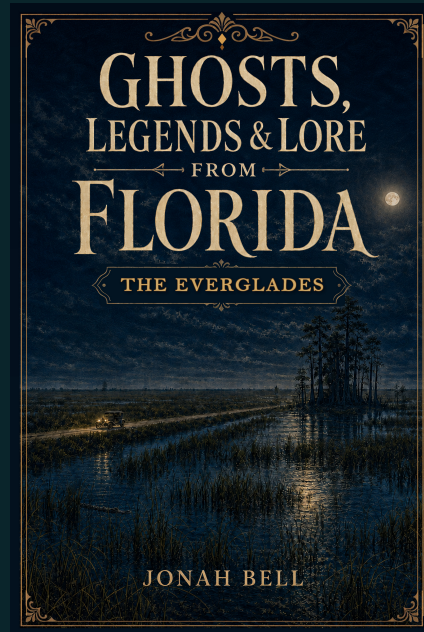


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Ghosts, Legends & Lore from Florida: The Everglades

Chapter 12: Ochopee and Birdon

One complete chapter by Jonah Bell

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Chapter 12: Ochopee and Birdon

The Ochopee post office occupies a former irrigation-pipe shed with room for one clerk and one customer. The National Park Service presents that small building as the remnant of a larger tomato-growing and company landscape that also included a store, packing facilities, housing, fuel service, and roads.C12.1 The agency interpretation supplies the frame for Ochopee and nearby Birdon; the missing payrolls, census schedules, ledgers, deeds, worker testimony, and independent fire record define its limits.

After the Trail

The road-construction history remains in Chapter 8. Here, the Park Service connects the Trail's 1928 opening with increased settlement and industry in Big Cypress; Ochopee belonged to that change.C12.2

According to the agency, Edgar S. Gaunt bought 250 acres from James Jaudon for tomatoes, and the J. T. Gaunt Company later acquired another 3,000 acres and established a packing house, general store, living quarters, and gas station.C12.3 The same page estimates nearly 1,000 employees by the 1940s. Because the cited interpretation supplies no payroll or census schedule, the figure remains an agency estimate and cannot define the workforce's composition or conditions.

Jaudon, Bird, and Another Tomato Town

The Park Service says James Franklin Jaudon moved to Ochopee in 1930 after earlier work at Pinecrest and Loop Road, pursued plans involving logging, sugar cane, distilling, and tomatoes, and formed the H. W. Bird Tomato Corporation with H. W. Bird.C12.4

The Birdon name has a straightforward documentary explanation in the Park Service history: it combined Bird and Jaudon. Ochopee's name does not have the same certainty. The often-repeated account says that a store owner asked an American Indian customer for a Seminole word for farm and received "O-Chopp-ee." The Park Service itself introduces that account as a story. Without a Tribal-language source, it cannot be presented as verified Seminole or Mikasuki linguistics.C12.5

For Birdon, the agency reports an approximately 2,500-acre purchase in 1930, a tomato peeling and packing operation, homes and service buildings, and more than 340 residents at the town's height.C12.6 The cited pages do not provide deeds that reconcile this acreage with the Gaunt transactions, so the figures remain separate parts of the agency synthesis.

The Park Service also reports that field workers earned \$1.25 per day and received company-issued scrip usable at the company store.C12.7 The compensation could be spent at a store controlled by the same enterprise, but the source does not show how every worker spent or converted it. Without payrolls, scrip specimens, ledgers, a worker census, or oral histories, the chapter does not infer debt, illegality, or a common household experience.

Decline and Survival

The Park Service says Birdon's operation prospered for a few years, suffered during the Great Depression, and disappeared in the 1940s.C12.7 Ochopee's larger company landscape also contracted, leaving the former pipe shed as its best-known remnant.

In the Park Service account, Ochopee's original post office occupied the Gaunt Tomato Company general store until that building burned in 1953. Postal work moved into the irrigation-pipe shed as a temporary substitute, and the agency reports continuous postal use there since then.C12.8

The sequence gives the little building its real historical weight. It did not begin as a miniature civic monument. It was equipment storage within an agricultural system, then an emergency replacement after the loss of a company store. Its survival records adaptation after the larger business landscape around it had begun to disappear. Even the post office's celebrated size is best understood as a claim attached to continued use, not as the reason Ochopee existed.

In 1974, Big Cypress National Preserve brought Ochopee's historic area within a protected watershed while private residences remained.C12.9 The post office is public, but Birdon Road also serves residents; homes and side roads are not historic exhibits.C12.6

What the Small Building Holds

The Ochopee post office became the community's most visible surviving landmark.

Credit: Holding institution; no known restrictions

Together, the Park Service histories present Ochopee and Birdon as Trail-era agricultural projects built from fields, packing operations, stores, housing, fuel, and roads. Their population and employment figures remain attributed estimates, and their pay system cannot stand in for worker testimony. The former pipe shed marks the surviving edge of that larger interpreted landscape: it points back to irrigation, the company store, and the agency's account of the 1953 fire, while Birdon Road leads toward a settlement whose human consequences remain only partly recoverable. Loop Road, next, preserves another branch of the same development impulse after the principal highway went elsewhere.

Chapter Notes

- C12.1 C12.1. Post office as an industrial remnant: National Park Service, ["Ochopee"](<https://www.nps.gov/bicy/learn/historyculture/ochopee.htm>). Used for the irrigation-pipe shed, the former company-store post office, the building's capacity, and its attributed claim to be the nation's smallest post office. □
- C12.2 C12.2. Trail-era setting: National Park Service, ["Tamiami Trail and Monroe Station"](<https://www.nps.gov/bicy/learn/historyculture/tamiami-trail-and-monroe-station.htm>); National Park Service, "Ochopee." Used for the Trail's 1928 opening and the Park Service's connection between the road and subsequent settlement and industry. The chapter does not repeat disputed sole-builder or exact-financing claims. □
- C12.3 C12.3. Gaunt acreage and company structure: National Park Service, "Ochopee." Used for Edgar S. Gaunt's initial 250-acre purchase, the J. T. Gaunt Company's reported additional 3,000 acres, the packing house, store, living quarters, gas station, and the agency's estimate of nearly 1,000 employees by the 1940s. The page supplies no payroll or census record, so the employment figure remains attributed. □
- C12.4 C12.4. Jaudon's Ochopee enterprises and partnership with Bird: National Park Service, "Ochopee." Used for Jaudon's 1930 move, the listed business plans, and formation of the H. W. Bird Tomato Corporation. The chapter does not expand those plans into undocumented operating histories. □
- C12.5 C12.5. Place-name evidence: National Park Service, "Ochopee"; National Park Service, ["Birdon Road"](<https://www.nps.gov/bicy/learn/historyculture/birdon-road.htm>). Used for Birdon as a combination of Bird and Jaudon and for the Ochopee naming account as an explicitly introduced story. The Ochopee account is not treated as verified Tribal linguistics. □
- C12.6 C12.6. Birdon land, facilities, population, and present-day limit: National Park Service, "Birdon Road." Used for the reported 2,500-acre purchase, tomato peeling and packing operation, homes and service buildings, road relationship to the Trail, more than 340 residents, continued residence along the road, and the private-property warning. □ □
- C12.7 C12.7. Birdon pay system and decline: National Park Service, "Birdon Road." Used for the reported \$1.25 daily wage, company scrip usable at the company store, Depression-era decline, and disappearance in the 1940s. The cited interpretation supplies no payroll, ledger, scrip specimen, worker census, or oral history; it cannot establish how every worker used the compensation or support claims about debt, illegality, worker identity, segregation, or living conditions. □ □

C12.8 C12.8. The 1953 fire and replacement post office: National Park Service, "Ochopee." Used for the agency's account of the fire at the original post office in the Gaunt Tomato Company store, the move into the irrigation-pipe shed, and continuous postal use. The claim remains attributed because the page supplies no independent fire record. □

C12.9 C12.9. Preserve context and private ownership: National Park Service, "Ochopee"; National Park Service, ["A National Preserve: One Land, Many Uses"](<https://www.nps.gov/bicy/learn/the-first-national-preserve.htm>); National Park Service, ["Laws and Policies"](<https://www.nps.gov/bicy/learn/management/lawsandpolicies.htm>). Used for the 1974 establishment of Big Cypress National Preserve, the preserve model, continued private ownership allowed under its legislation, and the historic Ochopee area within the preserve. The chapter does not provide private or sensitive locations. □

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