

Settlement Record

The Crowley Museum recalls Florida's pioneer days



The circa-1889 Tatum House forms the centerpiece of the Crowley Museum and Nature Center's Pioneer Area.

by Chris Conroy

Imagine that you need to pick up some groceries in the next town over. But you have no car, and your horse is busy out in the fields. So you have to walk there—in July—and that takes a day and a half each way. Then imagine that, once you get home, you have to turn a sawgrass marsh into a rice paddy, forge a new blade for your shovel, handle all of the neighborhood's mail, and get that darned bobcat away from your chickens. And then you realize that you forgot to buy the flour.

Though I was born and raised on the Gulf Coast, I'd always considered Florida's "pioneer days" to be, well, the

1950s, when Northerners armed only with an air conditioner and a dream swarmed into our state and set about suburbanizing it. But the Crowley Museum and Nature Center, tucked away on the edge of Sarasota, has quickly disabused me of that notion. The scenario I just described was the reality of daily life for the Crowleys, a pioneer family who settled on the Myakka River in the late 1800s, and it's the center's task to give all of us spoiled modern types a glimpse of the area's history.

At the same time, the center acts as a nature preserve, protecting 190 acres of Florida wildlands that range from pine forest to open river. And I hadn't even



A reconstruction of a typical one-room Florida pioneer cabin; a water pump outside the cabin (top left); a Viceroy butterfly spotted on the boardwalk (top right)

known that it existed until about a month before I visited.

Debbie Dixon, the facility's executive director, was behind the welcome desk when I arrived. She provided me with a booklet that indicated the property's two main walking trails, the Pine Level Trail and the Boardwalk. Along each trail, numbered guideposts refer to a section of the booklet, an efficient way of highlighting the site's most interesting features. Dixon gave me a basic sense of the preserve's geographical orientation, then hauled out a powerful-looking telescope. "I'll have this set up when you get back," she said, "so you can see the bald eagle nest!"

The center has embarked on an ambitious program of historical reconstruction.

The center occupies land donated in 1964 by Jasper Crowley. His grandfather, John Crowley, settled there in the late 1800s under the Homestead Act, placing himself along the route between Braidentown (now Bradenton) and Pine Level, which was then the Manatee

County seat. In addition to farming the land, he operated a blacksmith's shop, the contents of which are preserved at the center today. Over the generations, the Crowleys also ran the region's post office and general store, and Jasper Crowley was both a teacher and principal at a local one-room schoolhouse and, eventually, Fruitville Elementary School. Jasper was also an avid environmentalist, and when he donated his family's land to create the center, he charged it with the dual purpose of preserving Florida's history as well as its natural beauty.

To that end, the center has embarked on an ambitious program of historical reconstruction. The centerpiece of its Pioneer



PHOTO BY CHRIS CONROY

The center's nature trails provide views of the Tatum Sawgrass Marsh along the Myakka River.

Area is a two-story 1889 “Cracker” house—so named, I learned, for the sound of the whips the builders used to drive oxen—originally constructed by the Tatum-Rawls family and relocated from a site miles away on Sarasota’s Proctor Road. The exterior of the house has been lovingly restored over a five-year period, and plans to furnish and reopen its interior are currently under way.

The center boasts two other historic buildings: the Tatum Ridge schoolhouse, built in 1905 and currently awaiting restoration, and a reconstruction of the type of one-room pioneer cabin that Florida’s early settlers commonly built. The cabin contains nineteenth-century decorations and artifacts, as does the neighboring Crowley Museum, which showcases tools, glassware, artwork, and some very impressive taxidermy. I had forgotten that Florida even had bears until I saw the museum’s fierce-looking specimen!

Luckily, no bears accosted me on Crowley’s nature trails; instead, I was treated to the best hike I can recall experiencing in Florida. The trails are wide, flat, and very walkable. I came across a handful of muddy spots, but those just made deer, bobcat, and other animal tracks that much easier to locate. The Pine Level Trail incorporates the original trail that ran between Bradenton and Pine Level, providing the opportunity to walk a fraction of that day-and-a-half-long route traversed by the pioneers.

On the center’s Web site, there’s a log of all the wildlife sighted in recent weeks; I was particularly excited about the family of river otters that had been repeatedly observed in the creek. Sadly, I never saw the otters, but I did have a close encounter with a strangely fearless Viceroy butterfly, which alighted on the boardwalk directly in front of me and allowed me to squeeze right up to it with my camera. From the top of the Selby Observation Tower at the end of the boardwalk, I watched a turkey vulture

Want to Go?

Take I-75 to Exit 210 (Old 39), Fruitville Road/SR 780. Head east to the road’s end (approximately eleven miles) and turn right onto Verna Road, which will become Myakka Road after a dogleg or two. The entrance to the Crowley Museum and Nature Center is two and a half miles down on the left; there’s a sign, but it’s easy to miss.

The center is open Thursday through Sunday from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. May 1 through December 31, and Tuesday through Sunday from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. January 1 through April 30. Admission is \$5 for adults, \$3 for children. For more information on the center and its programs and guided tours, call 941/322-1000 or visit www.crowleymuseumnaturectr.org.

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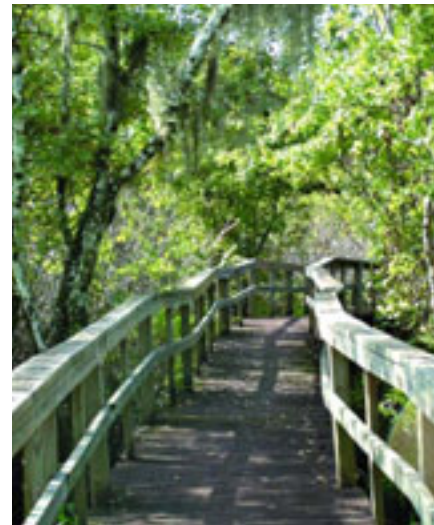
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A two-thousand-foot boardwalk leads visitors through the Maple Branch Swamp and the Tatum Sawgrass Marsh.

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE CROWLEY MUSEUM AND NATURE CENTER

swoop and swerve over the sawgrass marsh of the Myakka River.

During my hike, the center's booklet came in handy, helping me to identify everything from moss to paw prints. I learned that a natural-looking trench flowing along the trail was actually part of the drainage system dug when the Crowleys used the Myakka marsh to grow rice. The Crowley land has had forty years to revert back to nature from its agricultural past; seeing the job that the wilderness has done on it over those four decades, it's a wonder that the pioneers were able to squeeze any kind of crop out of this terrain, especially without modern technology.

Dixon did indeed have the telescope set up when I returned to the preserve's entrance. And sure enough, high in a pine tree across an open field, the head of one of the eagles was visible over the top of a nest of branches. "They're a young pair; this is only their third year here," she told me. As I left the center, the other member of the pair swooped over the road, heading back to the nest with some kind of meal in its claws. I silently wished them the best of luck—they've got a long, hard slog ahead of them if they plan to catch up to the homesteading record of the Crowleys. 🦅

A native of Osprey, Florida, Chris Conroy is a recent transplant to Brooklyn, New York. He often finds himself missing the Gulf Coast, especially in the dead of winter.

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