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WRITING SAMPLES

Books

Book Chapter

TALLAHASSEE

Tradition, Technology & Teamwork

Chapter Eight

What's To Love About Tallahassee

Hidden Treasures: Southern Accents and Old Country Roads

"Throughout a century and a half of growth, Tallahassee has maintained its Southern charm, its hospitality, and has kept its feel of "small-town South," a quality and character that its inhabitants defend staunchly even today."

(From "Yesterday's Tallahassee," by Hampton Dunn)

There are four seasons to a year, but to Tallahasseeans there are a great deal more. Within each season, numerous sights, sounds, tastes, and events help mark the calendar year. There's the season of plantation-style picnics at the homes of Tallahassee notables. There's the season to take weekend dips in one of the sinks among the trails located south of town.

And the season when a young bank vice president becomes a weekend widow as her husband and his pals prefer Labradors, shiny shotguns, and Eddie Bauer camouflage to yard work and other family obligations.

Of course, in Tallahassee there's also a time of budding Bradford pear trees, or the same trees' burst of bright orange and yellow before they drop their leaves – sometimes delayed until the winter months. There's one of the favorite seasons when azaleas spill over with color, and dogwoods burst forth in pink and white blooms.

In addition to season-related events, there are also perennial images of Tallahassee that give it a sense of time and place all its own. The early Saturday morning gatherings of runners and bikers during Gulf Winds Track Club's foot races and triathlons, the athletes' attire – warm or sparse –

matching the temperatures.

And then there are the ever-present towering pines that dot the landscape north, south, east and west. Most people have never seen such a gathering within the Florida state line. There's the moment of being awestruck on Roberts Road as drivers on a clear day notice the wide expanse of green pastures dominated by giant oak trees, each limb draped in gray, shawl-like moss.

And any day – cold or warm – could spark a bit of curiosity in those seeing the old gent whose rustic barn sits alongside Meridian Road, a handmade sign advertising his "Fix-it Shop" with its display of lawn mowers and hubcaps. There he stands, leaning against a barn door, watching the world – and you – go by.

Tallahassee is a city of contrasts, where you're likely to find uptown symphony orchestras just as popular as cracker-box "jook" joints with their window displays of neon beer signs on Bannerman Road.

And the same people who might be found jamming at the American Legion with Tom and the Cats on one night, on another night might be taking a quiet stroll up town, stopping in at Andrew's Upstairs to hear some jazz tunes or heading out to Dave's CC Club for a healthy dose of rhythm and blues.

Some might say Tallahassee has its peculiarities. But all added up, they blend together to charm visitors and residents alike.

IN THE SOUTHERN TRADITION

There's a joke that says the farther north you go from Miami, the farther south you get. It's true. The accents found in north Florida are tinged with a bit of south Georgia. It's where you'll find a woman behind the wheel of a big four-wheel drive vehicle sporting a sticker on the back bumper: Real women drive trucks. And yet, there are times when a person would swear Tallahassee had more BMWs and Lexuses per capita than any other city in the Sunshine State.

To better know Tallahassee, one could follow the various roads leading like spokes of a wheel from the center city. Follow one through town and see the chain of parks that received a face-lift in 1994, a monument to mark Tallahassee's undying respect for green spaces and the great outdoors. The renovation includes brick paved sidewalks, inviting benches and a multitude of shady spots including a gazebo. There's a return to angled parking and the addition of "bump outs," helping downtown to regain a sense of pedestrian friendliness.

To the immediate south there are neighborhoods like the FAMU Addition, with homes that have been handed down through the families as many as five times over. There are the newer neighborhoods to the northeast – large expanses of land that have been carved up into developments – each with its own personality: traditional, upscale, modest or mix. And manufactured housing communities scattered on the outskirts of town provide an entirely different living experience.

A hint of Tallahassee is found in a variety of images: its surroundings, social occasions, and backdrop.

Here, a person might discover a little-known neighborhood behind the southside police substation where it seems time has stood still. There's a very rural feel, with a general store at the center – no sign marking its existence – old cracker-box size houses with cars propped up by bricks in the driveway. Dirt trails are evidence of well-traveled pathways among neighbors and friends.

A very different discovery, also well hidden, is Golden Eagle style golf course homes and the lakefront bungalows and estates on Talquin, Jackson, Iamonia or Bradford.

TALENTED TYPES

Tallahassee boasts a highly educated populace – something that is revealed through the readings by local poets and authors at a standing-room only café and in the Sunday afternoon barrage of parents, children, college students, senior citizens and more at the main branch of the Leon County Library.

It's talented, too. There's the multi-medium artistic talent of Sandy Proctor with his stone sculptures, watercolors and oils. And musically, there's the wildly talented singer Pam Laws, pianist Marvin Goldstein and a bit more folksy with original performances – John Paul Walters.

There are also the unforgettable poignant portraits by Ray Stanyard, a Tallahassee-based professional photographer, and numerous local artists-in-waiting whose work wins display at LeMoyné Art Gallery.

Tallahassee's literary talents comes in many forms: amateur – as what shows up frequently on the Tallahassee Democrat's opinion page – and professional, including the works of novelist Janet Burroway and fiction specialist Jerry Stern.

TIME OUT AND TIMING

A little bit of Tallahassee can be seen in the small groups of young teenagers, gathered on a Saturday afternoon at the greenery-accented Hopkins' Eatery. Or the well-dressed 40-somethings talking at dinner at the far-out (as far as distance is concerned) Nino's Italian Eatery.

As those who leave Tallahassee for career or marriage and return later in life often find, the area comes with its own special timing, as if the metronome has a notched setting for Tallahassee alone. It gives time for sharing a beer over the back fence with a neighbor, or grabbing a "time out" cup of coffee with a friend at the mall.

There are the annual parties that mark the year – which people come to expect: The Colonel's Club and the Ryals Lee New Year's Eve party where a person would find himself among a veritable Who's Who of the Tallahassee social register.

Such gatherings come with their own brand of social customs. Newcomers are sometimes surprised by the presumptuous manner in which they're introduced: "He's one of the Gavalas boys, you know – the Nic Gavalas family, Nic's Toggery."

As transient as it might seem because of the comings and goings of college students and state government types, there's still an undercurrent of stability: Old Tallahassee.

Family ties are strong in this part of the South. There are small pockets of families running several generations deep. There are the Phipps, the Hannons, the Eppes, the Hopkins, the Hadleys and the Bannermans. Tallahassee Police Chief Tom Coe is a fifth generation Tallahasseean, too. And County Commissioner Manny Joanos has roots that go back to the early 1920s.

They've all stayed for love of the area. Perhaps that's why newcomers often describe Tallahassee as "a great place to raise a family." There are more parks, green spaces and lively playgrounds than many other towns its size. It's the kind of place where a young girl can grow up declaring her first true love was a horse and where mommies or daddies might make parenting their

stay-at-home job.

WORDS BRING PERSONAL HISTORIES ALIVE

Through the years, those who have discovered Tallahassee have pursued the recording of its pleasures in both pictorial and historical representations ranging from cookbooks and diary accounts to gift books and college dissertations.

People of Tallahassee have been writing about it for years, from the yellowed ages of the delicate book, "A Century of Tallahassee Girls (1824-1924)," to the rugged tales of Robert C. Balfour Jr. in "This Land I Have Loved."

The main branch of the Leon County Library has a quiet room closed off from the reference section that houses a collection of books, reports and other materials detailing facts and impressions about this favored land.

It proves a love for various aspects: architecture, people, nature, history, culture and images.

In "Yesterday's Tallahassee," author Hampton Dunn lovingly illustrates the city's history, from the capital in the wilderness to Tallahassee since 1940. In his foreword, he says he thinks of it as his other hometown. For 25 years he visited first as a political writer and later as a political commentator. "Tallahassee grows on you," he writes, "and you find yourself wanting to spend more time there."

In her chapter, "Two hundred miles from anywhere else," in the book, "The Other Florida," author Gloria Jahoda says: "Tallahassee, in Leon County, is Middle Florida's metropolis and all of Florida's capital. And yet it has no orange groves, no cocktail bars, very few bikinis, no porpoises and a history innocent of refurbishing. It lacks everything symbolic of Florida the carnival except its legislature."

In 1976, author Eleanor Ketchum wrote her dedication of Tales of Tallahassee. "To all who love Tallahassee, the place where springtime begins, the dowager city of the Great State of Florida, Capital of the Sunshine State, garden spot of the whole cotton pickin' world, and the Southland at its very best!" She describes Tallahassee through vignettes to give a brief glimpse of the city's historical significance, Southern charm and gracious hospitality.

TALES OF TALLAHASSEE

A unique books on the shelves of many long-time Tallahasseeans is "The Colonel Inn Caterer's Tallahassee Historical Cookbook," organized by Delia Appleyard Mickler and Carolyde Phillips O'Bryan. "This is a book about the families who came and settled in Tallahassee over a one-hundred-year period from 1824 to 1924. Many members of these families married each other, and through the years formed long and lasting kinships. It is about these people, and the homes they built and lived in, that this book is written."

The book's foreword says: "Those of use who live here feel that Tallahassee is the most beautiful city in the world. Early in the year nature opens up its springtime with its brilliant azaleas, camellias, pink buds, dogwoods, flowing quince, tulips and daffodils in all their blaze of glory."

An index of people and places is included in the book – Call, Perkins, Strauss, as well as Bellevue, Elks Club and The Grove – which is followed by an index of recipes. It's a true genealogy of Tallahassee's first families and their favorite eats.

Something that also captures the unique spirit of Tallahassee is the Canopy Roads cookbook, a treasure collected by the Junior Woman's Club, where men have a section of recipes all their own. One entry, for example, is Buttermilk Fried Mullet, "very delicious at breakfast or anytime served with grits," says contributor Bill Rowan. "It has a taste all its own."

And in the proper southern tradition, some women will still be referred to according to their husband's name, as in the reference, "Mrs. Charles Miner (Judy)."

There's a special section for dignitaries, where cooks will find recipes from the likes of Donna Lou Askew, wife of former Governor Reubin Askew (1970-1978), and Adele Graham, wife of former Governor Bob Graham (1978-1982), now a United States senator, as well as many Florida senators and representatives and their wives.

A bit more formal is the "Thymes Remembered" cookbook, which was organized by the Junior League of Tallahassee. A prelude says, "Every locale has its notable distinctions. Since plantation days, the charm of Tallahassee's rolling hills, beautiful flowers, and plentiful trees has beckoned many to make this city their home. The hallmark of Tallahassee is the nurturing atmosphere it provides families to flourish and create cherished memories so indicative of its style. Tallahasseeans consider their city a perfect place to call home.

Appropriately, the words are illustrated with a genteel setting of wicker chairs, a wide-brimmed, flowered hat with ribbons, pink lemonade, lace and a scrumptious-looking kiwi-raspberry-mix dessert.

This is Tallahassee true to form.

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