

Chapter 1: Mega Miami

Emilio Ponce de Leon the Fifth stares through the large glass window of the Southeast Bank Building that strategically overlooks Biscayne Bay at the mouth of the Miami River directly above the construction lot. Ponce surveys the streetscape below, his back turned to his five project managers who sit quietly at the conference table. Some nurse their morning coffee. The Cubans and even some of the Anglos are addicted to their morning ritual of tiny paper cups filled with café con leche.

Ponce grabs a long reed arrow from a beautiful colored fabric quill mounted on the wall. He had purchased it in the market place in Iquitos on the Amazon River. It is his favorite prop at his staff meetings. "Three dollars I paid for it from the Indian peddlers," he boasts slapping it against his hand, and in the same breath adds, "The Brickell parcel; another bargain. A vacant parking lot in the heart of downtown Miami." He points the arrow out the window towards the riverside lots below "That one... that one... and this one. All three of those parking lots are prime for re-development. Get them permitted for thirty story mixed use buildings with a parking garage and we're in business. Gentlemen, we are at the apex of the biggest building boom in Miami since the 1920's. With the new zoning changes, half of downtown is obsolete and underdeveloped. That building," pointing to the ruins of the 1948 Brickell Apartments, "Obsolete and underused. That is why we own it and that is why we are tearing it down. And as we accelerate our construction to meet downtown's carrying capacity, we are on a parallel trajectory to build homes west of 177th Avenue."

His newest hire, permit manager, Jeff Elton, a fast learner and fresh from Chicago speaks up, "I thought that any building west of SW 177 Avenue was off limits because of the wetland moratorium because it's in the eastern Everglades buffer."

Ponce points his arrow directly at Jeff. "You gotta have wetlands to have a wetland moratorium. You gotta have sawgrass and plants to have an Everglades. I happen to know of several thousand acres

that aren't looking so good. Kind of drying up and overrun with maleucca. Did you know that stinking Australian tree is drying out the Everglades. Well, I proposed a plan to the county zoning director to fix the problem, because we can't have no stinking exotics snuffing out our precious Everglades. Why hell, if those melaleucas fill up that buffer, they'd spread right in to Everglades Park and ol' Marjorie Stoneman Douglas would turn over in her grave. No sir, we can't have those pesky plants ruining our Everglades, so I offered a common-sense solution. We'll cut those melaleuca – harvest them at our expense, turn them into toilet paper or whatever, and we keep them from growing back by just building lots and lots of homes to cover that dried muck and stopping all those little seedlings ready to sprout."

Jeff looks baffled by Ponce's explanation. "That makes no sense – then there will be no more Everglade's buffer."

"That's where you're wrong, that's why this plan is so beautiful. They get a buffer all right. It's just made of concrete and we guarantee that no exotics will be growing there. Our landscaping will be native plants! Our new development is called Glades View. It's a winner! The new residents will be the guardians of the Everglades! I've brought in a plant expert to help us with our landscape plan; Dr. Mayaree. He arrives tomorrow from Australia with a special cargo. It will be your task to meet him at the Tamiami Airport."

"I'll be there," said Jeff.

"Ernesto, where are we on the Brickell Point parcel?" said Ponce, turning to Ernesto who appears to be day dreaming. Ernesto comes to attention almost leaping out of his chair, and covers his exuberant brown-nosing reflex by pretending to straighten his tie. "The due diligence is up on May 10th, so we've got two weeks to wrap things up. No problems – a good clean title, no below ground containments. I think we'll be ready to get this to the City Commission for approval in October."

"Why not September?" retorts Ponce.

“The traffic and the emergency service studies are proving challenging, because we added parking for two-hundred cars for the new residents and there is no easy access from Brickell Avenue for fire trucks.”

“Prod our traffic consultant – we pay him enough that he should stay on schedule. Set up a fire contingency plan using a fireboat and make a \$5000 donation to the Fireman’s Benevolent Association. I want each of you to have an FBA sticker on your car before our next meeting with the fire inspectors.” said Ponce adding, “What about the demolition schedule?”

Ernesto responds, “Well, up until yesterday, everything was going fine. The demolition of the old apartments is nearly complete, but then the County Archaeologist showed up and found some Indian artifacts.”

“What did he find?”

“He showed me some fossils and stuff. Little pieces of pottery and shell. It looked like garbage to me.”

“Did he stop the demolition?”

“No... no... nothing like that. He just said he needed to dig some holes to see what was there.”

“He can play in the dirt as long as he doesn’t slow us down, but keep an eye on him. We have a schedule to stick to.” Ponce walks to the window peering down at the construction lot. “I think that’s the County SOB now. I see his truck.”

No one from the demolition crew pays attention to the small truck with the Miami-Dade County emblem on the front doors as it slowly lumbers onto the lot and parks in the shadow of a large crane amid the rubble of the Brickell Apartments, now reduced to piles of twisted steel and concrete blocks. A small framed taunt man exits the car. He is fortyish with dark brown wavy hair and a deep tan- a

combination of his Cuban DNA and years of working outdoors. Manny Garcia is the County archaeologist. A second generation Cuban-American, he has an extensive knowledge of Indian artifacts, having spent ten of his forty years studying Florida prehistory directing digs in St. Augustine then being hired as Miami's first urban archaeologist.

Manny walks to where he had seen some exposed conch shells the day before. He pushes his trowel deep into the loamy black earth next to the concrete foundation that had been pushed out of its footer trench by the bulldozer. The uncovered soil is filled with broken shells, most of them chalky white from centuries of being buried and leaching by rain. Amid the shells are animal bones and pottery sherds. This rich organic mixture of shell, animal bones, artifacts and dirt is called midden by archaeologists. Its discovery means prehistoric people once occupied this site leaving behind refuse from their meals, including broken pots, and other artifacts.

Manny digs as deep as his arm can reach, trying to reach the top of the bedrock, a white limestone that underlies all of Miami. Manny has told people countless times that the rock is not coral – as most believe, but rather is a limestone formed by millions of sandy particles, called oolids, that formed in a shallow sea over a hundred thousand years ago. Manny pushes his trowel deep into the black earth. To his surprise, the ubiquitous limestone bedrock is not reached at the usual forty-centimeter depth. Deeper and deeper he digs. He contemplates the unusual depth.

This sure is a deep pocket of soil. Maybe it's a natural solution hole or a crevice in the bedrock.

As he digs deeper, he switches from a trowel to a shovel and finally strikes the hard limestone bedrock at almost 3 feet below the surface. After more digging he discovers the hole is about three feet long and is framed by smooth walls of limestone. Solution holes are created from organic acids dissolving the rock. They're an important geological feature that preserves artifacts that can provide important clues about prehistoric subsistence and changes in the environment through time, but this

hole is different. It seems deliberately constructed. Solution holes are asymmetrical with irregular walls – but this one is perfectly uniform with smooth walls. It appears to be a large basin deliberately cut into the bedrock.

When he probes the dirt next to the basin he strikes bedrock at the usual 40-centimeter depth. It's the same depth everywhere he digs, but when he continues probing he finds another deep basin hole only a few feet away. Then another. He thinks he sees a pattern in the holes, but he is not certain. He realizes that this is a job for T.H. Williams. T.H. is a surveyor who had appeared in Manny's life unexpectedly ten years earlier while he was directing a dig in Coconut Grove. T.H. had simply showed up, out of the blue, and offered to create a map of the excavations-gratis. "I just like to help," Williams had said, "I have a long-time interest in Miami's history." Manny was glad to get the help, and after the datum point was set and the base lines measured, he went to thank T.H., but he was gone. Disappeared without a word. T.H. reappeared a week later – map in hand, and from that moment on they developed a close friendship.

He called T.H. and leaves a message on his answering machine.

"Come down and take a look at these strange holes. I don't know what to make of them."

Manny then texts his friend Conrad Jenkins- the county botanist. They were hired by the County at the same time five years earlier and had taken the employee orientation together. He liked Conrad's work ethic, although he thought Conrad took himself too seriously. Although Manny wasn't too excited about the plant world, Conrad's second passion was archaeology.

"Hey, Conrad. Get your butt down to Brickell Point. I got something I want to show you."