



Weeki Wachee, City of Mermaids: A History of One of Florida's Oldest Roadside Attractions (Florida History and Culture)

Lu Vickers

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In the postwar explosion of domestic tourism, Weeki Wachee spring offered the quintessential vacation fantasy, a city of colorful mermaids in a natural crystal spring right off the West Coast highway in a sparsely inhabited Florida. In those early days, the mermaids had to stand alongside the highway to flag travelers down, but once word of their charms got out, travelers headed south to playgrounds in Miami, Ft. Lauderdale, and Tampa found Weeki Wachee a tantalizing detour from the grueling two-lane road connecting vacationland with the work-a-day world to the north. Vickers shows how that local novelty became a stellar international attraction.

Founded in 1947 by Walton Hall Smith and Newt Perry, Weeki Wachee and its featured attraction, mermaids, combined the allure of pinup girls with the wholesome talents of variety entertainers to create a daily schedule of underwater acts ranging from eating bananas and performing ballet to staging underwater musicals. For nearly 60 years, these mermaids with their underwater talents have attracted crowds of vacationers, film crews, and celebrities. Drawing on extensive archival research as well as interviews with dozens of mermaids and other park employees, Vickers traces the park's rise to prominence. Brilliantly illustrated with 250 stunning photos, the resulting work shows what it was like to be a mermaid at Weeki Wachee in its heyday.

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