

# RIVER

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sciences at Florida Gulf Coast University, who has long championed the river. "It's now operating as a series of lake pools with weir structures, and it grows stagnant."

The River has become our off-spring, in other words, called variously a "canal," or simply C-43 on official maps, or even more insultingly, a "ditch," by many who remember what it once was.

This month, as Congress considers revisions to the 1972 Clean Water Act, and as officials in the region anticipate huge injections of money to help clean up waters sliding toward the Caloosahatchee from almost as far north as Orlando, the big C remains a glistening sheet of dark liquid stretching wider than the Mississippi at St. Louis when it passes Redfish Point — more than a mile from the north to the south bank.

What flows in that liquid, and how it ultimately affects us, is still not precisely defined — far from it. And if it's been defined, it's often misunderstood, a fact recognized by an increasingly sizeable number of men and women whose interests might formerly have seemed at cross purposes. Almost inadvertently, they've become new champions of an old river.

"They talk about phosphorous in it, but that's far from the major problem," says Charles Brown, Jr., whose company, Paramount Chemicals & Plastics, provides agricultural and industrial chemicals and supplies to farmers and waste treatment facilities.

Brown, who comes from a long line of commercial boatmen, fishermen and farmers in Florida, spent part of his boyhood in the 1970s traveling the river, and fishing it. Then, he recalls, "It looked like a lawn, it was all grass except in the channel. But now there's not enough light for the grass to survive."

And now he uses the river mostly for transportation, to get from his boat slip in Olga out to Charlotte Harbor, where he fishes. What's changed is both obvious and complex, in his mind.

"Let me give you an example," he says. "When you buy a bag of fertilizer and it says 10-10-10, the first number is nitrogen, the second is phosphorus and the third is potassium — those are the meat and potatoes of fertilizer," he explains. And those are what go into the river from cities and suburbs where the green earth is neither native nor xeriscaped, along with copper, magnesium manganese, and other things.

And then there are the new chemicals, such as estrogen, which can build up in the water supply after passing through human bodies (as birth control medication), and sewer treatment plants. "They're mainly treating for solids and pathogens, like e coli. They don't treat for a lot of stuff," Brown notes. "And don't forget street drainage — most of the streets in the city still drain into the river. It's economic: Where are you going to put all that water?"

"During a flood or a hurricane, huge amounts of water are going through the drainage and the sewer system. The waste-water treatment plants have to treat that as fast as they can, and some of it slips through. So they also put their sewage effluent into the river. I'm in the treatment business, and I can tell you, stuff happens."

"Stuff" mandated in part by the 1972 Clean Water Act, which strongly influences what happens to all water here, especially the Caloosahatchee.

"We still only treat sewage into the lower 90 percent level, so if you have 10 people, one of them is 'doing it' directly into the river." Bill Ham-



Graphic by Florida Weekly  
Source: South Florida Water Management District



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A much cleaner Caloosahatchee River existed in this photo from a half a century ago.

mond explains. "When the rules went into effect in 1972, the population in Lee County was miniscule compared to today. So even if you're treating sewage to within 5 or 6 percent today, that's much more than 100 percent of what was going into the river then."

Hammond, who served almost eight years as a governing board member of the South Florida Water Management District in the 1990s, cites another huge problem he couldn't convince that board to face a decade ago: medicinal and chemical treatments still virtually ignored.

"Everything from my heart and arthritis medications, to estrogen, to other things run right into the river. Like dumping your grass clippings, these are things that can be stopped, if we had a will too. And that could change the river very quickly."

## Once upon a time

Once, the River was an alien. It came from water that came from the other places that weren't of our making — the vast sky and the wet earth. The water fell on the land or the lakes or the creeks. It became part of the land, and sometimes it gathered the land and then carried it southward to the River — downhill from the living peninsula that breathed in subtropical rhythms, and between those great breaths of wet and dry gave up magnificent sheets of liquid, the lifespawn of the Southwest and the Everglades. From the River, the water became part of the sky again, or the sea. The Caloosahatchee pushed its then-gentle plumes of fresh into the salt bays and sounds — the San Carlos,

the Pine Island, the lower Matalacha, the upper Estero. And it married the Peace River's flows in southern Charlotte Harbor like a pregnant young bride who finally accepts a union with the rich old Gulf.

The River was itself then, and it was all things except us. Even after the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers dredged a deeper bed all the way upriver in the 1930s, following the older, 19th-century ditch that threaded the shallow lakes and wet marshes of eastern Hendry County, linking the river with Lake Okeechobee — even then, the river remained itself, the old-timers say.

"When I was a very young boy, it was dredged the first time, and my mother and father would take me down there and watch it," recalls James English, who farms citrus and raises cattle on the north shore in Alva on about 800 acres, with his three younger brothers. Their great-grandfather homesteaded on that spot immediately after the Civil War.

Perhaps the most obvious measure of the River before its rebirth, and even after that for a couple of decades, are fish memories.

"We always caught saltwater fish up here in the spring of the year, snook and sand brim and there were times when sheephead were up here," English says. "I have known redfish being caught as far up as Alva. The snook they caught all the way to the Ortoona locks. During the rainy season the fish would congregate around the mouths of creeks. Wherever there was feed for them."

But then everything began to change,

slowly at first. In 1957, Jim English was only 21 years old, the product of a self-reliant, less demanding era when citrus farmers didn't irrigate, and when few lawns sprang from fertilizer injections of nitrogen and phosphorous, and when raw sewage pumped into the water had not yet overwhelmed it.

"When I was young we didn't irrigate orange groves, but now, economics being what it is, you have to irrigate," English explains.

"In those days, all the groves were on real good grove land, on rivers and creeks. They didn't produce as heavily, although they'd produce without irrigation. If we'd had to do it, groves in flatwoods wouldn't have survived."

Now, he says, "if they want to keep some open land and they want us to farm, they're going to have to let us use that water."

Then, though, air conditioning and mosquito control would become part of the human life fabric within 15 or 20 months of the Rosen brothers' arrival, easing the way for massive injections of people. The Army Corps of Engineers would straighten the River with its large-scale second dredging in the early 1960s, creating a deep channel to Lake Okeechobee unimagined 25 years earlier in the 1930s, and killing or altering many of the old River's trademark ox bows.

Later, the Franklin Locks would be built, and defined by the South Florida Water Management Board as the effective freshwater mouth of the River.

It was in 1957, on May 14 while the Rosens were slogging around the mangrove forests and wetlands across the river, that the City of Palms established its current charter. Captain Ed Hanson took the helm as dock master of the downtown Yacht Basin, which he would expand in 1972 from less than 50 slips to 246 slips — the year the Clean Water Act of the US Congress mandated a limit on some pollutants, the ones people generally knew about in those days.

President Dwight D. Eisenhower marched steadily into his second term in Washington, and one of the nation's fleet of Navy ships, the U.S.S. Caloosahatchee, refueled aircraft carriers in the Arabian sea, as tensions in the Middle East threatened a conflagration. (In prestige, this was a big step up from a dredge named the Caloosahatchee that forced its way up the New River near Fort Lauderdale in 1905, when Gov. Broward began drying out the Everglades.) ■