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There Are a Million Stories in the Sainted City

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Orange juice stands on the corners and green park benches along the street side are just a couple of reminders of St. Petersburg's colorful past. The above photo, circa 1945, is but one of 400 historical photographs featured in the book, all from the Earl Jacob's Collection housed at the Nelson Poynter Memorial Library.

There Are A Million Stories In The Sainted City

And Ray Arsenault captures some of the most fascinating ones in St. Petersburg and the Florida Dream 1888 - 1950.

Ray Arsenault was in the midst of writing a book on the civil rights movement when he was asked to tackle another book with an earlier deadline — the official centennial history of St. Petersburg.

Though swamped with his research on the Montgomery bus boycott, the associate professor of history couldn't turn down the project. His reason loomed larger than his eight-year, live-in romance with the city.

"I was very much concerned that the existing histories of the city are unbalanced," Arsenault says. "Too much of the written histories are centered on the real estate industry, but no attention was paid to the history of women, the black community and working-class people."

St. Petersburg is a unique city with a remarkable history that needed to be brought out in its entirety, Arsenault says.

"I wanted to make sure the city's diverse aspects got their fair share of attention," he says. "I wanted to recapture the lives of some forgotten people."

The result is a lively, very readable 350-page book titled *St. Petersburg and the Florida Dream, 1888-1950*, which chronicles the evolving development and culture of the lower Pinellas peninsula.

"This well-researched and finely written study is both a visual treat and a pleasure to read," wrote Raymond Mohl, a leading urban historian, in a recent review. "At the same time, it makes a very important contribution to modern Florida history."

"And a fascinating history it is, characterized by colorful visionaries, boosters, and builders, an economy growing at a heady pace throughout most of the century (although often slowed by periodic economic downturns), unending waves of newcomers and tourists, increasing ethnic and racial diversity, and a powerful pattern of urbanization that made Florida 85 percent urban by the 1980s," Mohl confirmed in the review. "*St. Petersburg and the Florida Dream, 1888 - 1950*, provides a marvelous exploration of these varied themes set against the panorama of dynamic change in modern Florida history."

The limited-edition book, sponsored by the St. Petersburg Historical Society and the

Orange Belt Express Inc., was published in December, 1988. The book includes a photo essay of 400 rare historic prints and maps, many from the Earl Jacobs Collection housed at the Nelson Poynter Memorial Library.

In June 1988, the *St. Petersburg Times* featured excerpts from the book in a special city centennial edition.

The real drama of the book, Arsenault says, is the "survival of this little piece of earth — and the interaction between the natural history of the place and the human beings acting out their lives there."

Consider Doc Webb, the "master showman of volume sales" who became staggeringly successful running his Webb's City complex of stores. Or Al Lang, the popular, baseball-loving mayor who sponsored the "green-bench" ordinance and set his sights on transforming St. Petersburg into the tourist capital of the world.

Arsenault's favorite character was a woman of boundless energy named Katherine Bell Tippetts (1865 - 1950). Tippetts founded the area's first Audubon Society and Boy Scout troop, and swayed the Legislature into adopting the mockingbird as the state bird.

"She was incredible," Arsenault says. "She was on every conservation board of the day, ran a hotel, was fluent in five languages and wrote poetry, short stories and plays."

While researching his book, Arsenault found a mountain of intriguing historical material, enough to fill two books. He cut off his research at 1950 so he could write an "in-depth analysis of the pre-Sun Belt city rather than a slipshod, cursory one of its entire history," he says.

Missing is the story of St. Petersburg during the great demographic explosion of the '50s and '60s, the tourist boom, large-scale development of suburban subdivisions, desegregation and present downtown redevelopment.

But Arsenault says his book attempts to get to the heart of the city's history by "looking seriously at the past and how it impinges on present prospects and problems."

"St. Petersburg is a monument of a city,"

says Arsenault, disturbed about the city's redevelopment at the cost of some older buildings.

"It's ironic that in the centennial year the city is more threatened than at any time in history," he says. "The bulldozers are potentially poised to tear down historic buildings — it's terrifying that the aesthetic beauty and historic integrity could be lost."



Arsenault

The real drama of the book is the "survival of this little piece of earth — and the interaction between the natural history of the place and the human beings acting out their lives there," Arsenault says.

Arsenault hopes readers recognize the value of the past and that a "city doesn't have to be a Boston or Charleston with a 350-year-old history" to house great treasures worth saving.

Since finishing *St. Petersburg and the Florida Dream, 1888 - 1950*, Arsenault has resumed working on *The Stuff of Dreams: The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Emergence of the Modern Civil Rights Movement*, which will be published by Harvard University Press.

By Deborah Kurelik