

T H E R E ' S

N O T H I N G

M I C K E Y

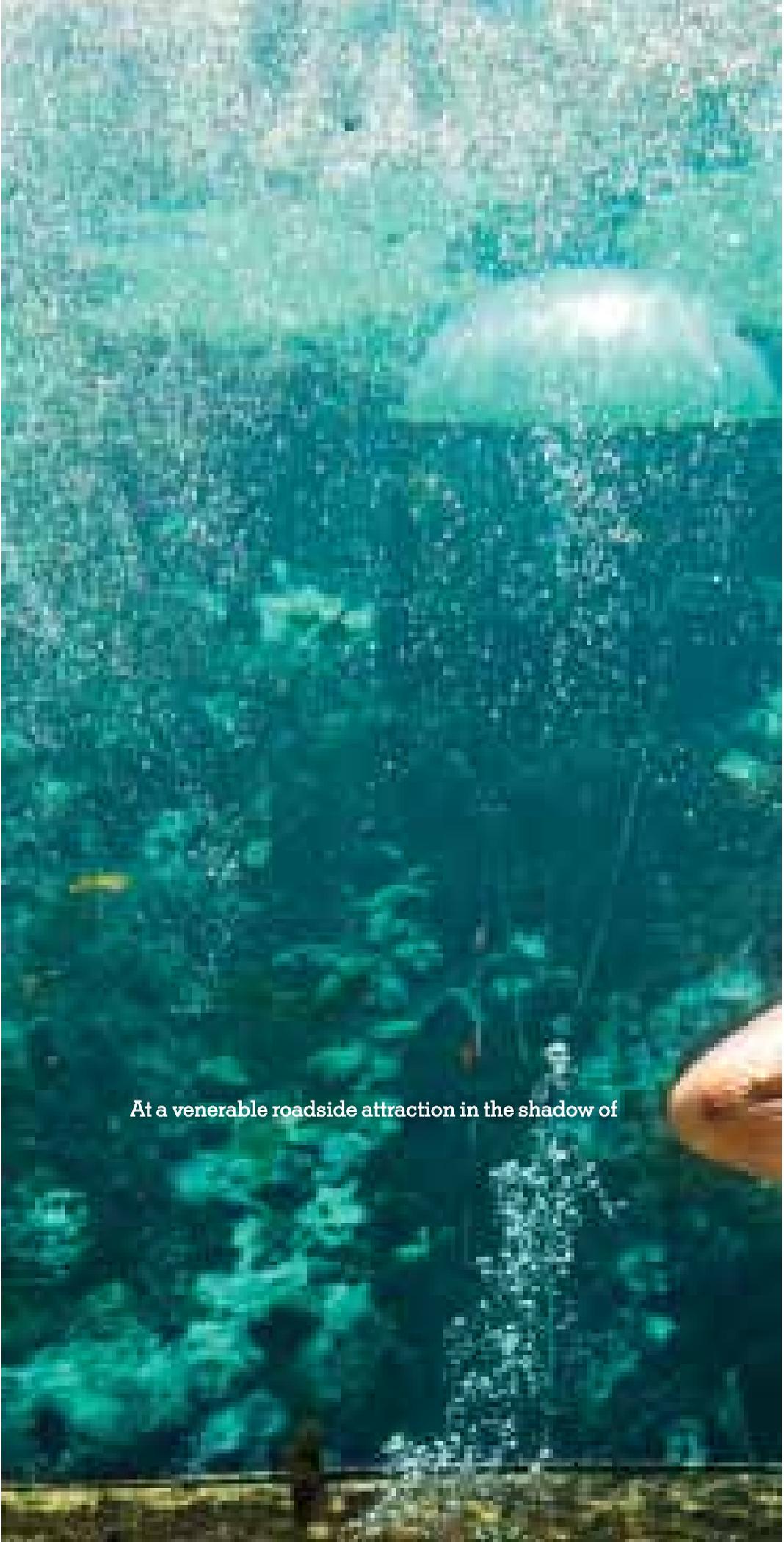
M O U S E

A B O U T

T H E S E

M E R M A I D S

At a venerable roadside attraction in the shadow of





Disney World, an endangered species is practicing the old secrets of the deep. BY VIRGINIA SOLE-SMITH

I T was only a two-hour drive across Central Florida from Disney World to Weeki Wachee Springs, but the distance traveled was much further, from sleek theme parks, hotels with room service and package vacation deals to a rundown motel with broken Wi-Fi situated across the highway from a thrift store and a Hooters. To get there, I took State Road 50 through mile after mile of swamp and farmland, which was dotted with pawn shops looking to buy guns and gold, and billboards with photographs of babies and reminders that “my heart beat 18 days from conception.” Strip malls were broken up by new town-home complexes, old trailer parks and churches.

When I reached the intersection of 50 and Route 19, a faded blue-and-white sign welcomed me to Weeki Wachee Springs, which is both a very small “city” (population: 4) and a 538-acre state park. It is also “the world’s only city of live mermaids.” For an entrance fee of just \$13, the “live mermaids” perform three or four daily shows in the Newton Perry Underwater Theater. Perry was a local entrepreneur and diver who built the theater directly into the limestone side of the spring in 1947.

It was dark inside when I sat down on one of the long wooden benches facing a dusty blue curtain and waited for the 11 a.m. show of “Hans Christian Andersen’s ‘Little Mermaid.’” On that April Tuesday, the 400-seat theater was barely half full, mostly senior citizens and toddlers in Ariel T-shirts, and both groups shifted restlessly. But when the prerecorded music began and the curtain lifted, the mood changed. Through a glass wall, some 100 feet from one side to the other, we could see the sun shining into the spring, which stretched endlessly before us, stunning and turquoise. Schools of small fish and turtles swam into view; apparently it’s not uncommon to spot the occasional manatee. And then a 32-year-old performer named Crystal Videgar popped up from some deeper part of the spring and swam up to the glass in a bright red tail and sequined bikini top. Waving and smiling, she swam the entire width of the glass without appearing to need to breathe. For a moment, I found myself wanting to believe in mermaids, despite having met Videgar, standing on two legs in a locker room, just 10 minutes earlier.

Videgar was joined by two other women, and they began lip syncing while doing a tail-clad version of a kick line to their signature song, “We’ve Got the World by the Tail”: “We’re not like other women/We don’t have to clean an oven/And we never will grow old/We’ve got the world by the tail!” The number, with its throwback lyrics and synchronized dance routine, is meant to evoke a real “Old Florida feel,” which is how everyone associated with Weeki Wachee describes the place, meaning the Florida of memory and pop culture from varying points between the 1940s and the 1970s, when the state’s tourism industry hit its stride. “When you think of Old Florida, you think of pink flamingoes, racecars at Daytona Beach and the Weeki Wachee mermaids,” said John Athanason, Weeki Wachee’s public relations director, as he showed me around the spring.

But in fact, “World by the Tail” and the entire current production of “Hans Christian Andersen’s ‘Little Mermaid’” was composed in 1991, when “Old Florida” was already in retreat, and Weeki Wachee was determined to remind Floridians why they should cherish their state’s cultural inheritance of quirky roadside attractions just as much as Disney and the other shiny new super parks of Orlando.

Weeki Wachee started out as a swimming hole, a natural spring 117 feet deep that feeds the seven-mile-long Weeki Wachee River, which pumps more than 100 million gallons of fresh water into the Gulf of Mexico every



**‘I CAN DO THIS FULL TIME BECAUSE I’M
LOW RIGHT NOW,’ SAYS ONE 19-YEAR-OLD.
THIS JOB IS A LOT MORE FUN THAN**

day. When Perry built the spring’s theater, he also submerged two airlocks into the rocky base and developed air hoses so swimmers could free-dive 20 feet down. Then he recruited young women, mostly local high-school students and waitresses, to work for him. He taught them the same kind of synchronized-swimming routines that were making attractions like Cypress Gardens so popular — except at Weeki Wachee, they would do everything underwater. Perry’s swimmers learned to drink something called Grapette and eat bananas while sitting on a ledge in the spring. Perry didn’t pay the women for their efforts; they worked in exchange for meals, free swimsuits (tails would come later) and glory.

After 1959, when the American Broadcasting Company bought the park, the performers earned a small salary while paying \$25 per month to live in dorms. The next decade or so was Weeki Wachee’s heyday, when the cast put on nine shows a day. (“Mermaids on the Moon” was the hit of 1969.) According to park lore, half a million visitors came each year. Many of the performers



Amy Lynn (left), preparing for her role in “Little Mermaid”; Nikki Chickonski, taking the tube that leads to the mermaids’ “stage.”

SE MY EXPENSES ARE PRETTY AR-OLD MERMAID. ‘IT TURNS OUT N BAGGING GROCERIES.’

were still local girls, and the 35 jobs as mermaids were coveted. “There wasn’t much else to do around here back then,” Bev Sutton told me. She swam at Weeki Wachee from 1969 to 1972 and now works at a title company nearby. “Not that there’s a whole lot more now. Weeki Wachee girls were celebrities.”

Then, in 1971, Disney arrived. At first, tourists would spend a day or two at Walt Disney World, then fill the rest of their week visiting other Central Florida attractions. But as Orlando’s theme parks grew in number and size, vacationers stayed there. Florida’s tradition of idiosyncratic, locally owned tourist attractions was displaced in much the same way as Wal-Mart replaced regional grocery stores and multiplexes put independent movie theaters out of business. Cypress Gardens closed in 2003, and Weeki Wachee was close to failure. The sidewalks were cracked; the paint peeled on plaster statues at the park’s entrance; audience head counts were often in single digits.

“It was at the point of: Do we make payroll or do we pay the electric bill?” says Robyn Anderson, a former Weeki Wachee performer who is now the

park’s assistant manager. In 2001, at 27, Anderson was elected mayor of the tiny municipality, which made her one of the youngest mayors in the United States. “And the only mer-mayor,” she adds, deadpan. “Whatever sells tickets.”

Anderson is now paid less than \$10 per month for her mayoral duties, which involve managing agreements with the local utility companies and negotiating deals to bring in a CVS, a Dollar General and other businesses near the city’s main intersection. When she was first elected, just as the attraction’s financial crisis hit its peak in the early 2000s, she refused even that salary, donating it to the “Save Our Tails” campaign, which she, Athanason and other Weeki Wachee officials established in 2003 to attract media attention and keep the struggling enterprise afloat. “We were desperate,” Anderson says. At various points, she and Athanason tried shopping a reality show and brought in Paris Hilton and Nicole Richie to film an episode of “The Simple Life 2” at Weeki Wachee.

In 2008, several years after the attraction was given to the city of Weeki Wachee by the last in a succession of owners, Anderson and the rest of the city management decided to donate it to the state of Florida, converting it into Weeki Wachee Springs State Park. Suddenly the “mermaids” were state employees. With government support, as well as money raised by a nonprofit called “Friends of Weeki Wachee,” the park was able to put on a fresh coat of paint and hire more employees. (Today there are 21 female and 3 male performers.)

Weeki Wachee and the state-parks department weren’t a likely match. Early on, Anderson found herself having to explain purchases of things like bikini tops, tails and makeup to officials used to covering the cost of trail markers and trash cans. The state’s goal is to preserve the spring and the river, and it’s debatable how much the show aids in those environmental conservation efforts. “I would like to see it all focused on the girls, but it’s not — it’s not neglect, it’s just not the focus,” says Barbara Wynns, who performed at Weeki Wachee from 1967 to 1969 and again from 1972 to 1975, and now serves as the park’s main volunteer and unofficial ambassador. “I’m coming from a 65-year-old historical attraction, and they’re coming from 30 years of land maintenance, and we just can’t communicate.”

On my second morning at Weeki Wachee, nine women, ranging in age from 19 to 33, were roaming around the locker room in bikinis and bathrobes. Officially, they were getting into hair and makeup for the morning’s first show, but mostly they were blasting Rihanna, checking their phones and joking about whose backside could fit into which costume. Amid the flurry of wardrobe changes and showers, the cast doesn’t have time to be modest. “You can’t be shy here — we’re all like family,” one performer told me as she shimmied into a pair of the thick nylon tights that most of the women layered under their tails for extra warmth and “to hide the jiggle.”

I sat down next to Crystal Videgar on a bench in front of a mirror that ran along one wall. She wore a black fishnet stocking pulled down over her face, which she used to create a scale pattern as she dabbed metallic green and purple eye shadow around her temples. The conversation had turned to whether everyone should meet up at Hooters or Applebee’s after work, but Videgar worked on her makeup with quiet focus. When she pulled off the stocking, I could see in between the fish scales that her skin was lightly freckled from life in the Florida sun. “We love that we get to dress up all day long,” she said. “It’s like reliving your childhood.”

Videgar and her co-workers earn \$10 to \$13 per hour. They punch time-cards when they arrive at Weeki Wachee an hour before the first show and again when they leave after the last show of the day, usually by 5 p.m. In

between performances, they train new recruits, scrub algae off the theater windows, do laundry and clean their locker room, bathroom and showers. They take breaks on a rooftop sun porch, where a surprising number of them smoke; their joke is that inhaling is good practice for holding your breath underwater.

Unlike in Weeki Wachee's dorm culture of the 1960s and '70s, the performers today live off site. Many are married, have children, go to school or work other jobs as hair stylists, waitresses or home health aides. "Lots of the girls have other commitments now," Athanason told me. Many saw their other jobs as a means of making their work at Weeki Wachee possible. Videgar, who lives nearby in a double-wide trailer on five acres with her tattoo-artist boyfriend, said she always needed to work a second and "sometimes third job" since starting at the attraction in 2003. She left in 2009 to work full time at an oyster bar where the money was "fabulous" but returned last year when Anderson called to say they could use someone with her expertise. (It takes around four months of training before a rookie is deemed "show ready.") Videgar hadn't planned to come back, but her mom had just died from breast cancer. "I was at a very low place in my life," she said. When Anderson reached out to her, Videgar "felt a fire ignite in my soul." She remembered how much she loved being a part of what she described as the mermaid sorority, and how much her mom had loved watching her perform. "Something in me said, 'You need to do this,' and I haven't looked back." She now works at Weeki Wachee four days a week while

moonlighting as a waitress at a local barbecue joint on nights and weekends.

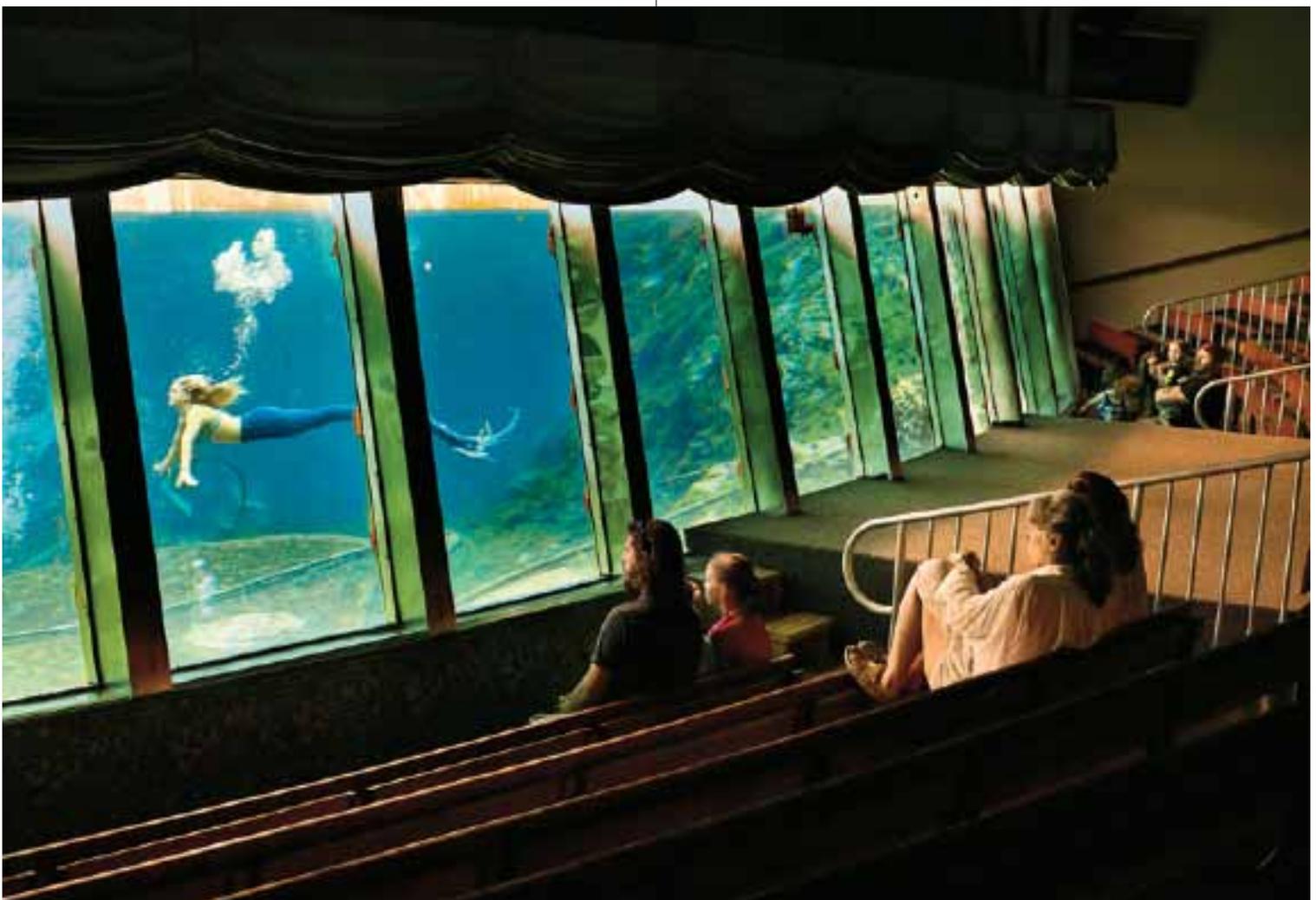
Her makeup finished and costume in place, Videgar led me out of the locker room and down a flight of stairs to the theater's Tube Room, a small, saunalike space with a hole in the middle of the floor. A concrete tube drops 14 feet down and 64 feet out into the spring, delivering the performers just below the rocky shelf they use as a stage during the show; to the audience it looks as if they are swimming up from the depths of the spring. "Everyone gets so freaked out by the tube, but it's nothing after you do it once," Videgar said, right before she jumped in.

I watched that performance from the control booth, a tiny room off the theater where Stayce McConnell was directing the show. McConnell, 34, started performing at Weeki Wachee soon after graduating from high school, and she has been a bartender at the local Applebee's for almost as long. She used a microphone that is amplified underwater so she could talk the swimmers through each number — they also hear the show's soundtrack and narration — and remind them where they dropped their air hoses.

In the show, a faux calypso song celebrating the Little Mermaid's birthday had just wrapped up, and the prerecorded narration took over: "The 15th birthday is very special to a mermaid," the narrator said. "Because she is allowed to swim to the surface of the sea for the very first time."

"We all hate that it's her 15th birthday," McConnell told me. "It's like, who gets married at 15? Why can't she be at least 18 or 20? None of us are 15 anymore."

A Wednesday performance of "Little Mermaid" at Weeki Wachee Springs.



T H E official minimum age for performers at Weeki Wachee is 18, though exceptions have been made for the occasional 16-year-old. In the locker room, one performer put it this way: “We don’t really hire girls in their 30s. We hire them when they’re young” so they can stay a long time. Many start right out of high school. “I can do this full time because my expenses are pretty low right now,” Deidra Rodgers, a cherubic 19-year-old with blue streaks in her long blond hair, says. Before auditioning, Rodgers worked as a grocery bagger at the local Publix. “I didn’t think I would like this as much, because I knew everybody there, and it was comfortable,” she said. “But it turns out this job is a lot more fun than bagging groceries.”

After the morning’s first show, I went with Rodgers and three of her colleagues to Athanason’s office. The four of them were scheduled to meet over Skype with a Los Angeles producer interested in developing a reality show. “We get approached to do this two or three times a month,” Athanason said. “And believe me, we have plenty of mermaid drama here. But we almost always say no.” The state-parks department doesn’t want its employees on television partying and cat-fighting in bikinis. And reality-television producers aren’t interested in much else. But Athanason was optimistic about this new opportunity: “It’s going to be more about the making of a Weeki Wachee mermaid,” he told the women as they sat down in his office under a wall of photos documenting celebrity visitors to the park (Elvis, Mickey Mantle, Larry the Cable Guy, Jimmy Buffett). “The audition process, the training. Like the show about the Dallas Cowboy cheerleaders.”

“Do we get paid?” Rodgers asked flatly. Athanason wasn’t sure. While waiting for the producer to call, they talked about how trendy mermaids had become in pop culture. One performer, Kylee Troche, who started swimming at Weeki Wachee at 16, has posed during her off hours at mermaid conventions as “Mermaid Kylee, the International Mermaid.” (She does not represent the park when she does this.)

A former Weeki Wachee employee, Eric Ducharme, was featured this spring on TLC’s “My Crazy Obsession” as “the Mertailor.” After his grandparents took him to visit Weeki Wachee as a kid, Ducharme fell in love with the idea of mermaids and began designing and wearing his own tails by age 12; he performed the role of the prince in the Weeki Wachee show at 16. “I can swim every role in the show,” he told me when I visited him at his home and tail workshop in Homosassa, about 40 minutes north of Weeki Wachee. “I was there in an unofficial capacity way before that, doing costumes, choreographing routines, scrubbing the floor, you name it.” Ducharme left Weeki Wachee after a year of official employment. “It was a lot for Eric, trying to manage all those personalities,” says Barbara Wynns, the park volunteer, who thinks of Ducharme as an adopted son. For his part, Ducharme asked me: “Why aren’t there more mermen at Weeki Wachee? Is it because it’s a state park? Or is it a problem with the management accepting sexuality?”

Now 22, Ducharme has a thriving business making custom spandex and silicone tails that he sells from \$500 to upward of \$5,000. His handiwork has appeared in ads for Target and Skittles, he told me; Lady Gaga wore one of his tails for a performance in 2011. “I think every little girl wants to be a mermaid when they grow up,” Ducharme said when I asked him who spends that kind of money on a tail. “A lot of parents buy them for their kids, but we also have women, and a lot of men too, buying the tails, because they love that magical experience of swimming in a tail. It’s a lifestyle choice.”

Back in Athanason’s office, Rodgers and the others were ready to talk to the producer from L.A. — except she never called. When I checked with Athanason weeks later, he said they were still waiting for the right opportunity to come along.

“As soon as I saw my first Weeki Wachee show at age 13, I told my mother I wasn’t ever going to get married or go to college, I was going to be a mermaid,” said Barbara Wynns, who officially stopped working for Weeki Wachee in 1975 but never really did. We were sitting in the living room of

her “Mermaid Mansion,” located near the mouth of the Weeki Wachee River. It was a cloudy day, so the room was dark except for the blue glow of a video that showed a performance at the spring playing on an endless loop on her otherwise never-watched television. All around us were tails, ornaments, photographs — even the bathrooms featured mermaid-themed shower curtains, hand towels and toilet lids. “I don’t have any other identity, particularly,” Wynns admitted. “I spent about a year and a half trying not to be a mermaid, and it was just like, ‘Well, I am.’”

Even when she was married and living in Virginia, where she worked for years selling eyewear, Wynns introduced herself as “a mermaid” to confused customers. Some of the current performers told me they felt similarly; several use “mermaid” in their e-mail addresses or Instagram handles. But for Wynns, the identity is all-encompassing. She and her husband built the mansion in 1993 as a vacation home, and when Weeki Wachee hit its decline, Wynns helped organize reunion shows of all the former swimmers who had left but wanted to come home. A widow now, Wynns lives in the mansion year-round and serves as a surrogate mother to the current performers, bringing them birthday presents and life advice. “I always tell Barbara that I want to be her when I grow up,” McConnell told me. “It’s my dream to have my own Mermaid Mansion one day.”

And Wynns was fiercely protective of how I or anyone else might perceive the performers. “Look, any time you have a group of young women all together, people are going to call them sluts, I don’t care whether you are mermaids or nurses,” she said. “But these girls are in relationships, they have families — they just revere the fact that they get to be in a tail. I haven’t met a girl yet who is trying to use this as a sexual identity.”

Wynns helps organize a monthly reunion show for seven former performers who happen to be her best friends. Together, five of them run a “Sirens of the Deep Camp” at the park for women over 30. Wynns calls it “finding your inner mermaid,” and she is sure that this is a much more common spiritual yearning than we realize. “I just talk from what I know and believe, which is that we all evolved from Atlantis,” she said. “More and more, women are realizing that they have this mer-spirit inside them. It’s not about the tail or posing as a siren on a rock. It goes deeper.”

Carolyn Turgeon, the author of “Mermaid” and several other novels that are modern retellings of classic fairy tales, says, “It’s a pretty feminist mission that Barbara has going on, helping all these women find their inner mermaids.” Turgeon also writes a blog called I Am a Mermaid and attended the Weeki Wachee Sirens camp in June 2011; I called her after my trip to trade notes. For her, mermaids represent a kind of stealth girl power. “You can dismiss them as just these pretty girls, but there is a real wildness there,” she told me. “They are sexualized and desexualized at the same time. So they make a good symbol for a lot of women who are trying to negotiate being strong but still accessible and lovable.”

The next day, when I returned to Weeki Wachee, I saw six women standing in front of the information booth, dripping plastic pearl necklaces and seaweed. One wore a crown made from shells and fake flowers, with long tendrils of beads that draped on either side of her face. Siren Camp had begun.

They were getting ready for the glamour shots. This is why everyone else arrived bedecked in shells and starfish — Wynns and the other volunteers helped us find tails that fit, but the rest of the outfit was up to us. “We do ask that you have ‘your sisters’ well contained, as the theater is open to the public,” Wynns wrote in the introduction letter she sent to participants a few weeks before the start of camp. One woman named Jessica Montgomery had come from San Diego and made her own bikini by sewing aqua starfish on to a nude nylon top. A group of three middle-aged friends all wore more demure floral one-pieces and matching beads. And then there was Connie Heitzmann, of the shellfish crown. At 65, she was the oldest camper and introduced herself as the “Critter Queen” of New Orleans. “I lost my house and most of my family in Katrina, so now I go around working on my bucket list,” she told us. The month before, she (Continued on Page 47)

MERMAIDS

(Continued from Page 29)

went cage swimming with sharks.

It's worth mentioning that I was six months pregnant at the time, so I wasn't convinced that I'd make much of a mermaid, or that they'd even have a tail that fit me, but Wynns was determined that I not miss out. Fortunately, spandex is a forgiving fabric. To get into a tail, we had to first insert a pair of flippers into special pockets in the base. Then we sat down and stuck our feet into the flippers and shimmed the tail up our legs. When it came time to get it up over our hips, some undignified hoisting was required. Once we were encased, standing became impossible, so we sat down and scooted into our poses. The volunteers stood around offering suggestions, fixing our hair and moving us into position onto a plaster seaweed-covered throne.

When it was time to get in the water, Wynns paired me with Becky Young, a respiratory therapist who swam at Weeki Wachee from 1973 to 1976. Then she left to marry and have a child — only to come back,

after her divorce, from 1981 to 1985. "I just wasn't done yet," she told me.

We strapped on face masks and slipped off the dock into the water. Young instructed me to hold on to a float (think pool noodle but more substantial) and then towed me behind her as she powered across the spring. "Don't try to do anything, just let me pull you — don't worry, I'm really strong," she yelled back as I bobbed helplessly. Weeki Wachee mermaids, former and current, are tremendously athletic; reporters approaching their third trimester are not. All week everyone had told me how swimming in a tail felt more powerful, more aerodynamic, than swimming like a human. But I couldn't get my tail to stay behind me — it wanted to drag me straight down or kick out in front, so I'd flop on my back, flailing.

Young dived under, and we dipped our face masks in the water to watch as she showed us how to pose in front of the glass window of the theater in a kind of three-quarter turn, bending our knees and pointing our toes to best display the fin. We also had to arch our backs and hold our arms out gracefully, cup-

ping our fingers "like you're holding a Ping-Pong ball." The closest I could approximate was a kind of bound-leg yogic tree pose.

Then my tail started to slide off, and Young had to dive down to yank it back up for me. After that, we decided I should practice just swimming in the tail instead. This involved using my hips instead of my legs and trying to sort of ripple through the water. "Yes that's better!" Young exclaimed after I rippled around for a while. "More hips, less legs. It's like having really good sex."

Even gripping my noodle, I could appreciate the sense of freedom and wonder that everyone at Weeki Wachee talked about. And as I watched the other campers do their poses and move on to advanced free dives and ballet moves, I could see how they were living out a fantasy and, perhaps, tapping in to that mer-spirit that Wynns was so sure we all had.

At lunch on my second day there, Young and I sat on the dock, feeding bread to the turtles, and she told me about swimming competitively as a kid growing up in landlocked central Iowa. She discovered Weeki Wachee

when her parents moved to Florida during her senior year of high school. But even though she was an accomplished swimmer, she didn't think she'd make the cut at auditions.

"They were all so pretty and glamorous," Young said. "Even when I was young and thin, I was never that glamour-girl type."

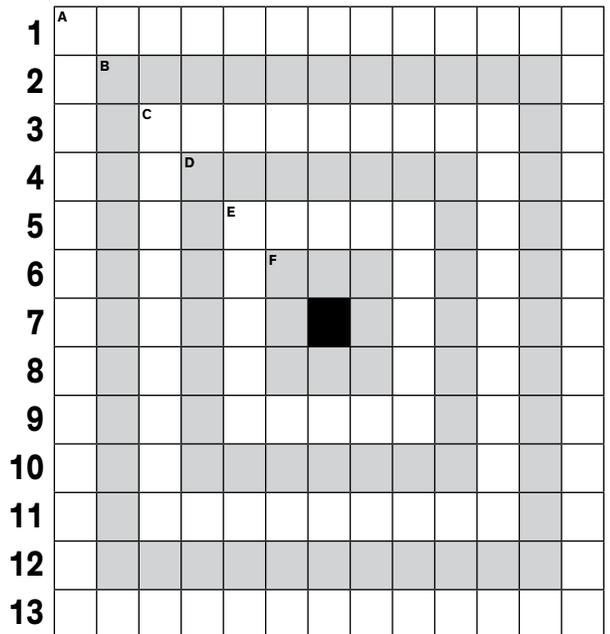
I asked if that perception of herself changed once she auditioned and became a mermaid.

"Yeah, I guess so," she replied. "When I came to Weeki Wachee, I got to be that girl for a while." ♦

MARCHING BANDS

By **BRENDAN EMMETT QUIGLEY**

The words in this puzzle march around the grid in two ways. In one formation ("Rows"), words march across — two words for each numbered line, reading consecutively from left to right. The dividing point between these answers is for you to determine, except in row 7, where the words are separated by a black square. In the second formation ("Bands"), words march around each of the six shaded and unshaded bands, starting at the lettered squares (A, B, C, D, E and F) and proceeding in a clockwise direction, one word after another. For example, Band A will consist of eight consecutive words (a through h) starting in square A and reading around the perimeter of the grid. Again, the dividing point between these answers is for you to determine. All clues are given in order. When the puzzle is completed, each square in the grid will have been used once in a Row word and once in a Band word.



ROWS

- 1 a Flub, on a keyboard
- b Thing of no significance
- 2 a Supplied with gear
- b Big name in pharmaceuticals
- 3 a Like most Sherpas
- b Imperturbable
- 4 a Up above (2 wds.)
- b Fix securely in place
- 5 a 1959 Edward Albee one-acter, with "The" (2 wds.)
- b Troy's tale
- 6 a Stuffed to the gills (with)
- b Tilting
- 7 a Brilliant displays
- b Key of Beethoven's Symphony No. 1 (2 wds.)
- 8 a Josh with the 2013 No. 1 album "All That Echoes"
- b "Fingers crossed" (3 wds.)

- 9 a Movie theater stipulation at a premiere, maybe (2 wds.)
- b "Ditto" (3 wds.)
- 10 a Union grp. with 12+ million members (hyph.)
- b Eases up
- 11 a Indy 500 participant
- b AIDS researcher who was Time's 1996 Man of the Year (2 wds.)
- 12 a Grand or baby grand
- b Cause of a falling star, maybe?
- 13 a Still in its original packaging
- b Time when forging began (2 wds.)

BANDS

- A a Somewhat teary-eyed

- b ___ dish (lab item)
- c Ripped off
- d Un + deux
- e Pizza seasoning
- f Tilt-a-Whirl, e.g.
- g Dawn
- h Kenny Loggins hit from the "Top Gun" soundtrack (2 wds.)
- B a Witty line
- b Filmmaker Almodóvar
- c Barrio residents
- d N. Oregon ski resort (2 wds.)
- e "9 to 5" singer
- f Where Lyndon Johnson was sworn in (3 wds.)
- C a Turns white
- b Country on the Baltic Sea
- c Oscar-winning actor
- D a Begins the bidding
- b Fall from exhaustion

- d Star with a big ego
- e Austin Powers's enemy (2 wds.)
- f 1970s Cambodian dictator (2 wds.)
- D a Begins the bidding
- b Fall from exhaustion
- c Poet/playwright Jones
- d Coup-plotting groups
- E a Conservative party belief in the U.K.
- b Common mirage images
- c Indulge to the max
- F a Faculty protests (hyph.)