

## Clara Barton was Here

I'd like to murder the couple in the motor boat. But maybe the word murder is too strong. All right, I'd like to sabotage their loudspeakers, throw their ice-cold beers overboard, and send them packing. Their radio is stuck on the chorus of "Everybody Dance Now," which they blare as if we're in a dance club instead of a remote island in the Gulf of Mexico. The other tourists don't seem to care. They eat jumbo-sized Pringles and play catch with "Life Is Good" Frisbees. Is life good? Maybe if nobody else had discovered Egmont Key. Maybe if, as I'd hoped, I could have appreciated nature without all these distracting people around.



*The ruins on Egmont Key make it a haunting beach to explore.*

It's June, the day before Father's Day. My dad and I almost missed the 11 a.m. ferry from Fort Desoto, arriving just in time to buy two \$20 tickets and find a seat beside the 26 other passengers. Since we don't have a boat, a ferry is the only way to access Egmont Key, a 1.5-mile-long strip of land that stands guard at the mouth of Tampa Bay. Beyond it lies the Gulf. "We come back at 1:30 and 2:30," the gray-haired ferry captain announced over his loudspeaker. "Repeat after me: 1:30 and 2:30. Don't be late. If you're late we let the other passengers do whatever they want to you." Missing the ferry could mean spending the night on a deserted island, where not even a trickle of freshwater can be found and the only shelter is in the darkness of old ruins. The captain flicked on the radio and it started playing "One is the Loneliest Number." I made

a silent vow not to miss the ferry.

As our green and yellow vessel left Fort Desoto behind, I listened to the other passengers ooh and ahh over the captain's tour-guide spiel. The 30-minute ride brought us gradually closer to our destination, an abandoned island inhabited only by protected wildlife. If not for the motor boats anchored off Egmont's shore, we might have been traveling back in time to unsettled Florida. Sometimes I agree with nineteenth-century naturalist John Muir, who yearned for places where "no mark of man" spoils nature – places where nobody blares

their radios on the beach and drowns out the rhythm of breaking waves. But not every mark of man destroys. I traveled to Egmont Key to seek the marks of history, of almost-forgotten peoples whose stories are still buried in the sandy soil and salt water of this island. These haunted human landscapes are even more precious than empty, unspoiled nature: through them, we can connect to the people who lived here before us, which in turn connects us to the land itself. My journey of exploration began that summer morning in June, when I first glimpsed the island from the ferry.

This island is haunted. I can see it in the distance, a fringed line of scrub and palms. The lighthouse beckons our ferry closer. It seems a part of the land, gleaming white against the sky like bleached bone. There are many bones around Egmont Key. The bones of ships are sunk offshore, the skeletal ruins of old Fort Dade crumble on land, and the remains of soldiers and lighthouse



*A dead tree stands sentry on the island's shore*

keepers and Seminole prisoners are buried under the sand. When our ferry docks, a flock of seagulls hovers over the scrubby island, where vine-choked trees twist skyward. The birds are “unearthly” in their beauty, like the sandhill cranes early explorers mistook for dead pirates’ spirits. Visitors should be warned – this is an unearthly sort of place. While most of my fellow passengers sun-bathe on the beach, I search for Egmont’s forgotten ghosts.

Following the red brick army roads, my dad and I cut through the heart of the island until we reach the Gulf beach on the southwest side, near the bird refuge. Here, the U.S. Army’s power plant, once built in the center of a thriving island during the Spanish-American War, is now a pile of crumbling cement on the beach. It looks like a giant’s child built a house of blocks and knocked it over. Felled palms are scattered among the rubble like huge toothpicks. The sea trickles into the ruins, making little afternoon tide-pools that shimmer in the sun. We decide to swim. Floating in the water, I discover a barnacle-encrusted septic

tank several feet offshore that looks like an abandoned well. As the waves diminish the island bit by bit, the power plant is shoved further into the sea, and the Gulf reclaims it. After swimming beside the building that once powered this island community, I want to see the ghost town itself – even if that means leaving the coolness of water for the sweltering interior.

Egmont Key is hot. We’ve been walking along this brick road for an hour, but it feels like days. A grasshopper catapults onto my back. A fuzzy caterpillar plops onto my leg. Thousands of caterpillars have invaded the island, inching up the lighthouse as if it’s Mount Everest and dropping unexpectedly onto us from every palm tree. As if the caterpillar invasion isn’t enough, I cut my toe on a slab

of cement covered with green slime, and now I'm bleeding. My water bottle is running low. But when I stop complaining, I wonder what it was like for the people who lived here before. Sick soldiers from the Spanish-American War were once quarantined here, nursed back to health by the famous Clara Barton. She later wrote with polite horror that Egmont would have been a lovely island except for the "gnats, mosquitoes, sand fleas, snakes, and daily storms." In other words, she hated it.

With Clara Barton's words echoing in my head, a scrubby island suddenly becomes a place rich with stories. I understand how writer and conservationist Susan Cerulean felt when she praised the power of these "storied" landscapes. "The real stories of Florida are so powerful ... that if we were to somehow reclaim them ... things would be very different" she writes in her essay "Restorying Florida." What she meant by "very different" is an increased appreciation for our wild places: history turns sticky, buggy Florida nature into something transcendent. Through Egmont Key, Clara Barton and I have something in common.



*One of the island's only remaining inhabitants.*

As I walk along the ghost town, where crumbling cement steps lead to invisible houses, I feel connected to the vanished people who lived here before. A white egret strolls along the red brick road, taking long strides, bobbing its thin neck. It looks like a smug gentleman dressed in a white summer suit with yellow galoshes, out to visit his friends. Only egrets, seagulls, and tortoises walk this way now – even most bikini-clad tourists keep to the

familiar beaches. But these roads that cut with military precision through the island once united a small town, which boasted electricity, tennis courts, and movie theatres during WWI. My dad obligingly holds my blue beach bag embroidered with pink sequined fish while I walk around the tennis court, imagining it in its glory days. I can almost see the trim young soldiers in white tennis shirts and regulation trousers, lobbing the ball back and forth across the net. Now it's just a slab of concrete in the middle of the scrub. Egmont Key has a rich military history. During the Civil War, rebel blockade runners slipped past the Yanks, who were ever-watchful on their island outpost. Some unlucky Confederates were caught and imprisoned here. Maybe they didn't like the caterpillars either. Theodore Roosevelt and his Rough Riders watched this island fade into the distance as they sailed to Cuba during the Spanish American War. Today, I trudge the same soil Teddy marched.

There are no ruins on Egmont Key to commemorate the Seminoles' stay here. That dark portion of Florida's history is blotted out. But the island remembers. The captured Seminoles – warriors, women, and children – were “penned like cattle” in a stockade. They might have been cattle waiting for the slaughterhouse, for all their captors cared, but they were really waiting for deportation. “If suddenly we tear our hearts from the homes around which they are entwined, our heart strings will snap,” the Seminole chiefs pleaded. I whisper Seminole words, probably mangling them badly, but wondering what they might have sounded like when this island was filled with prisoners. A gopher tortoise scampers down the road towards his burrow. Yok-che, turtle. Within the heart of the island, where no motor boats are visible, the landscape hasn't changed much since Seminoles were here. These palm trees and wildflowers, Numpagalaale laknalon, were probably their final glimpse of Florida nature. Egmont Key was the last sight of their beloved Gulf Coast, before they were crowded onto freighters bound for New Orleans, and finally the West. Three-thousand Seminoles passed through this tiny island, which was the first stage of the aquatic Trail of Tears. Many died before they reached their next destination, and some died – of their snapped heart strings? – before they left Egmont Key. A mass of darkening storm clouds builds over the Gulf, and I wonder how many imprisoned Seminoles gazed out over this same stretch of water. Now they're gone.

As the sun rises higher overhead, walking in the Florida brush becomes unbearably hot. We switch to the beach, strolling along the sand at the edge of scrub. Near the bird refuge on the south side of the island, the vegetation



*Dead trees stretch skeletal branches skyward.*

suddenly dies out, as if ravaged by fire. Australian pines reach skeletal branches to the sky and decapitated palms stand like sentries – a lonely place. Dad checks his cell phone and realizes it's 1:30 already. We turn around, heading back towards the ferry through the scrub, but the lonely feeling stays.

Sometimes the land's link to the past is so strong it scares people. Haunts them. They see things here. Since the 1970s, park

rangers have heard someone whistling “Dixie” in the twilight. They've seen platoons of rebel soldiers standing guard, shadowy shapes moving along the old fort. One park ranger swears he saw a Civil War soldier walk four feet in front of

him, then vanish into the darkness. I keep on the look-out for rebel ghosts, but I don't see anything. That doesn't mean I don't hear things. Inside the skeleton of a mine storehouse, wind rattles against crumbling concrete. Except there is no wind. I walk along the road the soldiers built and hear something rustling in the scrub beside me. Nothing is there. Train tracks lead to nowhere, finally disappearing into the sand. Sunlight burns my face and shoulders, but underneath a canopy of Sabal Palms, everything is dark. Almost creepy. Dead palm fronds scrape each other – scritch, scritch. If Egmont Key is really haunted, I can understand. It wasn't always a tourist destination. For some people, it was a nightmare.

They say you could hear the screams from the shore. At night, it was too dark to see the island, but the cries were audible. It was 1898, the end of the Spanish-American War. Wounded soldiers sailed from Cuba, expecting medical care



*The lighthouse graveyard is filled with haunting stories.*

once they were quarantined on Egmont Key. But no one was ready for them. The doctor was away in Tampa, and a storm wrecked the hospital tents – sending the soldiers back to their unsanitary ship, the Santiago. It was August. The sun pounded the ship, where the men had no proper food or sanitation. All they could do was scream. Four died. Their bodies were buried in the lighthouse cemetery, never more to leave the island – maybe left to haunt it.

Time is running short, and my dad and I have to meet the ferry before it leaves us stranded here. But we want to see the lighthouse graveyard before we go. Thirty mounds in the sand. Thirty plain white crosses. Thirty lumps of jagged cement before each unmarked grave. I look at these mounds, and think about the bones of Seminole Chief Tommy, and the 6-month-old baby a Seminole mother laid to rest, and all the young American soldiers who died on the Santiago. An American flag flies over all the graves, even the Indians'. The stories buried in this place are so strong that sometimes, when there is no one else around and wind whispers through the trees, I can hear the voices of those who came before.