

THE EDITOR'S COLUMN

In Tallahassee

In Florida, they say, the further north you go the further south you get, and one cannot get further north than Leon county, named for Ponce de León and seat of Florida's capital. Tallahassee is a small southern city of tall pines, spreading live oaks, and pecans. Living costs and taxes are low; the air and water are clean; traffic is light. It is nothing like Miami.

Tallahassee is a long way from anywhere; some prefer it that way, though to have lived here 50 or 100 years ago, when the train was the primary means of access, would have been dreadful. Its airport sits in a national forest, scrub pines and swamp. As the most isolated part of Florida a lot of drug smuggling once took place in the vicinity.¹

Tallahassee is an oasis of moderate sophistication in the midst of rural and desperately poor north Florida.² As the seat of two universities, state government, and not much else, the average educational level is high and the average age low. The only Southern capital not burned during the Civil War, it has a touch of the antebellum charm of Charleston, mixed with a bit of the musical scene of Austin, a dash of 60's counterculture and a considerable dose of religious fundamentalism. The local paper carries letters denouncing the teaching of evolution "theory" in the schools, or sex education, or whatever the current issue is, and there is a billboard with a giant snake inquiring "Christ—or world Communism?" After a while, like (I suppose) dirt in the street in third-world countries, one learns not to see it.

Tensions here are mild. We have had a black mayor and a black state representative. The only public violence in the twelve years I have been here was the stoning of a Ku Klux Klan march; it never came back. When gay rights supporters demonstrated on the steps of the capital, the favorite spot for demonstrations in Florida, fundamentalists counter-demonstrated, and each side tried to drown out the other singing hymns.

Tallahassee only gets national attention for items which ridicule it: the huge snake found in a state warehouse, the minister

¹ See, for example, John Rothchild, "The Day Drugs Came to Steinhatchee, Fla.," *Harper's*, January, 1983, pp. 45-52.

² The sophistication is indeed moderate; when in a bank attempting to wire money to Brazil, I was asked if Brazil was a city or a country.

who organized a public burning of rock records because the syncopated beat of the music causes sin, the homeless man who lived in a box and found the locals friendly. To counteract this I have been making my own collection of Tallahassee facts. Tallahassee has the largest Lesbian publisher in the world, Naiad Press. It is the largest city in the U.S. with no expressway going through it. It has not only a confusing layout but is said by postal workers to have the most confusing street names in the U.S.; it has many streets which change their name in the middle, as in Europe. It was recently first in the nation in housing starts per capita. Since I have been here it has also drifted in and out of first place in rapes per capita in the U.S.; also, and related if one thinks about it, Tallahassee has or had the highest number of pinball machines per capita. Florida A & M University was listed as the second most dangerous campus in the U.S. in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*.

With the progress of transportation and communication and the consequent decentralization of American culture, Tallahassee is not as isolated as it once was. One can listen to Prairie Home Companion every weekend and watch David Letterman, from whom I have picked up many tips on teaching, four nights a week. A lot of British television gets shown here, among it "Yes, Minister," "Father, Dear Father," and lately we saw Spitting Image's "The Famous Company" and "The Ron and Nancy Show." The *New York Times* arrives in the driveway every morning. One cannot see movies not in distribution in this country nor Manhattan Cable's Channel J, nor can one hear visiting lecturers or see Pavarotti and Kiri Te Kanawa at the Met, and occasionally there is a pang that one does not live where one has access to such things. But one makes do with the Florida State Opera, at \$7 a ticket and free parking a block away. The Met we see on TV.

Tallahassee has the best radio station I have ever heard anywhere, including New York, Houston, Los Angeles, and San Francisco: the Florida A & M student station, whose staff can be astoundingly incompetent but whose music is spectacular. It is from it that I first made the acquaintance of black gospel music, played six mornings a week by a middle-aged lady who is one of FSU's custodians. Having learned what it is, I have sat outside of tiny storefront revival centers listening as long as I dared.³

It is commonly said that it takes a long time to get accustomed to Tallahassee, so long that one wonders whether "accustomed" is the correct word or whether the adaptation is not due to aging and the changes of the town itself. One must acquire a taste for barbeque, catfish, hush puppies, and boiled peanuts. After one has

³ See the final chapter of Gloria Jahoda's *The Other Florida* (New York: Scribner's, 1967), for a similar experience.

done so, something seems to be missing elsewhere.

For a few weeks each spring, when the azaleas and dogwoods bloom, the town is a riot of color. The rest of the year, the sun and rain do not cause contentment, but they provide an *inclinación* towards it.

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The university is a practical exercise in making lemonade out of lemons, *corazón* from *tripas*, taking the glass as half full instead of half empty, or whatever inspirational adage one cares for. “No es muy mala, pero no es muy buena, a lo menos, no es tan buena como yo quisiera” (*Don Quijote*, II, 22).

There is little innovation, as it is not rewarded. What is rewarded is enrollment, student approval, and pages published. Quality that cannot be documented in figures is irrelevant. There is bitter competition among departments, and indeed among universities in the Florida system, for numbers. “Y es lo malo que hay quienes digan que esto es lo perfecto, y que lo demás es buscar gullurías” (I, 48).

The legislature disagrees with the university about the latter’s mission, as a result of which the university is chronically underfunded by its own standards. The faculty was able to unionize itself a decade ago, the first such to do so in the South; a discussion would exceed the scope of this column, but on balance the effects are undoubtedly positive. However, support staff are poorly paid and overworked, and their demeanor can be correspondingly surly; there are far too few employees in such facilities as the registrar, financial aid, the bookstore, the parking office, and the health center, all of which provide mediocre service at best.

There is an overlapping maze of ever-changing policies and practices, sometimes sensible, as often meaningless, occasionally contradictory or counter-productive. Adaptation is finding out what they are and which ones one can ignore. There is little advising of undergraduates, and they are left to cope with the system as best they can. Many are understandably angry.

One means of survival is to spend immediately any money one receives; also, one contrives to plausibly request more than is actually needed, since one usually does not get what is requested. Supplies and furniture are hoarded. It is reminiscent of the supply situation in Michener’s *South Pacific*. At times and for certain purposes money is easy to get: it is all but impossible to get \$100 to bring a lecturer to campus, but travel money is plentiful. One year, *sin pedirlo*, the department is offered a computer, so we take the computer, and next year perhaps we can get software to use the computer, which meanwhile sits in a storeroom.

To try to find out why a sign indicating our department is in a building we have not been in for five years cannot be repainted, why the broken seminar table cannot be repaired, why locks cannot be changed after a passkey is stolen, why parking garages cannot be built is to engulf oneself in a *labyrinth de muy dificul-tosa salida* (I, 38). Finally one finds something to prop up the table, or holds class outside on the grass, walks half a mile from parking and looks down on those who won't do likewise, realizes signs are decoration, and keeps nothing worth stealing in one's office.

Few who are serious about getting an education and can afford to go elsewhere come to Florida State, the home of the "streaking" fad of the 70's and the only college with a circus.⁴ Our most famous alumnus—not graduate, as he gleefully points out—is Burt Reynolds. The most popular major is business, fraternities are strong, parking the biggest student issue. Still, Burt Reynolds has endowed a chair of theater, and student life can be amusing and thought-provoking. A group of sorority pledges, dressed alike, out on their front lawn singing "We're all-American girls, / and we love the life that we lead" (a popular song from a few years ago) resembles a scene from *Giulietta degli spiriti or Città delle donne*.⁵

The *discretos* on the campus, of whom there are, as Cervantes would say, *cuatro y medio*, either make their peace with the situation or leave. The view is sometimes openly stated that it is foolish to take the whole any more seriously than the students or legislature do. There are, all the same, two saving aspects. If the *cara* is mismanagement, the *cruz* is freedom, *la santa libertad*. Here a faculty member can do what he or she wants: go fishing, write poetry, start a journal, build houses, nothing at all. No one cares how one dresses.

Finally, we now have a truly superb library collection, *el regalo de mi alma y el entretenimiento de mi vida* (I, 24). We don't always buy everything promptly—it took five years to get the facsimile of the *Cantigas*—but everything that is currently available we eventually buy. Instead of rare Spanish books, we have hundreds of reels of microfilms of them. The journal holdings are similar. It makes no sense, from any point of view other than pleasing me, to spend such resources on materials in Spanish, but no one else asks as persistently, so I get my way. It is madness, perhaps, but the world adjusts itself to it.

⁴ The Flying High Circus, a student activity, actually far saner than intercollegiate athletics. Florida is the home of most American circuses.

⁵ Movies by Federico Fellini [this note not in printed version].