

# SUNSHINE

NEWS/SUN-SENTINEL

NOVEMBER 24, 1985



**T**he road leads nowhere, except to more swamp. And now State Road 94 has been banished from the map. But you'll still find a few hardy souls out there on the Everglades Loop: Indians and hunters and loners who think the Russians are coming; survivors in territory the government insists should be a no-man's-land.



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# ADRIFT IN THE RIVER OF GRASS

BY LAWRENCE MAHONEY  
PHOTOS BY MICHAEL CARLEBACH



*A flooded prairie off Loop Road makes a perfect swimming hole for Miccosukee tribe members Renee, left, and Marty Billie. Top: The road in drier times.*

## On Florida's vanishing frontier, you'll find Indians, gunslingers, guerrillas, feds — and even the ghost of Al Capone.

**I**N WINTER, IT IS SUPER COLD and damp out here. In summer, the mosquitos will physically injure you. Yet there remain a handful of folk who can't or won't leave. They remember earlier days when Loop Road, a notorious trail that leads nowhere, seemed to have some prospects.

It could have been, God forbid, an Orlando in the Everglades. Today, estimates of how many people live on the Loop range from 10 to 15. Most are lost-cause ranters living out their days on Florida's last frontier. The Loop, slashing through the boonies of Dade, Monroe and Collier counties, became part of the Big Cypress National Preserve in '79, giving nature legal supremacy over man — as if mankind really ever had the upper hand in that brooding swamp.

No more people are allowed to make their homes on the Loop, as if any would really want to. People are not encouraged to drive there — it's too dangerous. Once designated State Road 94, it has vanished from

the latest official maps handed out at Florida Welcome Stations.

"Road" is really a misnomer when you talk about the Loop. Loop *ride* is more like it, like one of those heart-stopping five-coupon rides at the county fair. It is 33 miles of pavement and no pavement — a roll that redefines the pothole.

But it's also true that the Loop was the *original* Tamiami Trail, and there were grandiose plans for the community of Pinecrest, which now lies in picayune ruins, with the federales planning a further reduction.

"I guess to these people living out here we are the Russians," says a young National Park Ranger just transferred down from Richmond. "Yessir, the plan is to let the Loop go back to wilderness."

Most of the road's mileage lies in Monroe County; translate that to a remote government in Key West and it's easy to see how low priority something as vital as a road can be when *not one* of your voters travels it. So remote is the Loop that it once

took three days to get a sheriff's deputy out there to investigate a murder.

The legends of the Loop are an odd blend of past and present. The machine guns of Al Capone (who, locals insist, once bootlegged on the Loop) are today found in the car trunks of would-be anti-communist *contras* out in the Glades for target practice. Indians cooling off in a swimming hole chug Heinekens. A ghostly fiddler plays *The Orange Blossom Special* in a long-closed juke joint.

I HAVE MADE the Loop a major family happening for Joshua, my 10-year-old. He really loves the place. Today, he is wearing camouflage, a Marine fatigue cap, a survival knife from Hialeah and a machete from Guatemala.

Josh had felt like he was in a penitentiary in the Everglades National Park. The landscape, as the Indians will tell you, is depressing. The park is a tourist scene of Yankees with rec-V's and \$1,000 cam-

eras. Of course you can't touch anything, and I saw the beautiful heart break one day when the gorgeous yellow rat snake crawled past his feet while a pack of birdwatchers with Nikons thundered by.

We turned to the Loop as an alternative. There is still a certain freedom out there and Loop people live the other way if a boy catches a banded watersnake or two, or a low rat snake every inch as gorgeous as the one that the birders not see in the National Park.

Joshua, a South Florida city boy, is happy to have such wild country near home. He has this favorite place, a thick hammock with gum limbo, a lone giant royal palm and a couple of trash piles right along the road. The place is the closest thing to a cathedral he has known in his life. He cuts his way through underbrush, jumps over sinkholes and now knows how to carry a big knife.

At Otter Pond, down near where the road turns just plain terrible,



*"This country is going to hell," warns Walter Guise, owner of the Loop's last truck stop. Right: A proud hunter displays his disemboweled catch.*

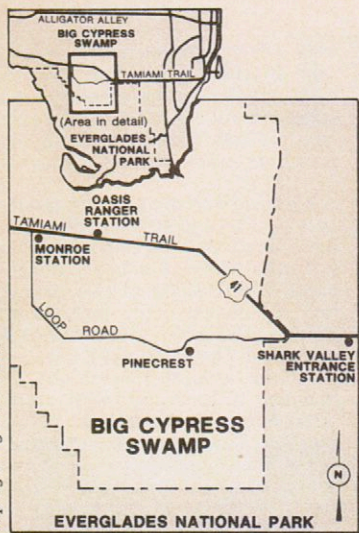
## SWAMP

Joshua and his buddy "Red" Henderson watch ravenous otters eat an alligator, an obvious reversal of the food chain. I tell the boys that somebody in a pickup truck probably shot the gator and left it to rot. The banks of the pond, like everywhere on the Loop, are littered with the empty brass of rifle and pistol bullets.

The gun remains as much a part of the Loop as if the Wild West had been reincarnated at the bottom of Florida. It is a hunter's dream. Yellow raccoons frisk through the underbrush, and the green-water canals are acrawl with chirping baby gators. At high noon, large owls hunt from the tallest cypresses and turkey vultures pull bleeding garfish from the canal.

The Loop is an animal-watching paradise not only for the boys, but for the old man. My favorite line in literature is by the Mississippi writer Eudora Welty: "They lived so far back in the woods that they had

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Map by Diego Del Valle



Still singing the gospel at age 100, Martha Willie is the oldest congregant at the Indian Trail Baptist Chapel on Loop Road.

foxes for yard dogs and owls for laying hens."

The Loop is not *that* far back in the woods, but it's getting there.

AS WE PROCEED down the Loop, the mirages of water on the road so common in Southern summers turn out to be real water flooding the road, but it's nothing our Japanese Super Trooper II jeep can't handle. Then there is one of the coolest sights I have ever seen in South Florida: Indians floating and splashing in brown water flowing three feet high across a prairie that just yesterday was hard-dried land — land aswarm with repulsive newborn grasshoppers of the kind that grow big and spit tobacco juice at you and chew everything green.

The brown Indians were handsome, some of the women even beautiful, and I later learned that this is a seasonal swimming hole used by many Miccosukees. The brown water was as refreshing and clean as any blue water.

A group of four Miccosukees invites us in. Their names are classic Tamiami Trail tribal: David Tiger, Eleanor Tiger, Renee Billie and Marty Billie.

Eleanor, who is a computer technician at Miccosukee Headquarters just back by the Indian Trail Baptist Chapel, emerges to get me a Dutch beer. Dripping wet, she looks much like the famous girl in the wet T-shirt on the Jamaican travel poster. More Indians arrive, including an old couple in a shambling GM car like those driven by Marielitos back in the city. A grizzled mongrel is riding on the hood, above an FM Country Radio KISS license tag.

Dogs are a big thing on the Loop, but this fellow proves he is no ordinary Indian cur by walking slowly into the flooded prairie and floating on his back.

Someone should write a country song about that dog.

WE HAD PAUSED earlier inside the cool and calm coral rock sanctuary of the Baptist Chapel. There, three dozen Indians, all dressed in the visually stunning geometric garments of Seminole, heard Pastor Earl Boyette, who hails from a long line of early Florida Crackers, talk of a better world beyond the Trail, the Loop and the Glades. A 100-year-old Miccosukee woman, Martha Willie, had nodded awake when the ebullient preacher led the congregation in song:

*We have heard the joy-ful sound,  
Je-sus saves, Je-sus saves;  
Spread the glad-ness all a-round,  
Je-sus saves, Je-sus saves,  
Bear the news to ev-ry land . . .*

ONE OF THE Miccosukee swimmers learned that we had been down at the Baptist Chapel. "That's not the real religion for most of us," he said, waving his Heineken, "because the Tamiami Trail people more than

the other Florida Indians still stick to the original spirits of our people."

There was a time not long ago when federal and Florida law made it a criminal offense to sell alcohol to an Indian. Such things have passed, but these people, like all people, hold onto large chunks of their past.

"Are there still Corn Dances on Loop Road?" I asked.

The swimmer grinned. "I wouldn't tell if I knew," he said.

A SHORT DISTANCE from the swimming hole, at the Loop's first official checkpoint, a tall, angular young man from the Florida Game and Freshwater Fish Commission has just got his first buck to process on the first day of the 1985 Muzzleloader Season.

The camouflaged hunter in his Japanese truck looks like one of the young doctors on *M\*A\*S\*H*, despite his prideful grin over the kill. The buck, already disemboweled at the dwarf cypress stand where the old-fashioned firearm killed him painlessly, is strung up in a tree for measurement and inspection. The checkpoint official gets a pair of Sears garden shears from his van and carefully cuts out the jaws of the deer, which, along with the teeth, will be forwarded to the state for study.

The hunter takes the rest — 75 pounds of venison.

NOT ALL HUNTERS are instantly lucky, but all are a breed apart. Back home in Sarasota, Dave Brimblecom is the very model of a modern paramedic. But put him in camouflage from head to toe, rev up the engine of his ATC (the ubiquitous red three-wheelers born for mud), place his elegant muzzleloader and powder horn in his arm out on the Loop, and Dave Brimblecom becomes a zealot, as intent on taking life as normally he is on saving it.

Some bureaucrat in Tallahassee has told him to keep his ATC out of the woods because the motorcycles scare the endangered panthers and destroy the terrain, such as it is.

"There's no way there could only be 14 pairs of breeding panthers left," Brimblecom rants. "I know a guy who regularly sees them in North Port Charlotte, and there must be 70,000 retirees living in that neck of the woods. The male panther breeds right up until death, some kind of super sperm."

"I've proposed to Tallahassee that we deer hunters leave the spoils for the old cats. Pile up all the guts and last on the pile is the liver." Dave's freckled hands display just how large that organ is.

Brimblecom is itching for a deer — "There's gotta be one out there for me today" — and he prepares to assault the Loop Swamp, which is rather deep today. He fires a final shot as the ultimate scooter jerks on:

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## SWAMP

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"Tallahassee's the problem, with Bob Graham and the director of Game and Fish. That director told me he does not work for the people of Florida but represents the creatures!"

WALTER GUISE HAS a cap with the Confederate flag on it and rides a girl's bicycle for exercise in front of his RC Truck Stop. Born in Ohio 75 years ago, his compound consists of three trailers and his little store, which is surmounted with big steerhorns.

Guise is a man of strong opinions and unafraid to express them to a stranger on the Loop. His dog Tippy, about the size of a squirrel, proves

that size isn't all that important in a watchdog. Tippy strains on his leash outside the truck stop, which doesn't even carry Royal Crown Colas anymore.

"Some nut jumped my barbed-wire fence at 4 in the morning and all he claimed he wanted was a pack of Marlboros," Guise says. "You gotta watch your step, but it's still better out here than in the city."

Referring to the Gold Coast's urban sprawl, he says, "I tell most people they better get out of town, out of the city, and I mean by tonight. No matter who the president is, get out of town!"

Guise rants about the U.S. Department of the Interior, which governs the Big Cypress National Preserve: "I had 80 acres and I'm now down to 1.9. This country is going to hell.

Interior is worse than the Russians. Tippy, hush, these is friends. We may be taken over by Russia in a full-scale invasion. Tippy, now be quiet!"

Although you will find neither drink nor smokes at Loop Road's version of a truck stop, you can park for \$1, but be careful — the water's a mite high today.

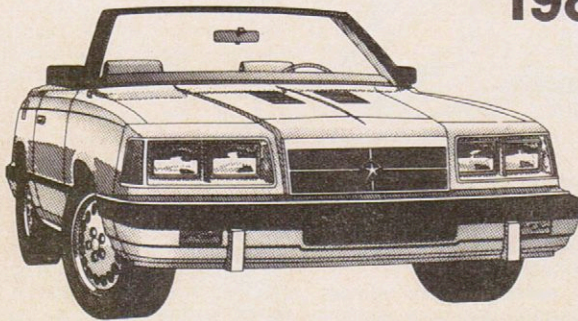
BACK IN 1923, the Chevelier Corporation laid out street after street of what is now the ghost town of Pinecrest. But Barron G. Collier, the flamboyant developer-king of the Florida county that bears his name, desired to have U.S. 41, the highway named for both Tampa and Miami, go nearly straight west through his vast cypress domain, thus bypassing the Loop.

Sandy Dayhoff, a fourth-generation Floridian born in Miami, longtime Looper, runs the environmental education center in Pinecrest.

"Pinecrest was to be an elite place, all right," she says. "I still see some of those planned roads that were scratched there were never more than a couple living here. There were 50 in a school started in 1924, 1912. The Loop reached its peak in the late '20s and '30s, when cypress and pine were logged out at a sawmill that closed in 1951."

I asked her about the story of Al Capone running a liquor still on the Loop. "I doubt that he was here," she said, "though it might have been. There was no

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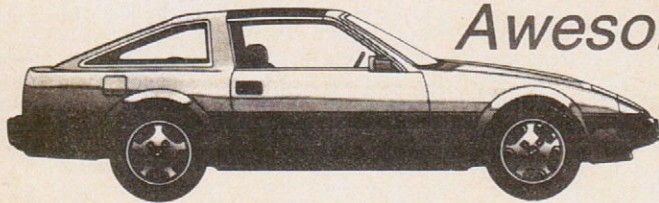
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# SWAMP

here in those days, and the Loop always had a pretty fair whiskey-still industry. And it's apparently true that a man named Jim Dill built a large gambling casino on Loop Road during Prohibition. It had pools of gold fish and became famous. Many politicians, judges and people like that, came out here."

THE RUINS OF trailers and live-in buses are scattered all along the Loop. One of the buses, merged through rust and rot and erosion into the oolitic limestone, still carries its "CHARTERED" sign.

In downtown Pinecrest today, amidst the trucks and road signs all shot to pieces over the years, a group of men who live in those trail-

ers and buses is sitting around Jack Gove's incredibly littered gas station — which, naturally, has no gas pumps.

These old swampers are cut from the cloth that Rudyard Kipling would have called the non-com class in India. Hacking too much phlegm but still kicking, they like to talk about the dumping ground that the Loop has become for Miami's Latin murder victims, of Cubans with automatic weapons shooting at cypresses with 50-caliber slugs, and always about the feds and their incessant rules on how to behave in the woods.

Jack Gove himself is a mechanic known at marinas on both sides of South Florida. Snoopy, his No. 1 dog, is a German Bristling Griffin, a dog so rare that the AKC has yet to

see one. Husky as a hog dog, Snoopy demonstrates his Teutonic genes by diving underwater for rocks in an alligator-inhabited canal.

Gove introduces us to the mayor of Pinecrest, a refreshing old fellow for a mayor because he'll shake your hand but won't tell you his name.

Across the Loop from the trailer colony are the burned-out ruins of the Pinecrest Restaurant, which was mainly a bar — a bar so violent and full of lowlife that Loopers like Sandy Dayhoff to this day will not talk about it "because it degraded everyone around here."

Twenty years ago, when I first came to South Florida, I went into the Pinecrest Restaurant on a Sunday sunset; memory recalls that its interior looked like the inter-planetary bar in *Star Wars*. Certainly, I

have never seen a stranger assemblage of drinkers.

THERE IS A sweeter side to this, of course. A few years ago old swamper died out on the Loop where he had lived parttime. He was Ervin T. Rouse, songwriter of *Orange Blossom Special*. There is a juke box left on Loop Road, but some places along the Tamiami Trail — The Lord's Station, Coopertown — you can still hear Johnny Carson's version of a Loop man's ultimate ride:

*Looka yonder comin'  
Down dat railroad track  
Looka yonder comin'  
Down dat railroad track  
It's the Orange Blossom Special  
Bringing my baby back.*

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