

Florida's Healing Waters: Gilded Age Mineral Springs, Seaside Resorts & Health Spas. Rick Kilby, 2020. Gainesville: University Press of Florida. 228 pp.

Review by:

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Orlando-based graphic designer and writer Rick Kilby is no stranger to Florida springs and other waters. In 2013, the University Press of Florida published his trim and well-illustrated *Finding the Fountain of Youth: Ponce de León and Florida's Magical Waters*. That book uses a few hundred images (photos, drawings, old brochures and other promotional material) to reveal the impact of the sixteenth century Spanish conquistador on Florida's twentieth and twenty-first century landscapes—especially those where people have long sought to capitalize on Ponce de León's fabled search for a fountain of youth. As Kilby (2013, p.31) suggests, "If you visit the many places in Florida that have claimed ties to the Fountain of Youth, you might get the impression that Ponce de León stumbled across the peninsula, drinking from every spring he could find in search of the elusive elixir." Kilby's recent book, *Florida's Healing Waters*, is equally well-illustrated, but it is no coffee table book. Kilby clearly builds on our understanding of the historic development and continuing evolution of tourism in Florida. He contends that better understanding the history of Florida's Victorian-era springs, spas and sanitariums will help us see "how they fit into the larger context of human history and our relationship to water" (Kilby 2020, p. ix).

Florida's Healing Waters is divided into nine chapters. The first two chapters review the long history of using selected water bodies for healing, including what we call medical tourism. The next three chapters shine a light on Florida's historic spring spas, especially those near the St. Johns and Suwannee Rivers (and their tributaries), and those clustered along the state's central Gulf coast (or "Springs Coast"). Kilby then briefly examines the historic consumption of the state's mineral waters, the emergence of ocean bathing in Europe and its spread to the northeast U.S. and eventually to Florida, as well as the development of hydrotherapy in Florida. His concluding chapter comments on the negative impacts of dramatic population growth on Florida's waters. Like Kilby's earlier book, *Florida's Healing Waters* is lavishly illustrated with mostly historic and occasional contemporary photographs, but also many promotional materials. In this regard, Kilby's book reminds me of books from Tim Hollis (2006, 2016).

The author sets out to elucidate the history and geography of Florida's springs, spas, and sanitariums. In 1973, geographer Burke Vanderhill began this process with an underappreciated essay on several historic spring spas in Florida. Rick Kilby took the handoff from Vanderhill and moved the ball well downfield. Kilby makes generous use of many secondary sources, but his book is no mere literature review. To be sure, he appropriately mines several well-known eighteenth and nineteenth century Florida travel books and other works intended to promote what was then a thinly populated state—accounts from travelers such as William Bartram, John James Audubon, John Lee Williams, Sidney Lanier, Ledyard Bill, George Barbour, and resident Harriette Beecher Stowe. Yet Kilby also cites many local histories, century-old newspaper articles and promotional materials, and Florida's photographic archives. Geographers will appreciate the fact that Kilby visited many of the places he writes about, supplementing his historical and geographical review of Florida's healing waters with periodic discussions of his own travel and experiences. All of this material is used to craft an attractive and well written volume on the use of Florida waters for medicinal purposes from the middle nineteenth to the middle twentieth centuries.

I confess to typing a dozen pages of notes, quotes, questions, and comments as I read the book. Many of Kilby's stories attracted my interest. For example, after noting that Florida remained a thinly populated backwater throughout the nineteenth century, Kilby observes that in the 1800s—as the notion emerged that being outdoors contributed to one's health—Florida began to attract medical tourists seeking recovered health, rejuvenation, and wellness, especially at several of the state's springs. Kilby (p.40-41) admits that “It is difficult to say exactly how many of Florida's springs were developed into spas, because much of the built environment of that era has been lost. . . . We have evidence, though, that at least twenty-three spas existed alongside Florida mineral springs.” Indeed, a common refrain throughout the book is that springs attracted significant investment in bath houses, hotels (some of them opulent), and recreational facilities from the mid-nineteenth into the early twentieth century. By the 1920s, after fires (a common hazard a century ago) had repeatedly destroyed many resorts, the Great Depression (which in Florida, arguably began in 1926) and the rough justice of American capitalism combined with modernizing medical practice and road construction to lure people away from springs and toward Florida's beaches. Perhaps the most stunning photograph in the book is a crystal-clear image of Daytona Beach from 1904 (p.150), featuring many well-dressed people, ocean bathers off in the distance—and several horse-drawn carriages on the beach! Of course, there are many terrific photos in this book. Unfortunately, some image captions do not provide a date, perhaps because the photo's date is not known.

Readers hoping to find a more critical engagement with the intersection of healing waters, race, and environmental justice will be disappointed. To his credit, Mr. Kilby provides a few details about Jacksonville's Moncrief Springs, which transitioned into a pool for African Americans around 1945. The spring is now long gone, perhaps the victim of groundwater pumping and declining aquifer levels in the region. In addition, Kilby includes an undated photo of the entrance to Milwaukee Springs (near Gainesville), featuring the jarring image of the words “colored only” on one of the buildings—but there is little additional commentary. Indeed, it is not clear where this site was/is. Moreover, there is no mention of Paradise Park, a portion of the Silver Springs attraction open only to African Americans between 1949 and 1969 (see Vickers and Wilson-Graham 2015). To be fair, Paradise Park opened after springs attracted medical tourists and it was never marketed as a place where “healing waters” could be enjoyed. Similarly, there is no mention of northeast Florida's American Beach, a coastal recreation area promoted and visited primarily by African Americans from the 1930s into the 1960s (see Dean-Phelts 1997). Again, American Beach became a recreational haven for Black people after the era of health resorts, so Kilby can hardly be taken to task for such an omission.

Finally, geographers will no doubt cringe at the lack of maps identifying all of the wonderful places Kilby describes. The author includes a beautiful map of Florida from 1765, but this map was not created to identify springs, and it reflects the era's rudimentary understanding of Florida's basic geography. There is also an undated map of peninsular Florida, that depicts the St. Johns River and several of the region's springs. Yet despite the elegant simplicity of this map, it cannot be used to locate these springs today because it has the headwaters of the St. John rising from near present-day Miami.

Rick Kilby includes a chapter devoted to a handful of Florida places that developed the practice of hydrotherapy for medicinal purposes, and then he finishes the book with a brief chapter bemoaning water quality and flow reductions in many Florida springs. He set out to explore and tell the story of Florida's many spring spas, seaside resorts, and other health spas, mostly from the 1850s to the 1930s, although a few persisted longer. Not only does he succeed in this endeavor, he also succeeds in stitching this part of Florida's past and present places onto the larger narrative of this

state's historical geography—a narrative that has not yet been fully articulated. Thumb through Kilby's book for the many terrific images, but read it to learn more about how Florida's waters launched tourism as the state's leading economic activity.

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