

# the florida digressions

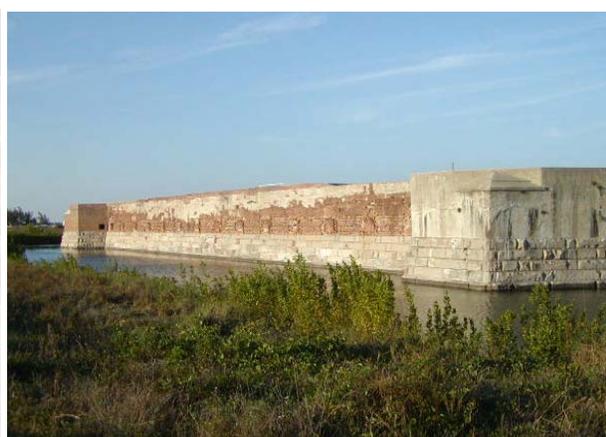
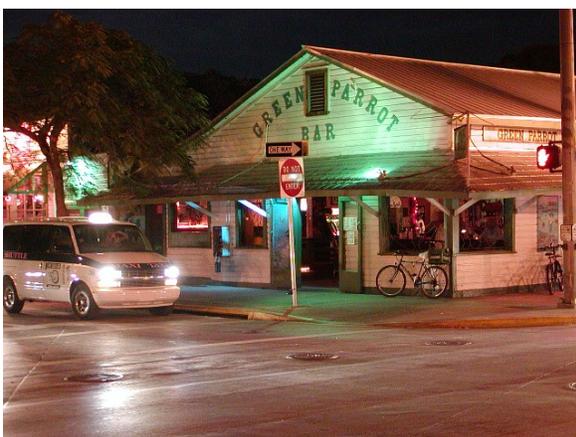
## Fock 3: More Conch Republic Reveries

Commercialism does not sit still, of course, and many changes have taken place on Duval. Barefoot Bob's is gone – rumors have it that cocaine played a role in its demise, which is not exactly a jaw-dropper. It was replaced by a more sedate Willie T's. The Strand Theater has a new tenant: Ripley's has left the building, and Walgreen's, representing the pervasive "corporate creep", moved on in. Wendy's has set up shop across Eaton Street from St. Paul's. Art galleries change ownership like drag queens change wigs. In true survival-of-the-fittest style, restaurants starve one another out of business. Several small, locally-owned shops have sold out to the national chains: Banana Republic, Coach, Little Switzerland, et al. They can better weather the caprices of this remote and unpredictable, tourist-driven market. Upper Duval is becoming an upscale mall; its character is being suffocated by the big business dollar. Sad to see.

Even if you wander away from Duval Street, though, there are many appealing watering holes in Key West, and you can find the right one for just about any mood or budget. They all have character, but if I had to pick just one, I'd have to stay with The Green Parrot.

Though it does proudly claim to be a "locals' bar" – and is, most of the time – *El Loro Verde* is a tourist-attractor in itself just because of that claim. The oldest bar in Key West, it is not situated on the tourist-tilted environment of Duval, but a good block southwest. It doesn't take much to get away from the glitzy stuff here; one block either way will do it fairly well. The intersection where the Parrot roosts is about two blocks from Mile Marker Zero, the end of the long road that is US-1, making the GP the very last bar to lie on that route.

[Note in the photo that the sign in the background indicates that the very first mile of US-1 has been adopted by none other than the Southernmost Parrot Head Club.]



The Green Parrot, one of whose slogans is "A Sunny Place For Shady People," was established in 1890, and it has been going strong since. I cannot begin to imagine how different this place would have been in 1890. Tourism wasn't an industry yet, but you could have only reached Key West by boat anyway. And once you got here, there was nothing to see except sunsets. Fort Zachary Taylor was here, having been built during the Civil War, but the only people here were sailors, wreckers, fisherman,

and soldiers. I'm sure it was rough and ugly underbelly, though the wrecking and salvage industry was booming. Due to clever laws and industrious pirating, Key West was the wealthiest city per capita in the United States in 1900.

Fort Zack is still quite the cool place, though. Having gone through restorations and such – including going from water-locked to land-locked to moated, and having its top two stories dynamited off to accommodate more modern Spanish-American War weaponry – it is now an Official Historical Site.

It is also flanked by Key West's best beach, the only one you have to pay for (\$2.50 gets you the full day of beach, fort, fir tree picnic grounds, and spectacular, uncrowded sunset viewing). It's a superior



place to swim because the beach is steeper, so the water actually gets deep enough to be over your head, unlike Smathers or Higgs Beaches, where you can walk till you can barely see the beach and still have dry shorts. It also has some waves, which are rare 'round these parts, and, though there are rocks lurking under those waves, they are rounded and more friendly than the toothy coral that makes the other beaches treacherous. The backdrop of Australian Pine trees, with their beckoning shade and numerous tables, gives the comfort of knowing that a cooling break of the dry kind is readily at hand.

One time I was out there, a sunset wedding was taking place on the beach, with a reception spread out on the picnic tables in the grove. Very cool way to tie the knot. I mean, if you're gonna be that foolish anyway.

And a mere 200 yard saunter brings you to the Fort itself. Built in 1845 as the largest fort to date, it was never attacked, and never saw any hostile activity whatsoever. But, cleaned and restored after decades of neglect and duty as a Navy junkyard, it is a serene place to wander and think about the way life was.

Dimly lit archways abound, and an unusual skeleton sculpture made from old junk machine parts guards the fort from across the moat. It must have been a pretty choice assignment back in the day, with parapet views of the sweetest sunsets known to man. It sure beat the hell out of those poor bastards stationed in the dusty plains of Oklahoma.



But that has nothing to do with the Green Parrot, except that the GP lies just three blocks from Zack's only entrance.



The Parrot's neighborhood has been home to the height of Key West Society as well. Renowned author Ernest Hemingway's famous mansion, full of the weird in-bred six-toed cats, is practically next door. Though Sloppy Joe's Bar and Captain Tony's Saloon downtown vie for the claim of "Papa Hemingway's Favorite Bar," I'm sure Ernie spent a few nights doing the Parrot thing. And, yeah, as if anybody really gives a wet hanky where the author of *The Sun Also Rises*, *The Old Man and the Sea*, and *For Whom The Bell Tolls* (and a few other books that I was supposed to read in high school and college) sat his fat arse to get loaded.

Then, there is the local Presidential influence. Harry S Truman had his own retreat,

known as the “Little White House” just a block or so away in what is now a VERY high-priced, gated community of houses and condos called Truman Annex. Check it out next time you score a Lotto jackpot.

So, no matter what kind of politicians, literary giants, or vermin who sloshed suds there in the last 112 years, it is definitely a great place today. My friend and erstwhile co-worker Justin shuns it, saying that he has no desire “to dwell among people who have given up on life.” Justin himself is an interesting tale. We get along well because we both seem intelligent, with grad school credentials and coaching backgrounds, and are totally devoid of anything resembling a career.

We don’t always match tastes, however. We definitely agree to disagree with each other, which is the way things should be. I mean, he thought *The Royal Tennenbaums* was a great movie. So the fact that I like *The Green Parrot* and he doesn’t just means, well, that he’s wrong. ;-)

Why do I dig the Parrot so? Let me count the ways:

◆ Dim atmosphere, despite the gaping window openings that you could drive a Hummer through. It can be blindingly sunny as you look out at Whitehead or Southard Streets, but the old wooden overhangs keep the inside dim and easy on the eyes



◆ Amusing signs and retro artwork, including a ceiling and upper walls decorated with the façade signage of many of the now-defunct bars of Key West. The best sign, though, is the plain black-letters-on-white wooden admonishment that stands above the center of the rectangular bar: “No Snivelling.” My second favorite is the simple single-word sign that is posted, askew, on the back wall: “Balance.”

◆ The parachute. The room’s central ceiling fan hangs under a large red and (once) white parachute, now with strings of colored lights, that drapes down from where the fixture meets the ceiling, and stretches to all corners. It hangs just low enough to constantly ruffle in the fan’s breezes, and gives a really cool effect to the room.

◆ The music. Tucked into a corner, some really great blues bands have jammed and slammed on weekend nights. The noisy crowd gets a bit raucous sometimes, and the movin’-to-the-music even spills out into the overflow crowd that bobs and weaves and just kinda chills out on the sidewalks (usually because it’s cooler out there at night). All the stuff I love in a live blues performance: crying harmonica, soul-aching saxophone, bungee-noting trombones, thrumming bass wielded by badly dressed bass players, sharp and wailing guitar, bowler-derby-wearing gravely-voiced singers, and deep-throated black female leads who can hold a note until the sun comes up.

◆ Beer prices. Though I lament that there is no Harpoon I.P.A. to be found anywhere in the South, I have found a very suitable substitute here: Key West Sunset Ale. Full of amber flavor, and exuding fun and substance in every delectable sip, it loudly mocks the overall SHITTY, bland, Anheuser-Busch-dominated beer selection available throughout South Florida (and, sadly, most of America). And at the Green Parrot, it is \$2.50 for a 12-ounce mug, and a smiling \$1.50 at Happy Hour. [That Happy Hour concept is very much alive here. It still vexes me that it was foolishly smushed by the Bay State legislature almost two decades ago.]



◆ The “Proverbidioms” poster in the men’s room. An alphabetical index of several hundred popular idioms – things like “cat’s got your tongue” and “every cloud has a silver

lining” are all painted into one mishmash 24”x36” scene, and you get to try to solve another little piece of it next time you take your 45-second turn at the vertical porcelain convenience. It’s an extra treat. Sometimes I make the walk just for that.

➡ The patrons. I think I’ll just let Justin’s pithy description stand on its own. He is right, for the most part. Cleanliness and class are definitely not prerequisites for admittance.

I’m not one to “hang” at the Green Parrot, like I once “hung” at Lewis’. There were a couple of very rare late afternoons that I settled in for some Happy Hour Sunset Ales while I diddled in my notbook, and a few late weekend nights when the band was good enough to hold me from the typical peripatetic Duval-hopping, but, generally, it’s wander-through, procure a mug or two of grog, bounce a bit to the tunes, and saunter back off to other atmospheres.

But what makes the Parrot noteworthy is that, no matter what else is happening around KW, I will *always* take the walk down that Southard Street block to see what The Other Side is up to. And it seldom disappoints. The block is only about a furlong long, but the gulf between the Duval bars and the Parrot is wide indeed.



One of the oddities of cruising down US-1 through the last few islands on the way to Key West is that the peaceful sky is often ripped by the unnerving roaring of fighter planes inning

and outing from Boca Chica Air Force Base. I have no idea if they are F-15’s, Q-99’s or RAM-626’s, but they sure are sleek, and they sure do make impressively tight turns, and they sure are **LOUD!!**

The military presence is an odd contrast to the normally laid back sense of life here, and a reminder that no place is really paradise.

The overall law enforcement presence is hard to overlook too. Patrolling this little string of islands, there are cruisers, Jeeps, SUV’s, Corvettes, motorcycles, boats, and helicopters representing KWPD, Florida State Troopers, the Monroe County Sheriff’s Department, and the U.S. Border Patrol. There is also a generic fleet of gray cars, simply labeled Law Enforcement, that are the Fish and Wildlife Patrol.

The KWPD patrol cars have *Protecting Paradise* painted on their fenders. I like the sound of that.



The cemetery in Key West, as in New Orleans and other low-lying, flood-prone areas, is spooky. The crypts are stacked like shoeboxes in neat piles. It’s like walking through the back room of Footlocker.



In New Orleans, the problem with interring bodies is that the silt is too loose to hold anything underground when things flood. Given a good dousing with delta overflow, those buried boxes will rise to the surface and bob in the mud.

Here, though, the other issue is the coral. The Keys are, after all, nothing more than the top of a coral reef that extends more than 100 miles into the Gulf of Mexico. The islands rise only a few feet above the rest of the reef. I think the highest point on Key West is called Solares Hill, which checks in at a dizzying 10’ above sea level.

The hardened surface of the reef is called caprock, and it is indeed rock. Without a backhoe, you ain’t breaking through that layer, and once you do get a

couple of feet down into the sand and such underneath it, you find yourself standing in water that has seeped in from within the reef itself. So, obviously, burying coffins is not a top option here.

The cemetery is creepy, I think, though others describe it as “quaint”. Something about big, white boxes of dead people piled five-high just gives me the willies, whatever they are.



*Why is “underneath” even a word? How is it different than “under”? What is “neath”? If you are above something, are you “overneath” it? Is “underneath” different than “beneath”? And if it’s not, then it would seem that “be” and “under” mean the same thing. Which would mean that “beware” and “underwear” would be synonymous. Hmmm.*

Actually, “neath” is an Olde English reference to “nether” meaning lower, as in “the nether regions of the underworld”, or the Netherlands, which are so named because they are below sea level. I wonder if they bury their dead Dutch there, or just pile ‘em up above ground? In boxes, I mean.

Roosters suck. They have to be the most obnoxious animals this side of the other side. The stereotype of a noble creature trumpeting in a new day for Farmer Fred and his freaking overalls is sorely misguided.

I have found this out because chickens and roosters are ubiquitous in Key West, and there just ain’t no farms down here, mate. They roam the city streets, just as pigeons do in most cities. And they crow whenever they goddamn well feel like it, not just a quick how-do-you-cockle-do at daybreak.

Now, if it was a pleasant crowing, rich in tone and/or melody, that would be one thing, but these things simply *screech*.



It sounds like somebody clamped a pair of vise grips on a chimpanzee’s nuts. And they do it over and over and over and over.

Chickens are OK, though. They just walk around. They don’t even cluck. At least not loud enough to bother anybody. But roosters suck shit through a straw.

There is on-going passionate debate about Key West chickens. Half the population decries them for their noise and filth and the spread of disease. The other half embraces them for their character and uniqueness. There are websites devoted to the topic. There is even The Chicken Store on Duval Street, devoted to the care and protection of the birds.

In many ways, though, Key West and the Lower Keys are not totally the paradise you might expect. They are very nice – don’t get me wrong – but there are some aspects that don’t seem quite paradisiac.

For example, the beaches kinda suck, with the exception of Bahia Honda State Park, which is awesome, but 40 miles north of KW (see photo, left).

Scenically, there are no hills to create sweeping vistas, and the mangrove trees that line much of US-1 are short, twisted, and create a dense and impenetrable jungle. Since the Keys are the tips of a five-mile-wide reef, there are no waves.

Anyone who comes to Key West for a beach vacation will be disappointed. Oh, it’s fine for lying on the sand and collecting rays. There are *plenty* of rays to be had. But if you try



swimming or playing beach-type water games that involve diving for a Frisbee or a ball, you better have good health insurance.

Smathers Beach, the largest public beach in Key West, is especially deceptive. Much of the sand has been imported so people will have something to lie on without puncturing themselves. But once you go into the water, you are walking on ragged coral. And you have to walk out about 200 yards before you even get waist deep. On top of that, the first several yards are cloudy enough, and with enough floating seaweed, that you wouldn't see what you were getting yourself into.



I'm sure that, each year, the KW hospitals get several gouged college kids who drive down on Spring Break, reach the beach, chug down whatever beer is left in their cans, rip off their shirts, sprint madly across the sand with a "WE'RE HERE!!!" yell, and leap blindly into the eight-inch-deep water only to be impaled on the reef's teeth.

And the seaweed is overwhelming. You drive by the northern half of Smathers any afternoon, after the tractors have combed the popular part of the sand, and deposited a ton or two of seaweed where it can just rot and fester in the ultraviolet rays, and you have to hold your breath. Man, does it *STINK!* I have made the mistake of running by there, and damn near gagged on the stench.

When I pulled up roots in '93 and drove as far south as the roads would take me, many people tried to make me feel bad about moving down there by admonishing me that I would "miss the change of seasons." Pshaw. Humbug. Balderdash. Cow ka-ka.

Or, at least, so I thought.

What I failed to take into account is that there is more than one definition of "miss." Saying "I miss my friends" is a lot different than saying "I missed my root canal appointment."

The latter two contexts are far more accurate for this particular case. I have felt no great fond longing for bitter cold and roaring nor'easters. I do not pine for numb toes, or black ice on the roads, or slush underfoot as I run, or scraping my damn windshield in the morning. I miss those in the sense of "Thank God I missed that oncoming truck," because they all just go on by without causing me pain.

Yes, snow does look nice on tree branches and such, but I'd seen it before, and there are plenty of photos of that on the Internet. Whatever. Next point.

And I suppose the context of "I missed that last telemarketing call" is appropriate too, because the months just come and go without a whole lot of notice. Up north, it's Thanksgiving time once the trees are good and bare, and the mornings are frosty. It's Christmas time when it's damn cold and the snow has probably fallen.

Thanksgiving in the Keys was just suddenly here. I was not the only one that week to be exclaiming, "Hey, that's this Thursday!"

Christmas is a whole 'nother experience. The electric lights on the palm trees, though nice, take a little adjusting to. The playing of "Let It Snow" seems downright silly. And poor Santa has his chestnuts roasting in that heavy red suit when it's 83 degrees out.

The funniest thing about A Keys Christmas was something I saw during the big parade in downtown Key West. It was an evening parade, of course, to keep it out of the afternoon *heat*. This concept was not lost on me, given that, in my days as a youthful cornet player for St. Bartholomew's School Marching Band, we marched in Boston-area parades for Christmas, St. Patrick's Day, and even Easter, when it was so cold that we couldn't even play our instruments because the valves were frozen solid. We basically just walked along in our white bucks, satin shirts and sashes, stupid hats and the rest of our dumbass uniforms, looking like sixty red and yellow Michelin men all bloated up by seven or eight layers of thermal long johns and such underneath, and lamely following the ragged beat of the numb-fingered, albeit gloved, drummers. The only thing dumber was the people who stood on the snow-and-ice-encrusted sidewalk in the frigid wind and **watched** us! But, they, at least, could booze.



So, this evening Key West Christmas Parade had a Reviewing Stand, loaded with lots of local luminaries, and each parading group would pause and strut its stuff for a minute or two before marching onward. The funniest one was the *It's A Conch Christmas* float. It was a large flatbed truck, all decked out in tropical stuff, with a steel drum band comprised of a dozen or so kids who were around eight to ten years old. There were also another dozen or so singing. How sweet, huh? *But they were playing and singing Jimmy Buffet's "Wasted Away Again In Margaritaville"!!!*

Even the nothing-phases-us Key West crowd was a bit flummoxed by that. The woman with the mike on the Reviewing Stand looked around, quite baffled, checked and rechecked her program, and commented over the P.A., "Aren't you supposed to be playing a Christmas song??" Then the float pulled away, with the Conch Christmas Kiddies chanting "Salt... Salt... SALT!!" Very weird. Cracked me up.

New Year's Eve, 1993, saw the beginning of a new Key West tradition: the dropping of the Conch Shell. Though a lame imitation of the big ball drop in Times Square, it nonetheless attracted a throng to the intersection of Duval and Greene Streets, right in front of KW's #1 bar, Sloppy Joe's. Duval gets closed off to traffic, and it becomes a 30-foot-wide sidewalk for the night, which is still not sufficient for the number of people who descend on that street to celebrate. Public drinking is not against the law in Key West – at least, not on Duval Street – though there is technically a No Open Containers stricture on the books. Because of that law, which frowns on cans and scowls at bottles, plastic cups abound. Especially on New Year's Eve, everybody walks around carrying a cupful o' cocktail.

It bothers me is that I can't drink while I'm walking. Out of a bottle or a can, I'm fine, but no way from a cup. The fluid rocks back and forward as my center of mass shifts with each stride, and in no time, it's sloshing down my chin and my shirt. I've tried to lower my hips and level my stride, adopting a Groucho Marx posture and sort of sliding along. I've tried using all-ankles and no-knees. I've tried countering the slosh with equal-but-opposite head motions so that I look like a bobblehead boozier. Nothing works. I have to stop, swig, and resume the walk. I feel so unskilled.

It's really the only downside to Key West's sauce-to-go mentality. Any bar will let you walk right out carrying your drink, and almost every bar will let you walk right in carrying a drink. This is why I'm currently plagued by this shortcoming; you tend not to hunker down for a spell in any one bar, because you can just grab and go. I'm determined that I will train myself to do it smoothly and without sloshing, but I also know that it will take a lot more practice. I'm willing to put in the work, though, just 'cause that's the kind of goal-oriented guy I am.

So on NYE, there is no need to pay some absurd cover charge to hoot and holler in some bar. The street itself is THE party, and everything else is peripheral.

In '93, face painting was the rage, and artistic, air-brushed renderings of anything from skulls to fish-faces, to seascapes, to dizzying spirals adorned the countenances of assorted teens, adults, and elders. It was very cool to see.

A few blocks away from that primetime crunch, a gathering of spectators had formed around a persistent bongo beat. Those within the circle were hippie from shaggy head to dirty toe, with bodies marked with painted, though non-artistic, designs. Amid their ring, whirling and gyrating to the bongos, was a skinny and bespectacled Fire Eater. His performance was hypnotic, taking the fire from one wand, holding blazing over his open mouth as a flaming bubble, then launching it with a sharp exhale over a foot of air and onto his other wand. He performed this and several other tricks over and over for the appreciative crowd. I first saw him around 10:30, yet when I passed through that block for the final time at about 2:00, he was still at it. I'll bet he had a sore throat the next morning.

The feature event, of course, was the Conch Drop itself. A yard-long papier-mâché rendering of a conch shell had been perched atop a ten-foot-tall standard on the roof of Sloppy Joe's. As midnight approached, the numbers 9, 4, and 1 illuminated on the pole to count down the remaining minutes. In a sudden rush, bar-boozers swarmed out to join the already jammed street crowd. The surge of the extra people compressed the throng dangerously. You could have lifted both feet off the ground and still be held up by the crush off the crowd.

At midnight, the conch slid nimbly down the pole and the street exploded in mirth. Kisses, hugs, and chugs abounded for several minutes before anything resembling walking room reappeared. Further

up the street, in the “pink triangle”, Sushi, a prominent drag queen, was being dropped in a large red shoe from the balcony of the Bourbon Street Complex before a packed street of alternative revelers.

When I left the party zone at about three-ish, and endeavored to navigate my bicycle back to my “home”, things were still fairly festive. After a couple of miles of erratic and very unsteady riding, I proclaimed a rest period at Smathers Beach, the large public beach along the southern shore of the island. I lay at the foot of a tall palm tree, its fronds soughing in the light and balmy breeze. It was about 65° out, and the half-moon smiled through a milky veil of high, thin clouds. Foreseeing an imminent snooze, but retaining enough clarity to protect my possessions, I locked my bike to my right arm, and dozed off.

I awoke to a dim horizon. Gradually figuring out who I was, where I was, and what the heck this thing was that was holding my arm down, I tried to shake off downy sleep. Looking straight up, it occurred to me how fortunate I was that none of those dozen or so fat coconuts had shaken themselves loose and fallen. A good conk on the cranium by one of those football-sized, rock-hard objects would do some serious damage. After a recovery nap in Max, I spent most of the day back at that beach, relaxing in the warm sunshine.

Damn nice to do that on January 1<sup>st</sup>.

