



Historian Gary Mormino, amid research materials in his home office last spring.

Photo by Lynn Waddell

Florida's dream writer

BY LYNN WADDELL

To fully grasp the depth of historian Gary Mormino's research, you have to visit his home office.

Just walk through the tidy St. Petersburg bungalow he shares with his wife of 46 years and climb a narrow stairway. You will need to dodge a few boxes on the way up—a hint of what's to come. Open the office door, and behold: The room is a silverfish's culinary dream. Almost every surface is covered in papers. His desk is buried in file folders, scribbled Post-It notes, and loose newspaper clippings (some crisp, some yellowed). Bins, books, boxes, and cascading piles are everywhere. If bookshelves could groan, his would attract an ambulance.

"To an outsider this seems like chaos," Mormino explains to

a visitor, "but I can put my hand on anything I'm looking for. I have my own organization." He demonstrates by plucking a copy of a 1945 newspaper article from a bin of material on the politics of World War II, a subject in his next book. After displaying the photocopy, he lays it back on top of the bin. "Of course the tremendous challenge is putting everything back," he says.

As his organizational style reflects, Mormino is an original. Recipient this year of the Florida Lifetime Achievement Award for Writing, he is lauded as a prolific, insightful author of books

and articles about Florida. He is a respected scholar, an emeritus history professor at the University of South Florida St. Petersburg (co-founder of its Florida Studies program), and scholar-in-residence for the Florida Humanities Council.

While he focuses on historical work, he also loves the funny, quirky stories that could be filed under "weird Florida" and probably has collected enough to fill more than a few bins. He's the guy the *New Yorker* and *New York Times* call for insight when the southernmost state once again seems to teeter on the edge of ruin.

He proudly calls himself a Luddite. He wrote all but his most recent book in longhand and shunned computers until his university forced him to adapt. He still doesn't have a cell phone

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and is famous for forgetting email attachments. To track him down, friends and colleagues call his wife’s cell. He’s known for spending hours in libraries and scrolling through microfilm of old newspapers. He’s also known for making photocopies of news articles and distributing them to friends, colleagues, and anyone else who might be interested—often accompanied by amusing anecdotes related to the topics.

“His favorite phrase is ‘by the way,’” says Ron Cooper, a humanities professor at the College of Central Florida who has known Mormino for 26 years. “As soon as he gets near the end of something, he’ll say ‘and by the way,’ and he’ll have some little anecdote usually about a Florida politician like Claude Pepper or somebody like that, some amusing

story, and [then] he’ll find his way back to the narrative thread.”

The anecdotes often show up in his writing, too, making his books and articles more colorful and publicly accessible than those written by most academics, says Raymond Arsenault, USF St. Petersburg history professor and co-founder with Mormino of the Florida Studies program. “His writing is distinctly Gary, so personal. It’s like good jazz, not Muzak,” Arsenault says. “He loves the turn of a phrase, to make allusions to Shakespeare, and make these kinds of odd connections. It all makes him a good fit for Florida.”

Like most Floridians, Mormino, 68, didn’t start out in Florida. He grew up in the Midwest—Wood River, Ill., an oil-refinery town across the Mississippi River from St. Louis. He

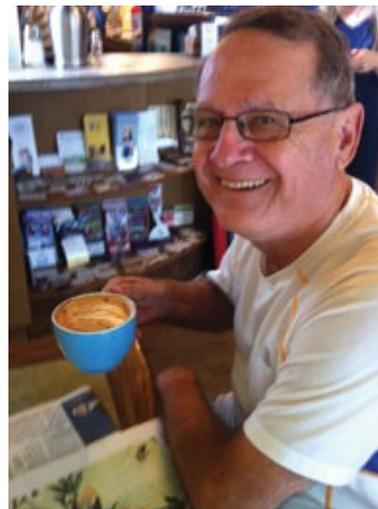


Photo courtesy of Lynne Mormino

Mormino savors a café au lait in a coffee shop during a recent trip to North Carolina.

describes this working-class town as “paradise for European immigrants.” Mormino’s father was second-generation Italian American with Sicilian roots, a union machinist with a fourth-grade education. Mormino once wrote: “His view of the world was simple. Life is hard. Get used to it. Never expect anyone to rescue you, especially your father.”

CHOOSING A MIGHTY THEME

Excerpt from Mormino’s speech last April at the Florida Book Awards luncheon, hosted in the Governor’s Mansion in Tallahassee:

In Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick*, Ishmael, contemplating the great leviathan, instructs readers: “To write a mighty book you must choose a mighty theme.” I chose wisely. My theme is Florida. I have explored the Lake Wales Ridge in search of scrub jays, walked the back alleys of Little Havana, and waded for ghost orchids in the Fakahatchee Strand.

My odyssey has also allowed me to meet some of Florida’s most memorable personalities: Loren “Totch” Brown, the Chokoloskee hunter, outlaw, and raconteur; Gov. LeRoy Collins, who richly deserved the epitaph, “Floridian of the Century”; and Wilfredo Rodríguez, the last of a fabled group of Ybor City *lectores* to read the novels of Victor Hugo and Miguel Cervantes to cigar makers...

Historians tell stories. We also provide perspective... The Sunshine State has become Everyman’s Metaphor:

To environmentalists, embattled Florida is the modern scrub jay in the phosphate mine. To political wonks and journalists, the I-4 corridor serves as a modern Rune stone. To crime novelists, Florida is the new capital of literary Noir. To Internet junkies, Florida is the North Star of weirdness. To retirees, Florida is the place of second starts and the early bird special in Pembroke Pines...

Florida is so diverse, so difficult to grasp, that journalists frequently ask: “Just where does Florida belong?” Florida remains America’s southernmost state and the northernmost province of the Caribbean. The answer depends upon your vantage point, your latitude and attitude. Key West is 90 miles from Cuba, while Tallahassee is a day’s walk from the Georgia border...

Walt Disney’s “Fantasia” offers a cautionary parable for modern Florida. Like the imperiled castle, Florida’s great conundrum challenges wizards and mortals: What is the proper balance? Is it possible for Floridians to maintain a dreamscape that drew so many of us here—the pristine springs, the unstraightened rivers, and enchanting beaches—with the challenges of sustaining 20 million residents and 100 million tourists! Real-life answers, unlike those provided by sorcerers and historians, are found in no book or spell.

To pay his way through college, Mormino toiled on a road crew for the Illinois Highway Department and then at an oil refinery where his father got him a union job. Old-timers at the refinery worked him hard. He later learned that his father had asked them to make the job grueling so that he would stay in school.

Mormino says writing didn't come easy to him; he made only average grades in writing until late in his undergraduate studies at Millikin University, when he embraced revision. "I love the rhythm of language, but I learned if I relied on the first draft I would fail." He went on to earn his Ph.D. in history from the University of North Carolina, writing his dissertation

on immigration in the St. Louis Italian community known as "the Hill."

"In a lot of ways it really shaped my career because there were not a lot of books about the place, and I was too proud to admit I had made a mistake in choosing it. So, I got a tape recorder and started interviewing people." He later used that research method in some of his work on Florida, especially his book, *The Immigrant World of Ybor City: Italians and their Latin Neighbors in Tampa, 1885–1985*.

After graduate school, he returned to Millikin and taught history with a focus on immigration. It wasn't until a friend who was teaching at the University of Florida told him about a job at USF in Tampa that he

even considered the possibility of moving to this state.

"Florida wasn't even on my radar," he says. "I just knew the St. Louis Cardinals came here for spring training." Florida also wasn't on most historians' maps, which he decided could be a plus. "I saw an opportunity to make a difference, but I never imagined where it would take me."

As a professor at USF Tampa, Mormino continued to focus on immigration history. It wasn't until he was a Fulbright scholar in Rome in 1980–81 that he found his new calling as a historian of modern Florida. "I was going through American newspapers that year, and all these things were happening in Florida—the Miami race riots, the Mariel boatlift. It looked like Florida was flying off its hinges. The greatest story of my life was happening in Florida. When I came back I started working on my next book."

Mormino became fascinated with what he termed the "Florida Dream," a mindset that he says led to the phenomenal post–World War II population boom that sparked the transformation of Florida from a sleepy southern backwater into the mega-state that it is today. Returning American GIs, who did their basic training in Florida, were captivated by this dream, "images of swaying palms, sand dunes, and the promise of a better life—or at least a better February," he says in his public talks.

His book, *Land of Sunshine, State of Dreams: A Social History of Modern Florida* chronicles the rapid development and growth of 20th-century Florida—and does so with the engaging wit and color that has become his signature style. Cooper calls this "the gold standard of Florida history books."

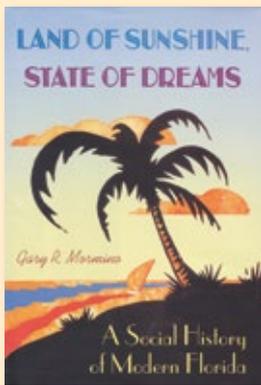
While researching the book, Mormino moved to the USF St. Petersburg campus in 2003 to help Arsenault found the Florida Studies master's degree program, which looks at the state through multiple academic

EXCERPT FROM

LAND OF SUNSHINE, STATE OF DREAMS: A SOCIAL HISTORY OF MODERN FLORIDA

BY GARY MORMINO

The decades following 1940 changed Florida more than the previous four centuries, altering boundaries, reconfiguring landscapes, and casting new relationships. The march to and across Florida was irresistible and irrepressible, as orange groves became gated communities, small towns



were transformed into cities, and big cities sprawled into metropolises and boomburbs. The reasons are ancient and modern. Dreams of better lives in exotic climes exercised a powerful hold on Americans and the world. The Florida dream reemerged more resonant and resounding than ever.

Florida's Big Bang, 1950–2000, is a story of astonishing growth, a state swelling from 2.7 to 15.9 million inhabitants...

From its founding as an imperial outpost to its modern identity as a tourist empire, Florida has evoked contrasting and compelling images

of the sacred and profane: a Fountain of Youth and a Garden of Earthly Delights, a miasmic hellhole and scuzzy wasteland. Florida's dreamscape stirred the imagination of Walt Disney and Dick Pope, Morris Lapidus and Elizabeth Bishop, Carl Hiaasen and John D. MacDonald. A powerful symbol of renewal and regeneration, Florida's dreamscape constantly shifts. Where once the land and climate were sufficiently inspiring to bewitch artists and travelers, now gated condominiums, age-restricted communities, and theme parks constitute that firmament.



Gary and wife Lynne Mormino pose last April in front of the Governor's Mansion. He received the framed image (by photographer Jon Moran) when accepting the Florida Lifetime Achievement Award for Writing.

student Cathy Salustri. "If you have even a scrap of love for the state, you catch Gary Fever when he talks."

Salustri says Mormino encouraged her and helped find funding for her master's thesis research, retracing the Florida driving tours touted in the 1930s Works Progress Administration book, *Florida: A Guide to the Southernmost State*. This led to her forthcoming book on the subject. "Most professors would have insisted on something more traditional," Salustri said, "but Gary saw the value of what I was doing and how it would add to the Florida canon."

Mormino's role in influencing other Florida writers was cited by the judges who selected him as recipient of this year's lifetime achievement award. They praised his work as a teacher of writers—as well as the influence his own writing has had on other writers.

"He's written about almost every aspect of Florida history and culture," said Cooper, who nominated

Mormino for the award. "He's written innumerable newspaper articles on all sorts of things. He writes about crazy Florida all the time. He loves to write about eccentric Florida leaders and pioneers. And his style, he's just a good writer."

Mormino is now writing a book that focuses on the Florida homefront during WWII and what precipitated the post-war population boom—a companion to *Land of Sunshine, State of Dreams*. Although he retired from USF in 2012, he still teaches one class a year, usually on the history of food in Florida. Yes, he has bins of research material and is writing a book on that subject, too.

LYNN WADDELL is a freelance journalist based in Florida and author of *Fringe Florida: Travels Among Mud Boggers, Furries, UFOlogists, Nudists, and Other Lovers of Unconventional Lifestyles*.

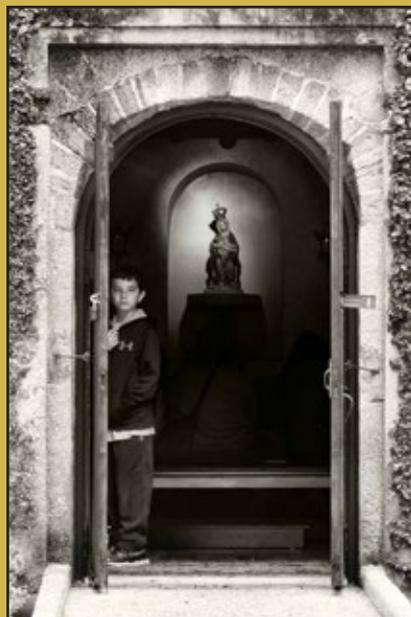
disciplines, from environmental studies to political science. Mormino says, "Sometimes I have to pinch myself to believe how successful it's been."

Author and former *Tampa Bay Times* "Real Florida" writer Jeff Klinkenberg was the program's first writer-in-residence. He calls Mormino a mentor and friend, and says the historian played a pivotal role earlier in his career. "He came into my life at kind of a low time in the '90s when I was at the *Times* and I really didn't think anybody was interested in my work. But Gary was. So, it was extremely encouraging. It gave me the courage to do what I did, and I will forever be grateful for that." Klinkenberg dedicated his 2011 book, *Pilgrims in the Land of Alligators*, to his Florida Studies professors Mormino and Arsenaault.

In the 38 years that Mormino taught at USF, he inspired many of his students to write about the state. "It's contagious the way he talks about Florida," says former Florida Studies

St. Augustine at 450

Crealde's newest documentary project celebrates the oldest city in the United States



"Boy at the Shrine of Our Lady of La Leche," Kucku Varghese

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