How many of you know Chief James Billie? The story goes that after he returned from Viet Nam in the 1970s, to his astonishment the Seminoles elected him tribal chair. In lacking the confidence to lead the Seminoles—that is a modern era—you’ve got to realize the Seminoles were impoverished, he consulted an elderly medicine man and asked “what can I do to win over my people?” He said “son, you must first go out and capture, kill, and eat a Florida Panther,” which he proceeded to do, and he was promptly arrested for killing a native species. He pleaded that it was a religious purification ceremony on sovereign land and in fact, was acquitted in what was called the trial of the century in Ft. Lauderdale. As he stepped out of the courthouse there were about 200 reporters there, the first question they asked was “what does panther taste like?” He replied “it tasted like a cross between Bald Eagle & manatee.”

You may be wondering what is such an urbane looking person know about agriculture? First, I grew up on a chicken farm in Illinois, so ask me about Rhode Island Reds and Plymouth Whites. I’ve always found agriculture a really interesting window into Florida because you can look at the labor—who is picking the crops—that’s an interesting insight into Florida. In fact the next slide will probably visually shock you, let me give you some context on this. Another way to look at Florida is through ethnic groups.

In the late nineteenth century, early twentieth century, you had half a dozen to a dozen farming communities in Florida that were comprised by one ethnic group or another. So the most famous is probably Dania, which the name implies it was a settlement of Danish farmers. I think its Broward County. I’m almost certain Carl Hiaasen’s great uncle was one of the founders of Dania. You had Swedes in Sanford—General Sanford, the founder of Sanford thought Swedes would be ideal. You can imagine Swedes in August in Florida. You had Polish immigrant communities in Dade County. Ybor City is known as the cigar capital of America but in fact many of the Sicilians don’t gravitate to horticulture; they do horticulture. When I was doing field research in a very mountainous area of Sicily—one the communities is so high you really can’t farm and they were all pastoral agrarians—they had sheep flocks and in Tampa the land was very cheap when they arrived in the 1900s. So they bought lots of land and established dairies. Finally as the next slide shows, how many of you are familiar with Yamado in Palm Beach County? It was like the only Japanese holiday in Florida and when I first saw this I thought “this is an insulting article,” but in fact it’s rather positive if you read it. There was a “we need more Japanese farmers, look what they’ve done in other places in America,” especially look at California.
When the Spaniards arrived in Florida in the 16th century, they must have been the most disappointed group, first of all their initial image of Florida was this is the American Mediterranean, look at the palm trees that were native here. They brought with them this holy trinity of foods stuffs; olive oil, wheat, bread, sheep, and wine. That’s not trinity but none of those things did very well in Florida, in the 16th century; European Spanish grapes didn’t grow here at all. Olives wouldn’t grow here in the 16th century. It’s now kind of afad crop; it’s mainly a substitute for oranges. Wheat will only grow in one area in northwest Florida, and sheep die by the flock. So the Spaniards really had to adapt their diet to Native American Indian diet.

This is a typical cracker style cottage in the 19th century; it looks like they’re cultivating marijuana there. I’m a little uneasy about this. They may be castor beans, we’ll assume its marijuana, it’s more romantic. First of all you have to realize what an isolated, unsettled state Florida was; in 1880 I believe the population of the state was fewer than 300,000 people. 300,000 people; half of the population was African American and it would never go higher, in fact it would go down each year for about a century. Land was cheap and astonishing things were being grown here at the time just with truck farms and everything. You could still homestead land in Florida if it was the proper area. Under the Homestead Act, they would give you 160 acres of land and all you had to do was agree not to cultivate the timber within five years and build a house. So lawyers got involved and said all you have to do is build a house made of bench section; they didn’t say the specifics of the house and you had a lot of people taking advantage of this. Even from the Seminole War era people realized the most valuable land would be the hammock land, you can see all of the hardwood around there.

This is one of my favorite slides of all time; it’s Largo, FL, not far from here, I captured this; the guy in the center has written his brother in law in North Dakota and said we had a very bad year this year. The cabbages were especially small, this could be an illusion, he could well be holding 3 or 4 cabbages and pressing them together but I don’t think so. I mean it’s probably virgin muck and Largo is one of many places in Florida that used to be known for agriculture. One way you can tell is the nicknames on the athletic teams; anybody know the nickname of the Largo High team is? The Packers. They were not packing meat, they were packing produce. The name of the Pompano Beach athletic team? The Pompano Beach Beanpickers, still today, there hasn’t been a bean picked in Pompano Beach in 40 years. But you’ve got to admit; it’s a great name.

This is going to be embarrassing; how many of you have seen most recent Forum magazine put out by the Florida Humanities Council? The issue is devoted to the orange, there’s a quiz in back; we’ll see how good you are. The quiz asks what places used to be known for crops that are no longer grown there? So I’ll throw out the crop and you can tell me the place.

Strawberries? Starke, yes—Starke, Florida—used to be called the sweetest strawberry this side of heaven and Plant City eclipsed it.

How about Kumquats? St. Joseph’s City, near Dade City in Pasco County.


(Who is that? Kevin you’re good.)

Sweet Corn? Zellwood.

It’s really sad if you think about it, how a place established a reputation for one crop. I’ve always wondered if something like strawberries got to Plant City, did they impose the crop upon the land or was there something special about the soil in Plant City?

Harvesting celery in Florida, this is something for which Sanford and Sarasota were quite famous. Listen to the names of some of these roads; Fruitland Road in Sarasota—not exactly an agricultural powerhouse today. But Florida still has these urban counties like Palm Beach and Hillsborough that are agricultural powerhouses. As a social historian I find the fact that in a place like Palm Beach you can have Palm Beach City and Boca Raton and in the same county you can have Belle Glade and Pahokee. On the west side you’ve got Naples and Marco Island with Imokolee.

Do you see anything interesting about this? Lettuce, Banana Tree, I think this is actually Clearwater, FL. Pretty handsome banana tree. This is an early effort to grow sugar on a massive scale and it generally failed. The first effort was in New Smyrna, what is that; Volusia County. In 1760s when Britain controlled Florida a man by the name of Andrew Turnbull, a Scottish physician, brought several hundred Minorcans; Minorcans are Spaniards from the Balearic Islands. He brought Italians (mainly from Genoa) and Greeks to New Smyrna and they were all indentured servants; kind of semi-slaves — in fact they had a revolt and killed the overseers. But the Minorcans escaped to St. Augustine where they were kind of the first family of St. Augustine. But the crop they were growing there was what? Not sugar in 1760. What crop guaranteed you a profit; Indigo. They used it to dye; how many of you have been to the Kingsley Plantation? You can see them make indigo, it’s terrible work, smelly.

Okay horticulturists, how many of you have observed sugar cane boil? Oh this is a good crowd, I’ve asked students and groups like this, to me this is one of the quintessential things every Floridian should do. I’ve been in two of them, this is pre-massey production of sugar in Florida; probably in the 1890s. Farmers wanted to be as self-sufficient a possible and its said that poor whites and poor blacks in Florida lived on the three Ms (meal, molasses, and meat—meat was generally pork back). So everyone had a sugarcane patch, you’d cut the sugarcane and have a mule, well you talk about a disappearing animal in Florida; the mule was so valuable in Florida. More hearty and dependable, longer life than a horse. Hard to breed two mules. This scene here would have been everywhere in Florida. I was with a group of teachers about two weeks ago, no about a month ago in Belle Glade and for us they did a sugarcane burn. How many of you have seen a sugarcane burn? This is another one, you can see they’re crushing the cane, the mule and the grist stones are crushing the cane there.

Pineapple, you don’t associate Florida with the pineapple. Where was the pineapple center in Florida? Jensen Beach is one of them but also Key Largo. These Harper illustrations are from Key Largo; it’s a very expensive and long-growing plant, for a quick turnaround, this is not the plant to grow and ultimately was abandoned. You can import pineapples cheaply and it’s terrible work. Let me back up a second here. You also had in Florida, if you’ve ever been to St. Cloud, Florida; Kissimmee? If you go there you can see some of the ruins of the Hamilton Disston sugarcane operation. Disston bought a million acres of land in Florida in 1880 for $250,000 I think, no he bought 4 million acres for a million dollars; 0.25 an acre. He went bankrupt by the way, but one of his dreams was to become the first person in America to grow sugarcane on a colossal scale. What group
did he bring in to grow the sugarcane? Sicilian immigrants. My
grandfather was a sugarcane cutter in Napoleon, LA; he came as
an immigrant. It’s probably the worst job in America, no one
has cut sugarcane with a machete in a long time, it’s all done by
machines, and they finally perfected a machine. But St. Cloud is
kind of a monument to failure.

Now this is Gainesville, FL. Its probably a major enterprise in
Gainesvile today. Spinning and cleaning Spanish moss; believe
it or not, Gainesvile, Alachua County was the center for this.
They’d use it for stuffing mattresses; the problem was getting
the redbugs out. Ex slaves living in central Florida near (look at
the chimney separating the house) wouldn’t you love to return
with a tape recorder to interview those people?

Cotton was grown in Florida in the late 19th century, but Florida,
compared to the deep Southern states was never dependent on
cotton. I think one of the most interesting questions about Florida
history, answer yes or no; is Florida a southern state? Yes, raise your
hand, no, raise your hand. It looks like a tie, I think most people
don’t know how to vote; it’s still a sensitive subject. In terms of
race there’s no question that Florida was a deep southern state
until at least the 1950s, we can argue that later. Jim Crowe called
us a slave state. The cotton belt in Florida ends around Alachua
County, its middle Florida they called it. The Apalachicola River
was the cotton area. This is 1880 now and you can see there is
essentially no cotton grown south of Ocala on that map.

An interesting one is kudzu. Kudzu won’t grow very well
south of Ocala so Ocala is kind of the kudzu line in Florida. A
colleague of mine actually did an experiment; I hope the state
would not subsidize this. He would stop at every Burger King on I-4
and just kind of poke the skin; there’s nothing like that smell.

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This is one of my favorite photographs; what do you find interesting in this photograph, what’s going on? It’s harvest time, what about the trees themselves? They’re much taller than you would find today, they might have been planted from seeds rather than stock graft. Most of the workers are African American, the ladders are interesting. Twenty years ago I’m coming back from Arcadia and I stop on the side of the road, it may have been the last of these places in Florida; they were making citrus ladders by hand with wood. As I recall they were using oak and cypress. You’ll notice the bottom of the citrus ladder is slightly wider than the top for practical reasons. Picking oranges would have been very dangerous work; you’re almost certain to fall, break your arm or your back, and there are snakes in trees. Just the sheer labor itself — this is a very demanding job. Most of the grunt work was done by African Americans because they were here, they needed work, and agriculture provided work here.

That changed during World War II. I’d love to know some of the other characters — the guy on the far right, is he the boss, the foreman. Look at these trees, again you don’t see groves like this anymore and it accentuates the danger.

This is one of my favorite photographs; that is a classic Florida fruit packing house. You can see in the lower center, they look like grapefruit, but those are either oranges with tissue paper or the color has faded. One of the problems before frozen concentrate was that everything depended on the look of the orange. If it had a log of rust on it or a cut; consumers weren’t going to buy it — there was a terrible amount of waste. So they’re washing the oranges there, discarding the bad ones, and preening the fruit. Some fruit in say Alachua County, Cross Creek, fruit drew an extra amount because the celebrated fruit. Who is the most celebrated grove owner in Alachua County? Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings.

I’m not sure if this was ever a real photograph, you can see the train coming and the groves of oranges. You’ve got to love the orange crate labels, orange crate labels are terrific. The golden age was 1880 to 1930. There’s also a golden age of cigars you find the same thing in cigar and tobacco shops. Just look at the theme here; this is the piney woods, it looks like yellow pine there, the razorback hog, some of these are insulting by the way, but we’re all adults. Also you notice the places; this is Winter Park in Polk County, one of the centers for the Coon Brand. They loved animals, especially exotic animals; people in the north may or may not know a coon. This must have been for a private men’s club; this is a little rated, no children in the audience. I’ve never found the answer, as to why there was a nude woman on a men’s club; this is a little rated, no children in the audience. I’ve been to Disney World. Kind of pathetic I guess. But Main Street Disney, its Main Street Disney. So is there anyone in this room except one person has been to Marsielle, MO? I’m betting everyone in this room except one person has been to Marsielle, MO. What’s the riddle? Where else is Marsielle, MO? Disney World, its Main Street Disney. Is there anyone in this room who has never been to Disneyland or Disney World? Three, three members of the communist party have infiltrated and I think they should be expelled. I wish we had time to talk about this by the way because I admire your independence. What do we have in common as Floridians? Besides plants, most everyone 95% have been to Disney World. Kind of pathetic I guess. But Main Street Disney; the reason it’s so appealing to adults; its 3/5 scale so adults feel like this is Toyland in a lot of ways, like a doll house because it’s so intimate.

How many of you live or work in Lake Alfred? Is this building still there? This is interesting; you can see they’re setting up young trees in Davenport FL, another huge place. Look at that a 1930’s WPA photographer captured this; wouldn’t you love to know more about the guy, what he’s thinking about? Is he a citrus worker, if that monument is still there, does anyone have an idea? Yes, where is it? County line Road. The orange industry

Winter Haven; that explains it. Note the fashionable bathing suit — probably 1915, 1920.

Florida loved to associate itself with the Mediterranean. The masthead of the Ft. Myers news; Ft. Myers is the Mediterranean of America. Think about it; the architecture, the Mediterranean revival. But the idea of calling something capri, a romantic association with a contadina; an Italian peasant girl. Glamour, sex, sells and sold.

That’s Lakeland Florida. Who’s the artist this reminds you of? Maxfield Parrish; doesn’t that remind you of a Maxfield Parrish? Romance — you think of romance with your morning orange juice.

Doesn’t look anything like a Seminole by the way. As you probably know there is an argument over the derivation of the word “cracker” — common acceptance is that it was a term used by cattleman as they drove their flock from Georgia “crack the bullwhip.” Poor whites and poor blacks in Florida love the cracklins; renderings from lard, you put cracklins in the gravy. I used to work at Kentucky Fried Chicken; we did the same thing with the gravy there. Poor whites in Florida had reputations as fiery fighters so someone called them fire crackers. So, take your choice.

More labels; crane, don’t you love that, it’s just a beautiful animal.

The Sapsucker. I don’t think I got it in this group but going along with the strawberries in Plant City, actually the strawberries dictated the school system there. At the time, between 1900 and 1940 you didn’t have huge consolidated corporations controlling the industry. You had lots of poor white farmers who might have 5–10 acres. Strawberries may be one of the few crops you can actually make a living, they are so prolific. But they also don’t apply well to migrant laborers because as you know strawberries have to be picked when they’re ripe, they can’t pick them green. So who did the labor; mainly the kids in the community. So the Hillsborough County schools in that area would close the schools in January & February; the boys would pick the strawberries, the girls would pack the crates. If you wanted to earn extra money, you’d go out in the morning and shoot robins and sapsucker woodpeckers; you got like a penny a pound. Flamingo Grand, Dixie Highway, Leesburg, you can still see some groves like that in that area.

Let me go back to Leesburg, this is in Lake County Florida, this is one of my favorite Florida stories. If you go to Tavares Florida into the Lake County courthouse and ask “I’d like to see the oldest wedding certificate.” They’ll bring this dusty binder out and the first couple to be married in Lake County in 1889 was Flora Call and Elias Disney and they homesteaded a piece of property they called Kismet; a Turkish word meaning destiny and as fate would have it the freeze of 1895 wiped them out. Embittered Elias Disney joined the socialist party, voted for Eugene Debbs, and moved his family to Chicago. How many of you have read the Devil in the White City? He’s actually a bit part actor; he’s being paid to tear down the Chicago World’s Fair. He’s now worried that Chicago might corrupt his two young sons, Roy and Walt, and they move once again to Marsielle, MO. How many of you have been to Marsielle, MO? I’m betting everyone in this room except one person has been to Marsielle, MO. What’s the riddle? Where else is Marsielle, MO? Disney World, its Main Street Disney. Is there anyone in this room who has never been to Disneyland or Disney World? Three, three members of the communist party have infiltrated and I think they should be expelled. I wish we had time to talk about this by the way because I admire your independence. What do we have in common as Floridians? Besides plants, most everyone 95% have been to Disney World. Kind of pathetic I guess. But Main Street Disney; the reason it’s so appealing to adults; its 3/5 scale so adults feel like this is Toyland in a lot of ways, like a doll house because it’s so intimate.
has been a challenge industry. Everything looked terrific until 1895; you had a series of events. First of all, you had a major/minor, minor/major freeze in December 1894. It was enough that trees lost their leaves but some of the crop was still salvageable; so it was a major/minor freeze. Then in the next six weeks it became very warm and as you know sap begins to rise, then in February 1895 the freeze of the century hit and essentially wiped out every orange in north of today’s Interstate 4 and really south of that as well. This is not just a freeze; this is probably one of the ten catastrophic events in Florida History. One person in the San Juan Hotel in Orlando; the orange growers gathered and someone would read out the temperature and when it got to 26 they heard a gunshot, he had killed himself. Something like 100 banks failed in Florida. You had a problem with unemployed citrus workers going from city to city en masse; screaming the public. You can see the devastation here; it looks like fire just ravaged it. This is what I call the three armed man in 1895 photographers always told you don’t move for 5 seconds after the photograph. That’s why people often appear to look very unfriendly and rigid. This man slightly moves his arm and look at the crop the next day; this is somewhere in central Florida and everything is lost, including the tree. The fruit is lost; there was essentially no harvest in 1894–95. Look at that; a sea of frozen oranges, it looks like that is a pecan grove rather than an orange grove.

I think this is one of the most interesting slides—it’s like 1900 and it tells you that lumber is so cheap and labor is so cheap that there is a suspected freeze coming and they’ve got all of these portable sheds. They’re literally erecting these wooden sheds around these young orange trees. First of all would that work? Rather impractical to say the least. Now look at the image on the left; one dot equals 10000 orange trees, look where the orange belt was in 1890, it’s beyond Alachua County, it looks like Putnam County, they were even growing oranges in Nassau and St. Johns Counties; which is amazing, you’d be out of your mind to consider that today. Then look at the consequences on the right side, particularly the northeast part of Florida—it’s almost gone. This has happened two or three times in Florida, how many of you were here in the decade of the 1980s? One freeze in 1989 wiped out all of the oranges north of Interstate 4. So Lake County prior to 1980 had been among the top five, often top three, orange producing counties in the state, wiped out overnight. It was going that way anyway because of the growth of Disney.

Clermont is an interesting place. Look at that; another vanishing institution; the roadside fruit stand. Used to be you could travel Highways 19, 301, and 441 you would run into these places often offering free orange juice. Then you might send a bushel to folks in Illinois. I checked with the box fruit industry, they’re down to about 30 members in Florida from a couple hundred 25–30 years ago. I always take my students, how many have been to the citrus place in Terra Ceia, Florida? When you go over the Sunshine Skyway Bridge you get off at Highways 19 the first exit and it’s just around the corner there. Mr. Ben Tillett and his family lived there since the early 20th century. But he’s trying to sell the place, he blends his own oranges. Don’t you wish we had a glass of fresh orange juice to toast?

Race was used to sell as well. At a time in the South when blacks were seen as domestics something like this would be a positive role model. By the way there is a tremendous market for what they call “race advertising.” Almost every product used by biscuit manufacturers; Crisco even had stuff like this. This one is truly insulting; Jewish citrus crate labels.