

Reporting back to his cosmopolitan readership, a New York City journalist discovers the beautiful, the odd, and the dangerous in a Florida now long forgotten. Before he was a New York congressman and winner of the Congressional Medal of Honor, Amos Jay Cummings covered bruins and buzzards, rednecks and racists, murderers and mosquitoes, rich soils and poor souls, for the New York Sun. In 1874, journalist Cummings was among only a handful of white people to make their way down through the Florida wilderness to stand on the sunset-drenched shores of Lake Worth, today among the most expensive properties in the state. The Sun--famous for its editorial titled "Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus"--published a series of articles about his explorations. As New Yorkers marveled at the contrast between the barely explored Florida frontier and their own city, Cummings stripped the veneer off the paradise touted in brochures to reveal an untamed wilderness. He wrote about "sportsmen" who traveled the St. Johns River on steamboats, shooting every animal that moved, and he pondered over graves dug in earth-floored hovels, only to learn they were flea traps! Cummings's cast of characters, from Captain Dummitt, "a man who works for no man--not even himself," to Cone, the alligator hunter who "done peeled the bark from a gator in twelve minits," are riveting and engaging. Twenty years later, Cummings would return to witness the beginnings of efforts to drain south Florida. For over a century Cummings and his Florida articles lay undiscovered in the New York Public Library archives. Now, archaeologist Jerald T. Milanich digs up these 20 amusing and remarkable stories in *Frolicking Bears, Wet Vultures, and Other Oddities*, providing introductions and annotations, but otherwise allowing Cummings to emerge in his own vivid words.

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