

# Corridor's Story



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Traveling the Ridge Scenic Highway offers an introduction to the ecology, history, and culture of Central Florida. Travelers who take time to walk in the historic communities, tour the unique attractions, or partake of the activities available in the parks and conservation areas located along The Ridge Scenic Highway leaves travelers with a new understanding of Central Florida, its ecology, its history, and its people.

*How is the Corridor Story told today? Captions and photos in the green boxes highlight only a few of the many attractions, historic sites, museums, conservation lands, and views that teach travelers of the rich history of the Ridge Scenic Highway and the communities found along it.*

### Natural Setting along the Corridor

The Ridge Scenic Highway is located along the Lake Wales Ridge, which extends from southern Highlands County north to rolling hills occurring just west of Lake Apopka in Lake County. During ancient sea level rises, the sand dunes and sandhills that comprise the Lake Wales Ridge became islands isolated from the mainland of the United States of America. The isolation imposed during these periods led to the evolution of numerous plant and animal species, many of which are endemic species found living

*Travelers along the Lake Wales Ridge can explore the rare habitats found in the Lake Wales Ridge by hiking in the conservation and recreation lands found along the Ridge Scenic Highway, including:*

- *Historic Bok Sanctuary*
- *Mountain Lake Cutoff (Lake Wales)*
- *Peace Creek Canal System*
- *Ridge Audubon Nature Trail*
- *Crooked Lake Sandhill*
- *Crooked Lake Prairie*
- *Tiger Creek Preserve*
- *Hickory Lake Scrub*
- *Lake Wales Ridge State Forest*



*Crooked Lake Prairie*



*Hickory Lake Scrub*

exclusively on the Lake Wales Ridge, adapted to the specific conditions of these arid areas. Because of the rarity of the habitat required for these species, many are listed by state or federal agencies as endangered or threatened.

Although a variety of habitat types occur on the Lake Wales Ridge, two of the rare habitats are of specific concern to ecologists: the high pine/sandhill areas and Florida scrub. High pine historically occurred throughout much of the southeast on dry sandhills or other extremely well drained sands. These areas typically had a

very open canopy of longleaf pine (*Pinus palustris*) with a dense herbaceous layer dominated by wiregrass (*Aristida beyrichiana*). Florida scrub occurs on extremely well drained sands and is typically comprised of a sparse to dense canopy of sand pine (*Pinus clausa*) or various scrub oak species (*Quercus* spp.). The herbaceous layer of these areas was typically sparse and consisted of a variety of plant species, including several federally listed endangered plant species.

### Early Residents along the Corridor

Native Americans made their homes along the lakes of the Lake Wales Ridge, taking advantage of the rich soils and moderate climate. The Maskaki tribe claimed title to lands in extreme north-central Polk County along the Lake Wales Ridge. Early Americans from the Creek Nation inhabited a village on Lake Pierce. In 1870, there was a small camp of Seminole Indians on Crooked Lake. Leaving behind no written or oral history, their legacy is preserved through artifacts, shell middens, and ceremonial mounds.

Citrus was introduced to Polk County as far back as the 1500's, when Spanish missions planted oranges near the missions, reportedly to induce Native Americans to remain close by (*The History of Polk County, FL p.1*). These oranges were not the sweet treats we enjoy today, but were a sour variety. The orange trees survived and were used by later settlers who found the area well suited for citrus. Growing only a few trees near their homes, the settlers found use for both sour and sweet oranges, eating and trading the sweet oranges, and using sour oranges to season their meat.

The Spanish also brought cattle to Florida. Native Americans made use of these creatures, which were a coarse-haired, bony animal that could survive the Florida weather.

Settlers began arriving to Polk County following the purchase of Florida by the Colonies in 1819. One settlement was reported northwest of Lakeland, west of the Ridge Scenic Highway, as early as 1837. By this time, there were also two forts (*The History of Polk County, FL p.1*) Fort

*Archeological sites are scattered along the length of The Ridge Scenic Highway. While not open to the public, these sites provide significant information to researchers and preserve the history of these lost cultures.*

Fraser and Fort Gardiner. In 1850, Fort Clinch was established near Frostproof, at the southern end of the Ridge Scenic Highway.

### Early Industries of the Corridor

In the nineteenth century, Polk County was not easily accessible to northern markets; therefore, growth in the area was slow. The only means by which to transport fruit and other exports was by boat. In the mid nineteenth century, settlers began shipping citrus to England. To keep citrus from spoiling for long periods, the fruit was dried in the sun before shipment.

By the 1880's, citrus was a growing industry in Polk County. Settlers began developing the cattle market in the 1800's, trading principally with Cuba. Unsatisfied with the type of cattle brought over by the Spanish, settlers continued to experiment with breeds of cattle that could survive in the Florida heat. In 1916, E.F. Lester introduced the Brahman cattle from India. These cattle thrived. Ranchers began to crossbreed the Brahman cattle with other breeds to produce hardier cattle that could live in Florida, making huge advancements in the cattle industry. Another major breakthrough was achieved when the Compulsory Dipping Law of 1923 required dipping cattle, a technique used to control the



*A thriving citrus industry is located along the length of the Ridge Scenic Highway.*

tick population.

### The Early Nineteenth Century - Polk County and Township Established along the Corridor

First known as Keystone City, the Town of Frostproof was laid out in the early 1880's. Stephan Washington Carson and his family, the first family in Frostproof, settled in the wilderness in 1886. Shortly after arriving, he and his two sons Munsy and Joe started a citrus nursery on Streaty Lake, just south of Frostproof. They used their nursery stock to plant two groves in the area (Carson's Diaries, 1886-1896). Other early residents also planted orange groves, which became the primary industry of the town. The name Frostproof was chosen for the area in 1892. Walter Overocker became the first postman, with the post office operating out of the Overocker home for 22 years. The Walter Overocker house, built in 1892, is still located on Overocker Circle, off 9<sup>th</sup> Street. The town grew slowly due to the lack of transportation facilities, with 30 residents by the end of the nineteenth century. Frostproof did not open its first school until 1901.

On February 8, 1861, Polk County was established.

### The Corridor and the Railroad

The South Florida Railway Company extended a railroad line for both freight and passengers into Polk County in 1883. The introduction of the railroad, linking the county to northern markets, sparked rapid population growth. Cities such as

Haines City, Lake Hamilton, Dundee, and Lake Wales grew up around the rail line, while other cities, such as Frostproof, saw a new era of growth with the introduction of the railroad.

Originally named Clay Cut, Haines City, the Gateway to the Scenic Highlands, was established in 1883. The city was named after Colonel Haines, an official of the South Florida Railroad. It is said that this gesture played a role in enticing the railroad to serve Haines City. The economy was primarily based around cattle, citrus, and residential development. Tomatoes were also grown in the area in the 1890's. In the first years, Haines City grew quickly. A school was built beginning in 1880, with 37 students enrolled in the two-story schoolhouse by 1887. The first telephone installation in Polk County was made in the 1890's in Haines City, which became the link for telephone service throughout



*Constructed between 1913-1937, the Downtown Haines City Commercial District preserves the character of the historic commercial area.*



*The Overocker home – photo provided by the Frostproof Historical Society.*



*Haines City's St. Mark's Episcopal Church, constructed in 1890, is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.*

## Polk County.

The introduction of the railroad expanded the citrus and cattle industries and supported the growth of new industries. The 1880's saw the beginnings of the phosphate industry, which relied on the railroads to ship its product. Polk County has led the nation's production of phosphate since 1894 (*The History of Polk County, FL p.26*).



*The Dundee ACL Railroad Depot, constructed in 1911, currently serves as a history museum.*

Dundee was platted in 1911 by the Highlands Development Co., and incorporated in 1925. It was the first new town platted on the Haines City-Sebring branch of the railroad. The first industries were the Mixon Sawmill Co., Rayburn Turpentine Distillery, and Glen St. Mary Nursery (*The History of Polk County, FL p.16*). Lake Hamilton also owed its development to the railroads. Lake Hamilton, named after the lake on which it is located, was founded in 1913. The Atlantic Coast Line Railroad completed a station in April 1914. A Woman's Club was established early on, and a Board of Trade was established by 1915.

Lake Wales began as a turpentine complex and small hamlet. In 1911, Tillman, Johnson, Bullard, and Stuart founded the Lake Wales Land Company. The railroad was extended to the hamlet in June 1911, and the turpentine complex opened in 1912. In 1913, the A.R.P. Church, known today as the First Presbyterian Church, was completed. A school was opened in 1913. In 1916, Lake Wales was connected to both the Atlantic Coast Line Railroad and the Seaboard Air Line Railroad, providing

unsurpassed access to markets across Florida. The City of Lake Wales was incorporated in 1917. The Lake Wales Citrus Growers Association was established in 1918, and the town became known as the Highland Heart of "Citrus Land" (*Lake Wales, Florida, the Golden Age p. 4*) and the Crown Jewel of the Ridge.

The railroad supported a new industry in residential development, the winter estate. A few enclaves, such as the Mountain Lake Colony, developed north of Lake Wales as winter estates for well-to-do northerners. Mountain Lake was the winter home for many famous, affluent individuals, including Edward W. Bok, C. Austin Buck, August Heckscher, Irving T. Bush, and E.T. Benford.



*The Lake Wales City Hall, constructed in 1928, was the first building in town to serve a government function and continues to serve a government function.*



*Lake Wales received its unique clock tower in 1931. The clock tower was a gift to the City of Lake Wales from Misses Sara E. and Emma Y. Kolb. The core of the tower is brick, with a coquina façade.*

Lake of the Hills was also envisioned as a community of spacious rural estates. The W. J. Howey Land Company surveyed and platted the land around Lake Starr in 1914-1915 into a subdivision called Starr Lake Villa and renamed Lake of the Hills in 1923. The W. J. Howey Land Company set aside a lakefront lot of 200 by 200 feet for a Community Club. A Community Club was constructed in 1929. The building is the meeting place for the Lake of the Hills Community Club and the Lake of the Hills Garden Club. These organizations hold social and community functions, costume parties, the historical annual Ice Cream Social, Chicken Barbecue, and the annual Christmas Party at the Lake of the Hills Community Club. The Lake of the Hills Community Club historically functioned, and continues to function, as the focal point for communicating important issues of interest to both surrounding town and county residents.

The Atlantic Coast Line Railroad reached Frostproof in 1912, with the depot located near Reedy Lake. It spurred the first wave of growth the city had experienced. By 1915, Frostproof was the leader of production and shipment of citrus fruit in Florida. The town was incorporated in 1918.

### The Good Roads Movement and Construction of the Scenic Highway

The Good Roads movement that began around 1910 facilitated further economic growth in Polk



*The Lake of the Hills Community Club is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.*



*Scenic Highway, asphalt lane with clay shoulders (Source: Crooked Lake – Babson Park Rediscovered)*

County. Understanding the economic significance of regional transportation systems, residents of Polk County took an early interest in funding and constructing a reliable network of roadways. In June 1914, the Polk County Good Roads Association was organized. That same year, a \$1,500,000 bond issue was passed that funded the construction of 217 miles of asphalt highways (*The History of Polk County, FL p.5*).

The Ridge Scenic Highway, locally known as Scenic Highway, was among the first regional roadways constructed in Polk County. In December 1917, the Scenic Highway was completed from Haines City to Lake Wales, extending as far south as Lake Easy. By May 1918, Scenic Highway had been completed from Haines City to Frostproof. While a vast improvement over existing dirt roads, the road was only nine-feet wide, a little wider than the track of a model T.

Residents of Polk County continued to work to improve safety and aesthetics along the Scenic Highway. In 1921, the Crooked Lake community passed a resolution requesting that clay shoulders be added to Scenic Highway, with cement shoulders on the hills (*Crooked Lake – Babson Park Rediscovered, p. 54*). In 1923, the Associated Board of Trade of the Scenic Highlands, representing Davenport to DeSota City, advocated a bond issue to widen the nine-foot road to 16 feet. In June 1923 C.W. Lawrence, Max Waldron, and J.E. Hunt planted trees along the highway and bignonia vines on the fences along the Scenic Highway from

Crooked Lake to Lake Moody. Scenic Highway was renamed State Road 8 in 1926. A beautification project was completed in 1932, planting oaks and 170 palms along State Road 8.

### **The Florida Land Boom and Bust**

A number of residential communities took shape during the Florida land boom, which began around 1910. The Florida land boom ended abruptly with the Stock Market Crash in 1929 and the beginning of the Great Depression. Yet, many of the communities planned during the Florida Land Boom survived and are prospering today.

In 1917, H. E. Fairchild originated Hillcrest Heights. The Southern Land Company built the Hillcrest Lodge in 1917 to attract prospective land buyers. The original building burnt to the ground in 1918, but was reconstructed as the Hillcrest Lodge in 1919. Scenic Highway linked the community to existing towns and railroad stations. A charter incorporating the Town of Hillcrest Heights was granted in 1923.

In 1921, Irwin Yarnell began the development of Highland Park. Yarnell chose to build his home, the Casa de Josefina, near the entrance of the Village of Highland Park. The Casa de Josefina, modeled after a Spanish mansion, was constructed in 1923. The home contained over 36 rooms, green lawns, exotic flowers, and rare tropical trees. The Village of Highland Park was incorporated in 1927.



*Casa de Josefina, Village of Highland Park*

In 1923, Roger W. Babson purchased 400 acres of land on the north side of Crooked Lake. In 1924, he outlined a town plan, which was named Babson Park. Babson hired Fredrick Law Olmsted to develop plans for landscaping the town. Due to collapse of the Florida land boom in 1927, the town did not take form and the town was never incorporated. A number of buildings that had been constructed stood vacant.

The Babson Park Woman's Club, originally the Literary and Sewing Society, was founded in 1923 to further the development of highest ideals in the community. The Babson Park Woman's Club building was constructed in 1931.

### **Unique Attractions Develop along the Corridor**

During the Great Depression, residential land development came to a halt. Fortunately, visionary individuals found opportunities to create lasting legacies that help define the Ridge Scenic Highway.

Mrs. Babson got the idea to use the buildings originally constructed for commercial use in the original plan for Babson Park to house a college. In April 1927, Webber College, founded as a women's college, was granted a charter to organize a Scientific Institution of Learning in Polk County. Fredrick Law Olmsted landscaped the campus. The original site was sold in 1956 and the women's college was moved to a new lakeside campus across Scenic Highway.



*Babson Park Woman's Club*

Dutch immigrant and Pulitzer Prize winner Edward Bok chose the Lake Wales Ridge as the location in which to create “a spot which would reach out in its beauty to the people, and fill their souls with the quiet, the repose, the influence of the beautiful” (*America’s Taj Mahal* by Edward W. Bok). Historic Bok Sanctuary, located 298 feet above sea level, was dedicated as the Mountain Lake Sanctuary and Singing Tower in February 1929 by President Calvin Coolidge as Bok’s gift to America. The foremost artisans of the day collaborated to create a masterpiece of architecture, history, and nature. Milton B. Medary designed the majestic belltower; Lee Lawrie carved the sculptural elements; Samuel Yellin designed the magnificent wrought iron decorative elements; J.H. Dulles Allen created the colorful tile grilles; and Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. designed the meditative landscape gardens. The belltower houses a 60-bell Taylor carillon, considered one of the finest in the world. Historic Bok Sanctuary encompasses more than 250 acres and is a protected haven for two federally listed species of endangered plants, either grown in the Sanctuary or held as seed. Historic Bok Sanctuary is listed on the Florida Birding Trail.



*Webber International University contains historic buildings listed by the State Historic Preservation Office.*

In 1931, Bertha Hinshaw opened the Chalet Inn, known today as the Chalet Suzanne. In April 1991, Chalet Suzanne was listed on the National Register of Historic Places. World famous soups from the Chalet Suzanne Soup Cannery flew aboard the Apollo 15 and Apollo 17 moon flights.



*Historic Bok Sanctuary's “Singing Tower”*



*Chalet Suzanne*



### Historic Preservation Takes Root along the Corridor

The residents of the Lake Wales Ridge value history as the heart of their community. Since the early 1970's, the residents of the Lake Wales Ridge have invested resources to preserve the unique history and culture found along the Ridge Scenic Highway.

Through the efforts of dedicated citizens, a number of museums have been created to preserve the history of the communities located along the Ridge Scenic Highway, including the Lake Wales Depot Museum, the Frostproof Historical Society, and the Dundee Depot Museum.

Spearheaded by the Bicentennial Commission, the Lake Wales Depot Museum opened its doors in 1976. The Depot Museum serves as a resource center for the collection, conservation, exhibition, and study of materials pertaining to the history of Lake Wales.



*The Depot Museum – Lake Wales*

Following the success of The Depot Museum, the Frostproof Historical Society was formed in 1978. The objectives of the Society are to establish and operate the Frostproof Historical Museum Library, to promote interest in the history of the Frostproof area, to preserve the historic monuments and buildings of the area, and to collect, maintain, and exhibit other items of historical value to visitors and the people of Frostproof (Source: *Frostproof Historical Society Bylaws*).



*Frostproof Historical Society*



*Dundee Depot Museum*

The Dundee Depot Museum first opened August 27, 1999. Restoration was completed and the dedication held on November 18, 2001. The Dundee Depot Committee, a citizen-led volunteer organization, collects donations of historical artifacts and documented information to preserve the past for future generations. In addition to railroad memorabilia and artifacts, the Dundee Depot Museum rotates displays monthly, featuring a different theme each month.

The efforts of these and other groups to preserve historic buildings and structures have been successful, as can be measured by the number of historic structures preserved along the Ridge Scenic Highway. Since 1975, 6 historic districts and 19 historic structures located within one mile of the Ridge Scenic Highway have been listed on the National Register of Historic

Places. In addition, there are 125 sites and structures listed by the State Historic Preservation Office located within 500 feet of the Ridge Scenic Highway. (Historic Sites are listed under *Section 8: Designation Criteria*.)

### **Environmental Preservation – Public and Private Partnerships Preserving Unique Habitats along the Corridor**

The preservation of the Lake Wales Ridge natural heritage is being undertaken through the collaborative efforts of private and public groups, including federal, state and local government agencies, non-profit organizations, research groups, and citizen activists. To date, these groups have been able to place into conservation approximately 15,180 acres of land in Polk County (*May 2003, Source: The Nature Conservancy and Polk County*).

Environmental conservation and research has taken place along the Lake Wales Ridge since the mid-twentieth century. The Archbold Biological Station, a nonprofit research facility, began studying the Ridge in 1941. The Ridge Audubon Society was established in 1958, with the first meetings held in Lake Wales. In 1961, Roger Babson asked Webber College to donate 3 acres of land to the Society for a Ridge Audubon Center to be built along SR 17. Babson contributed the funds for a building. The Center was dedicated in 1964 and has been actively pursuing youth and adult environmental education ever since. The Ridge Audubon Society was incorporated in 1965. The Defenders of Crooked Lake, a nonprofit

organization, was founded in 1971 to preserve the natural beauty, purity of water, ecological value, and quality of life of Crooked Lake, the only Outstanding Florida Water in the area. The Board meets monthly at the Ridge Audubon Center. Also in 1971, the Nature Conservancy began acquiring land at Tiger Creek. First recognized as a pristine wilderness by Edward Bok, the preservation of this land was furthered by George Cooley and Ken Morrison. To date, the Nature Conservancy has secured almost the entire course of the wild Florida stream after which the preserve is named, as well as surrounding hardwood swamps and hammocks, sand pine and oak scrub, pine flatwoods, and sandhill habitats.

A broad movement to preserve environmentally sensitive lands along the Ridge Scenic Highway gained momentum in the early 1980s, when state agencies and local organizations began to purchase lands in Polk County. In the early 1980's, The Nature Conservancy purchased ecologically sensitive habitat based on information collected by the Archbold Biological Station, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Commission, and the Conservancy staff. Since its inception in 1980, Florida's Conservation and Recreational Lands Program (CARL) has purchased approximately 1,760 acres of land in Polk County. To date, the CARL program has identified an additional 22,116 acres of land for purchase in Polk County (*May 2003, Source: The Nature Conservancy and Glatting Jackson*).

The 1990's saw the introduction of new public and private organizations, along with greater coordination of efforts between groups. The Green Horizon Land Trust, a nonprofit organization headquartered in Lake Wales, was created in 1991 to preserve environmentally valuable or sensitive lands and open space areas in and around the Central Florida Ridge for the benefit of the public, and to educate the public as to the importance of such lands and their preservation. The Green Horizon Land Trust has preserved over 2,300 acres of environmentally sensitive land and open spaces in Central Florida for the benefit of the public (*Source: <http://greenhorizonfl.homestead.com>, May 2003*). In 1993, Congress designated a small portion of the



*Ridge Audubon Center*

Lake Wales Ridge as a National Wildlife Refuge. It was the first National Wildlife Refuge designed to protect rare plants. In 1994, Polk County passed an environmental lands referendum that allowed the county to purchase environmentally sensitive lands. Also in 1994, the Avon Park Air Force Range, owned by the Department of Defense, created a new management plan emphasizing the health of native ecosystems.

The government, non-profit, and citizen groups working in the Lake Wales Ridge to protect and preserve the natural environment are well organized and share resources through the Lake Wales Ridge Ecosystem Working Group, organized in 1991. The mission of the Lake Wales Ridge Ecosystem Working Group is to ensure the long-term protection of the native plants, animals, and natural communities of the Lake Wales Ridge. Members exchange information, promote research, share plans and solutions, coordinate training, and foster public awareness and support. Members include:

#### Non-Profit Organizations

- Archbold Biological Station
- Historic Bok Sanctuary
- Green Horizon Land Trust
- Highlands County Audubon Society
- Lake Region Audubon Society
- The Nature Conservancy
- Ridge Audubon Society

#### Federal Agencies

- Natural Resources Conservation Service
- U.S. Air Force-Avon Park Air Force Range
- U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

#### State of Florida Agencies

- C.A.R.L. Archaeological Survey
- Florida Bureau of Archaeological Research
- Central Florida Regional Planning Council
- Department of Environmental Protection
- Division of Historical Resources
- Division of Recreation
- Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission

- South Florida Water Management District
- Southwest Florida Water Management District

#### County Government

- Highlands County Planning Department
- Highlands Soil and Water Conservation District
- Polk County Natural Resources Division

(Source: © 2000, Archbold Biological Station, 11 July 2000, revised 22 August 2000.)

#### Attractions that Teach and Entertain

Spook Hill, located on North Wales Drive at Wilshire Avenue, a few blocks from the Lake Wales Historic District, is a natural attraction of the odd kind. Visitors from around the country come to see the natural wonder. When a car is placed in neutral at the designated location on the hill, the car rolls uphill, tugged by invisible forces which defy the laws of gravity. Over the years, there have been a number of legends meant to explain the natural wonder. The legend, as it reads on the sign next to Spook Hill:

*Many years ago an Indian village on Lake Wailes was plagued by raids of a huge gator. The Chief, a great warrior, killed the gator in a battle that created a small lake. The chief was buried on the north side. Pioneer mail riders first discovered their horses laboring down hill, thus naming it "Spook Hill." When the road was paved, cars coasted up hill. Is this the gator seeking revenge, or is the chief still trying to protect his land?*



*Spook Hill*

The murals found in the Lake Wales Historic District capture the character and history of the town. The “Crown Jewel of the Ridge,” painted on the east wall of the 254 Stuart Avenue and dedicated in 1995, depicts one of the main business streets in downtown Lake Wales as it stood in 1931. The mural painted on One Scenic Central Building portrays the turpentine works and the Atlantic Coastline Railroad. Frostproof completed its first mural, Citrus County, depicting the early days of Frostproof as seen from Lake Reedy on July 4, 2002. The second mural was developed in 2003. Tom Freeman and several art league members painted the second Frostproof mural, "Roots of the Community," located on the curved area of the Sullivan Real Estate office on North Scenic Highway. The large orange tree with a ladder leaning against it depicts the progress of the citrus industry in the Frostproof area.

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*Lake Wales Mural*



*Frostproof mural: Citrus County*