

# FORT MYERS FLORIDA WEEKLY®

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WEEK OF MAY 20-26, 2015

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INSIDE



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Above: WWII vet Joseph Mitchell, 89, rests outside his home in Harlem.

## DRIVING FLORIDA'S BACKROADS

PHOTOS AND STORY BY EVAN WILLIAMS • EWILLIAMS@FLORIDAWEEKLY.COM



Above: Lady Red welcomes visitors to Uncle Joe's store in Moore Haven.

At left: Writer Evan Williams' car prepares for a trip through Florida.

**F**AR FROM THE STATE'S POPULAR COASTLINES on three hot, bright days in May, I was sent on assignment to drive south central Florida's network of highways, state, county, and city roads in my green 1999 Honda Civic. Backroads were loosely defined as unfamiliar places and a state of mind, and where I traveled were often places of stark and sometimes ruined beauty or ugliness, endless skies, crumbling tourist destinations, blink-and-you'll-miss-it towns, fried whole catfish and other fine food, and unofficial, backroad histories and stories as told by people who live along the way. Here is where I went and what I found.

### SR 82 east

HEADED SOUTHEAST FROM FORT MYERS ON STATE Route 82, loosely grouped homes, some of them

SEE BACKROADS, A8 ▶



## Newspaper clippings chronicle Southwest Florida's fight during World War II

BY GLENN MILLER  
Florida Weekly Correspondent

Now, for the most part, they're reduced to numbers, just statistics on charts and lists, part of massive compilations of the dead.

World War II ended 70 years ago and 416,800 Americans died in combat. Of

those, 3,086 were Floridians, according to the Museum of Florida History website.

The National Archives tell us that of those Floridians who died in combat, 43 came from Lee County. They were 43 young men who died far away from the beaches of Southwest Florida, far away from their classrooms at Fort Myers or Alva high schools, far, far away from the

embraces of parents and sweethearts.

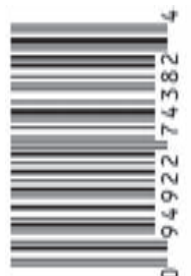
They had names and stories. They were more than numbers. Their stories have been preserved in two thick, three-ring binders bursting with newspaper clippings at the Southwest Florida Historical Society, where *Florida Weekly* found their

SEE MEMORIAL, A6 ▶

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THE AREA'S MOST WATCHED  
**LOCAL NEWS 2**



# BACKROADS

From page 1

unfinished concrete frames, slash pines and saw palmettos, electric lines strung across crooked wooden crosses, watery mirages pooling on the road in the open sun, the remains of a flattened animal, a roadside memorial, flashed by; Lee became Collier County and rows of citrus trees appeared and then a driveway where a man was coming out to check the mail.

## SR 29: Felda

TURNING ON TO STATE ROUTE 29 NORTH, the sun went behind a cloud and I passed a field of palm trees with their trunks scorched black from a fire.

Felda is a one-stoplight town just over the Hendry County line. A Shell station is across from a billboard where a huge Bud Light bottle glistens. On another corner, an old blue aluminum building

that used to house a grocery store and diner is closed down, the parking lot filled with weeds, the unofficial Felda Museum of Rusted-Out Cooking Equipment in the grass, love bugs drifting over it. Just up 29 off Church Road, I wandered a peaceful cemetery at Mount Zion Primitive Baptist Church (established 1925).



A LITTLE FURTHER UP 29, A BILLBOARD announced swamp buggy rides and "4,000 acres of pristine Florida wildlife." Down a long driveway is a small house with "Roberts Farms" printed on the front door. An older, sun-weathered man with long, dark hair and tired eyes appeared on the porch smoking a cigarette.

He did not want his name printed, but explained the sad, compelling history of the property as he sees it: 4,000 acres is what's left of a once thriving cattle operation with more than 100,000 acres, he said.

Black wasps floated harmlessly over the porch as we talked.

The swamp buggy business, his son's, stalled and for now is not in operation. Inheritance taxes on the land may force him to sell the remaining 4,000 acres. He produced a framed 1987 newspaper article about it and the area's other major cattle operations.

His great-grandfather was Robert Roberts, he said, one of the first Collier County commissioners. His great-grandmother used to make him PB&J sandwiches with a glass of milk and tell him stories on the front porch of a house in Immokalee, like the time her husband shot a dark shape out of a pine tree with a shotgun. When he rolled the dead animal over, "He said, 'damn honey, that thing looks like folks.'" The old Mr. Roberts had shot someone's escaped monkey.

He is satisfyingly profane and irreverent about historical figures from Barack Obama to Thomas Edison, wielding the f-word with aplomb: "My grandfather

remembers seeing (beep) Henry Ford waiting for (beep) Thomas Edison at the (toot toot) train station so he could give him a ride in a (beep beep) Model A," he said.

## GR 832: State Forest detour

UP SR-29, HENDRY COUNTY ROAD 832 runs east through the Okaloacoochee Slough State Forest, a 15,400-acre marsh, slash pine forest, and a north-south bridge for water flow between Lake Okeechobee and the Everglades. In the pines I spot two deer, one a fawn, skittish and alert. Some of the recreational dirt and gravel roads in the park are drivable, although may soon be flooded out by the summer rains, a ranger said. Down one there is an alligator pond and campsite. Another, Old Mill Road, rolled on for about four miles. A sparkling sunlit afternoon shower fell over the forest along the empty road, not disturbing an ugly black vulture standing on the side and dead ended at a citrus field. I turned back. A baby alligator with yel-

# THE BACKROADS OF FLORIDA

## THE DRIVE

1. The Caloosahatchee River at LaBelle Nature Park.
2. A tortoise blocks the southbound lane of County Route 17 (Detjen's Dairy Road) just south of Venus.
3. A train parked in the sugar cane fields as seen from County Road 720 between Clewiston and Moore Haven.
4. The Clewiston Inn off U.S. 27 (East Sugarland Highway) is a national historic landmark.
5. Joseph Mitchell is happy with his life in Harlem, a community off Lewis Boulevard just south of Clewiston, and that's no joke, as he likes to say.
6. Sandhill cranes cross a driveway to the house at Roberts Farms in Felda off State Road 29.
7. A dog stares from a mural on the side of broken down carwash just south of LaBelle at Azteca Super Centro 2000.
8. A woman and a man fish off a pier in Lake Okeechobee at the city of Pahokee Campground & Marina off North Lake Avenue.
9. Brenda's Place in Clewiston has good beer and vibes and an eclectic jukebox.
10. Whole fried catfish at Dixie Fried Chicken off East Sugarland Highway in Clewiston.
11. Anita Griffin runs Dixie Fried with her grandson Coby Griffin and his girlfriend Chelsea Vanskiver.

1.

2.

3.

4.

low stripes slipped into a canal. Yellow and purple flowers floated above a field. I turned off the car and watched a cloud grow, listened to the wind.

**LaBelle**

JUST SOUTH OF LABELLE ON 29, I WAS starving and stopped for gas and food at Azteca Super Centro 2000. A yellow dog stared at me next to a mural of Native Americans painted on what used to be a drive-thru car wash. At the deli, I devoured an enormously satisfying meal of homemade fried chicken, beans with huge chunks of pork, roasted jalapeños peppers and corn tortillas (cheap). There is also a wide selection of Rhino boots and I bought a pair that felt soft like moccasins (\$30).

I drove on to downtown LaBelle to see the blonde brick Hendry County Courthouse (National Register of Historic Places) and admire the huge old oaks dripping with Spanish moss. I drove over to a park near the end of Frasier Street and walked off the meal, down to

the bank of the Caloosahatchee River, then next door to LaBelle founder Capt. Francis A. Hendry's House (National Register of Historic Places), a politician who fought for the Confederate Army in the Civil War and raised cattle.

**Venus**

TWO-LANE SR 29 TOOK ME NORTHEAST TO U.S. Highway 27 north over Fisheating Creek, before getting off on Detjen's Dairy Road curving northwest to Venus, leaving Glades for Highlands County. The center of town is simply a four-way stop, where a man on a riding lawnmower was kicking up luminescent clouds of dust into the tops of tall oaks, the sun low in the sky shooting rays through their gnarled limbs. At the stop sign, I took State Route 731 west to Old State Route 8 headed north.

**Old SR-8: Lake Placid**

NORTH ON OLD STATE ROUTE 8 (COUNTY Road 17): a retro "Beef, It's What's for Dinner" billboard. There are series of hills on

this curvy backroad to Lake Placid where I've heard kids used to drive to "catch air." It crosses State Road 70, opening into a scenic view of the lake and citrus groves.

Utting up over U.S. 27 near downtown is the old and phallic Lake Placid Tower, also known as Happiness Tower. It was, well, erected, in 1961. More than 270-feet tall (27 stories), the concrete monument was envisioned as a tourism magnet where for \$3 folks could ride up the elevator and gaze upon the countryside. It appeared long abandoned, in a half empty strip mall with a defunct restaurant at its base. And yet red lights still blinked from up on the tower and an open door led into the restaurant where the evening light haunted the busted windows and dusty booths where people once ate, and the elevator, covered in crude graffiti ("Hell is here," someone wrote) sat dormant. Next to it, the door to the stairwell was open and lit. Eight flights of echoing metal stairs wound up through the tower ending at an open air observation deck: the blaze of the setting

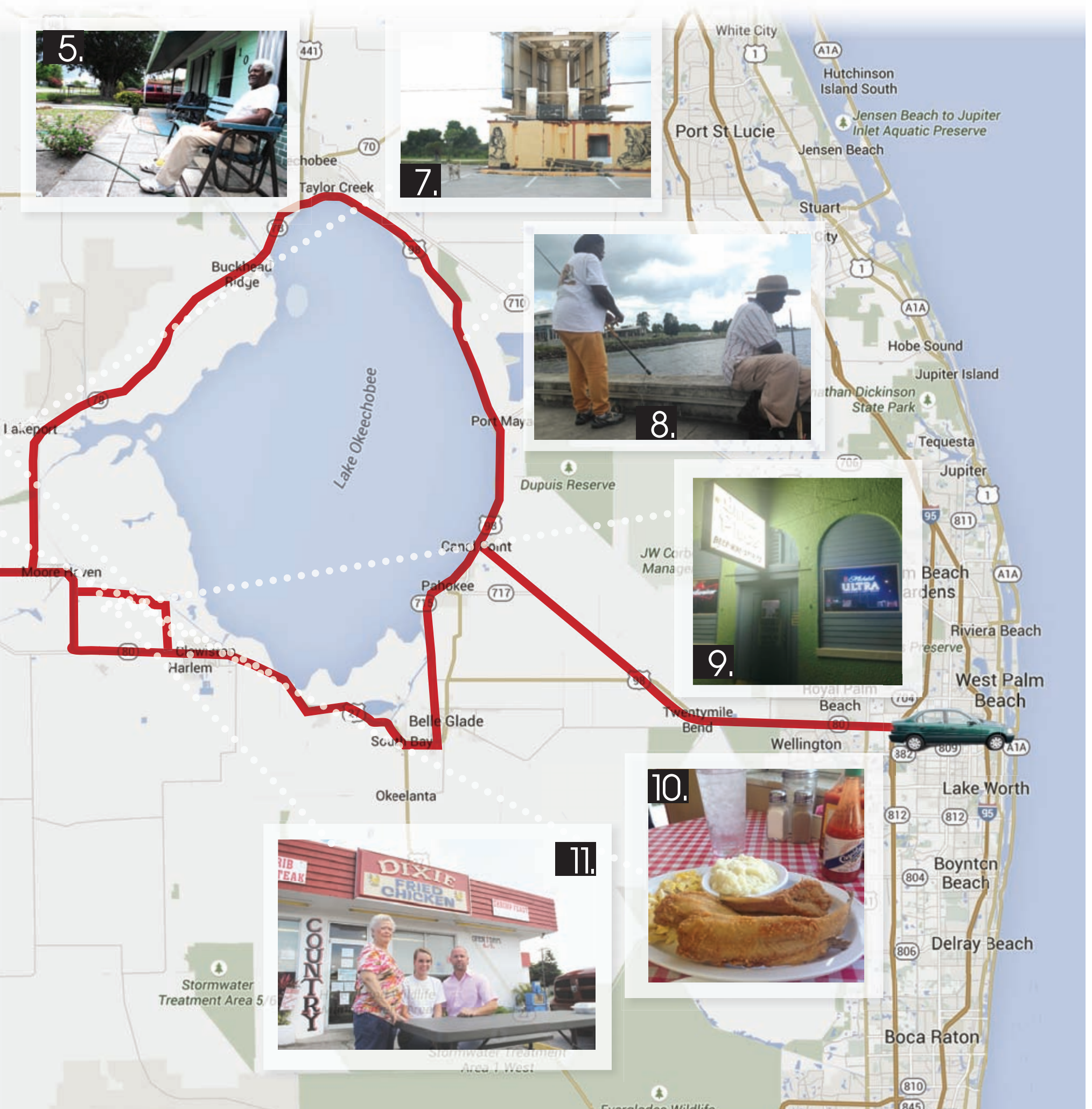
sun dropping over cars crawling along U.S. 27, a Publix, fields and lakes beyond. Efforts to restore the tower to fire code are long stalled and it is currently owned by CHL Tower Group, according to the Highland County property appraiser, which operates it as a cell phone tower.

Driving through downtown at night, everything was closed. A return trip is warranted to see the collection of circus art and clown memorabilia at Toby's American Clown Museum & School, which is open noon to 4 p.m. in the summer. According to tobysclownfoundation.org, more than 2,500 clowns have graduated from the school.

**SR 27: Clewiston**

IN HENDRY COUNTY IN THE EARLY AFTERNOON, blinding rain lasted for minutes on U.S. 27. I sped toward Clewiston, nicknamed "the sweetest town on earth" because it's home to U.S. Sugar Corp. Just before town, a right on Lewis Boulevard

SEE BACKROADS, A10 ►



PHOTOS BY EVAN WILLIAMS / FLORIDA WEEKLY; ILLUSTRATION BY ERIC RADDATZ / FLORIDA WEEKLY; MAPS BY GOOGLE MAPS

# BACKROADS

From page 9

takes you to Harlem. There is a large graveyard at the entrance to the community and cane fields were visible beyond rows of houses under No. 2 pencil-gray skies. Outside one house sat 89-year-old Joseph Mitchell, a World War II veteran born and raised in Greenville, Ala., swatting at gnats with a hand towel.

He talked slowly, stories winding along the backroads of his memory until he punctuated many of them with, “that’s no joke.”

“I don’t think about dying: I know, the Bible says sure as you’re born you must die. It’s no joke,” he will say.

Or, “God didn’t just bless the black man, he blessed the white man and all the other colors. That ain’t no joke.”

There is no bitterness in his stories even though many of them describe racism. His father, a Cherokee Indian, was sentenced to 10 years in prison for shooting and killing a white man, even though the jury ruled him innocent because it was in self defense, he recalled. Some of his stories include white men calling him “nigger” derisively. Asked if it still happens, he mentions a conversation he had many years ago with his doctor.

“He said, ‘well, nigger is nothin’ but a name. You don’t have to be black to be a nigger. You don’t have to be a human to be a nigger.’

“I don’t care about people callin’ me nigger,” he said.

Mr. Mitchell has four children, all in their 60s and living in Florida. His wife passed away in 2003. He is content to live alone: saved money all his life, worked as a tractor-trailer driver delivering loads of cane, paid off his house, cares for himself, tends to his yard.



OFF 27 (EAST SUGARLAND HIGHWAY) IN Clewiston, Dixie Fried Chicken cooks up a wealth of southern-fried goodness. Local frog legs are enticing, but best of all are the whole fried catfish fresh from Lake Okeechobee, their mild flavor improved by a generous dousing of Crystal hot sauce. An order of catfish and eggs with buttery grits (\$9.99) and piping hot fried green tomatoes (\$6.49) is best topped off with a slice of coconut cream pie (\$4) and a nap.

Anita Griffin runs Dixie with her grandson, Coby Griffin and his girlfriend, Chelsea Vanskiver. She’s an Elvis Presley fan and the walls are covered with memorabilia. She saw him perform in concert twice, young in Miami in the 1950s “when he got his first pink Cadillac” and middle aged in Los Vegas in the 1970s.

Raised in Nashville, Ga., where her parents were farmers, she ran a grocery store when Coke was a nickel, and later worked for a chain diner in Miami, before moving to Clewiston where her sister lived and purchasing Dixie Chicken in 1994. Although in the years to come her sister, as well as her only son, passed away, and her house burned down, she persisted as independent as ever — single since 1959 and “enjoyed every minute of it.” At 79, she works every day from about 8 a.m. until 10 p.m., except for July 4, Thanksgiving and Christmas.



DOWN THE STREET, I STOPPED IN THE BAR of the Clewiston Inn (National Register of Historic Places) and had a Budweiser (\$3) with Gregory Roberson. Originally built for sugar executives, the Inn resembles a plantation house, and the bar, tended by a young woman with long black hair, looks nearly identical to a picture of it in the 1950s.

Mr. Roberson, who is 51, was in town with a company that is cleaning a boiler



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**Sharon Colvin and her husband Bobby run a 5-acre farm in Pahokee off Bacom Point Road that produces 18 varieties of mango plus other tropical fruits and vegetables.**

**Chickens at the Colvin farm are driven into a feeding frenzy by papaya fruit.**

Scrambled eggs and corned beef hash, toast, hashbrowns and coffee came to less than \$6 (cash only) at The Moore Haven Restaurant, a squat whitewashed cement structure guarded by a tiny, angry Chihuahua, populated mostly by the elderly, and open only for breakfast in the summer.

On the way out of town, I browsed Mi Casa Thrift Store where Martin Gurza was sweeping the floor. He lives in Miami and commutes here three days a week. His impact glass installation business has afforded him the opportunity to run the thrift store as more of a hobby, he said, as long as it doesn’t lose money. Mi Casa is open Wednesdays and Saturdays 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. and Sunday noon to 3 p.m. There is an extensive used furniture collection and I snagged a paperback copy of “The Picture of Dorian Grey” by Oscar Wilde (75 cents).

Driving through the streets of Moore Haven, there were a lot of empty, abandoned buildings, like those in many towns along this route, that offer a certain kind of fascination; “ruins porn” is a term that grew out of the recession and applies here, each one a testament to a past when the lights were on and the rooms inhabited by people.

## SR 80: Belle Glade

A FEW MILES OUTSIDE CLEWISTON ON U.S. 27, Old U.S. 27 parallels it for a bumpy one-lane trip by cornfields and cane fields and into Palm Beach County. It becomes paved with two divided lanes again as it curves down through Lake Harbor, another small community that time forgot, and connects back with new 27 as it dips down and connects with State Route 80 (Cross State Highway) by the South Bay Correctional Facility. SR 80 curves 90 degrees north into Belle Glade, where a shirtless man in a motorized wheelchair inexplicably rode along the shoulder into a 93 degree day, prisoners working by the side of the road.

On 80 at Gator Boulevard, an uncontrolled, unlit takeoff and landing strip is also called Belle Glade State Municipal Airport. A pilot named Joe Don Burton, a crop duster or “aerial applicator,” was getting ready to take off. He flies a handsome yellow Air Tractor 502, which



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**The Lake Placid Tower stands 270 feet above U.S. Highway 27. The former tourist attraction, also known as Happiness Tower, stopped offering elevator rides to the top long ago and is now used as a cell phone tower. Here’s a look from the stairwell near the top.**

at the sugar plant, one big enough that it requires eight flights of stairs to reach the top. One of his favorite backroads is Old U.S. 41 where it cuts across the Everglades.

“A backroad for me is where you normally wouldn’t go,” he said. “Where the mainstream public wouldn’t go. It’s somewhere like Clewiston where you can go and nobody’s here. It’s where half the town is closed up. It’s where it’s peaceful. The backroad today is what you make of it. It’s like a lot of the little small towns. It’s not advertised. You have to actually Google it to find out there’s a town in that area. It’s where you can go and kick your feet up and have a beer without a bunch of shit.”

## CR 720: Uncle Joe’s Fish Camp

TIME TO FIND A PLACE TO SLEEP. UNCLE Joe’s Fish Camp is off County Road 720 (narrow with no shoulder) which connects Clewiston to Moore Haven, passing from Hendry to Glades County



as it cuts in an upside down L shape through cane fields. Uncle Joe’s Camp is off 720 about four miles down Griffin Road where it dead ends at Lake Okeechobee’s levee.

Eddie Massey and his wife have run the collection of small duplex cabins and RV trailers (daily, weekly and monthly rates) for 30 years, although the original Joe started it in 1948. It used to be frequented mostly by serious fishermen and hunters, but in the last decade, with a paved path built along the dike around the lake, bicyclists and hikers have been attracted as well. A room with a stove and a refrigerator (\$65 out of season) was comfortable and clean. From up on the levee, a huge hazy setting sun looked underwater. Car headlights crawled through the fields.



I VENTURED OUT TO FIND FOOD ABOUT 9 P.M., BUT A TIKI bar in Clewiston that offers an enticing gator tail dish had already closed. Along a darkened street there was only one lit sign for Brenda’s Place. It might have been a rough, dank hole but instead a Duval Street sign from Key West over the bar, a feedback-drenched Neil Young moaning “rock and roll will never die” and good beer were welcome relief. A 16-ounce can of crisp Imperial with a lime wedge was on special (\$2) and a group of young and old danced to an eclectic jukebox. The bartender, who had a stylish beard, chuckled when asked if it was the only bar in town (that was open). It was. Next stop: Wendy’s.

## CR 720: Moore Haven

AT 6 A.M. AT UNCLE JOE’S STORE, COFFEE was brewing and a sweet, gentle Doberman pinscher sat by the front door. Lady Red is the camp dog after her owner died here three years ago, cracking his head in a bicycle accident, Mr. Massey said.

On 720 into Moore Haven, the cane fields were filled with darting red-winged blackbirds feeding in the already humid morning.

costs about \$900,000, holds 500 gallons of gas, and has a turbine engine. It may be loaded with insecticide, herbicide, nutrients or whatever an entomologist determines is needed for a given crop. He treats sugar cane most of all, and sweet corn.

Mr. Burton has been flying for 34 years, part of that time on corporate jets. In the late afternoon he starts the propeller, climbs aboard, and roars off in the opposite direction of storm clouds.

**SR 715: Pahokee**

I TAKE STATE ROAD 715 (NW 16TH STREET) north to Pahokee on Lake Okeechobee. Off 715 (Bacom Point Road), Bobby and Sharon Colvin live on a five-acre farm. A roadside sign advertises mangos, papaya, and other fruits and vegetables they grow.

The Colvins regularly attend Pahokee city council meetings, and are in favor of a plan by a developer to pour millions into renovating the city marina and park off North Lake Avenue that they say local officials have waffled on and now may not happen.

“It could turn this town around,” said Ms. Colvin, who will be 69 in August.

Mr. Colvin tends the trees, his only employees being a flock of free-range chickens that help keep the groves clean eating bug and weeds. Ms. Colvin does the sales. He’d be willing to sell the whole place for \$800,000, but isn’t counting on that. “Realistically, I suspect we’ll be here ‘till Jesus comes and I don’t think that’ll be too long,” said Mr. Colvin, who is 69. “We’re both planning to go up in the rapture when it happens, and prepare other people for it.”

They also hold a Bible study group every Wednesday morning, the topic being



EVAN WILLIAMS / FLORIDA WEEKLY

Crop duster Joe Don Burton gets ready for takeoff at Belle Glade State Municipal Airport.



Now and then. Including J. Clinton Shephard’s iconic mural, not much has changed at the Clewiston Inn’s bar room today compared to a photo of it from the 1950s that you can see hanging outside the door in the hallway.

“Bible prophecy and end-time events.” Mr. Colvin gives me a papaya for the road and also one to feed to the chickens, who are driven into a piranha-like feeding frenzy, tearing it apart in seconds.



AT THE MARINA AND PARK OFF NORTH LAKE AVENUE, Pahokee Moe’s Tiki Bar and

Sunset Grill has a wall of windows filled with a view of the lake, a giant wildlife mural, and an excellent Mahi Mahi Ruben (\$10.95) on buttery toasted rye with a salad. The waitress preferred not to have her name in print, but said she told her unofficial, backroads history instead. She is from Alaska, part Aleutian Indian and part Eskimo and yes, she knows how

to build an igloo. At 47, she’s going to school for architecture and engineering, with at least three years left to go, and is one of an extraordinary if nearly impossible 24 siblings from the same mother. When I raised my eyebrows at this, she explained about Alaska’s long, dark winters, cooped up inside with nothing to do. Her family lives on Alaska’s west coast. They drove her crazy and she didn’t know half of them, so she packed two suitcases and her service dog (she has a heart condition) and headed as far away from home as she could get in a car.

After lunch, out on the pier, only a few old boats in the marina, five people were fishing.

“It’s nothing to do, nowhere to go but fishin’ — and church,” a woman said.

**U.S. 98: Port Mayaca Locks**

U.S. ROUTE 441/98 (EAST MAIN STREET) from Pahokee Moe’s hugs the lake up through Canal Point to Port Mayaca in Martin County, where the locks is known as one of the lake’s most beautiful vantage points. Just over a bridge on the north side of the locks, you can drive up and park on top of the levee. A bright expanse of lake stretches out like an ocean.

I took 98 around the lake and home on State Route 78, making one last detour between Moore Haven and LaBelle at Ortona Cemetery, noted by a roadside sign to be where the Seminole Tribe’s Billie Bowlegs III (1862-1965) is buried. According to the Library of Congress website, he was a tribal historian of Seminole and African American descent who educated the public about the tribe. I drove along the cemetery paths searching for his grave until it started to grow dark, unable to find it, and then home. ■

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**UPCOMING EVENTS**

**FRIDAY NIGHT CONCERT SERIES**

From 7 to 9 p.m. in the Restaurant Piazza

Friday, May 22: *Electric Lipstick*

Friday, May 29: *The Ex-Bachelors*

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Saturday, May 30

10 a.m. to 12 p.m. in **MUNDOFOX playland**

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