

PICNIC ISLAND PARK

Three Years after The Freeze

by William D. Moriarty

Christmas Day, 1986, marked the third anniversary of the freeze that destroyed 90% of the vegetation on Picnic Island Park in Tampa, Florida. The temperature that day in 1983 dropped to a record low 10°F. Approximately 2,000 Australian pines (*Casuarina equisetifolia*) died in the northern third of this municipal park, leaving it a disaster area. In one day 97% of the tree cover was destroyed.

March, 1984—City of Tampa Parks Department officials were groping for solutions on how to breathe new life into this spoil land that was Teddy Roosevelt's launching point to the Spanish-American War 100 years ago. Parks Department officials, along with representatives from the Tampa Reforestation and Environmental Effort organization (TREE) and the Suncoast Chapter of FNPS, all concurred that in order to avoid a repeat of the disaster, restoring the park would come through the planting of a diversity of native salt- and freeze-tolerant trees. Accomplishing this goal would be possible only after a monumental effort to remove the 2,000 dead Australian pines which, if left, would pose serious safety hazards, and if burned during drought, could possibly spread to Tampa's gasoline farms nearby.

June-August, 1984—Removed they were—2,000 Australian pines were cut and mulched into three piles, 30 feet tall each. Two thousand stumps were all that was left in the powdery white limestone soil. The park was totally devoid of foliage and was as barren as a bombing site.

November, 1984—Saturday the 18th: Utilizing 100 three-gallon slash pines (*Pinus elliottii*) donated from TREE, S.T.R.I.V.E., an organization from Tampa's Plant High School, planted a new generation of trees. Native plant restoration was now to

become manifest at Picnic Island Park—and the gamble seems to be paying off.

May, 1985—A second phase of planting was initiated by the local Boy Scouts of America troop, who added lero-size slash pines and live oaks (*Quercus virginiana*) from the Parks Department nursery. The Parks Department also planted balled and burlapped southern red cedar (*Juniperus silicicola*) as well as three-gallon red cedars donated by TREE.

Early summer, 1985, brought with it the most severe drought in Tampa history. In this period, 98 of the original 100 slash pines survived the drought conditions, an amazing achievement for first year planting in a limestone-marl environment such as this.

Labor Day, 1985—Hurricane Elena ravaged the Park, but took out into Old Tampa Bay only four of 200 newly planted, balled and burlap cabbage palms (*Sabal palmetto*). Several thousand sea oat (*Uniola paniculata*) plugs, however, to be used as dune restoration, were also taken out to sea. The sea oat plantings have never been resumed by the Parks Department. A total of 24 plants, primarily oak and pine, submerged in salt water for close to a week, died.

Oaks were left leafless...

Pines and cedars were left with brown needles...

...This was a rough first year for the new Picnic Island Park—and it showed.

Fall, 1986—One year after Elena, there is little evidence of her destruction at Picnic Island Park. Now close to 2,000 trees from 6" to 20' are growing at the Park, and most are in perfect health. The 3-foot S.T.R.I.V.E. slash pines of 1984 suffered only six losses, are close to 6 feet tall, and are candling buds for 1987 growth. The lero pines and oaks are full-foliaged up to 12 feet, and the three-gallon TREE red cedars are now up to seven

feet, having been planted at only two feet in 1985. S.T.R.I.V.E. repeated history by planting an additional 120 oaks, pines, and cedars, and the Parks Department has put in a nearly final installation of an additional 600 trees, as well as wax myrtles (*Myrica cerifera*).

Conclusion—After just two environmentally grueling years, these plants are proving their worth in reforestation under the harshest of conditions. What began as an environmental tragedy on Christmas Day, 1983, is now turning into a victory for the proponents of native plant restoration.

The following people made the Picnic Island Park Restoration possible:

Ross Ferlita, City Parks Director; Terry Johnson, former City Parks Special Services Manager; Mike Callahan, former City Parks Landscape Architect; Steve Graham, City Parks Arborist; Bob Scheible, TREE vice president; John Beckner, FNPS Suncoast Chapter former president; Mike Kenton, FNPS Suncoast Chapter former vice president; Dr. Richard Wunderlin, FNPS Suncoast Chapter former president; Alan Burdett, FNPS; Bill Ackerman - deceased, FNPS; William Moriarty, TREE president, former chairperson - Picnic Island Restoration Committee, FNPS Suncoast Chapter.

Picnic Island was only the first of TREE's major projects. TREE has planted close to 3000 native trees in the Tampa area over the past three years. This year, volunteers from the Suncoast Chapter of FNPS will participate in planting 600 native trees at the intersection of I-75 and I-4, and the planting will be dedicated to the memory of Bill Ackerman, former regional director of FNPS.

