

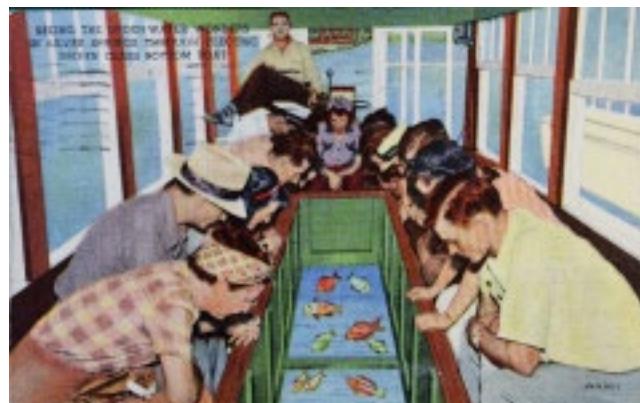


Silver Springs State Park

Silver Springs has been a huge tourist attraction in Florida for more than 150 years, starting when 19th century steamboats churned up the Ocklawaha and Silver Rivers with throngs of visitors. An 1855 poster advertised stagecoach rides to the springs from the Palatka area, and by the 1880s, trains were carrying passengers there.



Most historians believe glass-bottom boats were invented at Silver Springs in the 1870s and larger, gasoline-powered boats were added in 1924 when the springs were purchased by two Ocala businessmen, W.C. Ray and W.M. Davidson.



With the age of the automobile, the lure of Silver Springs grew as evidenced by this description in a 1940s era brochure: "Florida's largest and most heavily patronized scenic attraction, Silver Springs is to the South what Niagara is to the East and Grand Canyon is to the West—internationally renowned." Since this was the Jim Crow era in the South, Ray and Davidson established Paradise Park just downriver from the main springs for the

exclusive use of African Americans. Paradise Park featured many of the same offerings as the main attraction, including glass bottom boats, snake shows and a beach. It closed in the mid-1960s when the main attraction was integrated.



During its heyday, Silver Springs featured much more than glass-bottom and jungle boat tours. The Ross Allen Reptile Institute held demonstrations and lectures with snakes, alligators, crocodiles, and turtles and a fan favorite was the “milking” of rattlesnakes for their venom, to be used to make anti-venom. At one point, it is said that Allen’s collection numbered around 2,000 snakes, alligators, crocodiles, and turtles. Allen used to pay people by the foot for native snakes with large diamondback and canebrake rattlesnakes fetching the highest prices. A variety of reptiles were for sale as well.

A Seminole camp and pioneer village were built and manned by Seminole Indians and living history interpreters, and a replica of Fort King from the Second Seminole War was erected. Eventually, animal exhibits, rides and a water park (opened in 1978) were added, too.

Rhesus monkeys were introduced into the attraction in the 1930s. A tour boat operator, “Colonel Tooey,” released them on an island as an exotic bonus for visitors on the jungle boat tours, but Tooey didn’t realize that rhesus monkeys are good swimmers. The primates escaped and began reproducing. They’ve been a curious anomaly—and periodic management nuisance—ever since. Keep your distance and please do not feed!

Hollywood discovered Silver Springs and scenes from at least 20 movies were filmed there, including *Rebel without a Cause* starring James Dean, *Distant Drums* starring Gary Cooper, the James Bond movie *Moonraker*, *Creature from the Black Lagoon* (along with Wakulla Springs), and six Tarzan flicks. Episodes of television shows such as *Sea Hunt* were filmed at Silver Springs as well.



Other tourist attractions thrived in the area, the most notable being Six Gun Territory. This was an “Old West” town complete with dancing saloon girls and shootouts in the street. It followed the demise of westerns on television and closed in 1984.

With the emergence of mega-theme parks in the Orlando area, visitors began to bypass Silver Springs and the attraction fell on hard times from a business standpoint. In 2013, the Florida Park Service took control of the property. Glass bottom boat tours continued with veteran boat captains, a kayak launch was installed near the headsprings, the Wild Waters Water Park re-opened in 2014, and admission prices were reduced. Now, in a kayak or canoe, one can glide over the many springs and paddle past some of the remnants of past attractions, such as the replica Seminole War-era Fort King and a pioneer and Seminole village. These were once stops on jungle boat rides at the springs.



For the same admission, visitors can access what is referred to as the River Side of the park south of the springs and enjoy hiking, off-road bicycling and horseback riding. A campground and rental cabins are available, and one can visit the pioneer cracker village and Silver River Museum and Environmental Education Center.

Swimming at the state park is only allowed at the water park, so a glass-bottom boat ride is the best way to view the depths. Although the springs have suffered from decreased flow levels and algae growth, problems that the state is trying to address, the clarity of the water is still impressive, depending on rainfall levels in the area. A 1935 publication, Shrine of the Water Gods, describes a glass-bottom boat ride over the



springs: "Once afloat, peering down at the bottom, one gets the effect of riding high aloft on some magic carpet, sliding along smoothly and silently over a vast valley. Far below, as though viewed through thin air—so transparent is the water—many varieties of fish swim lazily, or dart up to gaze momentarily with round, unblinking eyes at the strange creatures who have come to stare down at them."

Visit Silver Springs and see for yourself.



