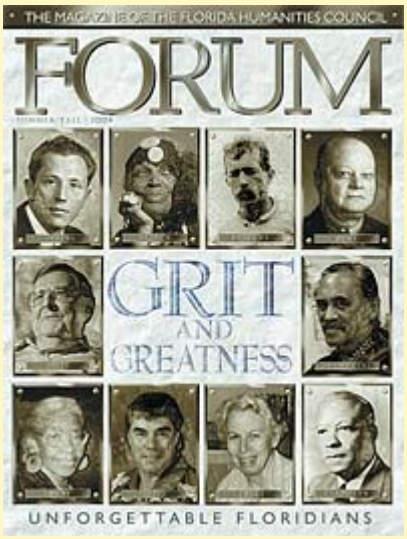
Here Today

By Gary R. Mormino

Do you remember those great floridans, john gorrie and edmund smith? No? Well, how about wankard pooser?



"Let us now praise famous men and our fathers that begat us," instructs the Book of Ecclesiastes. "Their seed shall remain forever, and their glory shall not be blotted out." How we honor our past and present heroes tells much about our society.

In Florida, where 10 years is an eternity and where roots are as shallow as an Australian pine's, yesterday's heroes too often reside in the dustbins of history. One generation's exemplar of gallantry may become the next era's trivia question, or, worse, embarrassment. The distance between marble and clay is time—and timing.

Enshrining heroes used to be easier. Imbued with a deep love of country and eager to record the accomplishments of Americans on the southern frontier, Floridians named places in honor of the early pioneers: Jackson, DuVal, Gadsden, Taylor, Brooke, Dade, Harney, Brevard, and Worth.

The Civil War's terrible sacrifices introduced a new generation of heroes. Bradford County commemorates Capt. Richard Bradford, the first Florida officer killed in the conflict, while Lee County memorialized Gen. Robert E. Lee, "the marble man."

In the half-century after Appomattox, the United Daughters of the Confederacy dedicated countless statues of Johnny Reb in county squares and cemeteries. When the Bay County town of Lynn Haven erected a statue of Billy Yank, Aunt Pitty-Pat fainted once again. Motivation, however, stemmed not from a deep yearning for national harmony; rather, local leaders sought to sell real estate to aging veterans of the Grand Army of the Republic.

The Gilded Age ushered in a new era of steel and steam, creating Robber Barons, men of fabulous wealth and influence. It was an age

of Henrys. The names Henry Flagler, Henry Plant, along with lesser luminaries, Col. Henry Haines and Henry Sanford, soon adorned cities and counties, colleges and churches.

In 1923, Suniland Magazine asked its readers to name "the greatest men in Florida." Julia Tuttle, Ivy Stranahan, and May Mann Jennings need not apply. The winning list included the aforementioned Flagler, Plant, and Haines, but also U.S. Sen. Duncan Fletcher, U.S. Rep. Stephen Sparkman, University of Florida President J. A. Murphree, and bridge-builder George Gandy.

Washington, D.C. became a permanent home to two of Florida's most revered figures. In 1864, Congress invited the states to select two persons "illustrious for their historic renown or distinguished civic or military service." In bronze and marble, states began to dispatch favorite sons (and occasionally daughters) to the Capitol's Statuary Hall. From the beloved (Oklahoma's Will Rogers), to the exotic (Hawaii's King Kamehameha), to the obscure (Arkansas's Uriah Rose), the august Hall has functioned as an American Pantheon.

In 1914, Florida proudly dedicated a bronze statue of Dr. John Gorrie, the "almost sacred" Apalachicola physician who in 1851 patented a "machine for the artificial production of ice." Recognizing the undying legacy of the "War between the States," Floridians commissioned a statue in 1922 to recognize Gen. Edmund Kirby Smith, the St. Augustine native and commander of the Confederate Army in the West. The last Confederate general to surrender, he was also the last southern general to die.

With all due deference to these 19th-century heroes, their chances of re-election today would be, at best, remote. In truth, the statues of Gorrie and Smith have proved longer lasting than their historic significance. Gorrie, "the father of modern air conditioning," is now blamed for making Florida so comfortable in the summer that millions of Yankees live here year-around. As the Grand Ole Opry's Uncle Dave Macon might have said, "I'd rather ride in a wagon and go to heaven than hell in an air-conditioned automobile." Smith, the unreconstructed rebel who spent his final years teaching mathematics at the College of the South, spent little time in Florida after his youth.

Revisionist historians and poll-watching politicians have suggested that it might be time to replace some of the Hall's aging heroes, arguing that each generation deserves the heroes it selects. One

shudders at the prospects of a muckraking press in a politically correct climate judging yesterday's heroes by today's standards. This historian suspects that only the West Indian manatee and the Florida panther could survive the vetting process.

Attacked by New England Brahmins as the very embodiment of Spanish cruelty and the black legend, Hernando de Soto was described by St. Augustine historian George Fairbanks in 1871 as a "gallant adventurer." In 1992, during the vexed debates over the meaning of Columbus and 1492, de Soto was equated with Hitler and Stalin.

Consider Andrew Jackson, the most revered American of his generation and Florida's first military governor. A steadfast patriot and hero of New Orleans and Horseshoe Bend, Old Hickory's legacy was only burnished by lively quarrels and deadly duels. But Jackson's views toward Native Americans and slavery make him so controversial today that Florida's first military governor and president no longer rides the lead mount in Springtime Tallahassee's parade. One might add that Jackson's beloved but outspoken wife Rachel simply loathed Florida.

Napoleon Bonaparte Broward, once lionized as a Cuban freedom fighter and a "Fighting Progressive," is now depicted as a gunrunning sheriff who advocated draining the Everglades and proposed expelling the state's African Americans.

Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, whose 1938 novel The Yearling won the Pulitzer Prize, and whose prose ennobled poor whites and the Big Scrub, has drawn criticism because of her use of the "n" word.

Not everyone has experienced a decline or reversal of historical reputation. Osceola, the son of a Scottish father and a Creek mother, battled U.S. troops in the Second Seminole War (1835–42), becoming the most reviled and hunted person on the peninsula. Today, a county boasts his name, while millions of Floridians cheer lustily for sports teams with the Seminole insignia.

This might be the time to resurrect the memory of Wankard Pooser, the Jackson County state legislator who was elected and re-elected on a simple campaign promise: He pledged to vote no on every single bill placed before him. Pooser—who a journalist remarked looked just like someone named Wankard Pooser—broke his solemn vow only once, and voters rejected him in the next election.

Politicians—or statesmen—once dominated the ranks of American heroes. Alas, they now rest somewhere between aluminum siding salesmen and telemarketers. How does one explain the public's disaffection with politicians? Like Longfellow's Evangeline looking for her lover, Floridians have waited a long time for good government. Perhaps in a post-9/11 world, we look for heroes outside the courthouse or statehouse. In Florida, the "unforgettable character" seems preferable to the heroic. In Shakespeare's Julius Caesar, Cassius – he of "the lean and hungry look"– may have understood the modern mind best. "The fault dear Brutus," states the Roman, "lies not in our stars, but in ourselves."