

## [Klinkhamer on Nelson, 'How the New Deal Built Florida Tourism: The Civilian Conservation Corps and State Parks'](#)

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**David J. Nelson.** *How the New Deal Built Florida Tourism: The Civilian Conservation Corps and State Parks.* Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2019. 314 pp. \$85.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8130-5631-9.

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In *How the New Deal Built Florida Tourism: The Civilian Conservation Corps and State Parks*, David J. Nelson challenges the notion that the Great Depression helped rather than hurt tourism in Florida. In fact, he argues just the opposite: that Florida took advantage of New Deal programs such as the Federal Writers' Project and more so the Civilian Conservation Corps to draw people's interest to the natural beauty of the state. Additionally, Nelson makes the case that the Florida Department of Agriculture and its little-known Bureau of Immigration would be the catalyst for promoting Florida and its parks nationwide.

Nelson begins by establishing the economic and social conditions of Florida leading up to the Great Depression. For many who may have believed that the state had always been an American paradise, he provides an image of a Deep South state sparsely populated, driven by agriculture, and drawn deeply into the culture of the Lost Cause and the image of the Cracker—a sometimes self-proclaimed, sometimes derogatory term for the early settlers and cattle men who lived there. With the exception of various boom-and-bust economic cycles driven by northern finances, this is the Florida that entered the financial calamity of the 1930s.

It is here that Nelson sets us into the story of creating state parks in Florida and the tensions that arose utilizing state and federal programs to do so. As the Great Depression led to New Deal programs under President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Governor David Scholtz looked to capture federal funds to create jobs. Scholtz ran in 1932 on a platform of small government but saw an opportunity in programs such as the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) as they became popular. Although Scholtz eventually enjoyed federal money pouring into the state, he was less enthusiastic about the requirements and controls established by the federal government that went with it. The fledgling Florida Park Service, created during this time to develop natural tourist attractions with little cost, depended on these funds for survival.

From the political players in the state park establishment, the reader is brought down for a more intimate look at the CCC working in some of the first parks. We are given the opportunity to see the impact of this program on the land and on the workers. Nelson frequently allows the workers to speak, utilizing their words from oral histories to describe

life in the camps. This is accompanied by information gleaned from reports describing projects underway, such as clearing forests for roads and infrastructure and game management to remove more "harmful" species. We also see broader struggles play out locally, such as racial tensions when black CCC camps were established near white communities or when camps opened and closed at the behest of the National Park Service representatives, who were following federal rather than state needs.

To have such attractions to draw tourists is simply not enough. Nelson also describes the unlikely role that the Florida Department of Agriculture and its Bureau of Immigration played in promoting Florida. Designed to promote working in Florida to potential farm laborers, the Bureau of Immigration and its unchecked purse filled by taxes and fees became in essence the marketing arm for Florida, including its state parks. This began with Florida's exhibits at the Century of Progress World's Fair in 1933-34 in Chicago. Florida was not to be outdone by any state, in particular California, which saw it as its greatest rival. The Florida exhibit proved hugely popular with attendees and its success spurred exhibitions at other major expos throughout the decade. These marketing successes did help lure people to Florida's state parks. But this meant delivering on the imagery of an American tropical paradise that sometimes had to be fabricated to meet expectations.

As the United States prepared for World War II and programs such as the CCC began to outlive their need, Florida's state parks were forced to survive and develop on their own. Men were disbanded from camps and either entered the military or switched to the growing military economy for jobs. After the war, Nelson notes that many GIs returned to the Sunshine State but found that the draw of the natural environment was being replaced by the growing industry of tourist traps and theme parks. This also brought challenges of re-envisioning the Cracker and the Lost Cause in a more modern narrative.

Nelson makes a convincing argument that this time period was the foundation for establishing Florida as a tourist destination. Although Florida had been promoted for decades prior as a place of enchantment, leisure, and play, the boom and bust of the economy did not allow for a substantial campaign to bring visitors. Ironically, the Great Depression and the New Deal programs that came with it provided a stable enough atmosphere for establishing a tourism industry. And Nelson also points out that this would be one of the very few instances when Florida's government was in control of that industry, promoting the assets it had—state parks.

This work benefits greatly from Nelson's experience as an archivist with the State of Florida. His command of the records brings oral histories, departmental reports, letters, memos, and correspondence to bear on this tale. Where one might find fault is in the lack of depth concerning some issues, such as the manipulation and transformation of the natural environment to create a false image of tropical Florida. As well, later chapters could have used a keener eye from the copy editor. Nevertheless, the strong case for the role of CCC programs in Florida, the readability of the text, and the excellent use of the sources at Nelson's disposal turned this reader from a skeptic about the New Deal and tourism in Florida to a believer.

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