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ACCENT

The Everglades' own personal bulldog

Johnny Jones has devoted most of his life to fighting for the rights of natural Florida.

By Michael Browning
Palm Beach Post Staff Writer

The names Johnny Jones recalls are all writ in sky-mirroring water, across hundreds of miles of sawgrass, under pearl-gray rainclouds in the wide, wind-ruffled Everglades.

As is his own.

Marjory Stoneman Douglas, Art Marshall, Bob Graham - they all recognized how extraordinary, how unique the Everglades were. They all fought to save them. They may have succeeded; they may yet have fought in vain. The Everglades may yet be lost, despite a federal plan to rescue the remnants, which amount to less than 50 percent of the original extent of the place.

But if the Everglades are saved, even partway, it will be in considerable part due to the unremitting efforts of an ornery man who never finished high school, a plumber by trade, a hunter by obsession, a man who badgered politicians so relentlessly they finally threw up their arms and surrendered.

"Johnny had a leadership style that combined intimidation with personal pain. He'd let you know with no misunderstanding how he felt about things," said Graham, former Florida governor and U.S. senator. "The most original thing about him was his tenacity. He was like a pit bull. He wouldn't let loose until he had chewed you up.

"He came along at a period when everything in Florida was up for sale, and he believed Florida was not a commodity to be consumed. In the '60s, '70s and '80s, he convinced a lot of people that Florida was a thing of value, to be conserved. He was in the leadership of that transition. He was active in a series of financing proposals that made it possible for environmentally vulnerable land to be saved - they all had Johnny Jones' fingerprints all over them."

Jones was the driving force behind the 1981 Save Our Rivers Act, which looped the Kissimmee River back up again after the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers had made it a shotgun-barrel-straight ditch that canalized its waters straight into Lake Okeechobee, drying out tens of thousands of acres of wetlands and ruining the hydrography of south central Florida. Jones fought successfully to replumb it, get it back the way it used to be.

Jones spearheaded the legislation that created the Conservation and Recreational Lands of Florida Act of 1979 (CARL), which gave birth to the "Florida Forever" and "Preservation 2000" programs that aim to acquire and preserve as much of the state as possible for public use and visitation, while leaving it pristine and undeveloped.

"I wrote CARL in my back bedroom on a yellow legal pad," Jones boasts offhandedly.

"It's true," his wife, Mariana, affirmed. "He woke up one morning at 2 a.m. and went back into his study and wrote the whole concept out. CARL, at least the idea behind CARL, was done right here in that back bedroom."

"Johnny Jones was instrumental in acquiring the Big Cypress Preserve for the state," said Manley Fuller, who succeeded Jones after his 16-year tenure as president of the Florida Wildlife Federation. "He was intimately involved in the establishment of the 765,000-acre Big Cypress National Preserve, both to protect the land from development schemes and to allow a great place for quality outdoor recreation, especially hunting, and a place for the Florida panther to roam."

"He used to drive me crazy," laughed Juanita Greene, formerly environmental writer for The Miami Herald and now head of Friends of the Everglades, a group founded in 1969 by Marjory Stoneman Douglas. "When I was back writing for the paper, he would call me up all the time and yell, 'Hello, babe!'"

"He would never let go. He would just wear you down. But in the end, his causes were so good you had to like him. We clashed a lot about hunting, because he is such an avid hunter. I don't like to shoot birds and he does. So I thought he was a gun-toting fascist at first, but he went back to the days when these wetlands were covered with ducks, and it was a hunter's paradise. He realized that wildlife needs habitat, and habitat has to be preserved. That's how he became a conservationist, by being a hunter," Greene said.

Today, Jones greets you sitting, wearing suspenders, sitting in a chair in a house he built and roofed himself on what used to be a narrow pine-clad street. Now it is Haverhill Road, and a flume of steely traffic travels it all day long, north and south, into the noisy night.

"We bought this house in 1953, 5 acres. He cut the cypress logs for the ceilings and walls and let them dry for a year under the house," Mariana says.

"It's amazing how much Palm Beach County has changed in our lifetime. In 1938, we lived on Garden



Johnny Jones makes a point in a meeting two decades ago. Jones, like many staunch conservationists, acquired his passion for nature as a hunter. 1985 FILE PHOTO

Avenue at the corner of Military and Southern; there were just seven houses and two dairies. Now look at it."

Jones is not in the best of health, having suffered a heart attack and a minor stroke some time back. But he still spits like a downed power line that remains dangerous, a force to be respected and reckoned with. He still has embers of his old truculence when it comes to Florida, which for him is a mind-kingdom of inexpressible wealth and memory. He alternates between quiet, thoughtful reflection and sudden blazes of expression.

Is he optimistic or pessimistic about the future of the place?

"Pessimistic," Jones declares. "I used to be optimistic, but now, because of the growth . . ." he trails off into sudden silence. Then he sparks back: "We haven't learned anything from these hurricanes. We've got so many housing developments built in wetlands. The Army Corps of Engineers is not infallible!"

"Here," says Jones. "Come on back here. Here is where I wrote most of my legislation."

He leads the way into his back bedroom, brightly lit by the noonday sun, which casts a huge map of the Everglades into sharp relief, with arrows pointing where the water ought to flow and doesn't anymore, and would, if only the restoration plan were implemented!

"If they would just . . ." and he begins a complicated exposition of the 2,358-square mile ecosystem that underpins the whole southern peninsula. For him, it is still a cause not quite lost and well worth saving.

'The state shall seek . . .'

Jones was born in West Palm Beach at Good Samaritan Hospital in 1932. His father was a plumbing contractor, and Jones went to public schools. "My wife and I met at Conniston Jr. High School," he recalls.

Mariana Jones jumps in: "I was born in Urbana, Iowa, in 1934. I moved to Florida in 1936, in December. I met Johnny when I was 12 or 13, in the ninth grade. Johnny was a four-letter man, good in all sports. He ran track, and I was a cheerleader. And my father was watching one day and he said: 'Boy, I like the way Number 12 plays.'"

"And I said: 'That's my boyfriend.'"

"And my dad said: 'He's all right.'"

"So in the 10th grade, we got married. I was 15, he was 16.'"

After robbing each other's cradles, the Joneses have stayed married 56 years. She is 71, he is 73.

What is the secret to a happy marriage?

"Being in love. Being forgiving," Mariana Jones answers. "There's no such thing as a 50-50 marriage. It has to be 100 percent on both sides."

Jones doesn't want to get lovey-dovey and sentimental. He wants to talk about laws and land, giving politicians hell. "I remember writing CARL up here in this room," he repeats. "It was going to be funded with a half-cent sales tax. It was going through the

Comrades in fight for swamp



From left, the late conservationist Arthur R. Marshall, former governor and U.S. senator Bob Graham, and the late author and environmentalist Marjory Stoneman Douglas, in a photo taken when she was 105 years old.

legislature like gangbusters.

"Then Phil Lewis (who served as Florida Senate President from 1978-80) said: 'We can't earmark the sales tax. Maybe we can use the severance tax from minerals, phosphate and oil.' So the money was found."

How do you write a bill?

"First it comes to you, one thing, the idea,"

Jones answers. "Then it comes together. The state shall do this, the state shall do that. I later found out that it is better to write 'the state shall seek to' instead of just 'shall.' The legislature doesn't like specific money rules, but they'll come up with it if you give them some leeway."

"Then I wrote 'Save Our Rivers,'" Jones says. "I wrote the bill. Then I had a heart attack. They wanted me to take it easy, but I wanted to call Bob Graham. I said, 'If you don't bring me a phone, I'll have another heart attack.' So they brought me a phone."

"Save Our Rivers" passed the legislature. On Aug. 1, 1984, it was Jones who tossed the first spadeful of dirt into the hated Kissimmee River Canal. He was waiting for Bob Graham to show up, but Graham was late and Jones couldn't wait to start filling in a ditch he detested.

Marjory and Art

One of the pleasures of attempting to save the Everglades was the comradeship, coming into contact with Marjory Stoneman Douglas and Art Marshall, both dead now, but nearly godlike figures in the pantheon of Florida conservation. Johnny and Mariana Jones got to know them both well.

Anyone who knew Douglas, author of the anthemic 1947 masterpiece, *The Everglades: River of Grass*, remembers her big blue eyes, magnified to Cyclopean intensity behind thick spectacles, her huge straw hats and her overwhelming presence. Douglas died in 1998, aged 108.

"She was very patrician," Mariana Jones said.

"When she spoke it was intimidating. She was a delightful person, but she liked her drink at 5 o'clock. She would ask: 'Is it time to drink yet?'"

Art Marshall (1919-1985), whose name is enshrined nearby in the 221-square-mile Arthur R. Marshall Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge, was a close friend.

"He was the most wonderful, common, ordinary person you ever met," Jones recalled. "He was down-to-earth, quiet, unassuming. He lived quite a frugal, simple life. He drove a little Datsun. He wouldn't run the AC in the car, to save gas. He wore cotton khaki pants and a T-shirt, and then when he got to where he was going, he put on a plaid shirt."

Mariana Jones breaks in: "His wife, she'd come in with her hair all blown every which way and sweat pouring down her face. And she'd say: 'Why can't he turn on the AC?'"

"Not many people know this, but Art Marshall fought at Normandy on D-Day. He got a finger shot off. My kids adored him. My grandchildren would crawl all over him."

In May 2002, Johnny C. Jones and Mariana Jones got a 16-square-mile chunk of Florida named after them, The John C. and Mariana Jones Hungry Land Wildlife and Preservation area in northern Palm Beach and southern Martin counties, a preserve open for hunters with permits and hikers and Floridians for generations to come.

The unconquerable Jones went hunting in a wheelchair three years back. He hasn't shot anything since.

He is still hungry for land. He wants the entire 1,181-square-mile Everglades Agricultural Area, the EAA, the domain of sugar around Lake Okeechobee, bought up and returned to its natural state.

Don Quixote never runs out of windmills. "If I can just stay alive long enough to see that farmland turned back over," he says.

michael_browning@pbpost.com