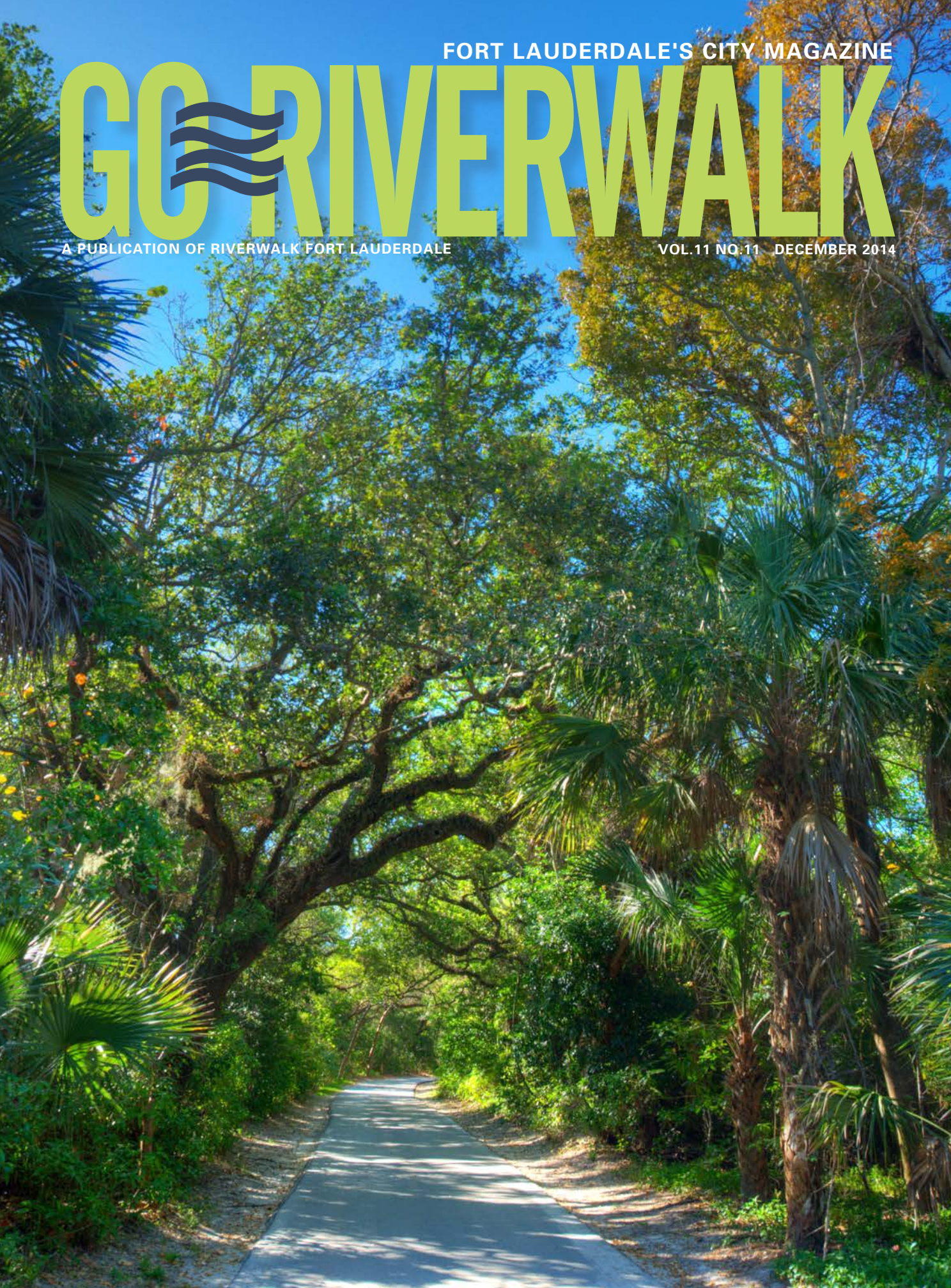


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Long Lake



A PARK AND ITS RE-CREATION

A planner for the future, Hugh Taylor Birch reserved some of his land to be dedicated to preserving Florida the way it was when he found it. About 75 years after his death, the park that bears his name remains undeveloped but also underutilized. With a new executive director at the helm, the Friends of Hugh Taylor Birch State Park are planning to enhance it - the land that Birch gave.

WRITER ALEXANDRA ROLAND



A view of the beach from Birch State Park taken between 1952 and 1955

BLACK AND WHITE PHOTOS PROVIDED BY THE FORT LAUDERDALE HISTORICAL SOCIETY / GENE HYDE COLLECTION



THEN AND NOW

A photo of Coco's Café taken between 1952 and 1955 and the existing concession stand

Gale Butler stands on the sidewalk on the west side of A1A, just north of Sunrise Boulevard. The Hugh Taylor Birch State Park signage stands behind her. There is a sense of nostalgia – at least for Butler. “Before, there was less vegetation so you could see the restaurant,” she says. She’s referring to Coco’s Café, the teenage hangout situated on the east side of the park. Butler would go sometimes on the weekends when she was in ninth grade. “I do remember just hanging out at Coco’s Café and I remember a song and a boy, you know, that sort of thing.

There used to be tables all out there so if you can picture it at night with the twinkle lights and the sea grape trees – it would just be stunning.” In October, Butler started as the executive director of the Friends of Hugh Taylor Birch State Park – a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization founded in 1999 that facilitates the preservation of the area.

She speaks as a woman with legacy. After all, she has history with the place. As a young girl she would ride horses with her sister along the sandy (now paved) main trail. Years later, she brought her young son to the park and distinctly remembers chaperoning him and his Cub Scouts troop at the primitive camp ground during the middle of what seemed like a monsoon.

We walk a few feet north to the front of Birch’s 1940 home, which has acted as a park visitors’ center in recent years. According to the State of Florida Board of Parks and Historic Memorials, the Chicago attorney, naturalist, and investor traveled to the then undeveloped portion of South Florida in the 1890s and settled near what is now the Bahia Mar Marina. As the town of Fort Lauderdale developed some years later, Birch designated a portion of his land for a four-lane highway from the beach into town and donated what is now the Galleria Mall and nearby neighborhood to his alma mater Antioch College in Ohio.

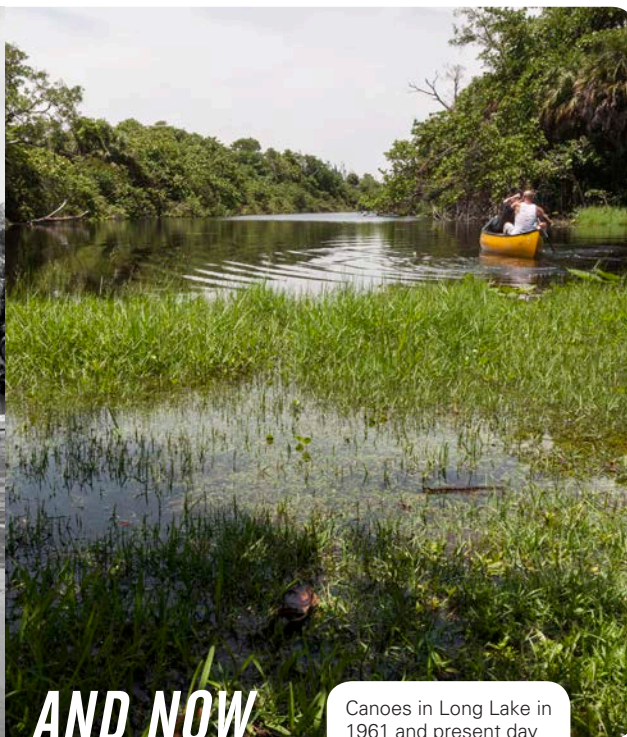
In 1942, a year before he died, he bequeathed 180 acres to the state. The land was to remain undeveloped and to be used as a park, as per Birch’s own stipulations. Birch also gave two and a half miles of what is now known as Fort Lauderdale Beach to forever remain accessible and visible to the public. “What a gift,” Butler says. “I can’t think of another town on the east coast of Florida that has that.”

The park was officially dedicated in 1954 and during the ‘50s and ‘60s became the “it” place to vacation. “Back then, Florida was exotic,” Butler says. “When you think about (this time period), which is probably when people discovered Florida because air conditioning came into



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THEN



AND NOW

PHOTO BY JASON LEIDY

Canoes in Long Lake in 1961 and present day



THEN

play, not many people travelled overseas still, so Florida was kind of this exotic place.”

It was the Central Park of Florida. Records from the summer of 1953 to June, 1954 logged more than half a million visitors. A “Fort Lauderdale News” article written in 1974 referenced 870,000 visitors in 1973.

The tropical oasis was navigable by a miniature train that picked up and dropped off visitors around the park, incorporating a stop right in front of Coco’s. The restaurant is gone now, the train tracks are in decay – the railroad shut down in 1984. It was spurred by a decline in park attendance, which occurred shortly after the “happiest place on earth,” Disney World, came to the state in 1971.

Then, perhaps the shadiest place in Fort Lauderdale became more of an afterthought, a connotation that has been carried down until recently. “It’s nothing that anyone did wrong, it just evolved this way,” Butler says.

People know about the park though – the Fort

Lauderdale A1A Marathon and Half Marathon’s course winds right through it and cars are often parked in the beach access parking lot. Picnic tables on the north side are used and there is even a Water Taxi stop where the Intracoastal butts up against the park. But its history has seemingly become...history. Nowadays, hotels ship tourists right past Birch State Park and out to the Everglades to view Florida as it was. The park often goes unnoticed and is thus underutilized. There are 45 acres of mangroves in the center of the park – Florida’s natural habitat is a lot closer than some think.

Jim Ellis, president of the Friends of Hugh Taylor Birch State Park group, thinks that community awareness is essential in cahoots with re-creating the park, highlighting practical use of the space, and developing nostalgia for the way the park used to be. “If we do that, we’ll be successful.”

There are 171 state parks in Florida. Birch State Park is one of two with an executive director, which Ellis

PHOTO BY JASON LEIDY



The main entrance gate to Hugh Taylor Birch State Park



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thinks communicates that they are serious about setting the precedent when it comes to the conservation and rehabilitation of state parks. The Florida State Parks system just announced David Dearth as Birch Park's new park manager. "David is going to be just what we needed," Ellis says. "He's energetic and progressive. There are just so many things we want to do. We needed someone who wants to come and shake it up a bit and he fits the bill."

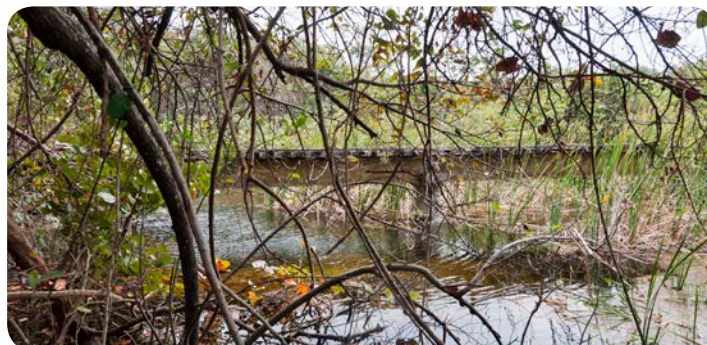
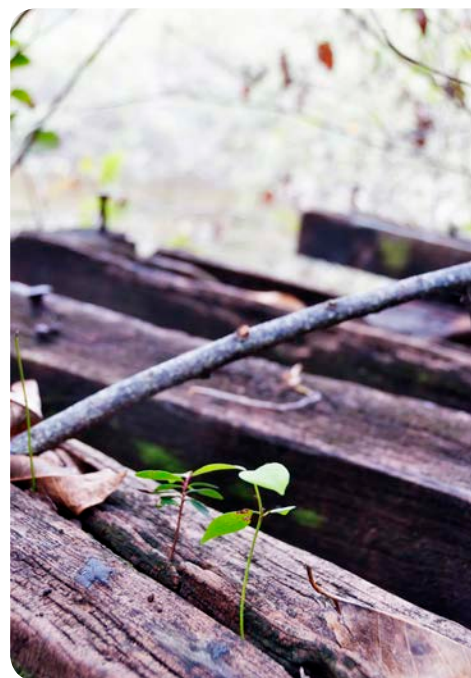
Butler takes me to the beginning of Long Lake, the

mile-long body of fresh water that runs parallel to the coast on the northeast side of the park. (It continues south and resurfaces somewhere near Bonnet House). "When I would bring my son here, you'd be able to see fish and turtles. But all this needs to come out," she says, referring to the abundant vegetation that has seemed to take over the lake.

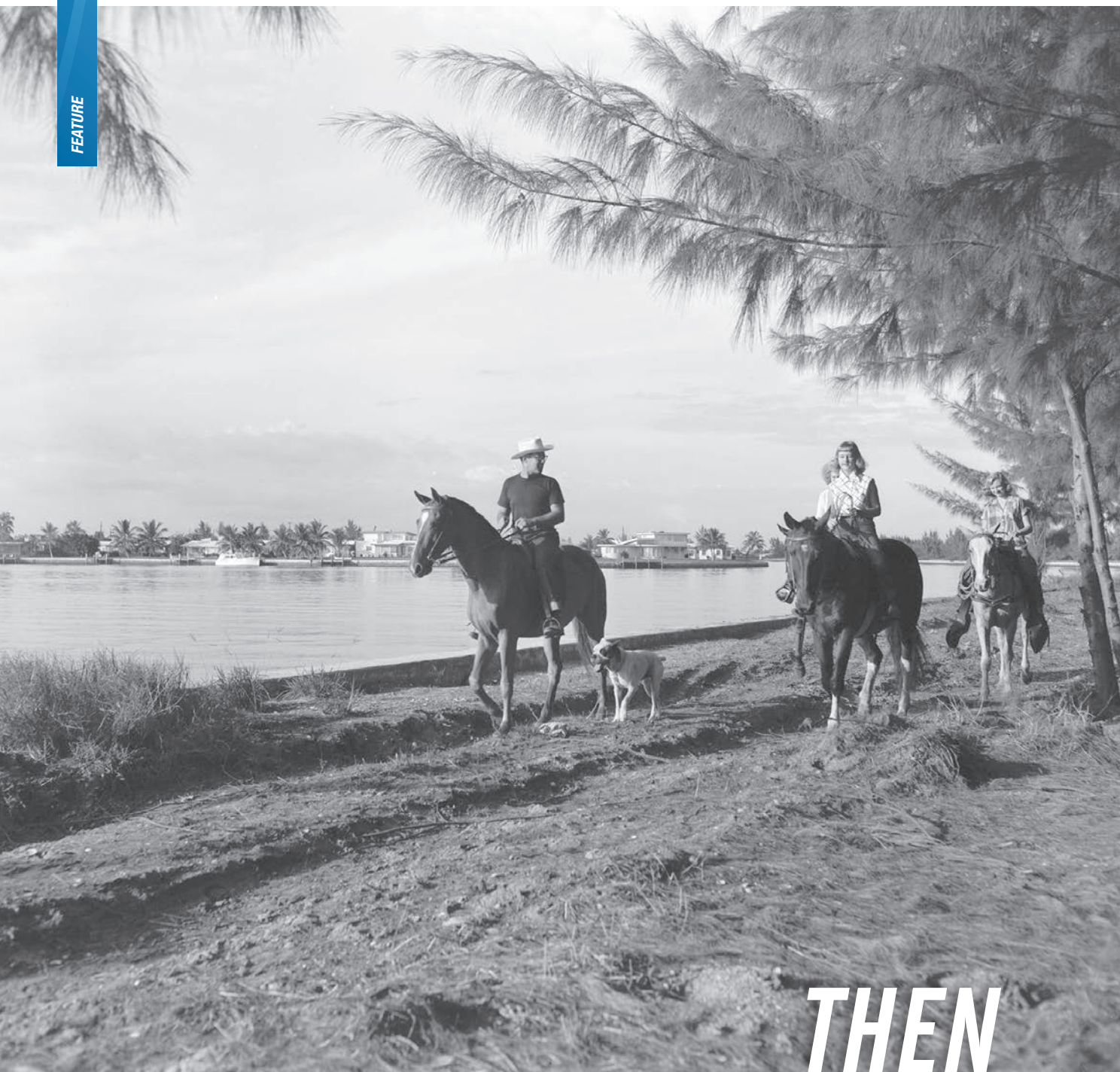
There is a launching area and a dock that both precede a channel that was previously used to load paddleboat riders



The miniature Birch State Park railroad in 1955 and the remnants of the train trestle today



PHOTOS BY JASON LEIDY



in the water. It's filled in with mangrove roots and flora but Butler anticipates that it will be cleaned out along with the rest of the lake.

Driving along the park's 1.8-mile loop, heading north, Butler says that the vegetation will stay. In some cases it creates shady canopy areas. Other spaces are open, like the pavilion where Kids In Distress hosts one of its annual events. A short distance from there, Gale says, they are planning to section off two dog parks for small and large

canines respectively.

Every year, guests line bleachers at the northern most end of the park to watch the Winterfest Boat Parade. Butler hopes to raise funds to construct an educational and entertainment stage at one end of the open space. "People can bring blankets and lawn chairs. It's like Sheep Meadow in Central Park in New York. If I could, this is where I'd put the children's fountain," a paved area with randomly timed water spouts for children to play in.

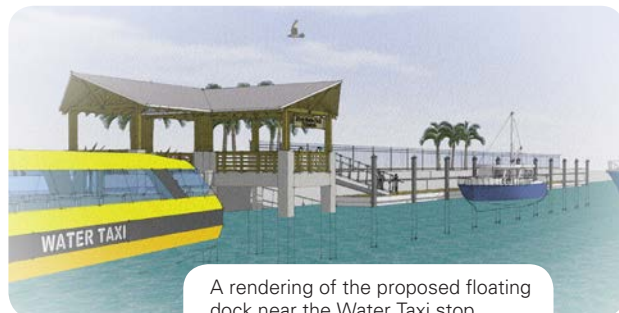


AND NOW

The park sea wall, which borders the Intracoastal, in 1955 and present day. The Friends group recently received a \$2 million dollar grant to replace the existing one.

We pass by an older playground, which Butler also hopes will be refurbished. Low lying land that potentially will be elevated to combat flooding, borders the decaying 1.2-mile sea wall that edges the Intracoastal. The park recently garnered a \$2 million dollar grant to rebuild the wall.

Many of these projects are in the design and permitting phase, but are at the mercy of adequate funding. Ellis and Butler seem optimistic though. Butler says that projects



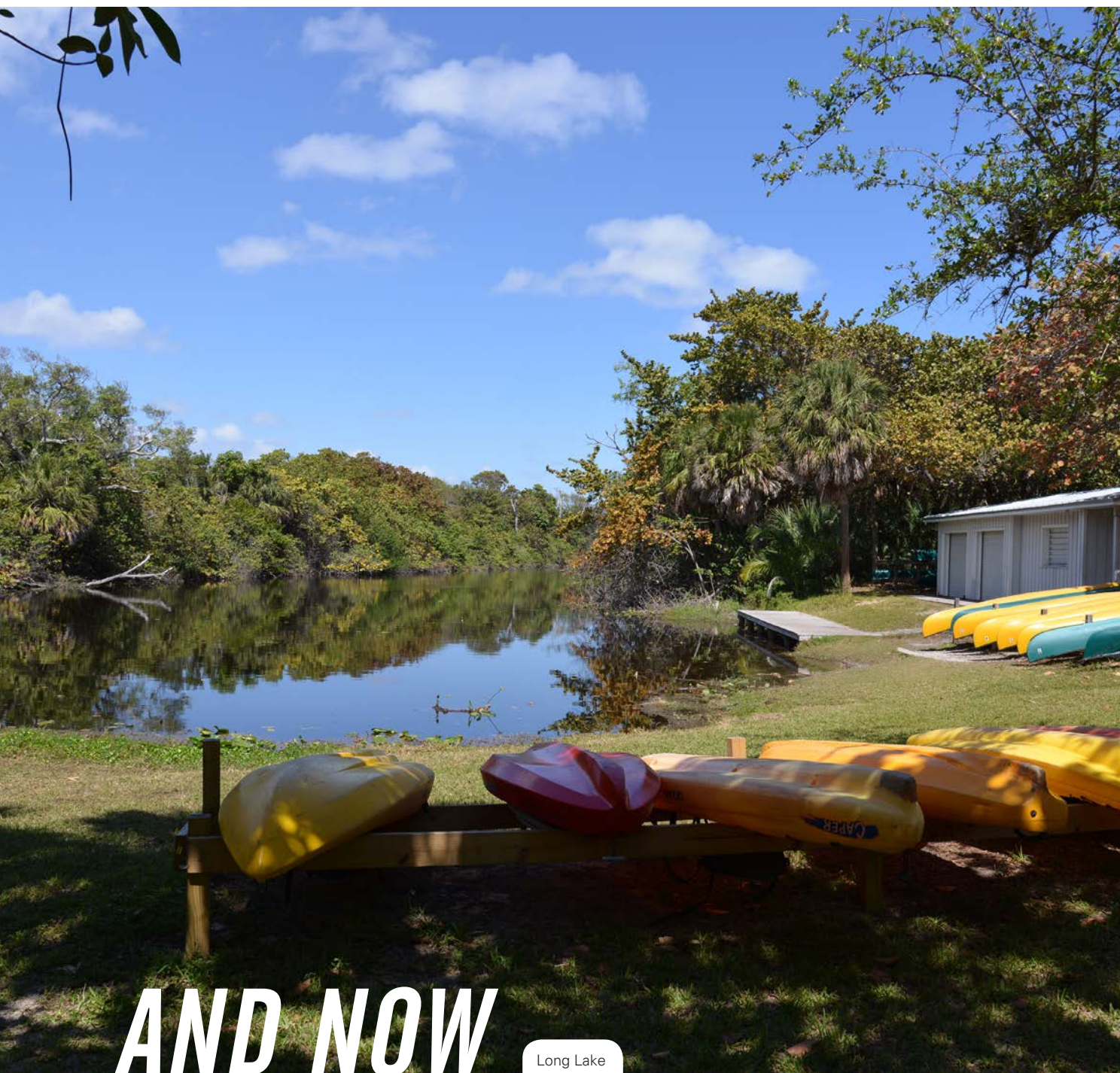
A rendering of the proposed floating dock near the Water Taxi stop.



like the sea wall and Long Lake should at least start in 2015 – they’ve applied for three different grants for the lake clean up and as soon as the first one comes in, they will begin the process. “We wrote a \$25,000 grant for the Community Foundation and then we’re getting help from (the City of Fort Lauderdale’s Department of Parks and Recreation). We’re getting a lot of in-kind help. People are donating machines to help with the dredging.”

They’re hoping a Partnership for Parks grant, wherein

the state matches 40 percent of funds raised for park initiatives, will also come into play. Other changes that they will soon implement will require substantial financial support, which they believe will be generated through a capital campaign. The \$1 million dollar 230’ floating dock on the west side of the park has already been partially funded. A total of 45 projects, including a pedestrian walkway through part of the 45 acres of mangroves, are in the works.



AND NOW


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To create a revenue source for the park, Ellis and Butler are proposing a holiday laser and LED light show to debut in 2015. The display would line the 1.8-mile loop and talks with Florida Power and Light are already underway.

A new restaurant is also in the conceptual phase. “Our hope is to bring the restaurant back – you know, at first it might be hotdogs and hamburgers during the day but the goal would be to have it open at night because you wouldn’t have to go into the park, you could park (on the street).”

The park offices on the south side of the concession building will move to the second floor of Birch’s home, slightly to the north. Plans even extend beyond the park fence. The city would like to relocate the fire station on Sunrise Boulevard closer to the Intracoastal, allowing the use of a fireboat. The Friends group is in initial discussions with Nova Southeastern University for a potential environmental education facility in the station’s current location.

Back inside the park, updates may also include assisting the Fort Lauderdale Garden Club with their quarters. Walking through their garden on the southern-most part of the park, you can't even tell that Sunrise Boulevard traffic is just behind a fence and a sidewalk. And likely, people walking along the boulevard don't know the history behind what's on the other side of the densely shaded park boundary. There are Ceiba trees, potted plants, and manifestations of nature – even those elements that are usually unwelcome. Butler spots the web of a golden silk orb weaver, which reflects a rich yellow color under direct sunlight. “They’re supposed to be really special spiders and I’m trying to think of them that way.” She finds a second web and then another and tries to take a photo with her iPhone. “Well, this is their world.”

These aspects of the park are elements of legacy for many. In a place where it seems like every leaf and spider web is respected by the onsite park rangers, Birch wouldn't need to worry. His preserve is being well kept and hopefully soon, well used again. 

BELOW PHOTO PROVIDED BY THE FORT LAUDERDALE HISTORICAL SOCIETY / GENE HYDE COLLECTION

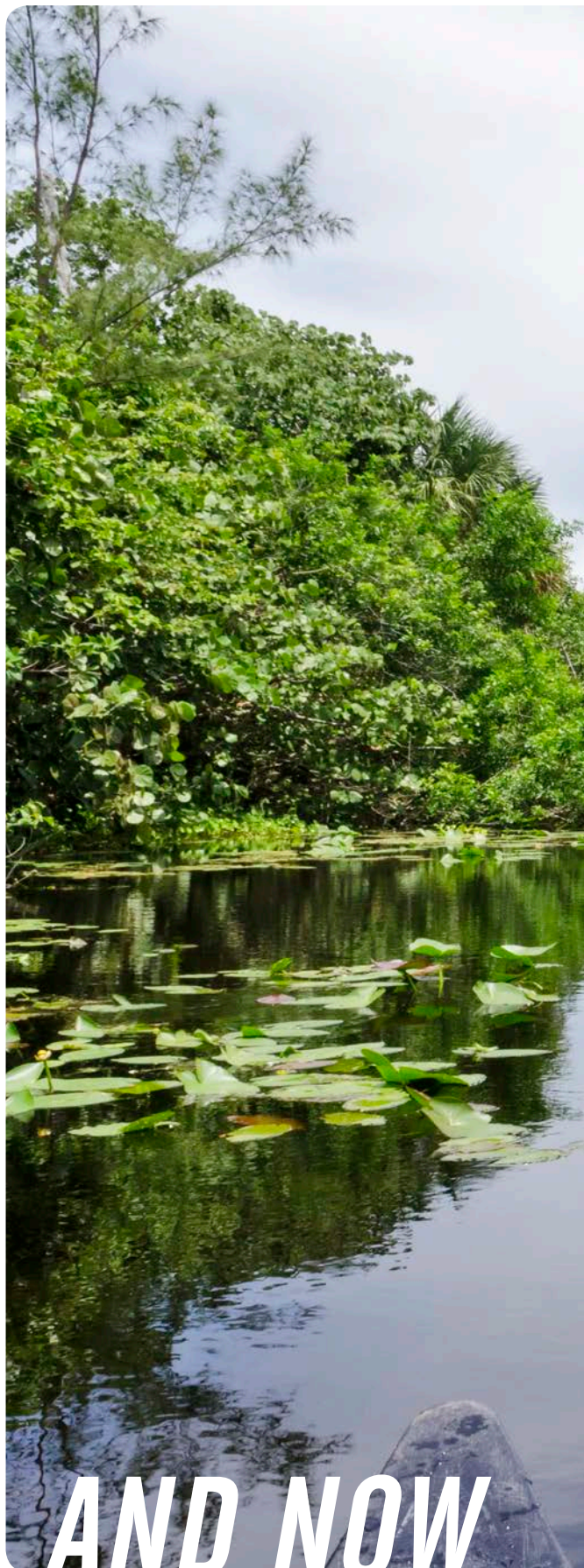




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Long Lake in 1955 and present day.