

THE WOODPECKER AND THE ALAMO

by BRYAN BROOKS

The year was 1949, and I was ten years old. Fort Lauderdale was still a sleepy seaside town that tourists came to and played in during the winter. It had always seemed to me that during the summer you could fire a shotgun down Broward Boulevard and not hit anything; at least I always wanted to try, especially after seeing a Randolph Scott movie at the old Sunset Theater. The Sunset Theater sat on Andrews Avenue at the end of East Las Olas Boulevard, in the very heart of downtown Fort Lauderdale. It cost nine cents to go to the Sunset Theater; after six p.m., the price went all the way up to fourteen cents.

Next door to me lived a kid my age named Bobby Lee. We lived just off East Sunrise Boulevard, which, in those days, was a two-lane road that snakes still crawled across and most folks still called Tenth Street. The Gateway Shopping Center was in the future, its location still occupied by the remnants of what, only a few years earlier, had been the Clyde Beatty Zoo.

Bobby Lee, like me, was a freckle-faced cracker kid. I think, in looking back, that he had much more nerve than I did. For instance, he was the one who came up with the idea of breaking into the old Alamo nightclub. The truth is, when he talked about it I was scared, but I didn't want to let him know it.

The Alamo was located south of where the Gateway Theater now stands. It was rumored to have been a gambling playground for gangsters back in the '30s. By

the late '40s it stood alone behind a swamp where the animals from the Clyde Beatty Zoo had played. That was all light years before some fool invented condominiums, which stand there today.

Bobby Lee kept talking about breaking into the old building. It seemed like he was always daring me to follow him on his dangerous childhood adventures. Finally, because I was more afraid of what he would tell the other kids if I didn't go, I agreed. We got onto our Schwinn bikes and headed solemnly toward our destiny.

A stairway led up to the second floor of the Alamo, where a window offered a way inside. The Alamo stood there all alone, quiet and out of the way beside the swamp. It was spooky. There was nothing in the surrounding area except palmettoes, sandspurs, pine trees, and white sugar sand. Today, the sugar sand is all gone, buried beneath concrete, condominiums, and elegant sod.

Without hesitation, Bobby Lee started up the stairway. I was scared to death, but I was more afraid not to follow him. At the top of the stairway, he was able to pry the window open as though he had been doing this his whole life. Quickly, he slipped inside. Although I was near panic, I followed, pushing my little form through the window.

The room was dark, but somehow we were able to find our way down an inside stairway to what had once been a bar and pool room. There were pool balls still on the table. I remember taking one of them with me. It was my plunder; having it, I would be able to prove to the other kids that I really did have the raw courage to sneak into the Alamo.

God knows how long this room had been sitting in the dark, or how many sins had probably been committed there. The ghosts of Al Capone and his henchmen seemed everywhere. Finally, convincing ourselves

In this autobiographical article, author Bryan Brooks combines lighthearted memories of his Fort Lauderdale childhood with more somber reflections on the destruction of a beloved way of life by rapid population growth and over-development. His recollections are sure to stir memories for many longtime Broward Countians.

A native of Fort Lauderdale and member of a pioneer family, Mr. Brooks is a former policeman and dive shop owner currently working as a free-lance writer.

Following this article, "Days Gone By," a selection of 1940s and 1950s photos from the Historical Commission collections, vividly illustrates the Broward County of the not-so-distant past.



View northward toward Sunrise Boulevard, c. 1950, showing Gateway Theater under construction (center) and new residential subdivisions. A small patch of woods still surrounds the old Alamo Club at bottom left.

that we had conquered the Alamo, we left, our manhood intact.

Not long after this adventure, we got guns. All redblooded men had guns, or at least in 1949 we thought so. The Lone Ranger had a gun, and so did Wild Bill Hickock and Lash Larue. They always had those neat-looking Winchester in saddle holsters, and we longed for the day when we could carry Winchesters of our own. The next thing I knew, Bobby Lee had a brand new Daisy Red Ryder BB gun that looked pretty much like a Winchester. And the next thing my mother knew, I had conned her into getting me one too.

But what was there to shoot at? The Indians all lived on reservations, even back in 1949. It would be a long time before either one of us realized that maybe the Indians were the good guys and that our ancestors might have been the bad guys, doing some highly questionable things, like breaking just about every treaty ever signed with the Indians. But such ideas were the enlightenment of the future. In 1949 I was ten, and, together with my pretend Winchester, I was looking for action.

Bobby Lee had the answer—birds. We would shoot birds. In our children's minds they became the enemy. In later years I would "wimp out" and become an environmentalist, shuddering, even now, at my childhood mind set. But then I wanted to do what I thought every real man does—shoot something.

Every Red Ryder BB gun could handle fifty or sixty BBs. But I soon learned that accuracy was something else. We must have hunted our neighborhood to death

before we shot the first bird.

The streets in our neighborhood had all been laid out, but at that time there were very few houses on those blocks. Bobby Lee's family and mine had the only houses standing in our area except the big, white stucco house on the corner. That house belonged to the Chief Deputy Sheriff of Broward County, Bob Clark, and we were afraid of him. Years later I would hear and read all kinds of things about his controversial career. The rest of the lots were covered with palmettoes, sandspurs, and sugar sand, with an occasional pine tree.

Just when I thought shooting BBs wasn't going to be any fun after all, Bobby Lee came up with a mission—shooting woodpeckers. He said that the Florida Power and Light Company in downtown Fort Lauderdale would pay us one dollar for every woodpecker we shot. It seemed, he explained, that woodpeckers were destroying the wooden power poles that the electrical lines were strung across. To hear him talk, by shooting woodpeckers we would be serving mankind, making life better for our fellow Americans.

I conjured up all kinds of fantasies. I would be rich. Contrary to what other little boys would say about girls, I ALWAYS liked girls. With all my money, I would be their hero. I could afford to take them with me to the Sunset Theater for the rest of my life. In those days, the power company business office was located next door to the Sunset Theater, an arrangement I thought was extremely convenient. There was even a malt shop on the other side of the theater. I knew

then that there was a God, and He lived in Fort Lauderdale.

So, on Saturday mornings we would crawl out of our beds, our trusty Red Ryder BB guns in our hands, and hunt. It took a long time, but finally—sadly—I shot a woodpecker. This was on Saturday. Suddenly I was faced with a problem. What would I do with the poor woodpecker until Monday when Florida Power and Light opened for cash business?

I quickly came up with a solution. I snuck the woodpecker into our refrigerator, hiding it in the freezer section in a brown bag so my mother wouldn't see it. I remember walking around that whole weekend with a swagger, a manly walk. I was earning money by shooting something; I was "Man, the hunter."

However, on Monday morning I had to make another decision. What to do with my woodpecker while I was in school? I decided to smuggle it into school with me inside of a shoe box. I went to school at St. Anthony's, which was located then, as it is today, on the corner of Northeast Second Street and Northeast Eighth Avenue. In those days it was a combination high school and grade school. Today it serves solely as a grade school.

My teacher was a Dominican nun named Sister Elise. She was very tall and very stern and hardly ever smiled. But somehow I made up my mind to get through this day and become rich. My dreams almost ended for me that afternoon in school when Sister Elise caught me looking at the box underneath my desk. She quickly grabbed the box and looked inside. I thought her glasses would fall off.

Without thinking, I blurted out, "Sister, I'm workin' for the Florida Power and Light Company. Woodpeckers hurt the power poles, ya know. I gotta turn this



Advertisement for the Sunset Theater.



St. Anthony's Catholic School, late 1940s.

bird in after school."

Heaven knows why she believed that; perhaps she was in shock. I remember the other kids smirking at me as she yelled, "You, Mr. Brooks, get that thing out of my classroom!" I ran outside and tucked the shoe box under the portable classroom, happy that I had not been separated from my prize.

After school I got on my bike and pedaled downtown. This particular Monday seemed to be a busy day in the Florida Power and Light Company office, and there was a long line. With my shoe box tucked under my arm, I waited patiently in that line. There I was, a child holding a shoe box with a dead woodpecker inside it, waiting in line with all of the adults who were there to pay their light bills. Somehow, at that moment, I felt very adult myself. In a few minutes I had managed to work my way to the front of the line. When my turn came, the lady behind the counter could hardly see me because I was so little. Then, bravely, I opened the box and plunked the dead woodpecker onto the counter.

For the rest of my life, I'll remember the look on her face - pure terror. Before I could say a word, she screamed. I tried to explain that I was free-lancing as a bounty hunter for the Florida Power and Light Company, but she never stopped screaming. In the midst of all of this screaming, I remember bravely asking her for my dollar.

The next thing I remember, a man who worked for the Florida Power and Light Company was leading me and my shoe box and my woodpecker outside. The door was quickly shut, and I was alone and

broke, standing outside on Andrews Avenue, a precious few feet from that childhood kingdom known as the Sunset Theater.

There was a certain childhood innocence that was lost on that day. I remember hating Bobby Lee, who laughed when I told him what had happened. My mother found out about my misadventure and nearly killed me. These were the days before Dr. Spock, and I considered myself lucky to be alive. Happily for me, Sister Elise never mentioned anything about a woodpecker again, and I never brought another shoe box to school.

The years quickly passed. Bobby Lee and I grew up and quickly moved into adulthood, launching careers in different parts of the world. The old Sunset Theater was torn down as downtown Fort Lauderdale, much like other downtowns in other cities, began to disintegrate. The post-World War II flight to suburbia was in motion. The Gateway Shopping Center was Fort Lauderdale's first large suburban shopping center; others soon followed. Then, through yuppie evolution, large shopping malls appeared and multiplied in south Florida.

The mangroves off East Sunrise on Middle River, where Bobby Lee and I fished for snook at dawn, disappeared. Our fishing hole had been close to the Alamo, and, with the woodpeckers and sugar sand, had a special meaning for two cracker children.

The magical island on East Las Olas Boulevard was dredged away forever. This island had been another special place for Bobby Lee and me, a watershed, childhood place to cast small, yellow feathers

across the dark, exploding waters on hot Florida summer nights, and fight for tarpon. When I returned from duty in the Navy, it had all simply disappeared.

The Fort Lauderdale I grew up in changed forever as more and more people came here. It seemed to me that the more people who came here, the more they brought with them the very things that they had been running here to escape. But they are here, and, thanks to air conditioning, airliners, and finally I-95, they will never stop coming here. The old South, with all of its slow ways, is forever gone, at least in Fort Lauderdale.

Sometimes, when I'm in my car on East Sunrise Boulevard, I can still see two ten year old boys with their Red Ryder BB guns walking alertly through the palmetto scrub on some brave mission. I can still see the old Alamo nightclub standing all alone in the woods by the swamp. I'm aware that the only sound I hear is the wind as it whistles through the palmettoes and pine trees; I can still feel the softness of the sugar sand beneath my bare feet.

But then a horn honks, and, like a time warp, I am back to the reality of the 1990s. The light has turned green on Sunrise Boulevard at the Gateway Interchange. A full six lanes of traffic are piled bumper to bumper. The cars are full of people who have all come from someplace else. The air is thick with automobile noise and exhaust.

All of the people in all of the cars seem to be looking suspiciously at each other. Some of them seem to be looking at nothing at all, alone in their air conditioned modules. I wonder if maybe that is because nobody but a few old crackers like me, and the Indians before me, has any ethnic roots here.

I look in the rear-view mirror, seeing the impatient driver who has caught me daydreaming. He looks like he is in a hurry; it seems like everyone is in a hurry. I wonder where they are all going? Suddenly I feel very old, alone, lost, and, yes, frightened.

Where is Bobby Lee? Where is the soft, Florida sugar sand? Where are the mangroves and the snook? I look at myself quickly in the rear-view mirror, but all I see is a middle-aged face looking back.

It is hot, and the traffic is stacked up. There is nothing around me but cars, concrete, and noise. Sadly, I put the car in gear, and, with only my memories, I drive away.

