

VILLAGE VIEW

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Clewiston is not one of Florida's better known tourist-attracting cities; most people from our part of the world never heard of it. Its broad Main Street, lined with stores and shops, is typical of main streets found in many a thriving community in any state; its outskirts, block after block of well maintained residential properties, are representative of hundreds of small American towns. But Clewiston is special.

It lies on the southwest shore of Lake Okeechobee, the second largest fresh water lake that is entirely within the United States. Only Lake Michigan is larger; the other Great Lakes, because they share their shores with Canada, are not entirely within our country. That's just one of the reasons Clewiston is special.

It was Sunday. We had no plans to visit anyone, expected no company, and since the weather was ideal, sunny but quite cool as January days in Florida often are, we allowed ourselves a recreation day. A Sunday drive, a restaurant meal, and a change of scene.

After driving west along the St. Lucie Canal that connects Lake Okeechobee with the St. Lucie River and the Atlantic Ocean, we turned south and skirted the lake's eastern shore through Pahokee to Belle Glade. There we headed northwest and arrived in Clewiston with good appetites. Of the several

restaurants in town, the most appealing was the Clewiston Inn which advertised dinners for \$4.45. It was a happy choice.

The inn is a two-story white structure overlooking a well kept park with tennis courts and an extensive playground area. With tall columns and arched windows characteristic of southern mansions, the inn presented a warm and welcoming entrance. Inside we found a spacious lobby nicely furnished in Colonial style. A large fireplace, the lobby's focal point, and mellow-with-age sugar pine panelling and woodwork gave an immediate impression of the gracious hospitality for which the South is famous, but which is rarely found in these days of neon and plastic.

Although the dining room was busy, we were seated promptly and served with courteous and thoughtful care. The menu offered baked haddock, ham, chicken, or roast pork with garden-fresh vegetables, mashed potato, cornbread dressing, hot rolls, and beverage. Tossed green salad and desserts were extra. Every mouthful was delicious.

Coming upon such an oasis in this off-the-beaten-path part of Florida piqued our curiosity. It seemed an unlikely place to find a motor inn possessing such an air of quiet elegance. When we'd finished eating, instead of leaving immediately, we nosed around.

Off the lobby, but closed on Sundays, we found the charming Everglades cocktail lounge, its outstanding feature a mural above the waist-high wainscoting, extending to the ceiling and completely encircling the room, depicting the Florida Everglades' wealth of wildlife.

Painted by J. Clinton Shepherd, a Palm Beach artist who came originally from Des Moines, Iowa, the mural is oil on canvas and is valued at over \$40,000. In the early '40s, Shepherd lived at the inn for several months, making daily trips to the Everglades to study the vegetation and wildlife. After accumulating hundreds of sketches, he returned to Palm Beach, to transfer the pictures of plants, birds, and animals he'd seen to a huge canvas. In 1945 the canvas was

mounted on the walls of the Everglades Lounge.

Illustrated are egrets, herons, and ducks, the mockingbird, sandhill crane, and brown pelican, the owl, spoonbill, and osprey, together with deer, skunk, bobcat, raccoon, black bear, squirrel, and even a bullfrog, all shown in their native habitat of pine, sawgrass, rushes, vines, and palm trees. This is truly a remarkable work, especially because so much of the Everglades has been destroyed through drainage, canals and irrigation, and development of the farms and grazing lands which now surround Lake Okeechobee.

Shepherd, a world-renowned artist, sculptor, muralist, and illustrator, active in his work and surprisingly agile until the day of his death in 1975 at the age of 86 years, left in this mural a glowing tribute to the natural history of Florida's Everglades.

Seeking more information about this delightful place, we questioned inn personnel and were soon enlightened. The inn, and many of the 300,000 acres of nearby sugar cane fields which yield over a million tons of raw sugar each season, are the property of United States Sugar Corporation.

Sugar cane has been grown in Florida, we learned, for many years, but only since the rise of the Castro regime in Cuba has sugar become a major crop in this state. During that time, sugar farming has expanded from two small mills to eight enormous ones.

The world's largest sugar mill is at Belle Glade, a town we'd passed through earlier in the day. There, 20,000 tons of cane are ground daily, producing 2,000 tons of raw sugar for a co-op of 53 growers. Five of the eight mills are co-ops; two belong to United States Sugar, and one is owned by Gulf and Western.

Sugar mills start grinding around-the-clock in October or November, and usually finish in April. In spite of the huge production, only half the sugar consumed in this country is homegrown. The balance is imported from other countries. Most of the raw sugar produced in Florida is shipped to Savannah, Georgia for refining, although there are three refineries here in South Florida.

Growing cane provides year-round employment for thousands of Floridians. Cane, which resembles a cross between pampas grass and bamboo, has a bud at each joint. The stalks are laid lengthwise in furrows about 8" deep and covered lightly. A year later, new cane is ready for harvest. Because it grows back from the stubble, one planting can be reharvested for from three to five years, depending upon the amount of damage done in the harvesting process each time.

A few days before the cane is ready for cutting, the fields are set afire to destroy the foliage and make harvesting and milling easier. Burning does no harm because the fire races quickly through the dried field, leaving the canes undamaged.

With our heads buzzing with the new knowledge we'd acquired in the last hour, we left Clewiston and resumed our trip around the lake. Traveling past acre after acre of cane in all stages of growth, we saw some newly planted, the fresh green sprouts beginning to break through the ground; some in full flush of maturity, plumes above green rushlike plants waving in the brisk west wind; some dry and brown, ready for burning; and some blazing and smoking as the fires consumed the dead foliage. We met many trucks, some empty, some loaded with stalks of cane, trundling between mills and fields.

As miles passed under our wheels, the landscape of cane fields gave way to cattle country with thousands of steers grazing the rich bottomland surrounding Lake Okeechobee's southwestern rim. Approaching the lake's northern shore we found meadowland changing to low sandy hills, and fishing communities huddled in the narrow space between the highway and the waters of the lake. Leaving behind the town of Okeechobee, we were soon on the road home, tired but happy, and enriched with the day's educational experience.

Clewiston may not be well-known to most Florida tourists who come to escape wild cold winds and winter snows this time of year, but Clewiston offers more of the real Florida than the beachside resorts that crowd the coasts of this peninsula, a Florida that too few New Englanders and Mid-Westerners—and perhaps, Floridians—know exists.