



"Eugenia was afraid of getting ants, but she still kept an altar on a ledge in the sleeping porch."  
Amy C. Evans | 10 in. x 7 in. | acrylic on wood panel | 2015

## FOREWORD

THE FLORIDA PANHANDLE IS A PLACE OF MYSTERIES. Tucked into the palmettos and scattered along the shoreline, centuries-old stories reside. For most of this place's history, Native Americans were the keepers of its secrets. Then came explorers and missionaries, inventors and botanists. Industry emerged with timber and cotton, then sponges and seafood. For the last 150 years, oysters have been big business here. Today, real estate and tourism outshine most everything else in this part of the Sunshine State. But the stories remain, and only the locals know where to find them.

*Saints of Old Florida* is chock full of these stories. We're introduced to the Panhandle's characters and quirks, while learning of its history and hidden gems. We're invited into people's homes where we get to peek into family photo albums and sift through old recipes. We hear tell of zebras on St. Vincent Island and Wewahitchka's liquid gold. It's hard to capture the essence of this place without visiting, but this book lifts the lid on the shell-encrusted treasure box.

I am not of Florida, but I have an honest, albeit tenuous, claim to the place: My parents met in Pensacola. When I was about eight years old, we returned for a visit as a family. On that trip I was introduced to some of the Panhandle's mysteries. I wandered through corridors that held the ghosts of Fort Pickens. On a dark night, I watched waves of blue light, reaching for the beach. Thinking back on it now, this was my first connection to a place that would loom large much later in my life.

In 2005, I made the first of many trips to Franklin County, Florida, as oral historian for the Southern Foodways Alliance. I was there to document the seafood industry and had the pleasure of spending time with some of the wonderful people featured in these pages. I walked the shore of St. Vincent Island with Tommy Ward, listening to stories about his family and discovering shards of Native American pottery peeking through the sand. I sat in Betty McNeill's living room, talking about turpentine and tearooms. I've opened oysters and grunted for worms. I don't claim to be privy to all of the Panhandle's secrets, but I have certainly been seduced by its charms.

I detailed those charms in an essay I wrote for an online magazine called *The Bitter Southerner*, which is how I got to know the women who created this book. The starfish aligned, and an immediate, albeit virtual, connection sparked collaboration. Our devotion to this place—the place that Emily, Melissa, and Christina call home—is captured here. Together, they have conjured up the stories hidden in the palmettos and gently placed them between the pages of *Saints of Old Florida*.

As for me, I just conjured up a painting.

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