

Day Trip: Weeki Wachee

By Ellen Heller

Water LIFE Publisher

Sometime during my most impressionable years, probably in the 1960's, I saw an ad, TV special or maybe just a colorful bumper sticker wired on to a station wagon for Weeki Wachee Springs in Florida. Somehow they reached this little girl in the very small town of Clinton Hollow, NY and I was gob smacked. The idea of women dressed in green and blue sequin scales, posing as mermaids and performing underwater ballet, gave me goose bumps. I envisioned them with pearl encrusted tiaras in flowing manes of hair, ample bosoms held in place with scallop shells, in a pristine tank of blue. I talked about mermaids and Weeki Wachee Springs until my entire family had enough. Okay I vowed silently, but I'm going there when I grow up. Little did I know how very grown up I would be.

Forty years later, 13 years of them in Florida, I finally went to Weeki Wachee Springs, and dragged my husband with me. Today it is a State Park but back in the day it was privately owned. The underground springs keep the tropical water a constant 74 degrees. The pond that the springs form had several water slides pouring adults and children alike into the crystal clear water. The swimming area neatly overflowed and created a slow moving Bahama-blue river that served as another way to enjoy the water, by tour boat. The park was built in the 40's and still maintains that period feel. Low cinder block buildings housed kitschy gift

shops, ice cream and fudge shops, and a table cloth type sit down restaurant. Paths meandered around an outdoor amphitheater for special shows and local wild life scurried around with imported peacocks. While we were strolling the grounds I played it cool, but I was extremely anxious to get on with the show. This was nice, but where were the mermaids? The next show was at 1:30 and I made sure we were near the front of the line.

Soon, but not soon enough for all the rambunctious kids swinging on the rail, climbing on adults and squealing with delight, the doors opened.

The entrance to the theater was below ground level and the seating was below that. It took a minute for our eyes to adjust to the dark, but it was easy to see a wall of glass holding back the spring. It was veiled first in a theatrical cloth curtain, then a curtain of bubbles rose behind that. We headed to the front close to the glass.

Not long after we were seated 2 flat screen TVs on either side of the small curved seating area came to life and a large voice boomed a welcome from a speaker in each corner of the room. I was thrilled with the anticipation of hose sucking mermaids and a little annoyed at having to hear the history of Weeki Wachee. Although hearing that the current Mayor of Weeki Wachee was once a mermaid did catch my attention. When the first curtain went up and the bubbles stopped bubbling I couldn't believe my eyes. This was so totally NOT what I expected at all.

This murky, muddy bottomed underwater cave with moss covered rock walls and



grecian statues was not the sterile aquarium I dreamt about. Where was the pristine tank with bright lights and glitz, shiny like an aquarium? I was quietly swallowing my disappointment when an algae covered "rock" moved off the bottom and swam towards the top, followed by three or four convict fish. Another rough looking turtle swam to the window in front of me then did a graceful turn and also headed up for air. And fast as that turtle I realized this was so much better than what I had expected. This was the real McCoy and the true inhabitants were not the visiting mermaids but these real water dwellers who were free to come and go as they pleased. In and out of the show or down the lazy river away from the crowds if they chose. They were not trained or contained but they still hung out with the mermaids and became part of the show. Would they have enjoyed my Hollywood set? I think not.

The mermaids were enchanting in their

grace and poise, performing water ballets while releasing air from their lungs, small bits at a time to change altitude, much the way a diver uses a buoyancy vest. These women must learn to breath from hoses gushing out air bubbles without breaking the dance routine or the serene mood. It was not unlike watching penguins underwater in a dark zoo exhibit, calming and the natural surroundings enhanced the feeling. Even the mermaid costumes, though lacking sequins and pearls and a little tattered, lent themselves to the underwater surroundings. Just maybe over the years I have learned to appreciate genuine beauty and see through the sleek, slick and sequined.

Although the landscape and buildings had seen better days, Weeki Wachee Springs State Park is far better than the glitz, glam and over the top commercial feeling new theme parks are offering families elsewhere in Florida today.



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