



A National Scenic Byway

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Scrambletown – *a story of survival through good times and bad.*

By Tom Rose (originally published October 2011)

Photos provided by Betty McDonald, Richard Mills, Diana Rose, and The Florida Archives

*Well the "G" men, "T" men, revenueurs, too
Searchin' for the place where he made his brew
They were looking, tryin' to book him, but my pappy kept a-cookin' Whshhhoooh .
WHITE LIGHTNIN' ...from the song by George Jones, "White Lightning"*

Life was not easy in the United States in the first half of the 20th century. The country went through two world wars and bounced into and then climbed out of a depression. Life in the Ocala National Forest could be even tougher. People worked hard to eke out a living from the land, the forest, the lakes and rivers. When night fell there was little in the way of formal entertainment. They might gather on someone's porch to visit for an hour or so before an early bed time. One such evening, probably in the 1920s, a group was sitting around with a lady visitor from the north. From out of the darkness came a shout, "REVENOORS!"... "It's those gol dang REVENOORS AGAIN!"



Scrambletown moonshiners at work

The women disappeared into the house, the men into the woods. Cars were started and roared off into the black night. The northern visitor declared that she had never seen such scrambling in her life, you people are always scrambling. "This place should be called "**Scrambletown**" Well, it did fit and it stuck. It has

been *Scrambletown* ever since. It is just a small community in the Forest, a loosely defined area near the intersection of County Roads 314 and 314A. The most prominent landmarks are the Cedar Creek Baptist Church and the



Loading the truck for deliveries

Scrambletown Country Store. Everyone knows everyone and they look after each other. Family names are McDonald, Kinsey, Gores, Yarbrough, Counts, and Parramores.

Sitting with Betty McDonald in the living room of her Scrambeltown home, the stories of living in the Ocala National Forest flow like corn liquor running from a coil of copper tubing. She is a lifelong resident. Her great grandfather moved to the Forest from South Carolina in the 1870s. Her grandfather, Walter, was born in Scrambletown and made his living

from the Forest. He hunted bear, coon, hogs, alligators and snakes. He raised tobacco and dried it for market in a barn that he built. He cut cypress knees to be sold to the tourist trade. He was a good man, always willing to help friends, neighbors, and family in times of need. He also made whiskey (moonshine). The production and sale of intoxicating liquor became illegal in the United States with the enactment of the 18th amendment in 1919. This created an opportunity for these hard working backwoodsmen to make a few badly needed dollars by producing moonshine. The process is a fairly simple one, a mash of corn, yeast, and sugar is allowed to ferment and then run through a distillation process to produce the whiskey.

The local law enforcement people and the sheriff gave the back woods distilleries very little trouble. Many were customers. They liked a drink just like every one else, but the Federal Revenue Agents, "Revenooors," raided the area frequently. However Walter and the other Scrambletown moonshiners were rarely caught and charged with the crime. They knew the woods too well, ran too fast and jumped too high to be chased down. In fact, Walter was never arrested for his illegal liquor activity. Even though the Federal Alcohol agents could not catch the moonshiners, they were able to find the stills. The result was worse than an arrest. They would "bust up" the stills and barrels of whiskey with their axes. Betty's father, William Cecil McDonald, was born in the Forest in 1924.

He became deaf as a child so it was difficult for him to find regular work. He followed his father's lead and made a living as a hunter and trapper, farmer and moonshiner. This was not unusual, as many in this small close-knit community in the Ocala National Forest did the same. William sold raccoon pelts to a man in Tennessee, gator hides to a processor in Ocala, and captured live snakes, skunks, raccoons and alligators for Ross Allen at Silver Springs. He did have an arrest for his gator



The result of a good night on the lake!

poaching activity. One of his old gator hunting partners later became a wildlife officer. He used his inside knowledge to catch and arrest William in the act. The fine, \$50, was no big deal. It was paid by the Ocala leather dealer who was buying the hides. What really upset William was that they confiscated his light, ax, gun, boat and motor. However, he never got mad or held a grudge against his old poaching partner who arrested him.

Alligator hunting was another illegal activity that helped the woodsmen of Scrambletown to make a living as alligator hides were in high demand for belts, shoes and purses during that era. Since the 40's, however, alligator hunting has either been totally banned or highly regulated. The woods and lakes of the Ocala National Forest were full of these giant reptiles. The gators were hunted at night. The hunters set out hooks baited with chicken. They would go out on the lakes at night with lights in their john boats. A hooked gator was pulled to the side of the



Richard Mills spent a lifetime in the Forest

boat and killed, most often with a single blow to the head with an ax. If they could not get in a good swing with an ax they would shoot the gator with a shotgun. One night's hunt could bring in 10 or more large alligators. There was a man in Ocala who bought all the hides they could bring in. There was good money in it because the hides often brought \$3 a foot. They also ate the meat occasionally, but the alligator was not a favorite food in Scrambletown. Richard Mills was just a little boy of 6 when his family moved to Lynne, Florida, in 1927. He arrived just in time to witness the limerock paving of State Road 40. His home was just a

stone's throw from Scrambletown. There were stills all through the woods. Richard loved the outdoors and the woods and spent a lot of time hiking and exploring. He often ran into stills and the still operators. He tried to avoid them - if they were caught he did not want to be suspected of turning them in. There were several small country stores in the area. One was Will Fore's store near the



Scrambletown couple with their Model A, modified for backwoods travel.

sight of the present Scrambletown Country Store. The main business and chief reason for existence of these stores was to sell sugar and cracked corn to the moonshiners. The stores also sold the finished product, corn liquor. So the moonshine provided a constant cash flow for the depression-poor area. Brokers from nearby Ocala would come in and buy the moonshine in bulk and sell it to various retailers in Ocala. Richard remembers every Saturday an ambulance from Ocala would come through the area. He wondered, "Someone must be sick?" Then he figured it out. "They were hauling shine!"

Richard told me this story from the moon-shine era. "Five or six fellows were just sitting around a little bridge over a creek near Pat's Island. There was a loud sloshing sound coming down the creek, everyone remained quiet expecting to see a bear. Slosh, slosh slosh. Around the bend and under the bridge came a guy with a large jug of moonshine, bringing it out of the woods from a remote still. He was one surprised guy, caught red handed with his jug of liquor! That creek has been Whiskey Creek ever since. You can hike out there and check it out."

After high school Richard served in the Army and joined the US Forest Service in 1948. He spent his entire career in the Ocala National Forest.

There was good liquor and bad liquor. But many produced a high quality and even went so far as to age it in oak barrels. He knew one Ocala doctor that bought the best quality moonshine and then aged it in barrels for several years. He would serve it to his friends on special occasions.

Even though the 18th amendment was repealed in 1933 money could still be made in the manufacture and sale of homemade corn liquor. The ordinary working man wanted a drink after a hard day's work, but could ill afford the high priced brands with their federal and state taxes. Locally produced and sold

moonshine remained a viable business in and around Scrambletown into the 50s. The end of the moonshine era came in the early 50s as prison sentences for the crime were increased to a year or more and rising sugar prices cut into profits. The risk of being away from family and home over a year drove most Scrambletown moonshiners out of the liquor business.

So the high price of ingredients and longer jail terms killed the moonshine business and the decreasing demand for gator hides killed the gator poaching business. However, none of this could kill Scrambletown. Although many have had to seek employment in town, they still hunt and fish in the Forest.

Scrambletown lives on, still proud, hard working, God-fearing, patriotic Americans. They still stick together, help one another in time of need, fight for their country in time of war and live free in the Forest in the area known as *Scrambletown*.

NOTE FROM OUR CHAIRMAN...Jim Thorsen
We are beginning to get into our “Fall” season and that means our Florida Black Bears will be moving on the landscape and searching for food. Our Florida Bears will start consuming more calories in the Fall to store up fat reserves for the Winter. During the winter, Black Bears will go into a “quiet period” that is similar to hibernation. So, if travelling our Byway, a Florida Black Bear sighting will be common.



Like our Florida Black Bears, we are busy in the fall with many events. The upcoming events for you to check out are:

- ✓ A black bear program at Lake Woodruff National Wildlife Refuge. The program will be on Saturday, October 11, 0930 to 1130. We will focus on bear education from a variety of agencies and organizations. For more information, visit: <https://bit.ly/flblackbear> If you have not been to this refuge out of Deland, it's very unique and lots of wildlife to view associated with the St Johns River. This will be great for kids!!
- ✓ On Friday, October 24th, FL Black Bear and River of Lakes Scenic Byways will feature an event at the Stetson Homecoming. This will be among many highlights for that day at Stetson and a visit to our exhibit would be very enjoyable.
- ✓ The next “big” event is the Fall Jamboree at the Pioneer Settlement in Barberville. The dates are November 1 and 2, Saturday and Sunday. We will have our staffed exhibit which is always popular with the attendees. We will

have new caps and men's and women's tee shirts for purchase as a donation for our activities. Also, we will have a very special visitor that the FBBSB will bring to the event. I will not disclose who at this time, but the individual is very popular in Florida in 1774. Can you guess who this may be?

We hope that you and your Family can visit these events and have a pleasant day of roaming these events like our FL Black Bears are doing! We are having a FBBSB Board Meeting at the Pioneer Settlement on October 7, 2025 at 2pm. You are invited and hope to see you on that date. Thank You!!

Jim Thorsen, Chair thor1505@aol.com



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Congratulations to Nikki of Eustis, FL who was first to answer the July trivia question. Nikki knew that the Lake Eaton Sinkhole descends over 80 feet into the earth. The sinkhole and

Lake Eaton Trail provides a unique Byway hike and adventure.

Website & Facebook: Learn more about the byway at our website <https://floridablackbearsenicbyway.org> and Facebook page <https://floridablackbearsenicbyway.org/facebook>

Board Meetings: Our next meeting will be on Tuesday October 7, 2025 at the Pioneer Settlement in Barberville - 2:00 PM. Visitors are welcome. Attending a board meeting is a great way to learn more about the byway. Please let us know if you plan to attend. tomrose43@gmail.com

Our Mission: To enhance, encourage and promote the preservation and protection of the outstanding natural, ecological, cultural and historical resources of the Florida Black Bear Scenic Byway for its residents, inhabitants, visitors and future generations.

Officers: Jim Thorsen, Chairman - Kristee Booth, Vice Chair - Nikki Thorsen, Secretary. **Board of Directors:** Tony Ehrlich, Georgia Turner, Mike Cross, Janet Lewis, Jessica Meinhofer, Carlee McKinney, Tom Rose

Editor: Tom Rose Contact: tomrose43@gmail.com. Your letters, comments, suggestions and submissions are encouraged and welcome.