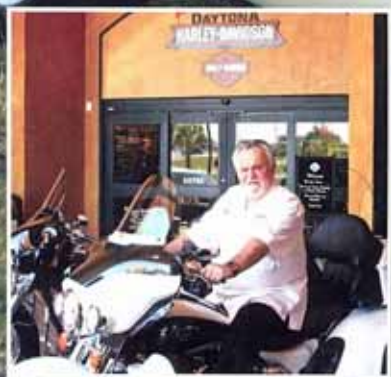
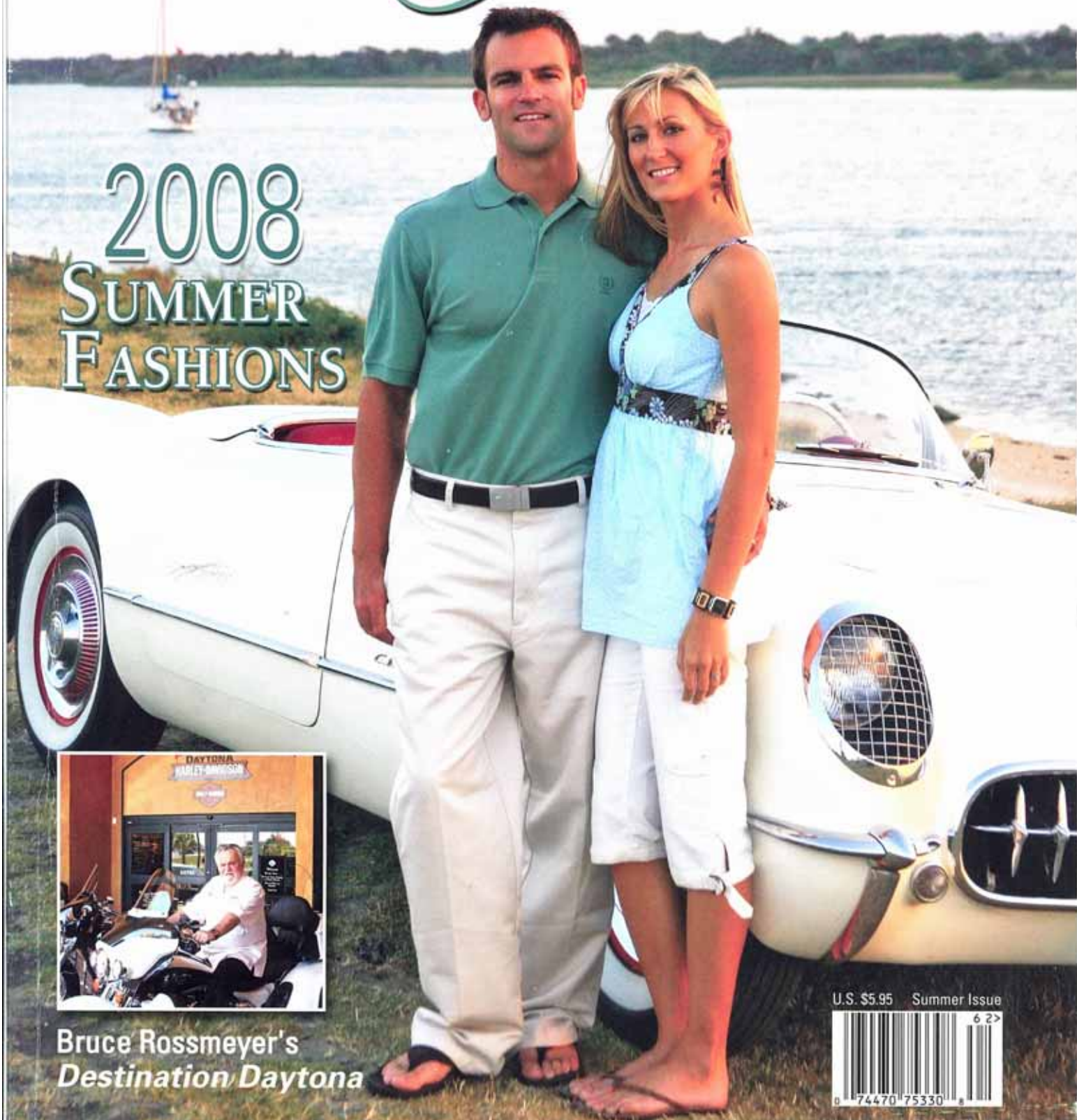


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Sundown at Lake Stella

# Crescent City Rising

Story and photography by Skip Lowery

Crescent City's library is a modern building on Summit Street (U.S. 17), the main thoroughfare through town. Inside, among the standard bookshelves, magazine racks,

and computer terminals, two fourteen-year-old girls are signing up for computer time. One of them, Latisha, is about to write her name at the desk when librarian Ardith Collette looks up suddenly. "Wait a minute! Your mother called awhile ago. You're supposed to be babysitting." Latisha looks a bit nonplussed, but Ardith Collette isn't budging: "Take your phone outside and call her!"

Not something you hear in most city libraries. But this is what's so wonderful about Crescent City. Yes, it has the word "City" in its name and yes, it's located in "the bass capital of the world" and yes, it sits next to the second largest lake in Florida — yet the population is less than two thousand. "It's Mayberry," newcomers will joke, but that's exactly why they moved here. They've got the small town charm, and since it's Old Florida at its best — live oaks draped with Spanish moss, herons perched on grassy banks, the lake bright behind the cypress trees — they've got the beauty as well.

But the city is poised for change. Being a small town has its positive qualities, sure, but there's the bad news too. As with most of the country, Crescent City in recent history has been in the doldrums, exacerbated in this case by problems with citrus groves (frost and canker), and now with a slump in the fern business. And the big bass tournaments that draw hundreds of fishermen are based mostly in Palatka, twenty-four miles to the north on the St. John's River. Growth would increase the tax base, provide jobs, and help put the city on the map.

The question is: how much and in what direction? You'll get some answers if you stop almost any weekday morning at the Crescent City Diner, just up the street from the library, or around noon at Jim and Lynn's Smokehouse. These are gathering places for local residents, including Mayor Lee Kinsella. They drop in for a bite to eat and to tell fish stories — "lies" some claim — and to complain about high gas prices and the presidential election. But there is also talk of what will happen when the Walmart Distribution Center goes in a few miles south of town. "Some people don't like it," Mayor Kinsella explains. "They hear the word Walmart and all hell breaks loose." But the Mayor and



Sprague House Bed and Breakfast

other city officials are convinced it will have a positive effect.

Joan Hagedorn agrees. Joan and her husband came for the Catfish Festival in 1986, fell in love with the area, and now own *The Shoppes at Total Interiors*, a complex of buildings that includes what was once the oldest continuing bank in Florida. Joan is also chairperson for the Planning and Zoning Committee, which gives input to the Mayor and other city officials. "We had people check out other places where a Walmart Distribution Center was built ... and nobody had a problem. It created new jobs and stimulated the economy." And at a recent County Commission meeting, as reported in the city's weekly *Courier Journal*, "...a memorandum of understanding" was passed in which Walmart, not the County, would pay for an access road.

It's that kind of "understanding" City

Manager Marcus Collins and Planning and Zoning Director Nick McRay want to have with all new businesses and developments.

Impact fees are now in place to help pay for city improvements, for example, and strict architectural guidelines have been established for new residents. They want to preserve what McRay calls the "genius of place." That's what others try to create but which Crescent City already has. It can boast many structures on the National Register of Historic Places (the city was founded in 1883), and of course the small town atmosphere. The trick is to invite growth but to avoid the sprawl that has adversely affected so many Florida communities. As McRay puts it: "When growth comes, we want to be prepared."

And it's coming. Not only the Walmart Distribution Center but a condominium development by the Waterside Group (see sidebar)

out of Naples. As a good example of the city's proactive approach, Waterside agreed to put underground parking in their three-story units in order to provide more green space.

Even new city road construction must bend, literally in this case, in favor of the natural environment. A stately live oak was in the path of a planned extension of Lake Street but, rather than cut the tree down, the city split the road in half, two lanes passing under the oak's ancient limbs and then rejoining as one lane again. The city has also received a grant from the National Forestry Service to plant ninety-five new trees along the banks of Crescent Lake's smaller neighbor, Lake Stella. (You can stand under the city's one traffic light at Summit Street and Center Avenue and see both lakes, the core of the city nestled between them.)

Future plans include a pedestrian walkway along Summit Street, a new park with boat ramps on the lake south of Center Avenue, additional boat parking at current city dock areas, eco-tourism, and so on. Even though the annual Catfish Festival, a Rotary Club fundraiser, has been drawing crowds every April for thirty years, Marcus Collins is currently working to promote three new festivals, one for arts and crafts, and two others for antique boats and cars, respectively.

A boat festival and new boat facilities will attract more people to the city's greatest resource, Crescent Lake itself. More fishermen will be able to launch here for runs after large mouth and striped bass or crappie (specks) or catfish as large as fifty pounds (or is this one of those "lies" that get around?). There are also mullet and shrimp and blue crab and — you name it.

Most importantly, boaters can go from Crescent Lake through Dunn's Creek, itself one of the most beautiful water passages anywhere, to the St. John's River, Florida's longest river and the one of few in the Northern Hemisphere that flows north. Over fifty miles of the shoreline is natural, undeveloped wilderness. You can take the river all the way to the Atlantic Ocean at Jacksonville, or you can go south into nearby Lake George and beyond.

City officials are excited about the prospects. "After fifty years of slow death," Mayor Kinsella is proud to announce, "we're now rising." As evidence for his optimism, several new businesses opened on Central Avenue in the last two years. One can be credited to the Catfish Festival. Jerry Moldrik and his wife used to ride motorcycles to the Festival from

Shops on Summit Street





and there's no one running it? You pick up your bag of fresh-picked oranges or ruby red grapefruit and leave \$4.00 in a collection box. A sign thanks you in advance for your honesty. Or how about *Leonard's Landing*, a marina and RV park on the lake, where the office door may say CLOSED next to the message: GONE FISHING.

*Genius of place indeed!*

## Waterside On Lake Crescent

*Waterside On Lake Crescent, the first major housing development in Crescent City, is the dream project of Lyn Bedell, Joe Krzys, and Bruce Carr, realtors and now partners from Naples who discovered Crescent City while searching for land on the St. John's River for a client. Entranced at what they saw as one of Florida's best kept secrets, they decided to invest in its future.*

*Waterside on completion will be a gated community of 72 units on 16 acres between Summit Street and Lake Crescent. The Highlands portion will consist of two three-story buildings on a hill overlooking the lake. The section called The Preserve, named for the eight acres between the buildings and the lake that must remain in its natural state, will be two-story "coach homes." All units include a lanai and a boat slip, the latter accessible by a boardwalk over the preserve to the dock. The development will also include a clubhouse with swimming pool, exercise facility, and a room for entertaining guests.*

*The location is ideal for boating. With a boat parked in the front yard, so to speak, Waterside residents can travel from Lake Crescent to the St. Johns River and from there to neighboring lakes and to natural fresh water springs like Silver Glen and Blue Springs. Or they can cruise up the St. Johns and out to sea at Jacksonville. The more adventurous could even take the "Great Loop" up the Intra-coastal Waterway to New York across to the Great Lakes and down from Chicago on the Illinois and Mississippi and Tennessee Rivers to Mobile and back to Florida.*

*Or they could stay home and go fishing or explore the almost 16,000 acres of Lake Crescent itself. Waterside is also within a half hour's drive south to De Leon Springs and DeLand (where Stetson University is located) and a half hour north to the city of Palatka. Forty-five minutes east is Flagler Beach and the Atlantic Ocean.*

*The hope too is that Waterside will be a boon to the area's economy. Advertisements for the project will appear in national boating and fishing magazines, for example, which will help, as Lyn Bedell sees it "...to put Crescent City on the map."*

*Clearing the land for the project should begin this summer.*



*Waterside on Crescent Lake*

Annapolis, and on each trip he was drawn to this two-story, dilapidated and half-abandoned bait house on the lake. "Somebody ought to do something with that," he kept saying. On his last trip he and his daughter bought the old building, worked hard on renovations, and two years ago opened a restaurant called *3 Bananas*, specializing in Crescent Lake catfish filets. The restaurant has become a dining destination (some folks arrive by boat and tie up at the dock).

Just up the street, the *Sprague House*, a bed and breakfast, has also been refurbished by new owners. Jeff and Amy Haston had long careers as firefighters and wanted a nice B and B to manage in their retirement. What they discovered when they came to Crescent City seemed ideal. They liked the small town feeling, and the house was a local landmark named for Katie Sprague, whose husband bought it for her in 1902 so she could run a rooming house for steamship captains and sailors during Crescent City's "golden age of tourism."

For this reason they get a lot of repeat business from folks who had previous connections with the house and the town. The wooden hall floor, for example, was originally the gym floor at the high school, which makes the house ideal for school reunions. Several couples got engaged or married here. However, if they now have children under 10 they'll have to stay somewhere else. Jeff and Amy don't allow young children, a rule most guests appreciate. Guests can also feel safer since Jeff is now Fire Chief for Crescent City.

Farmers and grove owners are getting into the act as well, experimenting with grapes and other new crops. And speaking of grapes, you

*Catfish Festival*



*Seelye-Middleton House (c.1885) Palmetto Avenue*

know things are looking up when another of those new businesses on Center Avenue is the *Stein and Vine*. The beer and wine "shoppe" is owned by two sisters and a close friend. They wanted to open such a place for a simple reason, love of wine and people. That's why patrons stopping in for a glass of cabernet feel like they're at Cheers, the bar of



*Maureen Van Dalen at the Stein and Vine*



*Lynn of Jim and Lynn's Smokehouse*



*Jerry Moldrik at 3 Bananas*

TV fame, where it doesn't take long before "... everybody knows your name."

Which could almost be said of Crescent City itself. Think about it. Where else can you find a fruit stand on the side of the main road

*Lawn leading to Lake Crescent*

