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LIFE

D-DAY'S HISTORIC BEACHES 40 YEARS LATER

WOMEN ARE WEARING MEN'S UNMENTIONABLES

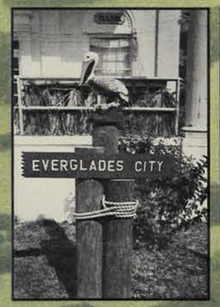
TEACHING TEENAGE DADS TO LOVE THEIR KIDS

INDIANA JONES RETURNS

...AND KATE CAPSHAW LANDS HIM IN THE NEW 'RAIDERS' MOVIE SEQUEL

TROUBLE IN EVERGLADES CITY

A SOUTH FLORIDA TOWN IS TARRED WITH DRUG SMUGGLING, AND MANY OF ITS 600 CITIZENS SAY, SO WHAT!



BY GEOFFREY NORMAN

The town's reaction was surprising, even to people who didn't think anything about Everglades City would ever surprise them again. A month or two after the big raid, a federal agent marveled, "You know what really amazes me? It's like they think *they* have a grievance. They don't feel the least bit guilty or ashamed. They don't even think they did anything wrong. One of them asked me why I was down there bothering them. He said it like the laws didn't apply to him—like they weren't even part of the United States."

The agent had been among 190 lawmen who arrived in Everglades City, Fla., at dawn last July 7. They came by land, in boats and two helicopters. They set up a blockade on the single highway into and out of town. They had several dozen warrants, so they paired up and started knocking on doors. They broke down at least one and went in with guns ready. They found some

In these mangrove swamps on the Gulf Coast due west of Miami, a task force of feds and Florida lawmen hit like a hurricane last July, rounding up 28 suspected marijuana runners.

WAYNE SORCE/VISIONS

of the people they wanted still in bed.

The raid, which went on all day long, was the climax of what the government has dubbed Operation Everglades. The effort still continues and at last count had led to the seizure of almost half a million pounds of marijuana, along with 39 boats, 21 vehicles and three airplanes. The arrest total has reached 193 in four states, and the number is expected to rise. The operation has even produced a notable fugitive, David McCain, a former justice of the Florida Supreme Court, no less.

For a week the dramatic raid dominated the papers and the television newscasts, especially those 80 miles across state in Miami. Everglades City became as notorious as is possible for a town of 600 souls. Although individuals were identified in the papers and on TV, the names seemed only a housekeeping detail. The thrust of the stories was that the town itself had gone bad—and gotten busted. Everglades City, the press implied, was rotten.

Geoffrey Norman, a native of Florida and a novelist (Midnight Water), *is an authority on fishing and conservation.*

"Just about everyone down there is in on it," the federal agent said from his office in Naples. "That, or is related to someone who is in on it. And it won't be long until some of them are at it again. They'll keep on until the day they go to prison. That's the way those people are."

Defiance in adversity does have a certain appeal. Compared to the lame excuses and elaborate justifications of, say, John DeLorean or the Abscam politicians, there is an Everglades attitude that's close to "Damn right I did it, and I ain't a bit sorry." A stranger in Everglades City does not have to look hard to find defiance. He can almost breathe it.

The Captain's Table is the gathering place in town. It is a combination restaurant, bar, marina, motel and condominium. In the afternoon, the local men gather at its outdoor bar to drink beer and talk or gawk at the tourist women swimming in the pool or sunbathing in their bikinis. The men make it a point to be loud and to glare at strangers.

Once the main raid was over, everyone in town knew who the informers had been. They were two strangers who called themselves Willie and Barbara Santos, and they had been coming and going for over a year, staying at different motels, getting to know people and insinuating themselves into the scene. They are gone now. But that doesn't mean that other strangers won't be arriving to pick up where they left off.

So when a stranger arrives at the outdoor bar and orders a beer, the four men who are there look at him for a moment or two, then begin to talk so loudly that he can't help hearing every word.

"One thing I would never do," one of them says, "I don't bait hooks for some Yankee fisherman." The other three nod their agreement. They are young, wearing work clothes, their shirts unbuttoned to expose the gold chains around their necks. "Cecil Oglesby, now, he makes good money," the speaker continues. "But look what he has to do for it. He calls it guiding. I'll tell you what it really is. It's baiting hooks for some sorry Yankee. There is no way I would ever do that." The young man stares across the bar to make sure he has the stranger's eyes. Then he says again, "I'd never bait some sorry Yankee's hooks. I hate them all."

The man is wearing one of those adjustable baseball-style caps that have just about become regulation with men who do not work in offices. On the crown of the cap there is printing that reads I SURVIVED OPERATION EVERGLADES. Next to the printing is the distinctive five-leaf silhouette of marijuana leaves. You see a lot of those hats in town as well as some T-shirts and bumper stickers with the same message.

"Those Yankees all got to have someone to take care of them," the man in the hat says, still glaring at the stranger. "Show them around so they don't get lost, find the fish for them. Bait their hooks. Clean the fish so they don't get their little hands dirty. But I'd never do it. I promise you that."

By this time, the stranger has had enough. He pays, and without finishing his beer or waiting for his change, he leaves. He hears the men laugh loudly in unison behind him.

If the essential character of the town is lawless and defiant, then Everglades City came by it honestly. Given the local history, there is no reason to doubt that it would be seduced by the lures of drug smuggling. Given its geography, it was almost inevitable. ➳

Native boatmen know the Everglades City inlets like their own bathtubs. To the narcs, they're a navigational nightmare.

WAYNE SORCE/VISIONS

EVERGLADES CITY

The town sits tentatively on some of the most exotic terrain on the North American continent. It is surrounded on three sides by the great saw-grass prairies of the Everglades. Big Cypress Swamp is to the north, and to the west are the Ten Thousand Islands, scattered like green pearls and leading through dozens of tricky passes and unmarked channels to the Gulf of Mexico.

The people in Everglades City make a living from this magnificent and terrible domain. They net fish and trap delectable stone crabs, which they market commercially. Some of them do bait hooks for Yankee sportfishermen who go out after tarpon and snook. Then there are a few locals who go into the Glades at night to gig frogs for sale to restaurants.

Until a decade ago, the men in the Glades at night would have been there to kill alligators. They would skin them on the spot, leaving the carcasses for the buzzards and the crows and keeping the hides, which they salted and sold to become handbags, belts and shoes for fashionable ladies. In Everglades City, as in most of civilization's marginal settlements, there are two laws. The internal law is recognized, enforced and obeyed. Sometimes brutally. The outside law is ignored and despised. The law against killing alligators came from the outside.

The prohibition against selling alcohol earlier this century also came from the outside. Back then, men from Everglades City ran rum through the treacherous Gulf passes or cooked moonshine on the remote unsettled mangrove islands. These days, some of those same men smuggle drugs. So do their sons and grandsons. The geography is perfect for it.

If some water systems make you think of arteries and veins, then this one suggests the capillary system. It is almost impossibly intricate. But the men who grew up navigating these waters had no trouble bringing whiskey in across them. They could do it at night, without lights, the same way the drug smugglers work today.

The same intimacy with the land helped the gator poachers, the most famous of whom still lives in Everglades City, where he guides fishermen now. "Yeah," Peg Brown says in a flat, disinterested drawl, "a friend of mine said when I retired that I'd gone from skinning gators to skinning Yankees." Silent most of the time, Brown, 67, is profane when he does talk. In a half day's fishing, a visitor will see a fine fraction of what Brown knows and will come to respect his skills in navigating a nimble little 15-foot boat like a cab driver working the city streets.

The visitor sits in the front seat and feels a surge of cold concern that turns to outright alarm as Brown points the boat straight at a wall of mangroves and bears down on it at 40 knots. The visitor knows there is no way Brown can turn in time, and his fingers dig

EARLIER, THEY SMUGGLED RUM

into the fiberglass gunwales to brace for the impact. Then, at the last moment, a slender break opens through the mangroves, and Brown slips through it into another channel and another wall of green. Brown takes it with the indifference you would expect. He has done it many, many times before. Often at night and now and then with people chasing him. Ask about those days, and whether or not he was ever caught, and he says simply, "They never even came close. Tell you the truth, I felt kind of sorry for them."

The area has always been attractive to the lawless, right from the time of the first settlements on Chokoloskee Island, which is three miles from Everglades City and connected by a causeway that was finished in 1956. Before that the children went to school by boat. A man named Ed Watson came to Chokoloskee early in the century. He had fled Oklahoma, where he had shot outlaw Belle Starr—in the back, according to legend. Watson farmed one of the Ten Thousand Islands, using labor that he imported, terrorized and sometimes murdered. Finally some of the men in town took it upon themselves to shoot Watson when he came in for supplies. He had gone too far and killed a woman.

Wild country. In addition to the gators, there are panthers that are now rarely seen, as well as manatees, water moccasins and all kinds of exotic birds, including eagles, spoonbills, ospreys, herons, egrets and curlews, which

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the natives shoot and eat and call Chokoloskee chicken. At one time the bird population of the Everglades was threatened by hunters who killed the birds for feathers to adorn women's hats. They did most of their hunting during nesting season, when plumage was at its brightest and fullest and when their damage to the total population would be greatest. Millions of young birds died in the nest or were eaten by scavengers.

Feathers for hats, gators for accessories or rum for speakeasies, men in Everglades City have become accustomed to doing dirty, illegal work to satisfy the vanity and the boredom of distant, unseen city people. Outsiders. It was easy, therefore, to despise those people and their laws, which you broke to get them what they wanted. They paid you to do it. Since that was true right up until the morning of the big raid, nobody believes it is going to change now.

The unique geography, in addition to providing both legal and illegal livelihoods, also presents some risks. Hurricanes come surging into the Gulf from the Caribbean every few years. Winds that exceed 100 mph begin a work of destruction that is finished by tides running over 15 feet.

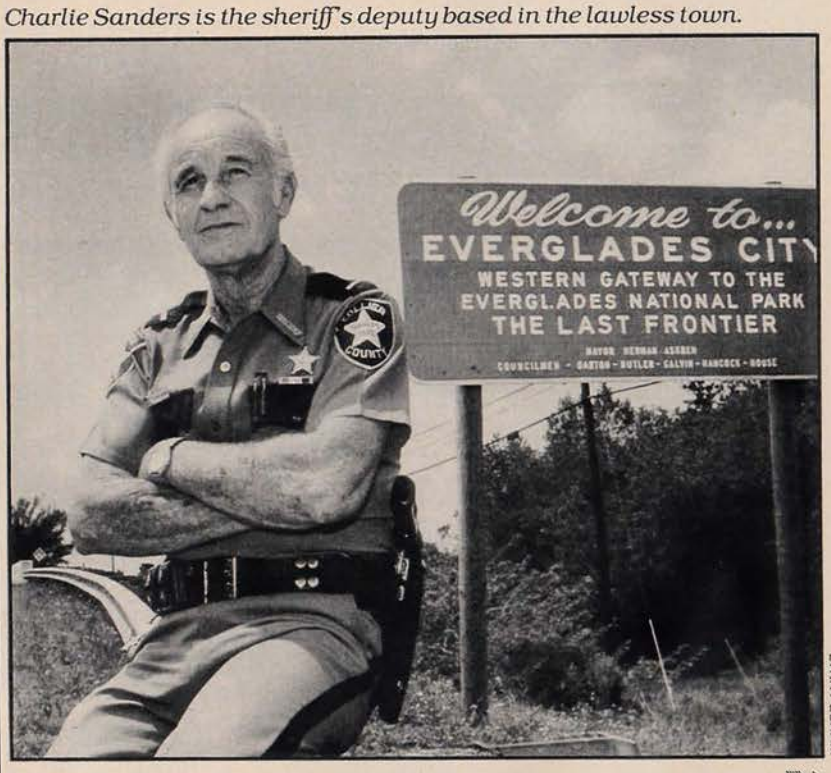
So most of the town as you first come on it from Route 29, off the Tamiami Trail, looks hasty and impermanent. Many of the homes are nothing more than house trailers set on concrete blocks, with a few shrubs planted around for looks. There are a few small stucco houses and some that are built of wood. The fish houses and marinas are made of sheet steel. Palms line the side streets and yards, along with hibiscus, oleander, bougainvillea and poinciana. The colors and fragrances are unmistakably tropical. At the center of town there are a few stucco buildings of more than one story. They look reassuringly durable, for they are the nucleus around which the town can rebuild after the next storm.

The bank, the mayor's office, the town library and a gift shop all occupy one of the larger buildings. It was the Collier county courthouse before the county seat was moved 30 miles north, to Naples, after Hurricane Donna of 1960. Next door there is a one-story structure, recently built, with a police cruiser parked out front. This is Lieutenant Charlie Sanders's office. He is with the Collier County sheriff's department, and Everglades City and Chokoloskee are his territory. He was not included in the planning of Operation Everglades, but he and his men participated. Ever since, Sanders has been a busy man.

"I was with the IRS team all this morning," he tells a visitor. "That's the next phase, and it's going to hurt a lot of people who slipped through the first phase. Some people who got used to having things are going to have to get used to doing without them. This business isn't over."

Law in Everglades City isn't a brand-new thing, but it hasn't been there forever, either. As an old-timer notes, "It used to be the deputies kept away. They'd stay put, up in Naples or someplace,

Charlie Sanders is the sheriff's deputy based in the lawless town.



LYNN PELHAM

and when they wanted somebody, they sent for him. If the fellow felt like it, then he'd go on in." Sanders still has to fight men who feel like they should be asked before he takes them in. One night one of them shot out the window of his cruiser with an AR-15. "He was drunk," Sanders says, by way of explanation. "But it still made me pretty mad."

Sanders lives near town, among these people, and what he feels is not so much dislike of his neighbors as compassion for them. "There's more to it than you see at first," he sighs. "They've got their side too." And he tries to clarify it for the visitor.

It starts with the fact that almost everyone in town is related. Most are descendants of one of seven or eight families that have intermarried through four generations until, among the natives, virtually everyone is related by blood, marriage or both. "So almost everyone," he says, "is kin to or knows someone who went to jail or who is now waiting to be tried."

Sanders himself is from Kentucky. So he knows something about small towns and clannish people. He came to Florida to stay in 1961. Before that he had been a paratrooper and a stock-car driver, and his arms bear the scars. He feels he knows these Everglades people as well as possible for an outsider—which he still is and always will be. Indeed, it would be an understatement to say that he is fond of them. "They are generous and bighearted in ways you can't believe," he says. "When someone gets in trouble, he gets helped. If he needs a hospital bill paid, somebody gives him the money. They take care of each other, and they keep to themselves. They are some of the best people I have ever known. I didn't like what I had to do to some of them," he continues, lighting a filter cigarette. "But that's my job, and I think they can understand that. I hope they can."

The marijuana smuggling started about 10 years ago, he goes on. But to understand the natives' side, you have to go back to the late '40s, when the southern Everglades were made a part of the national park system. "There were letters of agreement back when Eisenhower was President," Sanders explains. "The fishermen would be allowed to continue to fish in the park. That was never going to be taken away from them. But in the last few years it has been chipped away, bit by bit, and now the government is saying that net fishing will be banned altogether in the park, starting in 1986. These people see that and they say, 'Well, to hell with the government; if they are going to take away my means of making a living, then I'll just make a living any way I can.' "

Closing the Glades to commercial fishing was probably inevitable. There isn't enough of anything to go around in Florida. There is competition for every resource: land, water, wildlife and fish. Sportfishermen claim that commercial fishermen have seriously damaged the populations of desirable species like redfish, snook and tarpon. Those are the fish that draw tourists, and Florida has gone from encouraging tourism to virtually pandering to it. Families in Everglades City, most of whom go back to a time when there was no Disney World and some of whom can remember a Miami Beach without hotels, resent it. They were there before the tourists.

The resentment seems natural enough. Even justified. Many crimes have been motivated by lesser grievances. Lieutenant Sanders, who wants the visitor to understand his town and the people in it, says, "They feel like they've been singled out for some reason. Maybe they are wrong to feel it. But they do. And then when the chance came to get a little easy money, most of these boys couldn't jump fast enough. It was kind of like they were getting even."

Later the visitor drops in on Johnson's Seafood, a packing house, to find out more about the restrictions on mullet fishing and the impact on people who make their living on the water. Speedy Johnson, the owner, looks at the stranger with a mix of ➟

Peg Brown, an ex-alligator poacher and expert guide, has seen relatives imprisoned for marijuana running.

WAYNE SORCE/VISIONS

amusement and suspicion. Another man in the office stares at him with unconcealed hate. Johnson has not been implicated in smuggling, but his father, McBeth, has. McBeth even went on television, saying that he had been a "bad boy" all his life and that the whole town of Everglades City was guilty. The angry man in Johnson's office blames the television people for that; they tricked McBeth somehow. He holds outsiders accountable for all of Everglades City's misfortune. He is big enough to be intimidating, and he has the narrow, close eyes that you see on mean countrymen.

"They made us out to be criminals," he says to the visitor. "Stupid criminals. And it ain't like that. It ain't like that at all. They come over here from Miami, where they got a dope killing every day, and start talking about how we are all criminals. Well, there ain't no killing here."

Then he steps in close to the stranger and breathes into his face. "But the way we've been treated," he says through his teeth, "I wouldn't be surprised if you didn't get tarred and feathered before you leave here."

"Sorry we can't help you," Speedy Johnson says affably as the visitor is leaving. "But you know how it is."

"Well, you can understand how he'd be like that," Charlie Sanders says later. "His father and his brothers-in-law have been implicated. I imagine they've been following you around. You should be careful."

Still later the visitor talks to a man who guided sportfishermen in the Keys for several years and would sometimes take clients up to Everglades City to fish. "Oh, they were always kind of cool to me, but I never minded that," he relates. "Then they just turned mean. You practically had to fight a man just to buy gas from his marina. I guess all that goes back to the drug thing."

Nobody knows who was the first, but it doesn't make any difference. What is known is that beginning in the mid-'70s some men in town were suddenly rich, while their friends and relations were still just getting by, fishing and crabbing and doing it the old way.

You can make a living fishing or crabbing, but you will never, ever get rich doing it. Twenty years ago a fisherman could sell mullet commercially for about 20 cents a pound. The price is about the same today. But motors cost $500 then and five times that now. Gas cost less than 30 cents a gallon and is more than $1.30 today. There is more competition for the fish and fewer to go around.

Still, a man who worked hard and knew the water and had some luck could make $6,000 or $7,000 in a good month. There would also be months when he would be lucky to make anything. And every now and then, once every half dozen seasons, the fish would be abundant and he would always find them and the net would never tear or be slashed to threads by the sharks, and he might make $5,000 in a week. But when the drugs started coming to Everglades City, a man who had a boat and knew the water could make 10 times that in a night. *One night.* And it was easy. Easy and safe . . . or so it seemed right up until Operation Everglades.

According to the sheriff's investigators, marijuana smuggling would work like this. Someone in Everglades City would be contacted by an importer, usually in Miami. A shipment was expected by ship or air. The man in Everglades City would arrange for boat captains to go out at night and meet the coastal freighter or shrimp trawler coming up from Colombia or Jamaica. The go-between would be given a rendezvous point, radio frequencies, times and signals, which he would pass on to the boat captains.

It is common in Everglades City for boats to come and go at all hours of the day and night. There are far too many passes for the authorities to patrol them all effectively. So the ragged fleets came and went, dropping their cargo at fish houses where it would be loaded onto trucks and highballed to Miami, or hiding it in garages or sheds until it could be taken out in a van or a pickup or even in the trunk of a car. The boat crews and drivers could also expect to make good money.

Some nights as many as a half dozen boats would leave Everglades City to meet a mother ship in the Gulf. They would even bring in one load, get rid of it and return for another. A boat captain could make as much as $50,000 in a night, and his loaders could make as much as $10,000.

A BOAT CAPTAIN COULD EARN $50,000 A NIGHT

Everybody knew everybody else, or was related, so there was less suspicion than usual in drug transactions. It was a family business.

Even so, some people were not paid on time. They were told the money would be coming after one more run. That way, even the reluctant ones who thought they would just make one or two runs were drawn in deeper. The business, according to a sheriff's deputy, had a way of not letting go.

But everyone made good money, so nobody tried too hard to shake the grip. In a few years most of them made more money than they would have made in a lifetime of honest work. It was paid to them in cash—$20 bills were the favored denomination—so they didn't have to worry about the tax man. In a place where trade has existed for barely three generations, people can still remember catching or killing or raising everything they ate. And since the wages of even illegal labor had always been meager—$200 for a load of whiskey during Prohibition and $6 a foot for alligator hide at the peak of the trade—in that kind of community dope money was simply beyond calculation.

So the people who made it spent it. And they spent it in touchingly ostentatious fashion. They bought what they had always wanted—big cars and big boats—and they bought things they had been taught by television to believe were glamorous: gold neck chains and Rolex watches. They bought vans and pickup trucks with oversize tires and lots of chrome. They bought airboats to roar over the grassy stretches of the Glades. These craft also had a business use, since some of the marijuana was dropped into the Glades by low-flying aircraft, and only an airboat could get to it.

Some of the families built new houses and put in swimming pools, took trips to New York City, speculated in real estate. Some went on sprees of conspicuous consumption that were predictable enough and, when compared to the gaudier elements of Miami or Los Angeles or Houston, were modest and even tasteful. But even so, they were highly visible.

"That's where they were really dumb," says Lieutenant Sanders, "and I've told them so. They ➡

spent it in ways you couldn't help but notice." He pauses and shakes his head. "They were so damned obvious about it."

Maybe they were. If you drive around the town, as the lieutenant's visitor did, just looking, you will see some new homes with pools out back and big new cars up front. But fewer cars than you should see, according to the woman who works as dispatcher for Sanders. "They all had Lincoln Continentals before," she says, "but now they've hidden them."

You do see the vans and trucks, and each one of them probably cost more than a house did in Everglades City 20 years ago. But while the vehicles and homes and boats are surely expensive, they are not awesome. If this is lavish, you think, then Everglades City must have been truly poor before the drug smuggling started.

And you notice something else, slowly. These possessions do not seem to be accompanied by a sense that they must be protected. Cars are parked along the streets with the doors unlocked and keys in the ignitions. Boats are tied at most docks with no security. Fishing equipment is left in the boats. Doors are open. There are no antiburglar bars on windows, no signs warning that the neighborhood is being watched, no dogs trained to attack—in short, none of the defensive measures that have become part of the landscape all over the country, but especially elsewhere in crime-ridden and crime-terrorized south Florida. Everglades City, strangely, feels safe.

The few people who will talk to strangers are quick to point this out. They feel that their town has been unfairly treated by the newspapers and television. The implication is that everyone is involved and that Everglades City is a dangerous, criminal place. It is especially galling that much of this lurid coverage has come from Miami, where drug killings have become routine and gun sales are booming. Where real crime is an obsession.

Allan Eckert, a writer who lived in Everglades City for almost four years, asks, "How many people can say they live in a community where there is no murder, no rape, no breaking and entering, no burglary, no robbery? A town where you can leave your wallet on the seat of the car when you park someplace and leave the car unlocked as well? Where you can go out for a walk at night or leave town for a weekend without locking up the house? Well, I can say that."

WAYNE SORCE/VISIONS

Old-timer Ike Smith resents his "pot-hauling" nouveau riche townsmen.

His wife, Nancy, is even more passionate on the subject than Allan. She believes that the smugglers are not hurting anyone and that they are merely doing something people want done and making money for it. In fact, if anything, they are doubly justified since the government is in the process of taking their fishing away from them. She knew some of the smugglers, even though she was an outsider. "It's no different from Prohibition," Nancy argues. "The government is at fault, not these people. ➟

They're good people. They are all in it, and I'm all for them."

There is something tempting in that line of thought. It does seem true that there is no crime problem to speak of in Everglades City. You can feel the hostility of natives if you are an outsider, but you do not feel the dread that slips up on you when you go out alone at night into the streets of many American cities. Lieutenant Sanders says, "There's more crime than a lot of people hear about. But it is true that these are honorable people. It's sort of like we have crime but no criminals."

Indeed, some people have been hurt. Two boats collided one night in a pass off Chokoloskee. One was going out to rendezvous with a mother ship bringing a load up from Colombia. The other had already picked up its load and was headed in. Neither boat, of course, was using running lights. One man was killed and another seriously injured. A. C. Hancock, who runs a marine patrol boat for Sanders's office, helped in the rescue. He is a native.

Another local man, one who was involved in the smuggling, was pistol-whipped in his home one night by men who came for his money. He was almost killed. And several men from Everglades City have already gone to prison and come back. The families of those men suffered, of course. And so did the men themselves. The morale of the town must have suffered, too, when men everyone knew went away to prison.

There also were more car wrecks and bar fights once the dope hauling started. That, at least, is what some people will tell you. Everyone got a little wilder, especially the kids. A couple of them got pretty badly banged up in cars. Funny thing is, they usually drank, and it was the drinking that got them in trouble. They didn't use a lot of drugs themselves.

Finally, there is the comparison with Prohibition. We tend, 50 years later, to think of the men who smuggled whiskey in romantic terms and the government men who tried to stop them as fools in the service of the worst law in memory.

Old Ike Smith ran some rum into Everglades City. He won't tell you right out that he did, but he won't deny it either. He just smiles when you ask him about it. One man around town, who will talk to outsiders, says, "Oh yeah, Ike done that. He was good at it too."

He has done just about everything else you can do around Everglades City as well. He has fished and crabbed and guided sportsmen. You will also hear stories that he was Teddy Roosevelt's guide when he came to fish, but Ike won't admit to that either, for some reason. You suspect, when you have known him for a while, that it is a sense of pride and dignity that keeps him from talking about those things. Ike Smith does not need to borrow status from any man, even a President, and he doesn't need to be remembered as a rumrunner, even if he was one. There wasn't all that much to it.

These days he lives in a trailer with his third wife, Anna. He has added on to the place so it feels large and comfortable inside. There are family pictures on the walls, full bookcases and some ceramic sculptures that Anna has done. The house is quiet and cool, shaded by several trees. Out back there is a mullet boat tied to Ike's dock. Ike and Anna owned the Sundry Store in town for seven

Fishing and small businesses like this are the area's only legal industry.

WAYNE SORCE/VISIONS

and a half years. They sold out a few weeks after Operation Everglades. These days, Ike is pretty much retired.

"Oh," he says, "I could fish mullet, but I don't like the price. And I sold my pompano boat a while back. I read and I keep busy. And I still talk to some of the people in town. I used to see a lot of people around here. Visit them, you know, and have them over here," he continues. "This used to be a good place that way. But it has all changed. Hardly worth living here now."

What has changed?

"*Dope*. That's what changed. Dope came in and changed everything. It was the worst thing that could have happened."

Since he is from one of the old, original families, Ike Smith is related to almost everyone in town. When he turned 67 in 1980, there was a party on his lawn to celebrate. There was a whole roasted pig and a side of beef to eat and all the beer and whiskey anyone could drink. He had two tents set up in the yard and a live band to play music so people could dance. Two hundred and fifty people came to the party. "Now we couldn't get twenty of them to come," Anna says sadly. "The drug business has divided the town. People have turned against each other. Even families."

'DOPE HAS RUINED OUR COUNTRY'

"People I used to know who are in it, they won't speak to me anymore," says Ike. "They'll walk by me on the street with their noses so high up in the air that if it rained, they'd drown. They think that their money and their cars make them better than the rest of us. Well, I don't have much," he admits. "I don't drive a Cadillac, and I don't have a big fine boat or a house with a swimming pool. But what I got is all paid for, and none of the money came from hauling dope."

How, one asks, is it different from the whiskey that came in illegally during Prohibition?

"Everything about it is different. Nobody brought whiskey in to feed it to the children. And that's who uses dope. Kids. I've had friends whose children have gotten on it, and I've seen what it can do to them," he continues, disputing the general view that local kids have been barely touched by the drugs. "Whiskey was different. Now, I drink whiskey. Drink quite a bit of it, in fact. I like it. But I worked all my life, and even though I've lost an eye to cancer, I could work now if I had to. Those kids who get on dope aren't good for anything," he observes. "We used to hire them at the Sundry Store, and they'd come in all right in the morning. But later on they'd get high, and you'd watch them. They couldn't even make change. I think dope has ruined our country. It damn sure has ruined this place."

Perhaps because he isn't involved in smuggling, or perhaps simply because he is a very friendly man, Ike Smith is willing to talk to strangers. He is also willing to take one out and show him around, maybe even catch a few mullet to show how it is done.

We leave early in the morning to catch a falling tide. The islands we run past look like barriers in a green maze. Smith maneuvers the boat through the maze and watches the surface of the water for signs of fish. After an hour or so, he locates a school on a mud flat and guns the engine. He throws the anchored end of a 600-yard gill net from the stern, and it pays out cleanly until it has completely encircled the fish. They splash and jump inside the circle. Smith kills the engine and slaps the water with an oar, driving the fish into the mesh of the net.

Smith and his visitor put on rubber overalls and gloves and work the net back into the boat, stopping every few feet to free a silver-sided mullet and throw it in the fish box. It is hot work. The haul is 60 or 70, a small catch for Smith, who has taken 5,000 pounds of mullet in a single strike.

"I usually fish at night," he says. "I can load the boat in one set at night. I used to have a little dog that would come out with me. A dachshund. He'd sit up in the bow, and he could hear a school of mullet working. He'd start barking, and I'd know we were near fish. Pretty soon, I'd hear them too. We'd make a strike and catch a lot of fish.

"But somebody killed that dog," Smith continues sadly. "He got somewhere he wasn't supposed to be. He was a barker. I think somebody must have been unloading a boat full of dope

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when the dog started to bark at them. They killed him and went on with what they were doing. Later, they left the dog where I'd be sure to find it. I think it was somebody who knew me and knew how close I was to that little dog."

When the net is clear, Smith fires the engine and takes his visitor to the little island where his grandmother is buried. Abandoned now, it is one of several that were farmed once and have gone back to mangrove, buttonwood, palmetto and cactus.

After some looking, Smith finds the cistern. "They farmed everything they needed," he recalls. "Killed deer for meat. Caught fish. I was twelve years old before I first ate store-bought bread. People wouldn't know how to live like that now. They've got to have too much, and everything has to be done for them."

Later, back at his house, Smith fries some fresh mullet fillets and hush puppies. He also serves rice, and Anna puts out an eggplant casserole. "I cook the fish around here," says Smith.

The visitor is hungry after a morning on the water. As he eats, he feels that this is probably the way it once worked here. You welcomed a stranger, and you fed him what you had to eat. Smith still does. He has been doing things that way all his life, and he won't change now. Even if everything else in his world has.

Ike Smith talks about a man in town whose only visible means of support, as they say, is mullet fishing. The motor on his boat is newer and larger than Smith's—235 horsepower versus 35. The man has a new house, which he is adding on to, and a new four-wheel drive and an airboat. His mullet boat leaves the dock once or twice a week. The man spends a lot of time working on that big outboard and going places in his new vehicle.

Smith snorts at him and calls him, simply, "a sorry pot hauler." The man has his contempt but not his envy. Which makes Smith unusual. The success and the prosperity of smuggling in Everglades City—and other parts of Florida—is an almost irresistible incentive to crime.

There is a true corruption of values at work here. The smuggler, it is said, never worked hard as a fisherman. He was lazy and not very good at it. But now he is rich. The corruption is fundamental. Easy money drives down the value of hard-earned dollars—and the self-esteem of the people who work to earn them.

"When people who are not doing wrong look around and see the people who are getting rich and getting away with it, then they think, 'Well, I'm *stupid*.' It cheapens them in their own eyes." The sheriff's investigator down from Naples who says this thinks for a moment and sighs. "Those are the people I really feel sorry for. Not the guys who got caught up in it. They knew what they were getting into."

But how can the marijuana runners stay in business after the Operation Everglades crackdown? "They've just gone to different methods, and they've gotten more cautious than they used to be," observes one lawman. "They bring in smaller loads and conceal them better. They use decoy boats and decoy planes. And they're still getting it in and out."

According to the federal Drug Enforcement Agency, the U.S. drug traffic is an estimated $100 billion a year business, and some 75 percent of the narcotics imports are smuggled in through Florida. There are estimates indicating that drugs generate as much revenue in the state as tourism. It is reported that the cash in Florida banks went from $900 million to more than $5 billion in six years. An awful lot of that cash came from drug dealing—enough, in fact, for the U.S. Comptroller of the Currency to charge that there is more money laundering in Florida than in any other state.

The anecdotal evidence of what drugs have done to values in Florida is even more compelling. You hear stories, and the police will confirm them, of smuggling rings paying cash for small farms that they will use for a landing strip and three or four hauls, then abandon. Expensive boats and airplanes are routinely bought for cash, used once and left. Many of them find their way to sheriff's auctions, where they generate some of the money that finances undertakings like Operation Everglades. You hear of people being offered rents of $25,000 a week, cash, for their homes. Drugs have corrupted even the real estate market.

There is one place where you should be welcome, even if you are a stranger in a suspicious, unfriendly town. They have to accept you at church.

The First Baptist Church of Everglades is a pretty, plain building painted white outside. Inside, the walls are bare wood, worn to a

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smooth finish by time. There are overhead fans against the heat. An attractive young woman plays the piano. There are 40 worshipers in the pews.

The hymns are full of sweet old-time religion. The congregation sings enthusiastically, if slightly off-key. The pastor, William Flurry, asks the visitor to stand and introduce himself, just before the offering. Then he welcomes him, warmly, to the church.

During the offering, a man with a face that is both rugged and gentle joins the piano player for a hymn. He has a strong tenor, and the song of Jesus' suffering fills the little church. It is plain, somehow, that he and the woman playing the piano are married.

Reverend Flurry takes as his message the story of King Amaziah from II Chronicles. The king is warned that if he disobeys God and takes a mercenary army into battle with him he should "be strong for the battle: God shall make thee fall before the enemy, for God hath power to help, and to cast down." Flurry tells his congregation to shun feelings of envy "because your neighbor has two Cadillacs and takes three months of vacation every year while you are driving a two-year-old Ford and working all the time just to pay your bills.

"Remember what the man of God said to Amaziah when he was about to defy God's will. Go ahead on and do it, he said. But be ready. Because the Lord is going to make you fall before the enemy. And the hundred talents that you are paid are nothing. Nothing. The Lord is able to give you much more than that." Then, in his closing prayer, Flurry asks special blessings for those in jail.

Outside, after the services, in the bright noon light, the church members stop to greet the visitor and make him feel welcome. The man who sang the solo looks him up later and offers to take him fishing. He is Cecil Oglesby, the best and most ambitious of the local charter fishermen. "Cecil does real well," everyone in town says. "But he works hard at it."

It isn't so bad, Oglesby himself says, late in the afternoon, casting for redfish and catching them in a channel that runs close to a mangrove key. He has had to work hard to build his business, but now he has what he needs. He has children and does not worry about them getting into serious trouble. "I've been blessed," he says. "That's the only word for it." As for Operation Everglades and the men who smuggle dope, he says only, "Those dudes go their way, and I go mine."

Then the talk goes back to fishing and all his years on the water. Good talk. Oglesby has hundreds of stories, and he enjoys telling them. After 23 years of baiting Yankees' hooks, he still enjoys his work. He honestly feels he has been blessed.

Among Oglesby's neighbors is a man named "Totch" Brown—brother of Peg, the gator poacher. In January he was sentenced to 15 months, which he will serve at a federal penitentiary in Kentucky because it has a hospital. Brown, who is in his 60s, is not well. His son will serve five months of a two-year sentence and do 250 hours a year of community service for two years. So will Totch's son-in-law, who managed to get off with no jail time.

The three of them agreed, as part of their plea, to turn over $1.2 million in cash and $1.3 million in assets, including property in Tennessee and the Florida Keys as well as a shrimp boat and a car.

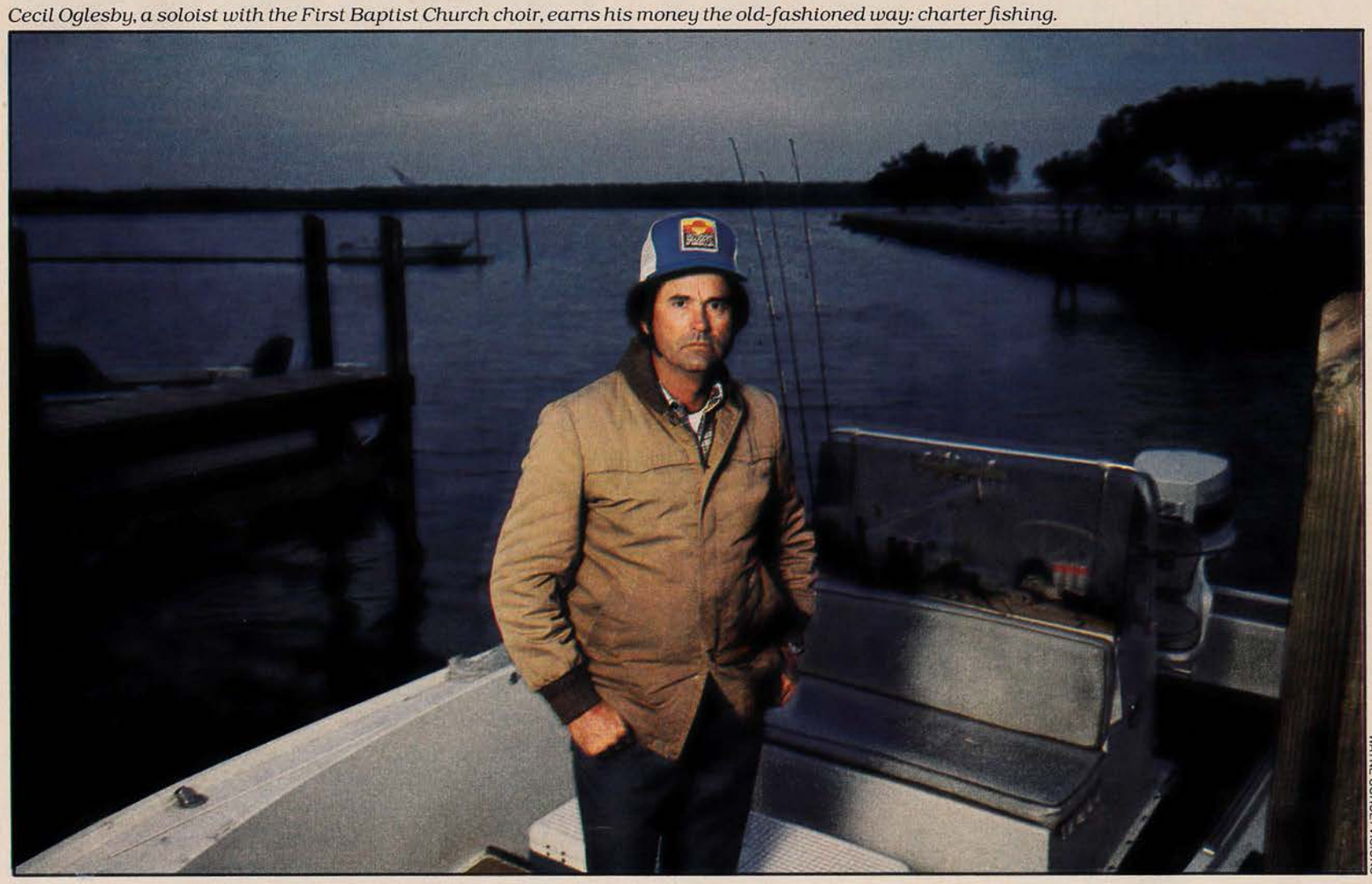
Robert Wells, who had previously been convicted of smuggling in North Carolina and was therefore held on $4 million bail, raised the money after several weeks and is still waiting trial. Two men who decided not to plea-bargain and took a jury trial were convicted and sentenced to 10 years each. Other trials and plea bargains resulting from Operation Everglades are still working their way through the justice system.

One of the boats seized in the raid, a large stone crabber, was returned to the owner on a technicality. It was found at a dock in Everglades City, five months later, loaded with marijuana. It was seized again.

The raid changed things, but it did not, obviously, stop the smuggling. The townspeople, meanwhile, have grown more suspicious as the smugglers have grown more cautious. Suspicious of outsiders, as always—and, more and more, of each other as well. Especially since the plea bargaining and trials started. What once seemed easy is now clearly risky. People suspected of talking to the law have been threatened.

But it goes on. The money—not to mention the geography and history of Everglades City—make it impossible to stop. ♠

Cecil Oglesby, a soloist with the First Baptist Church choir, earns his money the old-fashioned way: charter fishing.



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