. "Surrounded by old prints of his heroes and old maps of their exploits," Roberts wrote daily between 6:00 a.m. and 9:00 p.m.¹⁸

His old friend and colleague, Booth Tarkington, provided regular company and an occasional sailing adventure. His career, which produced many best sellers, brought him fame and fortune. This included a special Pulitzer citation for having "contributed to the creation of greater interest in our early American History."¹⁹

To the best of this writer's knowledge, Roberts never returned to Broward County after the year 1926. This is regrettable. Had he been willing to write of Broward in the depressed '30s as he was of the ballyhoo days of the '20s, our historical picture would have been more complete, not to say more entertaining. Heroic tales of our early heritage were his stock-in-trade during the '30s. Too bad he missed the contemporary tale of daily heroism happening in the '30s in south Florida and the rest of the nation.

FOOTNOTES

1. Kenneth L. Roberts, *I Wanted to Write* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Co., 1949), 150.
2. *ibid.*, 151.
3. *ibid.*, 152.
4. *The Saturday Evening Post Treasury* (New York: Saturday Evening Post, Pub., 1945), 283.
5. *ibid.*, 287.
6. *I Wanted to Write*, 163.
7. *ibid.*, 175.
8. Kenneth L. Roberts, *Florida* (New York: Harper and Brothers, Pub., 1926), 93.
9. *ibid.*, 94.
10. *ibid.*, 94-95.
11. *ibid.*, 96.
12. *ibid.*, 126.
13. *ibid.*, 105.
14. *ibid.*, 124-125.
15. *I Wanted to Write*, 175.
16. Kenneth L. Roberts "The Great Hurricane," *Saturday Evening Post*, November 27, 1926, 56.
17. *ibid.*, 59.
18. "Northwest Passage," *Life*, March 18, 1940, 52-54.
19. James P. Wood, "The Most Unforgettable Character I Ever Met," *Reader's Digest*, March 1959, 152.