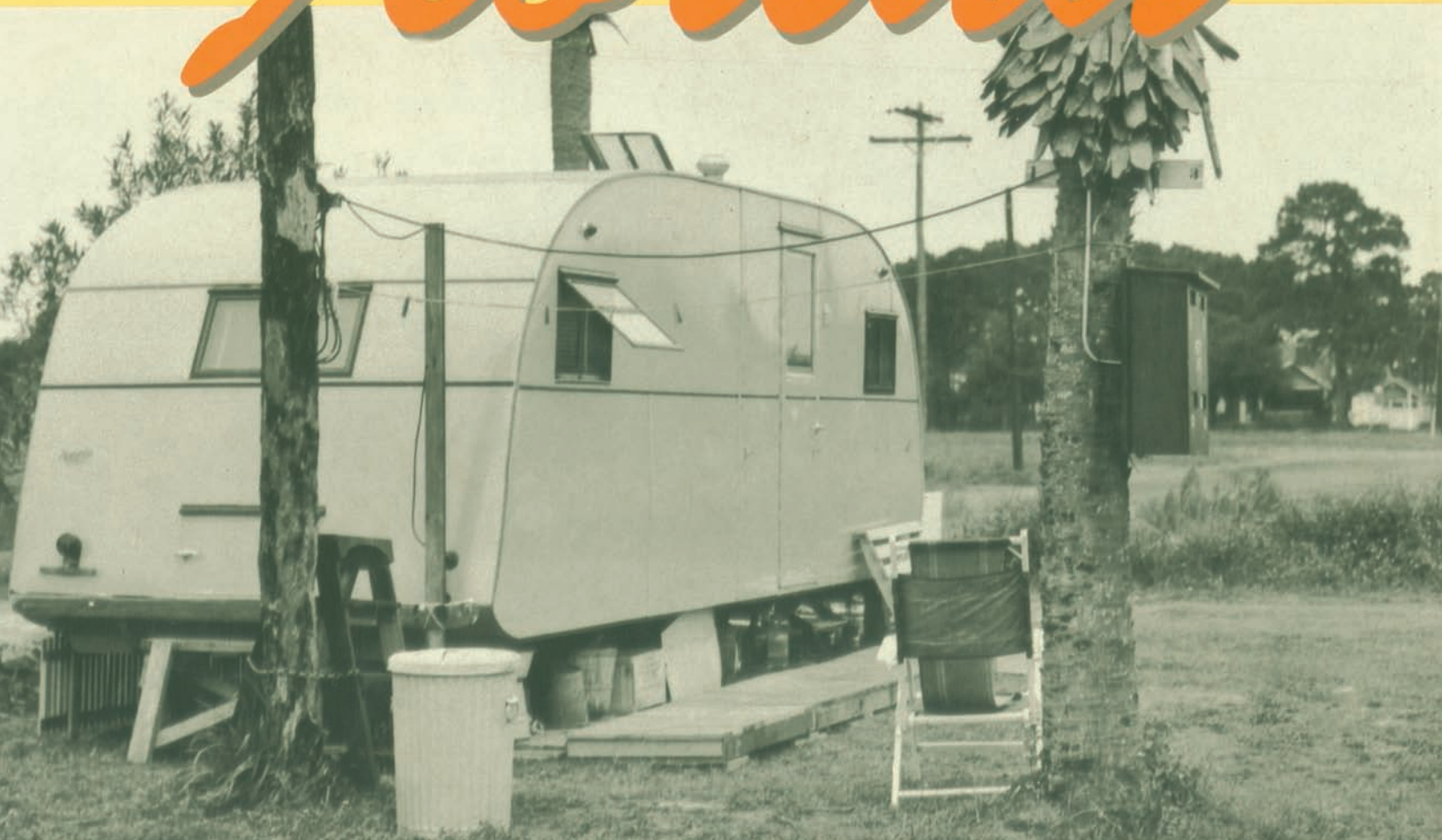


WALKER EVANS

# Florida



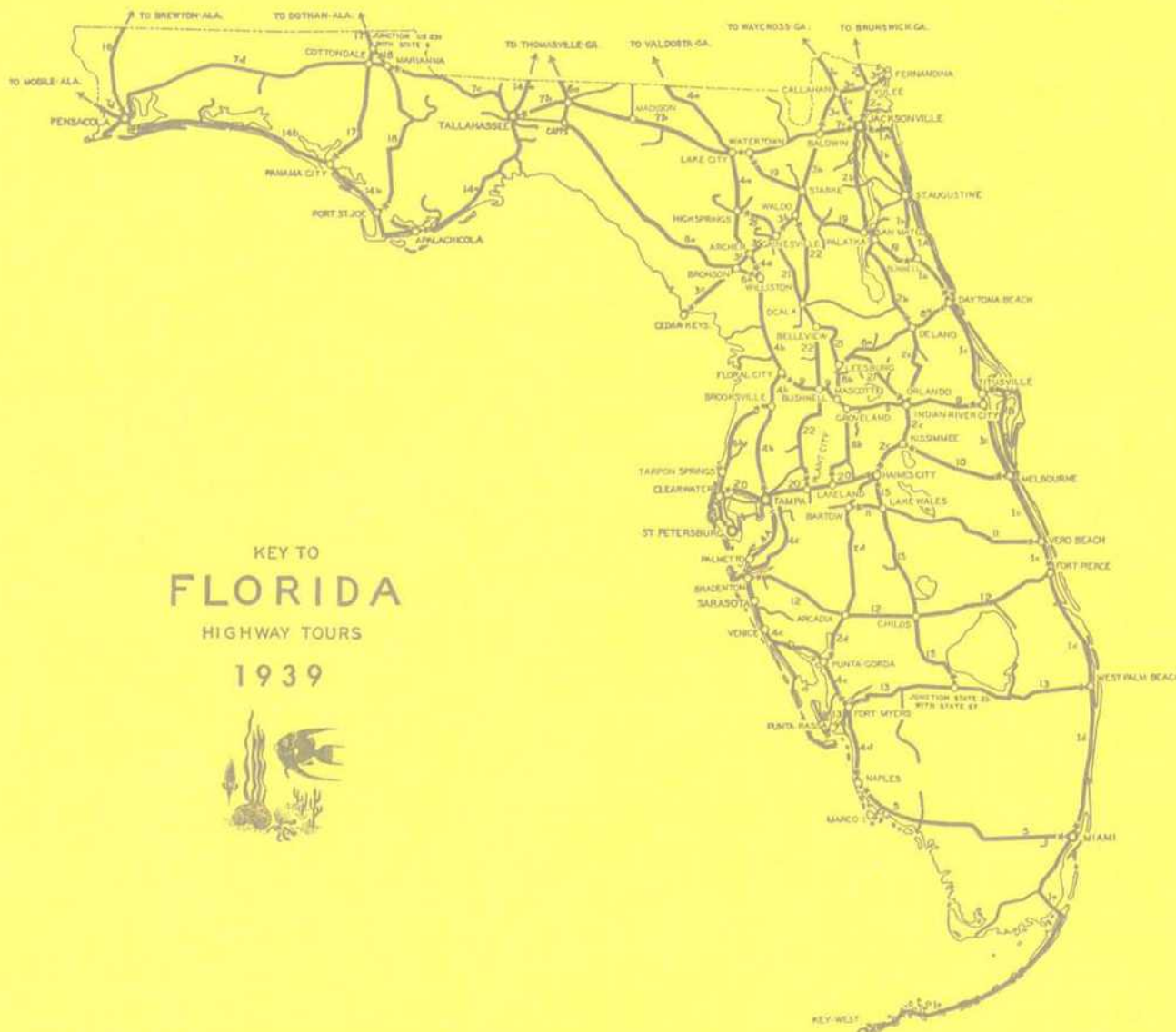
With an essay by Robert Plunket

**e** commissioned in 1941 by writer Karl Bickel, Walker Evans traveled to Florida to take the photographs that were published a year later in Bickel's *The Mangrove Coast*. These photographs constitute a little-known chapter in Evans's long career. Pelicans, trailer homes, dancing circus elephants from the Ringling Bros. winter quarters in Sarasota—the imagery Evans found in Florida was far removed from the Depression-era America with which this master photographer is so often associated.

*Walker Evans: Florida* brings together fifty-four of Evans's photographs of Florida, accompanied by an essay by novelist Robert Plunket, who lives in Sarasota. Plunket's wry account of the human and geographic landscape of Florida provides a superb counterpoint to Evans's photographs, revealing a side of Evans's career that may come as something of a surprise to many of his admirers.

FRONT COVER: *Trailer in Camp, Sarasota*; see page 56.

BACK COVER: *Three Palms*; see page 53.

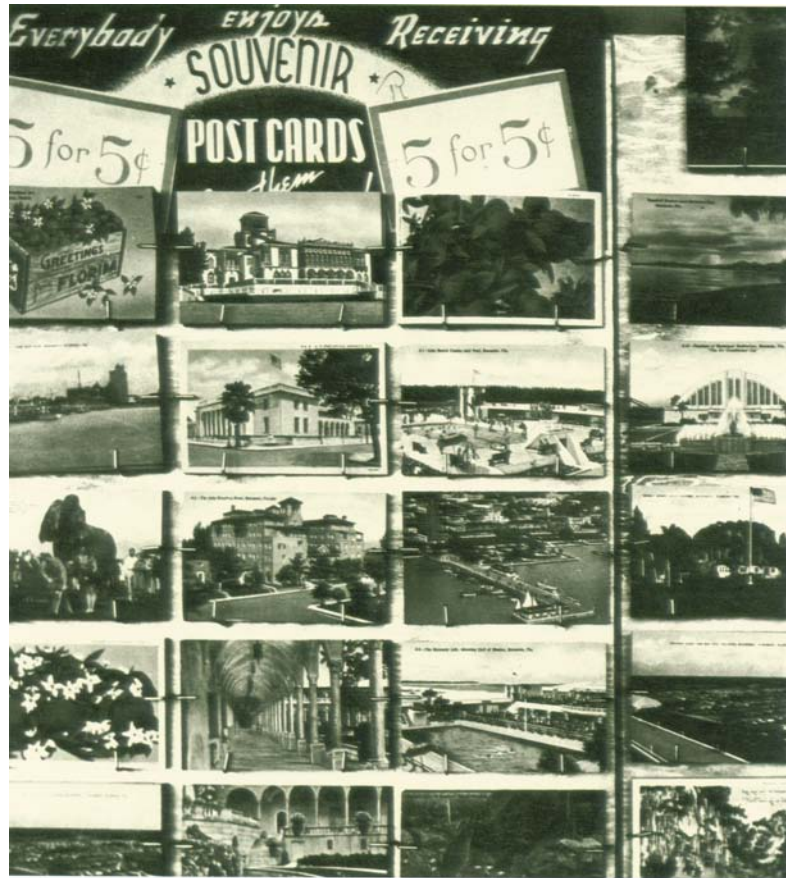


KEY TO  
**FLORIDA**  
 HIGHWAY TOURS  
 1939







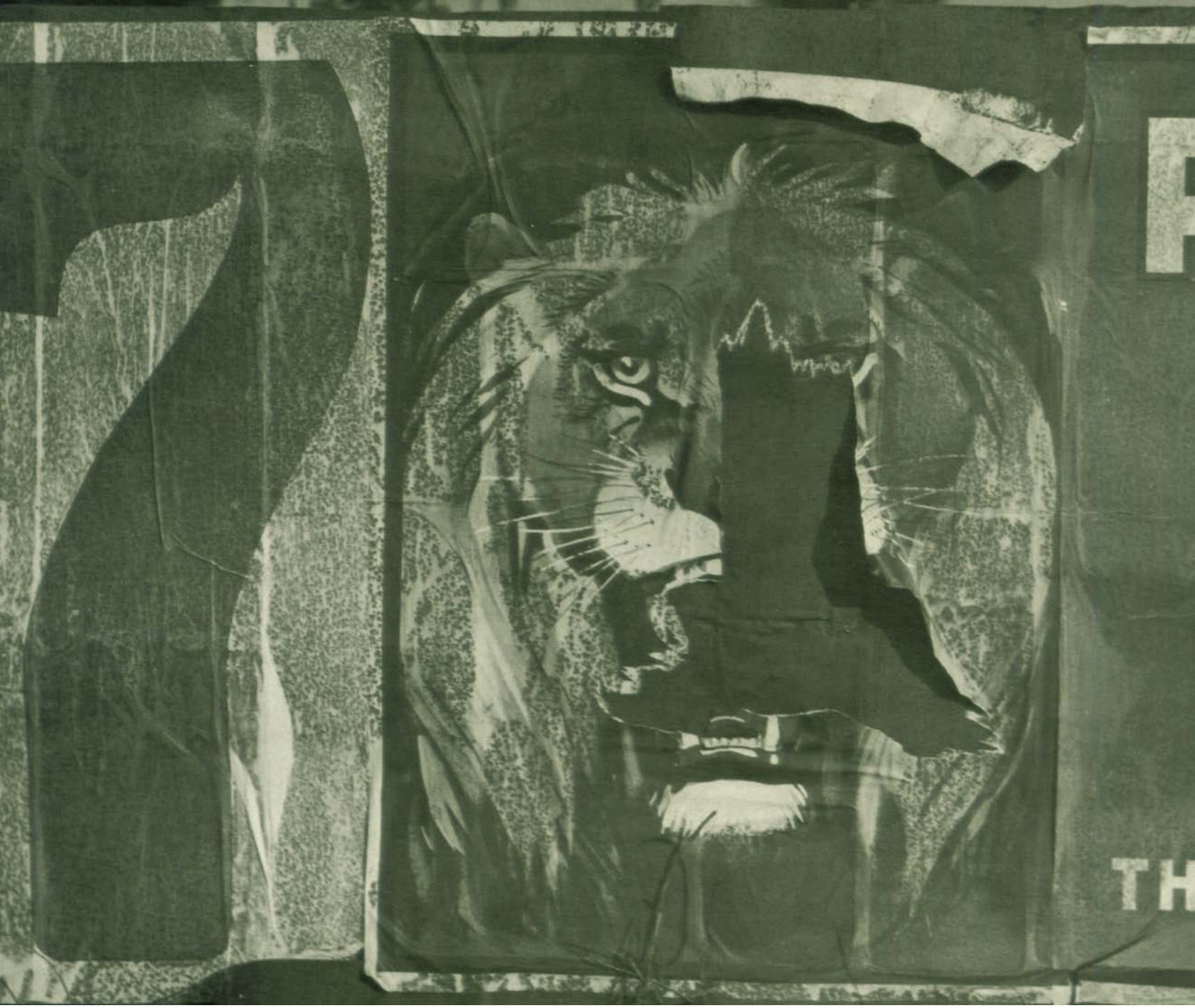








PLAZA



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WALKER EVANS  
*Florida*

With an essay by  
Robert Plunket

The J. Paul Getty Museum \* Los Angeles

## Introduction:

### Evans in Florida, 1941

**L**ongtime newspaperman Karl Bickel retired with his wife to Sarasota, Florida, in 1935. Bickel had been president of what was then called United Press Associations (now UPI) from 1923 to 1935, had written the book *New Empires: The Newspaper and the Radio* (1930), and, in 1932, had confidentially advised Charles Lindbergh on how to deal with the media during the ordeal of his son's kidnapping. In the quiet resort town of Sarasota (population 8,000), Bickel quickly became a community leader working toward economic as well as cultural improvements. He also took up the hobby of investigating the history of the west coast of the state. The result

of his research was *The Mangrove Coast: The Story of the West Coast of Florida*. It is a book that ranges from the geology of the region to the legends of its explorers to the author's personal reminiscences about favorite fishing trips.

*The Mangrove Coast* concerns a stretch of the state along the Gulf of Mexico described by Bickel as extending "from Ancolote Anchorage to Sanibel Key and then tapering off from Sanibel southward to the distant mouth of the Shark." Bickel declares that the attraction of the Mangrove Coast is actually to be found, not in its past, but "in its intangibles: the gleam of white sand, the softness of southwest winds, pink and turquoise sunsets, and the abiding simplicity of its people."

It does seem strange that Walker Evans (1903–1975), a photographer who consistently maintained that he found nature uninteresting, was selected to provide illustrations for a book about the historical myths and natural beauty



of the nation's vacationland, its southernmost state. But whatever the reasons for the offer, Evans was happy to accept the job of illustrating Bickel's book, which involved a six-week trip to Florida in 1941 and paid him a much-needed fee.

*The Mangrove Coast* appeared in 1942 in a first edition that consisted of Bickel's text (with an epilogue written that January reflecting the recent effects of wartime on Florida's west coast), followed by a portfolio of thirty-two photographs by Evans, introduced with his captions. This group of pictures is possibly the least known of Evans's pre-1945 works and survives in very few 1940s prints, most of them now located at the Getty Museum. Their importance has been overshadowed by Evans's New York subway series of the same period, but they exhibit the photographer's eye in an equally exceptional way and, with more exposure, should be accepted as a significant phase in the development of Evans's mature documentary style, com-

parable to his 1933 work in Cuba and his Depression-era pictures "from the field" for the Resettlement Administration.

The selection of Evans's Florida photographs presented here is accompanied by an essay by novelist Robert Plunket, who lives in Sarasota. Mr. Plunket knows Florida intimately, and his wry assessment of the Bickel—Evans collaboration places these little-known photographs within the colorful context of the Mangrove Coast.

Judith Keller

*Associate Curator  
Department of Photographs*

*A Technical Note*

Walker Evans: Florida contains fifty-four gelatin silver photographs, a number of which were first published in Karl Bickel's *The Mangrove Coast* (1942). All of the images were selected from the Getty

Museum's collection, the largest holding of prints made by Walker Evans himself. A few of the photographs have been slightly cropped, and a very few have been significantly cropped. All of the photographs are reproduced in their complete form, with

their dimensions and accession numbers, beginning on page 64. Further information about the prints, as well as the entire Getty collection of Evans's work, can be found in my *Walker Evans: The Getty Museum Collection* (1995).

J.K.



It is not to be denied  
that full half of the  
tourists and travellers  
that come to Florida  
return intensely  
disappointed, and  
even disgusted.

Why?

—Harriet Beecher Stowe  
*Palmetto Leaves*, 1873





## Walker Evans, the Mangrove Coast, and Me

by Robert Plunket

*Call me Mr. Chatterbox.*

1

Just about everyone in Sarasota does. For the past fifteen years I have been one of the town's leading gossip columnists. I've covered everything from charity balls to the Mayor's Prayer Breakfast, from the high-school prom to the opening night of the French Film Festival, where Jeanne Moreau and Audrey Hepburn, dressed to the nines, vied for "best entrance." (Audrey won.) I've roasted politicians, I've emceed charity auctions, I've modeled sportswear to benefit the Humane Society. I've even interviewed Warren Burger and Pia Zadora, although not at the same time.

PAGE xii

*Two Giraffes. Circus Winter  
Quarters. Sarasota*

PAGE 3

*Concrete Block Building with  
Shell Decoration*

2

And in doing so I've learned a lot about Florida. It really is different down here—the way it looks, the weather, the social patterns, the brand-newness of the place. Everybody comes from somewhere else, which means he has secrets from his past back in Dayton, and in a number of cases those secrets involve former wives who disappeared under mysterious circumstances. An amazing number of people blow into town, make a splashy name for themselves, and then are arrested. The buying and selling of real estate is the dominant industry. Indeed, it could be said that the real-estate ad is the principal form of literature here.

Even the art is different. True, there is much conventional art—paintings, performances, etc. But the really interesting artistic endeavors are usually disguised as something else—a theme park, a mystery novel, a coconut, even a simple vacation photograph. Walker Evans took many photographs here in 1941, but they are not, definitely not, vacation photographs. They are something else entirely.







WAGNER

ALE  
S.B.  
BEER

Coca-Cola

AMOUS

HAMBURGER

I first became interested in Walker Evans because I am what you might call a biography freak. They are my favorite form of reading. I haunt the “New Books” section at Selby Library at least once a week, looking for the latest. I’ll read anything, but I find myself most drawn to the lives of those tortured twentieth-century American writers, the ones who smoke and drank too much and then died young, thus becoming instant legends. One thing I’ve noticed is that in an astonishing number of these books, the name Walker Evans keeps popping up.

Two of Evans’s closest friends have particularly interested me. The first was





15

15

20

25

15

20  
DOZ



OPPOSITE

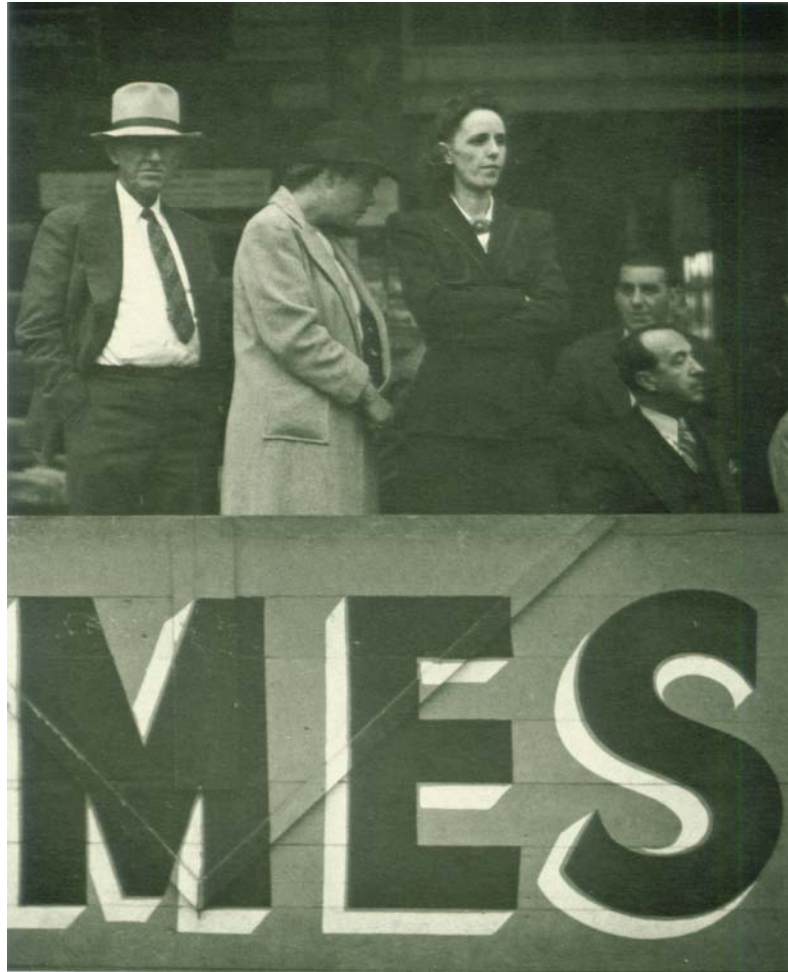
*Souvenir Shop Display*

RIGHT

*Racetrack Spectators*

Hart Crane, one of the great poets of the twenties. Talk about intense: he worked on one poem for seven years—*The Bridge*—for which Evans took the frontispiece photograph. Crane was a binge drinker and an indefatigable sailor-chaser, that is, until he surprised everyone by running off with Malcolm Cowley's wife. They went to Mexico and moved in with Katherine Anne Porter. But on the way back, Crane had second thoughts and jumped ship, literally, leaping off the stern of the SS *Orizaba* and drowning just north of Havana.

James Agee was even stranger. His career was the triumph of the will.



Nobody wanted to be a great writer more than he. He published one very good novel, *A Death in the Family*, more or less to prove that he could, but he is best remembered for his collaboration with Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, and his screenplay for *The African Queen*. Like Crane he died young, a heart attack in a taxicab. He was literally worn out by art. He was one of the original “problem smokers”; he had a bad heart but couldn’t stop his constant intake of nicotine. Women found him very sexy in a Nicolas Cage sort of way, and as he is a biographer’s dream, there are quite a few books about him.

Evans is the mystery of the trio. One reason may be that he lacked the energy of his friends. He was cool, passive, shy, more a voyeur than a participant. Evans didn’t wear his heart on his sleeve like Crane and Agee. He loved people-watching, particularly when he could do it in a reclining position. Today there are many artists like him—Andy Warhol and R. Crumb leap to mind—but Walker Evans was, back in the ’30s and ’40s, ahead of his time, personality-wise.

An example: he embraced the commercial. Indeed, his career was one of moving from job to job. Most of his major work resulted from becoming attached to a project initiated by some-

*Now, in his new home,  
Karl set out to become  
Sarasota's ideal citizen,  
the "active retiree."*

one else. The best known was, of course, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. But there were others as well; the book you're holding in your hands is the result of one of Evans's more exotic assignments, and just about the only one that could be described as fun.

It all began when Evans was contacted on behalf of a man named Karl Bickel, who needed some photographs for a book he was writing. Bickel had recently retired to Sarasota after a long and distinguished career in journalism that started with his coverage of the San Francisco earthquake. He moved from strength to strength until he ended up as head of UPI.

He joined various civic boards and boosted the city. He led the drive to build a big pavilion out at Lido Beach, and his wife, Madira, is still remembered for her ironfisted rule of the local women's club. But they both had an intellectual side as well, and the history of Florida became their specialty. Indeed, Madira rose to such prominence in the state historical society that an ancient Indian midden, or pile of shells, is named in her honor up in Terra Ceia.

Karl decided to do her one better, though. He would write a book detailing the long and colorful history of the Gulf Coast of Florida, to be titled *The Mangrove Coast*, after the ubiquitous plant that grows half-in and half-out of the water and covers much of



LEFT  
*Two Men Fishing*

OPPOSITE  
*Shuffleboard Players*

the shoreline. And he would get a first-rate photographer to supply the pictures. Walker Evans, who was, after all, the first photographer to be honored with an exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art, sounded perfect.

With his Guggenheim money running out (he'd received a fellowship in 1940) and the release of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* so disappointing—the book sold a mere six hundred copies—Evans must have been very happy with the prospect of spending six weeks in Florida, all expenses paid, just as cold was settling in up North. Furthermore it would be a free honeymoon: Evans had just married Jane Smith Ninas, a painter. And so, in late October of 1941, the newlyweds set out for the west coast of Florida.





**I**f the phrase “west coast of Florida” is drawing a blank in your mind, don’t worry: even people on the east coast of Florida don’t know much about it. You grow up on one coast and spend your entire life there, without going to the other. One reason is the journey itself, an endless drive through swamp or sugarcane or cattle ranches. The only human settlements are migrant-worker and prison camps. The message is clear: behave, or you’ll end up in the middle of the state.

No one denies that the east coast is more glamorous. It always has been. There was nothing quite as exciting as Miami Beach in the 1950s, and now, in its new guise, the Beach is back on top, with all those hip models and no place to park. And Palm Beach has always been one of the most glamorous places in the world, a top-ten contender. Even Boca Raton, even Ft. Lauderdale. . . .

But Tampa?



LEFT  
*Cypress Swamp*





*Like any self-respecting place with a similar problem, the west coast concedes glamour but insists that it is more "real."* In this case, "real" means

real old and real quiet, and with an

indigenous population that is real Southern in thought and action and lifestyle (i.e., lots of pickup trucks with Confederate flags). The economy centers around the retirement industry, and anyone under fifty is perceived as startlingly young. Though there are pockets of affluence (Naples and, near Sarasota, Longboat Key), the general atmosphere is middle-class Midwestern, with palm trees.

Keep in mind that the west coast of Florida is not the same thing as the Gulf Coast. The Gulf Coast stretches from Pensacola, at the Alabama border, all the way south to the end of the mainland, just north of Key West. The west coast is the lower part of the Gulf Coast, the part that faces west; up in the Panhandle, the land faces south. These two parts of the Gulf Coast, like the east and west coasts, have nothing to do with each other and are, in fact, separated by another natural barrier. On the map it looks like an enormous mangrove swamp. Whatever it is, it is impenetrable, and no one ever goes there.





C. WAGNER

DRINK

*Coca-Cola*

REST HOUSE

*Dr Pepper*

PAGE 14

*Auto Graveyard at Tampa*

PAGE 15

*Upstate Roadside Landscape*

RIGHT

*Fishermen in Sponge Boat.  
Tarpon Springs*

OPPOSITE

*Sponge-Diver's Boat.  
Tarpon Springs*







The west coast, where Evans took all his photographs, begins north of Tampa with a smattering of little towns, the most interesting of which is Tarpon Springs, where fifth-generation Greeks dive for sponges. Next comes Tampa itself. On the surface it seems to be a large commercial center of no particular interest, but the more you study it, the more it becomes very interesting indeed. Criminals on the lam are always being caught in motels there, and a serious devil-worship problem exists among the young; yet another claim to fame is that it has the highest incidence of lightning strikes in the country. St. Petersburg, across the bay, functions as a glum Brooklyn to Tampa's Manhattan. It was here that a broken, barely middle-aged Jack Kerouac drank himself to death in his mother's house.

Heading south, we next encounter Bradenton, an old Southern town famous as the home of Tropicana Orange Juice.





LEFT  
*Crowd Waiting at Street  
Corner, Tampa.*



Then comes Sarasota, about which more later, and then Venice, where retirement has become not just a lifestyle but *the* lifestyle. (I once covered a party there attended by, among others, twenty-seven people over the age of one hundred.) Ft. Myers is next; it is very large, over two hundred thousand inhabitants, but oddly out of the mainstream. I've only had occasion to go there once, and all I can remember is banyan trees and lots of traffic. Next comes Naples, which is very opulent. Old money retires here, but it is smallish—population twenty-one thousand—and, as they say, "dead in the summer." South of Naples is a place called Marco Island, crowded with vacation condos whose charm eludes me, and then . . . nothing.



OPPOSITE  
*Men in the Street at Tampa*

LEFT  
*Blind Couple  
in Tampa City Square Hall*







OPPOSITE  
*Coastal Landscape  
with Palms*

That was before air-conditioning and mosquito control. Roads were few and primitive; much of the transportation was by boat. When Charles and Anne Lindbergh came for a visit, they packed as if for a safari.

But Sarasota was a happy exception to all this. It was world famous back in those days, as the home of the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus, a beautiful, pristine little town of eight thousand—the undisputed star of the

west coast. It had thirty-five miles of white-sand beaches and a cosmopolitan population. The bars must have been great; people still talk about the old Plaza, not to mention the M'Toto Room (named after a famous gorilla) at the El Vernona Hotel, where there were circus acts and dancing every night. Visiting celebrities came through regularly. The Queen of Iran showed up, plus Will Rogers, and even Albert Einstein, who was fitted with a truss at Badger's Drug



Store on Main Street. The house where he stayed is still standing on South Polk Drive out on Lido Key, making Sarasota one of the few places where we can truly say we had “Einstein on the Beach.”

Karl Bickel gave Evans carte blanche as to what to take pictures of, and it’s not surprising that the urbane photographer, who bought his clothes at Brooks Brothers, decided to concentrate his efforts on Sarasota. The road trips were few and not very productive. (I wonder if Madira and her middens had anything to do with this.) A journey to Tallahassee\* yielded a single portrait of an antebellum mansion and a sidewalk scene. Tampa and St. Pete registered as group portraits of grim, elderly women. Only Tarpon Springs acquitted itself well: Evans loved the diving suit (p. 29) and the amateurish murals (pp. 30–31), versions of which still decorate the Tarpon Springs of today.

\*Ralph Waldo Emerson, no less, described Tallahassee as “a grotesque place,” settled by “office holders, speculators, and desperados.” Even in 1826, few writers were willing to give the west coast a break.



OPPOSITE  
*Antebellum Plantation  
House at Tallahassee*

LEFT  
*Negroes at Tallahassee*













PAGE 26

*The Green Benches at  
St. Petersburg*

PAGE 27

*Winter Resorters*

PAGE 28

*Winter Resorters*

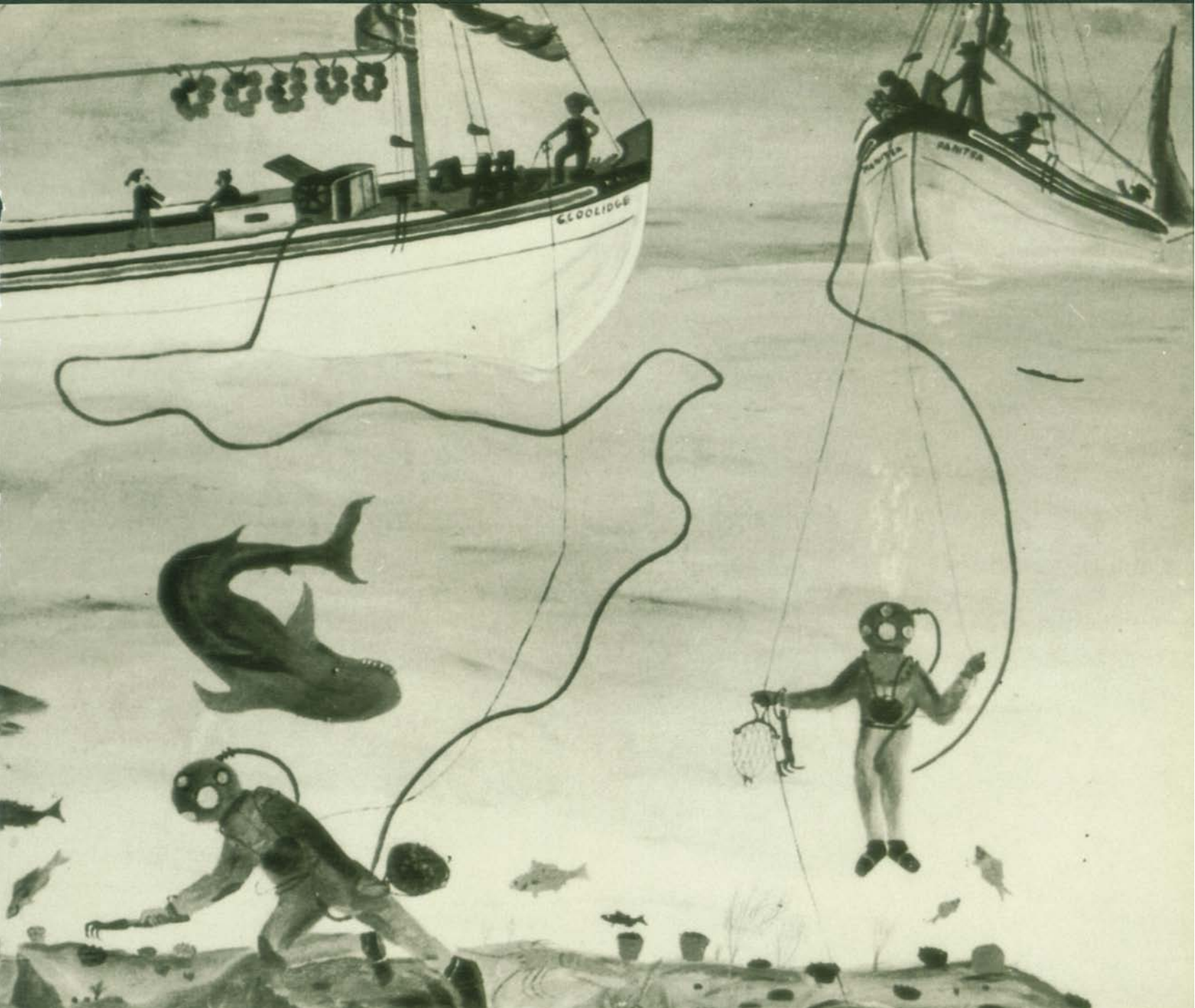
RIGHT

*Sponge Diver's Suit.  
Tarpon Springs*

For his Sarasota photographs, Evans managed to capture the things that were unique to the town. First, of course, came the circus. Time after time he journeyed out to the east of town to visit the Ringling circus winter quarters and photograph the animals, the architecture, the railroad cars, and most of all, the elaborate, hand-carved circus wagons that were used in countless parades down the Main Streets of countless American towns.









PAGES 30-31

*Descriptive Painting by  
a Sponge Diver*

RIGHT

*Caged Baboon, Circus  
Winter Quarters*



It is hard for us to imagine the hold the circus had on everyday life sixty or so years ago. For many children, the day the circus came to town was the high point of the year.

The story of Sarasota and the circus is a sad one, particularly because it began so happily. Back in the 1920s John Ringling, the brains of the five Ringling brothers, came to Sarasota for a vacation. He was immediately struck by the town's potential and began buying up everything in sight, developing it, selling lots, laying out streets; he was, quite literally, building a city.

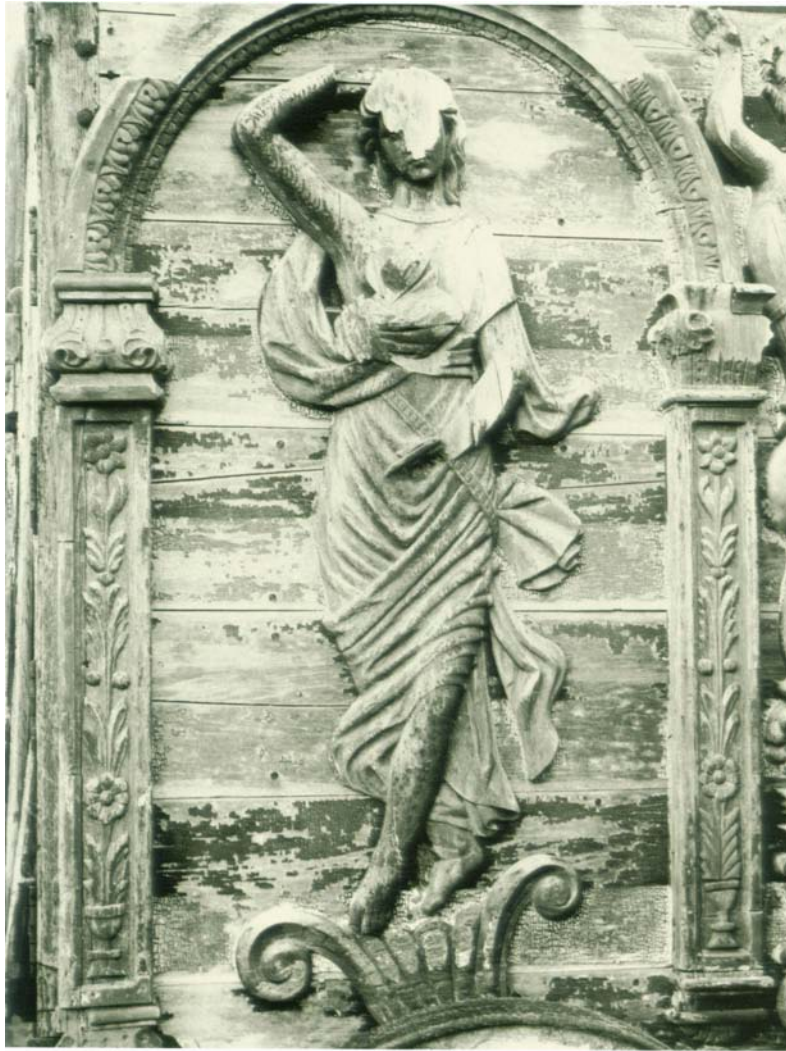
RIGHT

*Balcony Car, Circus Train,  
Winter Quarters, Sarasota*

34







LEFT  
*Ringling Bandwagon. Circus  
Winter Quarters. Sarasota*

PAGES 36-37  
*Uninhabited Seaside  
Residence in Sarasota  
(Ca'd Zan, formerly the  
Ringling Residence)*

He constructed a palace on the bay for himself and his wife Mable and his collection of Old Masters and began work on a Ritz Carlton Hotel. In 1927 he moved his entire operation here from Bridgeport, Connecticut (where, interestingly, Walker Evans also took photographs in the '40s—but that's another story). Sarasota suddenly became unique in the world: it was a one-industry town, and that industry was the circus.

For years it was a role that Sarasota played proudly. In no time the winter quarters, with its menagerie and rehearsals open to the public in an outdoor arena built to the exact specifications of Madison Square Garden, became the biggest tourist attraction in the state. It was the Disney World of its day. Tourists still show up looking for it. And when the depression hit, the circus enabled the town to survive quite nicely. The performers put down roots here, as much as circus performers can, and for a small town in Florida, Sarasota devel-

oped quite an eclectic population mix. We had aerialists from Europe; we had midgets—for a time we had more ex-Munchkins than any place in the world; I used to see them in the supermarket, but sadly most have passed away. And we had the Ringlings themselves, with their mansions on the bay and their *Dynasty*-like struggles over control of their empire.

When Evans visited in 1941 the circus was still in its glory days, and glorious they were. One small example: the elephants he photographed going through their paces in the outdoor arena would, in a matter of weeks, begin work on their new showstopper for the 1942 season. It was a "Circus Polka" with music commissioned especially from Igor Stravinsky, to be choreographed by George Balanchine, with costumes by Norman Bel Geddes.



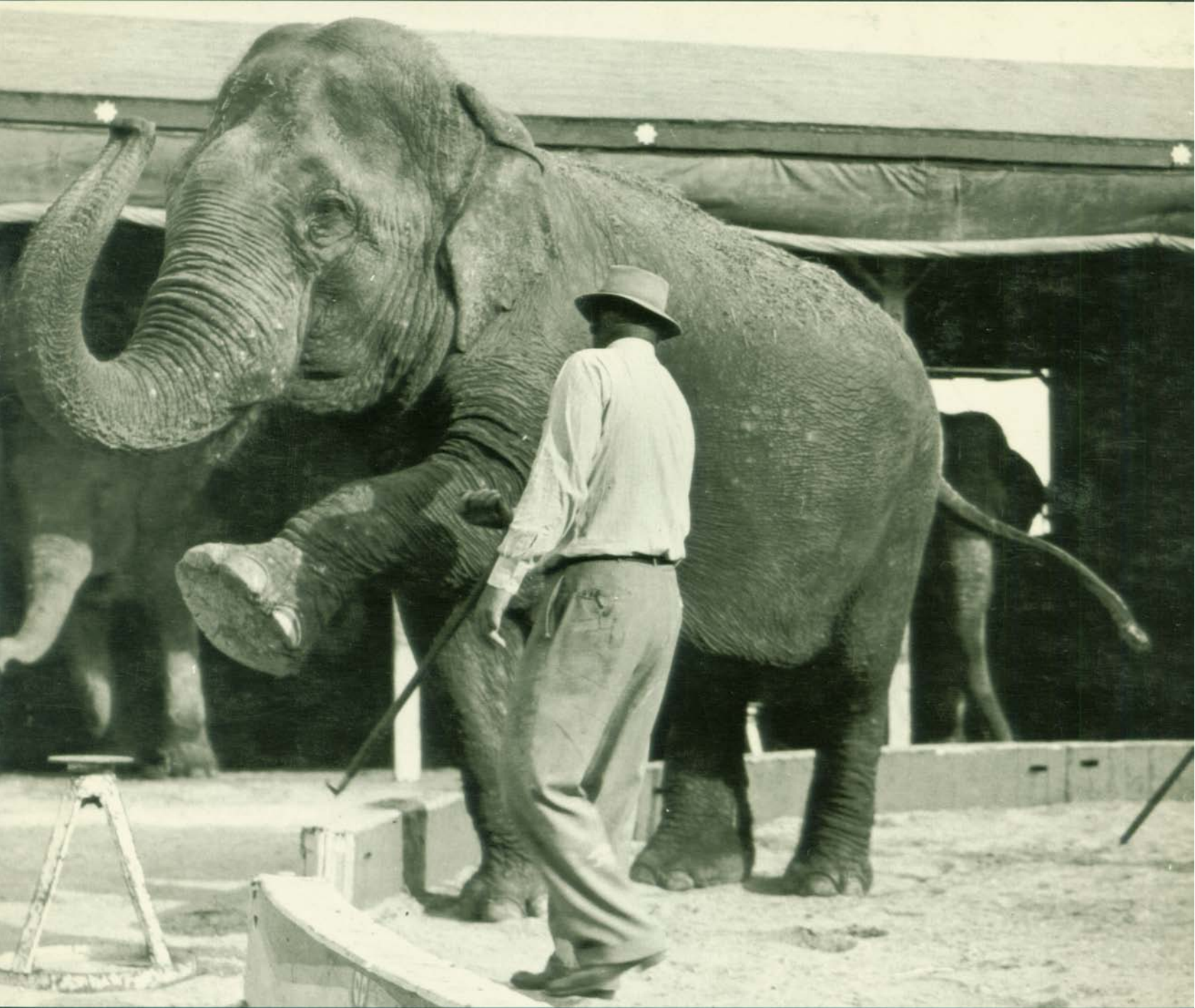




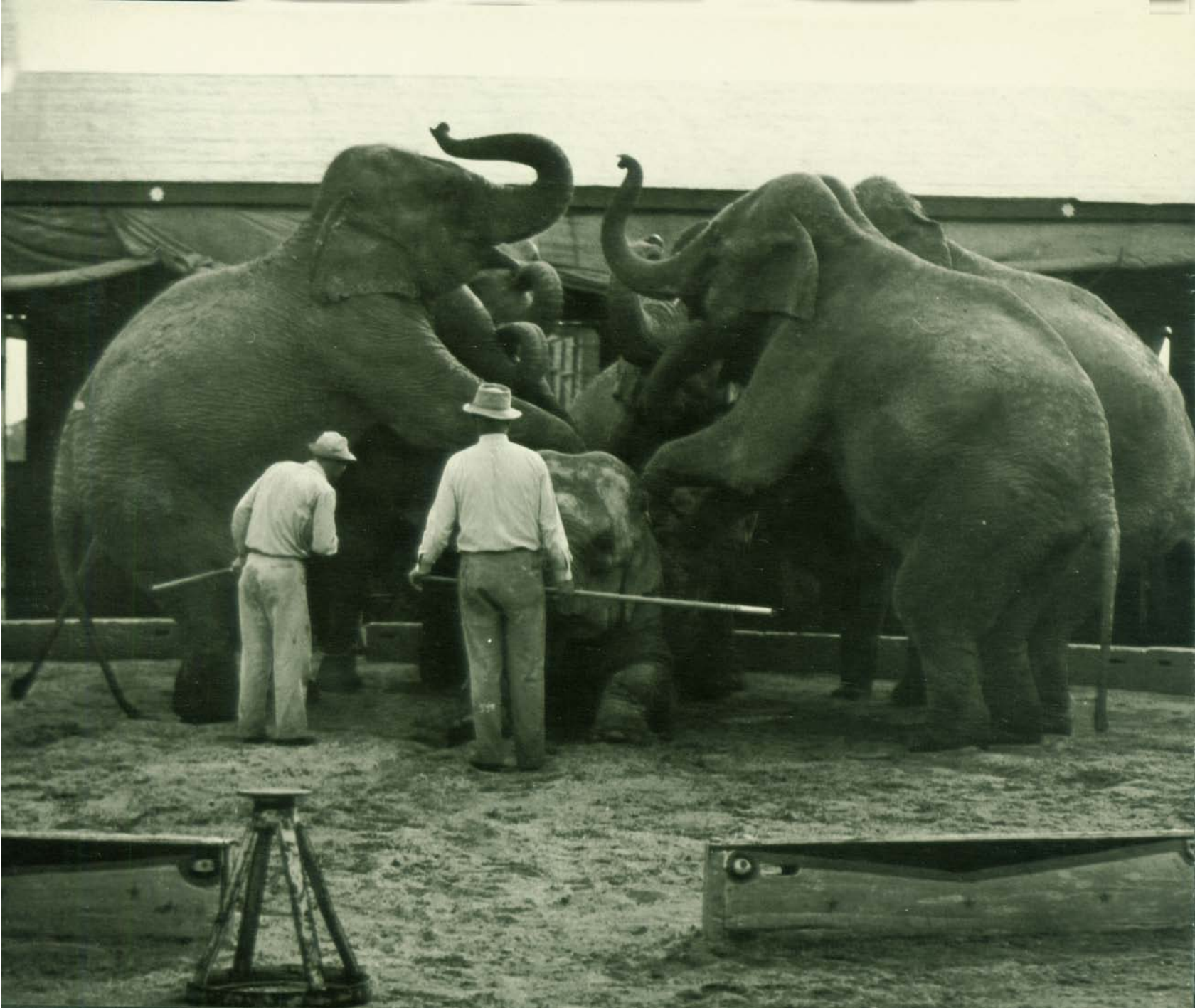
BELOW  
*Unfinished Boomtime Hotel*

OPPOSITE  
*Circus Trainer with  
Performing Elephant.  
Winter Quarters, Sarasota*











The stars were Old Modoc, the great circus elephant buried somewhere in an unmarked grave in the Kensington Park subdivision, and Vera Zorina, who was then Balanchine's wife. The *New York Times* (April 10, 1942) pronounced it "breathtaking":

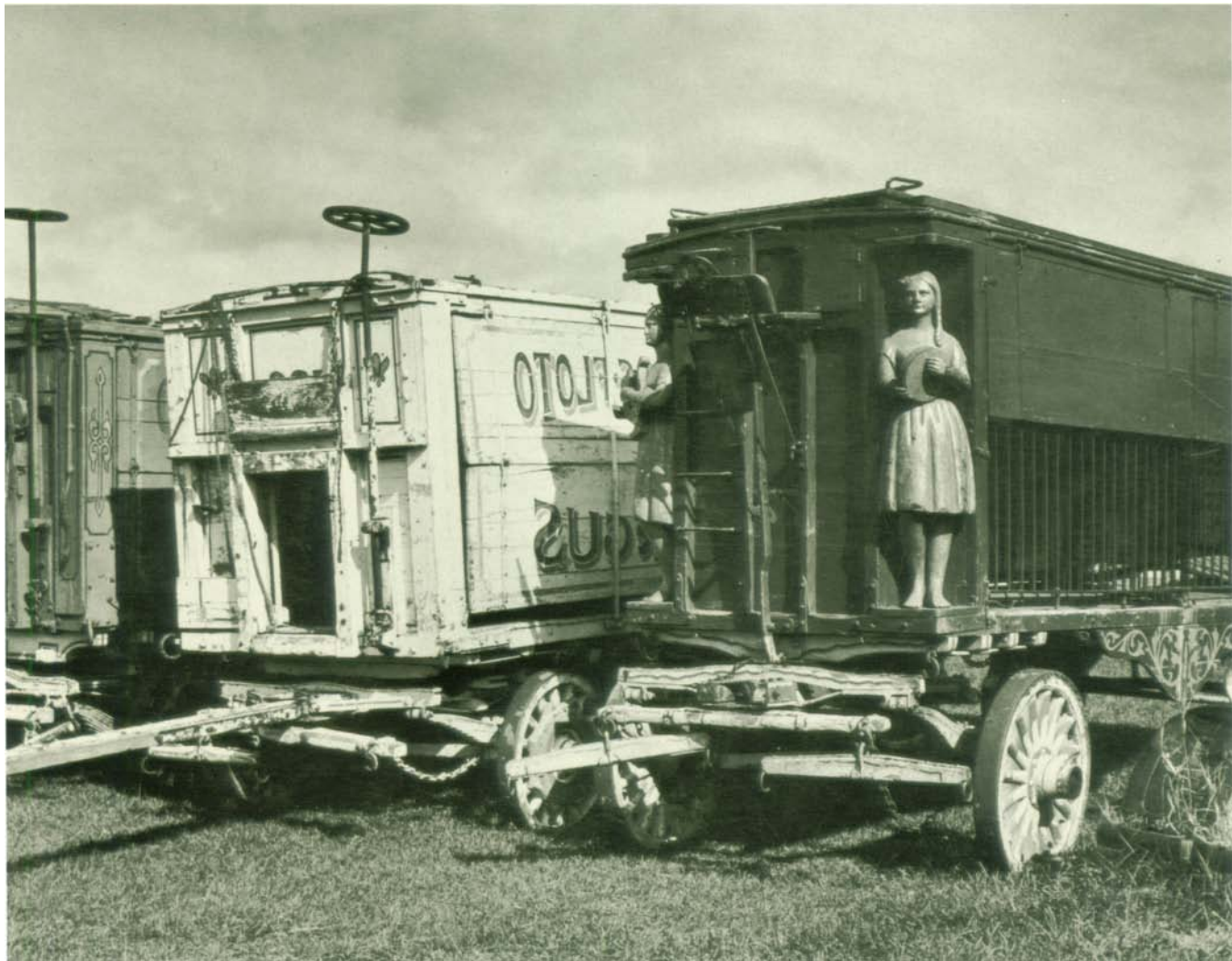
The cast included fifty ballet girls, all in fluffy pink, and fifty dancing elephants. They came into the ring in artificial, blue-lighted dusk, first the little pink dancers, then the great beasts. The little dancers pirouetted into the three rings and the elephant herds gravely swayed and nodded rhythmically. The arc of sway widened and the stomping picked up with the music. In the central ring Modoc the Elephant danced with amazing grace, and in time to the tune, closing in perfect cadence with the crashing finale. In the last dance fifty elephants moved in an endless chain around the great ring, trunk to tail, with the little pink ballet girls in the blue twilight behind them. The ground shook with the elephants' measured steps.

OPPOSITE  
*Two Circus Trainers with  
Performing Elephants.  
Winter Quarters, Sarasota*

PAGE 42  
*Three Circus Train Cars.  
Winter Quarters, Sarasota*

*Television killed the  
circus. But Sarasota, to  
its shame, helped out.*

Just when things were getting really bad and the circus needed every break it could get, Sarasota ungratefully zoned it out of town. It seems that circus people live with an inordinate amount of strange equipment—gaudy trailers, wild animals, trapeze rigging in the backyard—and one by one all these necessities were prohibited. They had become a little embarrassing in a carnival, honky-tonk sort of way. Besides, the town had found a new source of wealth: the retired Midwesterners who began moving here in the 1950s.





Even though Ringling Bros. left in 1960, first moving to Venice, then to Tampa, Sarasota remains a circus town. Over a dozen smaller circuses are headquartered here, though their performance schedules get smaller and smaller with each passing year. Many of the great circus families are still here, though most of the younger members have left the business. My old neighbor Gunther Wallenda taught history at Sarasota High. And Olympia Zacchini, the daughter of the first woman shot out of a cannon, is a prominent local artist. There is one Ringling left in town, Pat Ringling Buck. She is a gossip columnist just like me. Or she was. Now she's a critic.



PAGE 43

*Man at Work on Circus  
Wagon. Sarasota*

RIGHT

*Detail of Circus Wagon.  
Sarasota*

OPPOSITE

*Circus Winter Quarters.  
Sarasota*



But if the circus is but a shell of its former self, it has given Sarasota a history of creative endeavor unparalleled in the world. This is the town where the famous gag with all the clowns piling out of the tiny car was invented. This is where Franz Unus lived, the man who could stand on one finger. And then there were the elephants. What the *New York Times* didn't tell you about was an incident that occurred during a rehearsal at the winter quarters. Things were going fine until a sudden noise frightened the herd and they all took off en masse, heading south. The image of a distraught George Balanchine chasing a herd of elephants, all clad in pink tutus, down Lockwood Ridge Road—that, to me, is Sarasota, and always will be.









PAGE 46

*Circus Wagon (Calliope Car),  
Winter Quarters, Sarasota*

PAGE 47

*Ringling Bandwagon, Circus  
Winter Quarters, Sarasota*

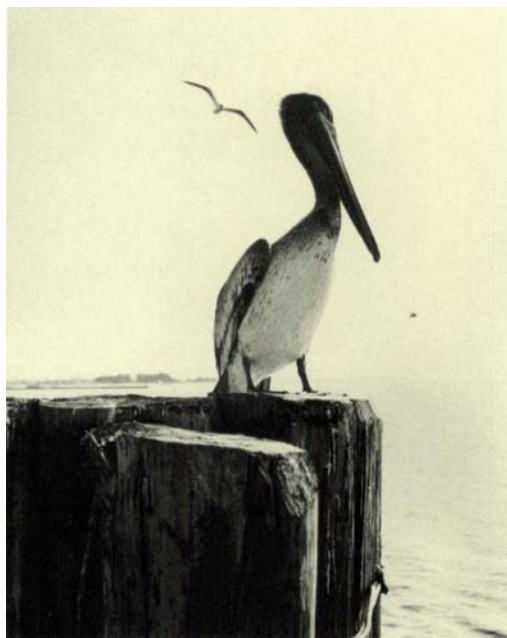
**A** friend of mine, visiting Sarasota for the first time, called it "pretty, but not *that* pretty." It is flat as a board. The vegetation is scrubby in some areas, tropical in others. There is nothing dramatic or breathtaking about it; when real beauty takes over, it comes from the changing colors of the sky and water.

This was something Walker Evans was not much interested in. He was clearly an artist who did not fall victim to nature's charms. No wonder Ansel Adams hated his work. The only natural thing he really liked was driftwood, which at least he could collect. One can even sense a certain hostility in his photographs of the Mangrove Coast's



LEFT  
*Inland Landscape*

BELOW  
*Pelican on a Dock*





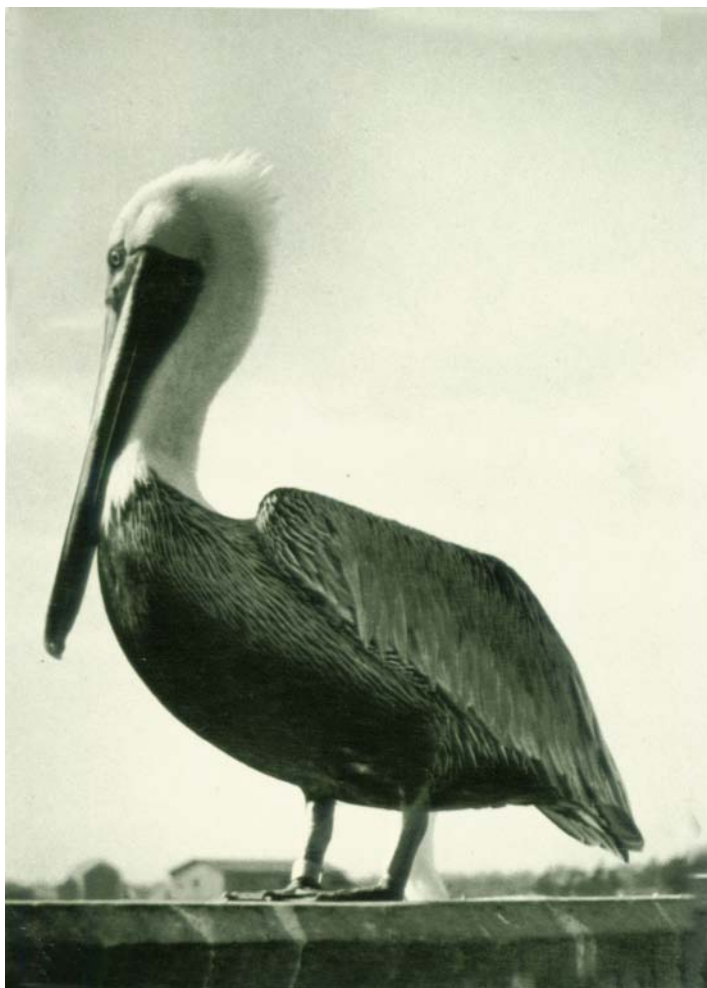
*The world is a poorer place for not having a Walker Evans photograph of a live alligator; they were his kind of animal.*

beaches and swamps. The swamps I can understand; back in those days they were not revered as fragile ecosystems, they were the enemy—useless for any purpose whatsoever and full of dangerous things like alligators. Many Floridians still look upon them this way, and not without reason. Alligators, reveling in a big comeback from their endangered-species status, are making off with children and small dogs at an alarming rate. At one retirement community they have a volunteer alligator patrol during poodle-walking hours.

Instead, he fell for the pelican. If you live here for any length of time, the pelican becomes about as interesting as the squirrel. Seabirds have a downside—they are vicious, stubborn, and greedy. They are always getting caught in hooks and fishing lines and then being rushed to the Pelican Man's Bird Sanctuary, one of the town's more popular charities.

I can forgive the swamps. I can forgive the pelicans, who do, after all, mate for life. But I really wish he had tried a little harder with the beaches. They are, after all, our bread and butter. One of them even won a Best Sand in the World contest. They can hold their own with any resort in the world.





True, the water does tend to be a little tepid and calm and bathtub-like, particularly in August, and they are eroding at an appalling rate. But they remain the town's pride and joy, not to mention a little gold mine.

But where are they? All we get are several shots of misshapen palm trees growing much too close to the waterline. Where is the Lido Casino, the glorious Art Deco beach pavilion championed by his host, Mr. Bickel, but sadly torn down in the 1960s? Where are the pale tourists, the tots with pails, the shell collectors?

*Apparently  
Evans just  
wasn't a beach  
person.*





PAGE 51

*Two Pelicans on a Dock*

OPPOSITE

*Pelican*

LEFT

*Three Palms*

BELOW

*Gulf of Mexico*

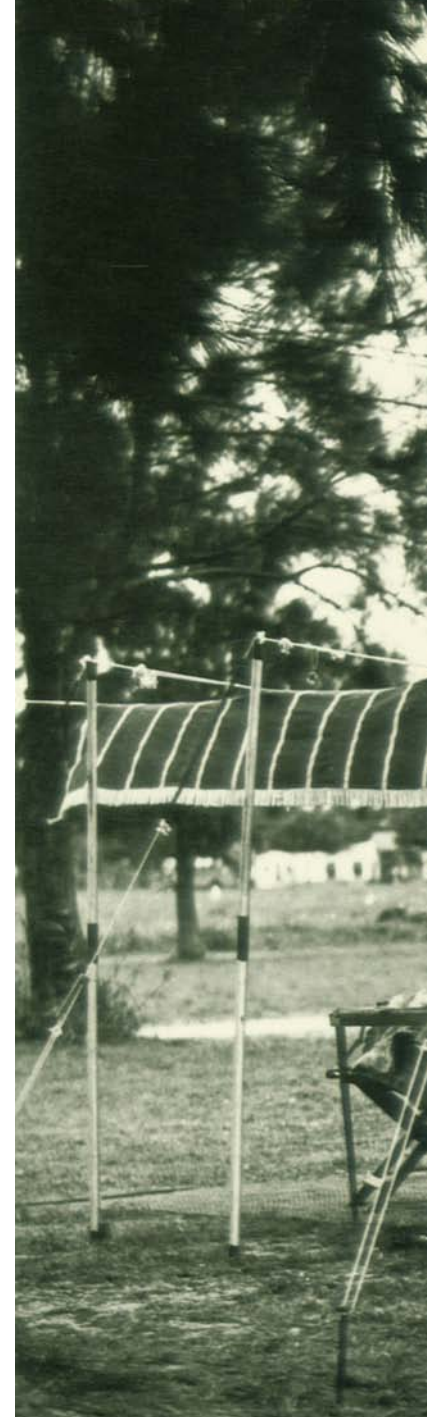


*But if he didn't like  
the beach, he certainly  
liked trailers.*

I've yet to meet another person whose enthusiasm for trailers matches mine, but I think that Evans may well be that person, my imaginary trailer friend, so to speak.

For years I've been trying to get people to pay attention to these fascinating things, but it's clear that they are just not going to. That's one of the reasons it's so hard to do research about trailers. There's been nothing written about them. And it doesn't look like the situation is about to change. I've been shopping around my coffee-table book, *Trailer Style*, for years, without a nibble. People just don't get it.

But I have the feeling that they were right up Evans's alley. Imagine: a little metal house that moves. How could you *not* be fascinated?







MA-95-37

EE-71-40





PAGES 54-55  
*Recreational Vehicle with  
Striped Canopy*

OPPOSITE  
*Trailer in Camp, Sarasota*

How I would love to show Evans a few of my favorite trailer parks: places like Mel-Mar Village up in Bradenton. Here the trailers are in what I call the "Toaster Style," which clearly caught Evans's eye, too [opposite page]. Everywhere you look there are long-forgotten names: First Lady, Pine Tree, Pal, Flame, and New Moon. Clearly Mel-Mar Village belongs to the Classic Period.

Or rather the Early Classic Period. Windmill Village North—not to be confused with Windmill Village South—is Late Classic. Here the look is 1959. The shape is larger, squarer. Gone is any pretense that these things can move. Porches sprout, plus carports. Bay windows appear, and if you're lucky, you may even get fins.

And yes, there is a windmill. It towers over the place, housing the clubhouse in its base, with the pool right in front. And the streets are named after Dutch cheeses. A good dose of well-done kitsch is always a plus in a trailer park; no one knew this better than Evans.

Recently, when I was in-between houses and had no place to live, I actually got to spend three weeks in such a park. It was called Tropical Acres, and it was heaven. My trailer was a great big double-wide, with so much space that it had rooms I never even went in. (The only problem was a certain wobble when you walked from one end to the other.) My neighbors were the nicest people in the world. When my cat got lost they organized into teams and combed the park, looking under every trailer and even searching the sewage treatment plant next door. My favorite neighbor was the guy right across the street. His trailer was tiny, barely 8 by 12. He and



LEFT  
*Statuette of a Cherub*

OPPOSITE  
*Municipal Trailer Camp*

his wife hauled it down each winter from Michigan. In their minuscule front yard they had a plaster goose, and each day they would dress the goose in a different outfit. That goose had more clothes than I did. If it was raining he wore his yellow slicker, but if it was sunny and bright, you never knew what he might have on, and it reached the point where I got out of bed in the morning just to see what the goose might be wearing. My favorite outfit was a gendarme's uniform, complete with a little goose-sized cape. Something tells me Evans would have been very interested in this goose; whenever I think about it, I can almost hear him yelling from beyond the grave: "Get the camera!"



KUM  
ANGO

LOT 14

OEKING



**T**he *Mangrove Coast* was published in 1942 and was a big hit—except for the pictures. They just didn’t mesh with the text. Bickel was dispensing popular history at its most eager-to-please, full of “lore” about pirates and explorers and moonshiners. The photographs supplied by Evans were about something else entirely. The two sat there in uneasy proximity as the first edition ran its course, but for the second and subsequent editions the photographs were dropped entirely.

I doubt that Evans minded much. Pearl Harbor was attacked while he and Jane were walking on Siesta Beach; from then on, he, like everyone else, had a

different set of worries. He went to Washington to investigate war work but ended up becoming a movie critic for *Time*. In 1948 he switched over to the art department at *Fortune*. It was during his tenure that *Fortune* achieved a level of art direction and photography rarely seen in a magazine. It could be argued that his cushy corporate job kept him from his art; in reality, it—like his Sarasota assignment—*became* his art.

Evans would cross paths with the *Mangrove Coast* again and again. His sister and brother-in-law settled on Anna Maria, the barrier island just north of Longboat, and he would come to visit often, usually to escape the



LEFT  
*Banyan Tree*





winter chill or to recover from the illnesses that plagued his later life. But there is no record that he kept up with the Bickels or that he participated in the life of Sarasota. It would have been out of character if he had.

The Bickel house still stands, suddenly back in the news as Sarasota's latest controversy. There are plans to demolish it—it has been derelict and abandoned for over twenty years—in order to widen the street in preparation for a new Ritz Carlton Hotel, an eerie echo of John Ringling's earlier dream. The historical preservationists are up in arms as usual, but everyone suspects they will lose on this one, too. The city has already destroyed most of its past, usually after great civic debate and agonizing feelings of guilt.

But Sarasota remains a very lucky town. Over and over it has been touched by genius. First there was Ringling and the circus. Then came John D. MacDonald, the mystery novelist. For thirty years he

lived and wrote here, elevating the lowly mystery novel to art as he explored the moral dilemmas of that odd new culture, the Sun Belt.

And now we have these extraordinary photographs by Walker Evans, powerful evidence—Harriet Beecher Stowe notwithstanding—that not everyone returns from Florida “intensely disappointed, and even disgusted.” They present a Florida that doesn't exist anymore, and what a strange place it must have been, so foreign looking, so handmade. If they show anything, it is that artificiality is many layers deep. And what better way to illustrate this than with pictures of a small town in Florida where the circus is king, pelicans fill the air, and the people live in little tin houses that they can move from place to place?

OPPOSITE  
*Circus Building, Winter  
Quarters, Sarasota*

# The Photographs

64



Postcard Display  
1941  
6<sup>7</sup>/<sub>16</sub> × 5<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> in.  
84.XM.956.874  
PAGE ii



Circus Trainer Leading Elephant,  
Winter Quarters, Sarasota  
1941  
6<sup>9</sup>/<sub>16</sub> × 7<sup>13</sup>/<sub>32</sub> in.  
84.XM.956.941



Ruin Tabby Construction  
1941  
7<sup>1</sup>/<sub>16</sub> × 6<sup>7</sup>/<sub>16</sub> in.  
84.XM.956.844  
PAGE iv



Torn Ringling Brothers Poster  
1941  
6<sup>7</sup>/<sub>32</sub> × 8<sup>1</sup>/<sub>16</sub> in.  
84.XM.956.914  
PAGE v



Resort Photographer at Work  
1941  
6<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> × 8<sup>13</sup>/<sub>16</sub> in.  
84.XM.956.948  
PAGE ix



Woman with Car from  
"St. Petersburg Alligator Farm"  
1941  
5<sup>1</sup>/<sub>16</sub> × 5<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> in.  
84.XM.956.938  
PAGE x



Two Giraffes, Circus Winter  
Quarters, Sarasota  
1941  
5<sup>15</sup>/<sub>16</sub> × 7<sup>3</sup>/<sub>16</sub> in.  
84.XM.956.859  
PAGE xii



Concrete Block Building with  
Shell Decoration  
1941  
7 × 8<sup>3</sup>/<sub>32</sub> in.  
84.XM.956.871  
PAGE 3



Mystery Ship Roadside Bar  
1941  
6<sup>9</sup>/<sub>16</sub> × 7<sup>3</sup>/<sub>32</sub> in.  
84.XM.956.936  
PAGE 4





Souvenir Shop Display

1941  
6<sup>29</sup>/<sub>32</sub> × 8 in.  
84.XM.956.935

PAGE 6



Racetrack Spectators

1941  
8<sup>85</sup>/<sub>32</sub> × 7<sup>3</sup>/<sub>16</sub> in.  
84.XM.956.1076

PAGE 7



Two Men Fishing

1941  
5<sup>1</sup>/<sub>16</sub> × 4<sup>21</sup>/<sub>32</sub> in.  
84.XM.956.908

PAGE 10



Shuffleboard Players

1941  
5<sup>5</sup>/<sub>32</sub> × 7<sup>23</sup>/<sub>32</sub> in.  
84.XM.956.913

PAGE 11



Cypress Swamp

1941  
9 × 6<sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in.  
84.XM.956.879

PAGE 13



Auto Graveyard at Tampa

1941  
15<sup>11</sup>/<sub>16</sub> × 7<sup>3</sup>/<sub>16</sub> in.  
84.XM.956.944

PAGE 14



Upstate Roadside Landscape

1941  
5<sup>1</sup>/<sub>16</sub> × 6<sup>15</sup>/<sub>32</sub> in.  
84.XM.956.937

PAGE 15



Fisherman in Sponge Boat.

Tarpon Springs  
1941  
6<sup>21</sup>/<sub>32</sub> × 6<sup>3</sup>/<sub>16</sub> in.  
84.XM.956.855



Sponge-Diver's Boat.

Tarpon Springs  
1941  
6<sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub> × 6<sup>7</sup>/<sub>32</sub> in.  
84.XM.956.929



Crowd Waiting at Street Corner.

Tampa  
1941  
5<sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub> × 4<sup>13</sup>/<sub>32</sub> in.  
84.XM.956.246



Men in the Street at Tampa

1941  
6<sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub> × 4<sup>5</sup>/<sub>16</sub> in.  
84.XM.956.934

PAGE 20



Blind Couple in Tampa City Square Hall

1941  
7<sup>1</sup>/<sub>16</sub> × 7<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> in.  
84.XM.956.814

PAGE 21



Coastal Landscape with Palms

1941  
7<sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub> × 9<sup>9</sup>/<sub>16</sub> in.  
84.XM.956.919

PAGE 22



Antebellum Plantation House at Tallahassee

1941  
6<sup>3</sup>/<sub>16</sub> × 6<sup>13</sup>/<sub>32</sub> in.  
84.XM.956.923

PAGE 24



Negroes at Tallahassee

1941  
6<sup>15</sup>/<sub>16</sub> × 6 in.  
84.XM.956.882

PAGE 25



The Green Benches at  
St. Petersburg

1941  
7<sup>5</sup>/<sub>16</sub> × 6<sup>3</sup>/<sub>32</sub> in.  
84.XM.956.930

PAGE 26



Winter Resorters

1941  
6<sup>5</sup>/<sub>16</sub> × 7<sup>19</sup>/<sub>32</sub> in.  
84.XM.956.939

PAGE 27



Winter Resorters

1941  
7<sup>3</sup>/<sub>16</sub> × 7<sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in.  
84.XM.956.839

PAGE 28



Sponge Diver's Suit,  
Tarpon Springs

1941  
8<sup>9</sup>/<sub>16</sub> × 6<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> in.  
84.XM.956.868

PAGE 29



Descriptive Painting  
by a Sponge Diver

1941  
4<sup>7</sup>/<sub>16</sub> × 7<sup>9</sup>/<sub>16</sub> in.  
84.XM.956.873

PAGES 30-31



Caged Baboon,  
Circus Winter Quarters

1941  
6<sup>29</sup>/<sub>32</sub> × 5<sup>5</sup>/<sub>16</sub> in.  
84.XM.956.885

PAGE 32



Balcony Car, Circus Train,  
Winter Quarters, Sarasota

1941  
7<sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub> × 6<sup>11</sup>/<sub>16</sub> in.  
84.XM.956.946

PAGE 34



Ringling Bandwagon,  
Circus Winter Quarters, Sarasota

1941  
8<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> × 6<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> in.  
84.XM.956.875

PAGE 35



Uninhabited Seaside Residence in  
Sarasota (Ca'd'Zan, formerly the  
Ringling Residence)

1941  
6<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> × 8<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in.  
84.XM.956.827



Unfinished Boomtime Hotel  
1941

4<sup>13</sup>/<sub>32</sub> × 7<sup>5</sup>/<sub>16</sub> in.  
84.XM.956.867

PAGE 38



Circus Trainer with  
Performing Elephant,  
Winter Quarters, Sarasota

1941  
6<sup>1</sup>/<sub>16</sub> × 8 in.  
84.XM.956.829

PAGE 39



Two Circus Trainers  
with Performing Elephants,  
Winter Quarters, Sarasota

1941  
6<sup>1</sup>/<sub>16</sub> × 8<sup>11</sup>/<sub>32</sub> in.  
84.XM.956.853

PAGE 40



Three Circus Train Cars,  
Winter Quarters, Sarasota  
(reversed printing)

1941  
7<sup>3</sup>/<sub>16</sub> × 8<sup>15</sup>/<sub>16</sub> in.  
84.XM.956.803

PAGE 42



Man at Work on Circus Wagon,  
Sarasota

1941  
8<sup>23</sup>/<sub>32</sub> × 6<sup>23</sup>/<sub>32</sub> in.  
84.XM.956.940

PAGE 43



Detail of Circus Wagon, Sarasota

1941  
8<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> × 5<sup>15</sup>/<sub>16</sub> in.  
84.XM.956.877

PAGE 44

PAGES 36-37



Circus Winter Quarters.  
Sarasota

1941  
7<sup>3</sup>/<sub>16</sub> × 8<sup>7</sup>/<sub>32</sub> in.  
84.XM.956.942

PAGE 45



Circus Wagon (Calliope Car).  
Winter Quarters. Sarasota

1941  
5<sup>13</sup>/<sub>16</sub> × 9<sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in.  
84.XM.956.851

PAGE 46



Ringling Bandwagon.  
Circus Winter Quarters. Sarasota

1941  
7<sup>11</sup>/<sub>16</sub> × 6<sup>29</sup>/<sub>32</sub> in.  
84.XM.956.831

PAGE 47



Inland Landscape

1941  
7<sup>25</sup>/<sub>32</sub> × 6<sup>3</sup>/<sub>16</sub> in.  
84.XM.956.837

PAGE 49 LEFT



Pelican on a Dock

1941  
8 × 6<sup>7</sup>/<sub>16</sub> in.  
84.XM.956.876

PAGE 49 RIGHT



Two Pelicans on a Dock

1941  
6<sup>11</sup>/<sub>32</sub> × 5<sup>11</sup>/<sub>16</sub> in.  
84.XM.956.925

PAGE 51



Pelican

1941  
7<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> × 5<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> in.  
84.XM.956.860

PAGE 52



Three Palms

1941  
8<sup>1</sup>/<sub>32</sub> × 6<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> in.  
84.XM.956.816

PAGE 53 LEFT



Gulf of Mexico

1941  
5<sup>15</sup>/<sub>16</sub> × 7<sup>7</sup>/<sub>16</sub> in.  
84.XM.956.931

PAGE 53 RIGHT



Recreational Vehicle with  
Striped Canopy

1941  
5<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> × 8<sup>11</sup>/<sub>16</sub> in.  
84.XM.956.932

PAGES 54-55



Trailer in Camp. Sarasota

1941  
6<sup>31</sup>/<sub>32</sub> × 6<sup>13</sup>/<sub>32</sub> in.  
84.XM.956.945

PAGE 56



Statuette of a Cherub

1941  
8<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> × 7<sup>1</sup>/<sub>16</sub> in.  
84.XM.956.920

PAGE 58



Municipal Trailer Camp

1941  
6<sup>1</sup>/<sub>32</sub> × 7<sup>3</sup>/<sub>32</sub> in.  
84.XM.956.798

PAGE 59



Banyan Tree

1941  
7<sup>7</sup>/<sub>16</sub> × 5<sup>3</sup>/<sub>16</sub> in.  
84.XM.956.943

PAGE 61



Circus Building. Winter Quarters.  
Sarasota

1941  
6<sup>35</sup>/<sub>32</sub> × 6<sup>5</sup>/<sub>32</sub> in.  
84.XM.956.883

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*Apparently Evans just wasn't a beach person. But if he didn't like the beach, he certainly liked trailers.*

So writes novelist Robert Plunket in his witty, insightful essay, which accompanies fifty-four of Walker Evans's photographs of "The Mangrove Coast"—the western coast of Florida—made in 1941.

Culled from the Getty Museum's extensive holdings of Evans's work, these images—of men in hats playing shuffleboard, brightly painted circus wagons, giraffes peering elegantly over a fence—present a lesser-known, and more playful, side of Walker Evans.

Robert Plunket is the author of the novels *My Search for Warren Harding* and *Love Junkie*. He lives in Sarasota.

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