

Transcript of Interview with Robbie Morin, current Glass Bottom Boat captain. Interview on 03/28/2023.

C: I got in touch with you because you are involved with a lot of stuff with Silver Springs, so could you give me a background with what you are involved with? Kind of what you do with Silver Springs and how long you've been working with them?

R: Yeah, I've been driving a glass bottom boat for about four and a half years now, I also work at the Silver River Museum as the boat captain there for the field trips.

C: Cool. And you've been doing that for about four years?

R: The museum, this is my second year. Glass bottom boats is four and a half years

C: Could you tell me a little bit about kinda what you know about Silver Springs and its own history and how it's been operated over the years?

R: Oh jeesh, how much time do we have?

C: As much as you'd like, I know its quite a bit from what I've been seeing.

R: Yeah, I know as far as the glass bottom boat tours, they've been running those since 1878, a 14 year old boy named Hemmell Jones took a wooden rowboat, put a piece of glass in the bottom of it and he started paddling up and down the river, doing tours for about a nickel a piece. And its just kind of expanded from there. I know Silver Springs itself was a steamboat stop for years for the steamboat paddlewheelers back in the 1800s. They built a hotel there at Silver Springs, I don't remember what year. And then they also had a railroad that would go from Silver Springs into Ocala. And then the steamers would pick up produce, and materials, turpentine good

and whatever was grown up and down river then they would offload it on the railroad and take it into Ocala. And then pick stuff up and transport it back up the river.

C: So the river was like the pre-interstate interstate?

R: Exactly. The river boats were huge in the 1800s, I know there was one particular company called the Hart Line that operated out of Palatka and Jacksonville. There was a couple other different steamboat lines that operated where passengers would pick up the boat in Jacksonville and would come into Silver Springs, it would take 3 days. The boats would stop at various landings and people would be there to cook food and stuff like that. They had their own cabins and things. And if they took the steamboat from Palatka it took 24 hours to come into silver springs. And they would run these boats 24 hours a day.

C: Awesome. So you touched on some of this stuff with how the Glass Bottom Boats go started, but that was actually going to be the next thing I asked you about. Kind of what are you aware of with the history of the Glass Bottom Boats? You mentioned that they stated in the 1800s, have they been consistently operating and evolving to these versions since then?

R: Yes. In fact I just saw something last week where the Glass Bottom Boats are the oldest continuing attraction in the state of Florida, tourist attraction. You can go on, there's Marion County History, on Facebook, you have to join it but they're always putting pictures and stuff like that on it. And I know the boats, they stayed rowboats primarily for the longest time. And they even adapted the cover on the top of them so people could see down into the spring. And then when the gasoline motors first started to get invented that's when they converted over to gas. And they ran gas motors. I know, I don't know the year, but one of the motors caught fire, nobody was on board but it caught fire, and Thomas Edison was a huge fan of Silver Springs,

and him and Firestone and Goodyear were hanging out at Edison's house in Fort Myers, and they came up to Silver Springs and started designing the first electric motor.

C: That's really cool. Was that in response to the fire?

R: Yes. In fact Thomas Edison had come up the paddleboats with his bride and spent his honeymoon there at Silver Springs, at the hotel when they first got married.

C: That's awesome. I found some photos from like the 1950s, and I was noticing there was a change in design from the boats that I'm familiar with seeing as a guest, to the one's I was seeing pictures of. When were the boats that we have now implemented like that design?

R: That's a good question, I know they have an old boat from the 40s or 50s there at the museum that was actually abandoned down river, and they brought it a family refurbished it and then donated it to the museum, but that's a gas motor, and its on display outside. And they used to have a pie-shaped wedge that went into the dock because the boats were pointed and they used the wedge to dock the boat so people could get on and off the boat. I don't know when they switched the design for a square bow, I know the fleet of boats we have now were built in the mid 60s. I think the youngest boat we have now was built in 1972. When they switched over to aluminum. So that fleet of boats that we have now are over 50 years old.

C: And then the newest one that was just added recently, the Betty Mae Tiger Jumper boat, was that launched in 2020 or 2021? I remember reading about it in the newspaper.

R: It was commissioned a year ago last October. I've got pictures from then when they brought it up-river, because we escorted it with the Sheriff's Office. And I mean the boat is a great idea, and that's a whole other history of how that got started by a lady named Paula Russo who has polio, and has been in a wheelchair. That's see, they launched the boat June 24th of 2021. Then they

brought it up the river, then it was finally dedicated in October. Again the boat was an awesome idea, but it was overbuilt for what we needed it for on the river. Like I said, bless her heart, she tried to please everybody, and it got overbuilt. One of the stories I heard, was if it needs to hold 26 passengers, that have it hold 26 wheelchairs. And then the heaviest wheelchairs are around 1000 pounds, so that's make it where it will hold 20 some odd wheelchairs at 1000 pounds so the thing just kept getting bigger and bigger and bigger. They used lithium batteries, which they have to build watertight steel boxes for them to go in, because if they hit water they explode, and that would be bad on a boat, if they get wet and they explode while a passenger is onboard that's bad. They had to build it for current coast guard regulations, so needed a fire suppression system, it needed a smoke alarm, it's got bilge pumps, all this stuff we don't need. If they had condensed it down to hold 2 or 3 wheelchairs, it would be a lot better. Its got two 20 horse motors on it, dual motors, but the freeboard, going up the side of the thing is so high, as soon as a gust of wind takes it your into the bank, the motors aren't big enough to power it. We have a bridge...near the ticket booth... the boat is too big to go under the bridge. So they have to drive this big boat all the way down to the Fort King Waterway, a half a mile, then out into the river to bring it up to the dock. So yeah, it just got overbuilt. And it doesn't work right now because the charging system is faulty, its not charging the batteries.

C: Well that's unfortunate. I noticed last time, I got to go on one of the boat rides last December, it was over winter beak, I still loved it, it put me back in my childhood nostalgia for sure, but I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about the captains perspective, how do you go about doing your tours, like what do you try to communicate to your guests and try to share with them when their visiting?

R: What material are we using?

C: Yeah, what do you talk about and how do you pick what you talk about?

R: There's a script, we have it for the hearing impaired so they can read it, the thing is full of so many spelling errors its almost embarrassing. That's what all the captains start with. It's a 120% focus job when your driving that boat. Cause you have to drive the boat, you have to watch your customers in the boat, because your responsible for all 26 of them, you have to give the tour and you have to maneuver around kayakers and paddleboarders who do not get out of the way, some of them don't have a clue of what their supposed to do, even though number 3 on the waiver highlighted states you will yield to Glass Bottom Boats. That applies to everybody but them. So it can be pretty intense especially if there are a lot of kayakers. We start with the basic tour. And this is what I train all the other boat captains on, do que cards and hit all the bullet points. You know first Glass Bottom Boat 1878, the water temperature is 72 degrees, its 98% pure. Going to the first spring, it's the Spring of Stars, lot of movies made here, its 26 feet deep. Talk about the fish, then go to Creature. This is Creature Spring, Creature from the Black Lagoon was made here, 33 feet deep, the cavern was the creature's home. Then go to the next spring. And then everybody kind of adds their own routine to the speech. I was told when I started working there, and I tell all the other captains, ride with every captain because everybody does it a little bit different, and then steal their stuff, and make your own tour. I pride myself on doing history and facts,...I do facts, history, some of the other boat captains, one guy thinks its Chris Rock comedy hour, some of the facts they give aren't necessarily correct. I do a lot of mine on wordage, I've just recently changed this over the past couple of years, I used to always go *historically* all the springs would produce 850 million gallons a day. "Historically," that was 50 years ago, its not like that now, its anywhere between 440 million to 550 million total. So, I've kind of adapted my tour to that because I can back that up with information from the USGS. I do a lot of history, talk

about the movies that were filmed there, I do a whole section about the Seminoles and Osceola and the Treaty of Payne's Landing which was attempted to have been signed right out there in the middle of Hog Valley back in the day, 1832 I think. So that's how I run my tour. And again, everybody's a little bit different.

C: You mentioned the Seminoles that's actually quite a bit of what I'm interested in, with Osceola there's the statue of him kind of close to the docks, but what actually got me interested in Silver Springs was noticing that a lot of the Glass Bottom Boats have names that I recognized from studying Native American history, So I was going to ask what you know about the people that the boats are all named after.

R: They're all named after authentic Seminole or Native American chiefs. Chief Neamathla is actually named after a Red Creek Indian from Georgia, Neamathla means 'fat with honor,' I'm not quite sure about Emathla and who that one was named after. Chief Charley Cypress, that's the boat I drive now. I know Chief Yalahochee translates to 'chief crazy turtle.' But I think if you google those names it should link you to the history of those names and what chiefs they were named after.

C: I know I looked up some of the ones I've seen just on my visit out, including the Chief Charley Cypress, and he actually lived at Silver Springs for a while.

R: That would have been – I don't know if Allen was the one who brought them in or if it was the Ray and Davidson, but yeah Charley Cypress was a chief there a part of the band that was all up and down the Ocklawaha. And even Osceola when they were hunting him he would sneak down into the Orange Springs area because that was his favorite hunting grounds.

C: That's Cool, So with names of the boats related to native history and people, do you ever have guest that ask about that or want to know more about that, or do they not even notice?

R: Sometimes they ask. Like I said when I drive the Yalahochee I mention that it means Crazy Turtle. But they never really asked about Charley Cypress, so I'm glad you mentioned that because I wouldn't have known where that came from. Of course the Chief Patackee Betty Mae Tiger Jumper, she was the only female chief elected to the Seminole Nation there in Florida. In the Seminole language they don't have certain letters so its actually pronounced Po-tath-i according to her son who was here when they dedicated the boat.

C: So its an every once in a while sort of thing that guest ask about it?

R: Yeah every once in a while.

C: and I think you already answered this but do you ever mention it during your tours? I know you mentioned the one that translates to Crazy Turtle

R: Yeah sometimes when I leave the dock, and especially when I drove the Neamathla, I drove that for a couple of years. That translates to 'fat with honor' or 'full of honor' but na they usually don't ask, and if they do we usually just say that they were named after famous chiefs from the area and southern Georgia, Alabama, stuff like that. Have you visited Fort King?

C: I have, although when I last visited Fort King they had just started the reconstruction stuff to reconstruct the fort. They had like the walls and the watchtowers and a little museum off to the side

R: Well they've also added a blacksmith shop and all that stuff. So they're trying to steal the thunder from the silver river pioneer village. But I got a lot of this information from a pamphlet

at the museum that was all about the Seminole people. The story of Osceola, how he used to be really good friends with the soldiers and stuff, especially the Indian Agent named Wiley Thompson. But Wiley lied to him a couple of times, but I don't know what happened but shortly after he stabbed the Treaty of Payne's Landing, which there's still a little bit of possible folklore with that, but Osceola waited in the woodline around Fort King with some of the other Braves and when Wiley and some of the other soldiers came out, Osceola shot him and killed him. And that's what started the war for Osceola.

C: Have you ever been to the Dade [Massacre] or Battle site?

R: Never been but that was the same day.

C: that's what I was going to mention. I've done more on the war periods than anything else with the Seminole side of it.

R: yeah so supposedly with the Treaty of Payne's Landing and the statue of him stabbing the treaty, supposedly some people say that didn't happen, some people say that it did, some say they've actually gone the Bureau of Indian Affairs and pulled that treaty and looked at it and there's a triangle shaped hole right in the middle of it. So was it folk lore, did it happen I haven't confirmed it either way.

C: So with there being a lot of controversy with Native American imagery and what not, just for example with sports push to change teams like the Cleveland baseball teams from the Indians to the Guardians, and the Washington football team, has there been any kind of pushback or requests or efforts to change the names of the teams.

R: no, not that I've heard of. To me that pays homage to them. I know I talk about the Seminoles and I first ask who were the people that lived here in the 1700s and then what Seminole

originally meant, which was 'outsider' or 'runaway' then I explain how they got that name by being forced down into Florida from the southern end of the United States by the population increasing. Then in the late 1700s even African American slaves fled to Florida and joined the Seminole people and I talk about how it's a big melting pot, Creek, Cherokee, Apalachee. Did you know that Osceola was not born in Florida?

C: Yeah he was born somewhere in Alabama, we actually talked about that today in my Southeastern Native American History course.

R: Yeah, I believe his mother was native Muscogee he was born in Alabama in 1804, they fled to Florida right here in Marion County in 1814. His dad was English and Scottish, and that's how he learned to read and write the English language.

C: that's actually what we didn't have in class today, because someone asked if we knew who his father was, my professor was not 100% sure, we were leaning towards his father being English or Scottish, but my professor is not really a Seminole historian, but we knew his mom was Muskogee Creek and since their culture was more matrilineal it didn't really matter who his dad was.

R: Well Osceola had an English name which was Billy Powell, his father was William Powell. They fled here to Marion County in 1814.

C: I had two more things, with what I'm researching I want to make a statement about why this is so important and what not, so I was wondering if you had an idea of how many guest come to the park, like general idea I don't know if you have those kinds of stats anymore or what not. Has there been an uptick recently?

R: we do, you might be able to get that. Its been crazy since COVID, its been nuts. Before covid we'd sit there in the summer time and wait for 4 people to show up to go on a boat ride. It is off the chain since we reopened. Right now we run 3 boats during the week. The boats have historically started at 10 o'clock now, Cape Leisure, who runs the concessions, has us coming in at 8, the first boat leaves at 9 then people can do the 9:30 then the 10 o'clock. As far as the tourism goes, where Disney got the ide for the que lines, that started at Silver Springs. We don't do that much any more, we've kind of adopted the FastPass style of selecting a particular time. So you can sign up for a specific time. Here recently we've been booked through 2:30 by ten in the morning. That's 26 passengers a boat every 20 minutes. We'll adjust that if we need to. People can book the 10 12 and 3 oclock online. People seem to like that a lot better because people aren't standing in line for 3 hours looking at the person's head in front of them. and then it gives us about 10 minutes between tours to get off and pee, get something to drink and get back on the boat. If were running late because of Kayakers or manatees wouldn't get out of the way we have about 10 minutes to play with. The better way to get the attendance would be to contact the park the ranger side should be able to give the attendance, its hit or miss on the week. Last week we did 700 boat rides on Monday, 700 on Tuesday, I think it was about 680 on Wednesday and about the same on Thursday. On the big weekends it could be around 1500 people a boat ride. And that's just the Glass Bottom Boat, so the attendance can get crazy sometimes.

C: I bet that's very stressful as a part of the staff and running it, but I love Silver Springs and want to see it do well, It's like a good problem to have. But I hope yall are doing okay with that kind of stress.

R: there's also the stress on the environment, we're not really sure what the river's max capacity is. We have the glass bottom boats, Cape Leisure has the kayaks, and the state allows private tour groups to come in and launch their kayaks so they pay 6 dollars a kayak to launch, you know their charging their customers at least \$30, so their making a lot. We handle the guided tours really well, if their at a spring Ill hold off. And their supposed to give us the right of way. like today were work together.