

COMMENTARY

What would Charles Foster do?

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There are plenty of ways to save a river, and maybe the best is to let it save itself by getting out of the way. That's also impossible, if you're talking about the Caloosahatchee.

We're here, and we aren't getting out of the way. Even if we could, we've forever altered waterflow in the southern half of the Florida peninsula, so no amount of restoration will make the river what it once was — not mighty like the Mississippi or insistent like the Hudson or longer than months of walking like the Missouri or revered by balladeers like the Shenandoah, or famous for its deep and dramatic gorges like the Colorado or Arkansas, or a natural U.S. border like the Rio Grande — none of those things.

Instead, the river was something else entirely: a short, sinewy, wild thing, a mysterious meanderer even into the second half of the 20th century. A place festooned in subtropical life forms.

Born in 1913 and raised in eastern Lee County, Charles Foster saw all this, and submerged himself in it. The river had already beckoned his kin and others like them — the pioneers — to its banks, then watered them, fed them, transported them, washed them, entertained them, and only occasionally ruined them (by sudden flood or calamity).

He lived on the Caloosahatchee in the waning moments of its 10,000-year natural lifespan — admittedly just a tiny bit late for a pure glimpse, since a group of pioneering men, including his relative F.A. Hendry, had extended the river's eastern reach by miles,

digging a canal from Lake Flirt all the way to the great Okeechobee in 1881, 32 years before Foster's birth.

That effort had little effect on the river Foster knew as a young boy, at Alva, with its fish- and bird-laden, alligator-haunted, wild-flower-bejeweled ox-bows, and its refusal ever to follow the human whimsy of a straight line.

The river of his youth, the one that earned his lifelong love and fidelity, bared the bones of its entire history from the late Pleistocene on like an uninhibited eulogist who can't help getting giddy-drunk and singing merrily of the dead. Just below the modern day Franklin Lock, for example, the river had cut a cellar-deep

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channel into the banks. In the dry season, their exposure revealed world-class fossil beds, rich with the calcified memories of giant sloths, mammoths, camels, sabre-toothed cats, dire wolves, sharks, crustaceans and other creatures long since vanished from the globe. That was all back-flooded after 1965, when the Franklin Lock, then called the Olga Lock, was piled into the river's soft bottom.

Foster's young river wasn't always merry, nor could it be controlled like the one he knew and still feted as he grew old. It turned accomplice to a killer on September 16, 1928, when Foster was 15 years old and a hurricane killed

2,000 people in 6 hours, after Lake O burst from the low muck dike that then contained it.

That was still seven years before the Depression-era Army Corps of Engineers dredged the river and completed its first lock at Moore Haven, designed to control freshwater emerging from Lake O.

Foster went away to school in Gainesville in 1935, graduated in time to go to war, and later went back to graduate school at Columbia University in New York City, before returning finally to Lee County to spend the next 55 years.

Once, I chatted with him about the neighborhood where he'd lived in New York a half-century before our conversation — I had lived and studied there, too — and I was struck by the precise and generous detail of his memory.

And it was that, finally, which struck me most as he worked to save the river, or what he could of it, even into his ninth decade when he had long since been tagged, "the old river rat."

Sure, he'd helped found the Caloosahatchee River Citizens Association. And he'd worked tirelessly on the river's behalf in classrooms and the official meeting rooms of local governments and bureaucracies (he was a teacher both by vocation and temperament, an amicable apologist, and a natural storyteller). But most convincingly, he could remember.

He always relied on a dependable distillation of recollection, mixed with a keen eye for the reality of the moment, to describe his river.

Simply to describe it. His was the muscular memory of a man who had grown up watching everything around him and could recount it exactly. And, skeptic that I am, since I had a way of verifying its accuracy — by checking his memory against a New York place I knew as well and a lot more recently than he did — I began to trust what he said about the river, and



Foster

what he did.

And what he did was take anybody who cared out on the river, or into the river, or up and down the river, by day or night. He tried to let you see it by yourself, and to see what he saw; but he never tried to tell you what he thought you should do about it.

Just look at the river, he seemed to say: Just look and touch and smell and listen to it, then do it again, perhaps with somebody else who can also look and touch and smell and listen.

So, if you care about the Caloosahatchee River — now little more than a man-made and sometimes toxic-inducing canal — just ask yourself: What would Charles Foster do?

I don't know what he would do; he's been gone for two years now, since March 6, 2005.

But I do know what he did do: he went down to the river and climbed in, again and again and again, for 91 years. ■



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