

# PATRICK SMITH'S DISCOVERY OF AN UNFORGETTABLE FLORIDA

BY BARBARA O'REILLEY

THE HERD OF CATTLE was grazing in lush marshland when a dense black cloud of mosquitoes descended. The cows panicked, bucking and kicking, but the mosquitoes swarmed over them. One by one, the cows hit the ground, mosquitoes covering them, clogging their noses and mouths, suffocating them. Tobias, Zech, Emma and their ragtag extended family ran for their lives—some on horseback, some on foot.

This horrible culling of their herd was just one of many setbacks faced by the tenacious McIvey family, the fictional Cracker pioneers who carved out hardscrabble lives on the Florida frontier, starting in the mid-1800s. They fought off bears, saw Rebel deserters torch the home they built, faced down murderous rustlers, dodged hurricanes and venomous snakes, and did whatever else it took to survive a wilderness like no other.

Their story is chronicled in Patrick Smith's beloved novel, *A Land Remembered*, which over the past three decades has introduced many Floridians to the real pre-Disney history of their state. Published in 1984, it is the best known of the seven novels and numerous short stories and nonfiction books that Smith has penned over a half-century. In recognition of the lasting impact his work has had on Florida, Smith, now 84, has been named recipient of the 2012 Florida Lifetime Achievement Award for Writing.

Smith himself is still amazed at the public's response to *A Land Remembered*. "It beats anything I ever saw," he said in his thick southern drawl during a recent interview. Smith and his wife Iris still live in their modest Merritt Island home of 45 years.

Readers have sent him thousands of letters over the years, some exclaiming that the book tells the story of their own families. Parents have named their children after the story's characters. Folks on their deathbeds have requested the book be read to them. Many Florida schools require students to read it. Some gated communities hand it out to newcomers as an introduction to the state.

How did Smith, who's originally from Mississippi, write a Florida story that has struck such a chord with Floridians? That's a story in itself.

When he first set eyes on Florida, Smith was an 8-year-old boy gazing out the backseat window of an old Ford. It

Photos courtesy of Rick Smith



Patrick Smith with his wife Iris, daughter Jane, and son Rick, in about 1955. Smith was recovering from a fall that shattered his right elbow.



Smith sold cars and appliances, the only work he could find at the time in his hometown of Mendenhall, Miss. He owned a Studebaker and Kaiser-Frazier dealership from 1947 to 1956, sometimes letting customers pay with cows and shotguns.

was 1935, and his folks had saved up \$100 (a lot of money during the Depression) for a three-week family vacation. They left their small town in southern Mississippi and drove the full length and breadth of Florida—down the Gulf Coast, over the Tamiami Trail, up the Atlantic Coast, and then back home.

They saw miles and miles of uninhabited beaches with sand as white as powdered sugar; tiny fishing villages; gumbo limbo trees, strangler figs, and wild orchids; panthers, alligators, and flocks of birds so thick they actually blocked out the sun; and prairies, swamps, and endless waves of sawgrass stretching to the horizon. “It was like leaving this earth and going to another planet,” Smith has said in reminiscing about the experience.

After that, he became fascinated with this “really really different, beautiful” place, reading books about it after returning to Mississippi. His connection to Florida only grew over time. In 1948 he married Iris, who came from a pioneer Florida family in DeLand—and they brought their kids to the state every summer for long visits.

When Smith earned a master’s degree in literature at the University of Mississippi, he wrote his thesis about Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, author of such Florida classics as *The Yearling* and *Cross Creek*, which describe the lives of backwoods people in central Florida. “Her books were so down-to-earth and realistic about people you could understand,” he said.

Finally, in 1966, Smith landed a job as public relations director at Brevard Community College in Cocoa, and he and his family moved permanently to Florida. He had always been what he calls a “moonlight writer,” working on novels during evenings and weekends while keeping his day job. He’d written two books that way in Mississippi. After he officially became a Floridian, he set out to write a Florida book.

At the time, Florida’s post-World War II population boom was in full swing. A thousand new residents were moving into the state *per day*. Developers were building more and more highways, housing tracts, and strip malls. Pavement and people were replacing the wild, other-worldly landscape that Smith remembered.

The dramatic contrast between the Florida he fell in love with as a child and the rapidly developing Florida he moved to as an adult would become a driving force in his writing. The stories he went on to research and write focused on the exotic land and hardy people of old Florida, and dramatized the tension between preserving the natural environment and bulldozing it.

He wanted his first Florida novel to be a story about an old Seminole Indian being pushed off his ancestral land in the swamp to make way for a housing development. Before he could write it, however, he had to overcome a problem: “I knew absolutely nothing about the Seminole culture,” he said.

The solution, he decided, was to drive down to Big Cypress Reservation, introduce himself to some Seminoles, and ask them about their lives. It would be six months before he worked up the nerve to actually do this, he said. Then, for several frustrating months he drove every weekend to the reservation and tried to meet people and start conversations. The Indians were always polite, “but nobody would talk to me,” he said. Finally, he decided to give up—joking ruefully to himself that maybe he should write a “who-done-it” or even a romance novel.

But first he figured he’d give it one more try—this time driving to the Hollywood Reservation and paying admission to a small wildlife park run by Seminoles to bring in tourist dollars. It was a hot summer day, so Smith stopped at a concession stand to buy a cold drink. As he stood in line he noticed “a very fierce-looking young Seminole man” standing next to him.

Smith describes the encounter this way: “I looked at him and he looked at me, and one of those magical things happened that might happen to a person only once in a lifetime. Without saying a single word, we formed a bond of friendship.”

Smith introduced himself and said that he wanted to write a book about Seminoles but that no one would talk to him. “What do you want to know?” the young man asked.

*Angel City*, Smith’s second Florida novel, depicts the struggle of migrant workers. He stands at the gate to the labor camp, used in 1980 as the set for a CBS Movie of the Week based on the book. This led to legislation giving workers more rights and better living conditions.



“Everything,” Smith responded. “I want to know about your religion, your superstitions, your fears, your legends, how you actually live on a day-by-day basis. But more than anything I want to know the Indian outlook on what is happening to nature today.”

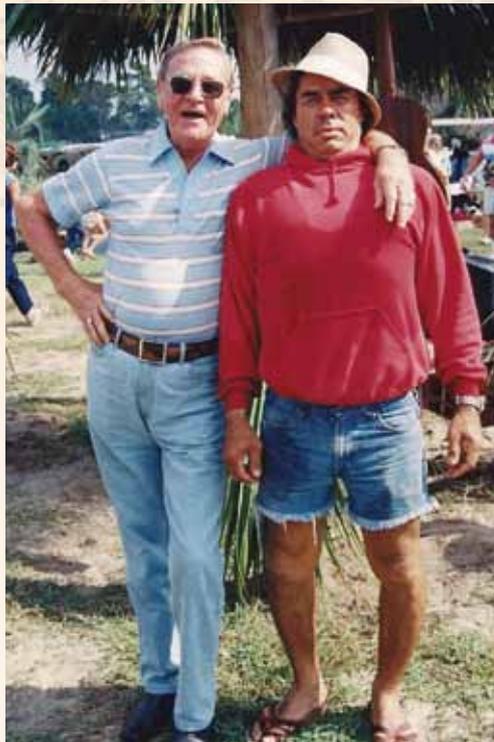
“I’ll tell you everything you want to know,” the young Indian responded. The two men then sat under a nearby cabbage palm tree and began talking. Their meetings continued on a regular basis over a two-month period. The young man also took Smith on an airboat ride, giving him a first-hand look at Big Cypress and the Everglades, and introduced him to Betty Mae Jumper, then the Seminole chief and a lifelong tribal storyteller.

Smith said the knowledge he gained from these tutorials not only enabled him to write his first Florida novel, *Forever Island*, but also spilled over to his other Florida books, especially *A Land Remembered* and *Allapattah*, a story about a Seminole man in despair about the encroachment of development on the Everglades and the loss of a way of life.

Smith’s Seminole tutor was none other than James Billie, who went on to become the chief who brought big-time gaming and prosperity to the Tribe. At the time Smith met him, in the late 1960s, Billie had just returned from serving two tours in the Vietnam War, most of it as an Army Ranger. The two men kept in touch for many years afterwards, especially through events that Smith organized at Brevard Community College to feature Seminole culture.

In 1982, Smith decided to write about the Cracker pioneers who settled the wild Florida frontier. He was intrigued by the tales his wife’s family recounted about their ancestors, and he’d heard other stories while doing his Seminole research. The books by Rawlings inspired him, too. But instead of writing about one year in the life of backwoods people, as she did in *The Yearling*, Smith set out to cover 100 years of Florida history, told through the lives of three generations of a Cracker family.

He read numerous histories about Florida, but none told the human story that he wanted to tell about why people came and how they survived. So, Smith became a modern-day anthropologist, seeking out and interviewing scores of old-Florida families



Smith and James Billie, chairman of the Seminole Tribe of Florida, in about 1986, at a Seminole festival on the grounds of Brevard Community College. Billie was Smith’s mentor for his first Florida novel, *Forever Island*, which was published internationally. The book became particularly popular in Russia, and Smith was flown twice to that country to speak to hundreds of fans.

about the lives of their ancestors. Some still lived in Cracker cabins in the woods. He sat with them on their front porches, drank their strong coffee, and listened to their stories, often staying for a meal.

The resulting book, *A Land Remembered*, is a saga that traces the evolution of Florida from its frontier days to modern times through a family that is a composite of the many Smith met during his field research. The McIveys started penniless, subsisted off the land, and began capturing and branding wild cattle that had proliferated in the scrub over the 200 years since Spanish colonists brought them to Florida. Succeeding generations built up herds that they drove across a state with no fences, raised citrus, accumulated land and, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, began selling land for development. The last of the McIveys regretted this and mourned for the old Florida days.

Smith said he “never dreamed” that this novel would become so popular and expressed “a few theories” as to why: “People new to Florida are fascinated by what it used to be. They had no idea this state was like that portrayed in the novel. For some people, it is the way [pioneers] used to live, the family values and things

like that. There’s so much action that young kids like it.” Then he added, “I don’t know. It just kind of pushed a button.”

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BARBARA O’REILLEY, editor of FORUM, wrote this article using information from many sources, including a recent interview with Smith, a Q-A in the Winter 2006 FORUM, and the documentary “Patrick Smith’s Sense of Place.”

Iris and Patrick Smith in 2002.





Photo: Florida State Archives  
John Wiley Hill family in front of their log house in 1800s Florida.

EXCERPT FROM:

## A LAND REMEMBERED

BY PATRICK SMITH

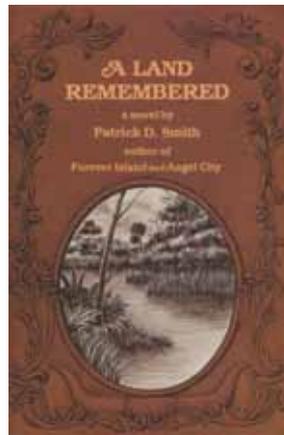
**T**HE MARSH DISSIPATED rapidly, and then they came to the edge of the place they were seeking, the great cypress swamp.

At first the land was peppered with small dwarf cypress and pond cypress; then suddenly there loomed before them the mighty virgin bald cypress trees themselves, reaching up to a hundred and fifty feet into the air, some with bases seventy feet in circumference.

Cypress knees sprang up all around the base of the trees, like giant mushrooms, some shaped like deformed human heads, some like birds, others like small animals, creating a wooden menagerie. Wild orchids clung to every limb, turning the somber trees into colorbursts of yellow and white and green and purple. There were also gumbo-limbo trees, lancewoods, cocoplum bushes; oaks festooned with Spanish moss; and the awesome magnolias with leaf-covered limbs reaching sixty feet outward and then downward to the ground, like a mother hen protecting her brood with a covering of wing feathers. Piercing all of it were royal palms whose bare trunks towered above some of the bald cypress, forming little umbrellas of fronds high in the sky.

At first they stopped and stared incredulously, comparing the giant bald cypress to the little matchsticks that formed cypress stands on the prairie; then they moved forward again.

The ground was dry, but they could see watermarks several inches up the cypress knees where water normally



reached. They passed easily over dry sloughs that once would have to be forded, and skirted around ponds covered solidly with lily pads and green slime. Cottonmouth moccasins scurried away beneath the surface and left trail marks, and the snouts of alligators poked upward like dead logs, their eyes open and blank as the intruders passed by.

They were also greeted by hordes of mosquitoes, not a solid mass like the cloud at the salt marsh, but a constant annoyance. Zech and Tobias both slapped and scratched, wondering how the Indians who lived here could stand it.

They could see areas on the bases of the trees where panthers scratched the bark to shreds sharpening their claws, and the horses stepped around holes rooted out by wild hogs searching for food. The deeper they penetrated the swamp, the thicker became the trees and other foliage, until finally they faced obstacles almost as formidable as the custard-apple forest.

Once again they zigzagged and backtracked, searching for open paths, having difficulty controlling the cows. Zech was doubly worried, wondering if there was no end to this alien land, and also noticing Tobias slumping forward in the saddle, sweat pouring from his face and staining his shirt. He did not believe there was even a bare possibility of finding the Indian village in such an overwhelming swamp, that to continue was foolish and useless; but Tobias would not relent and turn back.

From *A Land Remembered*, © 1984, 2011 by Patrick D. Smith

To see an annotated list of all of Smith's books, go to [FloridaHumanities.org](http://FloridaHumanities.org)