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Time to grow up: The rise and fall of spring break in Fort Lauderdale

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Time to grow up: The rise and fall of spring break in Fort Lauderdale

by

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A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
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INTRODUCTION: TROUBLE IN PARADISE

This story begins at a seemingly tranquil beach early on the morning of Monday, April 18, 1985. Aside from the activity of a flock of nearby seagulls, the sound of waves hitting the shore, and a few ships in the distant horizon, all is quiet, calm, and peaceful. A hypnotic sun starts its daily ascent over a beautiful ocean that ostensibly extends for eternity. The sunlight that reflects off the miles of endless water and white sands of the beach provides an illumination that, despite its beauty, makes it agonizingly difficult to observe for too long. A warm breeze begins to pass through the area, spreading the distinct smell of salt and brine from the ocean and coaxing nearby palm trees to sway gently back and forth.

Yet, despite this serene setting, something is inherently wrong with this picture. The same gust of wind that disseminates the intoxicating smells of the water begins to push debris along the beach like a pack of tumbleweeds drifting across a barren desert. Where miles of untarnished sand usually sit, there is instead a mass accumulation of litter conquering the beach. Consisting mostly of cigarette butts, promotional fliers touting nightly drink specials, beer cans, frisbees, and abandoned sandals and beach towels, there is enough refuse in fewer than two miles of beach to fill over six garbage trucks.¹

As the breeze carries an empty plastic sack across the adjacent road just west of the beach, the scene becomes even more disheartening. The scent of the

¹ Elizabeth Willson, "Bar Brigade Hits the Beach," *The Miami Herald*, May 1, 1984.

ocean quickly disappears, with a pungent combination of urine, puke, and stale beer instead stinging the nostrils. A homeless man, carrying his favorite bottle of liquor and wandering the sidewalk in search of his next meal, passes by an uninterrupted row of beachfront taverns whose reputations match or perhaps exceed their derelict outward appearances.² The activities that had taken place in many of those establishments the previous few weeks would have made even the most experienced vice squad officer blush.³ The homeless man eventually finds a bench on which to rest near a small hotel that, in light of its peeling paint and various broken windows, has clearly seen better days.

Inside the hotel, a maid faces what she knows will be a long and difficult day. Recalling the destruction in previous years, she realizes she will have to stay at the hotel far later than usual in order to complete her work. As she opens the door of a room, a foul stench hits her immediately. Stepping into the chaos, she quickly pinpoints the culprit- a trail of white deodorizer across the brown carpet. As she surveys the rest of the damage, the maid thinks to herself that it looks as if a tornado had passed through the room. Strewn across the room are eight empty cases of Old Milwaukee Beer, soft drink bottles, Big Mac cartons, numerous pairs of underwear, leftover food, one shoe, and one sock. The bathroom is equally miserable. Along with a hole in the bathroom door, a towel rack has been snapped off the wall, a torn jockstrap hangs on the doorknob, and shaving cream covers the mirror. After finally

² Susan Gillis, *Fort Lauderdale: The Venice of America* (Charleston: Arcadia Publishing, 2004), 127, 129.

³ Jennifer F. Schenker, "Lauderdale Vice Buttonholes Emcee over Lewd Contests," *The Miami Herald*, March 14, 1985.

completing her duties in the room and filling three large plastic bags with garbage, her face cringes in disgust as she enters the next room.⁴

Elsewhere in the hotel, the owner sits at the front desk in despair. The destruction of his hotel had always been bad this time of year, but 1985 was far worse than he could remember.⁵ As reports steadily pour in from his maids of the dishevelment of the rooms, he debates whether he should spend the thousands of dollars necessary to repair the damage. Recently, his struggle to maintain the integrity of the hotel seemed to be a never-ending battle that he was clearly losing. Even if he decided to expend the funds to restore the rooms, next year the same thing would happen all over again.⁶ Although he tries to find solace in the fact that the hotel's revenue over the past few months had been better than ever, he still faces the prospect of a diminishing clientele for the rest of the year, a trend that had been developing since the early 1980s. He wishes he could simply stop serving such rowdy customers, but his hotel would falter without them.⁷ At least, he thinks to himself, the hotel's occupants had not thrown the Coke machine into the pool as they had done a few years earlier.⁸ Still, he could not face another season like this; something had to change.

⁴ Patrick May, "Spring Cleaning: Hotels Restore Order Following College Invasion," *The Miami Herald*, April 8, 1984.

⁵ Linda Robertson, "Spring Antics Descend to Record Low, Hoteliers Say," *The Miami Herald*, April 13, 1985.

⁶ Cynthia Vaughn, "County to Breakers: No One Waits for You," *The Bradenton Herald*, March 12, 1990.

⁷ Linda Robertson, "Spring Break Antics Descend to Record Low, Hoteliers Say," *The Miami Herald*, April 13, 1985.

⁸ Shirish Date, "Fort Lauderdale - Few Miss the Spring Break Crown," *The Orlando Sentinel*, July 5, 1989.

As the hotel owner wrestles with his fate, a retiree in a nearby beachside condominium leans over to turn off his blaring alarm clock. He, however, had not been sleeping. Like so many restless nights during the last month and a half, the constant slamming of doors, loud music, and wild screaming had startled him at various times throughout the evening. When he woke up around 2 AM, he had been too upset to go back to sleep. Leaning over to kiss his wife goodbye, he is at least optimistic that today will be a better day. For the first time in six weeks, he will be able to leave his condominium without having to worry about waiting in traffic for hours. More importantly, he can look forward to a sound night of sleep. Walking to his car, his mood once again turns sour when he views urine on the garage door, vomit on the sidewalk, and beer bottles in the pool. They got me again, he thinks. Why does it always surprise me? While he retrieves the hose and skimmer net from the shed, he debates calling his friend in the realty business. Although he and his wife had lived at the same residence for eighteen years, this spring had been so bad that they were thinking about moving somewhere off the beach.⁹

Across town, a mother has been losing sleep as well, but for a much different reason that makes the difficulties of those previously mentioned quite trivial. As she lay in bed wiping tears from her eyes, she still could not comprehend what had happened over the past few weeks. Only a month ago, she had just gotten home from work when she received a call from the hospital that her seventeen-year-old daughter had been in a serious car accident near the beach. How could this be, she had thought. She was supposed to be at the park with her friends. After arriving at

⁹ Dan Ray, "Record Spring Break Leaves City Reeling," *The Miami Herald*, April 14, 1985

the hospital, she collapsed when the doctor told her that her daughter was brain dead. Tracking down the police officers who had been at the scene, she was finally able to piece together what happened. Her daughter had lied to her about going to the park, instead heading to the beach where she and her friends had piled into the van of an unknown man to cruise along the ocean. Sadly, they had failed to close the van's door and she somehow fell out the vehicle, slamming her head on the pavement.¹⁰

As the doctors described her daughter's bleak situation, the mother went through the five stages of grief in an instant. She could not get over the fact that when she said goodbye to her daughter earlier that day it would be the last time they would ever talk. With no hope for recovery, she finally decided to remove her daughter from life support and she was pronounced dead at 3:39 PM on Friday, March 9, 1985. The mother finally snaps out of her daze when she reaches for another Kleenex but the box is empty.¹¹ As she gets out of bed to search the house for more tissues, she feels anger toward not only the driver simply known as "Dennis" but also herself for not being more vigilant in preventing her daughter from going down there. Yet, local kids had always snuck away to the beach. How could any parent stop them?¹²

What had happened to this town? What, or perhaps more importantly who, had fostered this virtual warzone of death, destruction, decay, and despair to take place across a backdrop of paradise? It was not a tenth-century Viking orgy as one

¹⁰ Jennifer L. Schenker, "Teen Brain Dead after Accident on Strip," *The Miami Herald*, March 8, 1985.

¹¹ Wendy Shaffer, "Brain-Dead Teen Removed from Support," *The Miami Herald*, March 9, 1985.

¹² Herald Staff, "Spring Breakdown," *The Miami Herald*, March 18, 1985.

reporter facetiously suggested, but many members of the local populace felt it was close.¹³ Rather than Leif Ericson and his compatriots, it was the aftermath of the annual invasion of hundreds of thousands of collegians for spring break in Fort Lauderdale. As students had finally returned to their campuses and residents and business owners began the annual process of restoring civility to their community, they thought back to the seeming innocence and excitement of the tradition during the 1950s and early 1960s and asked themselves two important questions: “How did we allow it to get so bad?” and “When, if ever, will this end?”

At first, Fort Lauderdale’s association with the tradition was insignificant, beginning with small crowds of collegians coming to the city during the 1940s and 1950s. The 1960 release of the hit spring break film *Where the Boys Are*, however, fundamentally transformed the tradition and the community, truly institutionalizing spring break in Fort Lauderdale as a rite of passage among American youth. For the next quarter century, Fort Lauderdale was the unquestioned spring break capital of the United States. As students annually invaded their city thereafter, residents developed a tense relationship with the tradition. Although spring break brought national attention and tremendous revenue, many citizens over the years grew more and more concerned with the students’ misbehavior and the notorious reputation it gave Fort Lauderdale. By 1985, with some 350,000 collegians migrating to the city and spending an estimated \$120 million, spring break in Fort Lauderdale had reached unprecedented heights. Along with these record numbers, however, also came increased collegiate drunkenness, debauchery, and death that ultimately

¹³ Bill Luening, “Beach Businessmen Poised to Spring into Break Dance,” *The Miami Herald*, March 30, 1984.

destroyed this fragile relationship. Despite Fort Lauderdale enjoying twenty-five years as the indisputable spring break mecca, the unruly mobs of the 1980s sparked protests among residents that brought about the unthinkable rapid demise of the tradition in the city by the end of the decade.

CHAPTER 1: “AT THE START THEY CAME TO FORT LAUDERDALE IN DRIBLETS, THEN BY SCORES, AND SOON BY HUNDREDS”

As the final decade of the nineteenth century began, the area that would later become Fort Lauderdale remained largely uninhabited. The New River and surrounding miles of swampland that passed through the region made navigation, settlement, and commercial activities daunting tasks. Similar to many other frontiers in the continental United States, introduction of technological advancements in transportation soon began taming the desolate environment.¹⁴ In rapid succession, the 1890s saw construction of the area’s first road, ferry traversing the New River, and railroad. Along with various drainage and canal projects, these efforts linked Fort Lauderdale to the rest of the state and ended its virtual isolation.¹⁵ After the federal government established a post office in 1891, giving Fort Lauderdale its first permanent resident in postmaster William C. Valentine, settlers slowly began migrating to the area.¹⁶ By 1911, a community of 160 people incorporated the city of Fort Lauderdale, naming it after Major William Lauderdale, an officer in the United States army who had built a series of forts in the region during the Second Seminole War.¹⁷

¹⁴ Lake Douglas, “Beyond Spring Break,” *Landscape Architecture* 95 (2005): 88.

¹⁵ August Burghard and Phillip Weidling, *Checkered Sunshine: The Story of Fort Lauderdale, 1793-1955* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1966), 15-18.; Stuart B. McIver, *Fort Lauderdale and Broward County: An Illustrated History* (Woodland Hills, CA.: Windsor Publications, Inc., 1984), 35-43.

¹⁶ Burghard and Weidling, *Checkered Sunshine: The Story of Fort Lauderdale, 1793-1955*, 14-15.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

Echoing a similar pattern occurring throughout the rest of Florida during the early twentieth century, tourism played a vital role in the growth and development of Fort Lauderdale. While agricultural pursuits remained the city's biggest attraction for settlement and would continue to dominate the local economy through the end of the Second World War, Fort Lauderdale, from early on, also played host to a number of temporary visitors each year. While Fort Lauderdale was initially a haven for either Northeastern elites who could afford the expensive journey south or local sportsmen venturing to the area to fish in the waters of the New River, revolutionary changes in transportation and labor soon democratized tourism, opening Fort Lauderdale for the first time to many working and middle class Americans.¹⁸

With the increasing prevalence of automobiles, a rise in wages, and a decline in workers' hours throughout society during the first few decades of the twentieth century, Americans had more time and money to travel.¹⁹ As "tin-can tourists" subsequently began flocking to Fort Lauderdale during the 1920s, the city experienced a wave of unprecedented prosperity. Fort Lauderdale began attracting private developers from all over the country hoping to capitalize on the city's burgeoning tourism industry, ultimately sparking a building boom as hotels sprouted up throughout the city to house the annual hordes. In time, a significant portion of Fort Lauderdale's economy was built around - and had grown dependent upon - tourism, eventually replacing agriculture as the area's main source of income and commerce among residents.

¹⁸ Tracy J. Revels, *Sunshine Paradise: A History of Florida Tourism* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2011), 63-64.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

David C. Alexander

While Fort Lauderdale held the potential of becoming a world-renowned resort, David C. Alexander's development of the city's beach perhaps had the most profound impact on Fort Lauderdale's future. When Alexander arrived in Fort Lauderdale from California to visit his parents in 1909, the beach was almost completely unused. Wary of the oceanfront's propensity for hosting tropical storms and disinterested in the area's land because of its unsuitability for agricultural use, most early settlers in Fort Lauderdale preferred using the New River for transportation and farming.²⁰ Furthermore, at least a mile of dense mangrove swamp, under water at high tide, cut off the oceanfront from the rest of the city, making the beach nearly inaccessible.²¹ After viewing the development of coastal areas in California during his time at Stanford University, Alexander saw great promise in the city's pristine and untouched beach.²²

By 1914, Alexander had begun developing the area. He purchased a small beachfront hunting lodge and converted it into the Las Olas Inn, Fort Lauderdale's first hotel near the ocean.²³ Alexander also began constructing a road along the beach, which would later become part of Highway A1A. To maintain the integrity of the beach and preserve it for public use, he built the road a distance from the beach and restricted any development east of it, a stipulation that remains in place today and continues to contribute to the area's beauty. When Alexander faced financial

²⁰ McIver, *Fort Lauderdale and Broward County: An Illustrated History*, 66.

²¹ Burghard and Weidling, *Checkered Sunshine: The Story of Fort Lauderdale, 1793-1955*, 31.

²² McIver, *Fort Lauderdale and Broward County: An Illustrated History*, 66.

²³ Developers eventually tore down the Las Olas Inn in 1958 and replaced it with the Oceanside Hotel, an establishment that would later host infamous beachfront bar the Button. Cindy Elmore, "Beach Hotel to Go Down In History," *Sun-Sentinel*, October 19, 1992.

difficulties owing to the lack of a sufficient route to the beach, Broward County residents stepped in and voted on the county's first bond issue, approving \$400,000 to build a road across the swamp. Finally constructed in 1917, the road opened up the beach - Fort Lauderdale's biggest tourist attraction - for public use and, as was the case throughout the rest of the city, eventually generated a building boom as numerous hotels and shops filled Fort Lauderdale's beachfront along Highway A1A to meet rising tourist demands.²⁴

Regardless of its early successes, Fort Lauderdale still lacked a selling point that would bring national attention to the city and ensure its continued growth. Aided by a burgeoning tourist economy, Fort Lauderdale had grown from a sleepy community of fewer than two hundred huddled along the New River into a town of just under eighteen thousand on the eve of the Second World War.²⁵ Furthermore, such a boom attracted countless entrepreneurs to the city who financed various construction projects that helped build its infrastructure. Yet, during Fort Lauderdale's first few decades of existence, the city had not created a unique image for itself. Tourism, by nature, is a fickle business and for any city hoping to embrace such an industry, it needs a distinct identifier that will separate the community from other competitors and continue to attract vacationers.²⁶ Certainly, Fort Lauderdale had a beautiful beachfront, but so did many other nearby Florida cities that were experiencing similar growth at the time. In order to prevent losing tourist and

²⁴ Ibid., 66-67.

²⁵ United States Census Bureau, 1970 Census of Population, *Characteristics of the Population*, CPH-1-11, Florida, United States Government Printing Office, Washington DC, April 1973, 15.

²⁶ Christopher M. Law, *Urban Tourism: The Visitor Economy and the Growth of Large Cities* (London: Continuum Books, 2002), 67-68.

development dollars to competitors, Fort Lauderdale needed to find a way to put itself on the map so the American public would not simply regard it as just another faceless South Florida resort somewhere near Miami. For better or worse, Fort Lauderdale soon found this identity in spring break.

Despite the degenerative nature of today's spring breaks, the genesis of the custom was rather innocent. In 1935, before the ubiquity of collegiate indoor swimming pools, Colgate University's swimming coach Sam Ingram became concerned that the harsh winters of Upstate New York were inhibiting his team's strength and conditioning. At the suggestion of a swimmer's father who hailed from Fort Lauderdale, Ingram and his team traveled to Fort Lauderdale over that year's winter break to train at the Las Olas Casino Pool, which the city had built in 1926 as Florida's first Olympic-size pool. As the community eagerly courted his swimmers, Ingram reasoned that Fort Lauderdale was an ideal location to hold a competition that could display talent and allow proper winter conditioning for his and other swim teams.²⁷

With the aid of Fort Lauderdale Chamber of Commerce Secretary August Burghard and pool manager Al Gordon, Ingram established the Collegiate Aquatic Forum.²⁸ Held over winter break 1935 at the Las Olas Casino Pool, the event attracted over two hundred competitors from several northern colleges.²⁹ Still reeling from the combined effect of the recent Florida land boom collapse and a devastating hurricane that had struck the city during the late 1920s, local officials, shrewdly

²⁷ Bill Marsh, "The Innocent Birth of the Spring Bacchanal," *New York Times*, March 19, 2006.

²⁸ Burghard and Weidling, *Checkered Sunshine: The Story of Fort Lauderdale, 1793-1955*, 42.

²⁹ Associated Press, "Aquatic Forum Scheduled for Ft. Lauderdale," *St. Petersburg Times*, December 23, 1935.

recognizing the event's financial potential, decided to make the forum an annual competition.³⁰ By 1940, nearly six hundred coaches and competitors representing approximately one hundred colleges traveled to Fort Lauderdale to compete in the forum.³¹ Although the city suspended the competition for the next five years because of the Second World War, the Collegiate Aquatic Forum resumed in 1946 and Fort Lauderdale continues to host the annual event today.

Establishing the Collegiate Aquatic Forum, while important for the city in its own right, also fostered the beginnings of the spring break phenomenon in Fort Lauderdale. With an increasing number of swimmers enjoying their annual trips to the city, American college students began taking notice of Fort Lauderdale. Word spread quickly across college campuses that Fort Lauderdale was a great warm-weather destination to escape cold winters and spend academic breaks. August Burghard, influential figure in the establishment of the Collegiate Aquatic Forum, described this phenomenon in *Checkered Sunshine: The Story of Fort Lauderdale 1793-1955*:

Collegians who attended [the forum] had returned to their schools and spread the word of the wonders of Fort Lauderdale. College students were given spring vacations at a time when long and dreary northern winters still had muddy tail ends of cold to go through. They listened to their fellows on the swimming teams and started "Fort Lauderdale plans" for the spring recess. At the start they came to Fort Lauderdale in dribblets, then by scores, and soon by hundreds.³²

³⁰ Gary R. Mormino, *Land of Sunshine, State of Dreams: A Social History of Modern Florida* (Gainesville, University of Florida Press, 2008), 317.

³¹ The 1940 forum was also an international affair, playing host to athletes from several Central American and Caribbean countries. Associated Press, "600 Will Attend Holiday Swim Forum," *The Palm Beach Post*, December 18, 1940.

³² Burghard and Weidling, *Checkered Sunshine: The Story of Fort Lauderdale, 1793-1955*, 243.

Aided by the GI Bill's democratization of higher education and the dramatic emergence of American youth culture in the 1950s, collegians began invading Fort Lauderdale each spring after the Second World War and the modern spring bacchanalia was born.

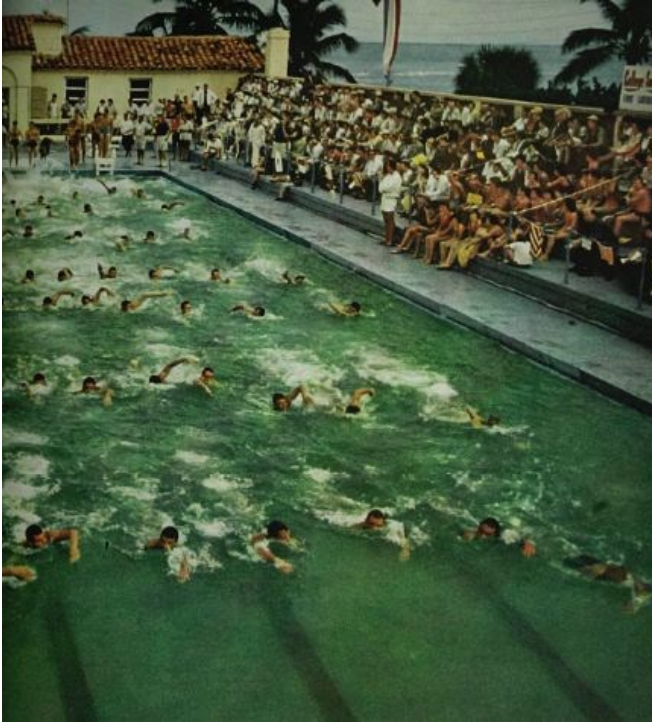


Figure 1: Swimmers take part in the “salmon run” to kick off an early College Aquatic Forum at the Las Olas Casino Pool.³³

Recognizing the increasing desire among American college students to engage in such spring frivolity in the years after the Second World War, the Fort Lauderdale Mayor's Hospitality Committee sought to capitalize on the city's burgeoning reputation as a spring break haven. In early 1953, city leaders mailed invitations to over five hundred college campuses encouraging students to enjoy

³³ “Splashy Spectacle,” *Saturday Evening Post*, February 28, 1959, 28.

spring vacation in Fort Lauderdale.³⁴ As an estimated ten thousand collegians journeyed to Fort Lauderdale that spring, the city seemed on the cusp of becoming a commercial juggernaut.

Although the city's marketing campaign was a public relations and financial success, the local populace became alarmed over some of the students' antics during spring break 1953. Fueled by a toxic amalgamation of cheap alcohol and immaturity, collegians vandalized property and terrorized the city. In the late hours of the night, students tossed dead fish into hotel swimming pools, hurled coconuts through car windows, streaked through the streets of Fort Lauderdale, and even hijacked a city bus.³⁵ Citizens were also dismayed with collegians' indecent behavior along the city's beach. One resident was shocked to have witnessed "lewd sex and liquor parties" among youths who "showered like ancient Romans under facilities provided for bathers."³⁶ Perhaps most disturbing to the populace, however, was the death of two students in the early hours of Easter Sunday morning when their car careened off Ocean Boulevard, striking two couples strolling along the beach.³⁷

In response to residents' distress, city officials attempted to curb unruliness during spring break 1954. The Mayor's Hospitality Committee, for example, attached notices to campus invitations warning students to behave while on spring break.³⁸ Hoping to keep students busy and out of trouble, the city organized a reception

³⁴ Paul S. George, "Where the Boys Were," *South Florida History Magazine* 1 (1991): 5.

³⁵ Associated Press, "College Horde Headache to Florida's Spa Officials," *Spokane Daily Chronicle*, April 7, 1953.

³⁶ George, "Where the Boys Were," 5.

³⁷ Associated Press, "College Horde Headache to Florida's Spa Officials," *Spokane Daily Chronicle*, April 7, 1953.

³⁸ George, "Where the Boys Were," 5.

committee that sponsored various recreational activities such as block dances, cookouts, and tugs-of-war.³⁹ Despite the committee's efforts, collegians proved unresponsive. When Fort Lauderdale organized a dance for spring break 1954, only seventy-five students participated and the band was playing to itself by 11:00 PM. As one disenchanted student remarked, "We have dances at home. We don't come down here for planned entertainment."⁴⁰ Largely uninterested in organized activities, students once again focused on drinking and sophomoric hijinks during subsequent spring breaks.

As the decade unfolded and spring break attendance increased, collegiate delinquency fostered further consternation among residents. While Fort Lauderdale had primarily dealt with a few prank-happy individuals in prior years, the city faced its first serious disturbance in 1959 when Porky's Hideaway ominously offered unlimited beer to students for \$1.50.⁴¹ When the establishment's beer supply exhausted before the first hour was over, drunken collegians vented their frustrations by destroying the bar's furnishings and tossing them into a nearby pond.⁴² Requiring police intervention to quell the melee, "Porky's riot" was emblematic of the culture of heavy drinking at spring break that posed a worsening problem for the city in future years.

Such episodes as "Porky's riot" helped spring break become somewhat of a mixed blessing for the local populace during the 1950s. Although there was considerable outcry over the outrageous behavior of students - with some tormented

³⁹ Ibid., 6.

⁴⁰ Anne L. Wendt, "Spring Recess by the Sea," *New York Times*, April 13, 1958.

⁴¹ Gillis, *Fort Lauderdale: The Venice of America*, 114.

⁴² George, "Where the Boys Were," 5.

hoteliers even asking officials to ban collegians - residents could not deny the financial potential and national recognition the tradition brought their city.⁴³ Whereas national publications had traditionally only mentioned Fort Lauderdale in relation to Miami and South Florida in general, hosting spring break gave Fort Lauderdale its first countrywide exposure. From 1958 through the end of the 1960s, for example, the *New York Times* ran articles every year discussing the peculiar phenomenon occurring among America's youth each spring in Fort Lauderdale. Furthermore, after an estimated nineteen thousand students reveled in Fort Lauderdale during spring break 1954, *Holiday Magazine* christened the city as "the greatest college town in the country."⁴⁴

⁴³ Ibid., 5-6

⁴⁴ Gillis, *Fort Lauderdale: The Venice of America*, 114.

CHAPTER 2: “THIS IS WHERE THE BOYS ARE”

Though the 1950s certainly brought notoriety to spring break in Fort Lauderdale, a few events at the turn of the decade cemented the city’s reputation as America’s indisputable spring break mecca. One such was the publication of an article in the April 13, 1959, issue of *Time Magazine*. Entitled “Beer on the Beach,” this story depicted the annual phenomenon in Fort Lauderdale as an invasion of moderately behaved college students who dressed in Bermuda shorts and bikinis and spent their days and nights “beach boozing.” While the article afforded Fort Lauderdale national attention, an innocent quote to conclude the story proved to be the most fateful for the city’s future. Asked why she made the trip to Fort Lauderdale for spring break, an anonymous coed replied, “This is where the boys are.”⁴⁵

In time, this innocent quote served as the inspiration for college professor Glendon Swarthout to pen a best-selling novel about spring break in Fort Lauderdale. Appropriately titled *Where the Boys Are*, Swarthout’s 1960 book tells the story of four female collegians’ adventurous search for romance and excitement while on spring vacation in Fort Lauderdale. Shortly thereafter, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer purchased the rights to Swarthout’s novel and quickly set out to produce the movie. Filmed on location and featuring local youngsters as extras, *Where the Boys Are* depicted many spots frequented by spring breakers including the Marlin Beach Hotel, beachfront bar Elbo Room, and, of course, the beach. The film also captured

⁴⁵ “Beer and the Beach,” *Time Magazine*, April 13, 1959.

the incredible bustle and excitement of “the strip” which was the mile-and-a-half stretch of Highway A1A that separated the bars, restaurants, and hotels from the beach.⁴⁶

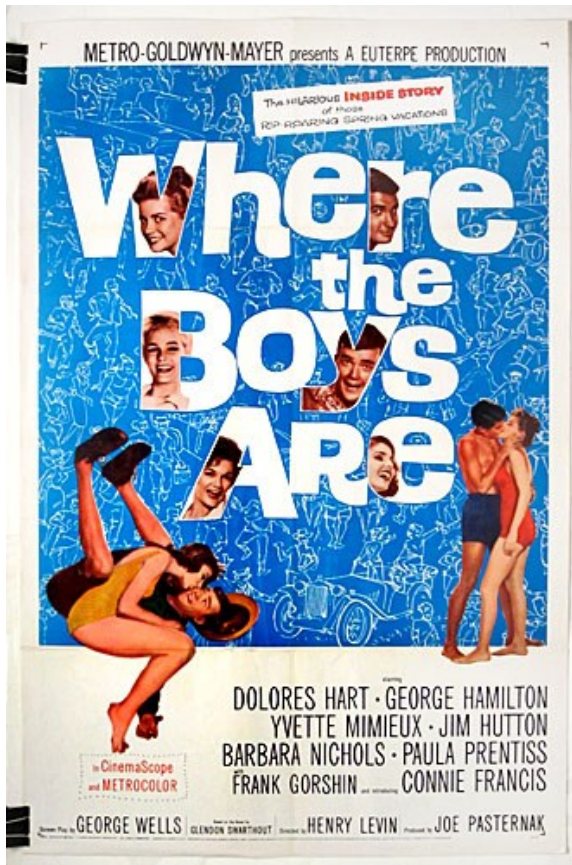


Figure 2: Released in 1960, *Where the Boys Are* helped popularize spring break in Fort Lauderdale among American collegians.⁴⁷

The movie consequently inspired a nationwide craze among college students for spring break and Fort Lauderdale profited from the publicity. Accompanied by the hit eponymous title track performed by costar Connie Francis, *Where the Boys Are* was a smash box-office hit following its release in December 1960. Merely three

⁴⁶ Gillis, *Fort Lauderdale: The Venice of America*, 114.

⁴⁷ Turner Classic Movies, “Where the Boys Are,” <http://www.tcm.com/tcmdb/title/493/Where-the-Boys-Are/>.

months after the film's premiere an unprecedented fifty thousand students migrated to Fort Lauderdale for spring break.⁴⁸ Bringing their wallets and healthy appetites for hedonistic consumption, collegians spent an estimated three million dollars during their brief six-week stays.⁴⁹ Hence, an innocent girl's quote truly institutionalized spring break as an American rite of passage and the city of Fort Lauderdale became synonymous with the tradition.⁵⁰

At the same time *Where the Boys Are* brought national attention and increased revenue to Fort Lauderdale, the sudden proliferation in attendance and student misbehavior further strained civil patience. One infamous event that drew considerable public condemnation and typified citizens' concerns occurred on "the strip" during spring break 1961. Barred from drinking on the beach within city limits, spring breakers for years had instead gone to nearby Jade Beach. When the sheriff's office closed the beach at the behest of its owner, thousands of incensed students amassed along "the strip" on the evening of March 28, 1961, to protest the city's drinking ban.⁵¹ As a growing mob disrupted traffic and a riot loomed on the horizon, Minnesota State Teachers College student George Dalluge climbed the traffic light at the corner of Los Olas Boulevard and Atlantic Boulevard.⁵² Hanging upside down from his knees, Dalluge broke into a drunken rendition of "The Star-Spangled Banner" and encouraged students below to demand that the city allow alcohol in the streets. After making 225 arrests, the police were finally able to restore

⁴⁸ George, "Where the Boys Were," 6.

⁴⁹ Gay Talese, "Youth Tide Rising on Florida Beach," *New York Times*, March 25, 1962.

⁵⁰ Gillis, *Fort Lauderdale: The Venice of America*, 114.

⁵¹ The Boca Raton News, "Fort Lauderdale: Where the Boys- and Girls- Aren't: A Spring Break Chronology," *Omaha World-Herald*, March 30, 1994.

⁵² Gillis, *Fort Lauderdale: The Venice of America*, 115.

order and coax Dalluge down from his perch.⁵³ When the chaotic spring break of 1961 finally ended, police had arrested five hundred students, including Dalluge, over three nights of disturbances.⁵⁴



Figure 3: George Dalluge hanging from a light pole along “the strip” and nearly starting a riot during spring break 1961.⁵⁵

The Dalluge incident embodied and amplified residents’ increasing reservations about hosting spring break. Along with their concerns regarding

⁵³ Miami News Bureau, “Lauderdale Arrests 225 College Rioters,” *The Miami News*, March 28, 1961.

⁵⁴ George, “Where the Boys Were,” 6.

⁵⁵ Miami News Bureau, “Lauderdale Arrests 225 College Rioters,” *The Miami News*, March 28, 1961.

collegians' behavior, citizens were alarmed that the sudden escalation in attendance led to serious overcrowding and congestion during spring break. With students often congregating along "the strip," their frequent crossing of Highway A1A led to numerous accidents and traffic jams. Similarly, as students overtook Fort Lauderdale's beach during their stays, residents felt unwelcomed in this area of the city and avoided it. Moreover, upon discovering that photos of the Dalluge incident appeared in *Life Magazine* and newspapers all over the country, many members of the populace feared that spring break might give Fort Lauderdale a negative image that would inhibit the city's ability to attract older tourists, new residents, and development.⁵⁶

The students' misbehavior during spring break 1961 divided the city over how to cope with the annual influx. After students returned to their campuses, community leaders debated the merits of inviting them back. Annoyed with the students' outrageous behavior, some residents urged city officials to break with the tradition, arguing that the mayhem was giving Fort Lauderdale a bad name and, if not controlled, could lead to the dilapidation of their city. The more liberal faction of the populace, in response, opposed such drastic measures, contending that press reports, despite exaggerating the extent of the 1961 unrest, did more good than harm for the city's image. More importantly, they hoped that spring break would provide a crucial boost to Fort Lauderdale's continuing growth.⁵⁷ As Forrest Crane, Fort Lauderdale's publicity director, argued in 1960, "We feel these kids are the

⁵⁶ Gillis, *Fort Lauderdale: The Venice of America*, 115.

⁵⁷ Gay Talese, "Youth Tide Rising on Florida Beach," *New York Times*, March 25, 1962.

future adult visitors to Fort Lauderdale. They are not only a potential tourist crowd but also a source of possibly future residents.”⁵⁸

In the end, the city decided to resume courting collegians for the following spring break. As had been the case in the past - and repeatedly so in the future - community leaders attempted to curb the yearly bedlam with organized entertainment and activities to keep students occupied and out of trouble.⁵⁹ While such efforts may have temporarily assuaged outraged residents, persistent collegiate misbehavior thereafter fostered a seemingly annual discussion within the populace as to whether each year's crowd had gone too far. Thus, when the city welcomed collegians back for spring break 1962, this situation gave birth to a love-hate relationship between Fort Lauderdale and spring break that persisted for the next quarter century. Although residents certainly enjoyed spring break revenue and hoped the tradition would foster the city's continued growth and development, after the turbulence of 1961 many citizens began questioning at what moment the cost of hosting the event would finally outweigh its benefits.⁶⁰

While “the strip” remained relatively sedate for the next few years, yet another large-scale disturbance broke out during spring break 1967, once again taxing local residents' patience. Originally a march protesting the Vietnam War, the demonstration soon devolved into violence and looting when a group of students

⁵⁸ Clark Ash, “Fort Lauderdale Greet the College Crowd,” *New York Times*, April 10, 1960.

⁵⁹ Gay Talese, “Youth Tide Rising on Florida Beach,” *New York Times*, March 25, 1962.

⁶⁰ Gillis, *Fort Lauderdale: The Venice of America*, 114.



Figure 4: Riotous collegians surround local police during spring break 1967.⁶¹

stopped a bakery truck and seized its inventory of bread and cakes. Gaining in number as it marched and walked over cars along Highway A1A, the mob then attacked a city bus with twelve riders, including a mother and her infant, harassing the frightened driver, smashing its windows, and nearly overturning the vehicle. In time, the horde - numbering nearly three thousand by this point - set its sights on police arriving at the scene. As unruly students began throwing debris at the officers, the melee forced elderly tourists to seek refuge in the nearby Marlin Beach Hotel. One innocent girl, however, was unable to escape the mayhem and suffered a gash on her forehead when a glass bottle intended for police struck her. After employing

⁶¹ Associated Press, "Police Quell Melee of Students in Fort Lauderdale," *New York Times*, March 25, 1967.

tear gas and making thirty arrests on charges including inciting a riot and disturbing the peace, police were finally able to restore order.⁶²

Not surprisingly, incidents such as 1967's riot made the issue of hosting spring break more polarizing among the populace. Just days after the disturbance, State Attorney Roger H. Harper publicly vented his frustrations, complaining to a local civic club that the collegians who occupied Fort Lauderdale every spring "...plundered commercial vehicles, destroyed public property, taunted and abused police, urinated in public, stole and ruined public property, explored illicit sex on the beach, dressed and conducted themselves salaciously and lewdly, and overtaxed the city's courts and jail." He urged officials to "place this despicable class of tourists on notice it is no longer welcome in Broward County." To deal with future lawbreakers, he suggested draconian measures, including "over-attentive police surveillance, excessively stern judicial treatment of offenders, and total community ostracism."⁶³ Although Harper was unsuccessful, his efforts reflected the developing tension at the time between residents and the spring break tradition.

In spite of intensifying hostilities, citizens simply could not deny the collegians' financial contribution to the growth and development of Fort Lauderdale. From 1960 to 1970, Fort Lauderdale's population grew 68.9 percent to nearly 140,000 compared with an increase of 49.3 percent among other Florida cities.⁶⁴ Although numerous factors contributed to this boom, hosting spring break was instrumental in carving Fort Lauderdale's niche in the state's emerging tourism industry and

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Associated Press, "Lauderdale Urged to Shun Collegians," *New York Times*, March 28, 1967.

⁶⁴ United States Census Bureau, 1970 Census of Population, *Characteristics of the Population*, CPH-1-11, Florida, United States Government Printing Office, Washington DC, April 1973, 15.

attracting development and investment to the city. During the 1960s, for instance, Fort Lauderdale placed second among Florida cities behind only Pensacola in construction of new motel rooms.⁶⁵ Therefore, as students annually poured millions of dollars into the economy, spring break, in many ways, helped give Fort Lauderdale the unique identifier that put the city on the map and ensured its vitality in the face of competition from other Florida vacation destinations.⁶⁶

Table 1: Percent Increase- Motel Rooms in Florida, 1960-1969⁶⁷

Region	% increase
Pensacola	30.0
<i>Fort Lauderdale</i>	<i>24.3</i>
Tallahassee	12.1
Orlando	11.0
Tampa	10.4
Florida	9.8
All SMSAs	7.7
West Palm Beach	7.5
Miami	2.7
Jacksonville	0.7

Thus, as the 1960s came to a close, residents' relations with spring break had become more tense and complicated. With collegians invading their city year after year, the conservative faction of the populace became more vocal in their opposition to hosting the tradition. The millions of dollars that coincided with the event, however, also made it increasingly difficult for Fort Lauderdale to distance itself from spring break. By relaxing promotion or clamping down too aggressively on

⁶⁵ "The Beach, the Bay, and the City: Tourism at the Crossroads," May 1971, Milo Smith and Associates, 12.

⁶⁶ Robert L. Steinback, "Spring Times are Changin'," *The Miami Herald*, March 1, 1987.

⁶⁷ "The Beach, the Bay, and the City: Tourism at the Crossroads," May 1971, Milo Smith and Associates, 12.

unruliness, city officials risked alienating collegians, losing business to other Florida cities, and relinquishing the millions of dollars in revenue students infused into Fort Lauderdale's economy.

CHAPTER 3: “GREG IS CRAZY TO CARRY BUSCH AT FIFTY CENTS A BOTTLE”

In the years after the release of *Where the Boys Are*, Fort Lauderdale had struck a delicate relationship with its duties as spring break host. Most residents and community officials in favor of continuing the tradition were willing to accept - or at least reluctantly tolerate - the annual mayhem only because of the publicity, revenue, and development it brought their city. With changes in the nature of Florida's tourism industry and the community itself that took place during the ensuing decade, however, spring break gradually ceased serving as a boon to the city. Instead, Fort Lauderdale's use of spring break as a catalyst for growth transformed into an unhealthy dependence, ultimately causing Fort Lauderdale to fall far behind competing cities in the state's tourism industry, fostering the tragic dilapidation of the beachfront, and besmirching the city's reputation for nearly a generation.

Opening its doors on October 1, 1971, Walt Disney World was truly the first of its kind. Never before had the United States - and possibly the world - seen an attraction that had the ability to draw huge numbers of domestic and international tourists consistently year after year. Built on forty-three square miles of land twenty miles south of downtown Orlando, the original tract was roughly twice the size of Manhattan.⁶⁸ As other amusement parks in the state paled in comparison to the massive size and scope of Orlando's shrine to consumerism, Walt Disney World overshadowed and overwhelmed its competition and quickly redefined tourists'

⁶⁸ Revels, *Sunshine Paradise: A History of Florida Tourism*, 123.

expectations.⁶⁹ Despite Disney executives' initial disappointment with attendance figures, at the end of its first year, Walt Disney World had attracted nearly eleven million tourists.⁷⁰ By the early 1980s, Walt Disney World would overtake the Eiffel Tower as the world's most popular tourist attraction- with Orlando as the number one vacation destination.⁷¹

The popularity of Walt Disney World subsequently sparked an economic and construction boom in Central Florida. With only 3.5 million tourists visiting the area in 1969, Orlando officials had been searching for a gimmick that would carve the city's niche in Florida's tourism industry and stop tourists from bypassing Orange County for South Florida.⁷² Walt Disney World provided Orlando with more attention than it could have possibly imagined. Soon after the opening of the resort, other world-class theme and amusement parks began construction in the area, including Sea World of Florida in 1973, Six Flags Stars Hall of Fame in 1975, and, much later, Universal Studios in 1990.⁷³ Reflecting this tremendous growth in tourism, the number of hotel rooms in Orlando jumped from just 6,300 in 1971 to more than 40,000 a decade later, ranking fifth in the world at the time behind New York City, London, Chicago, and Las Vegas.⁷⁴

The proliferation of Orlando's tourism industry soon spurred growth in the rest of the city and its economy. After the opening of Walt Disney World in 1971, Orlando's population exploded, growing nearly thirty percent in both the 1980s and

⁶⁹ Ibid., 130.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 126.

⁷¹ "Has Broward County been Mickey-Moused?," 1984, Leadership Broward, 11-12.

⁷² Revels, *Sunshine Paradise: A History of Florida Tourism*, 122.

⁷³ Ibid., 127, 131; "Has Broward County been Mickey-Moused?," 1984, Leadership Broward, 14.

⁷⁴ "Has Broward County been Mickey-Moused?," 1984, Leadership Broward, 16.

1990s.⁷⁵ On the eve of the twenty-first century, Orlando was the nation's fastest growing region in terms of new residents. This tremendous expansion also helped Orlando and the surrounding region become a major hub for national corporate firms. A state report completed in the early 1980s found that more than seventy percent of all industry relocating in Florida did so in the Central Florida area.⁷⁶

Along with fostering tremendous economic growth, the opening of Walt Disney World also transformed Florida's tourism industry. After Mickey Mouse's arrival, for example, the existence of beautiful beaches was no longer the main attraction for visitors to the state. During the 1960s, Florida's visitors listed various beaches as the number one reason for traveling to the state, with swimming and other associated recreations the most popular activities.⁷⁷ As Walt Disney World heightened expectations for vacation experiences, tourists were no longer simply content with sitting along a beach, sending other Florida resort cities scrambling to develop alternative attractions in order to stay competitive in the changing tourism industry.⁷⁸ Walt Disney World also ushered in an era of new hotel construction throughout the state. Previously, the development of Florida's tourism industry had been an unorganized affair, consisting largely of kitschy roadside attractions and a multitude of small, mom-and-pop motels. With Walt Disney World making tourism more lucrative than ever, national firms were eager to participate in the state's hospitality industry, building thousands of new lodgings ranging from budget motels

⁷⁵ U.S. Census Bureau, 2000 Census of Population and Housing, *Population and Housing Unit Counts*, PHC-3-11(RV), Florida, United States Government Printing Office, Washington DC, October 2003, 36.

⁷⁶ "Has Broward County been Mickey-Moused?," 1984, Leadership Broward, 11.

⁷⁷ Revels, *Sunshine Paradise: A History of Florida Tourism*, 106.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 138, 137.

to luxury high-rises. In time, Floridians and tourists alike changed their view of mom-and-pop motels from quaint and unique to comparatively tacky and outdated.⁷⁹

Finally, and perhaps most significantly for Fort Lauderdale, Walt Disney World shifted the focus of the state's tourism away from South Florida to Orlando and Central Florida. In the first month after Walt Disney World's opening an estimated 10.8 percent of all visitors to Florida headed to the Orlando area - up from 3.7 percent the previous year - while traveling to Dade County dropped from 10 to 7.7 percent during the same time.⁸⁰ Although Walt Disney World undoubtedly created many pull factors for this emerging trend, concurrent developments in Fort Lauderdale during the 1970s also helped alienate and push tourists - not to mention business development and new residents - away.

Diverging from the rapid ascension of Orlando and Central Florida, Fort Lauderdale was a community very much on the decline during the 1970s. The tremendous growth the city had consistently experienced since its inception - its population had increased over sixty-five percent each decade from 1910 through 1970 - had finally stagnated, nearly coming to a complete halt. By the end of the 1970s, Fort Lauderdale's population had only grown ten percent over the previous decade.⁸¹ With the city nearly eighty-five percent developed, new residents and businesses started moving into Fort Lauderdale's suburbs where land and housing were readily available. With attention and resources focused on the areas

⁷⁹ Ibid., 137.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 134.

⁸¹ United States Census Bureau, 1980 Census of Population, *Number of Inhabitants*, CPH-1-11, Florida, United States Government Printing Office, Washington DC, February 1982, 20.

surrounding the city, several neighborhoods in Fort Lauderdale began to suffer from neglect and deteriorate.⁸²

The most obvious victim of this downward trend in Fort Lauderdale was the beach and its adjacent “strip.” While the district had been home to an assortment of retail shops, restaurants, and taverns since the late 1940s, spring break began taking over “the strip” during the 1970s. As Fort Lauderdale continued to draw collegians, many businesses that catered almost exclusively to spring break crowds replaced the more respectable establishments along “the strip.” In addition to a variety of tacky t-shirt and souvenir shops, a number of tawdry beachfront bars that would soon gain infamy began operating.⁸³ With the opening of the Button in 1970, the Candy Store in 1977, and Penrod’s in 1979, countless seedy taverns lined Fort Lauderdale’s beach by the end of the decade, gradually transforming the reputation and general atmosphere of the neighborhood from one of relaxed consumerism to hedonistic capitalism.⁸⁴

⁸² Gillis, *Fort Lauderdale: The Venice of America*, 127.

⁸³ Susan Gillis, *Fort Lauderdale: Images of America* (Charleston: Arcadia Publishing, 1999), 107.

⁸⁴ John Hughes, “Greg Newell Still Crazy after All These Years,” *Sun-Sentinel*, April 1, 1990.; Liz Doup, “Closing Time on the Strip,” *The Miami Herald*, November 11, 1992.; Neely Tucker, “Landmark Bar Finds Going Sour,” *The Miami Herald*, April 15, 1988.



Figure 5: During the 1970s, numerous collegiate bars overtook “the strip” and transformed the beach’s image.⁸⁵

“Crazy” Greg Newell

Perhaps no individual personified or did more to fuel the beachfront’s decadent transformation than “Crazy” Greg Newell. The self-proclaimed “father of spring break,” Newell first came to Fort Lauderdale as a Purdue University student

⁸⁵ *The Fully Unauthorized 1981 Semi-Official Guide to Fort Lauderdale* (New York: National Lampoon, Inc., 1981), 23.

during spring break 1957. Falling in love with the city, he moved to Fort Lauderdale after graduating with a bachelor's degree in education and psychology. Initially working as a hearing aid salesman, Newell earned his nickname and local fame as a bartender at the Elbo Room in the early 1960s. While most other barkeeps along the beach were reluctant to stock Anheuser-Busch's new Busch beer, Newell decided to serve the brew in 1962 and carried a drink special in order to entice collegians. Signs all across Fort Lauderdale that day let students know "Greg is crazy to carry Busch at fifty cents a bottle."⁸⁶ From that point, the nickname stuck and, with everything from his trademark beanie complete with a propeller to his license plate reading "CRAZY," Newell was quick to embrace his new moniker.⁸⁷

In 1970, Newell joined a group of three other investors in opening a beachfront bar called the Button. With his knack for collegiate promotion, Newell's business soon took off after he started holding a series of spring break competitions between students representing various colleges. While these contests were initially innocent activities such as tricycle races, basketball shooting, and rolling eggs across the barroom floor, Newell soon developed more sexualized rituals, including the soon-to-be legendary "wet t-shirt" contest. As Newell's business exploded, other beachfront bars were quick to mimic the Button's success by holding their own scandalous competitions. Ultimately, Newell's opening of the Button ushered in a new breed of bar owners along "the strip" who accommodated collegiate crowds and were uninterested in attracting adult tourists. As their racy contests became staples

⁸⁶ John Hughes, "Greg Newell Still Crazy after All These Years," *Sun-Sentinel*, April 1, 1990.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*; Seth Borenstein, "Back to the Beach - Spring Break Founder, Foe Recall What it was Like Nine Years Ago," *Sun-Sentinel*, March 27, 1994.

of the spring break tradition in Fort Lauderdale, these establishments were major factors in giving “the strip” its ill repute.⁸⁸

Decaying hotels and motels along “the strip” also added to the general dilapidation of Fort Lauderdale’s beach area. By the 1970s, many of the city’s lodgings, which had once been some of the most charming establishments in the state, had begun to age less than gracefully.⁸⁹ As national chains amplified their involvement in Florida’s hotel industry during the decade, several of Fort Lauderdale’s beachside hotels and motels - the majority of which were small, mom-and-pop operations - faced difficulty in keeping up with their rivals’ modest rates, luxury extras, and national marketing capabilities.⁹⁰ With hotel business booming elsewhere, many of Fort Lauderdale’s establishments - already financially limited - were unable to afford the wide-scale renovations necessary to stay competitive with the amenities of newer hotels. Furthermore, as collegians had made the destruction and vandalism of hotel property a yearly tradition in itself, some hoteliers, anticipating similar damage to materialize once again the following year, simply stopped making major repairs.⁹¹ Thus, by the end of the 1970s, most of the city’s beachside hotels and motels had become comparatively aged, rundown, and generally uninviting.

⁸⁸ John Hughes, “Greg Newell Still Crazy after All These Years,” *Sun-Sentinel*, April 1, 1990.; Herald Staff, “The Button’s Bygone Days,” *The Miami Herald*, November 11, 1992.

⁸⁹ Gillis, *Fort Lauderdale: The Venice of America*, 129.

⁹⁰ By the early 1980s, hotels and motels with 50 or fewer rooms comprised half of Broward County’s 25,000 hotel rooms. Bob Lamendola, “Beach Motels Hard Hit: Sale Signs Pop Up as Business Drops,” *Sun-Sentinel*, April 2, 1991.

⁹¹ Cynthia Vaughn, “County to Breakers: No One Waits for You,” *The Bradenton Herald*, March 12, 1990.

“The strip’s” decline was part of a serious image problem that hurt South Florida in general during the late 1970s and early 1980s. With nearly seventy percent of all marijuana and cocaine imported into the United States passing through the region and Miami owning the nation’s highest homicide rate, South Florida had become both the murder and drug smuggling capital of the United States. The problem was so dismal that in November 1981 *Time Magazine* ran a cover story titled “South Florida: Paradise Lost” analyzing the area’s numerous problems and speculating about the hopelessness of the situation.⁹² For its part, Fort Lauderdale’s “strip” was a major contributor to the region’s difficulties. Drawn to the area’s many cheap motels, dingy bars, and notoriety as a youthful haven, a sea of vagrants, prostitutes, teenage runaways, and drug dealers gradually inhabited Fort Lauderdale’s beach during the 1970s.⁹³ While the FBI listed Miami as the most crime-ridden city in the United States in 1980, Fort Lauderdale was not far behind at eighth.⁹⁴

⁹² James Kelly, “South Florida: Paradise Lost,” *Time Magazine*, November 23, 1981, <http://www.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,922693,00.html>.

⁹³ Gillis, *Fort Lauderdale: The Venice of America*, 129.

⁹⁴ James Kelly, “South Florida: Paradise Lost,” *Time Magazine*, November 23, 1981, <http://www.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,922693,00.html>.

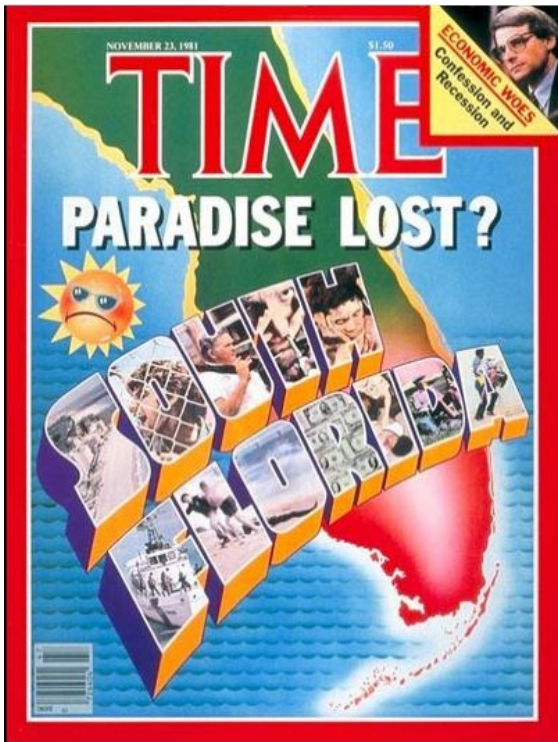


Figure 6: Fort Lauderdale’s deterioration was part of a growing crime, drug, and general image problem that beset South Florida during the late 1970s and early 1980s.⁹⁵

With “the strip” growing decrepit and Florida’s overall tourism industry reeling from the recessions of the 1970s, local leaders made various attempts during the decade to address the growing crisis on the beach. In 1974, for instance, a private business group report urged the city to take steps toward redeveloping the area or its problems would “spread to neighboring cities like a cancer.” In the wake of the study, the City Commission formed the Beach Advisory Board to oversee efforts at revamping the beachfront.⁹⁶ Three years later, the group sponsored the creation of the Strategic Action Program whose purpose was to “provide the framework for action by municipal, county, state, and federal government levels as well as by

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Scott A. Zamost, “Redevelopment Plans Clash with Spring Break,” *Sun-Sentinel*, March 2, 1986.

private developers...to help them to contribute to the overall goal of a revitalized beach for residents and tourists alike.” Completed in late 1977, the five-month study outlined the numerous problems plaguing the beach and listed proposals intended to overhaul the area, including a sports/convention center near “the strip” to lure increased development and the appointment of an executive director to implement such strategies.⁹⁷ Ultimately, with the ensuing economic recovery and subsequent boom in the area’s tourism industry, the drive to refurbish the beach temporarily lost its urgency, causing these plans to result in inaction due to a lack of adequate public and private support.⁹⁸

⁹⁷ Ibid.; “Fort Lauderdale Beach: Analysis of the Past, Direction for the Future,” 1985, Leadership Broward, 3.

⁹⁸ Scott A. Zamost, “Redevelopment Plans Clash with Spring Break,” *Sun-Sentinel*, March 2, 1986.

CHAPTER 4: "THANK GOD FOR THE KIDS"

At the same time Mickey Mouse began his reign in Central Florida, Fort Lauderdale's main tourist attraction was rapidly descending into moral excess and decay. Fostered by the consequences of hosting the annual collegiate assault, the city's beachfront had become a tragic contradiction by the end of the 1970s, with miles of beautiful, unblemished ocean on one side of Highway A1A facing the overwhelming tastelessness of "the strip" on the other. With the yearly chaos of spring break, a corroding beachfront, and absence of a major tourist attraction akin to Walt Disney World, Fort Lauderdale quickly fell behind its competitors, ultimately losing major business to Central Florida and creating an unhealthy dependence on the spring break economy.

After a period of stagnant attendance, spring break in Fort Lauderdale rebounded spectacularly, reaching unprecedented heights by the early 1980s. As American collegians during the late 1960s and early 1970s busied themselves with various causes, their countercultural ethos temporarily dampened enthusiasm for the superficial debauchery of spring break. With an end to the Vietnam War and a decline in student activism by the mid-1970s, however, students once again sought lighthearted fun instead of political reform. As one collegian on spring break in 1976 remarked, "We've given up on changing the world. All we ask - at least on our holiday - is to have a good time."⁹⁹ Starting with an estimated turnout of 100,000 in

⁹⁹ George, "Where the Boys Were," 6.

1976, spring break attendance doubled over the next 5 years, with a record 200,000 collegians embarking on the city in 1981.¹⁰⁰

Despite all the problems that had been occurring along “the strip,” Fort Lauderdale initially embraced this rapid growth. One reason was that the nature of students and their activities seemed to have changed. As American youths had battled authority figures throughout the turbulent Vietnam War era, the story was no different in Fort Lauderdale. Evident in the 1967 riot, the spring breakers of the era brought with them their defiant attitudes, resulting in numerous protests, demonstrations, and clashes with police.¹⁰¹ “Students were rebelling against everything then,” said Tommy Mercer, director of tourism for the Fort Lauderdale Chamber of Commerce during the early 1980s. “They were a different breed of cat. It was just the times we were all going through.”¹⁰²

With the ensuing rise of conservatism in the late 1970s, a different variety of college students started arriving on the beaches of Fort Lauderdale. Gone were the longhaired, unshaven, drug-using hippies, and in their place came clean-cut, old-fashioned, beer-guzzling collegians.¹⁰³ Such a transformation sparked a wave of nostalgia among many Fort Lauderdale residents who greeted it as a return to a time of spring break innocence. “The kids we get today are like the ones we had in the

¹⁰⁰ Phillip Ward, “...And so Does this Binge,” *The Miami Herald*, January 2, 1983.

¹⁰¹ Associated Press, “Beer, Not Drugs, Lures Students to Fort Lauderdale,” *New York Times*, March 27, 1977.

¹⁰² Phillip Ward, “...And so Does this Binge,” *The Miami Herald*, January 2, 1983.

¹⁰³ Associated Press, “Beer, Not Drugs, Lures Students to Fort Lauderdale,” *New York Times*, March 27, 1977.; B. Drummond Ayres Jr., “The Fifties Resurgent on Florida Beaches,” *New York Times*, April 9, 1977.

50s," said "Crazy" Greg Newell. "They're fresh-faced, rosy-cheeked, apple pie kid-next-door types. They can still raise hell, but it's clean hell-raising."¹⁰⁴

More importantly, Fort Lauderdale civic and business leaders welcomed spring break growth for the revenue it afforded the city. While collegians poured an estimated \$30 million into the local economy in 1976, their spending neared \$100 million by the dawn of the 1980s.¹⁰⁵ Overall, spring break's expansion was part of Fort Lauderdale's resurgent tourism industry at the time. After years of uncertainty, recessions, and escalating competition from other Florida destinations, the Greater Fort Lauderdale area experienced a tourism renaissance during the late 1970s. Aided by an improving economy, a record 3.9 million visitors vacationed in Broward County in 1979, up from a mere 2.1 million just 3 years earlier.¹⁰⁶ With Fort Lauderdale's tourism business thriving, officials' earlier apprehensions regarding spring break's adverse impact on the city and its economy looked to have been unwarranted.

Unfortunately, the prosperity of the late 1970s was only fleeting. In addition to yet another recession in the early 1980s, Fort Lauderdale lost significant tourist dollars to the opening of Walt Disney World's \$800 million EPCOT center in October 1982. As Walt Disney World drew nearly 23 million visitors in 1983 and largely helped shield Orlando from the effects of the economic downturn, South Florida hoteliers began complaining of a virtual wall surrounding Central Florida that

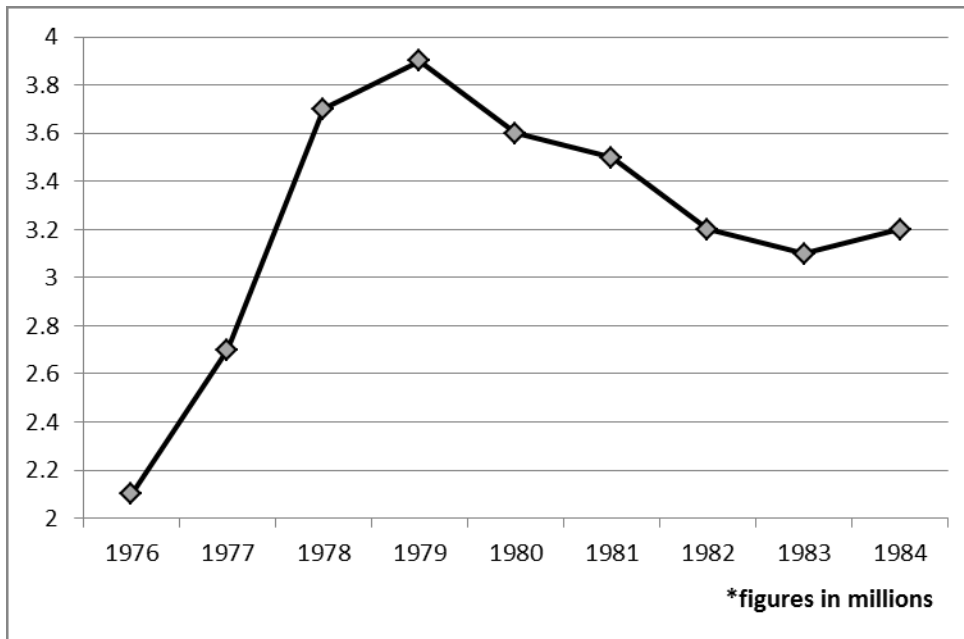
¹⁰⁴ Phillip Ward, "...And so Does this Binge," *The Miami Herald*, January 2, 1983.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ "Has Broward County been Mickey-Moused?," 1984, *Leadership Broward*, 33.

prevented tourists from traveling any farther south.¹⁰⁷ Reeling from these combined factors, the total number of visitors to the county dropped after a record 1979, bottoming out in 1983 at just over three million.¹⁰⁸ Annual occupancy rates in the county also plummeted, falling from 70.1 percent in 1980 to 56.2 percent in 1983, below the approximate 60 percent necessary for hoteliers to break-even for a year.¹⁰⁹

Figure 7: Number of American and Canadian visitors to Broward County, 1976-1984¹¹⁰



During these difficult years, public officials and business leaders embraced spring break in hope of temporarily bolstering the economy until it could fully recover. Fearing that other cities might detract from Fort Lauderdale's collegiate

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 12.; Scott A. Zamost, "Tourism Ads will Target Middle Class, County Campaign to Aim at Attracting Families," *Sun-Sentinel*, August 25, 1988.

¹⁰⁸ Michele Cohen, "Tourism Officials Look Beyond Spring Break" in *Broward in the '80s: A Progress Report*, ed. Gene Cryer (Fort Lauderdale: Sun-Sentinel, 1985), 47.; "Has Broward County been Mickey-Moused?," 1984, Leadership Broward, 33.

¹⁰⁹ Gail DeGeorge, "Business Hotels Flowering in Broward," *The Miami Herald*, December 16, 1984.

¹¹⁰ "Has Broward County been Mickey-Moused?," 1984, Leadership Broward, 33.

tourism, Broward County's Tourist Development Council (TDC) spent \$130,000 advertising in campus newspapers in 1983 as well as taking out a full-page flier in *Rolling Stone* magazine.¹¹¹ Furthermore, many business owners poured thousands of their own dollars into marketing the city's spring break season. George Gill, for example, spent \$25,000 on advertisements in 50 college newspapers promoting his 2 beachside Sheraton hotels.¹¹² In the end, such efforts proved rewarding as spring break attendance surpassed 250,000 in 1983 and 300,000 in 1984.¹¹³

Along with the city's active marketing campaign, this incredible growth was aided by a slew of films that helped usher Fort Lauderdale's spring break into a new era. Films such as 1983's *Spring Break* and a 1984 remake of *Where the Boys Are* aptly titled *Where the Boys Are '84* introduced to a new generation of American youths the time-honored tradition of spending spring break in Fort Lauderdale. Shot on location, these films depicted the often-outrageous spring break activities and rituals that had originated during the 1970s and undoubtedly fueled a desire among a crop of new collegians to partake in the excitement. Although *Spring Break* and *Where the Boys Are '84* were largely critical and commercial flops, they still ensured that Fort Lauderdale would continue to remain synonymous with the annual rite of spring break.¹¹⁴

¹¹¹ Bill Luening, "Beach Businessmen Poised to Spring into Break Dance," *The Miami Herald*, March 30, 1984.

¹¹² Elizabeth Wilson, "Spring Break '84 May Be Best Ever for City Merchants," *The Miami Herald*, March 21, 1984.

¹¹³ Patrick May, "Promoters: Rules Sour Spring Rite Spirits," *The Miami Herald*, March 4, 1984.; Brian Blanchard, "Youthful Invasion is Nearly History," *The Miami Herald*, April 9, 1985.

¹¹⁴ David Marcus, "Extras Create 'Spring Break' for Movie," *The Miami Herald*, July 10, 1982.; Ron Ishoy, "Carr Renews Rites of Spring in 'Where The Boys Are'," *The Miami Herald*, July 3, 1983.

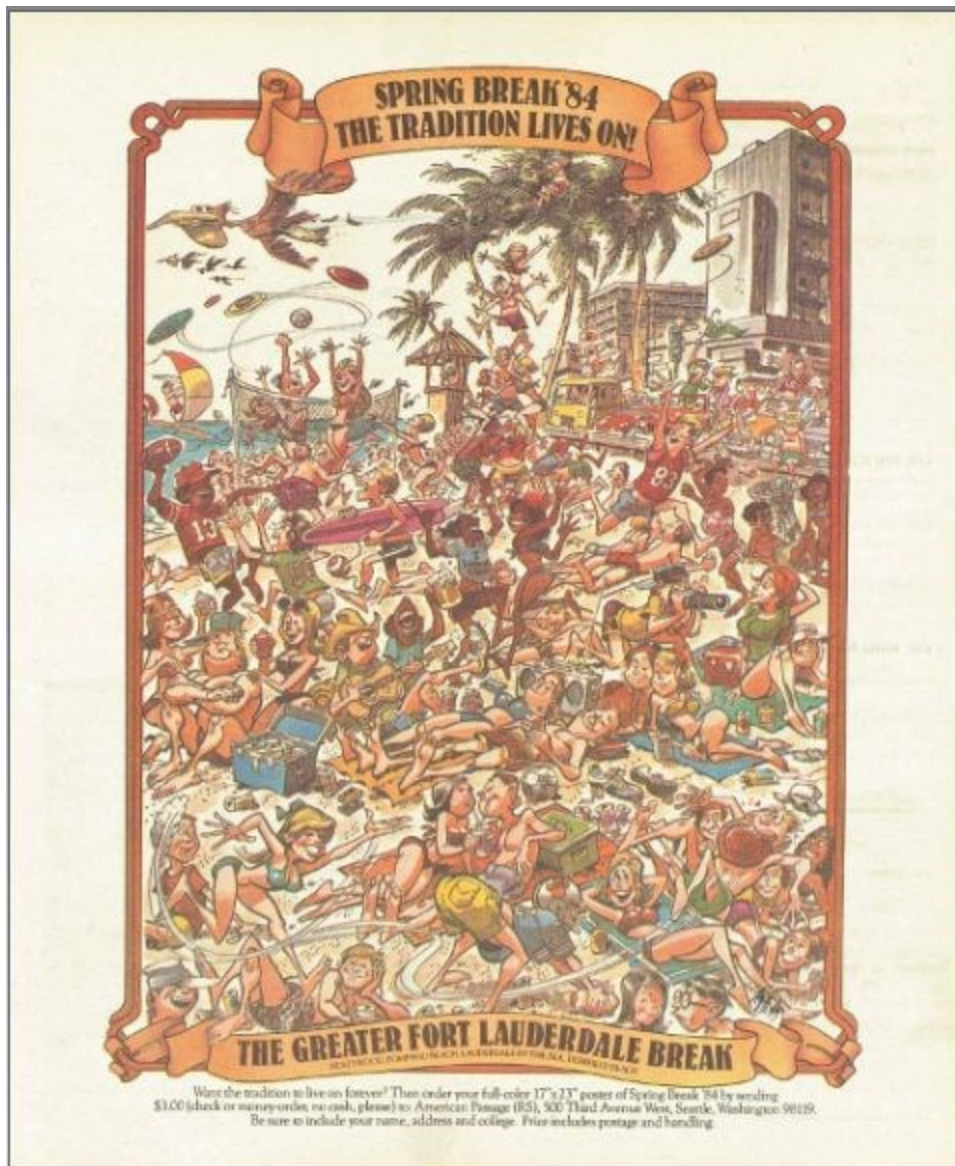


Figure 8: In 1983-84, the TDC spent over \$100,000 advertising spring break in Fort Lauderdale, including this full-page flier in *Rolling Stone*.¹¹⁵

Thus, at the same time overall visitors to the city dropped, spring break attendance, in contrast, continued its rapid growth. After a sluggish winter tourist season in 1982 that saw Fort Lauderdale's hotel occupancy in November and

¹¹⁵ *Rolling Stone*, March 1, 1984, 5.

December a combined fifteen percent below the same months in 1981, several Fort Lauderdale hoteliers became dependent on the always-reliable spring break season for revenue.¹¹⁶ Frank Buonauro, president of the Broward Hotel and Motel Association, echoed such desperation, “Without the college season, we’d really all be in trouble. Thank God for the kids.” He went on, “My big concern is that the kids have enough money, with the economy the way it is.”¹¹⁷

While clinging tighter to spring break revenue may have temporarily softened the blow of a tourism industry in the doldrums, the decision of business leaders and government officials to embrace and promote the tradition fully did far more damage to the area’s economy in the end. For years, Fort Lauderdale had walked a fine line, promoting itself and enjoying a reputation as both a fine resort city as well as a haven for spring break excess. In 1983, for instance, the TDC unveiled a \$1.7 million marketing campaign that targeted both collegians and more mature tourists, inviting them to “take a Greater Fort Lauderdale break.”¹¹⁸

With spring break crowds swelling to unprecedented numbers by the mid-1980s, the goal of attracting both demographics had become unrealistic. The combined effect of a dilapidating beach area, hordes of rowdy collegians, continuing bad press for both Fort Lauderdale and the South Florida region, and the absence of a major tourist attraction had finally taken its toll, hindering the city’s ability to entice more mature and upscale vacationers. Although Fort Lauderdale and Broward County’s overall tourism economy began to improve in 1984, this rate of recovery

¹¹⁶ Associated Press, “Florida Tourist Businesses Counting on Students,” *Toledo Blade*, February 28, 1983.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Patrick May, “Tourist Panel Buys Ad Pitch,” *The Miami Herald*, December 16, 1983.

considerably lagged behind the county's recent growth in the late 1970s and the rest of the state's concurrent growth.¹¹⁹ As the city's tourism industry remained sluggish, some business owners feared they had become prisoners of the spring break economy. While there had previously been enough family tourism throughout the year for small motel owners to refuse rental to college kids, the multiple problems that had been developing in Fort Lauderdale since the 1970s in accordance with spring break had tainted the family trade, forcing these businesses to rent to students in order to stay afloat.¹²⁰

After 1984's spring break season, Fort Lauderdale officials felt compelled to act, but faced a difficult and complex situation. With the annual collegiate invasion clearly out of control and staining the city's reputation, leaders were reserved about the future prospect of liberating Fort Lauderdale from spring break. Referring to the yearly flood of students, Assistant City Manager Bob Baldwin commented in 1984, "People are just going to keep coming down here and there's not much we can do about it. At some point we may have to start discouraging people from coming here."¹²¹ Yet, city officials could not pursue a concerted effort targeted at ending spring break in Fort Lauderdale for fear of losing business to other Florida cities and conceding the millions of dollars in student revenue on which many businesses had come to rely.

¹¹⁹ Phillip Ward, "...And so Does this Binge," *The Miami Herald*, January 2, 1983.

¹²⁰ Linda Robertson, "Spring Break Antics Descend to Record Low, Hoteliers Say," *The Miami Herald*, April 13, 1985.

¹²¹ Joseph Schwerdt, "Lauderdale Hopes to Subdue Spring Break Ritual," *The Palm Beach Post*, July 23, 1984.

In preparation for spring break 1985, Fort Lauderdale officials, while certainly not discouraging spring break, enacted a number of measures aimed at controlling collegiate rowdiness and its undesirable effect on the city. Hoping to limit overcrowding along the beach, for example, the city banned holding concerts in the area, instead restricting them to the city's two stadiums several miles from the beach. As spring breakers often left behind massive amounts of litter, the city also limited the locations for promotional giveaways (which students usually threw away), disallowed companies from handing out free cigarettes, and encouraged beachside bars to stop serving to-go cups.¹²² City officials even considered turning a section of Highway A1A into a one-way street to limit traffic congestion, but their plan collapsed due to difficulties in making the change by the beginning of the spring break season.¹²³

As part of its effort to tone down spring break 1985, the City of Fort Lauderdale clashed with the TDC over its brief but effective spring break advertising campaign. Created in 1980 to oversee the county's marketing strategies and supported by a 2 percent hotel bed tax, the TDC - for the first time - spent over \$100,000 promoting spring break in Fort Lauderdale in 1983.¹²⁴ Fearing that additional publicity would add to an already swarming crowd, the City Commission

¹²² Ibid.; Elizabeth Wilson, "Group Wants Spring Break Cooled Off," *The Miami Herald*, July 12, 1984.

¹²³ Herald Staff, "One-Way A1A Spring Break Plan Put Off," *The Miami Herald*, November 28, 1984.

¹²⁴ Andrew Froman, "Cities Say End Of Tourism Panel Would Halt Tax Rivalry," *The Miami Herald*, December 18, 1985.

voted in 1984 to encourage the TDC to halt advertising spring break in Fort Lauderdale.¹²⁵

To the chagrin of city officials, the TDC, feeling it had an obligation to promote the county in any way possible, initially rebuffed this request. Commenting on the decision, June Switken, director of the TDC, stated bluntly, “Our function is to fill hotel rooms.” Another TDC member reasoned, “The money we make [in hotel-bed taxes] during [spring break] helps support our programs for the whole year.”¹²⁶ In what proved to be the first in a series of protracted disputes between the two entities over competing visions of spring break and the area’s future tourism economy, the TDC finally compromised with the city after serious and often hostile negotiations, agreeing to withhold spring break promotion but also provide “all the support material we can to the [travel agents and airlines] who promote spring break.”¹²⁷

Fort Lauderdale officials’ reactions to spring break 1984, at least at first, seemed to follow the alternating hot and cold relationship that had traditionally characterized the city’s affiliation with the event. In the past, particularly raucous or large crowds had spurred protests from residents and resulted in actions from city officials to moderate spring break, but as the following year was often comparatively less disorderly, calls to restrain the tradition usually waned. While this had occurred regularly since the release of *Where the Boys Are* in 1960, the chaos of spring break

¹²⁵ Joseph Schwerdt, “Lauderdale Hopes to Subdue Spring Break Ritual,” *The Palm Beach Post*, July 23, 1984.

¹²⁶ Patrick May, “Collegiate Invasion Welcomed,” *The Miami Herald*, July 27, 1984.

¹²⁷ Mike Sante, “Where the Joys Are/First Group of Students Arrives, Hits Beaches,” *The Miami Herald*, February 24, 1985.

1985 destroyed this pattern by ushering in a new era of collegiate revelry far worse than the city had previously witnessed.

CHAPTER 5: “I’M NO PRUDE, BUT THAT STUFF IS PRETTY VILE”

Despite the city’s efforts to reduce the annual revelry, an unprecedented 350,000 spring breakers packed along “the strip” in 1985, causing more mayhem and destruction than Fort Lauderdale had ever seen. Although that year’s spring break infused a record \$120 million into the economy over a mere six-week period, the decadent behavior of its participants and continued attendance growth intensified existing and created new concerns for the populace and city officials, bringing their already fragile relationship with the tradition to a breaking point. Troubled by spring break’s adverse impact on their city and quality of life, Fort Lauderdale and its citizens were at a crossroads by the mid-1980s. The city could continue embracing spring break and hope to find a way to overcome its difficulties or it could shun collegians and deal with the negative financial consequences. Whereas students’ commercial contributions had traditionally overwhelmed calls for terminating the event, a growing list of concerns arising from the spring breaks of the early 1980s - especially 1985 - fostered widespread sentiment among residents and officials alike that the cost of hosting the yearly party may have finally outweighed its benefits.

The sudden influx of students during the 1980s, for example, fostered serious traffic issues, becoming a perpetual source of inconveniences and headaches for citizens. In 1972, a Florida Department of Transportation traffic study warned that Fort Lauderdale faced potentially serious congestion problems along Highway A1A

unless the city took immediate action and installed one-way pairing.¹²⁸ Similar to various other studies completed in the 1970s regarding the beach area, this report resulted in little action. When attendance rose from 100,000 in 1977 to 350,000 in 1985, the 1972 study proved prophetic. For residents needing to use A1A to commute to and from work, the constant crossing of pedestrians and even more cruising aimlessly along the road resulted in endless traffic congestion that made these short trips exhausting journeys. During spring break 1985, traffic crept along A1A at an average speed of 1.3 miles per hour, transforming the 2.4-mile trip from East Las Olas Boulevard to Atlantic Boulevard into a 2-hour odyssey.¹²⁹ In a subsequent 1986 research poll, eighty percent of central beach residents said spring break unfavorably affected their quality of life while two-thirds living in the area responded that the tradition had forced them to change their routines or arrive late for scheduled activities.¹³⁰

Fort Lauderdale citizens were also disgusted with the vulgar and raucous behavior of spring breakers. Any warmth citizens had previously felt toward the return of collegians in the late 1970s quickly evaporated as the mischievousness of the mid-1980s made clear that these were not the same youths who had flocked to the beaches in *Where the Boys Are*. Not surprisingly, such impropriety owed to the culture of heavy drinking that had historically plagued spring break. By the 1980s, bars that eagerly catered to collegians' thirst for inexpensive alcohol had overtaken the city's beachfront. As the most popular establishments used as many as one

¹²⁸ Scott A. Zamost, "Redevelopment Plans Clash with Spring Break," *Sun-Sentinel*, March 2, 1986.

¹²⁹ Marie Betancourt, "One-Way Streets Urged for Beach," *The Miami Herald*, October 19, 1985.

¹³⁰ Scott A. Zamost, "Residents, Business People Split on Spring Break," *Sun-Sentinel*, March 2, 1986.

hundred beer kegs in a day, collegiate disturbances requiring police intervention turned from isolated incidents into nightly occurrences, resulting in record numbers of arrests each year.¹³¹

In addition to drunken and disorderly behavior, the students' relieving themselves in public fostered concerns of unsightliness. With the sudden increase in spring break attendance, restroom facilities were overtaxed and students often chose to handle their business outside rather than wait in lengthy queues.¹³² Combined with heavy drinking, this situation posed a serious problem. As Barbara Hagdorn, owner of Sea Isle Apartments, astutely concluded after spring break 1985, "The more you drink, the more you gotta go." She went on to reflect residents' concerns, "Kid's don't use toilets anymore. We're tired of public urination, defecation, and fornication."¹³³

While residents were upset with the way collegians conducted themselves in public, the activities that went on behind the closed doors of the city's beachfront bars also raised indignation. After conducting a sting operation at the Button in March 1985, city officials revealed to an outraged public the sexualized rituals in which collegians participated. Undercover police officers claimed to have witnessed simulated oral sex during the "like a virgin" contest, a young man fondle himself as part of the "wet willy" contest, and students tear the tops off and grab the breasts of female contestants in its "wet t-shirt" contest. On previous visits, police also alleged

¹³¹ Gillis, *Fort Lauderdale: The Venice of America*, 140.; Patrick May, "Nine Arrested in Scuffle on Lauderdale Strip," March 26, 1984.

¹³²

¹³³ Linda Robertson, "Spring Antics Descend to Record Low, Hoteliers Say," *The Miami Herald*, April 13, 1985.

that collegians drank beer enemas, beer-vomit cocktails, and even urine as part of the “gross acts” contest. This, however, was not the first time Fort Lauderdale had reprimanded the bar for such lascivious entertainment. In 1984, the city forced the Button to end its now legendary “banana eating” contest in which a female simulated oral sex on a banana placed between a male’s legs.¹³⁴ After the 1985 sting operation, the city charged and sentenced Button Disc Jockey John Torregrossa to a year in jail for “promoting a lewd, lascivious, indecent live show before an audience.”¹³⁵ In the wake of these revelations, Fort Lauderdale Mayor Robert Dressler echoed exasperations, “I’m no prude, but that stuff is pretty vile.”¹³⁶

Residents were also dismayed that the dangerous behavior of collegians had made death a seemingly permanent fixture of Fort Lauderdale’s spring break season. Impaired by their heavy consumption of alcohol, students often engaged in various life-threatening activities, including “balcony jumping” in which they attempted to reach adjoining rooms by climbing outside hotel balconies. From 1965 to 1986, fifteen collegians fell to their deaths while on spring break in various Florida cities, including six in 1986 alone.¹³⁷ Furthermore, the constant mix of students and vehicles along “the strip” made Highway A1A a deathtrap, leading to numerous accidents and fatalities every spring. One incident that caused significant public outcry was the death of local high school student Charla Laboda during spring break

¹³⁴ Jennifer F. Schenker, “Lauderdale Vice Buttonholes Emcee over Lewd Contests,” *The Miami Herald*, March 14, 1985.

¹³⁵ Patrick May, “Nightclub’s Lewd Shows Get DJ Jail,” *The Miami Herald*, September 4, 1985.

¹³⁶ By this time, “Crazy” Greg Newell had sold his stake in the Button, acting only as a “consultant” to the new owners. Jennifer F. Schenker, “Lauderdale Vice Buttonholes Emcee over Lewd Contests,” *The Miami Herald*, March 14, 1985.

¹³⁷ “Balcony Bill Flies through Senate,” *The Orlando Sentinel*, May 14 1986.

1985. After telling her mother that she was going to a barbecue at a park, Laboda instead went to party on “the strip,” on March 7, 1985. Asked by an older man if they wanted to cruise A1A, Laboda and her friends piled into his van, leaving the sliding door open. When the seventeen-year-old lost her balance, she fell out of the vehicle and struck her head on the pavement.¹³⁸ Two days later, Laboda was removed from life supports and pronounced dead.¹³⁹ Laboda’s death was the first of three fatalities stemming from traffic-related accidents during spring break 1985.¹⁴⁰

Laboda’s death confirmed many citizens’ fears that the spring break scene along “the strip” lured their children away to a dangerous place.¹⁴¹ For years, local teenagers had flocked to “the strip” during spring break to mix with college students, often cruising along A1A on the beds of pick-up trucks or boots of convertibles. As there was little else to do on “the strip” aside from drinking and causing mischief, parents hoped to keep their kids away from the district. Asked if he would allow his daughter to go to “the strip,” Broward Sheriff Sergeant Dennis Creamer evinced such sentiment, “She’s not going there- not as long as I’m breathing.” As demonstrated by Laboda’s secret venture, however, parents were often helpless in preventing their children’s excursions. In the wake of her daughter’s death, Sharon O’Brien reflected many citizens’ feelings regarding the district, “I hate this place. It’s so bad for kids.”¹⁴²

¹³⁸ Jennifer L. Schenker, “Teen Brain Dead after Accident on Strip,” *The Miami Herald*, March 8, 1985.

¹³⁹ Wendy Shaffer, “Brain-Dead Teen Removed from Support,” *The Miami Herald*, March 9, 1985.

¹⁴⁰ Linda Robertson, “Lauderdale Has New Wall for Spring Break Madness,” *The Miami Herald*, January 9, 1985.

¹⁴¹ Mike Sante, “Revelry Lures Local Kids Too,” *The Miami Herald*, March 18, 1985.

¹⁴² Herald Staff, “Spring Breakdown,” *The Miami Herald*, March 18, 1985.

Along with the decadence of “the strip,” residents also felt the time had come to retake control of Fort Lauderdale’s decaying beach. In the early 1980s, concerned citizens formed the Fort Lauderdale Informed Parents (FLIP), a group that sponsored a series of walks and demonstrations along “the strip” to bring attention to the danger of the area and reclaim the beach as a pleasant place for residents and tourists to visit.¹⁴³ “We’re trying to make our presence known on “the strip,” said Marilyn Obrig, FLIP’s vice president. “We want to say to the kids, ‘We’re coming down here, we’re going to keep coming down here. You’re not going to keep people like us away’.”¹⁴⁴ Yet, as had been the case in the past, the annual rowdiness of spring break continued to impede such efforts, only causing the beach to deteriorate further. Although spring break took place over a mere six weeks, the residual problems it left behind lingered throughout the rest of the year. Delinquency, for example, became so dire in the area that by 1985 Fort Lauderdale was widely known as the “runaway capital of America.”¹⁴⁵

Coupled with the presence of these undesirables and other transients, the annual swarm of college students and their disregard for the beach’s beauty furthered the perception among residents that the area had become an unruly wasteland. After spring break 1984, for instance, volunteers filled 6½ garbage trucks with the litter collegians left along the beach.¹⁴⁶ Police Chief Ron Cochran later indicated residents’ dismay, “the thing that saddened me the most as I walked up

¹⁴³ “Fort Lauderdale Beach: Analysis of the Past, Direction for the Future,” 1985, Leadership Broward, 4.

¹⁴⁴ Mary C. Hickey, “Stroller Fight for the Strip,” *The Miami Herald*, July 30, 1984.

¹⁴⁵ Marie Betancourt, “Runaways Home-Free with Railways Ticket,” *The Miami Herald*, June 9, 1985.

¹⁴⁶ Elizabeth Wilson, “Bar Brigade Hits the Beach,” *The Miami Herald*, May 1, 1984.

and down the beach was the absolute squalor. Your feet stuck to the pavement because of the urine, puke, and beer. Just heaps of garbage in a tropical setting.”¹⁴⁷

With spring break fostering the physical and moral degradation of their city, the local populace grew concerned that hosting the event was having a detrimental impact on the health of Fort Lauderdale’s long-term tourism prospects. During the early 1980s, many residents finally realized that notoriously thrifty collegians were not the ideal type of tourists.¹⁴⁸ While the average traveler stayed two weeks and spent sixty-eight dollars daily, collegians only expended about forty-six dollars per day over one week.¹⁴⁹ To account for limited budgets students crammed into hotel rooms, slept in their cars, and subsisted on meals from fast-food restaurants. In March 1983, for instance, Fort Lauderdale’s Burger King had the highest monthly volume in the United States.¹⁵⁰ This led some citizens to believe that the only businesses to profit from spring break were establishments that catered mainly to the college crowd.¹⁵¹ Thus, after the spring breaks of the early 1980s, residents felt the city should begin courting adult tourists who would provide a steadier source of revenue over the entire year rather than the crash six-week period of spring

¹⁴⁷ Scott A. Zamost, “Officials Try for the Best, Fear the Worst,” *Sun-Sentinel*, February 16, 1986.

¹⁴⁸ Brian Blanchard, “Youthful Invasion is Nearly History,” *The Miami Herald*, April 9, 1985.

¹⁴⁹ Michele Cohen, “Tourism Officials Look Beyond Spring Break” in *Broward in the ‘80s: A Progress Report*, ed. Gene Cryer (Fort Lauderdale: Sun-Sentinel, 1985), 47.

¹⁵⁰ Linda Robertson, “Police Chief Wants Ban on Beach Booze,” *The Miami Herald*, May 1, 1985.; Patricky May, “Spring Break Scene: The Faster, the Better,” *The Miami Herald*, March 20, 1984.; Paul Shannon, “Investigation of ‘Fines’ Is Increased,” *The Miami Herald*, March 28, 1986.

¹⁵¹ Herald Staff, “Spring Brakes,” *The Miami Herald*, April 5, 1985.

break.¹⁵² Said City Commissioner John Rodstrom in 1985, “I’d rather have 100,000 people who spend a lot of money than 300,000 people who spend a little money.”¹⁵³

Even Fort Lauderdale’s hoteliers, despite the importance of spring break revenue, also desired a different clientele. Spring 1985 had indeed been very good financially for the area’s hospitality industry, with the average occupancy rate for the county increasing from 86.9 percent in March 1984 to 88 percent in March 1985 and the average room price rising from \$69 to \$77.¹⁵⁴ In spite of these profits and although students had habitually trashed hotel rooms since the tradition’s inception, hoteliers felt the destruction during spring break 1985 had gone too far. “We have a consensus that spring break is out of hand,” said Broward Hotel and Motel Association President and Fort Lauderdale Motel owner George Trodella. “Every year we hear the same outrage and then the fervor evaporates by summertime. But this year, because the problems were worse than ever, we intend to really make some changes.”¹⁵⁵ After spring break 1985, hotel owners hoped city officials would scale down spring break to pave the way for the return of more mature and moderately behaved tourists. “Financially, we would do just as well if spring break was scaled down,” Sea Isle Apartments’ Hagdorn said. “I have adults and families I could rent to instead.”¹⁵⁶

¹⁵² Gillis, *Fort Lauderdale: The Venice of America*, 141.

¹⁵³ Michele Cohen, “Tourism Officials Look Beyond Spring Break” in *Broward in the ‘80s: A Progress Report*, ed. Gene Cryer (Fort Lauderdale: Sun-Sentinel, 1985), 47.

¹⁵⁴ Linda Robertson, “Spring Antics Descend to Record Low, Hoteliers Say,” *The Miami Herald*, April 13, 1985.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

As residents wanted to shift Fort Lauderdale's tourism demographic away from collegians, they feared that spring break had hindered the city's ability to attract more affluent tourists. Some citizens believed the outrageous behavior of students provided an atmosphere unsuitable for adults and families. George Gill, owner of two beachside Sheraton hotels, spoke for many of his colleagues, "You are not going to attract a different clientele if they can't walk on the street at night. The harassment of tourists is terrible."¹⁵⁷

Furthermore, businesses and residents were concerned that Fort Lauderdale had become synonymous with collegiate revelry and moral excess, a reputation that scared away adults and family vacationers. By the mid-1980s, Fort Lauderdale - perhaps better known by its sobriquet "Fort Liquordale" - often served as a punch line in American popular media for its rowdy and decadent image. In 1985, for example, Chevy Chase during an appearance on *Saturday Night Live* and Garry Trudeau's *Doonesbury* comic strip poked fun at the city for its party atmosphere.¹⁵⁸ Furthermore, an expose in the April 8, 1985, issue of *People Magazine* titled "Rites of Spring Break" painted Fort Lauderdale in a less-than-flattering light. Describing "the strip" as "a sleazy mile-and-a-half-long stretch of shops, bars, and hotels...dead center in the salty armpit of Fort Lauderdale," the article was a source of controversy among business owners who felt increasingly imprisoned by the spring break economy. In light of the article, local motel owner Don Larson reflected the sentiment

¹⁵⁷ Scott A. Zamost, "Redevelopment Plans Clash with Spring Break," *Sun-Sentinel*, March 2, 1986.

¹⁵⁸ Chris Cubbison, "Officials Must Tame Spring Break Free-For-All," *The Miami Herald*, April 21, 1985.; Steve Bosquet, "Museum Give Country Cousin Uptown Style," *The Miami Herald*, January 13, 1986.

held by his colleagues, “We invite the kids down here and then present them with an open city to carouse in. We’re going to have to fight to get rid of that image.”¹⁵⁹



Figure 9: With *Saturday Night Live* (above) and *Doonesbury* mocking Fort Lauderdale, the city had become a joke in American popular culture for its party image by the mid-1980s.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁹ Marie Betancourt, “Mayor: Strip Story Bad Break,” *The Miami Herald*, April 6, 1985.

¹⁶⁰ NBCUniversal, <https://nbcuphotobank.com>; Pierre Trudeau, “Doonesbury,” April 12, 1985, <http://www.gocomics.com/doonesbury/1985/04/12>.

Along with the legion of residents' complaints, city officials during the early 1980s had their own reservations about hosting spring break. With over 300,000 collegians pouring into Fort Lauderdale by the mid-1980s, their increased presence taxed police manpower to the detriment of the welfare of citizens. In early 1985, for example, residents of northwest Fort Lauderdale, long one of the city's poorest areas, complained to Mayor Robert Dressler that police were negligent of the prostitution, drug dealing, and trash in the streets that plagued their neighborhood. In a series of meetings with local leaders, Dressler blamed the demands of hosting the annual event for the city's inattention, "So much of the police department is tied up with spring break that there is not the normal number of officers."¹⁶¹

As spring break was clearly outgrowing the city, civic officials were also disgruntled with the financial burden of hosting the tradition. Although the city earned \$355,190 during spring break 1985, mostly due to parking fees and sales tax, this only covered half of the more than \$700,000 required for the cost of beach maintenance, trash pickup, and police overtime, among other expenses.¹⁶² Faced with swelling expenditures, the city once again feuded with the Broward County Tourist Development Council. While the TDC promoted spring break and profited from a two percent bed-tax, county bylaws prohibited the organization from contributing to the city except for tourism promotion.¹⁶³ With no end in sight to spring break expansion, Robert Dressler and other city officials were upset that the TDC

¹⁶¹ Dan Ray, "Residents: Neglect Plagues Northwest," *The Miami Herald*, April 10, 1985.

¹⁶² Dan Ray, "Record Spring Break Leaves City Reeling," *The Miami Herald*, April 14, 1985.

¹⁶³ Marie Betancourt, "Tourist Council Offers Spring Break Aid," *The Miami Herald*, September 6, 1985.

benefitted from spring break's growth but did not help pay for any of its costs.¹⁶⁴ "I'll accept the fact that it's good for the county," said Fort Lauderdale Police Chief Ron Cochran, "but the rest of the county is not doing anything to support our infrastructure. The city pays for the cost of policing it and cleaning it up."¹⁶⁵

Ultimately, the new era of excess ushered in by the 1980s- and especially 1985- severed the city's fragile relationship with the tradition and set it on a course to end its association with spring break. Similar to many buildings along the beachfront, Fort Lauderdale's population had aged quickly, making it far less likely to tolerate such raucousness. During the 1970s, the number of Broward County residents over sixty-five increased almost ten thousand every year.¹⁶⁶ By the end of the 1980s, retirees were by far the city's fastest growing demographic, with one out of four Broward County residents over the age of sixty-five and one in ten older than seventy-five.¹⁶⁷ With most of these migrants hailing from out of state and already retired, they had little commercial or personal interest in collegians or spring break. As this aging population wielded tremendous local political power, elected officials had to give considerable attention to their increasing protests and diminished patience regarding spring break rowdiness.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁴ After a series of heated negotiations following spring break 1985, the City of Fort Lauderdale and the TDC reached a tentative agreement that would allow the county to circumvent its law and assist Fort Lauderdale by buying advertising space on city property. This deal fell through, however, when city officials balked at the county's request to have the exclusive right of selling "official" spring break souvenirs. David Jackson, "League Vote Steers Clear of Tax Feud," *Sun-Sentinel*, January 10, 1986.

¹⁶⁵ Dan Ray, "Record Spring Break Leaves City Reeling," *The Miami Herald*, April 14, 1985.

¹⁶⁶ Michele Cohen, "Tourism Officials Look Beyond Spring Break" in *Broward in the '80s: A Progress Report*, ed. Gene Cryer (Fort Lauderdale: Sun-Sentinel, 1985), 4.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 8.

The unruliness of the 1980s convinced most other residents that hosting spring break had contributed to the city's general decline. In addition to the dilapidation of the beach and adjacent "strip," other areas of Fort Lauderdale including its downtown district had long suffered from neglect and were deteriorating.¹⁶⁹ Moreover, with citizens and businesses fleeing to the suburbs, Fort Lauderdale's population plateaued after the boom of the 1960s and actually declined during the 1980s for the first time in the twentieth century.¹⁷⁰ While citizens sought to revitalize their city, court affluent tourists, and once again attract new development, they perceived spring break and its increased drunkenness, debauchery, and death as major impediments.¹⁷¹ No longer believing that spring break provided a major boon to their city and its economy, residents felt little reason to continue tolerating collegiate delinquency. For the city of Fort Lauderdale, the cost of hosting spring break had finally outweighed its benefits.

¹⁶⁹ Gillis, *Fort Lauderdale: The Venice of America*, 127.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 137.

¹⁷¹ Maya Bell, "Where the Boys Were: Fort Lauderdale De-emphasizes Spring Break," *The Orlando Sentinel*, March 6, 1988.

CHAPTER 6: "IT'S NOT AS WILD AS LAST YEAR"

In the wake of 1985's turbulence, an unprecedented number of residents and business owners organized to demand a reduction of spring break rowdiness.¹⁷² Many citizens wrote Mayor Robert Dressler, imploring him to end, or at least curb, the annual anarchy. One angry resident described his consternation with spring break, "I would rather be back on the battlefield of World War II than go through these conditions- at least I could shoot back, but not here, where you have to swallow it."¹⁷³ In response to augmented indignation, Fort Lauderdale's Beach Advisory Board convened on April 18, 1985, to discuss the city's future as a spring break host. Hoping to take back their city from the grasp of collegians, more than 250 outraged citizens packed the commission chamber to vent their frustrations.¹⁷⁴ The Beach Advisory Board, spurred to action by this onslaught of complaints, eventually approved the creation of the Spring Break Task Force to address specifically spring break issues on a year-round basis rather than the few weeks before and after the students' arrival.¹⁷⁵ Faced with a clear popular mandate to diminish the chaotic nature of the tradition, officials enacted a number of measures to crack down on unruliness during spring break 1986, ultimately alienating collegians and fostering the rapid and unthinkable downfall of spring break in Fort Lauderdale by the end of the decade.

¹⁷² Dan Ray, "Record Spring Break Leaves City Reeling," *The Miami Herald*, April 14, 1985.

¹⁷³ Steve Bosquet, "Not Everyone is in Love with Spring Break," *The Miami Herald*, April 12, 1985.

¹⁷⁴ Paul Saltzman, "Lauderdale Wants Breaks from Crowds," *The Miami Herald*, April 19, 1985.

¹⁷⁵ Herald Staff, "Spring Break Task Force Planned," *The Miami Herald*, May 18, 1985.

To mitigate the traffic congestion and fatalities that had plagued Highway A1A during previous spring breaks, city officials appropriated nearly \$100,000 in late 1985 to construct a temporary barrier down the middle of the road that separated the line of bars, hotels, and stores from the beach. Officially deemed a “vehicle separator” but known colloquially as “the wall,” the divide was a 4½-foot high concrete structure topped with 18 inches of chain-link fence that ran 3,000 feet from Grenada Street to Las Olas Boulevard.¹⁷⁶ Installed in early February 1986 and razed after spring break had ended, “the wall” closed A1A’s two southbound lanes along “the strip” for pedestrian usage and restricted traffic to the lanes on the opposite side of the barrier near the beach.¹⁷⁷ Although “the wall” was a source of controversy among some residents for its cost and lack of aestheticism, the structure proved effective.¹⁷⁸ By allowing students to cross A1A only at designated points, “the wall” prevented pedestrians from mixing with traffic, offered little reason to cruise aimlessly along the road, and significantly eased congestion. One student during spring break 1986 observed, “You can drive down ‘the strip’ in thirty minutes instead of two hours.”¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁶ Linda Robertson, “Lauderdale Has New Wall for Spring Break Madness,” *The Miami Herald*, January 9, 1985.

¹⁷⁷ Mike Sante, “Spring Break Beach Barricade Approved,” *The Miami Herald*, July 17, 1985.

¹⁷⁸ To prevent potential graffiti, Dressler asked 1,200 local art students to decorate the wall. His only requests: “No nudes. No pictures of drunken students. No politicians.” Jefferey Moore, “Graffiti-Deterring Plan: Paint Spring Break Wall,” *Sun-Sentinel*, February 13, 1986.

¹⁷⁹ Linda Robertson, “Spring Break is Subdued, Less Lewd,” *The Miami Herald*, March 24, 1986.



Figure 10: “The wall” during spring break 1987.¹⁸⁰

Fort Lauderdale also aggressively enforced formerly neglected capacity limits and fire ordinances during spring break 1986. Whereas officials had previously allowed businesses to pack students into hotel rooms and bars, the city was determined to punish such future violations. In preparation for spring break, a six-man enforcement team visited the most notorious bars along “the strip” in January 1986, warning managers to keep their crowds within legal limits when the students arrived.¹⁸¹ Working six nights a week during the collegiate season, the enforcement team swiftly punished managers found in violation of capacity ordinances. In less than twenty-four hours, for instance, the team arrested three managers of the Elbo

¹⁸⁰ “The Candy Store, Fort Lauderdale, Spring Break 1987_0001.wmv,” YouTube video, 0:35, Posted by “Nevalake,” September 26, 20011, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NNKKvTbWDRM>.

¹⁸¹ Steven Girardi, “Bars Along Strip Warned to Heed Legal Crowd Limits,” *Sun-Sentinel*, January 9, 1986.

Room for allowing their crowds to exceed capacity during spring break 1986.¹⁸²

Local officials also cracked down on Fort Lauderdale's beachfront hotels. Finding the Lauderdale Surf Hotel in violation of more than 100 fire codes, city inspectors arrested the establishment's manager and temporarily closed the 253-room hotel until it remedied its transgressions.¹⁸³ Forced to find alternative lodging, the hotel's two thousand occupants, who averaged nearly eight per room, were quite chagrined with the city's harsh measures. "It sucks monkeys' eggs," lamented one collegian as he carried his luggage to his new spring break accommodations- a friend's car.¹⁸⁴

Perhaps most importantly, the city addressed the culture of heavy drinking that had historically plagued spring break in Fort Lauderdale and fostered continued collegiate rowdiness since the tradition's genesis. At the behest of the Spring Break Task Force and Police Chief Ron Cochran, the city passed an ordinance in late 1985 that effectively banned open containers of alcohol while walking in public or driving along "the strip."¹⁸⁵ Moreover, Florida complied with the National Minimum Drinking Age Act in 1985, heightening the statewide age for alcohol consumption from 19 to 21.¹⁸⁶ Like its capacity limits and fire codes, the city enforced these new laws aggressively, even enlisting the help of agents from the Florida Division of Alcoholic Beverages and Tobacco to control rowdy crowds.¹⁸⁷ Not surprisingly, these ordinances were controversial among many spring breakers who were reluctant to

¹⁸² Michael Connelly, "Bar Crowding Brings Arrests," *Sun-Sentinel*, March 7, 1986.

¹⁸³ Jonathan Susskind, "Violations Force 2,000 to Evacuate Beach Hotel," *Sun-Sentinel*, March 17, 1986.

¹⁸⁴ Andrew Froman, "Students Have a Night Out, Literally; Fire Safety Violations Roust 2,000 from Lauderdale Hotel," *The Miami Herald*, March 17, 1986.

¹⁸⁵ United Press International, "Year-Round Drinking Ban Hits Beaches, Fort Lauderdale Set To Shed Its Old Image," *The Orlando Sentinel*, December 2, 1985.

¹⁸⁶ Lynne A. Duke, "Reaction Mixed on Drinking Bill," *The Miami Herald*, June 1, 1985.

¹⁸⁷ Mike McKee, "Agents to Crack Whips during Spring Break," *The Orlando Sentinel*, July 11, 1985.

relinquish their public drinking privileges without a fight. Only midway through spring break 1986, Fort Lauderdale had nearly eclipsed the total number of arrests made during the previous year's spring break, largely due to the new drinking ordinances.¹⁸⁸ When spring break 1986 finally ended, police had made 2,506 arrests, up from merely 889 in 1985.¹⁸⁹

For collegians, residents, and business owners alike, the impact of the city's crackdown was immediately apparent during spring break 1986. Students who made the journey to spring break were disheartened to learn that Fort Lauderdale officials had transformed their beloved haven of decadence into a virtual police state. One student complained, "You can't drink on the beach. They put walls up. It's not as wild as last year." Angered by the seeming lack of freedom, another collegian reflected the growing consensus among Fort Lauderdale spring breakers, "I wouldn't come back." He went on to assert, "It's not an appealing place. The Bahamas is better."¹⁹⁰

As news of the city's lukewarm reception, strict rules, and police crackdowns spread across college campuses, many collegians cancelled their trips to Fort Lauderdale. Despite the TDC's earlier prediction that 1986's crowd would continue spring break's recent growth trend and surpass 400,000, only 300,000 collegians showed up in Fort Lauderdale in March and April, down 50,000 from the previous year.¹⁹¹ With this reduction, numerous beachside businesses suffered. Over a 10-

¹⁸⁸ Michael Connelly, "Spring Break Arrests Near Total for 1985," *Sun-Sentinel*, March 11, 1986.

¹⁸⁹ United Press International, "Blame Spread for Smaller Spring Break," *The Orlando Sentinel*, May 18, 1987.

¹⁹⁰ Associated Press, "Students Say Rules Ruining Spring Break," *The Orlando Sentinel*, March 16, 1986.

¹⁹¹ Kevin Allen, "A Tamer Break Comes to an End," *Sun-Sentinel*, April 6, 1986.; Linda Robertson, "Miami Beach is no Match for the Strip," March 16, 1986, *The Miami Herald*.

day period in March 1986, for example, hotel owner George Gill had 716 cancellations, almost tripling his average number during that period.¹⁹² Bob Gour, manager of the Holiday Inn-Oceanside, commented, "We're at eighty-five percent occupancy this week, but we were full every day in March last year." For most other beachside businesses relying on spring break, the drop in students and revenue was alarming. The Sunwear T-shirt Shop, which normally did more than half its annual business in the first three months of the year, reported a forty-five percent decrease in sales compared with the previous year's spring break season.¹⁹³ Furthermore, some beachfront bars like the Button saw their revenue drop as much as thirty-five percent during spring break 1986.¹⁹⁴

With markedly fewer spring breakers and aggressive policing further subduing collegiate rowdiness, most residents - particularly those living near the beach who had traditionally been the most outspoken against and effected by the tradition - were quite pleased with the city's efforts. Malcolm Friedman, president of the owners' association at the Venetian, a condominium development near the beach that had many times previously been the target of spring break vandalism, stated, "With the advent of the open-container law and the police doing a good job enforcing it, we had about eighty percent of our problems resolved. I think everyone relating to the city did an absolutely magnificent job."¹⁹⁵ Citizens also noticed that such efforts

¹⁹² Scott A. Zamost, "Breakers Skipping the Strip, Police Crackdown Scares off Students," *Sun-Sentinel*, March 30, 1986.

¹⁹³ Andrew Froman and Marlene Sokol, "Lauderdale to Pull Welcome Mat from College Kids," *The Miami Herald*, April 6, 1986.

¹⁹⁴ Linda Robertson, "Spring Break is Subdued, Less Lewd," *The Miami Herald*, March 24, 1986.

¹⁹⁵ Andrew Froman and Marlene Sokol, "Lauderdale to Pull Welcome Mat from College Kids," *The Miami Herald*, April 6, 1986.

were having a discernible impact on the beach. “In the mornings, about seven o'clock, there were people walking, jogging, bicycling, using that east side of the beach,” observed Ray Letts, president of the Fort Lauderdale Beach Environment Association. “There was a change out there on the beach this year. The whole ambiance of the beach changed.”¹⁹⁶

While spring break 1986 drew rave reviews from many residents, the city's controversial crackdown sparked a period of heated debate over the next few years regarding the future of the tradition. Buoyed by the success of the city's efforts in controlling that year's spring break, some citizens began calling for officials to adopt more radical measures that would completely terminate the annual revelry rather than simply making it more manageable. Alarmed by the prospect of losing spring break revenue, business owners, while applauding the city's efforts to regulate spring break, argued that departing from the tradition would be disastrous for Fort Lauderdale.

In a debate local civic group Leadership Broward held at the Lauderdale Surf Hotel in February 1986, two prominent figures from these opposing camps engaged in a heated discussion regarding the merits of continuing Fort Lauderdale's duties as spring break host. Representing many beachside businesses, Jack Penrod, owner of Penrod's and the Elbo Room as well as a member of the Spring Break Task Force, pleaded for patience with the efforts to tone down spring break, arguing that the tradition could become more manageable while still serving as a boon to the city's economy and vitality. In response, Elliot Barnett, prominent lawyer and

¹⁹⁶ Andrew Froman, “Parking Ban Pleases Lauderdale Residents,” *The Miami Herald*, April 13, 1986.

president of Fort Lauderdale's Museum of Art, contended that the only way for Fort Lauderdale to save its image and decaying beach was to break away completely from spring break. "We have to come to terms that spring break does not do us any good," he shot back. "I suppose that the Polish and Russian kings believed the Mongol horde could be controlled. They were absolutely wrong and found out when Moscow, Krakow, and Warsaw were burning down around them."¹⁹⁷

Despite increased demands to amplify their efforts in repressing the spring tradition, Fort Lauderdale officials instead adopted a more moderate approach, attempting to diminish gradually spring break crowds while embarking on a campaign designed to revitalize the city, supplant collegians with more desirable and affluent tourists, and soften the economic blow of such a transition. For example, as part of an effort to make Fort Lauderdale "the best city of its size by 1994," voters approved a \$44.7 million bond referendum - the largest in the city's history to that point - for various quality of life projects including a downtown riverwalk, city park improvements, and a children's science museum. The bond also appropriated nearly fourteen million dollars for an ambitious beach revitalization project intended to give "the strip" a much-needed facelift.¹⁹⁸

The heart of the city's oceanfront redevelopment plan, however, was the proposed construction of a beachside convention center. As business tourists boosted occupancy rates, were among the highest spending travelers, and allowed hotels to offer value-added services such as banquets, theme parties, and meeting

¹⁹⁷ Scott A. Zamost, "Lawyer Demands Halt to Spring Break; Bar Owner Disagrees," *Sun-Sentinel*, February 6, 1986.

¹⁹⁸ Randy Hoder, "Officials Give Progress Report on Bond Projects - Six Projects," *Sun-Sentinel*, May 24, 1988.

facilities, conventions had become a vital part of Florida's tourism and hospitality industry by the mid-1970s.¹⁹⁹ With a lack of recent development over the previous decade, Fort Lauderdale lagged behind other Florida cities in terms of attracting such clientele.²⁰⁰

In 1985, the City of Fort Lauderdale hired a private consulting firm, Sasaki Associates, Inc., to devise a revitalization plan for "the strip" and the adjacent central beach area.²⁰¹ The firm's first report released during spring break 1986 stated, "Major public intervention is needed in order to get the beach out of its current state of doldrums. If no public intervention occurs in the study area, the market forces that keep merchants dependent on spring break will continue."²⁰² To rid the beach of its negative reputation and spur increased private development in the area, the report identified the construction of a new convention center on the beach.²⁰³ With other cities in Broward County also hoping to build their own convention center, Fort Lauderdale was not the only community with such grand designs. As none of these cities could afford to undertake such a project alone, the fate of Fort Lauderdale's coveted convention center was ultimately in the hands of Broward County officials who would have to choose for which proposal to allocate the necessary county funds.²⁰⁴

¹⁹⁹ Rosalind Resnick, "Courting Conventions: Hotels Seek Meetings to Fill Vacant Rooms," *The Miami Herald*, December 31, 1984.

²⁰⁰ Gail DeGeorge, "Business Hotels Flowering in Broward," *The Miami Herald*, December 16, 1984.

²⁰¹ Andrew Froman, "Brainstorming Sessions Aim at Cleaning up Strip," *The Miami Herald*, December 13, 1985.

²⁰² Jeffrey Moore, "Razing 'Strip' for Convention Center under Study," *Sun-Sentinel*, March 18, 1986.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*; "Fort Lauderdale Beach: Analysis of the Past, Direction for the Future," 1985, Leadership Broward,

²⁰⁴ Rosalind Resnick, "Courting Conventions: Hotels Seek Meetings to Fill Vacant Rooms," *The Miami Herald*, December 31, 1984.

Bob Cox

While “Crazy” Greg Newell may have been the “father of spring break,” Cox would become known as the man who “killed” it. A staunch conservative in everything from his political beliefs to his crew-cut hairstyle, Cox was often blunt, controversial, and outspoken during his time as a civic official. In the early 1980s, he attracted widespread condemnation when, as a city commissioner, he suggested pouring kerosene into dumpsters on the city’s beaches to discourage vagrants from rifling through garbage.²⁰⁵ Cox carried this no-nonsense attitude in his approach toward spring break. When Robert Dressler stepped down as mayor for a failed senate bid in late 1986, Cox was appointed and took over Fort Lauderdale’s early efforts to moderate spring break. As mayor, Cox made no secret of his contempt for spring break and belief that Fort Lauderdale needed to rid itself of the tradition in order to accomplish its future goals. Asked in 1986 what type of tourists Fort Lauderdale should court, Cox stayed true to his provocative manner, responding that the city should pursue “family-oriented” tourism and not become a “mecca for gays” or “vomiting college students.”²⁰⁶

Pleased with a calmer and more subdued spring break in 1986, Cox amplified the city’s attack on the tradition, alienating more collegians along the way. On February 24, 1987, he appeared on ABC’s *Good Morning America* to tell an audience of five million viewers that Fort Lauderdale was attracting more collegians for spring break than the city could realistically handle.²⁰⁷ Appearing alongside

²⁰⁵ Kitty Oliver, “Mayor’s Candor Smacks of Bigotry,” *The Miami Herald*, September 24, 1988.

²⁰⁶ Darrell Eiland, “Lauderdale Begins Beach Revitalization,” *The Miami Herald*, April 8, 1989.

²⁰⁷ Ron Ishoy, “Mayor Cox on Spring Break: Simmer Down,” *The Miami Herald*, February 25, 1987.

Daytona Beach Mayor Larry Kelly, Cox expressed to anchor Joan Lunden his hopes that students would instead choose Daytona Beach. "We could use far less," Cox said. "I'm glad the mayor of Daytona Beach is here. I hope he can entice a few of them off to his fair city."²⁰⁸

While Cox avoided explicitly telling collegians to stay away from Fort Lauderdale, many students assumed his message meant they were unwelcome in his city for spring break. Coupled with the city's maintenance of its drinking ordinances and reinstallation of "the wall" during spring break 1987, Cox's message helped Fort Lauderdale quickly relinquish its traditional status among collegians as the indisputable spring break mecca.²⁰⁹ As Martin Axelrod, then-president of Northwestern University's Associate Student Government, stated in 1987, "Fort Lauderdale has been popular for a long time, but it's not the automatic spot to go to any more."²¹⁰ While 300,000 students reveled in Fort Lauderdale for spring break 1986, attendance dropped to 250,000 in 1987.²¹¹

²⁰⁸ Herald Staff, "Send Students to Fort Lauderdale, Mayor Cox Tells the Nation," *The Miami Herald*, March 1, 1987.

²⁰⁹ Lyda Longa, "City Proves there is Life after Spring Break- Ft. Lauderdale Basking in Banishment of Breakers," *Daytona Beach News-Journal*, February 27, 2002.

²¹⁰ Associated Press, "Fort Lauderdale: Now it's Where the Boys (and Girls) Aren't," *The Orlando Sentinel*, March 2, 1987.

²¹¹ Scott A. Zamost, "Breaking Away: Upperclassmen are Bypassing Fort Lauderdale for Their Spring Vacations," *Sun-Sentinel*, March 1, 1987.

CHAPTER 7: "IT'S LIKE A GHOST TOWN COMPARED TO WHAT IT USED TO BE"

By the end of spring break 1987, the city's efforts to curb the yearly mayhem were appearing successful. Fewer students were migrating to Fort Lauderdale, and those who still made the journey were markedly better behaved. With a much more manageable crowd, city leaders even decided that Fort Lauderdale no longer needed "the wall" along Highway A1A for spring break 1988.²¹² Despite Fort Lauderdale's seeming progress toward liberating itself, the tradition and its lingering legacy continued to haunt the community. The rapid decline in spring break attendance came as a surprise to city officials and business owners who were unprepared for the consequent sudden drop in revenue. Former mayor Robert Dressler addressed the dilemma in 1987, "We've got an unfortunate situation right now, but if people remember back two years ago, we had an intolerable situation. Changes had to be made. I think people would like to have seen it happen more gradually."²¹³

Although Fort Lauderdale had hoped to diminish spring break crowds while gradually supplanting them with upscale vacationers, the city discovered that the road back to respectability would be long and arduous. As Fort Lauderdale deemphasized its reliance on collegiate tourism, the city's repressive measures placed businesses in a trying transitional period. The decades of bad press

²¹² Herald Staff, "Strip Wall Won't Be Back," *The Miami Herald*, August 26, 1987.

²¹³ Robert L. Steinback, "Hoteliers Seek New Beach Image as Break Dwindles," *The Miami Herald*, March 26, 1987.

regarding the chaos of spring break and the degeneration of “the strip” remained vivid in the minds of more mature tourists, making it difficult for the city to revamp its image. A March 1987 editorial appearing in the *Sun-Sentinel* described the bleak situation well, “What gives [the city of Fort Lauderdale] problems is the fact that they can't switch from one style to the other overnight. They can't shut down spring break on a Saturday afternoon and expect a more mature clientele to fill hotel rooms and restaurants on Sunday morning.”²¹⁴ Dealing with the disappearance of once-reliable income from collegians and no substantial revenue to replace it, numerous beachside businesses faced financial collapse. With an important part of the economy in ruins, the spring break tradition would ultimately take one last, desperate gasp in Fort Lauderdale.

Along with a nationwide marketing campaign aimed at wooing adult tourists, Fort Lauderdale's first serious attempt to overcome its damaged reputation was a month-long concert series and subsequent television special starring Frankie Avalon and Connie Stevens, among other performers associated with the 1950s and 1960s.²¹⁵ Although Avalon and his movies were never associated with or set in Fort Lauderdale or Florida for that matter, his *Beach Blanket* films of the 1960s alongside costar Annette Funicello helped popularize the spring break tradition.²¹⁶ Attempting to capitalize on the nostalgia of adults who had participated in the ritual during their

²¹⁴ Herald Staff, “Fort Lauderdale on Right Track in its Approach to Spring Break,” *Sun-Sentinel*, March 14, 1987.

²¹⁵ Wendy Shaffer, “It's Back to Broward for Beach Blankets, Crooners,” *The Miami Herald*, January 2, 1987.

²¹⁶ Funicello was originally slated to cohost the event with Avalon, but had to back out due to scheduling conflicts with an upcoming movie. Ron Ishoy, “Oh, Annette, Of Course We Remember You,” *The Miami Herald*, March 2, 1987.

collegiate years, 1987's "Spring Break Reunion" was Fort Lauderdale's effort to show American audiences that the city was moving past its recent spring break problems and becoming more hospitable for family vacationers.²¹⁷ With the county expending \$300,000 on production and marketing costs and the TDC estimating the event would draw 125,000 visitors from all over the United States, many officials and business owners hoped that the "Spring Break Reunion" would help a reeling tourist economy and, more importantly, provide an important first step in finally overcoming the difficulties of life after spring break.²¹⁸ Banking on the success of the reunion, officials even began planning for a similar production for 1988.²¹⁹

Unfortunately, the "Spring Break Reunion" proved to be a disappointment for Broward County and Fort Lauderdale. Taking place over four consecutive weekends starting in mid-May 1987, the concerts failed to meet even the most modest expectations. Still hampered by recent negative publicity regarding spring break, the reunion series, rather than drawing hundreds of thousands of nostalgia-crazed adults from every corner of the country, was largely a local affair, attracting a mere fifty thousand attendees mostly from the surrounding area.²²⁰ Despite the lackluster turnout, city and county officials, anticipating a national audience between thirty and

²¹⁷ Scott A. Zamost, "Break Reunion Hopes to Be Where the Boys Are – Again," *Sun-Sentinel*, January 12, 1987.

²¹⁸ Wendy Shaffer, "It's Back to Broward for Beach Blankets, Crooners," *The Miami Herald*, January 2, 1987.; Scott Benarde, "Oldies Concerts Won't Boost Tourism - Musical Notes," *Sun-Sentinel*, April 17, 1987.

²¹⁹ Scott A. Zamost, "Break Reunion Show Heads for Television; 2nd Event Planned," *Sun-Sentinel*, June 16, 1987.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*



Figure 11: Fort Lauderdale officials and businesses had hoped that 1987's *Spring Break Reunion* television special would help repair the city's image throughout the country.²²¹

forty million viewers, were still confident that the ensuing television special would provide a long-term boost to the economy and begin to chip away at Fort Lauderdale's toxic image.²²² When the television special finally aired on NBC affiliates in August 1987, it too was a flop. Ratings showed that the *Spring Break Reunion* bombed in the nation's thirteen largest cities, placing last in six of those. Even in the local Miami/Fort Lauderdale market, the show placed second behind ABC's lineup of primetime sitcoms. After the special's airing, affiliates in some of the United States' biggest markets stated they would not broadcast a similar production

²²¹ "Drifters - Up On The Roof (Rare live clip)," YouTube video, 4:07, Posted by "bze2nlz4," June 29, 2010, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QbgaInm1PWY>.

²²² Due to the sorry state of "the strip," local officials, in their continuing effort to dissociate the city from spring break, elected not to show the area during the television special. Scott A. Zamost, "Fort Lauderdale Strip Too Embarrassing for TV," *Sun-Sentinel*, May 18, 1987.; Robert L. Steinback, "Bygone Performers to Put County in Spotlight," *The Miami Herald*, May 17, 1987.

if offered in 1988.²²³ With both the concert and television special falling well below expectations, Fort Lauderdale's first attempt to revamp its image had failed, forcing officials to cancel any subsequent plans of hosting the same event the following year.²²⁴

Even more disheartening to business leaders and city officials was the County Commission's decision in March 1987 to pass over Fort Lauderdale's beachfront for a proposed convention center and instead accept nearby Port Everglades' bid.²²⁵ As previously mentioned, city officials' plans to revitalize the beach hinged on the potential construction of a convention center in the district.²²⁶ Despite efforts to tame spring break revelry in preparation for the bid, the lingering effects of the tradition precluded Fort Lauderdale's chances to obtain the necessary funds from the county for a convention center and the economic development that would come with it. County officials, for instance, feared that a convention center, taking place alongside the annual spring break, would add to an already overloaded and congested Highway A1A. As County Commission Chairman Howard Forman remarked, "It's like putting an eight-pound cake into a six-pound can. It's just going to spill over."²²⁷ While most corporations scheduled their conventions and trade shows in the spring, the county was also apprehensive that national convention planners would be reluctant to use a convention center in an area overrun with collegians.

²²³ Scott A. Zamost, "'Spring Break Reunion' Wipes Out - Where the Money Went - Where it Placed," *Sun-Sentinel*, August 23, 1987.

²²⁴ Steve Bosquet, "TV Sequel to Reunion is Canceled," *The Miami Herald*, September 5, 1987.

²²⁵ Scott A. Zamost, "Break is Dead, Tourism Official Says," *Sun-Sentinel*, March 13, 1987.

²²⁶ Jeffrey Moore, "Convention Center Plan Done," *Sun-Sentinel*, October 22, 1986.

²²⁷ Scott A. Zamost, "Panel Criticizes Plan to Build Beach-Area Convention Center," *Sun-Sentinel*, February 9, 1987.

Finally, due to the decrepit state of “the strip,” the cost to rebuild and develop the beach area sizably outpaced that of Port Everglades.²²⁸

Fort Lauderdale’s failed bid for a beachside convention center destroyed any illusion that the city could quickly turn around its image. In the wake of the collapse of the city’s plan, Fort Lauderdale and the TDC began yet another public dispute. With the area’s tourism industry increasingly bleak, the TDC started questioning the wisdom of downplaying spring break, particularly the hasty fashion in which Fort Lauderdale officials enacted their campaign. The TDC felt the city had made a serious mistake in alienating collegians with the uncertain future of the convention center’s site. While Fort Lauderdale had no concrete plan to attract adult tourists, it could no longer simply turn to students for supplemental revenue. “Any diminishment of spring break until you had something positive to bring to that beach was a mistake,” said Nikki Grossman, chairwoman of the TDC. “Maybe the city sent too strong a message to college students.”²²⁹ Facing complaints from beach hoteliers about the sharp economic downturn, June Switken, director of the TDC, squarely indicted Fort Lauderdale officials, “They’ve killed [spring break]. It’s a dead issue.”²³⁰ Incensed by Switken’s comment, Mayor Cox remained committed to the idea that spring break did more harm than good for Fort Lauderdale, “She is completely wrong. If there is a business out there that is so fragile that the difference between a

²²⁸ Linda Robertson, “More Hotel Rooms Needed for Center Success, Study Says,” *The Miami Herald*, April 26, 1985.

²²⁹ Scott A. Zamost, “Break is Dead, Tourism Official Says,” *Sun-Sentinel*, March 13, 1987.

²³⁰ *Ibid.*

good spring break and a super spring break puts them out of business, then there is a real problem there.”²³¹

Dealing an estimated forty million dollar blow to the economy, 1987's drop in attendance fostered renewed debate within the local populace over the future direction of the city's tourism industry.²³² While some saw the situation as an opportunity to liberate Fort Lauderdale permanently from its unhealthy dependence, others felt officials had to do something, immediately, for the city's numerous reeling businesses. City Manager Connie Hoffman summed the complex situation of a city, once again, at a crossroads, “Now that this change has occurred, do we want spring break back in a big way, or do we want to diversify the tourist trade? We have to think carefully before jumping into something.”²³³ Although the issue divided the city, most officials and business owners could agree on at least one point: they had seen both extremes, an annual crowd out of control and an overall dearth of tourists, and they did not like either one.

With officials bickering with one another instead of cooperating to devise a new plan to solve the area's economic woes and the city's \$13.8 million beach revitalization program far from realization, many business owners - particularly those along the beach - began to panic. As some hotels reported as much as a ninety percent decline in business compared with spring break 1986, a group of about seventy merchants petitioned the city council for temporary tax relief to make up for

²³¹ Ibid.

²³² Scott A. Zamost, “Going Broke on Break: Missing Students Cost Broward \$40 Million,” *Sun-Sentinel*, April 21, 1987.

²³³ Scott A. Zamost, “Profits Dip with Outgoing Tide of Spring Breakers - Hotel Occupancy,” *Sun-Sentinel*, April 19, 1987.

lost income. “We have paid our taxes all our lives,” said Bob Motwani, owner of the Merrimac Beach Resort. “We need some kind of relief from the city. If the city has confidence that things will turn around, they should be willing to do that.”²³⁴ He went on to plead, “We are not asking for a handout. We have never asked for food stamps or Medicaid. All we’re asking of the city is to help us for three years.”²³⁵ The three years Motwani referred to was the TDC’s approximation of the time it would take to carry out its marketing program that would attract a different tourist clientele.²³⁶ In the meantime, Mayor Cox turned down their requests, stating that several businesses would simply have to “take a few lumps” as the city underwent its rebirth.²³⁷

Yet, many businesses, particularly mom-and-pop motels suffering from a marked drop in occupancy during the spring season, were on the verge of bankruptcy and did not have the time to wait for the city’s plan to come to fruition. “This season is a disaster as you know,” said Motwani. “The small motel and hotel owners make on the average fifty percent of their money during the spring break, and that carries them for the rest of the year. We did not have spring break the way we thought.”²³⁸ While beachfront bar owners remained the staunchest opponents of the city’s crackdown, some hoteliers who had previously been ardent supporters of taming spring break - including a few members of the Spring Break Task Force that

²³⁴ Robert L. Steinback, “Businesses Seek Break from City,” *The Miami Herald*, April 16, 1987.

²³⁵ Nancy E. Roman, “Owners Hope for Tax Help Fading Spring Break Prompts Relief Request,” *Sun-Sentinel*, April 16, 1987.

²³⁶ Scott A. Zamost, “Longer Season No Boost to Break,” *Sun-Sentinel*, April 11, 1987.

²³⁷ Linda Robertson, “More Hotel Rooms Needed for Center Success, Study Says,” *The Miami Herald*, April 26, 1985.

²³⁸ Associated Press, “Merchants Ask City for Tax Break Lean College Crowd Hurts Fort Lauderdale,” *The Orlando Sentinel*, April 17, 1987.

had led the charge – also began clamoring for a return of students. After an emotional two-hour meeting in mid-April 1987, a group of over sixty beachfront hoteliers and other small business owners formed the Beach Action Committee and, for its first point of action, agreed to ask city officials to encourage a resurgence of spring break.²³⁹

Responding to a petition signed by 265 hoteliers, the Fort Lauderdale City Commission surprisingly asked the TDC to resume promoting spring break, but to do so in a limited way, conducting a campaign that would portray the city in a “wholesome and positive light” and attract better-behaved students.²⁴⁰ After hearing of the City Commission’s decision, Mayor Cox was outraged, complaining, “I can’t believe they would want to go back to the chaos of 1985.” In a letter sent to the commission, he discussed his opposition “There is no way in which the city can allow any group, college students or whatever, for a period of about six weeks, to ruin our city’s image for the balance of the year.”²⁴¹ Despite Cox’s outcry, TDC Chairwoman Nikki Grossman gladly acquiesced to the City Commission’s request, reasoning, “Until there is either a substitute or spring break is back in business, we have to do something to fill in this gigantic gaping hole.”²⁴² For spring break 1988, the TDC spent \$35,000 marketing spring break to a more mature crowd of

²³⁹ Nancy E. Roman, “Owners Hope for Tax Help Fading Spring Break Prompts Relief Request,” *Sun-Sentinel*, April 16, 1987.

²⁴⁰ Nancy E. Roman, “Spring Break Wall, Drinking Ban May Be Ended,” *Sun-Sentinel*, April 22, 1987.

²⁴¹ Nancy E. Roman, “Mayor Rejects Plan To Rejuvenate Break,” *Sun-Sentinel*, May 1, 1987.

²⁴² Scott A. Zamost, “Profits Dip with Outgoing Tide of Spring Breakers - Hotel Occupancy,” *Sun-Sentinel*, April 19, 1987.

collegians, including 2 ads in *Business Week Careers* and another in *Newsweek on Campus*.²⁴³

Along with the TDC's spring break promotion, a coalition of twenty-three beachside hotels, bars, and other small businesses formed the Fort Lauderdale '88 Committee to coordinate a private effort aimed at convincing collegians to return to Fort Lauderdale.²⁴⁴ Spearheaded by "Crazy" Greg Newell, the group raised funds to participate in a MTV campus promotional tour, produce a spring break video, and send thousands of promotional fliers to eighty-five campuses.²⁴⁵ Furthermore, Fort Lauderdale businesses paid for thirty-two of the ninety-six page *Breakers Guide '88*, a glossy magazine covering spring break destinations in Florida.²⁴⁶ Promoting Fort Lauderdale as the "sun and sands capital" and boasting of "the strip's" various sordid contests, the committee's advertisements in *Breaker's Guide '88* apologized for the city's recent crackdown and promised students that, with the removal of the "bogus wall," they would be "free to frolic up and down the sidewalks of A1A at their own leisure."²⁴⁷

Despite these efforts, spring break attendance continued its swift descent. During spring break 1988, only 140,000 collegians journeyed to Fort Lauderdale, expending \$56 million- roughly half of what they had allocated three years earlier.²⁴⁸

²⁴³ Scott A. Zamost, "Agency to Present Limited Ad Campaign to Attract Students – Budget," *Sun-Sentinel*, September 15, 1987.

²⁴⁴ Neely Tucker, "Blitz Aims to Lure Back the Students: Beach Businesses Promote Lauderdale on their Own," *The Miami Herald*, January 27, 1988.

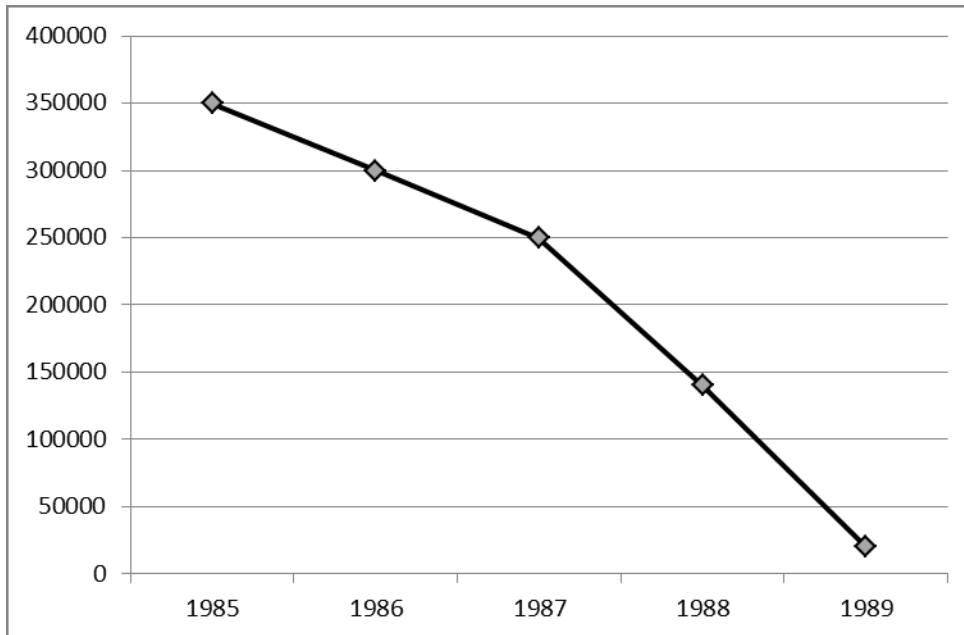
²⁴⁵ Herald Staff, "End Spring Break Schizophrenia," *Sun-Sentinel*, February 9, 1988.

²⁴⁶ Neely Tucker, "Blitz Aims to Lure Back the Students: Beach Businesses Promote Lauderdale on their Own," *The Miami Herald*, January 27, 1988.

²⁴⁷ Ibid., Scott A. Zamost, "Spring Break Quietly Backed," *Sun-Sentinel*, February 7, 1988.

²⁴⁸ Neely Tucker, "Spring Break's Losers Revamp for Tamer Times," *The Miami Herald*, April 10, 1988.

Figure 12: Spring break attendance decline in Fort Lauderdale, 1985-1989²⁴⁹



“It’s like a cemetery,” one student lamented as he packed his bags to leave Fort Lauderdale for Key West. “It’s like a ghost town compared to what it used to be. There is nobody here.”²⁵⁰ The obvious paucity of spring break 1988 finally convinced most business owners and local officials to abandon any hopes that Fort Lauderdale could revive its previous spring break glory. For example, although not part of Fort Lauderdale Committee ’88, Lauderdale Beach Hotel executives had put together what they called a “brilliant” \$92,000 marketing campaign advertising on 52 college campuses across the Northeast as well as airing commercials on MTV 5 times a day for a month.²⁵¹ When spring break 1988 ended, however, fewer than four hundred

²⁴⁹ Scott A. Zamost, “Breakers Skipping the Strip, Police Crackdown Scares off Students,” *Sun-Sentinel*, March 30, 1986.; Linda Robertson, “More Hotel Rooms Needed for Center Success, Study Says,” *The Miami Herald*, April 26, 1985.; Neely Tucker, “Spring Break’s Losers Revamp for Tamer Times,” *The Miami Herald*, April 10, 1988.; Herald Staff, “Where the Boys Aren’t... Should Lauderdale Try to Entice Students Again?,” *The Miami Herald*, December 23, 1990.

²⁵⁰ Associated Press, “From Spring Break to Spring Bust Fort Lauderdale: ‘Looks like a Ghost Town’ to Those Who Still Show Up,” *The Orlando Sentinel*, March 21, 1988.

²⁵¹ Neely Tucker, “Hotel Breaking it Off,” *The Miami Herald*, March 28, 1988.

students had stayed at the hotel- and thirty-six of them came on free trips. After 1988, Lauderdale Beach Hotel owner, Pennsylvania-based developer William Strine, decided to end such futile attempts at attracting collegians and instead start major renovations designed to draw upscale clientele.²⁵²

While a few beachfront business owners like Strine could afford to overhaul their establishments and wait for the arrival of the new crop of coveted tourists, most small hoteliers simply did not have the resources or time necessary for such ambitious projects.²⁵³ Moreover, with the uncertainty of the beach's future, banks refused nearly all loans for properties in the area, further impeding hoteliers' efforts to make improvements.²⁵⁴ The final realization that the city would never be able to resuscitate spring break came as a crushing blow to the many mom-and-pop motels along the beach. With bankruptcy imminent, a group of eighteen struggling hoteliers agreed to put their properties up for a joint auction in April 1988.²⁵⁵ To their dismay, bidders were reluctant to purchase property along "the strip" because of the area's ambiguous prospects. In the end, the auction drew just twenty-three bids, most of which were hundreds of thousands of dollars below what hotel owners were seeking and some not even covering the mortgages.²⁵⁶ With hotel values dropping below 1976 levels, mom-and-pop motels all along the beach became victims of spring

²⁵² Neely Tucker, "Spring Break's Losers Revamp for Tamer Times," *The Miami Herald*, April 10, 1988.

²⁵³ Neely Tucker, "Hotels on Strip Facing Crunch," *The Miami Herald*, February 14, 1988.

²⁵⁴ Neely Tucker, "Death Knell Sounds for Beach Hotels, Killing Spring Break Caused Motel-Hotel Fallout, Analysts Say," July 18, 1988.

²⁵⁵ Neely Tucker, "Hotel Selloffs Looming Along Strip," *The Miami Herald*, February 9, 1988.

²⁵⁶ Neely Tucker, "Strip Sale Bidders, Dollars Fall Short," *The Miami Herald*, April 8, 1988.

break for a second time, ultimately having to undersell their properties or face certain foreclosure.²⁵⁷

The Wrobleskis

Ewald and Agnes Wroblewski represented just one of the numerous casualties caused by Fort Lauderdale's campaign to end spring break. Working their entire lives as factory laborers in Massachusetts, the Wrobleskis used their life savings to purchase the eighteen-room Florida Resort Inn Motel in October 1987. For the Wrobleskis, this was the realization of a lifelong dream come true. Sadly, when the Wrobleskis purchased the motel, they were unaware that the city was undergoing such a difficult transitional period. Moreover, the previous owners had been dishonest during their sale, telling the Wrobleskis that the motel had a steady gross annual income of \$150,000 when, in fact, its intake had fallen with spring break's decline to \$105,000 in 1986 and \$80,000 in 1987.²⁵⁸

After a disastrous spring break in 1988, the Wrobleskis, unable to meet their mortgage payments and on the verge of bankruptcy, reluctantly joined the eighteen other hotels in the joint auction. "I'm considering selling while I can," Ewald reasoned. "Five years to little guys like me is a lifetime. I can't wait for things to turn around."²⁵⁹ Although the Wrobleskis had purchased their motel for \$650,000 only ten months earlier, the property went for just \$355,000. "I'm not going to give my

²⁵⁷ Neely Tucker, "Hotel Selloffs Looming Along Strip," *The Miami Herald*, February 9, 1988.

²⁵⁸ Larry Keller, "Jury Awards Buyers \$776,000 in Sour Lauderdale Motel Deal," *Sun-Sentinel*, July 7, 1989.

²⁵⁹ Neely Tucker, "Hotels on Strip Facing Crunch," *The Miami Herald*, February 14, 1988.

property away,” said a dejected Ewald, who ultimately refused the bid. “We’ll just hang in there and do the best we can.”²⁶⁰ Unfortunately, the Wrobleskis, like several other beachside hoteliers, could not abide much longer. By July 1988, the Wrobleskis, completely broke, returned to Massachusetts to live with Ewald’s mother and resume their factory positions.²⁶¹

As officials remained committed to transforming the city’s image, spring break in Fort Lauderdale rapidly fizzled out by the end of the 1980s. Although numerous businesses suffered because of the dramatic drop in spring break attendance, the city continued to enforce aggressively its fire codes and capacity limits. During spring break 1989, Fort Lauderdale charged the Candy Store, infamous beachfront bar and home of yet another storied “wet t-shirt” contest, with 52 code violations, amounting to more than \$76,000 in fines. Many business owners who catered heavily to the collegiate crowd feared that city officials were purposely targeting their establishments. Mike Brinkely, attorney for the Candy Store, reflected such suspicions, “The city is going out of its way. It looks like they’re doing their best to find anything [to shut these bars down].”²⁶² By the end of the decade, Fort Lauderdale’s quest to disassociate itself from the tradition was nearly complete. Just as word had spread across college campuses about the wonders of Fort Lauderdale in the 1930s, reports of the city’s oppression quickly circulated among American collegians in the late 1980s. Four years after an unprecedented 350,000 students

²⁶⁰ Neely Tucker, “Strip Sale Bidders, Dollars Fall Short,” *The Miami Herald*, April 8, 1988.

²⁶¹ Larry Keller, “Jury Awards Buyers \$776,000 in Sour Lauderdale Motel Deal,” *Sun-Sentinel*, July 7, 1989.

²⁶² Beth Duff Sanders, “Fort Lauderdale Hits Candy Store with 52 Violations,” *Sun-Sentinel*, April 7, 1989.

had made their annual pilgrimages to the city, only 20,000 students returned to Fort Lauderdale for spring break in 1989.²⁶³

²⁶³ Herald Staff, "Where the Boys Aren't... Should Lauderdale Try to Entice Students Again?," *The Miami Herald*, December 23, 1990.

CONCLUSION: “MORE PEOPLE ARE WILLING TO BE HERE WHEN THE KIDS AREN’T HERE”

What can explain Fort Lauderdale’s acrimonious split with the annual collegiate swarm that was so important to the local economy? Many economists would argue that Fort Lauderdale’s substantial spring break growth, while already increasingly unsustainable by the beginning of the decade, had finally reached the city’s “carrying capacity” in 1985. According to economists Alister Mathieson and Geoffrey Wall, an area’s “carrying capacity” is “the maximum number of people who can use a site without an unacceptable alteration in the physical environment and without an unacceptable decline in the quality of the experience gained by visitors.”²⁶⁴ Once a tourist destination crosses this point, the cost of hosting large numbers of visitors begins to wear down the physical environment of the destination, outweighing any potential economic benefits.²⁶⁵ As part of this “carrying capacity,” Mathieson and Wall argue that such expansion also pushes residents past their “threshold of tolerance” for accommodating tourists and, as a result, “numerous negative symptoms of discontent make their appearance, ranging from mild apathy to irritation to extreme xenophobia.”²⁶⁶

While all of these symptoms were evident after spring break 1985, noted geographer, economist, and current Professor Emeritus at the University of Western

²⁶⁴ Alister Mathieson and Geoffrey Wall, *Tourism: Economic, Physical, and Social Impacts* (New York: Longman Scientific and Technical, 1982), 21.

²⁶⁵ Christopher M. Law, *Urban Tourism: The Visitor Economy and the Growth of Large Cities* (London: Continuum Books, 2002), 38.

²⁶⁶ Alister Mathieson and Geoffrey Wall, *Tourism: Economic, Physical, and Social Impacts* (New York: Longman Scientific and Technical, 1982), 141.

Ontario R.W. Butler provides an excellent framework for understanding the historical process by which Fort Lauderdale's spring break eventually reached its "carrying capacity." In his 1980 article "The Concept of a Tourist Area Cycle of Evolution: Implications for Management of Resources," Butler puts forth a theory explaining that most tourist resorts experience a specific lifecycle initially marked by incremental phases of growth but ultimately ending in decline.²⁶⁷ In many ways, Butler's model of tourist area evolution is applicable to Fort Lauderdale's relationship with spring break.

Butler's lifecycle begins with what he calls the "exploration phase" when "visitors will come to an area in small numbers initially, restricted by lack of access, facilities, and local knowledge."²⁶⁸ In Fort Lauderdale, this took place during the 1940s and 1950s as the city began attracting relatively small crowds for spring break before the tradition was widely known. The next phase is one of "involvement" where "some local residents begin to provide facilities primarily or even exclusively for visitors."²⁶⁹ During the 1960s and 1970s especially, numerous beachfront bars and hotels opened along "the strip" in Fort Lauderdale that either catered entirely to collegians or the spring break tradition completely overtook them. Butler's subsequent phase of "development" "reflects a well-defined tourist market area, shaped in part by heavy advertising in tourist-generating areas."²⁷⁰ This stage

²⁶⁷ R.W. Butler, "The Concept of a Tourist Area Cycle of Evolution: Implications for Management of Resources," *The Canadian Geographer* 24 (1980): 5.

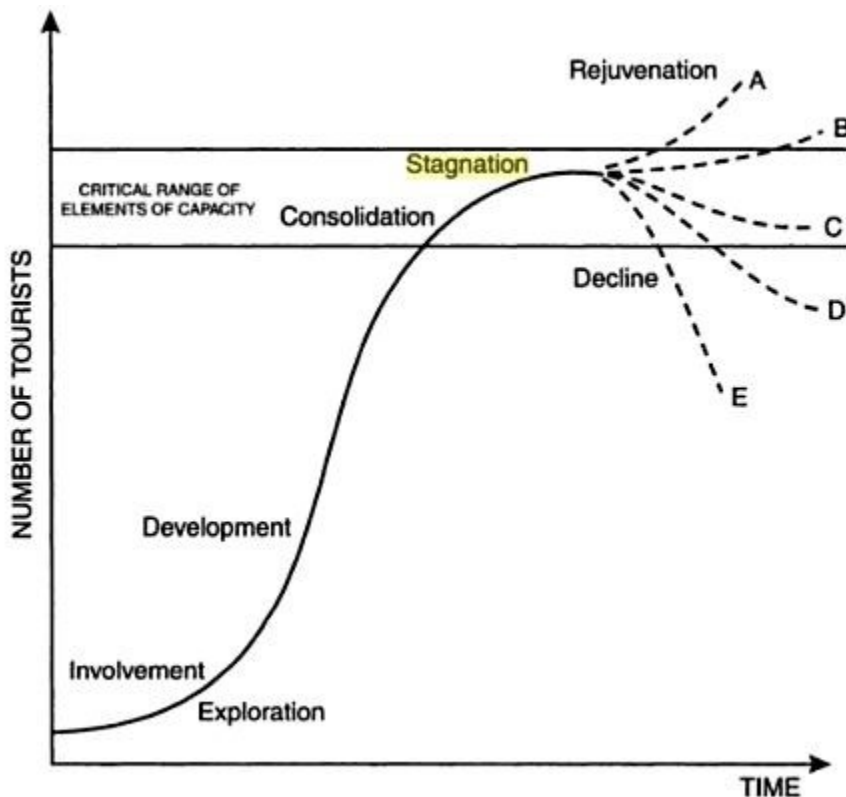
²⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.

²⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 7.

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 8.

developed in Fort Lauderdale when the city and county began embracing and promoting Fort Lauderdale's spring break in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

Figure 13: R.W. Butler's hypothetical evolution of a tourist area²⁷¹



With tourism numbers expanding, Butler argues that vacation destinations begin their downturns. Entering the ensuing “consolidation stage,” “the rate of increase in visitors will decline, although total numbers will still increase...”²⁷² After a period of recession, Fort Lauderdale's tourism economy began to improve in the early 1980s, but only did so marginally compared to its rate of growth during the late

²⁷¹ Ibid., 7.

²⁷² Ibid., 8.

1970s. While spring break attendance continued to increase, the growth of overall tourists to the city remained sluggish. Next, Butler contends that an area will enter the “stagnation phase” where “the peak numbers of visitors will have been reached. Capacity levels for many variables will have been reached or exceeded, with attendant environmental, social, and economic problems. The area will have a well-established image but it will no longer be in fashion. There will be a heavy reliance on repeat visitation...”²⁷³ As the spring break crowds of the mid-1980s were simply too large for the city to handle, this growth alienated more mature tourists while also fostering the economy’s dependence on the tradition.

After reaching its “carrying capacity,” Butler claims that a tourist area can follow one of two divergent paths. Faced with mounting problems, resorts either embark on a period of “decline” where “the area will not be able to compete with newer attractions” or “rejuvenation” may occur, although he explains, “it is almost certain that this stage will never be reached without a complete change in the attractions on which tourism is based.”²⁷⁴ Fort Lauderdale actually experienced both of these phases successively. Of course, Fort Lauderdale went through an era of serious decline when it could not compete with either Central Florida for adult tourists or, because of its crackdown, with Daytona Beach for collegians. Yet, Fort Lauderdale was also able to enjoy rejuvenation, but only after realizing the incompatibility of mixing college crowds with adult vacationers and completely redefining itself as a tourist attraction geared toward the latter.

²⁷³ Ibid., 8-9.

²⁷⁴ Ibid., 9.

In the years immediately following its eradication of spring break, the city of Fort Lauderdale faced a long, uphill battle in revamping its reputation. As tourism economist Christopher M. Law states, “Unfortunately, the media have a habit of recycling old images so that cities have a problem trying to escape from their stereotype.” Thus, despite only fifteen thousand collegians arriving for spring break in 1990, Fort Lauderdale’s negative reputé continued to plague officials’ efforts to attract upscale and family vacationers. For example, a 1990 survey of more than 1,100 travelers, travel agents, and American Automobile Association counselors throughout the United States discovered that the annual tradition still hampered outsiders’ perceptions of the area. Finding that Broward County lacked culture, grand resorts, attractions beyond the beach, and a concrete identity, the study concluded, “There seems to be a negative predisposition toward the Fort Lauderdale area.”²⁷⁵

Furthermore, when Prodigy, an early online service and one of the largest home computer networks at the time with 650,000 subscribers, unveiled a new tourism guide in 1990 listing the nation’s best vacation spots, it did not include Fort Lauderdale or Broward County. When Prodigy did discuss Fort Lauderdale, it only did so in a separate guide to Miami and linked the city with the same rowdy image officials were trying to elude, describing it as “the setting for *Where the Boys Are* and more recently as headquarters of the annual Spring Break crowd.”²⁷⁶ Prodigy’s snub disappointed tourism executives hoping to access the network’s lucrative

²⁷⁵ Toulia Vlahou, “Broward Image Lacking Study: Break’s Ghost Haunts Lauderdale,” *Sun-Sentinel*, March 3, 1990.

²⁷⁶ Bob LaMendola, “‘Prodigy’ Computer Buffs Shun Broward,” *Sun-Sentinel*, November 25, 1990.

demographic made up largely of urban dwellers with relatively high incomes. “We’re a lot more than [spring break],” said Francine Mason, spokeswoman for the Greater Fort Lauderdale Convention and Visitors Bureau. “Whoever put it together hasn’t been here in a long time. We’ll try to get them to update it.”²⁷⁷ Although these setbacks took place during the city’s early efforts to overcome spring break, people from other parts of the United States would continue to associate Fort Lauderdale with the tradition for years thereafter.²⁷⁸

Despite Fort Lauderdale’s initial struggles, time does indeed heal all wounds. Assisted by an active marketing campaign in which Broward County spent millions of dollars each year to lure more desirable vacationers and prove that the area had moved past spring break, local officials were gradually able to revamp the city’s image during the early 1990s by embarking on an ambitious campaign to revitalize the central beach district. Completed in 1994, Fort Lauderdale finally realized the fruits of its 1986 bond referendum; the \$13.8 million project overhauled the city’s “strip” and beachfront, installing landscaping, a twenty-eight-foot high skywalk crossing A1A to the beach, and a palm-lined, beachside promenade highlighted with fiber-optic lighting.²⁷⁹

While this renovation slowly attracted new development, most beachfront bars, stores, and mom-and-pop motels were unable to hold on until the city’s economic plan brought new business.²⁸⁰ One by one, city officials and private

²⁷⁷ Ibid.

²⁷⁸ Tracy Kolody, “Ad Campaign Realizes Lauderdale Can’t Make Clean Break from Past,” *Sun-Sentinel*, October 20, 1995.

²⁷⁹ Gillis, *Fort Lauderdale: The Venice of America*, 154.

²⁸⁰ Sue Reisinger, “City Embraces a Wealthier Spring Break,” *The Miami Herald*, March 28, 1999.

developers bought and demolished these historic establishments to make way for parking lots, luxury hotels, and high-rise condominium developments.²⁸¹ With the razing of the final vestiges of spring break, most of the criminals, transients, and other undesirables who had formerly inhabited “the strip” quickly fled, making the area much safer and more inviting to family and adults tourists as well as residents who had once avoided the beach. By 1994, with reports of crimes down fourteen percent compared with 1988, one beachfront hotel manager put it simply, “The beach is much safer than it ever was.”²⁸² Ultimately, the opening of the privately funded, \$22 million Beach Place in 1997 signaled the rebirth of Fort Lauderdale’s central beach district. Built where some of the most infamous “strip” bars once stood, Beach Place is a three-story open-air mall that houses a variety of upscale restaurants, retail stores, and nightclubs.²⁸³

As civic officials and private businesses overhauled “the strip,” Fort Lauderdale has been remarkably successful in overcoming its tarnished reputation. After decades of negative press, countless stories of Fort Lauderdale’s makeover have appeared in nationwide publications, largely helping disassociate the city from spring break in people’s minds and popular culture. After a period of stagnation, such a renewal has helped attract new development to Fort Lauderdale and the

²⁸¹ Gillis, *Fort Lauderdale: The Venice of America*, 154.

²⁸² Karen Rafinski, “New Beach Attraction: User-Friendly Cops,” *The Miami Herald*, May 14, 1995.

²⁸³ Tracy Kolody, “Beach Place Shoppers Test the Waters- Lauderdale's Unfinished Mall Offers Early Peek,” *Sun-Sentinel*, January 16, 1997.



Figure 14: Beach Place has helped transform the image of Fort Lauderdale's beach.²⁸⁴

surrounding area. From 25,000 in 1985, the number of hotel rooms in Broward County has increased to over 33,000 as of December 2012.²⁸⁵ Furthermore, despite its brief but difficult transitional period, Fort Lauderdale now enjoys a more diverse and lucrative tourism industry. As Nikki Grossman, president of the Greater Fort Lauderdale Convention and Visitors Bureau, stated in 2001, “More people are willing to be here when the kids aren’t here.” While 350,000 collegians contributed an estimated \$120 million to the local economy in 1985 (\$197 million in 2001 dollars),

²⁸⁴ The Gallery at Beach Place, “The Gallery at Beach Place,” <http://www.galleryatbeachplace.com/contact.htm>.

²⁸⁵ Elizabeth Willson, “Lauderdale Vendor Has a Beef With City Police: Police 'Wiener War',” *The Miami Herald*, April 3, 1984.; Doreen Hemlock and Arlene Satchell, “Tourism: A Look Back - Tourism Has Bounced Back - Record Number of Visitors in 2012 is an Encouraging Sign,” *Sun-Sentinel*, December 26, 2012.; Bureau of Labor Statistics, CPI Inflation Calculator, United States Department of Labor, <http://www.usinflationcalculator.com>.

during that same period in 2001, Fort Lauderdale attracted 650,000 vacationers - mostly families and business travelers - who expended more than \$600 million.²⁸⁶

Greater Fort Lauderdale's tourism industry continues to thrive today. In 2012, approximately 12 million tourists visited Broward County and spent \$9.8 billion, compared with about 4.2 million vacationers who allocated \$3.4 billion (\$8 billion adjusted for inflation) in 1986.²⁸⁷ As recently as March 2012, Orbitz.com ranked Fort Lauderdale fourth among the top ten most desired spring vacation destinations, behind only Orlando, Las Vegas, and New York City, in a review of trips booked on the travel site.²⁸⁸

In the time after Fort Lauderdale abdicated its spring break throne, Daytona Beach, Florida, subsequently assumed favored status among students. During the 1970s, with many local businesses suffering in lieu of Walt Disney World's opening, Daytona Beach officials had initiated an aggressive campaign to court collegians in the hope of supplementing lost tourist dollars. Attempting to break South Florida's traditional stronghold on the hearts and minds of America's youth, the city even hired helicopters during one spring break to drop ping-pong balls along the beaches of Fort Lauderdale with notes advertising Volusia County. Thus, when Fort Lauderdale

²⁸⁶ Lyda Longa, "City Proves there is Life after Spring Break- Ft. Lauderdale Basking in Banishment of Breakers," *Daytona Beach News-Journal*, February 27, 2002.; Bureau of Labor Statistics, CPI Inflation Calculator, United States Department of Labor, <http://www.usinflationcalculator.com>.

²⁸⁷ Scott A. Zamost, "Tourist Development Council Approves \$6.3 Million Budget," *Sun-Sentinel*, June 27, 1986.; Doreen Hemlock and Arlene Satchell, "Tourism: A Look Back - Tourism Has Bounced Back - Record Number of Visitors in 2012 is an Encouraging Sign," *Sun-Sentinel*, December 26, 2012.; Bureau of Labor Statistics, CPI Inflation Calculator, United States Department of Labor, <http://www.usinflationcalculator.com>.

²⁸⁸ Arlene Satchell, "Fort Lauderdale Remains Favorite for Spring Break," *Sun-Sentinel*, March 11, 2012.

voluntarily withdrew from spring break festivities in the mid-1980s, Daytona Beach eagerly stepped in to fill the void.²⁸⁹

No longer competing with Fort Lauderdale, Daytona Beach attracted an unprecedented 400,000 collegians for spring break 1989, leaving the city reeling and frustrating the local populace.²⁹⁰ Referring to his appearance two years earlier on *Good Morning America*, Daytona Beach Mayor Larry Kelly commented, “[Mayor Cox] turned to me and said, ‘You can have them.’ And I got them.”²⁹¹ While officials had initially welcomed this growth, Daytona Beach ironically went through the same identity crisis as Fort Lauderdale. Despite a tremendous boost in revenue, spring break 1989 provided a period of excess that created a desire among residents to curb the mayhem and court more mature tourists.²⁹² Echoing sentiment previously held by many Fort Lauderdale residents, one Daytona Beach citizen complained after spring break 1989, “The residents that live on the peninsula are fed up. The beer parties, the parking, the trash, we don't want that in our community anymore.” Confronted by mounting public pressure, Daytona Beach eventually sought to distance itself from the tradition soon after, even seeking advice from Fort Lauderdale officials concerning methods to control the annual anarchy.²⁹³

Thus, Fort Lauderdale has managed to overcome its immature past and disassociate itself from the tradition it helped create. Although students have largely

²⁸⁹ Mormino, *Land of Sunshine, State of Dreams*, 318-319.

²⁹⁰ Derek Catron, “1989 Spring Break- A Look Back at the Year that Left Daytona Beach Reeling,” *Daytona Beach News-Journal*, March 22, 2009.

²⁹¹ Beth Duff Sanders, “Daytona Asks Fort Lauderdale's Advice on Spring Break,” *The Orlando Sentinel*, December 22, 1989.

²⁹² Mormino, *Land of Sunshine, State of Dreams*, 318-319.

²⁹³ Beth Duff Sanders, “Daytona Asks Fort Lauderdale's Advice on Spring Break,” *The Orlando Sentinel*, December 22, 1989.

moved on to other destinations, Fort Lauderdale still attracts a sizeable, albeit comparatively paltry and more controllable, collegiate spring break crowd. For spring break 2012, city officials expected ten thousand collegians- a far cry from the unruly mobs of the mid-1980s.²⁹⁴ Regardless of the city's upscale transformation, spring break and Fort Lauderdale will always play an important role in each other's narrative. While Fort Lauderdale gave birth to the spring bacchanalia that has become a rite of passage for today's college students, the tradition, in many ways, put the city on the map, distinguishing it from the countless resorts littering Florida's coastline. With the notoriety and revenue that spring break brought their city, residents over the years developed a reluctant symbiotic relationship with collegians. As generation after generation of students annually invaded Fort Lauderdale, the populace continually had to pick up the pieces after they left. Whereas collegians' commercial contributions had traditionally muted calls for ending the event, the wild crowds of the 1980s severed citizens' already fragile relationship with spring break. As students at one time or another had to quit their partying and grow up, by the mid-1980s many residents felt their city should do the same. Hence, Fort Lauderdale and American college students have amicably parted ways and moved onto bigger and better things. Nevertheless, Fort Lauderdale will forever maintain an iconic place, both in the annals of spring break history and in the memories of millions of adults who spent a wild week of their youths reveling on the beach and along "the strip."

²⁹⁴ Arlene Satchell, "Fort Lauderdale Remains Favorite for Spring Break," *Sun-Sentinel*, March 11, 2012.

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