

# Look

MARCH 29, 1949

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I'LL NEVER FIGHT AGAIN

By JOE LOUIS PAGE 24

FLORIDA • POLLUTED  
PARADISE

By PHILIP WYLIE PAGE 26

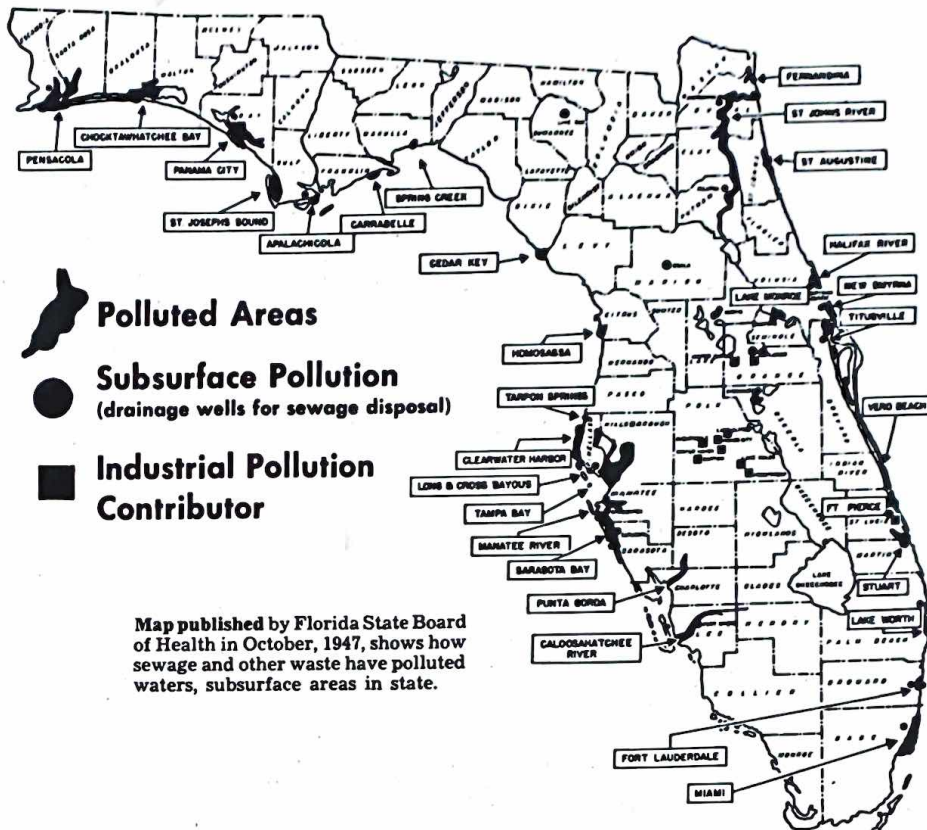


How to  
LIVE  
longer  
PAGE 41

SUMMER  
HATS  
PAGE 92



Bathing beauties offer movie cameraman utopian picture of Florida. But state's public



Map published by Florida State Board of Health in October, 1947, shows how sewage and other waste have polluted waters, subsurface areas in state.

# FLORIDA POLLUTED PARADISE

BY PHILIP WYLIE

Author of *Generation of Vipers* and Florida civic conservation leader

The land of perennial summer is every man's idea of a Garden of Eden—but thoughtless dumping of sewage and waste makes it one of our filthiest states

FLORIDA, where the sun forever shines on a tropical Garden of Eden, is regarded as a health resort. A large percentage of its three million annual visitors and of its two million-plus residents seek to benefit their health in Florida. The rarely printed fact is that Florida ranks hardly better than the other Southern states, which stand at the bottom of the nation's health list. And it is among the nation's filthiest states.

Much of the water—fresh or salt—near Florida's resort cities is contaminated. The clear, blue bays that once characterized the peninsula have become an opaque grey-green wherever man has been in residence in numbers for any length of time. The rivers have been fouled; for

most of Florida's cities dump raw sewage and industrial wastes into the nearest waters.

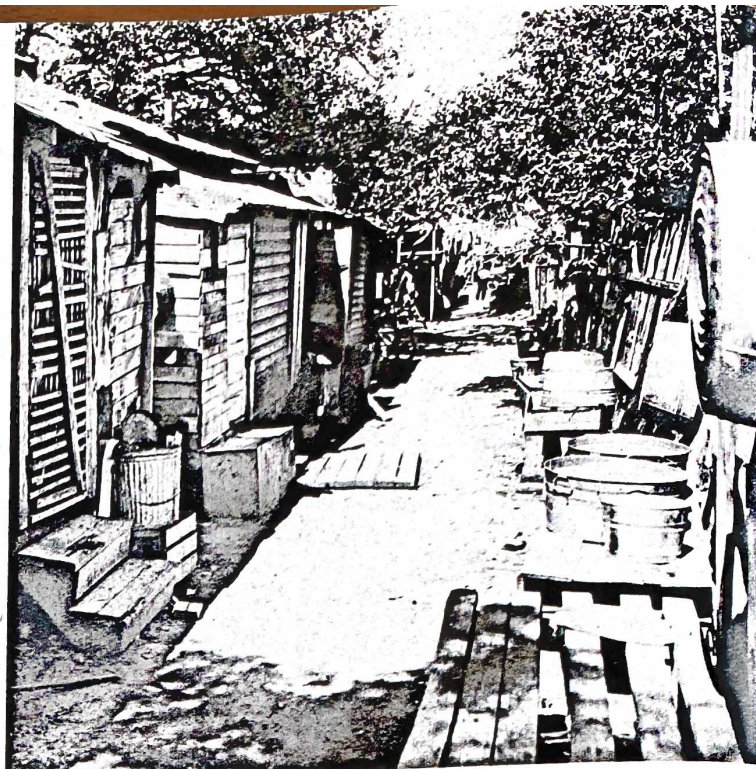
The terrain is very flat, so natural drainage is slow. The great salt-water estuaries and bays of the state are, in many cases, almost landlocked. Hence, wherever it is dumped, the refuse and ordure of millions has a tendency to accumulate. But modern sewage systems are the exception rather than the rule in Florida. It is a region of privies and septic tanks—and worse. Moreover, the substrata of much of the area is so porous, and the underground water table is so near the surface, that vast inhabited reaches of the ground itself steadily become more polluted.

Long ago, a considerable area of shellfish

(Continued on next page)



Luxurious living is one side of Florida. Here Hattie Carnegie, right, meets with friends at Brazilian Court Hotel, Palm Beach.



Other side of picture is shown in photo taken in Negro slum section of Miami. Such slums mark other Florida cities too. Many are "culture medium" for disease.

FLORIDA continued

## Florida's Governor asks co-operation in story on health and sanitation

EDITOR OF LOOK MAGAZINE

IT HAS JUST BEEN REPORTED TO ME BY DOCTOR WILSON SOWDER, FLORIDA'S PUBLIC HEALTH OFFICER, THAT UNITED STATES PUBLIC HEALTH OFFICIALS IN WASHINGTON HAVE ADVISED HIM THAT A PICTORIAL STORY IS SCHEDULED FOR EARLY PUBLICATION IN LOOK MAGAZINE WHICH AS OBSERVED BY THE UNITED STATES PUBLIC HEALTH OFFICIALS CONTAINS MISLEADING IF NOT INACCURATE STATEMENTS AS TO FLORIDA'S STANDING IN THE NATIONAL HEALTH AND SANITATION PICTURE. IT IS RESPECTFULLY URGED THAT IF THE INFORMATION AS REPORTED TO ME BE TRUE THAT YOUR EDITORIAL STAFF BE ASKED COMMA BEFORE PUBLICATION COMMA CHECK CAREFULLY ON FLORIDA'S POSITION WITH THE UNITED STATES PUBLIC HEALTH OFFICE IN WASHINGTON TO INSURE THAT ALL FACTS AND FIGURES PERTAINING TO FLORIDA BE AUTHORITATIVE AND ACCURATE. YOUR COOPERATION IN THIS MATTER WILL BE APPRECIATED. CORDIALLY AND SINCERELY.

FULLER WARREN GOVERNOR OF FLORIDA

beds in Florida was condemned; contamination of the sea had made the eating of these shellfish dangerous. The State Board of Health has continually broadcast this information. In October, 1947, it published a map which showed, in red, the salt waters its bacteriologists found to be polluted. This included the water around Jacksonville and Tampa Bay, most of the St. Johns River, part of the famed Indian River—known to boatmen as the Inland Waterway—as well as much of Biscayne Bay, which lies between the cities of Miami and Miami Beach.

But many cities continue to pour the deluge of their sewage into their own aquatic dooryards. Hundreds of thousands of men and women and children daily disport themselves in the water marked in red by the State Board of Health. Water-ski schools take their pupils out on the turbid, often evil-smelling bays. Recognizable debris, floating and repugnant, invades the seaside premises of smart hotels. Even the celebrated golden strand of Miami Beach grows visibly nastier every year. But

not much—as yet—is being done to correct conditions that are formidable at present and potentially disastrous for the future of the whole state.

Floridians claim their intense sunlight "purifies" their land and its surrounding water. This claim is refuted by representative statistics from the United States Public Health Service which show Florida to be at or near the bottom of the list in respect to the incidence of such diseases as diphtheria, marine typhus and syphilis. The claim for the sterilizing effect of sunshine dissolves to mere superstition when it is remembered that the sun-baked countries of the earth—India, Africa and the Indies, both East and West—are also the plague spots of the earth. And Florida, since it borders the tropics, harbors many diseases now unknown in northern latitudes: malaria, hookworm, various dysenteries and a sometimes-fatal form of typhus fever, carried by rat fleas. Dengue, or break-bone fever has appeared in the state; my wife and I had it.

The United States Public Health Service

itself stands effective guard in Florida, as elsewhere, against the invasion of even worse pestilences. Incoming travelers are checked carefully for their state of health. Inflying planes are zealously sprayed to exterminate every insect aboard; for Florida harbors mosquitoes which are capable of carrying lethal, foreign malarial, yellow fever and the like. In southern Florida, moreover, truly tropical conditions exist, so that various other disease carriers might be able to establish themselves. Health authorities live in a state of incessant alert—and the general filthiness of the region contributes to their anxiety.

### Slums Blot Many Towns

These circumstances are made more hazardous by the fact that many Florida towns and cities contain a jam-packed Negro slum of such squalor as to constitute a huge "culture medium" for all infectious diseases. The Negroes work for and mingle with the whites by day and return at night to their sometimes privyless shacks and often contaminated surface wells. Mosquitoes, flies, parasites and germs do not know about Jim Crow; but all White Florida—like the Deep South everywhere—behaves as if these menacing lower forms of life were well aware of the color line.

This past autumn, an inspection group studying the slums of Miami (and the citizens of Florida constantly observe, hold their noses, publish reports and do nothing whatever—or nearly nothing—or as little as possible) stated that less than four per cent of the wretched hovels in the segregated Negro area could be classified even as "fair to poor." Ninety-six per cent of the shacks, shanties and tenements were worse than fair to poor. And forty thousand people live there! Newspapers carried the account of these conditions; but the slum in the sun is unchanged.

This same autumn, in the town where I live (Coconut Grove) a group of worthy citizens discovered some unsavory facts which had always been known to those who have informed themselves concerning public health in Florida. Hundreds of Negroes in the "Colored

(Continued on page 31)



Flooded streets in Greater Miami aren't always occasion for frolic as here. Septic tanks back up sometimes and waters are contaminated by raw sewage.

## Low land, heavy rains add to Florida's problems

### Florida no worse than the rest of the nation, says State health officer

EDITOR OF LOOK MAGAZINE

FLORIDA DEATH RATES LESS THAN NATIONAL AVERAGE AND MUCH BETTER THAN THAT OF NEW YORK OR IOWA YOUR HOME STATE STOP ACCORDING TO 1945 FIGURES FLORIDA RANKED FIFTEENTH IOWA THIRTY-NINTH AND NEW YORK FORTY-SIXTH IN NATION AS TO DEATH RATES STOP ALTHOUGH FLORIDA NEEDS MUCH IMPROVEMENT IN SANITATION MR OSCAR EWING'S RECENT REPORT ON NATIONS HEALTH SAYS PEOPLE LIVING IN THE THOUSAND CITIES WITH EIGHTY MILLION PERSONS NEED IMPROVED SEWAGE SYSTEMS TOTAL COST FOR NATION TO COME FOR SANITATION NEEDS NEARLY EIGHT BILLION DOLLARS STOP ACCORDING TO RESEARCH COUNCIL FOR ECONOMIC SECURITY FLORIDA TWENTY-FIRST IN NATION IN SANITATION STOP FLORIDA IS ONLY STATE IN UNION EXCEPT NEW HAMPSHIRE HAVING NO REPORTED WATERBORNE EPIDEMIC IN OVER 30 YEARS STOP FACT IS FLORIDA RECOGNIZED THROUGHOUT COUNTRY AS HAVING OUTSTANDING HEALTH PROGRAM STOP CHECK STATEMENT WITH OTHER STATE AND NATIONAL AGENCIES STOP OUR SANITARY ENGINEER IS SPECIAL CONSULTANT TO U S PUBLIC HEALTH SERVICE ON PROBLEMS OF NATION AS A WHOLE ALSO ON BOARD OF DIRECTORS AMERICAN WATER WORKS ASSOCIATION AND CHAIRMAN CONFERENCE OF STATE SANITARY ENGINEERS STOP OUR DIRECTOR OF LABORATORIES CONSIDERED AN OUTSTANDING AUTHORITY ON COMMUNICABLE DISEASES IN COUNTRY AND BEING APPOINTED ARMY EPIDEMIOLOGICAL BOARD STOP MANY OTHER STAFF MEMBERS EQUAL CALIBER STOP THE HEAD OF OUR TUBERCULOSIS SANATORIA IS PRESIDENT OF THE AMERICAN TUBERCULOSIS ASSOCIATION STOP OUR STATE MORE COMPLETELY ORGANIZED AND STAFFED WITH COMPETENT PERSONNEL THAN ANY STATE IN THE UNION STOP IN THE FIELD OF COMMUNICABLE DISEASES BELIEVE YOU ARE SELECTING DISEASES PECULIAR TO SOUTHEAST BECAUSE OF MILD CLIMATE SUCH AS MALARIA, HOOKWORM, TYPHUS FEVER AND DENGUE STOP HOWEVER, HOOKWORM, IN FLORIDA MARKEDLY REDUCED IN CASES AND INTENSITY OF INFECTION STOP ONLY TWO CASES OF DENGUE FEVER REPORTED IN PAST FIVE YEARS ONLY OCCASIONAL CASES OF MALARIA REPORTED AND THESE MOSTLY RETURNING VETERANS TYPHUS FEVER REDUCED BY FOUR-FIFTHS IN PAST FOUR YEARS STOP DEATH RATE FROM TUBERCULOSIS MUCH LESS THAN NATIONAL AVERAGE AND RANKED FOURTEENTH IN 1945 AS COMPARED TO FORTY-SECOND FOR STATE OF NEW YORK STOP APPROXIMATELY SAME AS NATIONAL AVERAGE FOR DIPHTHERIA STOP ACCORDING TO U S PUBLIC HEALTH SERVICE FIGURES MORTALITY FROM SYPHILIS SHOWS MOST MARKED DROP OF ANY STATE IN THE UNION IN THE PAST FIFTEEN YEARS STOP DEATH RATES FROM SYPHILIS FROM 1933 TO 1945 DROPPED FROM FIFTEEN TO ELEVEN IN ENTIRE COUNTRY FROM FIFTEEN TO TWELVE IN NEW YORK AND FROM THIRTY-SIX TO THIRTEEN IN FLORIDA STOP WE RECOGNIZE AND HAVE PUBLICIZED MANY TIMES THE SHORTCOMINGS IN THE FIELD OF HEALTH AND SANITATION IN OUR STATE AND WITH SOME PROBLEMS HAVE DONE BETTER AND OTHERS NOT AS WELL AS THE REST OF THE NATION AS A WHOLE

WILSON T SOWDER MD STATE HEALTH OFFICER  
FLORIDA STATE BOARD OF HEALTH

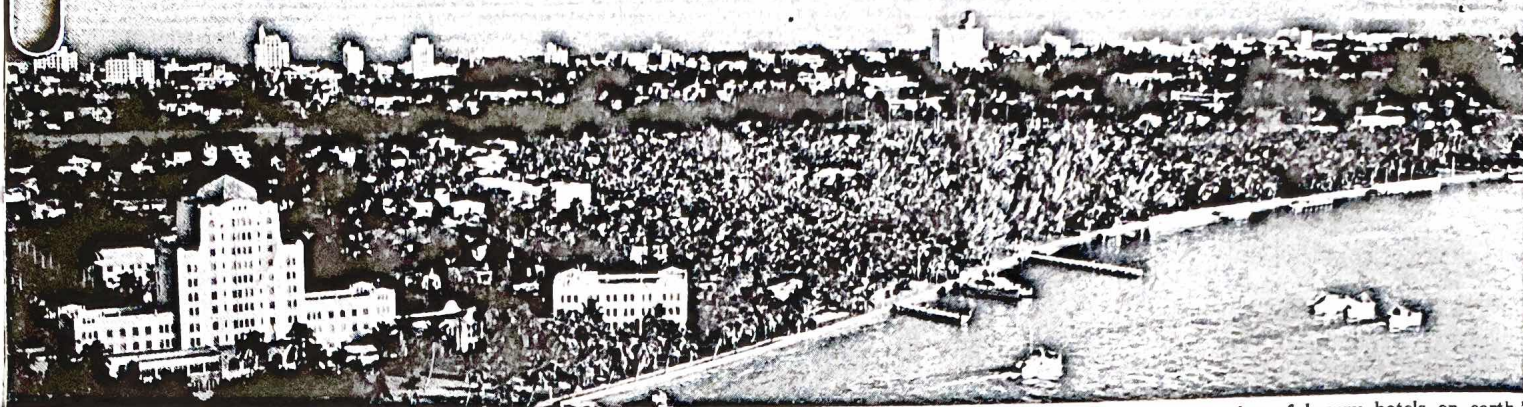
Town" area in the heart of the proud suburb lived not only without sewers or septic tanks—but without privies! Many of them had no running water of any sort—up to forty persons relying on a single outside faucet for their drinking and bathing supply. Empty tin cans were collected by these people and used for toilets. Periodically, at night, a truck went through the region and the used cans were thrown aboard, hauled away, and dumped somewhere. The truck had gone for years under the sobriquet of "the honey wagon." Again, a bold local paper carried the story, the details and the tragicomic nickname.

This did arouse local citizens to do something—something in the way of building privies, septic tanks, sewer lines and laying water pipes. The local health department pitched in—as it always does when funds, politics, knowledge and public opinion permit it to do so. In that one particular, the slum in Coconut Grove was cleaned up. But where else are honey wagons cruising? I don't know. And how many other Floridians, not only black but white, too, use privies—or nothing at all? Again, I don't know. Tens of thousands, of a certainty, health officials say.

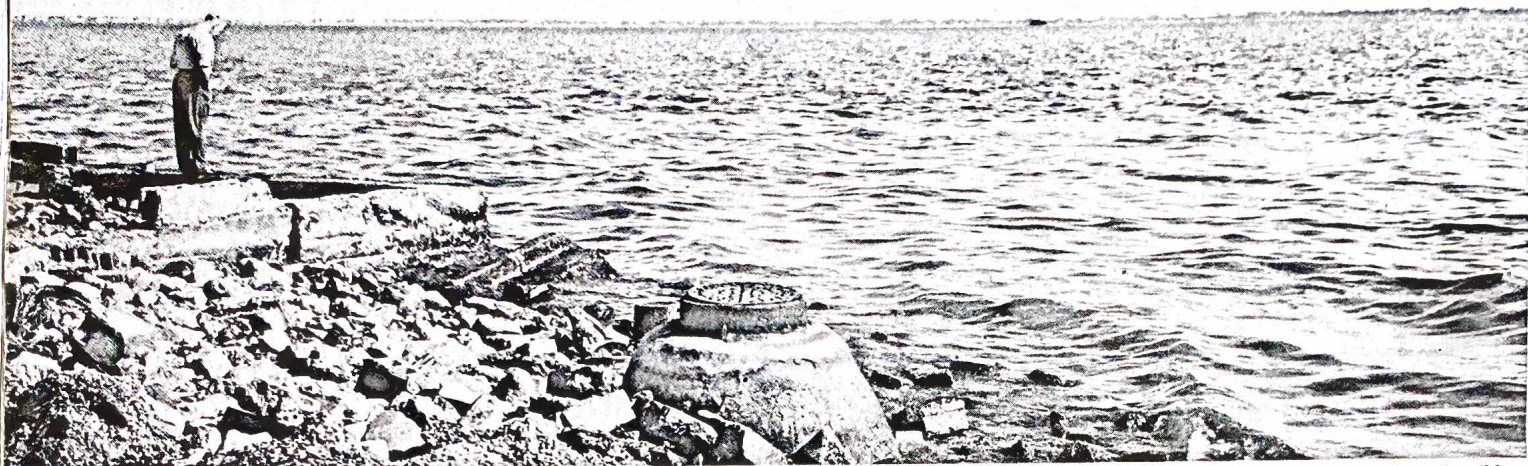
#### The Land Is Prairie-Flat

Much of Florida—an area about the size of Ireland—is prairie-flat and only a dozen feet or so above sea level. This includes the Everglades. To the north, the land is somewhat higher and slightly rolling. But nearly all of it is underlain by a porous limestone in which, at depths as shallow as twenty feet, the fresh water table may be found. The limestone does not filter and purify sewage as effectively as most other substrata. Florida rains are heavy—four-and-a-half feet a year; and as houses are set side-by-side, so are septic tanks. A sewage engineer who represented the State Plumbers' Association, told me, a year ago, that Greater Miami contained a hundred and

(Continued on next page)



Biscayne Bay, foreground, is a favorite site for yachtsmen, swimmers. Miami Beach, beyond, houses the "greatest string of luxury hotels on earth."



On Miami side of Biscayne Bay, 62 sewer outlets like this one belch sewage into bay. Practice has changed crystal-clear water to color of mildew.

## Septic tanks overflow when rains flood the low terrain

fifty thousand septic tanks. Many thousands were added this year.

During heavy rains, according to the engineer, the large, shallow "lakes" which form on lawns and streets are therefore contaminated by raw sewage—a statement supported by observation. I, myself, have seen septic tanks in numbers back up and overflow into lawns and onto sidewalks in residential areas, owing to the fact that the underlying ground was too burdened with sewage and water to contain any more.

### Orlando Put Sewage in Caverns

In Orlando, this sort of circumstance has had a most extraordinary result. The rock underlying the city contained numerous limestone caverns. These were used for "sewers" and for the disposal of industrial wastes. The acids from citrus canneries actually ate some of the caves bigger. And for many decades, the septic tanks and sewers of the city have contributed their substance to the substrata.

The purity of the municipal water supply, coming from lakes, remains unaffected. But today, in Orlando, a person drilling for a fresh water well is likely to hit water—plus orange peels, newspapers and other offal. And gases, forming for generations, have crept under the region. Sparks from drilling machinery sometimes explode these gases above ground. In

recent years, several men from drilling crews have been hospitalized by such accidents—and pictures have been locally published showing these water wells blazing like Oklahoma oil gushers. The city itself is in no danger of a major blast, as the gases must mix with air before they become explosive or inflammable. But an area of gas pockets eleven by three miles is estimated to underlie the city. A few adaptable citizens who drilled for water and struck gas have tapped it for fuel to run mechanical refrigerators! Orlando—at long last—has let contracts for disposal plants.

But how do such things happen? The hectic history of Florida is involved in the reply. First a part of the Spanish Main, it developed a piratical tradition which multitudes have faithfully served, ever since. The Keys wreckers, who moved beacons in order to plunder the resultant wrecked ships, were early exponents of the pattern. During the nineteenth century, the "robber barons" made part of Florida their winter lair for luxurious living and gaudy gambling. With the coming of Prohibition, rum-runners and gangsters swarmed upon the state. After them came the irresponsible, the fabulous perpetrators of the greatest real-estate "boom" America ever had. It was followed, inevitably, by the biggest crash of its kind.

Along with these were men who plun-

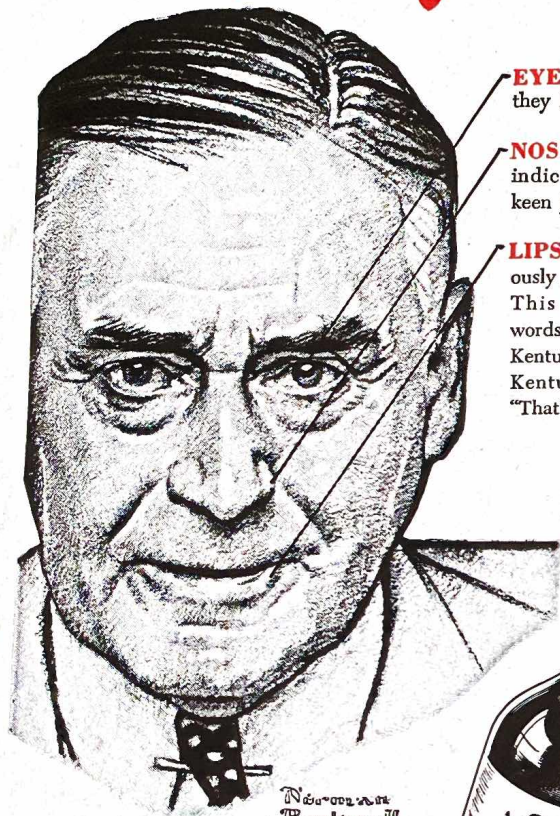
dered natural resources without thought to restoration, conservation or consequence. They saw quick money in winter crops from the black mucklands—and drained them. City wells began to salt up, as one result; another was even more ominous: it proved that much of the muckland, when drained and dried, would burn like peat. Scores of thousands of rich acres have gone up in smoke, leaving bare rock and drifting ash, unfit for beast or man or plant. Lumbermen cut away Florida's magnificent timber without thought of re-planting, as they have done till recently almost everywhere in America. And commercial fishermen, in their near-universal way, long ago began a wasteful and exhaustive assault upon the fresh- and salt-water fish life. Largely because of their wanton methods, Florida fishing today is not as good as it was in grandpa's time.

### Greedy, Ignorant Despoil State

Florida is, to my own mind, the most beautiful state in the Union. And its climate is unbelievably beguiling. That's why I live there. And that's why, down the years, I have engaged in a private war against the greedy, ignorant despoliation of Florida. South Florida is not quite in the tropics geographically. But, from the standpoint of sunshine, rainfall, flora and fauna, ocean temperature and sea life, it is truly tropical. Where else in the

(Continued on page 34)

*Have you the face of a  
successful man?*



**EYES:** Alert, thoughtful, they look facts in the face!

**NOSE:** Long, clean cut, indicates resourcefulness, keen judgment.

**LIPS:** Controlled, humorously upturned at corners. This man doesn't waste words. He savors Cream of Kentucky's "Double-Rich" Kentucky taste and says, "That's for me!"

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FLORIDA continued



Lavish night clubs, plus weather, attract millions to Florida each year. Meanwhile, health officers live in state of incessant alert.

## High tides carry ashore refuse from Biscayne Bay

United States can a whole year go by in which weather grounds the planes only half of one day? Where else will you find the sea over seventy degrees on days in February? Where else can you pick a ripe mango and eat it under the shade of a coconut palm? Or raise orchids on trees in your own back yard? Where else are land and sea nearly one—a land of jungles with alligators and crocodiles, too—and a sea so clear you can look at the bottom through a hundred feet of it, so blue . . . ?

But that last is the way it used to be—most of inhabited Florida has a dirty marine-scape today.

I sold my house on Biscayne Bay and moved inland. Twenty years ago, when I first saw it, that bay was as clear and clean as gin. Today, it is the color of mildew. You can see down into it only inches. Shoals are appearing in it—shoals of sludge, of sewage. High tides carry ashore from the bay quantities of stinking offal that sometimes dries out—partly—in streets. In lawns, too. In private driveways. People step in—and step around it, sickened.

Part of Metropolitan Miami does have sewers and these—sixty-two of them—belch continuously into the bay that was once the azure pride of the twin cities of the far south. Other sewers and outfalls and factory pipes pour into the Miami River—which was once, also, a jewel-clean stream with magically forested banks. The river runs into the bay. Hundreds of boats berthed and anchored in the bay use it for a sewer too. An unknown number of illegal private outfalls contribute. In the rainy season, the overtaxed substrata also purge into the bay the contents of myriad septic tanks. But thousands of people still fish in it. Swim in it. Water-ski upon it.

Biscayne Bay is like a big funnel. Its narrow, north exit makes an island of Miami

(Continued on page 36)

.....coming

IN THE NEXT ISSUE OF **Look**

ON SALE TUESDAY, MARCH 29



### Roosevelt's Most Important Decisions

Of the thousands of decisions which the late President was called on to make — decisions made during the twelve most tumultuous years in modern history — only a handful affected all of us. What were they? How did they change our life? Be sure to see the answers in the next issue of Look.



### Christian Science

Is Christian Science a boon to humanity? Read the searching story of one of the world's most thriving "new" religions . . . in the next issue of Look.



### What's Wrong With Baseball?

Cleveland's Bill Veeck, baseball's man of the hour and the owner of the pennant-winning Indians, tells what's wrong with America's pastime and what should be done to make it right. Don't miss this inside story in the next issue of Look.

Join the 17,439,000 regular readers of Look

FLORIDA continued



Shore at Miami Beach each year attracts thousands seeking escape from Northern winters. With rest of Florida, it's their idea of Paradise.

## Florida's faults reflect the faults of all America

Beach. Ebb tides carry some of its polluted waters out in front of Miami Beach, twice every day. More of the vile bay water is carried out at the south end of Miami Beach, on the same schedule. As if that were not enough, the city of Miami Beach itself collects the bulk of its raw sewage in a mammoth cloaca and dumps it into the sea about 7,000 feet off shore—off shore in front of the gigantic extravaganza of the greatest string of luxury hotels on earth. From an airplane, one can spot the greasy brown acres of "bloom" or "rosette" which mark the point of emergence of this material. And some of it is washed ashore.

### Some Sewage Drifts Back

"Only" six per cent of this raw sewage would ever come ashore, said the engineers. But even six per cent of the sewage of a tourist city with a winter population of more than a hundred thousand people is enough to see and, sometimes, to smell. And where it comes ashore is a matter dependent upon winds and tide and the curiously changeable currents along the margin of the Gulf Stream. Year-by-year, the celebrated sea off Miami Beach grows dirtier, under these influences.

The sludge on the bottom visibly, palpably accumulates. The number of noxious oddments from the sewers encountered by swimmers increases. It's an old story. Cities using their ocean front for a sewer always find, sooner or later, that nearby beaches are suffering.

Nothing has been done about it by Miami Beach. No plans to build a disposal plant—and do away with the fantastic cloaca—are under discussion today by the allegedly hard-headed business men whose hundreds of millions are invested in the hotels, apartments and residences of that city.

Miami, it is true, voted a bond issue for sewers and a disposal plant three years ago. Inflation caught the city short—and no engi-



neering firm would tackle the problem for the sum voted. So the project languishes while the bay and the sea off the Beach grow ceaselessly, remorselessly more odious — and odorous. Grabbing off the quick buck and squeezing out the last buck are the chief pursuits of Miami's citizens, as they are, alas, in too many other regions of our fair land. Besides, Florida is used to its dirtiness; impetigo, that common, contagious scourge of the insanitary, is known here simply as "Florida sores."

There is a line in an old song that runs, "Nobody knows—and nobody seems to care." In Florida, everybody knows, and nobody seems to care. I will never forget my first introduction to this fact. Accompanied by a Public Health official, years ago, my wife and I visited a camp of migrant farm workers. Their "sanitary facilities" consisted of four-by-four beams over troughs with a plank wall separating men from women. The troughs ran into a short ditch. The ditch into a canal. The canal into a river that ran through Ft. Lauderdale —where the yachts of the millionaires floated and the skyscrapers towered and the lawns of the hotels were graced by the waterway. In that camp was one typhoid case; we saw the sick man and the quarantine sign.

#### Publicity Ignored

"Go ahead," said the official. "Write about it. See what happens. Nothing."

I wrote. Nothing did happen. Perhaps it's different today in that particular camp. Who knows? But there are hundreds of other camps.

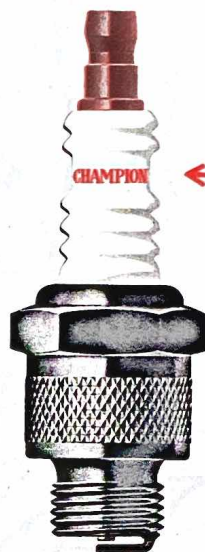
Some of the diseases we are liable to be exposed to, down in Florida, can be cured quickly and easily, nowadays. But some cannot. And filth is filth even if one merely is obliged to see it, sail on it and smell it. The dwellers of many big American cities may, furthermore, recognize in this account facts which remind them of their own Philadelphia, say, or Los Angeles, or St. Louis. For when things we know how to do and know we should do are compared with the status quo, none of us comes off very well.

Florida is merely a quintessence of national shortcomings—a land that grew up too quickly, a land with whole cities that did not start with proper foundations and principles but were built up any which way, by speculators. And "Floridians" alone cannot be blamed when their own newspapers call their own bays "open cesspools." For, who are they?

#### All States "Guilty"

A generation ago, the population of Florida was comparatively small. So most "Floridians" are immigrants—from Maine and Texas, Montana and Ohio, Wyoming and Kentucky—and from all the other states. So the shocking condition of Florida, sanitationwise, healthwise and in many other ways, reflects the shocking condition of the mind of Mr. and Mrs. and Miss America.

For Florida is the aggregate of Everyman's idea of what Paradise ought to be. It turns out that Paradise is sorely polluted and desperately in need of improved management, principally because John Q. Average American lacks the knowledge, the imagination, the good taste and the sense of public responsibility that would keep him from fouling his own nest—and especially that unique and once-gorgeous nest which Nature handed to him on the platter he calls Florida, for his winter migrations in perpetuity. **END**



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