



# Gladesmen: Gator Hunters, Moonshiners, and Skiffers (Florida History and Culture)

*Glen Simmons, Laura Ogden*

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"Remarkable. . . should have strong, immediate interest for the ecologists engaged in efforts to restore the Everglades."--William B. Robertson, research biologist for Everglades National Park

From the book--

*Pa built our house out of rough lumber that they got from Frazier's sawmill . . . a one-room house about 16 to 18 feet long and 12 feet wide. We all slept on cots and sat on boxes or a trunk. The kitchen was in the corner, and Ma cooked on a four-hole stove, which cost six dollars. Me and my middle brother, Alvin, sat on a trunk to eat at the table. That trunk had some long cracks in it. My brother knew just how to move so the crack would pinch . . . .*

Years before the Park was established, when all the land and marsh seemed to belong to me, we would help ourselves to whatever we could see or trade for survival. Mostly we would sell gator and otter hides. . . . On this particular trip, after grunting awhile at the gator hole, I gave up and made tracks to the camp since I wanted to return by dark. . . . I was lying under my skeeter bar with a small tarp stretched between two cabbage palms. About midnight, I heard the dried cabbage fronds breaking in the path toward my camp. The night was pitch black . . .

Few people today can claim a living memory of Florida's frontier Everglades. Glen Simmons, who has hunted alligators, camped on hammock-covered islands, and poled his skiff through the mangrove swamps of the glades since the 1920s, is one who can. Together with Laura Ogden, he tells the story of backcountry life in the southern Everglades from his youth until the establishment of the Everglades National Park in 1947.

During the economic bust of the late '20s, when many natives turned to the land to survive, Simmons began accompanying older local men into Everglades backcountry, the inhospitable prairie of soft muck and mosquitoes, of outlaws and moonshiners, that rings the southern part of the state. As Simmons recalls life in this community with humor and nostalgia, he also documents the forgotten lifestyles of south Florida gladesmen.

By necessity, they understood the natural features of the Everglades ecosystem. They observed the seasonal fluctuations of wildlife, fire, and water levels. Their knowledge of the mostly unmapped labyrinth of grassy water enabled them to serve as guides for visiting naturalists and scientists. Simmons reconstructs this world, providing not only fascinating stories of individual personalities, places, and events, but an account that is accurate, both scientifically and historically, of one of the least known and longest surviving portions of the American frontier.

Glen Simmons has lived in the south Florida Everglades since his birth in 1916 in Homestead. In 1995 he was awarded a State of Florida Heritage Award for his unique contribution to Florida's history and folk culture. He has demonstrated and taught glades skiff building for the Florida Department of State, Bureau of Folklife, and the South Florida Historical Society; his boats are on permanent display at the Florida Folklife

Museum in White Springs, Florida, and at the Historical Museum of Southern Florida, Miami.

Laura Ogden, also born in Homestead and a life-long friend of Glen Simmons, is assistant professor of anthropology at Florida International University.

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