FORT LAUDERDALE magazine®

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THE RESTAURANT PEOPLE

CHANGING THE FACE OF LAUDERDALE DINING

LANE KIFFIN

FAU FOOTBALL JUST GOT INTERESTING

BIRCH STATE PARK

ITS COLORFUL PAST & BRIGHT FUTURE

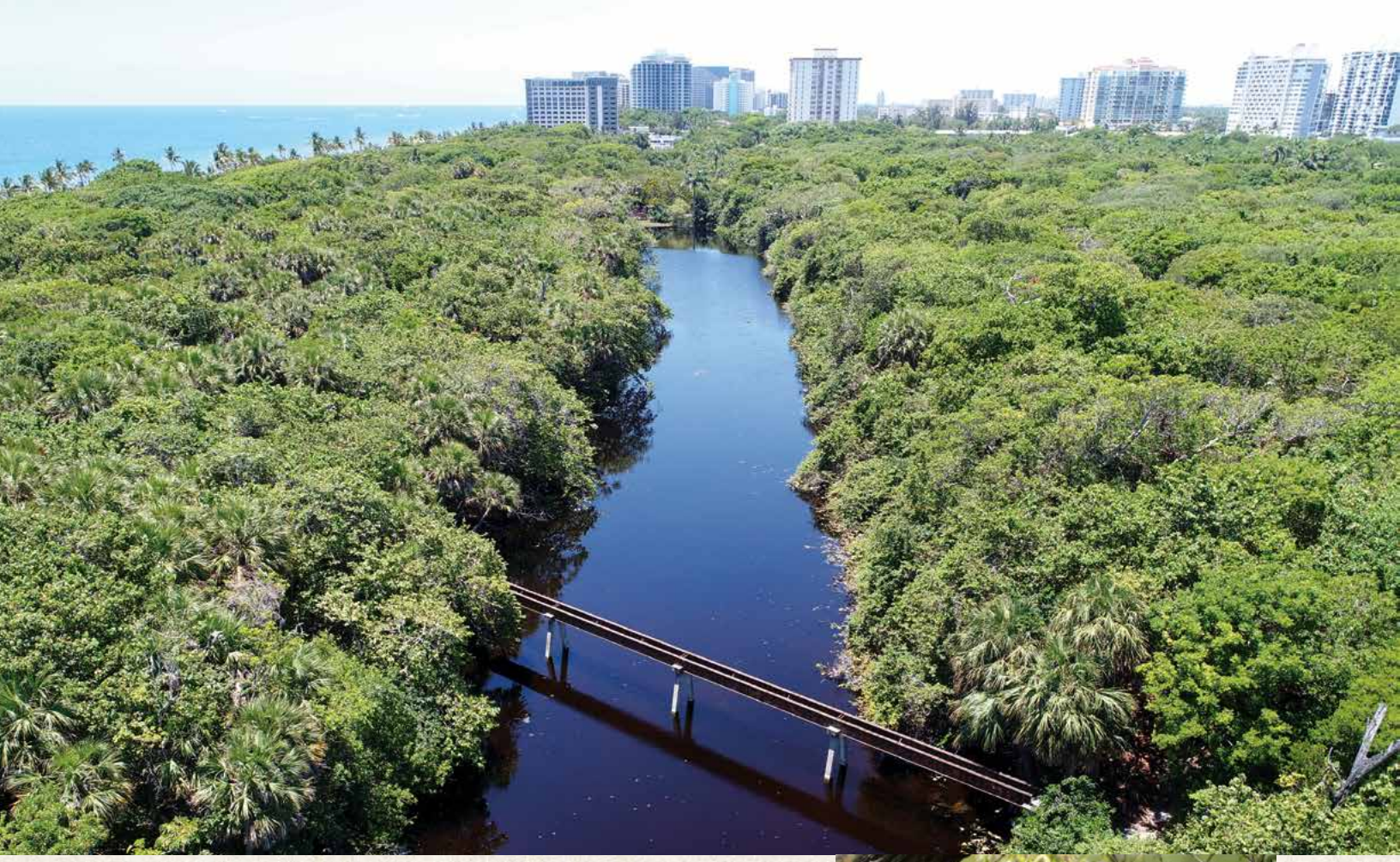
MR. BIRCH'S GIFT

by ERIK PETERSEN

by JOEL ERIKSSON

FOR SEVEN DECADES, **HUGH TAYLOR BIRCH STATE PARK** HAS STOOD ALONE, A SLICE OF OLD FLORIDA AMID A NEW AND RENEWED FORT LAUDERDALE.

The old rail route offers a bumpy ride through tropical hardwood forest. Dry, sand-soiled spots give way to swampy mangrove and the occasional freshwater lagoon. The driver steers expertly around turns tight with trees, slow enough to keep it safe, fast enough to keep it interesting. Summer has arrived in South Florida, but the mixture of brisk pace and dense maritime hammock makes the journey pleasant and something bordering on cool.



THIS IS A TOUR in a time machine. It's a journey through what the land now called Fort Lauderdale once was. Before the towering beachfront hotels, or the squat beachfront hotels they replaced. Before the real estate boom, or the other real estate boom, or the other one. Before we were where the boys are, or where the developers want to be.

But like an invasive kudzu vine, the present has a way of creeping into view. A condo looms through an occasional break in the trees. The vehicle navigating this old rail route is a golf cart. This is Hugh Taylor Birch State Park, and modernity has it surrounded.

Birch's home, Terramar.

Today's chauffeur/tour guide/time travel specialist is Gale Butler, executive director of Friends of Birch State Park. When the golf cart moves into the park's most unabashed modernity – a paved road, a playground, a crumbling (but soon-to-be-replaced) seawall and beyond that, the Intracoastal and multimillion-dollar waterfront homes of Coral Ridge – she sees something. A boy is sitting with a man – his grandfather, from the look of it. They've found a spot of seawall under a tree, and they've got a couple poles in the brackish water. Butler has been driving and talking fast – there's a lot to get in, particularly about the Friends' big plans. Now she slows down.

"That's what it's all about," she says. "That right there is what it is all about."

Usually when Butler talks about Birch, it's with the brisk efficiency of someone who rose through the corporate ranks and the passion of someone who today does exactly what she wants. Before coming to Birch, the Fort Lauderdale native spent much of her career working for another local institution, Wayne Huizenga. She had many things during her corporate career – but, she says, she never had the view she has now. Her office faces A1A and the beach; it sits on the east side of the ground floor of Terramar, the five-bedroom house Hugh Taylor Birch somewhat inexplicably built in 1940, when he was a 90-year-old millionaire recluse who had outlived his wife and children. Three years later, he would deed the house and surrounding 180 acres to Florida, to be made into a state park upon his death.

Today, Terramar is one of a number of recent Birch improvements. Before its 2016 reopening it had sat vacant for 12 years and,

ABOVE & BELOW: Park & Ocean.

Butler says, been neglected for 30. Now it's also home to a rangers' office and a small welcome center.

Walk around Birch – or hang on tight as Butler drives the golf cart – and you can see the new. To one side of Terramar, new bar and restaurant Park & Ocean has been attracting a crowd to the old semi-enclosed beachside park entrance with its craft beer selection and live weekend music.

There's the freshwater lagoon that a few years ago was strangled by cattails but now, after a massive rescue project, is clear and open for kayakers, canoeists and people in the park's new peddle-boats. "It has to be constantly maintained and it had been years [since] anybody had cleaned it out," park manager Jennifer Roberts says. "There's an island in the lake, and most people didn't realize it was there."

Soon there will be more improvements. On the Intracoastal side, the Water Taxi stop that opened in 2014 is a preview of a floating boat dock that will come with a new, raised seawall. (At high tide, water comes over the current, crumbling one.)

There's the meditation garden, the widened road with space for cyclists and walkers ... there's a long list.

With that comes a new take on an old challenge - how to attract more people while preserving that which attracts people in the first place.

Roberts believes they're getting the balance right. "If you come in and you just want a peaceful, quiet, serene experience, you can still have that," she says.

As founder of prominent Fort Lauderdale real estate and investment firm Ellis Diversified, Jim Ellis understands the development that surrounds the park. As president of the Friends of Birch, he cares about lack of development as well. "We're trying," he says, "to find the best way to work with nature and people." It's not a new balancing act for this park, or Fort Lauderdale.

DEEDS, SCHEMES & LAWSUITS

→ **WHEN HUGH** Taylor Birch deeded his land to the state of Florida for use as a park, he was doing two things he enjoyed: preserving nature and sticking it to Fort Lauderdale. Birch loved Fort Lauderdale – as in, the land. City leaders were another matter.

By that point, Birch was 90 and the Fort Lauderdale area had been a part of his life for half a century. An avid bird-watcher and amateur horticulturalist, he grew more reclusive in his oceanfront acreage as he outlived his wife and his children.

The Chicago attorney had made his first trip to the area near the mouth of the New River in 1893, the same year city father Frank Stranahan arrived. Sailing south in search of a winter residence, Birch was blown to shore by a storm and sought shelter at a house of refuge near today's Bahia Mar. It was an inauspicious introduction, but Birch liked the land he saw. In the coming years he would buy up property along the beach for between $1 and $4 an acre; by the turn of the century, he would own most of the land that would later form the main part of Fort Lauderdale beach. Others followed. Arthur Galt, the son of Birch's law partner, bought up beachfront property north of Birch's land. Birch also built a home, Bonnet House, for his daughter Helen Birch Bartlett and her husband Frederic Bartlett. (Helen died of lung cancer in 1925; in 1931, Frederic married Evelyn Fortune Lilly, who wintered in the house until shortly before her 1997 death.)

The man who spent his working life in Chicago did not see the need for his winter retreat to become particularly developed. Fort Lauderdale, which had been barely an upriver encampment when Birch first arrived, incorporated into a city in 1911 and became the seat of the newly former Broward County in 1915. This coincided with grand plans to drain the Everglades and make vi-

BIRCH GAVE THE LAND AS "A LITTLE PIECE OF GOD'S GREEN EARTH, IN GRATITUDE FOR WHAT FLORIDA HAD DONE FOR HIM."

able land out of swamp – and then came the 1920s Florida land boom.

In 1922, Birch wrote Stranahan suggesting a swap of some land the men owned. After the practical matters, he expressed broader views.

"I am more than pleased to remember that you are not in favor of the incorporation into the City of Ft. Lauderdale the swamp lands surrounding and including my home properties and of your own large unimproved acreage," he wrote. "I sincerely trust that the wild scheme will never be attempted in earnest."

By the time he deeded land to the state two decades later, the "wild scheme" was in full force. Birch had already given land to the city for, among other things, the right-of-way to what would become Sunrise Boulevard. He let the public use his beach. Eventually, he gave much of his beachfront property to the city, on one condition – that the people have an unobstructed view of and access to the beach. His business partner's son, Arthur Galt, had no such compunction – which is why today the grand hotels and condos of the central beach sit on the other side of A1A, but not so on Galt Ocean Mile.

But if Birch felt compelled to help the city, he wasn't compelled to be thrilled about it. And so the state, not the city, got the deed for a park to be created when Birch died. Death came in 1943, and Florida had 180 acres of state park. They just had to figure out what to do with it.

The park's early years were quiet – a 1950 *Miami Herald* story described it as "almost unnoticed" – but within a decade, it had become the most visited state park in Florida. As the park gained popularity through the 1950s and '60s, arguments raged about how it was to be used. Some plans – baseball fields, a golf course – were rejected. Others such as a miniature train were accepted, though not without a fight. The miniature train opened in 1964 after an ugly battle

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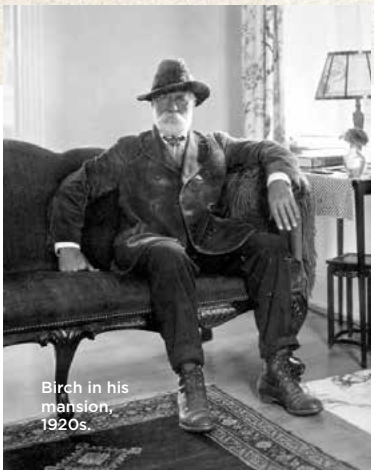

Birch in his mansion, 1920s.

in which no less than Ivy Stranahan, Frank's widow and the "mother of Fort Lauderdale," spoke out against it. She told a public meeting that Birch gave the land as "a little piece of God's green earth, in gratitude for what Florida had done for him. The little we can preserve now is all of nature our young people of the future will see."

Whenever some new proposed development popped up, another specter was invoked: Antioch College. The Ohio liberal arts college was Hugh Taylor Birch's alma mater. When he'd deeded the land to Florida, he'd added a clause: If it was abandoned as a natural refuge, it would revert to the college.

Locals viewed Antioch's intentions with suspicion – most likely with good reason. Birch had also left the college substantial property inland from the park. The idea was to create a southern Antioch campus; the reality was that the land was sold off. Stand today in the middle of the Galleria and notice a distinct lack of liberal arts college.

Nevertheless, Antioch hovered in the background and occasionally struck. College and state went to court in the 1950s when a golf course was considered. Antioch was invoked when a road through the park was debated, when the train was planned and – in a move that Hugh Taylor Birch would have found particularly vexing – when the state considered leasing the park to the city. Through the years, Antioch existed as a kind of bogeyman, ready to snatch up the park at any moment. It wouldn't be until 1987 that Antioch made its biggest push for the land.

The court case attracted national interest; the *New York Times* ran a story under the headline "College in Ohio Covets 'Neglected Park' in Florida." *The Times* also summed up the two sides' arguments rather succinctly: "The college is saying that the state has neglected the park, allowing it to become a rundown patch of green space; the state contends that the park is in exceptional condition, considering its urban setting, and that the college's lawsuit is nothing more than a bare-fisted grab for valuable public land to enrich its endowment fund."

To take the land, Antioch had to show that the state had "abandoned" the park. They attempted to show that through development and neglect, the state had abandoned it as a state park, making it into more of a poorly run recreation area. In court, lawyers for the college brought up the fact that the park had for a number of years hosted a landfill. (This was overselling things a bit; it was primarily a dumping ground for park and beach waste.) They mentioned pipes that drained storm water from roads into park lagoons. And they mentioned the train, although that had been shut down in 1984. ("As tourist attractions go," *Sun-Sentinel* columnist Gary Stein wrote when it closed, "this one doesn't really fit the present mold. No mouse, no water slides, no midget horses, no state-of-the-art electronics, no video game. Just a miniature train ... a train that has lasted 20 years and has been responsible for grand memories for countless people.")

Park attendance had fallen to about a fifth of its 1960s-and-'70s peak of around a million annually. But faced with losing its park, the community rallied. A group of first-graders even pitched in. On the day jurors toured the park, Samantha Munroe's Bayview Elementary class went for a picnic in the park to show it was loved. (The kids knew about the trial thanks to a classmate who lived in the park and whose dad was park manager.)

"We wanted them to keep open Birch state park and not put condos and golf courses on it," first-grader Jonathan Rein told the *Sun-Sentinel*.

In the end the jury, and the Fourth District Court of Appeal when the college fought the decision, were clear. Birch was a state park, and it had been used as a state park.

Antioch has stayed away since.

FAMILY & COMMUNITY

→ **MARC CARUHEL** holds up a jet black Eastern Indigo Snake and tells a crowd of half a dozen how lucky they are to be here with it.

This snake, Titan, is "the pride and joy of the family, and we're honored to have him."

Other members of the family are in plastic containers spread out on the table that Caruhel, Birch's animal care specialist, sets up twice a week in front of Terramar. For as long as anybody would like to listen, he gets out animals that are native to this area and once would have been found in the park. Some, like the gopher tortoises, still are. Others have responded to change much like Hugh Taylor Birch did – by making themselves scarce.

"The animals that come from South Florida, they're getting harder to come by, harder to come by, rarer to see every day," Caruhel tells the crowd. "Why are they so rare? Humans. Always humans."

When Caruhel talks about the animals – the family – he gives the facts. He explains why gopher tortoise tunnels are important to other wildlife or how the Florida East Coast diamondback terrapin is the only brackish water turtle. But he also tells stories about these particular animals. How they got their names. What they were like when they were younger. How they act when they're feeling playful. As he does this, his voice speeds up and his eyes close. He sounds like somebody flipping through a yellowed book of photos, talking about the grown kids who sometimes visit.

Like his animals, Caruhel is a Florida native, and somewhat endangered. He had a stroke when very young, was paralyzed and required years of academic and physical therapy. Kids, he says, can be cruel. As a matter of fact, so can adults.

"I was longing for interaction. And I wasn't getting interaction – I was getting poked at and made fun of."

Then he found animals.

"They don't care. They don't judge. You treat them with love and kindness and they repay and repay it. I dedicate my life to them because they have dedicated their lives to me."

It was during childhood that Caruhel found a different kind of sanctuary as well – Birch State Park. He first came here as so many local kids do – as a Camp Live Oak summer camper. Later, an internship would turn into a career at the park.

Today, everybody else at the park says you have to meet Marc. There are stories about the massive groups he's had in laughing fits outside Terramar, stories about the rare animals he's helped obtain for the park. Stories about how work like his represents Birch's best.

In the years since the threat of lawsuit ended, much of the work at Birch has been about building community. Friends of Birch State Park was founded in 1999. The group's first mission, Ellis, its president, says, was to get the community invested.

"Everybody thought, 'It's a state park, you can't do anything.'"

"THE ANIMALS THAT COME FROM SOUTH FLORIDA, THEY'RE GETTING HARDER TO COME BY, HARDER TO COME BY, RARER TO SEE EVERY DAY."

In almost two decades, Friends has proved that sentiment wrong. It's also become a popular group to join if you're a Fort Lauderdale power player – the board now has a waiting list. Through that, the park has been able to tap into expertise in areas such as fundraising, grant applications and complex legal questions that a small team of rangers and well-meaning volunteers just wouldn't be able to handle.

The people tasked with preserving and improving the park are not naïve. There are practical reasons for what they do. Friends of Birch board member Peggy Fucci is president and CEO of OneWorld Properties, the local company behind such projects as Paramount Fort Lauderdale Beach and 100 Las Olas. If you are, let's say, selling multimillion-dollar condos on Fort Lauderdale Beach, Birch doesn't exactly hurt.

"I continue saying and I'm going to say it until I can't say it anymore that in this environment, walkability is the number one amenity," she says. "If you have this island oasis in the middle of the town that you can walk to ... or even if you can take your bike there, it's enormous."

But it's more than a selling point in a brochure. It is what this place once was. It's history and community. It's Hugh Taylor Birch's vision, and Marc Caruhel's passion. "People want to preserve what Fort Lauderdale really is," Fucci says. "A lot of people don't get it."

Mr. Birch would agree.