



Stetson Kennedy relaxes at Big Talbot Island in 2000.

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A legend and his legacy

BY PETER B. GALLAGHER

The last time I saw Stetson Kennedy was Sunday morning July 10, 2011, in the coffee shop next to Anastasia Books, a store owned by his wife Sandra Parks in old St. Augustine. One could find Stetson there a lot of mornings, holding court with friends and fans, resting his froggy legs after taking his spirited constitutional from their nearby cottage. A friend and I were passing through town—more than enough reason to look up Florida’s legendary civil rights champion, that raging renaissance Cracker who kicked oppression in the ass every day of his life. My encounters with this great man over the 25 years I knew him are highlights of my life.



Kennedy in the 1940s.

How glad I am that we stopped that morning to see him. No one really knew then, but Stetson Kennedy was dying. They diagnosed it later as a subdural hematoma—blood leaking onto the surface of the brain. He had less than two months.

But oh how we marveled at the man after our visit. How great the 94-year-old word wizard looked, sharp as a catfish barb, strong as a Florida Cracker cow. The nonagenarian still had that aura of cunning and intuition swirling in the atmosphere of his presence.

“Whenever he was around people, he could muster up the old glow,” his wife said later. “But he was failing. Failing fast.” Sandra Parks—business owner, educator, social activist, and student of Florida culture—was Stetson’s guardian angel the last decade of his life. She noted that even the pure oxygen he breathed through a machine while sleeping each night was not doing the trick.

The man who scolded Congress, faced down the FBI, and ran roughshod over bigotry now needed a walker. Come to think of it, only a few months before, he had called to ask my help in writing an inscription for a plaque he wanted to present to Seminole Chief James Billie, naming him recipient of the Stetson Kennedy Foundation Fellow Man and Mother Earth Award. I was taken aback. “But Stetson,” I interrupted. “We already did that. You gave him the award a year ago!”

There was a long silence. Finally he said, simply, “Ninety-four.”

“Uh...what?” I didn’t get it at first.

“Ninety-four,” he repeated. And we both had a good hearty laugh.

That last time in the coffee shop, as Stetson sat there, cane balanced on the corner of the table, sipping his joe, it would never have occurred to me to describe this timeless Southern gent as an old man. Twinkles sparkled from his puffy red eyes when we walked in. The handshake was firm and sinewy as the

neck of a rattlesnake. He was all spry and wiry in a white *guayabera* and an odd wrinkled ball cap adorned with a National Airlines patch.

I knew better than to ask him a dumb question like “Where’d you get that cap?” because he would say, “I picked it up off the ground on the way over here. Why, did you lose it?” or “Ramblin’ Jack left it at the house. You want it?”

Such was the way he dismissed what he considered life’s unimportant details. He really wasn’t sure, for example, if Sandra was his sixth or seventh wife. What’s the big deal? “That’s for the historians to figure out,” was one of his favorite sayings.

Never have I encountered any person with so much absolutely vital and critically important information crammed inside his brain. He wrote and wrote and researched and collected, all the way to the very day they carried him to Baptist Medical Center South in St. Augustine, where he died.

Photo by Peter B. Gallagher

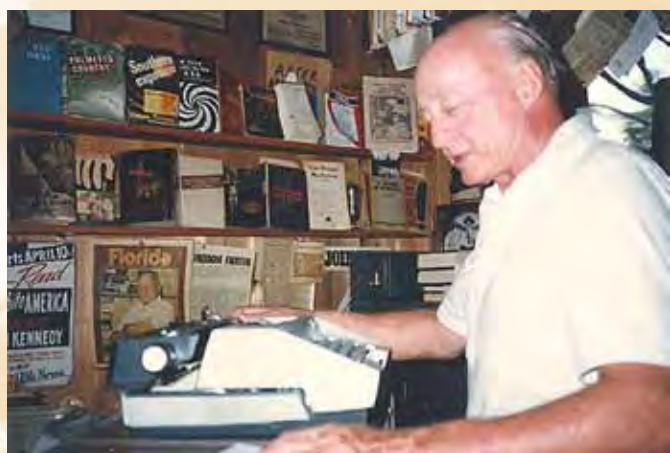


Photo courtesy StetsonKennedy.com

Kennedy at his desk in 1991, surrounded by books, headlines, clippings, and posters.

Kennedy chats with wife Sandra Parks last July in her St. Augustine bookstore, Anastasia Books.

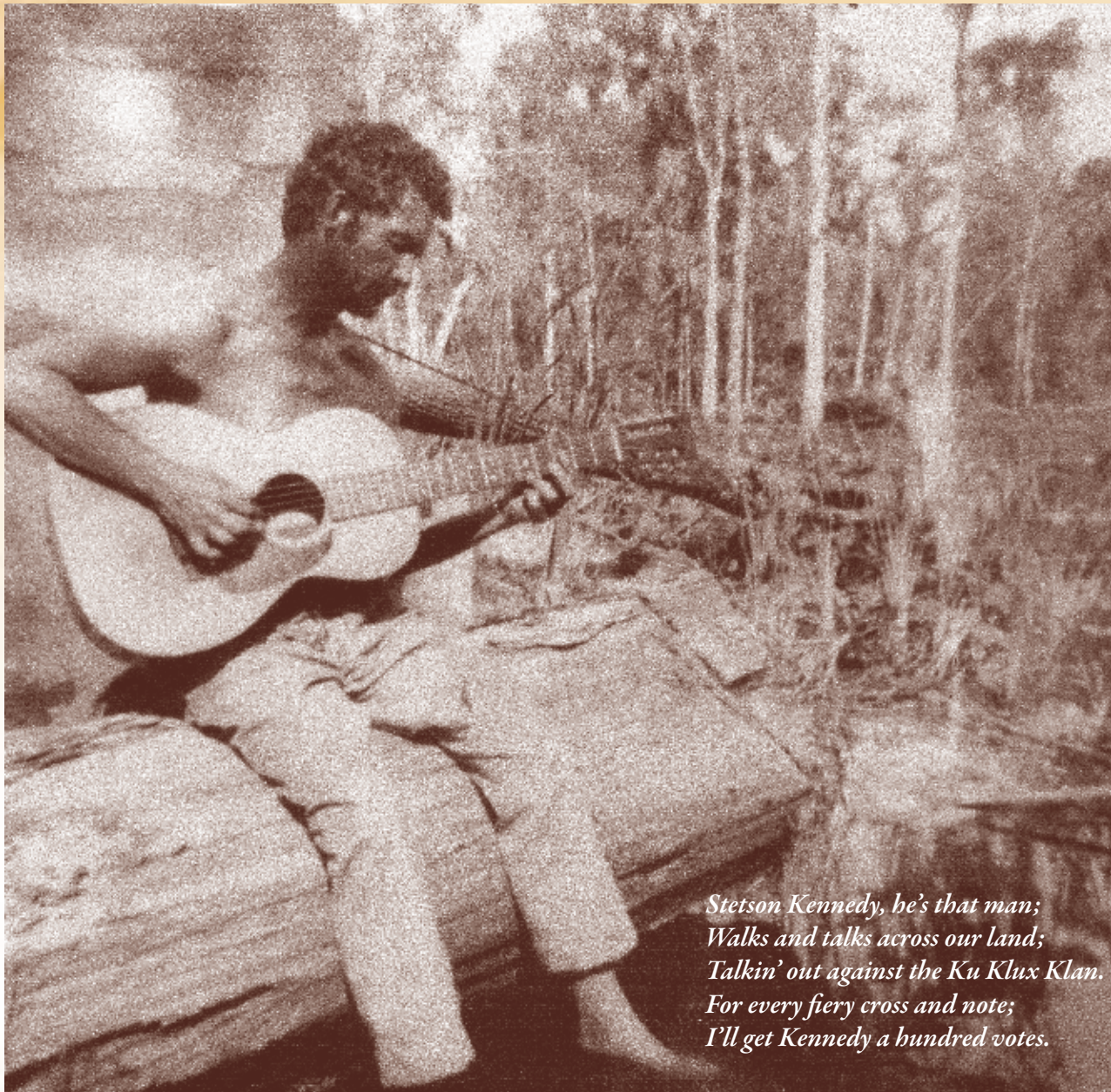


Photo by Stetson Kennedy

*Stetson Kennedy, he's that man;
Walks and talks across our land;
Talkin' out against the Ku Klux Klan.
For every fiery cross and note;
I'll get Kennedy a hundred votes.*

Legendary folksinger Woody Guthrie plays his guitar while sitting on a log, dangling his feet in Beluthahatchee Lake, during a visit with Kennedy in 1953. Guthrie wrote a campaign song for Kennedy's 1950 Florida write-in campaign for U.S. Senate. An excerpt from the song, titled "Stetson Kennedy," is above.

In a 70-year career, Stetson published 10 books—including the landmark classics *Palmetto Country*, *Southern Exposure*, and *The Klan Unmasked*. He also wrote thousands of articles, speeches, and journals about civil rights, environmental stewardship, and the preservation of folk culture. And still he had barely scratched the surface of sharing what he knew. At the end, he was the subject of all manner of oral-history projects, as historians, fearing his advancing age and slowing

pen, desperately tried to preserve his memories on voice recorders.

When a 94-year-old dies cancer-free and without heart disease, people usually ascribe it to old age. Stetson was notoriously accident-prone and may have fallen, causing the intracranial bleeding that ultimately killed him. But I prefer to believe it was brought on by the uncommon strain on his thought capacity. "A brain is a finite organ," he once said. "There is only room in there for so much information. I'm full, man.

I got to be careful. Every time I put something in one side to remember, something important falls out the other end."

In other words, don't ask the man where he got his damn cap. Ask him about his experiences in the 1930s with Zora Neale Hurston—Florida novelist, memoirist, anthropologist, and folklorist. She worked with him in the Federal Writers' Project of the Works Progress Administration (WPA), and

Stetson occasionally accompanied her on folklore-collecting trips to the jook joints and turpentine camps of Central Florida. Sometimes he disguised himself in blackface to avoid the dangers that might befall a white man and black woman riding in the same car during that era.

Ask him about his travels with ethnomusicologist Alan Lomax—a lifelong friend, first to record blues-greats Muddy Waters and Leadbelly, a legendary field collector who traveled the back roads to prison camps, honkytonks, and churches in the United States, Great Britain, Ireland, the Caribbean, Italy, and Spain, recording thousands of folk songs and artist interviews.

Ask him about his adventures with Woody Guthrie, the father of contemporary American folk music and composer of its national anthem “This Land Is Your Land,” who spent many winters writing poems and songs while living at Beluthahatchee—Stetson’s family home in Switzerland, near Fruit Cove west of St. Augustine.

Ask him about the two years he spent in the ’40s infiltrating the Ku Klux Klan, described in detail in his 1954 book *I Rode with the Ku Klux Klan* (rereleased in 1990 as *The Klan Unmasked*). Ask him about the death threats, the firebombing of his house, the ambivalence of the FBI, his eventual exile from the United States to escape the hate group’s retaliation for the reporting that took it down.

Stetson was best known for this and his other work in civil rights. Many people don’t know that he was also a pioneer folklore collector during the first half of the 20th century. His “belief in the dignity of the South’s battered sharecroppers, migrant laborers, and turpentine workers made him the region’s most sensitive and effective folklorist,” said University of Florida professor Paul Ortiz, who describes Stetson as “an epic bard of the South.”

As a folklorist, Stetson specialized in native Florida music and mores. He maintained close ties with dozens of



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musicians, from Florida folk patriarch Frank Thomas and national folkie Ramblin’ Jack Elliott to Arlo Guthrie (son of Woody), icon Pete Seeger and Wilco’s Billy Bragg—all well known social activists.

Over the years Stetson was lauded for his work and accomplishments, but he was uncomfortable with the attention brought by fame. He preferred to call himself a “po-folkist.” He received the Florida Folk Heritage Award, the Florida Governor’s Heartland Award, and the NAACP Freedom Award. He was also inducted into the Florida Artist’s Hall of Fame and received an honorary doctorate from the University of North Florida. The nation’s top award for oral historians is called the Stetson Kennedy Vox Populi Annual Award.

He was always much in demand as a speaker and could go for hours, virtually nonstop, regaling any-size audience in that signature southern-fried-possum voice of his. And

although that voice became weak in his later years, if you strained to hear it the reward was immense. Pulling no punches, he would admit he still grieved and seethed over the 1951 Christmas Day bombing murder of his friends, Florida civil rights pioneers Harry T. and Harriette V. Moore. This remains an unsolved hate crime.

Stetson Kennedy was a charter member in the pantheon of journalists, artists, and alternative pundits of the 1940s and ’50s who were adversarial, fiery, and uncompromising in their campaigns for reform and change:

- Throughout the late ’40s, he regularly leaked sensational Klan secrets to noted *Washington Post* columnist Drew Pearson, who agreed to keep Stetson’s identity anonymous. Intending to demystify the Klan’s mystique and cripple its recruiting, Stetson also leaked the ridiculous secret code words and details of childish Klan rituals to writers of the popular

“Superman” radio program in 1946; this resulted in several powerful episodes of “Clan of the Fiery Cross,” in which the man of steel took on the Klan, an astounding anti-Klan radio manifesto heard by millions of listeners across the country.

- Southern writer Erskine Caldwell, a lifelong friend and author of *Tobacco Road* and *God’s Little Acre*, edited Stetson’s folklore classic *Palmetto Country*.
- French existentialist philosopher and writer Jean-Paul Sartre helped Stetson during the 1950s when death threats and a fire-bomb attack sent him into years of self-imposed exile in Paris. So controversial was Stetson’s civil-rights work that Sartre was the only one to help him publish the *Jim Crow Guide to the U.S.A.* Simone de Beauvoir edited the manuscript. Stetson’s books pulled the hoods off the KKK before a shocked nation and world. After Stetson received numerous threats, the FBI, which never particularly liked outspoken activists, was forced to protect him.

Stetson was also friends with other thinkers and writers of that period, including Florida novelist Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, author of *The Yearling* and *Cross Creek*, who taught him in a writing class at the University of Florida and became a lifelong friend.

Two months before my last meeting with Stetson, a group of us from WMNF public-radio station (which broadcasts to the Tampa Bay region) visited with Stetson for hours at Beluthahatchee. We listened as he reconstructed compelling conversations and episodes with Woody Guthrie. Hand-written signs saying “Don’t forget to drink your water!” hung in every room, one of them beneath a framed poem about Florida that Guthrie had scrawled more than a half-century ago.

As we talked, the droning sound of a helicopter in the distance seemed to startle Stetson. It stirred up a surveillance paranoia he inherited from Guthrie, who, just like Stetson, was a

Questions raised about Klan exposé

Allegations surfaced in 2006 that Stetson Kennedy embellished his first-person account of infiltrating the Ku Klux Klan in his 1954 exposé *I Rode with the Ku Klux Klan* (re-released in 1990 as *The Klan UnMasked*). Kennedy admitted that this narrative included some events that a Klan informant had described to him. He said he’d never been secretive about this and had protected his informant’s identity.

Peggy Bulger, Florida’s State Folklorist from 1976 to 1989, who wrote her doctoral dissertation on Kennedy and interviewed him many times, said that he was always candid about this. Bulger, now director of the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress, said he wrote the book this way in part to make the narrative more compelling, like a Mickey Spillane novel, and that such embellishment was common in the 1940s when he wrote it. “He actually did infiltrate the Klan to do this work,” she said. “He was always upfront, he never lied.”

Kennedy told Jacksonville’s *Florida Times-Union* in 2006, “I wanted to show what was happening at the time. Who gives a damn how it’s written? It is the one and only document of the working Klan.” He added that in retrospect he wished he’d included an introduction explaining his strategy for telling the story.

After Kennedy’s death, Paul Ortiz, history professor and director of the Samuel Proctor Oral History Program at the University of Florida, wrote, “It is easy to forget that when Stetson first infiltrated the Ku Klux Klan it occupied a storied place in the white American imagination. Hollywood films from *Birth of a Nation* to *Gone with the Wind* promoted reverence for the ‘Hooded Americans’...Stetson did as much as any writer or activist in history to thoroughly discredit the Klan and to demonstrate to the public that this was an organization dedicated more to the principles of Nazism than Americanism.”

—Barbara O’Reilly, FORUM editor

To see a complete list of Stetson Kennedy’s books—and to read a fascinating analysis by Paul Ortiz about the impact of Kennedy’s work, go to our website, FloridaHumanities.org.



Kennedy consoles a woman who sought him out at a St. Augustine coffee shop last July to tell him that her son was critically injured by a hit-and-run driver as he walked along a road near his neighborhood. Kennedy planned to investigate the incident.

Photo by Peter B. Gallagher

sharp critic of the government and a self-appointed political representative of the poor and disadvantaged. “Whenever Woody was staying here, the helicopters flew by every day,” Stetson laughed. “We figured they were all upset that Woody Guthrie and Stetson Kennedy were hanging out together. I guess they wanted to know what sort of revolution to overthrow the government we two subversives were planning.

“It was irritating. I was always worried Woody might get drunk and take the rifle and start shooting. Little did they know, the most subversive thing we ever did was drink and laugh a lot!”

Stetson remained scared throughout his life—for good reason. He provided the evidence that enabled the IRS to pursue a \$685,000 tax lien from the Klan in 1944. He helped draft the brief used by the State of Georgia to revoke the Klan’s national corporate charter in 1947. For more than half a century, he provided expert testimony before numerous grand juries, Congressional hearings, and local inquisitions on myriad subjects ranging from Klan bombings to violence preventing black citizens from voting.

He never slowed down. During Stetson’s last year, “we were everywhere,” Sandra said with awe: He gave speeches at the Florida Historical Society’s annual meeting in Jacksonville, the Oral History Association in Atlanta, and the St. Petersburg Museum of History. He went to Tallahassee and successfully lobbied state officials to nominate sustainability architect Robert Broward to the Florida Artist’s Hall of Fame. He gave a fiery speech, then marched with the Immokalee Farm Workers Coalition in Hillsborough County. He marched at the One Nation Working Together Rally in Washington D.C., where he ran into Kerry Kennedy, daughter of Robert F. Kennedy. Impressed with his verve, audacity, and determination, she told him, “Stetson, I think we will claim you as a cousin.”

“A kissing cousin, I hope” was his winking reply.

The Florida Folklife Reader

Edited by Tina Bucuvalas

**An overview of the traditional, changing folklife
from a vibrant southern state**



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Kennedy's daughter, Jill Bowen, spreads his ashes on Beluthahatchee Lake after his memorial service, October 1, 2011.

At this Washington rally, Sandra remembered, "He was hanging out and inspiring young black people. He had them going. He marched up the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, followed by cameras, the Internet, and free-speech TV. He was doing that which he did best."

At his last public appearance, two weeks before his death, Stetson addressed (actually scolded) the Florida House Redistricting Committee for what he perceived as closet racism: "Gerrymandering is to the 21st century what the poll tax was to the 20th century!"

"He said he would go until he dropped," said Sandra. "And he did."

He died on Aug 27, 2011. He still had a year to go on his Florida driver's license. A month later, according to his wishes, a party commenced. It was a daylong celebration of his life, featuring testimonials mixed with his beloved Florida folk music. Afterward, as he had requested, his ashes were scattered along the mystic cypress waters of Lake Beluthahatchee.

Just as it was hard to think of spry Stetson Kennedy as an old man, it is hard to imagine that he is gone. For Sandra Parks, it is especially hard. "I am working harder now on Stetson Kennedy projects than

when he was here," she said. His latest book, *The Florida Slave*, was just published. A documentary film of his life, *Klandestine Man*, is in production. Two more books, including his autobiography, *Dissident At Large*, will have to be finished. She just returned from Washington D.C., where the Smithsonian accepted her donation of Stetson's Klan robe. She gave a speech, in his place, at a civil-rights gathering. The phone rings nonstop.

"Stetson Kennedy's not gone. He's everywhere," she smiles. "Now he's watching us. That's the way he always wanted it."

PETER B. GALLAGHER, a *Special Projects Writer with the Seminole Tribe of Florida*, is a 2010 recipient of the Stetson Kennedy Foundation Fellow Man and Mother Earth Award. A lyricist and musician, he also hosts a weekly radio program featuring Florida folk music and performers.



Kennedy and author Peter B. Gallagher during their last meeting, July 10, 2011.

Photo courtesy of Peter B. Gallagher