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'saltwater cowboy'

Everglades City has 'rowdied on down' since its drug-dealing days in the fast lane, but the stories remain, including one of the...

BY BILL CORNWELL bcornwell@floridaweekly.com



The woman was from up north — New York, most likely — and she made regular runs to remote Collier County, to the very edge of Florida's vast, swampy wilderness. She set up shop at a motel in Everglades City, and with great care laid out an array of gaudy jewelry, thick gold chains and other baubles favored by local drug smugglers who were heavy on cash, light on taste and routinely stoned, drunk or some combination thereof.

It was the early 1980s, and the dope pirates of Everglades City were going strong. Word spread quickly when the woman was in town; the men trooped to her room and laid down thousands of dollars.

When she had sold enough, The Cartel's Cartier packed up and moved down the road to Miami, where the Cubans and the Colombians (the honchos who bossed the locals in Everglades City) awaited with even bigger bundles of cash to spend on her wares.

In the living room of his modest home off an unpaved road in the wilds near Estero, 52-year-old Tim McBride toys with the purchase he made nearly 30 years ago from the traveling jewelry dealer.



Left: The Collier County courthouse in Everglades City in the 1920s. Everglades City was the seat of Collier County when it was carved out of Lee County in 1923.

Before the drug trade collapsed under the weight of federal task forces and a blizzard of indictments and convictions, Mr. McBride was among Everglades City's heaviest hitters. But those times are long gone, and he says the only totem that remains is the 14-karat gold chain around his neck holding a lion's head charm set with diamonds in each eye and a ruby in its mouth.

"This was the first gold chain I bought," Mr. McBride says. "God, this was way back, when I was just getting started, still new to the business and basically just throwin' bales of marijuana around and marvelin' that I could make five thousand bucks a night doing that. I can't even remember how much this chain cost. A couple of thousand? Sounds about right."



Top: Today, the renovated courthouse is

Mr. McBride's drug smuggling eventually earned him a four-year stretch in a federal prison and a \$4 million fine, which he paid in cash and forfeited property. The prison time and the fine could have been worse (up to a life sentence and \$16 million), but he cooperated with the feds.

By the time he was busted in the late 1980s, Mr. McBride (who had come to the Everglades City in 1980 from his native Wisconsin as a 20-something pothead in search of fast times and adventure) had risen to a position of prominence in the drug trafficking hierarchy.

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the city hall.
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Toward the end, he negotiated high-level deals between the Cubans and the Colombians, who despised one another and required a third party (Mr. McBride in this case) to act as a trusted broker.

Faced with the prospect of life in prison without parole, he gave prosecutors and investigators detailed accounts of how smuggling operations were orchestrated and conducted, but he staunchly refused to provide the names of the big boys in Miami and South America to whom he reported directly.

"Naming those guys," he says, "would have earned me and everyone in my family a bullet in the head. I'd have stayed in prison forever before I'd given up those people."

Still, four years in the slammer and financial destitution weren't mere slaps on the wrist. And now, more than two decades later, it's all gone anyway: the money (at the pinnacle, Mr. McBride says, he was making upwards of \$5 million annually), the women, the wild alcohol- and drug-fueled parties and the indescribable adrenaline rush of slipping enormous loads of marijuana and cocaine past befuddled law enforcers.

The subdued and decidedly anti-drug Mr. McBride of today is an apt metaphor for Everglades City itself. Both the man and the town have, like Hank Williams Jr.'s friends, rowdied on down.

Mr. McBride is a single father raising two teenagers, and his notable vice nowadays is an infrequent cigarillo. And Everglades City, once was the epicenter of South Florida drug running, is now famed for its quaint charms, abundant sport fishing and an annual seafood festival (which will be held next month) that embraces deep-fried fish and hushpuppies, enormous crowds and unremitting, high-decibel country music.

Yet even in their subdued states, Mr. McBride and Everglades City are reminders of a time when lawlessness and greed combined with a tiny town's stunning simplicity to create characters and a place that continue to enthrall. Both the man and the town look to the future, but neither shies from an occasional nostalgic glance toward the rearview mirror.

"I'm not saying that what we did was right," Mr. McBride says. "In fact, it was wrong. Wrong on so many levels. But we were just good ol' boys, fisherman and the like, who made way too much money and had way too much fun. I won't kid you; it was something to behold."

He shakes his head, which sports a cascade of thinning, shoulder-length gray hair, and laughs, "It was like the Jimmy Buffett song, 'A Pirate Looks at 40.'" After a pause, he recites the appropriate lyrics from memory:

"I've done a bit of smuggling, I've run my share of grass/I made enough money to buy Miami, but I pissed it away so fast/Never meant to last, never meant to last."

Looking off to some place deep within his memory, Mr. McBride adds, "There's never been a place like Everglades City."

True enough, and there probably never will be again.



Everglades City is small. Really small. As in 500 people or so. Its public school is said to be the last pre-kindergarten through grade 12 school left in the state, and it enrolls fewer than 150 students. Last year, the graduating class had nine members. The small town center often is forsaken and empty, and if anyone's in a hurry, they do a fine job of concealing it.

This is the way Florida used to be — or at least the way people think Florida used to be. It's Mayberry with mosquitoes, reptiles, the Skunk Ape (a swamp-dwelling version of Big Foot) and a history of illicit smuggling that dates back to Prohibition. There are no crowds (except during the Everglades City Seafood Festival), no tacky tourist attractions, no looming condominiums that block sun and sky.

The pace is slow and the people are peculiar. Why outsiders are appalled by the notion of dining on manatee is a mystery to many denizens of the swamps. (Bad joke: I love chicken; it tastes just like manatee).

Not a whole lot has changed, and that's just fine by the crusty natives who still call Everglades City home.

Even the town's longtime mayor, the flamboyantly redoubtable Sammy Hamilton (who despite his legendary garrulousness did not respond to requests for an interview for this article), is a certified hoot — a blast from the past who sports a sweeping pompadour that calls to mind Elvis himself, especially if the King had styled his ebony locks into a subdued mullet. When you reach Mayor Hamilton's home answering machine, you're treated to a nimble impersonation of the late Mr. Presley, which ends with the trademark "Thank you, thank you very much."

Ask around town about His Honor, and mostly you get a laugh and a gesture that seems to say, "Yeah, that Sammy, he's something else." No one, however, underestimates Mr. Hamilton's political acuity or his hold on power. The town's beautifully restored City Hall bears his name, although Mr. Hamilton insists he had no part in fashioning the honor. But he didn't decline it, either.

No doubt, Sammy Hamilton is the spot-on perfect guy to run a place like Everglades City.

Fittingly, given the town's roguish reputation, the area was settled by descendants of



The Bank of Everglades building in Everglades City.
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19th century pirates who brought with them the fierce pride and clannish ways of the Scotch-Irish. They arrived with a determination to live by their own rules, which were largely shaped by what it took to survive in such a harsh environment. And they never felt the need to be validated by the opinions of outsiders.

"Everybody knows everybody, and it sometimes seems like everybody is related to everybody there," says Mary Pat Rogers, an Everglades City native who was born in 1930 and whose family arrived there in 1924. "They just don't trust outsiders. They never have, and I suppose they never will. There are families dating back generations that have been living in the wilderness, fishing, trapping, acting as guides and doing who knows what else. If you don't share that history, you're viewed with suspicion by those folks. It doesn't mean they're bad people at all. They're guarded."

Bob Wells is a longtime Everglades City real estate man with a respected and thriving business. His for-sale signs sprout from lawns all around town.

"I moved to Everglades City in 1955, from Immokalee, when I was 9 years old," says Mr. Wells. "So I've been here close to 55 years —and I am not considered a 'local' by the locals. And no matter how long I stay, I will never be one of the locals."

"I married someone from here, and that helped. But they know I wasn't born here, so therefore I can't be a local. I'm accepted, but not as someone who was born here is accepted."

Visitors find a town that welcomes their business but still casts a wary eye on their reasons for being there.

"The people are quite nice," says Francis Webb, a transplanted Michigander who lives in Miami but drives his RV to Everglades City a couple of times a year for a few days of fishing. "Still, you get a jaundiced eye on occasion. People want to know where you're from, and more important, they want to know when you're going back. I think that's quite understandable in a place this small."

Mr. Webb is eating grouper chowder and nursing a cold Corona as he sits on the dock at City Seafood on Begonia Street.

"Where else can you eat outside on a beautiful day like this, watch manatees pop their heads out of the water and not be crushed by a horde of tourists?" he says. "Very nice. But I'd go crazy living here. Too small and too shut off from the outside world to suit me. I suppose if you grew up here, then you wouldn't even think about that."

Everglades City might have remained little more than a smudge on the map had it not been for Barron Collier, the who amassed massive land holdings there in the early 1920s.

An advertising mogul with a gift for self-promotion, Mr. Collier is said to have remarked that anyone could erect a city in a place like Naples, but building a town in the wilds was a mark of true genius and enormous enterprise. He was right.

Collier County, of which Everglades City was the original seat, was created by the Florida Legislature, with the proviso that the new county would complete the Tamiami Trail between Naples and Dade County. It was the early 1960s before the real power moved from Everglades City and Naples became the county seat.

From the beginning, Everglades City was shaped and defined by the land. It is the gateway to the Everglades and the Ten Thousand Islands, which sprawl across 2,000 square miles of gnarled mangroves, shallow flats, serpentine creeks and waters rich with all manner of seafood and plant life. There are innumerable opportunities in these waters and marshes for those unfamiliar with their intricacies to become stupefyingly (and fatally) lost. The Everglades exude an undeniable beauty, but once inside, everything looks the same. The uninitiated can become turned around and hopelessly baffled in a matter of minutes. To wander into this vast expanse absent a good local guide is roughly equivalent to tackling Everest without a Sherpa.

The muddled waterways around Everglades City, which Tim McBride and other smugglers knew better than anyone, provided the perfect opportunity for drug running. Mother ships were unloaded in the dead of night, and cargoes whisked through the dizzying backwaters to waiting vehicles that then departed for Miami and other distribution points.

That practically an entire town of fishermen would enter into such endeavors was not surprising, really. Environmental regulations and encroaching civilization made it difficult for them to earn a living. And there was that hardheaded streak of rebelliousness and independence that runs in their blood. The fishermen and boat captains were ripe for overtures from drug kingpins.

Everything rolled along quite nicely, from the smugglers's point of view, until July of 1983, when the first wave of arrests began.

Incredibly, an alphabet soup of federal agencies, including the FBI, the DEA, the IRS, the ATF and others, succeeded in infiltrating Everglades City's drug underworld. It was quite an accomplishment, given the tightly knit nature of the community.

The number of actual arrests varies from account to account, but as The Christian Science Monitor noted later, authorities arrested "nearly every adult male on drug charges." While that smacks of overstatement, it's safe to say that a substantial plurality of Everglades City's adult men was caught up in the legal mayhem.

In the largest single bust in 1983, 12 people from Everglades City were arrested. At other times, the investigation led to 149 arrests across South Florida, some of which involved Everglades City residents.

"They've arrested all the men," one local woman told the Miami Herald in 1983. "It's going to be a town of women."

Another resident complained: "Everybody acts like Everglades City is the only town that has smuggling. I guess I'm prejudiced right now because I have three brothers in jail."

Boats were seized, and it was estimated that about 75 percent of the local stone crab fleet was impounded.

Rusty Rupsis, publisher of the local newspaper, was quoted as saying that while many of the town's people had heard rumors about smuggling, they were mostly unaware of the widespread criminality. It seemed a strange admission coming from someone whose sole business was to know what was going on in a town about the size of Palm Beach mansion's back yard.

"The signs may have been there, but we may have been too close to see them," the newspaperman said. "The smugglers aren't stealing from you; they're nice people. They don't give you any trouble. You can live next door to most of them and never know the difference."

Most of those arrested served their time and returned to resume their lives in Everglades City. Even now, you can speak with a civic leader or prominent businessman and learn later that "he went away" as a result of the drug busts. It's a fact readily accepted and rarely noted by townspeople. Bad things happen to good people and all that.

Indeed, a stretch in federal prison back in the '80s for an Everglades City male of a certain age today is no more stigmatizing than a home foreclosure might be on the record of one of his contemporaries living in Fort Myers.

"The U.S. attorney told me that the government wasn't interested in locking up all these guys from Everglades City forever," Mr. McBride recalls. "They just wanted it stopped, and they wanted the people who were responsible to be punished. But they knew we weren't really bad, bad people at heart. We didn't carry guns. We didn't kill people — although the people above me certainly did. No, we were guys who just got caught up in this deal. We deserved punishment. I deserved everything I got. But there's no way we deserved to spend the rest of our lives in prison."

There is lingering speculation that many of the Everglades City smugglers stashed their cash and still draw from it to this day. Tales of coffee cans laden with loot hidden deep within the swamp are legion. While there's no hard evidence to back up these stories, the myth persists — and perhaps with good reason.

The amounts of money made were staggering, and on an average day a smuggler/fisherman might have walked around with \$10,000 to \$20,000 stuffed into the pockets of his jeans. Despite all that cash, many of the drug runners continued to live, outwardly at least, modest existences. Grand homes did not spring up, although new pickup trucks became commonplace.

Where did all the money go? "Well, I pretty well blew all of mine on high living: booze, drugs, women and things like a house in the Bahamas," says Mr. McBride. "And I spent about \$400,000 on my lawyer, who was from Baltimore. And then I had that fine of \$4 million. I paid about \$2.8 million in cash, and rest came from seizures."

Mr. McBride says partying consumed a good part of everyone's income. Convivial gatherings at local watering holes often turned into serious, prolonged bacchanals.

"Oh, man, everybody was drunk or stoned, and we'd be throwing bottles and breaking furniture," he recalls. "It was like the Wild West where cowboys come into town and tear up a saloon. Fights would break out, but it was all in fun. We had a good time, and no serious harm was done. And when we got the bill, we'd add on another two or three thousand for all the damage we had caused. Nobody seemed to mind. Everybody made money."

Still, extravagant partying — no matter how frenetic — seems unlikely to have seriously drained the pockets of these affluent smugglers, and a full accounting of how fortunes were decimated is unlikely at this late stage.

Says Mr. McBride: "How those guys spent their money is hard to say. I don't really know. Vacations were big things, and a guy might take his family on a big trip and then grab thirty thousand in cash when he was headed out the door. People bought nice fishing boats and lots of trucks.

"Is there a fortune in old drug money buried around Everglades City? I can't say, but I doubt there is. Like Jimmy Buffett said, we just pissed it away. And, trust me, that's a lot easier to do than you might think."



Francis Webb, the visiting fisherman from Miami, says he has heard vague stories about Everglades City's past.

"I knew that some of that had happened down here," he says. "I really didn't know the extent. But, look, I can see how that could happen. It's tough making a living off the land or from the water. This doesn't affect how I feel about this place at all. The people are friendly but reserved."

Mr. Wells, the real estate man, says outsiders do indeed move to Everglades City, but that the current housing market generally mirrors the problems other areas are experiencing.

Still, he says the town remains attractive to a certain niche of buyers — principally those drawn by the fishing and outdoors activities afforded by the Everglades.

Buyers come from Fort Myers, Naples and Fort Lauderdale, among other places. They seek second homes, retreats and the like. Everglades City also attracts interest from Northerners desiring a simpler, less-commercialized atmosphere.

And there's also property available for those who want something less mundane. Mr. Wells has a listing of four waterfront acres that carries an asking price of \$2.8 million. If that sounds extravagant, then think again, he says.

"Show me a comparable property anywhere else in Florida that you can get for the same price," he says. "You can't, because you can't find it. The price is relative to what's available elsewhere."

Will outsiders feel comfortable moving to Everglades City? Mr. Wells's answer is an unqualified yes.

"You move into a neighborhood anywhere, in any town, not just Everglades City, and the other neighbors want to know who you are," he says. "Are you in the witness protection program? Where are you from? These are questions people everywhere ask. They are basic things we all want to know."

The witness protection comment seems a bit awkward given Everglades City's past, but Mr. Wells has a point. The townspeople might never view you in the same light as a local, but they also remain a nonjudgmental lot, which is more than can be said about many places with less notorious histories.

Says Mr. Wells, "People here don't pry into other people's business."



It seems highly unlikely that Tim McBride will be moving to Everglades City anytime soon. He says it's been about five years since he set foot there.

Since his release from prison in 1992, times have been tough. He married, divorced and now lives with his teenaged son and daughter in their remote home near Estero. He abandoned his drug-infested lifestyle and became an ex-con before his children were born, and they have only learned the full details of his past within the last two years. Before the truth emerged, they believed he had spent four years in college, not prison.

"They accept me for who I am now, not who I was back then," Mr. McBride says.

Post-prison, he made good money in the construction trade, but an on-the-job injury left him with limited use of one arm and constant pain. He received a financial settlement related to the accident, and now employs attorneys to seek disability payments.

Remarkably friendly and articulate, Mr. McBride is writing his memoirs and offers to speak to youth groups about the dangers of drugs. Writing, he says, is his new passion, and Lord knows he's got enough stories to fill a dozen books. Because his injured arm makes typing difficult, he uses a device to translate spoken words into text on his computer.

He's also refreshingly devoid of the grating peachiness that infects some miscreants after they embark on the road to righteousness. Simply put, he knows when to joke and when to be serious.

He has a Web site that bears the nickname given to him and his smuggling crew: Saltwater Cowboys. (Clothing and coffee mugs are among items available through the site). How he acquired the sobriquet says much about the craziness that was Everglades City.

Here's the story: A man who shipped cattle from South America to New Orleans began to smuggle drugs aboard his boat at the suggestion of some Colombian drug lords. Eventually, the smuggling became so profitable that the cattle were mere props to conceal the true cargo.

Mr. McBride and his crew went out to unload the boat one night. They couldn't get to the 45,000 pounds of Colombian grass below deck because of the cattle. The captain pondered the dilemma briefly and then ordered 150 head of livestock herded off the boat and into the Gulf of Mexico, where they drowned.

"Even I couldn't believe that," says Mr. McBride. "I told the captain that we couldn't have all these dead cows washing up on Fort Myers Beach or wherever. That would attract too much attention. Didn't seem to bother him at all."

Mr. McBride's fellow smugglers thought the story was hilarious and hence the tag "Saltwater Cowboy." Mr. McBride saw the humor, too, but he was troubled by the incident and decided never again to unload that captain's vessel. And it wasn't just the logistics of getting to the drugs that bothered him.

"I mean think about it," he says now from his easy chair in Estero. "You've got to feel really sad for those poor cows that drowned. I know I sure did."

Memo to Jimmy Buffett: There's a song buried somewhere in that story. 



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