

J. K. SMALL

Florida's Venerable Naturalist

by Howard Means

John Kunkel Small, whose correspondence and photographic collection recently were donated to the Florida State Archives, was born in 1869 in Harrisburg, PA.

According to his son, George Kunkel Small, now 85 and living in Largo, John Kunkel Small "had a good sense of humor. He was a good marble player and... an expert shot. That came in handy many times. He was a good flute player, too. On three days' notice, he once played flute in the New York Metropolitan Opera orchestra for the *William Tell*."

John Kunkel Small also was a naturalist, a prodigious author of botanical studies, and curator and later chief of research for the New York Botanical Gardens. And it was in this capacity that he came to Florida at the turn of the century and began an affair with the state that appears to have been built on equal measures of love and grief.

"He came down in 1901," Small's son recalls, "and so did I. He saw the flora and how luscious it was, and how it differed from any other flora in the country. Just south of Miami — which then had 2,500 people — Coconut Grove was a hammock, a very dense subtropical hammock. He got in there and saw the variety of plants, and he discovered many plants new to the country... Nothing ever stopped him.

"I've seen his arms covered black with mosquitoes. He just wiped them off. He'd be a mass of blood, but he never complained."

In 1929, at his own expense, John Kunkel Small had 500 copies of a thin book printed. It detailed, as he wrote, a "botanical exploration of several

thousand miles in the Florida Peninsula and on the Florida Reef or Continental Shelf from the middle of April to the middle of May 1922."

The broad gist of that book, its prejudice, is revealed in the title Small gave it — *From Eden to Sahara: Florida's Tragedy* — and Small wasted few words in his preface in enforcing that prejudice.

There are, he wrote, three epochs to Florida's history. The first is prehistoric. The second, the "neutral epoch," began roughly in 1700 and extended into the 1800s. The third epoch, Small wrote, is "eminently historic. Its record shows a reckless, furious, even a mad desire to destroy everything natural."

"The way Florida was being destroyed was a sore spot with him," Small's son explains. "But it was coming. He saw it right from the beginning."

Were it only a lament, *From Eden to Sahara* would be of little interest to a modern age except, perhaps, to the more virulent strains of apocalyptic environmentalists.

But, among its long groans for the ecological destruction of the state, the book is filled with a kind of wide-eyed love of what had survived in the Florida of 1922 and with an enormous curiosity about the state.

Near New Smyrna Beach on his expedition, Small stopped to wonder, "Why should the live-oak have such a thick and rugged bark, while its associate the spice-tree has a thin, conspicuously smooth bark? The question has not been answered."

Near Sanford, he noted, "The western old flood plain of the Saint Johns has been transformed into a

vast vegetable garden where 'weeds' vie with 'truck' for the supremacy. The ragweed... was as high as one's head, and fields of celery, peppers, cabbage, lettuce, and other vegetables often stretched in the distance as far as the eye could see."

At Long Key — in the Keys — he set off in search of "a curiously branching palm" he had been told was "different than any other found in Florida." (The trip was a disappointment: The palm was only a rangy saw palmetto.)

South of Melbourne, Small marveled at "the moon-flowers [that] began to burst open all along the way... In passing through a hammock we seemed to be passing through an avenue lined with these large, rather unusual, snow-white flowers."

Curry Hutchinson of St. Augustine, an ecologist by training, is working on updating Small's book.

"I've taken the original book and then read all the other things that John Kunkel Small wrote about Florida," Hutchinson says.

She has "taken what is good, general ecological observation and then blended that back into the 1929 edition to approximately double the size.

"I've been completely captured by the thing. The thing that fascinates me is that Small... knew, absolutely knew, how the ecology of Florida held together, how delicate it was, where the critical connecting points were, and he knew that they had been destroyed," Hutchinson says.

"It's not like someone who understands only that his favorite flower or tree is gone. He knew the basic interactions."

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