



From Tails to Tales

Stalking a Dream

1905

Owen Godwin Sr. is born and spends his youth on the homestead of his uncle Lije at Rattlesnake Hammock, located on the Kissimmee River east of Sebring, Florida. Part of a ranching community known as Kissimmee Island, they were serviced by the steamers that carried supplies and tourists to Palm Beach from the railhead at Kissimmee. The kids could get an occasional tip by showing snakes and alligators to the passengers while their parents shopped.

1930's

Owen Godwin, Sr., builds an alligator pit in the backyard of his Sebring home, just south of Sebring, Florida. The pit is a sideline to Godwin's other jobs as butcher and postmaster. His wife, Pearl, sells gator products – key chains, belts and the like -- out of her kitchen. After making their purchases, customers step outside and stare in amazement at a gator mom with her babies. Watching them, Godwin dreams of an attraction that would showcase Florida wildlife.

1947

After World War II, he buys a parcel of land off Hwy. 17/92 and 441 in nearby Kissimmee. Tourists were just beginning to travel to Florida. The road, then the state's second most traveled highway, would be a good place for an attraction, he reasons. Years later, the area in the heart of Central Florida's tourist district becomes home not only to Gatorland, but also to Walt Disney World, Universal Studios and SeaWorld.

Godwin's 16-acre plot is actually a "borrow pit," having supplied dirt for the new highway. Three people invest \$100 each in Godwin's attraction. Most think it is a crazy notion. No one will pay to view Florida wildlife in a "borrow pit," they say. If people want to see alligators, they can just walk outside.

1948

Godwin, his wife and four children dig up palmettos and plant pine trees. His attraction would allow a rare, close-up view of animals in their native habitat.

Walk on the Wild Side

1949

Florida Wildlife Institute opens featuring alligators and snakes. What was to become Central Florida's first major attraction it began nothing more than a gift shop in a stockade-style building with a dirt floor covered in sawdust. The shop's thatched roof is made by Seminole Indians who live on the property and wrestle gators as part of the attraction's entertainment.

1950's

Believing the Institute sounded more like a government sponsored organization than a tourist attraction, Godwin changes the name to Snake Village and Alligator Farm. Upon entering the park, visitors are greeted by a huge display of snakes. The park also has alligator pools and an Indian village. Godwin notices cars speed up as they pass his sign. When families do stop, women often stay in the parking lot, while husbands and children go inside to view the snakes.

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Success comes in the form of a huge crocodile Godwin buys from a Miami breeder. Known as Bone Crusher, the leathery giant is approximately 15 ft. long and weighs 1,080 lb. Godwin bills him as the world's largest captive crocodile, offering \$1,000 reward to anyone who could prove him wrong. No one rises to the occasion. Bone Crusher remains a major attraction for years.

Building on Bone Crusher's success, Godwin equips a special trailer with a fan, heater and bathtub for 12-ft. alligator, Cannibal Jake. During the summer off-season, man and beast travel to the Carolinas. Working with Mason Lodges, Godwin sets up displays in towns. People pay a dime each to view the mysterious creature. Godwin and Cannibal Jake spend several summers on the New Jersey Boardwalk, too. The former clad in jodhpurs with cowboy boots and hat, regale passerby with wildlife tales. These tours and the pile of dimes collected from children marveling at the giant reptile keep Gatorland going in the early years.

Animal Attraction

- 1954 Snake Village gets a new name: Gatorland
- 1954 The gift shop is renovated. Thatch roof and stockade-style structure give way to a modern building with, not only the shop, but Godwin's home as well.
- 1960's As the tourism industry grows, so do the crowds at Gatorland. The attraction adds exhibits, one of the first being Coon House. The Godwin children had found an enormous, 25-ft. log on their property. They put a spectacular house on top, with screen door and spiral staircase then set the log upright. The resident, a raccoon, presents Godwin with a new obstacle to his dream of showing animal life native to Florida. The nocturnal critter sleeps inside all day, venturing out only in the dark of night.
- During the off season, Pearl and the children run the business. Godwin goes on safaris worldwide -- Africa, India, Honduras and Alaska -- searching for animals for the Gatorland zoo.
- 1962 The park's new attraction is zebras from Africa, the only ones in Central Florida.
- Godwin's youngest son, Frank, designs a unique entrance in the form of a gaping gator jaw painted in his father's favorite color scheme -- Florida aqua and white. In coming years, the signature mouth would be featured in movies, newspapers and magazines worldwide, beckoning tourists to take a walk on Florida's wild side.
- The gift shop expands in response to growing demand for the park's keepsakes.
- 1965 The Gatorland Train makes its maiden run. Children and adults enjoy tours of the park aboard the miniature, open-air locomotive. For pedestrians, new aqua, tin rooftops afford shade along exhibit walkways.

Evolution

- 1970 Gatorland incorporates as a family corporation.
- 1975 Owen Godwin, Sr., dies.
- Frank Godwin becomes president. He begins first major expansion of Gatorland with a snack bar renovation, including three kiosks in Florida design, with cypress boards and palm tree posts.

- 1978 Swamp Walk premiers. The 2,000 ft. boardwalk cuts through exquisite Florida wetlands, much as they existed thousands of years ago. In the tranquil preserve, visitors view hundreds of plants -- hyacinth, magnolia trees, 500-year-old Cypress and a marsh that serves as the headwaters to the Florida Everglades. Gift shop best sellers are Orange Blossom perfume, "I Love Mom" toothpick holders, and "crystal" flamingo necklaces, all priced at less than \$2.00.
- 1979 Gatorland starts research in alligator farming with the University of Florida (UF) and the Florida Wildlife Commission. Although alligators had been on the endangered species list, worldwide demand for gator products remained high. Gatorland gives UF a \$20,000 grant to study alligator reproduction. The resulting pioneer work helps populations in the wild become abundant once more.
- 1980's Gatorland is the only place worldwide where alligators have been artificially inseminated successfully. Previously, gators in captivity had been plagued by disease, infertility and embryonic death. Gatorland and UF develop state-of-the-art techniques for breeding alligators, incubating eggs and providing a diet and disease-free environment hatchlings need to thrive.
- 1983 The Gator Jumparoo debuts starring hungry reptiles lunging for their lunch: chickens of the store-bought variety suspended on wire a few feet above water. The famed Cracker-style wildlife show has been seen on television worldwide.
- The attraction introduces the now-famous photo op: snapshots of tourists holding a gator and wrapped by the park's pet boa constrictor.

Flourishing

- 1988 With the addition of adjoining property, Gatorland becomes a 37-acre tourist attraction and wildlife preserve.
- 1989 The park becomes home to Florida Black Bear, Judy, a gift from the Florida Game Commission. The Commission had confiscated Judy after finding her in an illegal enclosure. In Gatorland's more spacious quarters, she lounges by a private pool with sun deck.
- 1991 Gatorland breaks ground on a major expansion to recapture a wilder, more natural Florida. Included in the expansion are: The Gator Wrestling Stadium; Alligator Breeding Marsh; larger train tour, and Pearl's Smokehouse, serving up smoked gator ribs, gator nuggets, burgers, hot dogs and more.
- The 800-seat Gator Wrestling Stadium has a huge stage with surrounding moat. During 20-minute shows, a wrangler jumps into the reptile-infested waters and hauls a thrashing gator onto the stage. The audience is regaled with little known facts about the real-life, armored dragons.
- The Breeding Marsh brings new depth to Owen Godwin's vision, when it opens as home to more than 100 alligators. The ten-acre wildlife refuge provides a spacious, stress-free environment gators find conducive to starting families. From the adjoining boardwalk and observation tower, visitors watch in wonderment as the creatures swim and sun in their natural habitat.
- As a bonus, Gatorland becomes a vast rookery, with thousands of aquatic birds nesting above the marsh. Alligators protect nests from natural predators, like raccoons and opossums.

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Today, the rookery is considered one of the largest in Central Florida. The theme park is one of the few places worldwide where visitors can watch endangered wading birds build nests and feed their young, all just an arm's reach away.

1992-'93

Snakes of Florida debuts near the new Piney Woods classroom behind the Marsh. The snake awareness program is for children and adults, including firefighters, police, emergency medical service professionals and environmentalists. It is part of Gatorland's newly expanded education program.

Snakes of Florida exhibit opens, as well, bringing Rattlesnakes, Rat Snakes, Cottonmouth Moccasins and more into the limelight. The show from the snake pit entertains and educates tourists more about Florida wildlife.

1995

Hawkeye, a giant redtail hawk, makes Gatorland his home. The bird, with a 48-in. wing span, was rehabilitated and presented as a gift by the Florida Audubon Society.

Gatorland launches "Gator Nights," and "awesome Florida Cracker experience." The two-hour gala begins at 8:00 with a miniature train ride to Pearl's Smoke-house. Cracker delicacies include smoked barbecue chicken and gator snacks. After dinner comes gator wrestling entertainment. The finale is a boardwalk tour, where everyone can feast their eyes in wonder at hundreds of beady red gator eyes in surrounding waters. A fiddler and banjo picker entertain, Cracker-style, at the nighttime swamp party.

Gatorland's gift shop expands. The award-winning Florida-themed shop features a dazzling array of keepsakes and elegant, handcrafted alligator leather goods.

After a Wild Crocodile

1996

Mark McHugh is named Chief Executive Officer. McHugh comes to Gatorland from Sea World, where he was a curator and animal trainer. He is son-in-law of predecessor, Frank Godwin, who remains on the board of directors.

1997

Gatorland creates "real" kid fun with the debut of Alligator Alley, featuring more than a quarter-mile of interactive and educational exhibits for children of all ages.

Alligator Alley includes:

Lilly's Pad, a children's play area offering fun and relaxation with slides, jungle gym and more. "Allie's Barnyard," a baby animal petting zoo, with llamas, goats, lambs, ducks and turkeys. Very Merry Aviary, home to free-flying, rainbow-colored lorikeets. The lorries are so friendly they land on the hands and shoulders of visitors who feed them. Gadzilla, provides a rare photo op: snapshots of tourists perched inside a giant gator jaw (of the plastic variety... naturally).

Workers remove antiquated concrete block pools to make way for more natural surroundings. Now, gators swim in the main lake, parrots fly to open-air perches and pythons slither about a large enclosure.

1998

Jungle Crocs of the World premiers. The two-acre display houses one of the world's largest exhibits of giant crocodiles in captivity. The Jungle Crocs' design reflects natural settings, where the beasts can grow to be more than 20 ft. long and weigh more than a ton. While people seldom get to see crocodiles move, this unprecedented exhibit features the world's most ferocious predators exploding from water and chasing their prey onto land with startling speed.

- 1999 Gatorland becomes a 110-acre classroom with the newly expanded education program. Children and adults take to the field for classes on Crocodilians, Wading Birds, Snakes and Florida Swamplands.
- A new Gator Jumparoo showcases younger, faster reptiles lunging for lunch in the famous, action-packed Florida wildlife show.
- Gatorland launches a package with a nearby airboat ride company in Kissimmee, Florida. The ticket offers discounted admission to tourists who want to combine a visit to the theme park with a tour along one of Florida's most scenic natural waterways. There, they enjoy sensational views of towering Cypress trees, natural wetlands, eagles, osprey, alligators and more.
- 2000 After transporting over 7.5 million guests, the theme park retires the Iron-Horse Steam Engine. The train had logged over 200,000 miles, and started to show the effects of the Florida sun and long-lines of smiles waiting to travel deep into the Florida swamp.
- 2001 Keeping with decades of tradition, the "Alligator Capital of the World" debuts the all-new Gatorland Express railroad that takes guests on an entertaining trip around the wilder "backstage" areas of the park.
- 2002 The giant gaping gator's mouth entrance at the Alligator Capital of the World celebrated its 40th Anniversary as the theme parks icon.
- Gatorland selected Jeremy and Daniel Kemp from Palmetto, Florida as the theme parks Ultimate Gator Guide contest. The contest launched a nationwide hunt for an adventurous outrider who longed for the spotlight and a chance to get up-close and personal with some of the natives at Gatorland, Orlando's best half-day attraction. Hordes of entries from across the country were submitted and from those the ten lucky finalists were selected.
- 2003 The Gator Jumparoo Show celebrates its 20th Anniversary as the theme parks most popular show and one of the most unique photo opportunities in central Florida.
- 2004 Cobalt, the world's only known blue alligator, goes on display at the theme park in a new exhibit to showcase his unique coloring and to protect him from the harsh Florida sun.
- A partnership is formed between Gatorland and the Gaylord Palms Resort in the opening of the resorts all-new "Best of Florida Live" exhibit. This habitat, called Gator Springs, is home to 15 juvenile alligators and 30 native species of turtles. Guests have an opportunity to attend gator feedings and information sessions, which are held several times a week by a member of the GATORLAND team.
- A team of three alligator experts traveled to Alabama to aid in the capture of a 12 foot alligator, Chucky, displaced from his enclosure at the Gulf Coast Zoo during Hurricane Ivan. The successful rescue and capture of the large reptile took place in less than three hours.
- 2005 Gatorland's historic "Gator Mouth" goes under the drill as part of one of the largest expansion efforts in the attraction's history. The million-dollar expansion and renovation effort features a new façade and expanded parking for the 55-year-old theme park and wildlife preserve.

A team of four alligator experts traveled to Ken Malloy Regional Park to aid the City of Los Angeles Department of Recreation and Parks in capturing the alligator in Lake Machado.

2006

Mark McHugh, president and CEO of Gatorland takes over as the chairman of the Board of Directors for the Orlando/Orange County Convention & Visitors Bureau, Inc. (Orlando CVB). As the chairman, McHugh will be the first Small Attraction representative to receive the honor of being elected to represent the Orlando CVB's 1,400 + members in the future.

Gatorland announces the death of one of the theme park's most beloved residents, Alf, a 14 ft. 4 inch American Crocodile who passed away of natural causes.

A fire breaks out at Gatorland on Nov. 6, 2006. Despite the bravery and valiant effort of the firefighters, the 7,000 square-foot, award-winning Gift Shop and Executive Offices were lost. Tragically, one dwarf crocodile, two pythons and two hatchling alligators were also lost.

Nov. 24, 2006, Gatorland reopened to the public to record numbers.

Out of the Ashes

2007

Gator Gully Splash Park, the area's most unique splash zone, opens in May featuring unusual water sources crafted to resemble some of the parks most popular residents.

On October 8, 2007 ground breaking ceremony took place marking the beginning of a new era as the theme park embarks on the construction of a new \$4 million dollar Complex to be located at the site of the devastating fire that took place on November 6, 2006 destroying the original gift shop and theme park entrance.

2008

The Gift Shop & Admission Complex at Gatorland is completed on May 22, 2008. The Complex features over 19,000 square feet of retail, meeting and office space along with an open-air admissions pavilion that incorporates the historic gator mouth entrance, state-of-the-art meeting facility and classroom, and a cleverly designed shopping area featuring unique gifts ideas and a pictorial timeline outlining the rich history of the theme park.

2009

White Gator Swamp exhibit opens on February 13, 2009. The new exhibit features four of the world's largest white leucistic alligators known to roam the planet. Ivory in color, the large reptiles are each ten to eleven plus feet in length, weigh over 800 pounds and have reflective blue eyes that are believed to command good fortune to those lucky enough to make eye contact with the blue eyed beauties.

2010

The Mile of Monsters opened as a one-of-a-kind self guided tour through the lair of some of the theme park's most notorious reptiles. The one-mile walk features the stories of twenty-four large alligators and crocodiles whose unique antisocial personalities have left those who work closest with them in need of therapy.

2011

The theme park completes the Screamin' Gator Zip Line, a \$1.8 million dollar project that includes five intense zip lines and a 150-ft suspension bridge. This adventure of a lifetime takes you on a breathtaking journey along 1,200 feet of high flying thrills from seven platforms designed to merge with the architecture of the famous Breeding Marsh Tower.