

The Hillsborough River: from the Green Swamp to the Bay

This portfolio was created for *The Big Picture Project* during my tenure as the City of Tampa Florida's 8th Photographer Laureate. This progressive city project was modeled after those such as the Farm Security Administration photo program of the 1930's and 40's and Tampa's own historic Burgert Brothers archive. These men left an extraordinary visual link to Tampa's past with photographs dating from the late 1800s to the early 1960s.

The modern Big Picture Photographer Laureate program also becomes part of an image archive about the life and times of Tampa. Each year, via a juried process one photographer is commissioned to do a project of his or her choosing resulting in a unique portfolio about the city. I choose the Hillsborough River as my subject.

Florida is a most alluring state and a puzzle of contradictions. The state has a truly interesting history and a remarkable cultural and natural heritage. It is home to some of the most unique natural areas in the world. That said it is no secret that there is a constant balancing act between the preservation of Florida's wild areas and development. For me, the tie that binds all in this most diverse state is water. And my obsession has been Florida's freshwaters, its springs, rivers, and swamps. This interest recently culminated in an exhibition at the Southeast Museum of Photography, in Daytona Beach titled *The Mark of Water: Florida's Springs and Swamps*. The Hillsborough River Project allowed me to take my work one step further. The story of this specific river speaks volumes about Tampa, one of Florida's most vibrant cities.

The river begins at the still wild Green Swamp in Pasco County. Like so many other natural areas in Florida, it is a relatively short drive from the city. Not only is this area the headwaters of the Hillsborough, it is also the headwaters of the Withlacoochee, Peace and Ocklawaha rivers. When I began the project I spoke to my friends Bill and Martin who are Tampa natives and have been friends since childhood. For them the river was just part of growing up and has always been in their lives. It flows into Hillsborough Bay where as boys they water-skied and fished. These waters were a place of adventure when they were young; Bill even found a dead body floating in it one day. Martin wished I could have talked to his dad. He lived in Tampa all of his 90 years. By trade he owned a menswear store. By heart he was an avid fisherman. He REALLY knew the waters around Tampa. For nearly a century he explored them and saw them change.

For a visual artist, the paradoxical scenery—as I traveled through time both culturally and naturally from the swamp through the city—was irresistibly compelling. I allowed the work to bend and flow, in whatever direction the experience took me all the while creating work that reflects the life and character of Tampa in a very special way. The Hillsborough River project I created as the 2010 Photographer Laureate is formally complete. I commend the city for having such a forward-thinking program. My time of explorations and new directions this project nurtured continues and I welcome the vulnerability that brings.

Karen Glaser