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PRELIMINARY STUDY
KISSIMMEE PRAIRIE
FLORIDA

June - 1959

Carl P. Schreiber
Regional Chief
Proposed Parks Studies Section
Department of the Interior
National Park Service
Region One

6-22-00

PRELIMINARY STUDY

KISSIMMEE PRAIRIE

FLORIDA

UNITED STATES
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
REGION ONE

Prepared:

(SIGNED)
Carl P. Schreiber, June 4, 1959
Regional Chief, Proposed Park
Studies Section

Cleared for Transmittal:

(SIGNED)
Elbert Cox, June 5, 1959
Regional Director

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SYNOPSIS

1. Kissimmee Prairie, which is located in central southern Florida just north of Lake Okeechobee, is a broad flat expanse of grassland broken by hammocks of cypress, oaks and cabbage palms with some scattered areas of palmetto and sawgrass.

2. Ponds and swamps are numerous and the Kissimmee River provides the main drainage for the area.

3. Numerous birds, including the rare Glossy Ibis, Limpkin, and Everglades Kite, are found in the area.

4. So called game birds and animals hunted during open season include deer, turkey, quail, squirrel, dove, and ducks.

5. In recent years most species of wildlife have increased in numbers due to the increased efficiency in law enforcement and the fencing and posting of almost all private property.

6. Recreational activities, centered mostly along the Kissimmee River, include boating, camping, hunting, and fishing.

7. Most of the area is in private ownership.

8. Beef cattle production is the most important industry.

NAME

Kissimmee Prairie.

LOCATION

Polk, Osceola, Highlands, and Okeechobee Counties, Florida.

AUTHORIZATION AND PURPOSE

Authorization for this investigation was given by Acting Director Scoyen by his approval on March 30, 1959, of the Recommended Work Program, National Park System Plan, Region One, submitted by memorandum dated January 29, 1959, in which a preliminary investigation of Kissimmee Prairie was recommended.

The purpose of the investigation was to gather facts about the scenic, scientific, historic, and recreational values of the Kissimmee Prairie upon which a recommendation concerning national significance could be based.

INVESTIGATION ACTIVITIES

This investigation was made May 8-11, 1959, by Carl P. Schreiber, Regional Chief, Proposed Park Studies Section, Region One.

Much information was gathered in the field during conversations with fishermen, boat rental operators, motel and service station proprietors. Tax assessors and County Clerks in Okeechobee, Sebring, Bartow, and Kissimmee furnished valuable information regarding land ownership and boundary lines. Officers of the Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission in Okeechobee gave freely of their time and

knowledge of the past and present conditions of the natural features of the prairie. Information about the annual Boat-A-Cade on the Kissimmee River was furnished by the Chamber of Commerce, Kissimmee, Florida.

GENERAL INFORMATION

The portion of the Kissimmee Prairie investigated and covered in this report extends from Lake Kissimmee down both banks of the Kissimmee River for an air line distance of about 35 miles. Except for scattered areas and hammocks of oak, cypress, and cabbage palms, the level expanse consists of prairie grasslands with some areas of sawgrass and palmetto. The Kissimmee River, which meanders for about 100 miles between Lake Kissimmee and Lake Okeechobee, is for the most part a relatively narrow, slow moving stream. In addition to being the main drainage channel for the prairie the river supports extensive areas of marsh and wetlands along both banks for much of its length. There are, however, a number of drier locations, an example being Orange Hammock, where the river bank, except during flood periods, is several feet above the water. Open ponds, old meanders and the marshes are covered with water hyacinths, water lilies, rushes and other aquatic plants.

Although the combination of river and prairie presents a scenic picture the flat character of the land would, for many, produce monotony were it not for the birdlife which is one of the outstanding features of the area. James Stevenson in his Wildlife Report in 1938 noted 13 species of hawks and owls along with other

birds including cranes, ibises, limpkins, and egrets.

With reference to other species of wildlife it is interesting to note that on the 107,000 acre Avon Park Wildlife Management Area, a part of which is included in this study, the game kill during the past six years has increased tremendously. Below is a tabulation of the birds and animals killed by hunters during 1952 and 1957 taken from "Florida's Wildlife Management Areas," Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission, 1958.

	Deer	Turkey	Quail	Squirrel	Dove	Duck
1952	2	31	1,657	52	0	0
1957	19	72	3,714	313	274	24

During conversations with officers of the Commission in Okeechobee it was indicated that the increased harvest of game birds and animals was possible because of the increase in their populations on the management area since it was opened to controlled week-end hunting in 1949. During the closed season vigorous and effective protection is provided along with other game management practices. On all of the rest of the study area most of the land is fenced and posted prohibiting hunting. On the nearby Okeechobee Wildlife Management Area there are 13,000 acres of land on which the owner permits the Commission to supervise week-end hunting and where in exchange game management practices and wildlife protection are carried out.

NATIONALLY SIGNIFICANT VALUES

As an area set aside to protect a number of important species of birds and their habitat, including such rare ones as the Glossy Ibis, the Limpkin, and the Everglades Kite, Kissimmee Prairie probably is of national importance. Consideration would need to be given to the present recreational activities of boating, fishing, and camping, which are likely to increase but which need not develop into conflicting uses.

Scenic Values

Although the flat appearance of the area suggests monotony this feeling is dispelled by scattered hammocks of oak, palm, and cypress. Broad expanses of grassy prairie and palmetto are bordered or broken up by ponds, swamps, or small streams wherein are found water hyacinths, rushes, and other aquatic plants. Birdlife is ever present. The Kissimmee River is in itself a scenic attraction as it meanders slowly through the prairie country occasionally bordered by oak or cypress hammocks and in other locations by broad expanses of swamps. In places the grassy prairie extends to waters edge.

Scientific Values

The great variety of birdlife found on the prairie, in the swamps, and along the river is its most important scientific value. The opportunity to study these birds in their natural habitat is probably not duplicated in any other locality. Several species

believed to be poorly represented or unrecorded in Everglades National Park, such as Audubon's Cacara, Florida Bob-white, Florida Turkey, Short-tailed Hawk, Burrowing Owl, and the Florida Crane are found on the Kissimmee Prairie. The Glossy Ibis, Limpkin, and Everglades Kite are considered to be rare and in danger of extirpation. The Limpkin and Everglades Kite are especially threatened in their already limited habitat by the continued drainage of fresh water swamps. As these swamps are drained the only food supply for these two species, the fresh water snail, disappears.

Historic Values

Although the Kissimmee Prairie featured somewhat in the Seminole wars there seems to be no really outstanding historical value in the area. Locally Fort Bassinger is said to have been a small fort used during the Indian uprisings and near Okcechobee, on Christmas Day, 1837, was fought one of the fiercest engagements of the Seminole Wars. On that date Colonel Zachary Taylor led a force of 1,000 men through the swamps to attack less than half that number of Indians under Billy Bowlegs. The Seminoles retreated after three hours of hand to hand combat leaving few dead and wounded while American casualties totaled 138.

Recreation Values

Three major forms of recreation in the Kissimmee Prairie area are hunting, fishing, and boating with somewhat less interest in camping.

Two wildlife management areas, Avon Park, 107,000 acres and Okeechobee, 13,000 acres, are open to public hunting on week-ends during the hunting season upon the purchase by the hunter of a \$5.00 Public Hunt Permit. The permit is good in both areas and in most of the 30 other areas managed by the Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission. All of the rest of the Kissimmee Prairie area is posted prohibiting hunting except by special permission of the owners. Vigorous enforcement of game laws has eliminated illegal hunting from automobiles and light planes, a practice said to be quite common 20 years ago.

The Kissimmee River is considered by many to offer some of the best fishing opportunities to be found in southern Florida. The large mouth Black Bass is the most sought after catch but Chain Pickerel, Bream, Crappie, and Goggle Eye are also caught. All of the fishermen contacted had entered the river below Lake Kissimmee at the "Oasis" where boats, motors and tackle may be rented and a boat launching ramp is provided for private boats. About one half of the twenty boats seen with fishermen were privately owned. One party of fishermen contacted at Orange Hammock arrived with a complete set of camping equipment planning to fish and camp over the week-end. From them it was learned that both hunters and fishermen use the hammock for over night trips. Old camp fires and litter scattered about gave testimony to the popularity of the area.

Boating is an ever increasing recreational activity on the Kissimmee River. In addition to the boats containing fishermen,

ten other boats of varying sizes were seen carrying people obviously just out for a boat ride. All of these boats appeared to be privately owned, lacking the identifying marks of the boat rental operator.

Of particular interest insofar as boating is concerned is the annual Boat-A-Cade organized by Boat-A-Cade, Inc., a non-profit organization of Kissimmee, Florida, dedicated to promoting boating on the Kissimmee River Valley waterways. In October, 1958, 600 boats carrying 1,800 people from 30 states participated in the four day cruise from Kissimmee to Okeechobee and return. This outing is claimed to be "America's Largest Mass Boat Cruise." One overnight stop at Kicco, an undeveloped campground several miles south of Lake Kissimmee, is made in each direction.

PRESENT DEVELOPMENT AND USE

Most of the land considered in this study is private property, the one exception being the Avon Park Bombing Range belonging to the U. S. Air Force. Private ownership is in the form of 11 large holdings and 14 smaller ones. Beef cattle production is the main activity with a lesser amount of acreage being devoted to garden crops and dairy farms. Housing developments are appearing along the highways which skirt the edges of the prairie.

POPULATION

According to estimates of the University of Florida, Bureau of Economic and Business Research, the population on July 1, 1958,

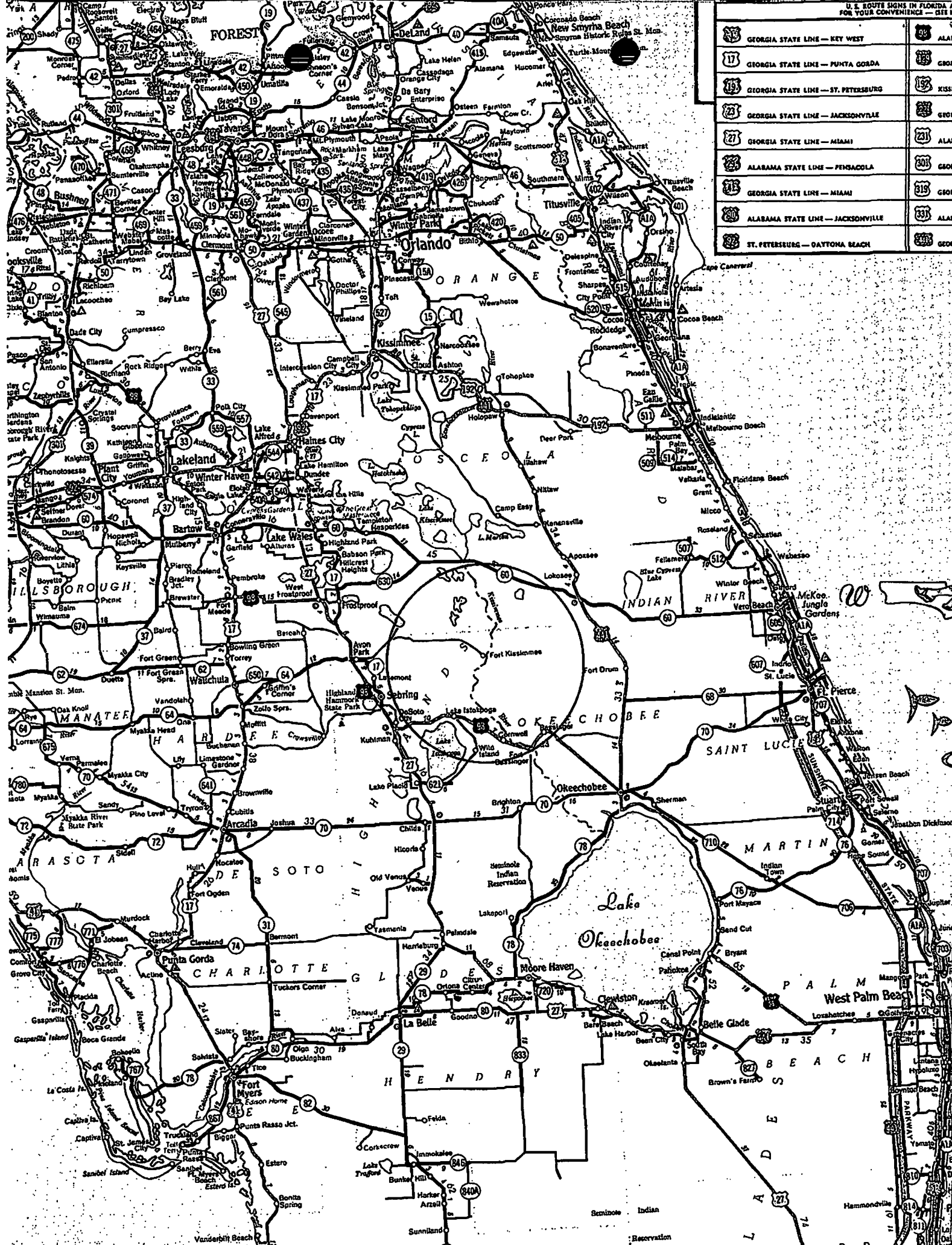
within 50 miles, 100 miles, and 200 miles of Kissimmee Prairie was as shown below:

50 miles	100 miles	200 miles
235,000	1,290,000	3,289,000

ACCESSIBILITY

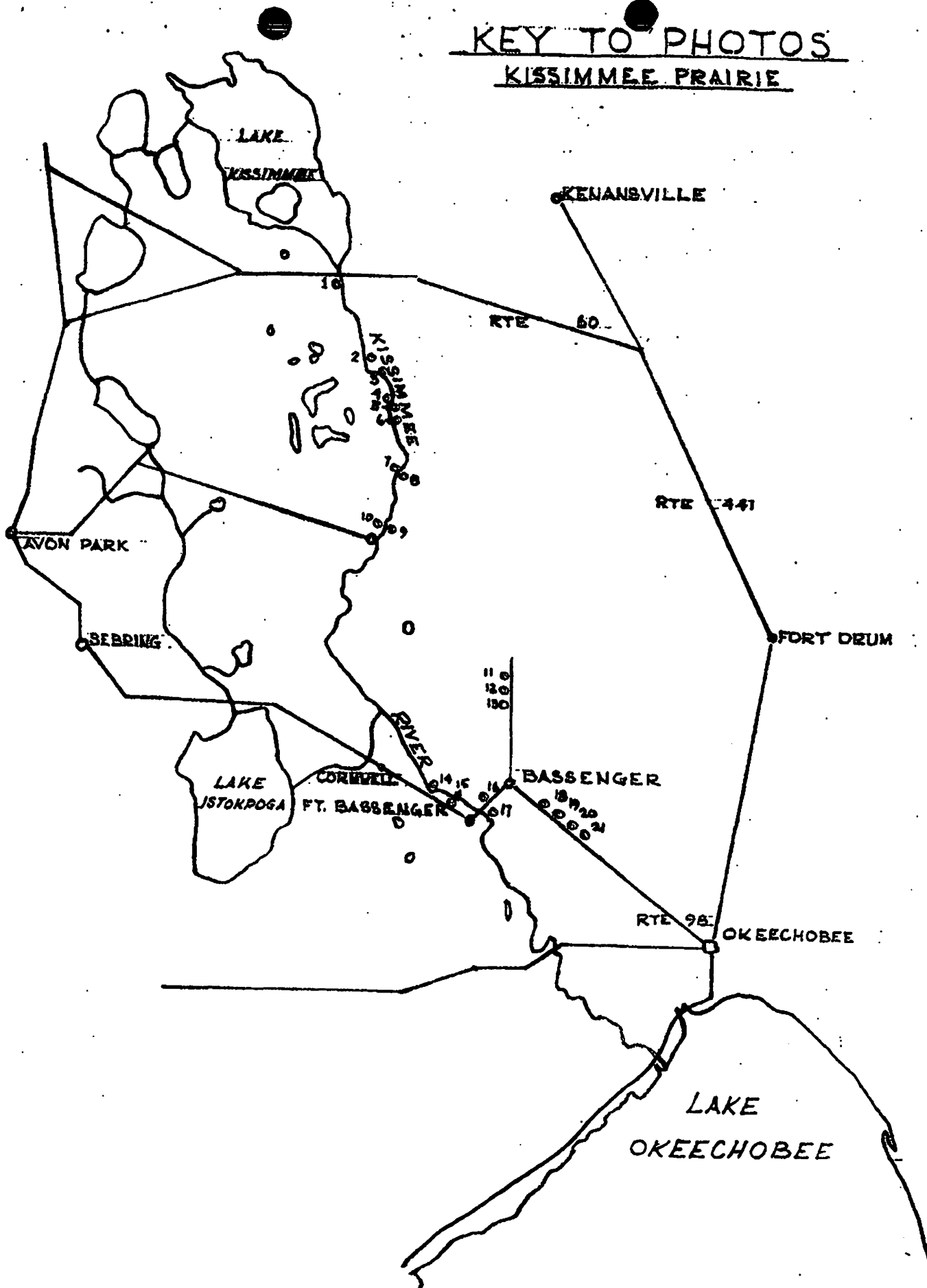
Kissimmee Prairie is accessible from all directions by air, rail, bus, and private automobile. In addition, from the north and south it is accessible by small boats on the Kissimmee River. Three state highways, routes 70, 78, and 60, and one U. S. highway, route 98, cross the prairie in an east-west direction. From the north and south U. S. Highway route 441 traverses the eastern edge of the prairie while U. S. Highway route 27 is a few miles to the west. Eastern Air Lines, Seaboard Air Line Railroad, Atlantic Coast Line Railroad and Greyhound Bus Lines provide public transportation to nearby towns and cities.

	GEORGIA STATE LINE - KEY WEST		ALABAMA STATE LINE - PENSACOLA
	GEORGIA STATE LINE - PUNTA GORDA		ALABAMA STATE LINE - JACKSONVILLE
	GEORGIA STATE LINE - ST. PETERSBURG		ST. PETERSBURG - GAITHER BEACH
	GEORGIA STATE LINE - JACKSONVILLE		ALABAMA STATE LINE - JACKSONVILLE
	GEORGIA STATE LINE - MIAMI		ALABAMA STATE LINE - JACKSONVILLE
	ALABAMA STATE LINE - PENSACOLA		ALABAMA STATE LINE - JACKSONVILLE
	GEORGIA STATE LINE - MIAMI		ALABAMA STATE LINE - JACKSONVILLE
	ALABAMA STATE LINE - JACKSONVILLE		ALABAMA STATE LINE - JACKSONVILLE
	ST. PETERSBURG - GAITHER BEACH		ALABAMA STATE LINE - JACKSONVILLE



KEY TO PHOTOS

KISSIMMEE PRAIRIE



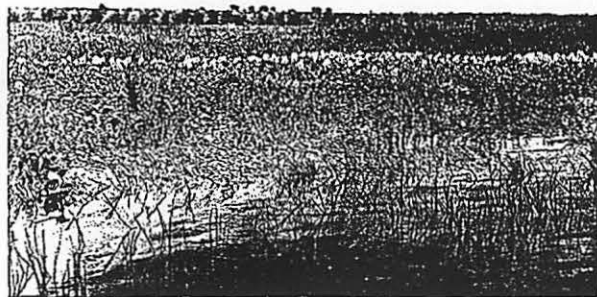


1. The Kissimmee River, which meanders for about 100 miles between Lake Kissimmee and Lake Okeechobee, is for the most part a narrow, slow moving stream. Here, however, it is wide with scattered rafts of water hyacinths along both shores.

While providing the main drainage channel for the Kissimmee Prairie, it also supports extensive areas of marsh lands, the natural habitat of many water fowl and wading birds.



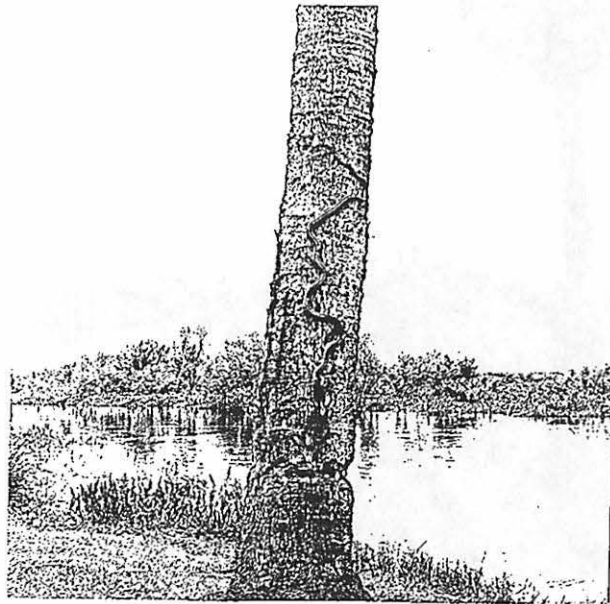
2. The ever changing scene along the river bank is dominated here by a dense growth of willows and elderberries.



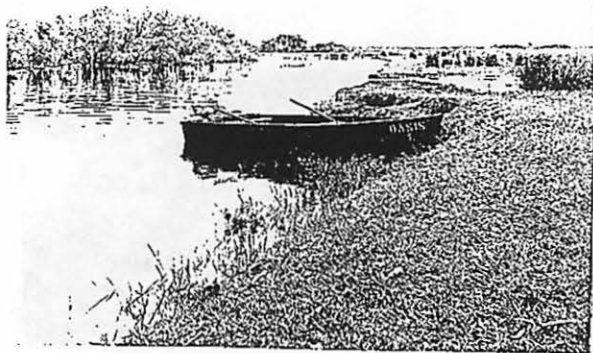
3. A broad expanse of marsh land separates the river from the grassy prairie in the background.



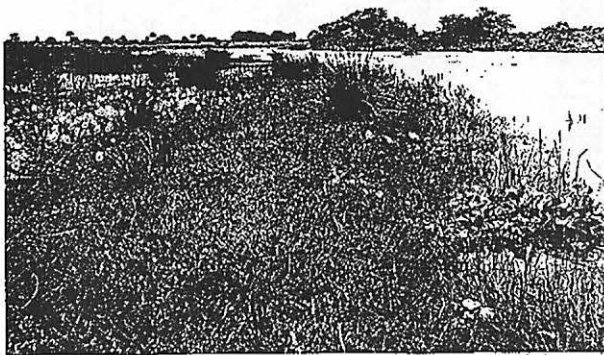
6. Cattle graze on the prairie in the background.



7. Although numerous snakes inhabit the prairie, this is the only one seen during the investigation.



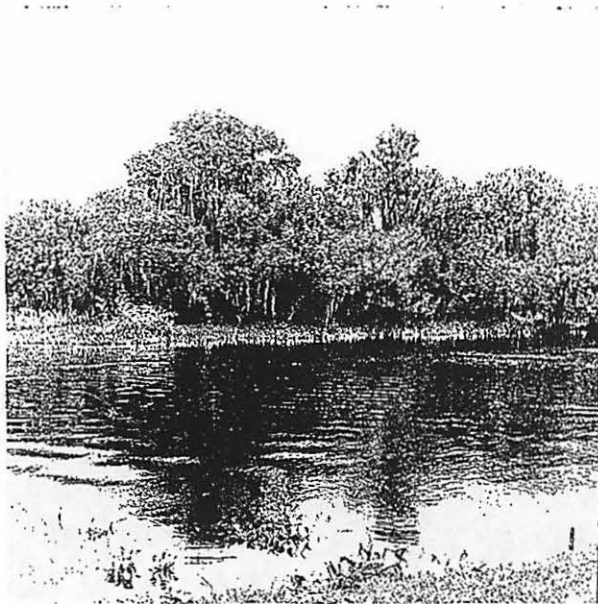
4 and 5. Upstream (above) and down stream (below) from one of the locations where the grassy prairie extends to the river bank.



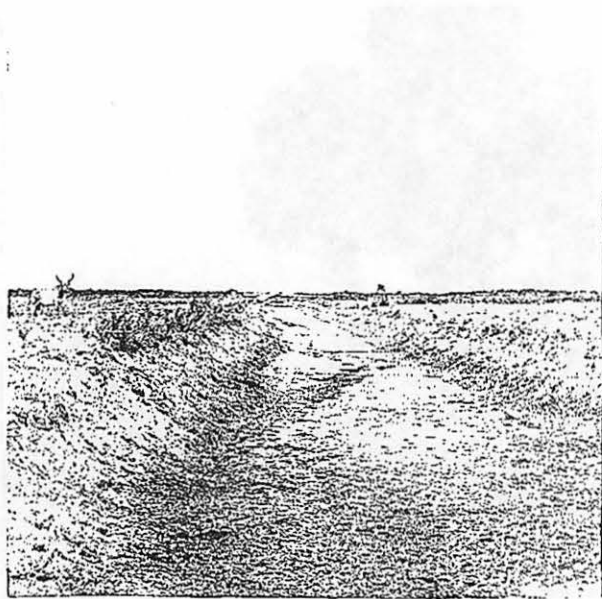
8. This narrow strip of grassy land along the river bank provides a comfortable place for "boaters" to stop for a picnic lunch.



9. Orange Hammock is a good camping spot much used by hunters and fishermen.



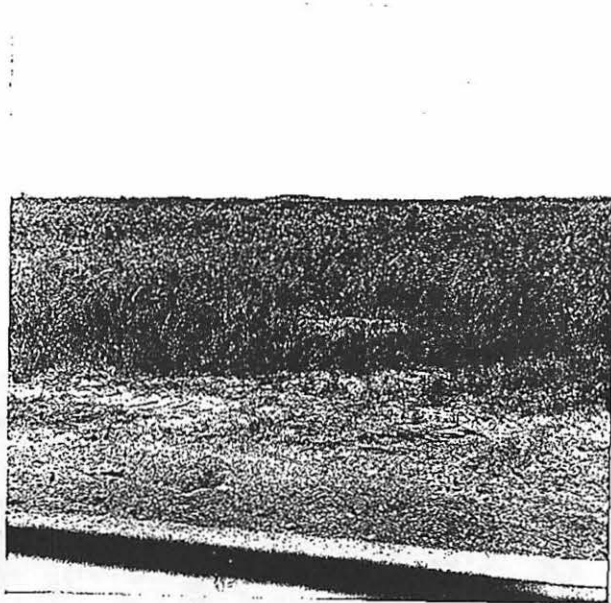
10. Moss draped live oaks line the shore across the river from Orange Hammock.



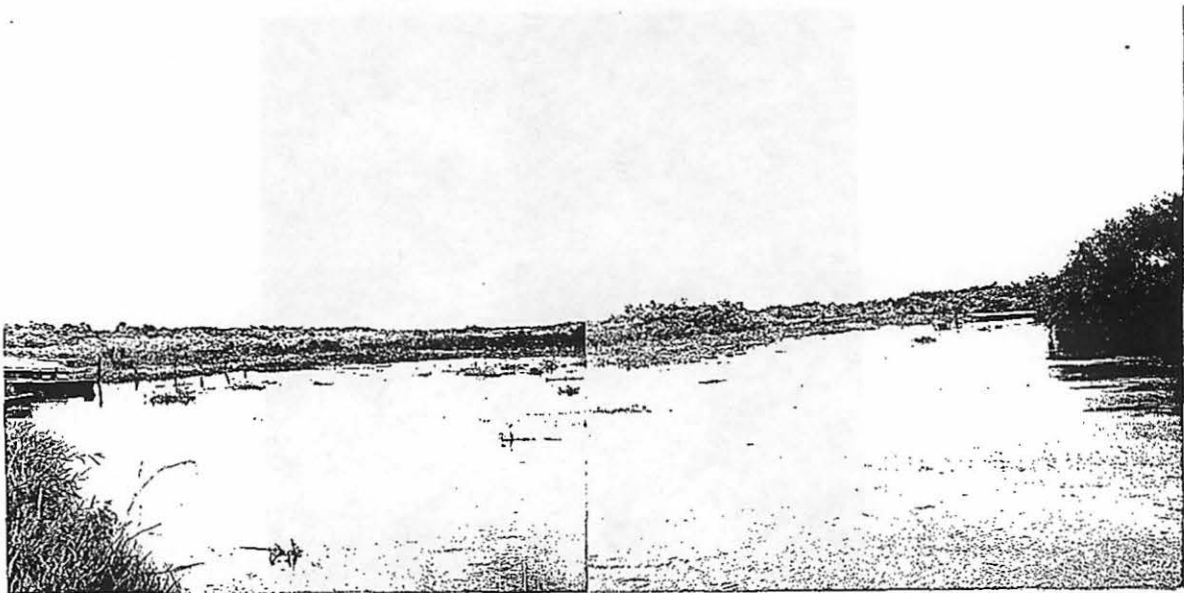
11. One of the many private drainage ditches which give Kissimmee Prairie a drier than natural character during the rainy season.



12. Hole of burrowing owl.



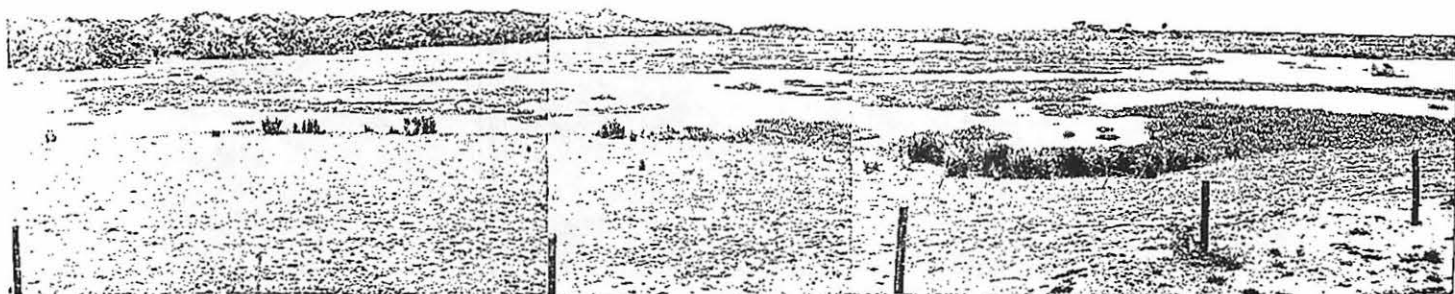
13. Burrowing owl.



14. Here, the river and marsh are about a mile wide and bordered in the extreme left background by an oak hammock.



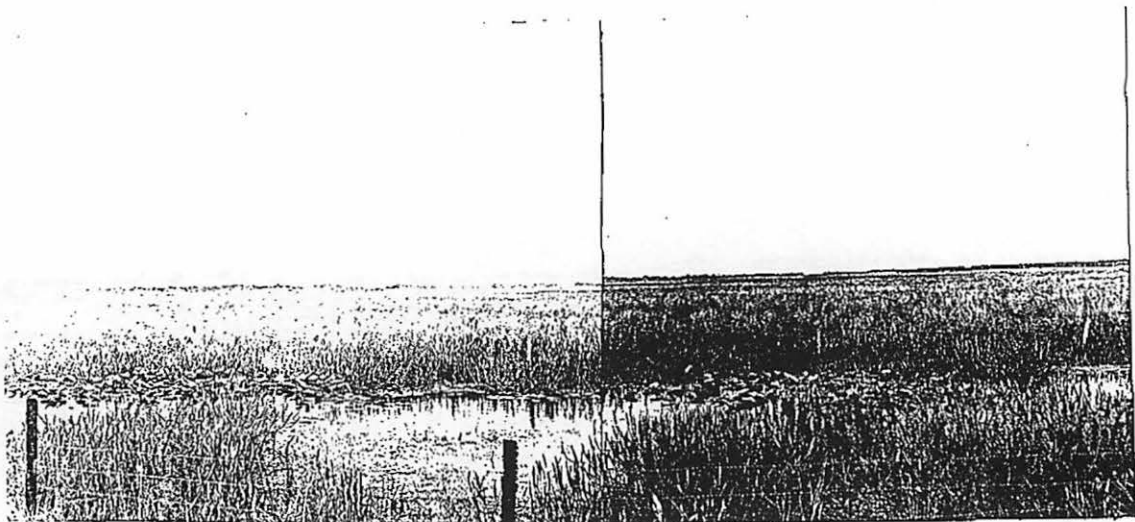
15. Typical of some portions of the Kissimmee Prairie is this broad expanse of palmetto.



16. Acres of water hyacinths and the meandering Kissimmee with oak hammocks on the left and open prairie on the right.



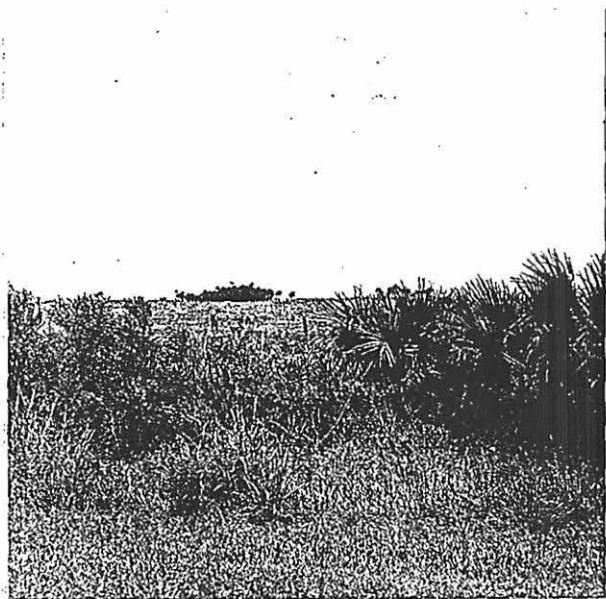
17. After meandering across this flat expanse the river narrows and flows on south in the left background.



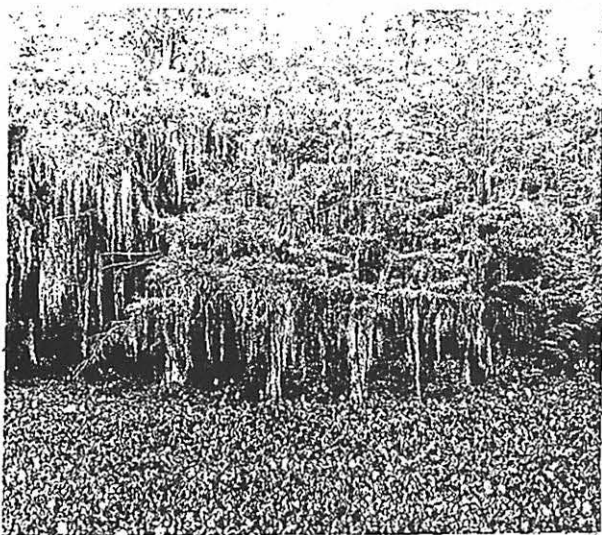
18. An example of the more grassy portions of the Kissimmee Prairie.



19. Palm hammock bordered by marsh.



20. A palm hammock surrounded by grassy prairie.



21. A small stream, choked with water hyacinths and bordered by cypress.

In reply refer to:
L58

Schreiber
4-9-59
4/9
Pugh

APR 9 - 1959

Memorandum

To: The Director
From: Acting Assistant Regional Director, Region One
Subject: Wildlife Report, Kissimmee Prairie, Florida

In preparing for the preliminary study of Kissimmee
Prairie approved by Mr. Scoyen's memorandum of March 30 we have
been gathering background information from available sources
including a report dated February 9, 1938 by Victor H. Cahalane
concerning his visit there in November 1937.

We would like also to review a wildlife report made by
James C. Stevenson in 1938 but are unable to locate a copy in our
files. If there is a copy of this report in your office which we
might borrow for a few days its loan would be much appreciated.
We will, of course, return the report as soon as it has been
reviewed.

(SIGNED)

Allyn P. Bursley
Acting Assistant Regional Director

CPSchreiber:AFP:ph

General
Daily

In reply refer to:
W2623-1NH

*4/27
Bursley*

April 27, 1959

Memorandum

To: The Director
From: Regional Chief of Recreation Resource Planning, Region One
Subject: Wildlife Report by J. O. Stevenson, Kissimmee Prairie,
Florida, May 17, 1938.

Attached is the copy of Mr. Stevenson's Wildlife Report,
Kissimmee Prairie, Florida, sent to us on loan, with Mr. Fredine's
memorandum of April 21. We appreciate the opportunity to borrow
this report and have made a machine copy for our use and files.

(SIGNED)

Allyn P. Bursley, Regional Chief
of Recreation Resource Planning

Attachment

CPSchreiber:ph

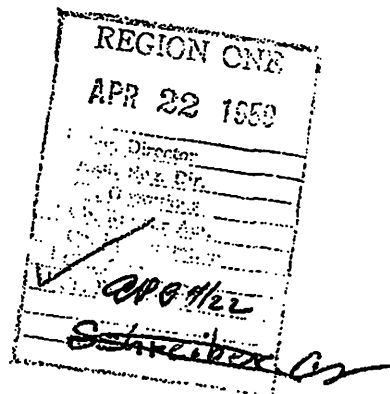
→ General
Daily



UNITED STATES
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
WASHINGTON 25, D. C.

IN REPLY REFER TO:
N2623-TNH

April 21, 1959



Memorandum

To: Regional Director, Region One

From: Acting Chief Naturalist

Subject: Wildlife Report by J. O. Stevenson, Kissimmee Prairie,
Florida, May 17, 1938

In compliance with the request by Acting Assistant
Regional Director Bursley on April 9, we are submitting the attached
copy of Mr. Stevenson's report on the Kissimmee Prairie, Florida.
This is our only copy of the report and we request that it be
returned to us when you are finished with it.

C. Gordon Fredine
Acting Chief Naturalist

Attachment

In reply refer to:
158

*Schreiber
6-4-59
Bureau 6/4
Lule*

June 5, 1959

For U. S. Government Use Only

Memorandum

To: The Director

From: Regional Director, Region One

Subject: Report of Preliminary Investigation, Kissimmee Prairie,
Florida, June 4, 1959.

Attached, in duplicate, is the report on Kissimmee Prairie, Florida, prepared by Carl P. Schreiber, Regional Chief, Proposed Park Studies Section, following his preliminary investigation of that area, May 8-11, 1959.

SUMMARY

The Kissimmee Prairie, except for scattered hammocks of oak, cypress, and cabbage palms, is a level expanse of grassland with some areas of sawgrass and palmetto. Small lakes and ponds abound and along the course of the Kissimmee River are found numerous areas of marshlands. It is the permanent home of many species of birds and animals and the seasonal home of a number of migratory birds. Several species of birds believed to be poorly represented or unrecorded in Everglades National Park are found on the Kissimmee Prairie.

Kissimmee Prairie appears to be suitable for inclusion in the National Park System as an area wherein natural conditions of habitat would be maintained for a number of animals, reptiles, and important species of birds. Of additional importance is the preservation of the present opportunities for the recreational activities of boating, fishing, and camping along the picturesque Kissimmee River.

CONCLUSIONS

This area was recommended for consideration as a National Biological Monument by Victor Cahalane following his two day inspection in November 1937. James Stevenson, in the Wildlife Report prepared following his inspection in May 1938, made the same recommendation. These recommendations were made because it appeared then that this area offered the best place wherein eleven important species of birds and their habitat could be protected. Several species such as the Glossy Ibis, Limpkin and Everglades Kite are considered by some authorities to be rare and in danger of extirpation. The Limpkin and Everglades Kite are especially threatened by the continued drainage of fresh water swamps which furnish their only food supply, fresh water snails.

Observations made during this preliminary investigation indicate that Kissimmee is just as valuable and important today as it appeared to be 20 years ago. Some of the natural features have improved as illustrated by the increase in the deer, turkey and quail populations. No improvement is noted in the critical scarcity of the

rare Everglades Kite which is still present but not in increased numbers. Drainage ditches have taken some of the seasonal "wet-land" character from the prairie but no permanent damage seems to have been done.

The main threat to the Kissimmee Prairie is the proposed canalization of the Kissimmee River for the purpose of flood control and land improvement. This project, authorized in 1954 and shown on a map published by the Corps of Engineers, U. S. Army, Jacksonville, Florida District, will stabilize the water level in the Kissimmee River by straightening the river and constructing six spillways between Lake Kissimmee and Lake Okechobee. (See attached map, Exhibit A.) During the rainy season flood waters will drain off more quickly and during dry periods stream flow will be retarded at the spillways. When this project is completed the natural beauty of the prairie and the winding river and much of the habitat of many birds and animals will have been destroyed. Boating, fishing, and camping of the type now enjoyed by many people will no longer be possible.

The attached map (Exhibit B) shows the recommended minimum boundary line. Enclosed within it are approximately 189,000 acres. Eleven large ownerships, including the U. S. Air Force and 14 smaller tracts are involved, (see Exhibit C). Acquisition should not be difficult but the probable cost of \$50 per acre for the 189,000 acres of privately owned land would run the total to over \$7,000,000.

Distribution of Land Ownership:

U. S. Air Force	40,000	acres
Consolidated Naval Stores	24,000	acres
Boney	2,500	acres
Cross	9,000	acres
Montodeoca Estate	4,000	acres
Dopler	8,000	acres
Maxcy	46,000	acres
Okeechobee, Inc.	20,000	acres
Carlton	6,000	acres
Mitchell	5,000	acres
Clevel	4,000	acres
14 small holdings	<u>21,000</u>	acres
	189,500	acres

If this area were acquired by the National Park Service a campground could be developed at Orange Hammock. Boat service and docking facilities might be needed. Some carefully selected roads giving access by automobile to parts of the prairie would need to be built. In general, man-made intrusions should be kept to a minimum.

Local attitudes toward public ownership of the Kissimmee Prairie as a unit of the National Park System will vary between individuals. Because of their interest in flood control and land improvement, cattlemen, land speculators, and real estate developers

will probably not be in favor of preservation of the prairie in its natural condition. Hunters will probably also object because of the reduction which would occur in the number of acres of public hunting ground on the Avon Park Game Management area. Individual local residents, boating enthusiasts, fishermen, bird lovers, and persons interested in outdoor recreation should be in favor of public ownership and preservation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that:

1. The present status of the project proposing to canalize the Kissimmee River be determined by conference with officials of the Corps of Engineers, U. S. Army.

If the project is in such a phase of development that it cannot be halted, there is no further need to consider the present probable national importance of the area. The unnatural conditions to be created by straightening the channel and the construction of six spillways are reasons enough to decide that, when the project is completed, national significance will be lacking.

If, however, the Kissimmee River project is not to be initiated for several years, or longer, there is still time to gather information which might show that the most valuable use of a portion of the prairie including the river would be to preserve it in its present relatively natural condition.

If it is learned that the Kissimmee River project is not to be initiated in the near future and that it would have no significant beneficial effect upon Everglades National Park if it were completed, it is recommended that:

2. All available up-to-date information concerning bird-life and habitat conditions on the Kissimmee Prairie that may be in the records of the National Association of Audubon Societies, Smithsonian Institution, or other organizations be studied along with the records, reports, and such material concerning birdlife in Everglades National Park which may be on file at the headquarters of that area or in other places to determine the exact extent to which the Kissimmee Prairie complements Everglades National Park in providing habitats for relatively important and rare species of birds.

The information secured by the above recommended steps should prove helpful in the final determination regarding the need for a full scale study or a rejection of the Kissimmee Prairie.

(SIGNED)

Elbert Cox
Regional Director

In duplicate

Attachments

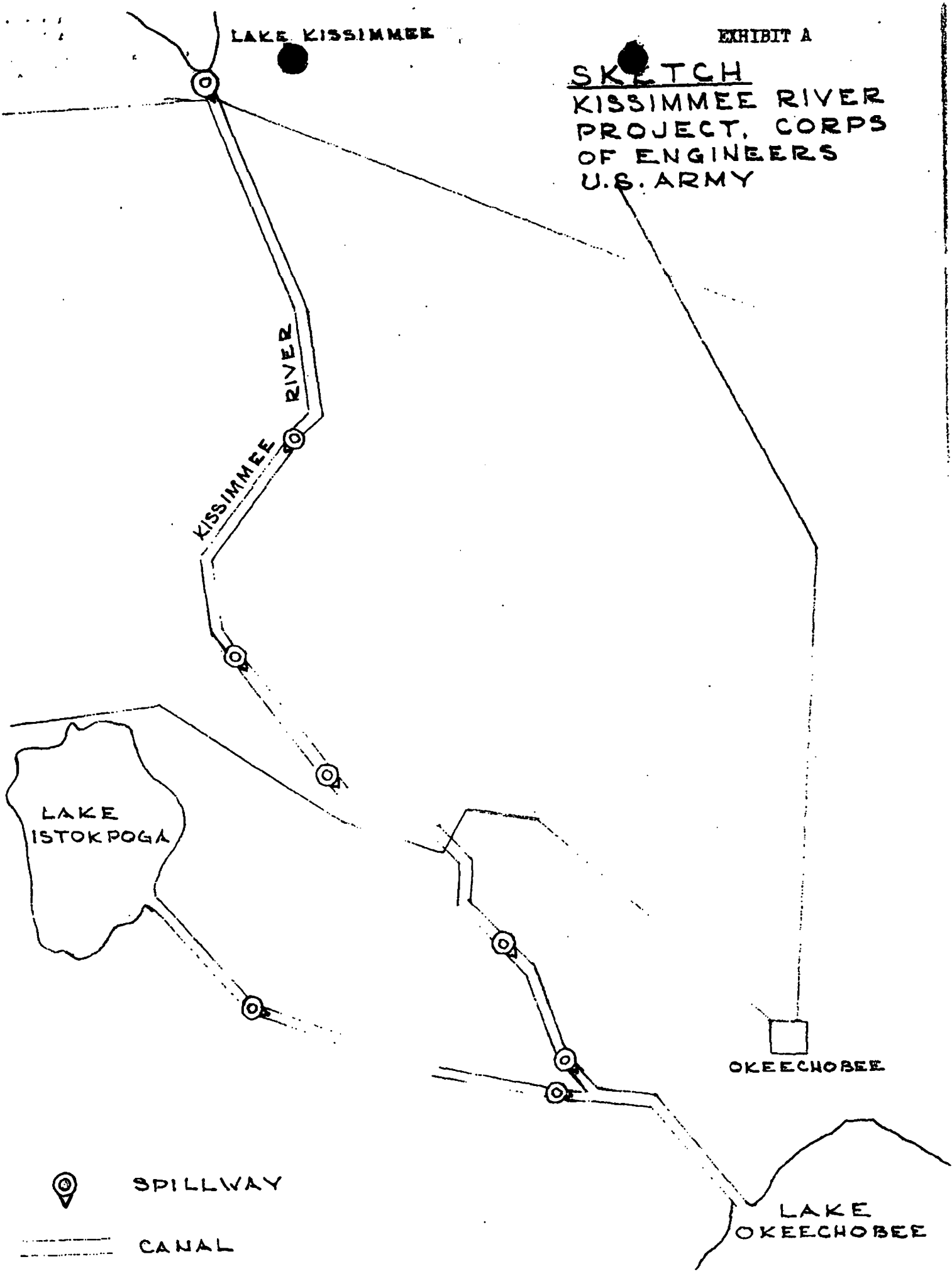
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General
Daily

LAKE KISSIMMEE

EXHIBIT A

SKETCH
KISSIMMEE RIVER
PROJECT, CORPS
OF ENGINEERS
U.S. ARMY



KISSIMMEE RIVER

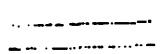
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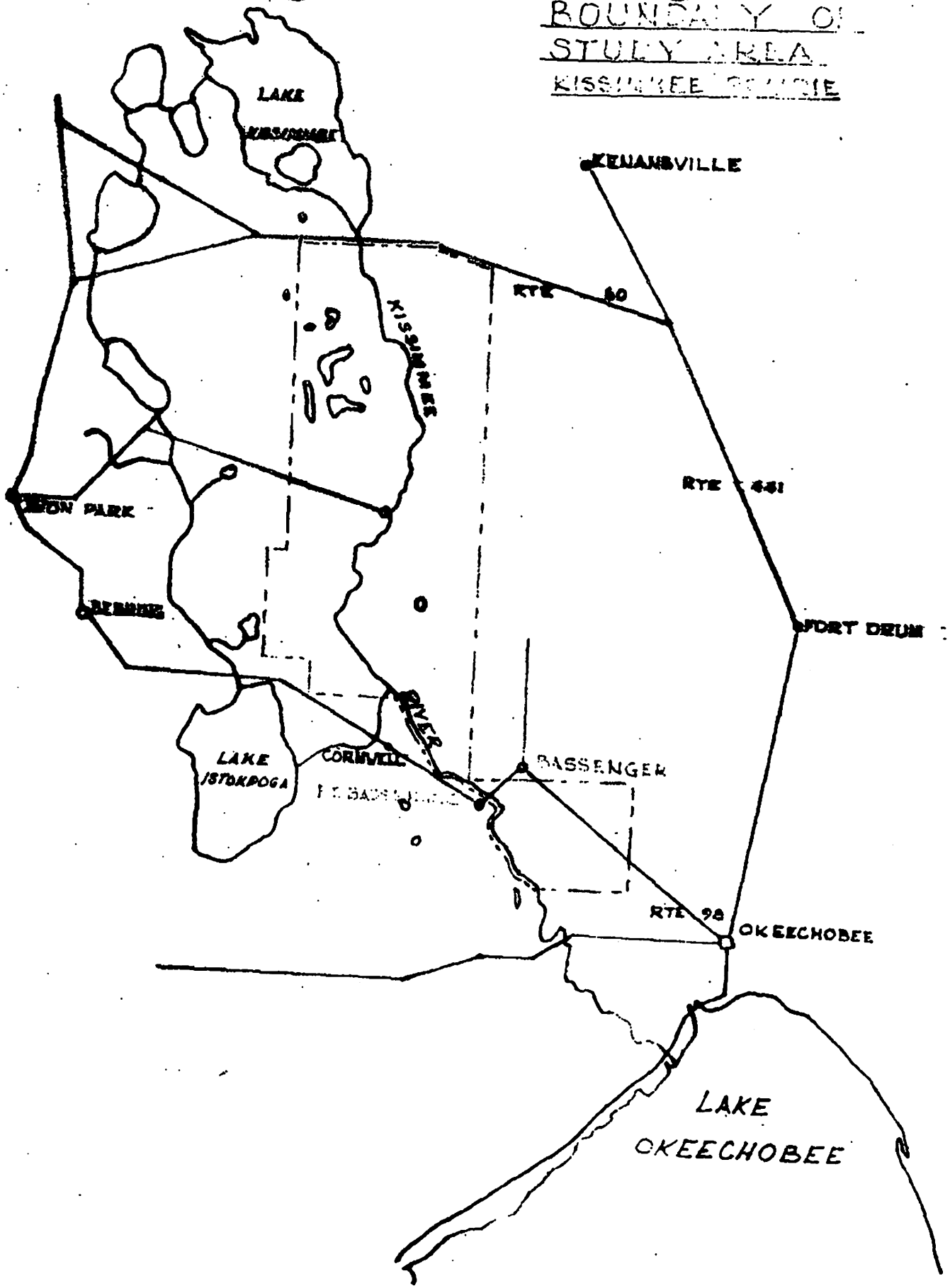


SPILLWAY



CANAL

BOUNDARY OF
STUDY AREA
KISSIMMEE BASIN



DISTRIBUTION OF
LAND OWNERSHIP
KISSIMMEE PRAIRIE

