

THE PEOPLE'S RECORDER

EPISODE 4: FLORIDA PART 1

ZORA NEALE HURSTON (ARCHIVAL): *My name is Zora Neale Hurston. This song, I got it in the northern part of Florida in 1935. I don't remember the man's name that sung it to me, but I got it at Callahan, it's a railroad camp.*

Ah, Mobile. Ah, Alabama. Ah, Fort Meyers. Ah, in Florida...

HOST: Zora Neale Hurston was one of the great American writers of the 20th century and a home-grown Florida treasure. She became famous during the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s for her wit, outrageousness, and her novels.

But in the 1930s, hard times struck Hurston like everyone else. Finding work where she could get it, Hurston began investigating Florida life during the Depression. She and others working on a government jobs program were documenting in real-time one of the worst disasters of American History.

In this episode we'll hear from Hurston through her writings, voiced by an actor, and also in some of her original recordings, where her wit, charm and gift for collecting folklore shine through.

ZORA NEALE HURSTON (ARCHIVAL): *"Mama Don't Want No Peas, No Rice" is a song a song from Nassau, the Bahama Islands. They make songs so rapidly, they say anything you do, 'we put you in sing.' And in a few hours, they have a song about it.*

CORITA DOGGETT CORSE (ARCHIVAL): *And how did you happen to learn it?*

ZORA NEALE HURSTON (ARCHIVAL): *Well, I was doing research down there, collecting songs out of Columbia University, and I collected quite a few of them. And this is just one of them.*

**Mama don't want no peas, no rice. No coconut oil, no coconut oil.
Mama don't want no peas, no rice. No coconut oil, no coconut oil.
Mama don't want no peas, no rice. No coconut oil.
All she want is whiskey brandy, all the time.**

I know I know some more verses, but right off, I don't recall them.

RECORDER (ARCHIVAL): *I think that's a very valuable contribution to scientific recording.*

(Laughter)

[Theme music starts]

HOST: This is The People's Recorder, and I'm your host, Chris Haley. This is the podcast that explores the work of the Federal Writers' Project, a 1930s government agency that set out to document the lives of everyday Americans. The Project ended up raising just as many questions as it answered in its quest to hold up a mirror to America - questions that we still ask ourselves today.

The Federal Writers' Project was a small part of the Works Progress Administration, or WPA, a New Deal program designed to put people back to work during the Depression. The goal of the Writers Project was to create jobs for out-of-work journalists, authors and clerical workers. In Florida, it recruited hundreds of writers, from the panhandle to Jacksonville and down to the Florida Keys. Many who joined its ranks were desperate for work. But many saw a WPA job as a form of welfare and didn't want a government handout.

Which brings us to Hurston. After studying anthropology at Columbia University with the renowned Franz Boas, she went on to make a name for herself as a writer in New York during the Harlem Renaissance. But during the Depression, she came back home to Florida to get through hard times and to be inspired again. In many ways it worked. In 1937, she released the book that would become her best-known novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. And yet, Hurston still found herself struggling to make ends meet.

Flo Turcotte manages the Hurston archive at the University of Florida.

FLO TURCOTTE: *She was definitely in poverty, and she didn't want to admit that. There was some kind of stigma associated with being poor and she sort of hid that entire part of her life.*

HOST: Hurston wrote about that feeling in her memoir, *Dust Tracks on the Road*.

ZORA NEALE HURSTON (VOICED BY ACTOR): *There is something about poverty that smells like death. Dead dreams dropping off the heart like leaves in a dry season.*

HOST: Hurston was hesitant to join the WPA, but eventually, despite her dislike of government welfare, found herself working on the Writers' Project. She faced further indignity when the Florida office assigned her a wage of a junior researcher, far below what her experience merited.

FLO TURCOTTE: *The whole idea with the Federal Writers' Project was it was a steady paycheck, right? Hurston chafed against rules and regulations and structure, but she had the wherewithal to know that she could further her own artistic and literary agenda and participate in the Federal Writers' Project.*

HOST: The Project's national director Henry Alsberg had assigned each local office the task of documenting life in their state. The primary result would be a series of travel guidebooks known as the WPA guides. Much like today, the Florida of the 1930s was known for tourism. Travel films like this one embraced a postcard image of life in the sun.

[Archival from radio tourism ad about Florida]

NARRATOR (ARCHIVAL): *Let's look at Florida. For the uninitiated the mere mention of the word Florida calls up a kaleidoscopic mental picture of flamingos and alligators, boating, bathing beauties and bottles of suntan oil, citrus fruit and palm trees and always, an azure sky.*

HOST: Hurston and her coworkers would produce a travel guide, as directed. But they would challenge how America saw Florida. Here's historian Douglas Brinkley:

DOUGLAS BRINKLEY: *They were working for the federal government and saying: Hey. We're going to tell the real story of real people in real Florida. We're not candy coating it. We're not doing it for the chamber of commerce. We're not putting a veneer on it. Look at the racism. Look at the hatred that's going on in the South. Look at the bigotry of America.*

PEGGY BULGER: *People think of Jim Crow and they think of Mississippi and Alabama, and Georgia. They don't think much about Florida.*

HOST: Peggy Bulger is a folklorist and former director of the Florida Folklife Program.

PEGGY BULGER: *Everything was segregated. Of course, even the beaches were segregated. Florida was one of the worst states for lynchings. You've got the story of burning down entire black communities.*

HOST: But would the Writers' Project in Florida actually publish stories that exposed the harsh realities of Jim Crow racism? In Jacksonville, even internationally famous jazz musicians like Duke Ellington had to hunt for the rare motel that served Black Americans.

The Florida Writers' Project office was directed by a white historian named Carita Doggett Corse. She set the editorial agenda, and she did not openly challenge Jacksonville's harsh segregation laws. Black staff on the Project had to report to a separate office across town. The impact of racism was noticed by another member of the Florida staff, a gawky young white kid named Stetson Kennedy. He would later become a Florida folk icon himself.

STETSON KENNEDY: *I was born in 1916 here in Jacksonville. And at that time Jim Crow apartheid reigned supreme over everything, not just in the South, but throughout America.*

HOST: Peggy Bulger wrote her dissertation on Stetson Kennedy and his work. They remained friends for decades. And in 2005, she interviewed him at a Library of Congress event celebrating oral history.

[Archival from Library of Congress event, 2005]

PEGGY BULGER (ARCHIVAL): *If you would, please welcome a remarkable, remarkable man who's had an incredible life and is going to hopefully share some of his thoughts with us today. Stetson?*

STETSON KENNEDY (ARCHIVAL): *Yes, well, I know I was billed as going to speak about building democracy in America, but that's probably a pretty hot subject.*

(laughter)

PEGGY BULGER: *Stetson was a crusader and ahead of his time, in terms of what was acceptable behavior for a white upper middle-class person, and he was expected to behave in a certain way. His family of course was very distressed that he was trying to open their eyes to how unjust and how unequal everything was.*

HOST: Kennedy's background was rooted in Southern white supremacy. He even had family members in the Ku Klux Klan.

STETSON KENNEDY: *The Jacksonville of my youth especially, it was very much a plantation psychology, mentality. And it was that racist, semi-literate atmosphere that the entire South really was caught up in.*

HOST: When he became a student at the University of Florida during the height of the Depression, he saw these divisions grow even more pronounced. Kennedy dropped out of college and when his money ran out, applied for a job on the Writers' Project.

STETSON KENNEDY: *I signed up in Gainesville at the University of Florida and you had to take a pauper's oath to get the job. And the pauper's oath required you to state that you had no money and no property and no job, and no prospect of getting any of those things. So I was eminently qualified and got the job.*

HOST: With little experience, Kennedy was hired for the state editorial staff in Jacksonville. While he was learning the ropes, Hurston was already an expert in gathering people's stories. She worked from her home in Eatonville, and when she came to the state office, it was a special occasion.

STETSON KENNEDY: *Our state director Dr. Carita Doggett Corse called the editorial staff together one day and announced that the Negro, as we said in those days, writer Zora Neale Hurston had signed on to the Writers' Project. Zora had already published her first two books at the time and Dr. Corse said, "Now, Zora has been feted by literary circles in New York and is given to putting on certain airs. Such as smoking in the presence of white folks and so we're going to have to make allowance for Zora." And so, Zora came, Zora smoked, and we made allowances.*

HOST: Despite being the most experienced person on the Florida staff, Hurston was still only being paid a junior researcher's salary. Black Americans across the country faced similar disparities every day. Even from programs established to help people pushed to the margins. But Hurston rarely talked about racism's effects on her personally. In her essay titled, "How It Feels to Be Colored Me," she seemed to both denounce racial bias and shrug it off.

ZORA NEALE HURSTON (VOICED BY AN ACTOR): *Sometimes, I feel discriminated against, but it does not make me angry. It merely astonishes me. How can any deny themselves the pleasure of my company? It's beyond me.*

HOST: Despite the obstacles and indignities, Hurston saw a way to wrestle from the Writers' Project something that was close to her heart: getting down people's stories and songs. In 1938, she arranged to borrow state-of-the-art recording equipment, to capture the real voices of the Gulf Coast. Kennedy followed along and helped conduct audio recordings across the state.

[Archival from the Library of Congress]

STETSON KENNEDY (ARCHIVAL): *This is the Florida Folklore Recording Expedition in the WPA Florida Writers' Project. This record is being made in Tampa, Florida. Stetson Kennedy is the interviewer-operator.*

STETSON KENNEDY: *Quite often we would arrive on the scene with the recording machine. This was one of the early prototype recorders, and Zora wrangled it from the Library of Congress on loan.*

[Archival from the Library of Congress]

ZORA NEALE HURSTON (ARCHIVAL): *This song is not a work song. It's a sort of social song for amusement and it's so widely distributed it's growing all the time by incremental repetition. And it is known all over the South. No matter where you go you can find versions of Uncle Bud.*

INTERVIEWER (ARCHIVAL): *Is it sung before the respectable ladies?*

ZORA NEALE HURSTON (ARCHIVAL): *Never. It's one of those juke songs and a woman that they sing Uncle Bud in front of is a juke woman.*

INTERVIEWER (ARCHIVAL): *I thought you heard it from women.*

ZORA NEALE HURSTON (ARCHIVAL): *Yes, I heard it from women. *Uncle Bud's a man, a man like this...**

HOST: Folklorist Peggy Bulger

PEGGY BULGER: *What they were doing was very forward thinking and radical in many ways, in terms of even thinking those stories were important.*

HOST: The Writers' Project aimed to talk with all kinds of people about their lives as research for the state guidebook. An interviewer would sometimes schedule an appointment. Or she might just show up at the person's front door and ask to talk. With her training and experience, Hurston was a rare interviewer with the skills needed to dig beneath the surface.

ZORA NEALE HURSTON (VOICED BY ACTOR): *You know, folklore is not as easy to collect as it sounds. The best source is where there are the least outside influences and these people, being under-privileged, are the shyest. They are the most reluctant at times to reveal that which the soul lives by.*

HOST: In her interviews across Florida, Hurston was able to code switch easily between white and Black America. She was able to sit and talk with working people and build their trust with her charm and wit. In short, Hurston had an amazing capacity to do the kind of work that the national office wanted done.

FLO TURCOTTE: *She moved the ball forward with chronicling African American life. She was essentially forced to translate and to interpret African American culture to the uninitiated, if you will, the outsiders, perhaps the white audience, but also other African Americans of her time.*

JAMES MCBRIDE: *It was a fountain of information if you wanted to find out about Black culture.*

HOST: That's James McBride, screenwriter and author of the National Book Award winning novel, *The Good Lord Bird*.

JAMES MCBRIDE: *These men and women during the 1930s were walking into condensed, packed stories that existed every half a mile, every half a block...a land saturated with untold stories.*

[Archival from the Library of Congress]

ZORA NEALE HURSTON (ARCHIVAL): *I heard Halimuhfak down on the East Coast...*

HOST: Hurston was deep down an anthropologist. One who worked close with the people – she wanted to be right there with them, talking with them. And she also had great respect for what they shared with her.

[Archival from the Library of Congress]

INTERVIEWER (ARCHIVAL): *You said you learn in a crowd. How do you learn most of your songs?*

ZORA NEALE HURSTON (ARCHIVAL): *I learn them, I just get in a crowd with the people if they singing and I listen as best I can and I start joining in with a phrase or two and finally I get so I can sing a verse. Then I keep on until I learn all the verses. Then I sing them back to the people until they tell me I can sing them just like them.*

INTERVIEWER (ARCHIVAL): *Go ahead.*

ZORA NEALE HURSTON (ARCHIVAL): **You may leave and go to Halimuhfak...**

HOST: The material Hurston gathered was revealing a very different and unexpected Florida, one full of color and spark. Some staff in the Jacksonville office weren't sure how to use Hurston's reports, but Stetson Kennedy was thrilled by their vibrancy. He always watched for the postmark from Eatonville, calling it "the Mark of Zora." He said her packages were always "stuffed with the most fabulous folk treasures imaginable." Like this item on food culture, a story she wrote for the Florida guidebook, called Diddy Wah-Diddy:

ZORA NEALE HURSTON (VOICED BY ACTOR): *This is the largest and best known of Negro mythical places. It is a place of no work and no worry. The food is even already cooked. If a traveler gets hungry, all he needs to do is sit down on the curbstone and soon he will hear something hollering "Eat me! Eat me!" and a big baked chicken will come along with a knife and a fork stuck in its sides.*

HOST: Rich creativity and foodways are parts of Black Florida life still found in the state. Here's Florida native and oral historian Dr. Tameka Hobbs, the Regional Manager of the African American Research Library and Cultural Center in Fort Lauderdale.

TAMEKA HOBBS: *Are there things that Zora Neale Hurston recorded that are still occurring today? I'm gonna say, yeah. When people got together for these communal experiences of feeding the community. So, the biggie was the slaughtering of the hogs. And the use of every part of that critter – everything from choice cuts of meat, making cracklin from the skin, that's something that, you know, was part of the Black culinary tradition for many years. They would also make cane syrup, is still a delicacy that far too few people appreciate today, but it's a very strong memory, and something that I crave even now. So, I think that some of those things are still going on. These folks are doing amazing work of tradition-keeping and place.*

ZORA NEALE HURSTON (ARCHIVAL): **I'm going to buy her / shoes and stockings, Slippers too, lord / Slippers too, I'm going to give her / all my money, Kisses too, lord / Kisses too**

HOST: Many of these recordings Hurston made with Stetson Kennedy. The two would travel through the back roads of rural Florida. As a Black woman and white man working together in the segregated South, Hurston and Kennedy were putting themselves in danger while seeking out stories of marginalized communities. And Hurston ran the greater risk.

TAMEKA HOBBS: *The images that come to mind are these long dusty back roads of these communities, that exist in Florida. In conducting my oral histories maybe a decade or more ago, I was traveling, perhaps, some of those same routes, that Zora Neale Hurston would have been traveling, often on my own. And I can tell you even in the late 90s, early 2000s, to be doubly burdened as a Black woman, there's always a layer of apprehension when you're traveling alone because you're vulnerable in multiple ways.*

HOST: Flo Turcotte sees that Stetson Kennedy admired Hurston's courage and independence.

FLO TURCOTTE: *I think Stetson very much wanted to do his own thing and so did Zora. So, I think in that respect they were kindred spirits with regard to their defiance of authority. Their questioning norms, questioning structure.*

HOST: Hurston and Kennedy were finding the riches and pains of Floridians in the Depression. They were using the tools at hand to document the full range of Florida life, including gambling.

Here's a recording they did together in the summer of 1939.

[Archival from Library of Congress event]

ZORA NEALE HURSTON (ARCHIVAL): *I'm gonna sing a gambling song that I collected at Balstrup, Florida and the men are playing a game called Georgia Skin. That's the most favorite gambling game among the workers of the South.*

STETSON KENNEDY (ARCHIVAL): *I think it would be better if you explain to us which ways the cards give out, or what?*

ZORA NEALE HURSTON (ARCHIVAL): *Well, you see, they take a deck of cards and shuffle it real good, they're four cards of every kind in the deck. And when a card like the card like you have selected falls, you lose. Sometimes if you don't watch the dealer, he'll shuffle three cards just like his own down to the bottom of the deck, so everyone falls before he does, and then he wins all the money.*

STETSON KENNEDY (ARCHIVAL): *Well, what does he do? Is the dealer holding the deck of cards?*

HOST: By 1939, after more than two years of researching and interviewing, and endless back and forth with the national office in Washington DC, the WPA Guide to Florida was about to go to press. It would join a whole series of state guidebooks – some of them had already been published to great fanfare. The California Guide was even selected for the Book of the Month Club. But in the Florida office, there was a storm brewing over competing visions as the state guidebook moved towards publication. State editors were rejecting a lot of the material being collecting by Project workers like Hurston and Kennedy, who felt an obligation to dig into the hard parts of Florida life.

STETSON KENNEDY: *We were taking seriously the Congressional mandate of holding up a mirror to America, warts and all. American South at that time was listed in the world studies as one of the world's hunger areas. And we felt that Jim Crow and lynching and Rosewood – things like that – were warts...and malaria and VD and all the other things.*

HOST: But they would run into resistance from editors who did not want to provoke the mainstream vision of Florida.

PEGGY BULGER: *A lot of what Stetson was collecting was rejected because he was wanting to tell the true story of what was going on in Florida. And nobody wanted to hear about that, they didn't want to hear about poverty. They wanted to hear about how wonderful the springs are and what a great place to vacation in.*

[Archival from radio tourism ad about Florida]

NARRATOR (ARCHIVAL): *It may be safely said that Florida has a population which perpetually acclaims youthfulness and vigor in their manner of work and play. The state in which summer spends her winters, according to the best sources of information, attracted a million and a half winter visitors during the season of 1933-34. They travelled by their own automobiles, by train, bus, airplane, boat, and private yacht.*

TAMEKA HOBBS: *That's classic Florida. There is a masterful PR job that's done to promote Florida as a tourist destination. Our beaches. Later, as Disney comes along. And in many instances, it covers over some of the worst of the racial strife that is very real for people of color in Florida.*

HOST: With deadlines approaching, the Florida guide editors anguished over questions of what should stay in, and what to leave out.

STETSON KENNEDY: *Jim Crow was actually the editor-in-chief of the project, looking over everyone's shoulders, white or black, with an eye as to what we were putting down - whether it conformed with the system of white supremacy and white etiquette, protocol.*

As we got down to the deadline for publication, the pressures were tremendous from all sides – not just internally – but externally from the community. I recall, I have a letter from the chief of police of Tampa, for example, writing to Washington headquarters of the Writers Project, urging them to please take out the material about the Black section of town: “we certainly don't want any tourists going in there. Just make bare mention of the fact that there was a colored town and let it go at that.”

TAMEKA HOBBS: *During this period in time, one of the primary goals of law enforcement was making sure that they observed and maintained segregation laws... this was the period in which lynching was still a very much a reality.*

HOST: The Ocoee massacre was an episode Hurston found that even she felt uncomfortable reporting. In Ocoee in 1920, violence erupted when white officials put down a movement by Black citizens to vote. At first, Hurston held back on the violent details because of her own reluctance to focus on what she called victim stories. She wrote:

EXCERPT FROM THE WPA GUIDE TO FLORIDA (VOICED BY AN ACTOR):
Election Day 1920: A race riot broke out at Ocoee, following a disturbance at the polls. The conflict arose when July Perry, prosperous grove owner and the town's most prominent Negro, ignored the threats of the local Ku Klux Klan and cast his ballot.

HOST: Only later, when prodded by national Black studies editor Sterling Brown, did Hurston go further. She added:

EXCERPT FROM THE WPA GUIDE TO FLORIDA (VOICED BY AN ACTOR): *Perry was locked up in the Orlando jail. At sunrise the jail was stormed; Perry was tied to the back of an automobile and hanged from a telephone pole. Mobs surrounded the Negro section of town and fired it. Some 35 Negroes perished.*

HOST: This violent incident of Black voter suppression became a flash point in the struggle over the Florida guide. Hurston and Kennedy insisted these were not isolated incidents to be swept under the rug. For better or worse, this was part of Florida's story.

In an effort to bury these episodes of oppression, editors in the Jacksonville office cut out the story about Ocoee, along with other sections talking about poverty, and racist laws and practices. They then sent the censored text to Project headquarters in Washington. Hurston and Kennedy's faction of the staff hoped that the national editors would find clues to the missing pieces, embedded like a code in the book's index.

STETSON KENNEDY: *We consoled ourselves that, well, the Ocoee thing and all these other things are in the index - and probably these people who had censored the manuscript forgot the index, and perhaps some bright lad or lass in the Washington office will see the index and say, "what happened to Ocoee?" And sure enough, that happened.*

HOST: Senior editors in Washington wanted the Florida guide to reflect the full picture of the state for all of its residents. They moved to restore the sections that state censors had cut. They even brought Hurston up to Washington to help with the re-editing. The Writers' Project national director Henry Alsberg and his editor for Black studies, Sterling Brown, directed the changes. And the incident of white mob violence against Black voters at Ocoee – and many other stories that had been censored – appeared in the guide when it was published.

The Florida Guide arrived in bookstores Fall of 1939 and has been reprinted several times since then. You can find it in libraries across the country. Check out a copy. Open it to any page.

EXCERPT FROM THE WPA GUIDE TO FLORIDA (VOICED BY AN ACTOR): *South Bay on Lake Okeechobee was practically destroyed by the hurricane of September 1928. Many residents fled to West Palm Beach. A field worker who passed unscathed through several hurricanes described the gale, "One day the wind blowed so hard, it blowed a crooked road straight."*

HOST: Thanks to local perspectives, the WPA Guide had what no other travel guides did: a view of Florida from the grassroots, so to speak. What Hurston and the WPA writers captured became legendary for later generations of writers. They include James McBride.

JAMES MCBRIDE: *There's no question that the Writer's Project was a spawning ground for Black talent. The fact of the matter is that I wouldn't be writing if it weren't for these kinds of writers.*

HOST: For McBride, that generation's connection to African American history is vital for artists today.

JAMES MCBRIDE: *Novelists and writers of long form fiction often are disconnected from their subjects, by nature. It's one thing to have to be a kid, to grow up in Florida and to walk thru the swamp lands and so forth and to have that experience in your head. It's another when you're 35 to get out of bed and put your pants on and go walk thru it for weeks which is what you need to do if you're going to write about it effectively. And that's what this Project allowed these writers to do. It allowed them to walk down the corridors of memory and time and to get paid for it-- minimally, but, you know, in those days anything that provided soup and potatoes was a good thing.*

What this is, sort of, like a lit road into history. And that's what artists do: they illuminate. And that's why this project was so important: because the government gave us a chance to see each other in a real way.

HOST: The most explosive episode of the Florida Writers' Project was yet to come. Next time on The People's Recorder: Zora Neale Hurston and Stetson Kennedy go deeper into the pine-sap gulag of turpentine camps.

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The episode was produced by Spark Media and includes original audio from the Library of Congress. Follow us on social media at @peoplesrecorder for more information and bonus content. I'm Chris Haley. Thanks for listening.