



The Bank of Everglades

Growing Up in Everglades City

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By Savannah Oglesby

With a bachelor's degree in History and being raised to appreciate the preservation of it, my love for the subject, without a doubt, runs both true and deep. Living in Everglades City means being surrounded by more than just fishing, stone crabs, and tourism. Many of the buildings in the Everglades are historical and still stand to this day through the adversity of hurricanes and time itself. As you walk or drive around our little city, you'll see historic buildings such as The Rod and Gun Club, The Museum of the Everglades (the old laundry building), and Everglades City Hall, all that are beautifully restored. Sadly, there are a few still in Everglades City that are not restored to their full glory. One of them being the Bank of Everglades building. The Bank of Everglades stands tall and strong in the middle of our city, its height easily measured by the skyscraping *Washingtonia robusta* palms that surround the building. This historical beauty was the first bank in Collier County. Founded in 1923, the bank first sat in a building along Broadway north before locating to the two-story structure in 1927 that still sits across from the Rod and Gun Club today. The notable building was designed by architect William O Sparklin, who additionally designed the courthouse (Everglades City Hall). Before Collier, the founder of Collier County, appointed his elder brother O

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The Bank business moved to Immokalee in 1962 where it became the First Bank of Immokalee before becoming Florida Community Bank. The reason for moving the bank to Immokalee came shortly after the County seat moved as a result of a referendum in 1957, and then damage caused by Hurricane Donna in 1960. Donna brought more than wind damage and debris to Everglades City as well. Just as Hurricane Irma did back in 2017, Hurricane Donna brought with it flooding that reached seven feet above normal. It is estimated that 50% of the buildings in Everglades were destroyed by the high winds and tidal floods. Five feet of water rushed into the Bank of Everglades causing all of the money inside to get soaked. In the aftermath, the employees attempted to salvage the damaged money by hanging the paper bills outside the bank along a clothesline to dry. The next morning, after keeping watch over the bills overnight, not a single dollar had disappeared. Interestingly enough, through the 36 years that the Bank of Everglades was operating, not once was it ever robbed.



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Photos by Savannah Oglesby | The Bank of Everglades back in 2019. Photos by Savannah Oglesby | The original Vault that still sits inside.

After its closing, in 1979 the building was used as the headquarters for the local weekly newspaper, *Everglades Echo*, and a boarding house. For nine years, Reba “Rusty” Rupsis, the publisher of the *Everglades Echo*, printed the newspaper from the building until it was sold in 1988 and turned into a bed and breakfast. I remember going to the Bank of Everglades with my mother in the early 2000s while it was a bed and breakfast. My mother at the time was close friends with the owners and decided to work for the spa located on the first floor of the building. To this day, I’ll never forget playing in the front room out of a large trunk that contained hundreds upon hundreds of beanie babies that the owner collected. I used to walk up and down the narrow hall inside the building and glance into the various beautiful rooms it held. The ceiling reached high above me and I would get lost staring down at the original Collier County pine flooring. Sadly, the bed and breakfast has been closed for years now.

Throughout the years the building has still held a close grip on my heart. Any chance to get inside I would do in a heartbeat. If I had friends coming to visit, I would get them on my golf cart and ride around town. If the front doors of the old bank building were open, I would take them inside to give them a tour. Because of my love for this town and its history, I decided to join the Everglades Society for Historical Preservation. The owner of the Bank of Everglades building generously donated the building to the organization in hopes to get it restored to its original glory. I cannot contain my excitement for this news! Finally, my beloved building will be restored for future generations to visit and explore the floors just as I did as a child. The road for restoration, however, isn’t going to be easy. A few days ago, I visited the building with Patty Huff, Vice-President of the Everglades Society for Historical Preservation, and we were shocked at how Hurricane Irma damaged the structure. Walking through the door felt like I hit a wall of emotions. As we walked around the vacant first floor my mind flickered through the memories and I saw myself sitting beside the trunk by the front door holding brightly colored beanie babies. Across the room beside the vault, I glanced into the narrow hallway, which leads to what once was a small kitchen, and saw myself standing up on a stool next to one of the owners of the spa as we laughed while making smoothies.

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you would like to volunteer your time or donate to help with the restoration in any way, shape, or form you can contact us by emailing ESHP@hotmail.com. For more information on the restoration of the Bank of Everglades you can visit our website www.evergladeshistorical.org. I'm excited to see what the future holds for the Bank of Everglades.



Photos courtesy of Marya Repko | Reba "Rusty" Rupsis, publisher of the Everglades Echo.



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Photo courtesy of the Collier County Museums Historic Photo Archive | The Bank (right) back in 1923 before the business moved to the two-story Bank of Everglades building that stands today.

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