



Florida Black Bear Scenic Byway Newsletter

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A National Scenic Byway

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Reptile Man

By Tom Rose

Photos provided by The Florida Archives

I was chatting with Bill Milton of Umatilla about the Florida Black Bear Scenic Byway. Bill is a retired judge who grew up in the area. He is an avid outdoorsman, hunter, hiker and kayaker. Our conversation about some of the early pioneers who long ago appreciated the unique area that now encompasses the FBBSB led me to research Silver Springs and one of the legends of early Florida, the Reptile Man, Ross Allen.

It was a good time for Americans and Central Floridians, the late 50s. Our nation prospered under President Dwight Eisenhower's 2nd term. We launched our first satellite, Explorer 1, Elvis was inducted into the Army, Floyd Patterson ruled the heavyweights and Nikita Khrushchev ruled the Soviet Union. The Cold War and Cuban Revolution continued. Florida's undisputed king of tourist attractions was Silver Springs (located at what is now the western terminus of the FBBSB) near Ocala where the top billing went to the Reptile Man, Ross Allen.

On a typical summer day at Silver Springs visitors had experienced the real Florida with glass bottom boat rides and jungle cruises on the Silver River. Many enjoyed a swim in the crystal clear 72 degree spring water bubbling forth from the Florida aquifer at a rate of 550 million gallons per day. Now some 70 of these visitors filled into the Ross Allen Reptile Institute, taking their place around a walled pit where over 50 eastern diamondback rattlesnakes roamed freely in the sand. After a short wait Ross Allen entered the pit and began his show. Spectators stood in awe as the large, handsome man moved among the deadly poisonous snakes. Allen's show was a combination of scientific lecture, factual demonstration, circus sideshow and thrill show all in one. Allen is comfortable and relaxed, he has been presenting his reptile show for almost 30 years, often 4 or 5 times a day, and



Ross Allen milks a huge eastern diamondback rattlesnake.

he'll continue for another 20 years. He catches a 5 foot diamondback bare handed with a quick grasp just behind the snakes head. He shows the fangs and rattles to the audience. He allows those who desire to feel the smooth, dry skin.

And he lectures factually on the snake. The level of excitement rises when an 8 foot alligator is released in the pit. Allen meets this monster of the Florida swamps head on, face to face. He circles the gator like wrestlers circle each other in the ring. With a quick move he grasps the gators mouth,



Allen wrestles a large American Alligator for an appearance on the TODAY television show

holds it closed, and flips the giant beast on his back. Rubbing the creature's stomach soon puts the animal into a sleep like trance. The grand final is the milking demonstration, when Allen, still working bare handed, hooks a rattlesnakes fangs over the rim of a glass "milking" the snake of its venom (used to produce anti-venom for



Florida Scenic Highway



Reptile Man, Con't

the life saving treatment of snake bite victims). For 50 years Ross Allen held a legendary status in Florida. With his alligators and snakes he represented the wild image of Florida's untamed wilderness. Other sections of the country had their Paul Bunyan and Johnny Appleseed but for the most part there was more fiction than fact to their stories. Not so with Ross Allen.



Allen shows off a cotton mouth moccasin captured in the clear spring water.

The stories of Ross Allen and his wildlife adventures were all true. Not only was he the real deal but millions had the opportunity to experience Ross up close and personal.

Born in Pittsburgh, PA in 1908 Ross moved to Florida with his family as a teenager. He was an Eagle Scout and his connection with the Boy Scouts carried on throughout his lifetime. Early on he had a keen interest in the frogs, snakes, alligators and other animals around his Central Florida home.

He was just 21 years old when he partnered with the famous Florida tourist attraction Silver Springs opening the Ross Allen Reptile Institute in 1929. He operated here for 46 years where he gave 4 or 5 reptile shows a day. Thousands were thrilled and awed by his interaction with poisonous snakes and alligators. Along with his handling and milking of huge diamondback rattle snakes and wrestling alligators Ross gave his lecture on the various creatures. He became widely recognized as a naturalist, zoologist and herpetologist. He was self taught, at home in the field but not in the classroom.

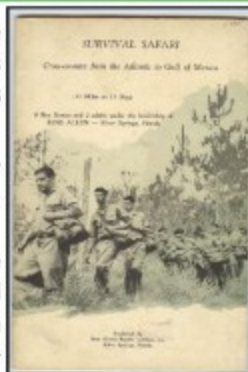
He was a friend and advocate of the Boy Scouts. Through his influence Scout troops were always welcome at Silver Springs. There were frequent Boy Scout Days and Camp Outs. Allen also organized cross Florida wilderness survival hikes for Scouts. These 14 day hikes started on the Atlantic coast and traversed the state to the Gulf of Mexico. The group would normally include 14 Scouts selected for their wilderness skills and 3 or 4 adult leaders.



Boy Scouts who participated in one of the Ross Allen Camps or hikes were awarded a patch to commemorate the event.

All gear was back packed by the hikers and most of the food was harvested from the wilderness along the way.

Over the years he appeared in or worked on numerous films, from short documentaries to major Hollywood productions. He was often called upon as an animal handler, stand in and stunt man in movies such as the Johnny Weissmuller Tarzan series and the Marjorie Kinnian Rawlings classics, *The Yearling* and *Cross Creek*.



Ross led an annual Boy Scout survival hike across the Florida peninsula.

In the early 70s with the opening of Disney World, Silver Springs experienced declining revenue and other changes. After 46 years Allen left and set up shop at the Sarasota Jungle Gardens. Here Ross continued to entertain and educate from '76 thru '78 with 5 daily shows. He soon developed bigger plans for Ross Allen's Alligator Town in Lake City. The 50 acre park was scheduled for a June 1981 opening. However, Ross became ill and died in Gainesville's Shands Hospital on May 17th. He was 73.

Judge Milton recalled an experience with Allen in the mid 50s. Bill and some friends were taking a week end break from their studies at the University of Florida. Heading for Bill's Umatilla home they encountered a large eastern diamondback rattlesnake on State Road 40 in the Ocala National Forest. They found a forked stick, fashioned a wire loop and managed to capture the snake and put it in the trunk of the car. After the capture the boys had some concern that the big snake would find a way to escape the car trunk. Fortunately it did not and on the way back to school they stopped by Allen's Reptile Institute. The word was that Allen was paying \$1.50 a foot for rattle snakes which he needed for his anti-venom business. Allen took the snake and told Bill to stop by in a week. He promised to pay him if the snake lived. The following week Bill stopped by and Allen paid him for snake. He explained that the capture procedures they used could have killed the snake or injured it so that it could not produce venom.

"He was a great outdoorsman and a natural teacher" recalled Cleve Powell, noted Jacksonville historian. Allen was collecting snakes in the woods near teenager Cleve's home in the 50s. "He showed me a wood duck nest near my home that even my woods wise family had not seen."

Walt Timmerman, current Recreation Bureau Chief with Montana State Parks worked with Ross in the late 70s at the the Sarasota Jungle Gardens where they put on wildlife



Reptile Man, Con't

demonstrations similar to the Silver Springs shows. Through the years the show had evolved from a circus side show act to a factual scientific presentation. Walt told me, "Ross Allen just had a way with animals like no one else I have known. It didn't matter if it was a gator, snake or baboon. He could relate to and control the creature".

In the later years Allen recognized that the population explosion in Florida would reach the point where survival of much of Central Florida's wildlife would be in jeopardy. Walt said, "I think Ross Allen would approve of the work of The Florida Black Bear Scenic Byway to preserve the forest as habitat for the big snakes like the eastern diamondback rattlesnake, the yellow rat snake, the black bear, and other animals."

Leesburg BikeFest 2011

The Leesburg BikeFest, which traditionally attracts 300,000 bikers, will take place on Friday, April 8th through Sunday, 10th. Although not directly on the FBBSB, our group is one of three area CME's supporting this event, the other two being the Scenic Sumter Heritage Byway and the Green Mountain Byway. Most of the bikers will travel on one of these Byways on their way to and from the festival, so it's a great opportunity to educate them about our resources.



The booth will be called Central Florida Scenic Byways, directly in front of the Leesburg Library on Main St. Chairman Mike Woods is looking for volunteers to man the booth. He says, "You can share a shift with your family or friends, and plan on spending the day to enjoy the event. I would really like to have a Black Bear rep on all shifts." If you're interested, email Mike on mwoods@lakesumtermo.com or call him on 407-314-4499. He can also fill you in on Park & Ride areas.

This will be a productive and fun event. In addition to having maps and literature to give out, we'll have a limited number of sew-on patches with the FBBSB logo for free, with a \$25 donation or Friends membership to the FBBSB.

For next year, Mike is planning to have a Smart Phone app with the names and locations of restaurants, hotels, and resources such as the springs, along the Byway. **Don't miss this great event!**

Bi-Annual Florida Scenic Byways Program Workshop

Our last newsletter contained a graphic on the up-coming Bi-Annual Florida Scenic Byways Program Workshop that will be

held in St. Augustine from June 8th through June 10th. Here is some additional information:

Registration will be from 8 to 10 a.m. Wednesday at the conference hotel, the Historic Bayfront Hilton. The day's program includes tours of Old St. Augustine and the A1A Historic Scenic Byway. Evening Dine-Arounds for parties up to 10 will be available at various restaurants in the city.

On Thursday, the conference will be at O. C. Whites, continuing registration from 7:30 to 8:30 a.m. in the White Room. The keynote speakers will be at 9, with additional presentations, break-out sessions, and round-tables until 5 p.m. From 6:30 to 8:30 in the evening a reception will be held at the Lightner Museum.

The event will continue on Friday with registration from 7:30 to 8:30 a.m., followed by Award Presentations and sessions featuring various national and Florida scenic byway experts, wrapping up at 3:30 p.m.

A detailed agenda will be shown later on the new website of the Florida Scenic Byways Program, <http://www.floridascenichighways.com>. We'll let you know when it is posted.

Conference registration is \$50.00. A special rate of \$115.00 per night plus tax has been arranged with the Hilton, www.hiltonhistoricstaugustine.com or 904-829-2277. Please reference FSH when making reservations.

Umatilla Black Bear Festival

As bear cubs began to leave their dens to explore the world, the City of Umatilla celebrated the Eleventh Annual Black Bear Festival on March 26. The one-day educational event was fun for all ages as thousands of Floridians and guests attended the free bash in honor of the black bear. Florida Black Bear Scenic Byway sponsored two bus tours that provided information about wildlife viewing, recreational opportunities, conservation lands and historical locations along the route; an excellent opportunity to learn about our resource-rich Scenic Byway.

Stop in and visit our sponsors: Lake-Sumter County MPO (Website: <http://www.lakesumtermo.com/>) and Olde Mill Stream RV Resort (Website: <http://www.oldemillstreamrvresort.com/>).

CycloCross By J. Klawunn

Florida Black Bear would like to thank the following volunteers for coming out to support this great event. Michelle, Sharna, Lisa, Dave, Paul, Tonia, Nikki, Jim, Diana and Tom all did an awesome job from setting up the tent for registration, helping lay out the course, and everything in between.



CycloCross Con't

Thanks to Quality Bicycle Parts, J&B Imports and Garneau for donation of prizes. Special thanks to Office of Greenways and Trails (land manager of Santos Trails), also Marion County Visitors and Tourism Bureau for supporting our event. Florida Black Bear Scenic Byway would also like to thank all the participants who made this a very successful.

Top 3 winners: **Kids:** Kaitlin Harries, Connor Graham, **Expert Women:** Michelle Blake, Renee Blaney, Diane Blake, **Expert Men:** Donnie Harries, Rick Copley, Jason Guillen, **Novice Women:** Marty McAudry, Carrie Miller, Lauren Sperling, **Novice Men:** Joseph Gilman, Clint Gibbs, Jeff Gangle.



L to R Jessica Kinnee, Dan Kinnee, Joan Bernat.
Photo By Diana Rose

Greenway Bicycles 1 year anniversary was Friday March 18, with everyone gathered around, Florida Black Bear Scenic Byway presented them with a plaque of appreciation for their generous donation. *Greenway Bicycles you guys Rock!!*

Website Tid Bits

If you have not been to our website recently, you might want to stop in and visit, it has changed. Has a new face, and added features such as bear stories, event photos, kid's page and an event calendar. Stop back often -- it seems to be changing constantly. Remember <http://floridablackbearscenicbyway.org> Enjoy.

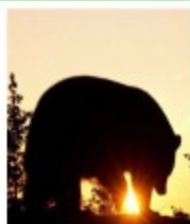
Bear Sightings

Coordinated by Tom Rose

PB&J Morning, J. Klawunn: It was early October, the morning was cool, and fall was in the air. The Florida Black Bear Scenic Byway was meeting at the Lake George Ranger station, a 15 mile ride one way. The question of the morning was do I take my motorcycle or ride my bicycle, flip a coin, bicycle wins, that means a power breakfast, Peanut Butter and Jelly sandwich with a cup of coffee.

My pack has some cloths and a laptop computer in it that should add a little extra weight to my pedal strokes. Add a protein bar for the way home, what is a little more weight?

The sun was low in the morning sky; it was a great morning for a ride. I started out easy to warm up going out of the development. After turning the corner and getting on SR 25 I put a little more speed to the pedals. The kids were at the bus stop, time for show and tell. Shifted down a gear and picked up some speed. As I was rounding the corner, some of the kids started to cheer me on, I got out of the saddle and



stoked up the hill, looked at my computer 20 mph, put my head down and sprinted as hard as I could to the next intersection, 21 mph, picked my head up and looked around, off the to left at the next intersection, there is a silhouette standing at the

the corner. I couldn't tell exactly what it was, animal of some sorts, my thoughts were a dog, as my speed slowed and I approached carefully, I realized it was a big black bear. It didn't move, and I moved very slowly. The bear turned to face me, we both stared at each other for a few minutes. I was close, thoughts started running through my head, what was my next move? My thoughts were answered as a car approached from behind and the bear just seemed to mosey across the street, not giving me or the car any thought.

I slowly rode by the spot where the bear stood and smiled, I knew it was going to be great ride. Seeing that bear made my day, I rode hard the rest of the ride, but it was also a time to enjoy my surroundings, to watch the sun starting to peak over the trees and the sounds of silence, just me, my bike, and nature -- that is what the ride was all about. I am glad I rode the bicycle that morning, that day will stay etched in my memory for a long time.

[J. Klawunn is the FBBSB Webmaster and a member-at-large of our Executive Committee.]

Deer Hunter Encounters Berry Eater: Bill Milton of Umatilla, FL is an avid outdoorsman, hiker, hunter, fisherman and sportsman. He told me this bear story. "I've had several encounters with Black Bears in the wilds of Central Florida. Several years ago while I was deer hunting near Paisley, off FR 599 in the Ocala National Forest, I was within a few feet of the largest black bears I ever seen in the wild. The two bears came within a few feet of me; they appeared to be twins and were full grown. I was well camouflaged and they never saw me. On another occasion in the Paisley woods a bear was going along on a trail that would cross my trail. It was getting dark and I was eager to get back out and not get lost. My partner and I stood still and watched the bear from about 25 yards; it was moving very slowly and eating berries and grubs from the ground. Finally I decided that we had to move or we might have to spend the night in the woods; when we moved forward, the bear looked up, slowly backed up and then turned and ran away as fast as a dog could run. Too bad that we didn't have a camera to record this! Very interesting. We were in our camo clothing and had on head nets and gloves and I don't think the bear ever really knew what we were."

Bear sightings are a regular feature of our newsletter. Our readers have provided some very interesting and exciting stories about their encounters with Florida Black Bears. If you have had a bear experience that you would like to share please send it to me at tomrose43@gmail.com.