



From Tails to Tales

Stalking a Dream

- 1905 Owen Godwin Sr. is born and spends his youth on the homestead of his uncle Lije at Rattlesnake Hammock, located on the Kissimmee River east of Sebring, Florida. Part of a ranching community known as Kissimmee Island, they were serviced by the steamers that carried supplies and tourists to Palm Beach from the railhead at Kissimmee. The kids could get an occasional tip by showing snakes and alligators to the passengers while their parents shopped.
- 1930's Owen Godwin, Sr., builds an alligator pit in the backyard of his Sebring home, just south of Sebring, Florida. The pit is a sideline to Godwin's other jobs as butcher and postmaster. His wife, Pearl, sells gator products – key chains, belts and the like – out of her kitchen. After making their purchases, customers step outside and stare in amazement at a gator mom with her babies. Watching them, Godwin dreams of an attraction that would showcase Florida wildlife.
- 1947 After World War II, he buys a parcel of land off Hwy. 17/92 and 441 in nearby Kissimmee. Tourists were just beginning to travel to Florida. The road, then t state's second most traveled highway, would be a good place for an attraction, he reasons. Years later, the area in the heart of Central Florida's tourist district becomes home not only to Gatorland, but also to Walt Disney World, Universal Studios and SeaWorld.
- Godwin's 16-acre plot is actually a "borrow pit," having supplied dirt for the new highway. Three people invest \$100 each in Godwin's attraction. Most think it is a crazy notion. No one will pay to view Florida wildlife in a "borrow pit," they say. If people want to see alligators, they can just walk outside.
- 1948 Godwin, his wife and four children dig up palmettos and plant pine trees. His attraction would allow a rare, close-up view of animals in their native habitat.

Walk on the Wild Side

- 1949 Florida Wildlife Institute opens featuring alligators and snakes. What was to become Central Florida's first major attraction houses its gift shop in a stockade-style building with a dirt floor covered in sawdust. The shop's thatched roof is made by Seminole Indians who live on property & wrestle gators as part of the attraction's entertainment.
- 1950's Believing the Institute sounded more like a government-sponsored organization -
more -

than a tourist attraction, Godwin changes the name to Snake Village and Alligator Farm. Upon entering the park, visitors are greeted by a huge display of snakes.

The park also has alligator pools and an Indian village. Godwin notices cars speed up as they pass his sign. When families do stop, women often stay in the parking lot, while husbands and children go inside to view the snakes.

Success comes in the form of a huge crocodile Godwin buys from a Miami breeder. Known as Bone Crusher, the leathery giant is approximately 15 ft. long and weighs 1,080 lb. Godwin bills him as the world's largest captive crocodile, offering \$1,000 reward to anyone who could prove him wrong. No one rises to the occasion. Bone Crusher remains a major attraction for years.

Building on Bone Crusher's success, Godwin equips a special trailer with a fan, heater and bathtub for 12-ft. alligator, Cannibal Jake. During the summer off-season, man and beast travel to the Carolinas. Working with Mason Lodges, Godwin sets up displays in towns. People pay a dime each to view the mysterious creature. Godwin and Jake spend several summers on the New Jersey Boardwalk, too. The former clad in jodhpurs with cowboy boots and hat, regale passerby with wildlife tales. These tours and the pile of dimes collected from children marveling at the giant reptile keep Gatorland going in the early years.

Animal Attraction

- 1954 Snake Village gets a new name: **Gatorland.**
- 1954 The gift shop is renovated. Thatch roof and stockade-style structure give way to a modern building housing, not only the shop, but Godwin's home as well.
- 1960's As the tourism industry grows, so do the crowds at Gatorland. The attraction adds exhibits, one of the first being Coon House. The Godwin children had found an enormous, 25-ft. log on their property. They put a spectacular house on top, with screen door and spiral staircase then set the log upright. The resident, a raccoon, presents Godwin with a new obstacle to his dream of showing animal life native to Florida. The nocturnal critter sleeps inside all day, venturing out only in the dark of night.
- During the off season, Pearl and the children run the business. Godwin goes on safaris worldwide -- Africa, India, Honduras and Alaska -- searching for animals for the Gatorland zoo.
- 1962 The park's new attraction is zebras from Africa, the only ones in Central Florida. Godwin's youngest son, Frank, designs a unique entrance in the form of a gaping gator jaw painted in his father's favorite color scheme -- Florida aqua and white. In coming years, the signature mouth would be featured in movies, newspapers and magazines worldwide, beckoning tourists to take a walk on Florida's wild side. The gift shop expands in response to growing demand for the park's keepsakes.

1965 The Gatorland Train makes its maiden run. Children and adults enjoy tours of the park aboard the miniature, open-air locomotive. For pedestrians, new aqua, tin rooftops afford shade along exhibit walkways.

Evolution

1970 Gatorland incorporates as a family corporation.

1975 Owen Godwin, Sr., dies. Frank Godwin becomes president. He begins first major expansion of Gatorland with a snack bar renovation, including three kiosks in Florida design, with cypress boards and palm tree posts.

1978 Swamp Walk premieres. The 2,000 ft. boardwalk cuts through exquisite Florida wetlands, much as they existed thousands of years ago. In the tranquil preserve, visitors view hundreds of plants -- hyacinth, magnolia trees, 500-year-old Cypress and a marsh that serves as the headwaters to the Florida Everglades. Gift shop best sellers are Orange Blossom perfume, "I Love Mom" toothpick holders, and "crystal" flamingo necklaces, all priced at less than \$2.00.

1979 Gatorland starts research in alligator farming with the University of Florida (UF) and the Florida Wildlife Commission. Although alligators had been on the endangered species list, worldwide demand for gator products remained high. Gatorland gives UF a \$20,000 grant to study alligator reproduction. The resulting pioneer work helps populations in the wild become abundant once more.

1980's Gatorland is the only place worldwide where alligators have been artificially inseminated successfully. Previously, gators in captivity had been plagued by disease, infertility and embryonic death. Gatorland and UF develop state-of-the-art techniques for breeding alligators, incubating eggs and providing a diet and disease-free environment hatchlings need to thrive.

1983 The Gator Jumperoo debuts starring hungry reptiles lunging for their lunch: chickens of the store-bought variety suspended on wire a few feet above water. The famed Cracker-style wildlife show has been seen on television worldwide.

The attraction introduces the now-famous photo op: snapshots of tourists holding a gator and wrapped by the park's pet boa constrictor.

Flourishing

1988 With the addition of adjoining property, Gatorland becomes a 37-acre tourist attraction and wildlife preserve.

1989 The park becomes home to Florida Black Bear, Judy, a gift from the Florida Game Commission. The Commission had confiscated Judy after finding her in an illegal enclosure. In Gatorland's more spacious quarters, she lounges by a private pool with sun deck.

1991

Gatorland breaks ground on a major expansion to recapture a wilder, more natural Florida. Included in the expansion are: The Gator Stadium; Alligator Breeding Marsh; larger train tour, and Pearl's Smokehouse, serving up smoked gator ribs, gator nuggets, burgers, hot dogs and more.

The 800-seat Gator Stadium has a huge stage with surrounding moat. During 20-minute shows, a wrangler jumps into the water and brings a gator onto the stage. The audience is regaled with little known facts about the real-life, armored dragons.

The Breeding Marsh brings new depth to Owen Godwin's vision, when it opens as home to more than 100 alligators. The ten-acre wildlife refuge provides a spacious, stress-free environment gator find conducive to starting families. From the adjoining boardwalk and observation tower, visitors watch in wonderment as the creatures swim and sun in their natural habitat.

As a bonus, Gatorland becomes a vast rookery, with thousands of aquatic birds nesting above the marsh. Alligators protect nests from natural predators, like raccoons and opossums.

Today, the rookery is considered one of the largest in Central Florida. The theme park is one of the few places worldwide where visitors can watch endangered wading birds build nests and feed their young, all just an arm's reach away.

1992-'93

Snakes of Florida debuts near the new Piney Woods classroom behind the Marsh. The snake awareness program is for children and adults, including firefighters, police, emergency medical service professionals and environmentalists. It is part of Gatorland's newly expanded education program.

Snakes of Florida exhibit opens, as well, bringing Rattlesnakes, Rat Snakes, Cottonmouth Moccasins and more into the limelight. The show from the snake pit entertains and educates tourists more about Florida wildlife.

1995

Hawkeye, a giant red tail hawk, makes Gatorland his home. The bird, with a 48-in. wingspan, was rehabilitated and presented as a gift by the Florida Audubon Society. Gatorland launches "Gator Nights," and "awesome Florida Cracker experience." The two-hour gala begins at 8:00 with a miniature train ride to Pearl's Smokehouse. Cracker delicacies include smoked barbecue chicken and gator snacks. After dinner comes gator-wrestling entertainment. The finale is a boardwalk tour, where everyone can feast their eyes in wonder at hundreds of beady red gator eyes in surrounding waters. A fiddler and banjo picker entertain, Cracker-style, at the nighttime swamp party.

Gatorland's gift shop expands. The award-winning Florida-themed shop features a dazzling array of keepsakes and elegant, handcrafted alligator leather goods.

After a Wild Crocodile

- 1996 Mark McHugh is named Chief Executive Officer. McHugh comes to Gatorland from Sea World, where he was a curator and animal trainer. He is son-in-law of predecessor, Frank Godwin, who remains on the board of directors.
- 1997 Gatorland creates “real” kid fun with the debut of Alligator Alley, featuring more than a quarter mile of interactive and educational exhibits for children of all ages.
- Alligator Alley includes: Lilly’s Pad, a children’s play area offering fun and relaxation with slides, jungle gym and more. “Allie’s Barnyard,” a baby animal petting zoo, with llamas, goats, lambs, ducks and turkeys. Very Merry Aviary, home to free-flying, rainbow-colored lorikeets. The lorries are so friendly they land on the hands and shoulders of visitors who feed them. Gadzilla provides a rare photo op: snapshots of tourists perched inside a giant gator jaw (of the plastic variety... naturally).
- Workers remove antiquated concrete block pools to make way for more natural surroundings. Now, gators swim in the main lake, parrots fly to open-air perches and pythons slither about a large enclosure.
- 1998 Jungle Crocs of the World premieres. The two-acre display houses one of the world’s largest exhibits of giant crocodiles in captivity. The Jungle Crocs’ design reflects natural settings, where the beasts can grow to be more than 20 ft. long and weigh more than a ton. While people seldom get to see crocodiles move, this unprecedented exhibit features the world’s most ferocious predators exploding from water and chasing their prey onto land with startling speed. Children can enjoy a variety of animal encounters, visit the iguana exhibit, quails and the turtle pond.
- 1999 Gatorland becomes a 110-acre classroom with the newly expanded education program Children and adults take to the field for classes on Crocodylians, Wading Birds, Snakes and Florida Swamplands.
- A new Gator Jumparoo showcases younger, faster reptiles lunging for lunch in the famous, action-packed Florida wildlife show.
- Gatorland launches a package with a nearby airboat ride company in Kissimmee, Florida. The ticket offers discounted admission to tourists who want to combine a visit to the theme park with a tour along one of Florida’s most scenic natural waterways. There, they enjoy sensational views of towering Cypress trees, natural wetlands, eagles, osprey, alligators and more.
- 2000 After transporting over 7.5 million guests, the theme park retires the Iron-Horse Steam Engine. The train had logged over 200,000 miles and started to show the effects of the Florida sun and long-lines of smiles waiting to travel deep into the Florida swamp.
- 2001 The “Alligator Capital of the World” ushered in an all-new, chill generator as the new Iron horse locomotive pulled out of the train station at Gatorland for its inaugural run.

- 2002 The giant gaping gator's mouth entrance at the "Alligator Capital of the World" celebrated its 40th Anniversary as the theme parks icon.
- Babs Steorts joined the entertainment department as the first female gator handler in the theme park's history.
- Gatorland selected Jeremy and Daniel Kemp from Palmetto, Florida as the theme parks Ultimate Gator Guide contest. The contest launched a nationwide hunt for an adventurous outrider who longed for the spotlight and a chance to get up-close and personal with some of the natives at Gatorland, **Orlando's best ½ day attraction™**. Hordes of entries from across the country were submitted and from those the ten lucky finalists were selected.
- 2003 The Gator Jumparoo Show celebrates its 20th Anniversary as the theme parks most popular show and one of the most unique photo opportunities in central Florida.
- 2004 Cobalt, the world's only known blue alligator, goes on display in a new exhibit to showcase his unique coloring and protect him from the harsh Florida sun.
- A team of three alligator experts traveled to Alabama to aid in the capture of a 12-foot alligator, Chucky, displaced from his enclosure at the Gulf Coast Zoo during Hurricane Ivan. The successful rescue and capture of the large reptile took place in less than three hours.
- 2005 Gatorland's historic "Gator Mouth" goes under the drill. The million-dollar renovation features a new façade for the 55-year-old theme park and wildlife preserve.
- A team of four alligator experts traveled to Ken Malloy Regional Park to aid the City of Los Angeles Department of Recreation and Parks in capturing the alligator in Lake Machado.
- 2006 Mark McHugh, president and CEO of Gatorland takes over as the chairman of the Board of Directors for the Orlando/Orange County Convention & Visitors Bureau, Inc. (Orlando CVB). As the chairman, McHugh will be the first Small Attraction representative to receive the honor of being elected to represent the Orlando CVB's 1,400 + members in the future.
- Gatorland announces the death of one of the theme park's most beloved residents, Alf, a 14 ft. 4-inch American Crocodile who passed away of natural causes.
- A fire breaks out at Gatorland on Nov. 6, 2006. Despite the bravery and valiant effort of the firefighters, the 7,000 square-foot, award-winning Gift Shop and Executive Offices were lost. Tragically, one dwarf crocodile, two pythons and two hatchling alligators were also lost. Nov. 24, 2006, Gatorland reopened to the public to record numbers.

Out of the Ashes

- 2007 Gator Gully Splash Park, the area's most unique splash zone, opens in May featuring unusual water sources crafted to resemble some of the parks most popular residents.

On October 8, 2007 ground breaking ceremony took place marking the beginning of a new era as the theme park celebrates the construction of a new \$4 million-dollar Complex to be located at the site of the devastating fire that took place on November 6, 2006 destroying the original gift shop and theme park entrance.

- 2008 The Gift Shop & Admission Complex at Gatorland is completed on May 22, 2008. The complex features over 19,000 square feet of retail, meeting and office space along with an open-air admissions pavilion that incorporates the historic gator mouth entrance, state-of-the-art meeting facility and classroom, and a cleverly designed shopping area featuring unique gifts ideas and a pictorial timeline outlining the rich history of the theme park.
- 2009 White Gator exhibit opens on February 13, 2009. The new exhibit features four of the world's largest white leucistic alligators known to roam the planet. Ivory in color, the large reptiles are each ten to eleven plus feet in length, weigh over 800 pounds and have reflective blue eyes that are believed to command good fortune to those lucky enough to make eye contact with the blue-eyed beauties.
- 2010 The Mile of Monsters opened as a one-of-a-kind self-guided tour through the lair of some of the theme park's most notorious reptiles. The one-mile walk features the stories of twenty-four large alligators and crocodiles whose unique antisocial personalities have left those who work closest with them in need of therapy.
- 2011 Gatorland soars to new heights as it opens the world's first zip line to race above giant alligators and crocodiles in the all new Screamin' Gator Zip Line at Gatorland. The \$1.8 million-dollar project includes 5 intense zip lines and a 150-ft suspension bridge.
- The adventure of a lifetime, voted Best Zip Line in the USA by AOL Travel, takes guests on a breathtaking journey along 1,200 feet of high-flying thrills from seven platforms designed to merge with the architecture of the Breeding Marsh Tower. At heights up to 56 feet, guests fly near 30 miles an hour through the park.
- 2013 Lucy and Neiko, brother and sister Florida panthers, arrive to Gatorland from private owners who want to give them a better home. Panther Springs opens.
- 2014 Osceola and Abiaka, two male Florida bobcats, are rescued from where they were living in captivity. Gatorland's Bobcat Bayou becomes their new home.
- 2016 Gator Gauntlet, a single zip line and attraction accessible to park patrons with mobility challenges or other disabilities, officially opens as the only zip line of its kind in the Southeast U.S. The wheelchair accessible ride enables participants to travel 350 feet down a zip line, soaring over the park and its lake of giant alligators.
- Gatorland welcomes Lucy a 300lb Galapagos Tortoise to the park. Lucy joins two other giant tortoises that call Gatorland their home.

Largest Expansion In Park History

- 2017 Gatorland opens brand new Baby Gator Swamp in summer 2017 as dedicated retreat for dozens of growing baby alligators.

Gatorland breaks ground on a \$2 million park expansion, the largest since opening in 1949, in Spring 2017. The brand-new *Gator Joe's Adventure Outpost* and *Stompin' Gator Off-Road Adventure* opened in December 2017. The new *Stompin' Gator Off-Road Adventure* takes guests alongside the swamps that feed the headwaters of the everglades. Each of the three monster-style, off-road vehicles seats 12 riders, plus the driver, and is decorated to represent iconic alligators and crocodiles in Gatorland's rich history.

The new *Gator Joe's Adventure Outpost* is located in front of the *Stompin' Gator Off-Road Adventure*, and serves as the park's home base for reserving and purchasing all separately-ticketed park adventures, including the *Stompin' Gator Off-Road Adventure*, *Screamin' Gator Zip Line*, *Adventure Hour*, *Gator Night Shine* and *Trainer for A Day*.

2018

Gatorland Global was created in 2018 to provide a dedicated conservation program for Gatorland. Our simple mission of Gatorland Global is to *Protect, Conserve, and Educate*. Specific programs are designed to protect alligators and crocodiles in Florida, while providing dedicated resources to support conservation research of critically endangered crocodiles across the globe. The final leg of our mission is to educate people on the importance of alligators and crocodiles to our ecosystems, to respect their power and beauty, and how to safely live with them in Florida and in communities around the world.

2019

Gatorland welcomes its very first baby emu, Beeper, weighing 391 grams just one week after its birth. Emu eggs incubate about 70 days and are rotated five times a day by hand. Emus grow very quickly and are full grown just six months after their birth. Gatorland acquired seven emus in 2008, with this being the first time they have had eggs and a baby hatch. The park's Emus can be seen in the area of the park closest to Pearl's Restaurant.

Gatorland celebrates its 70th Anniversary in a big way, with two new annual events, **Gatorpalooza** in May and **Gatorland's Gators, Ghosts and Goblins** in October.

Gatorpalooza features live music, artisans, vendors, family fun, games and giveaways. Gatorland's Gators, Ghosts and Goblins takes place five days in the month of October and includes spooky themed areas, Ghoulish actors, fun shows, specialty vendors and Frank & Stein's Octoberfest Pavilion.

Gatorland opens the brand-new White Gator Swamp, home to the largest community of white gators in the U.S. Three huge natural exhibits with filtered sunlight to meet the delicate needs of rare white alligators.

Gatorland's white gators family grows with the addition of three new baby albino alligators, Sawyer, Huck and Ellie Mae. Adult members of Gatorland's albino and leucistic family include Pearl, Moonshine, Cottontail and Whiskey, already famous on Gatorland's Facebook page and YouTube Channel.

Gatorland provides a forever home for Larry the Alligator, the famous alligator from The Villages, Fla. who was showing on golf courses and city streets and getting too close to people. Gatorland stopped him from being euthanized by a trapper as part of its Gatorland Global conservation program.

2020 Gatorland renovates and expands historic Pearl's Restaurant, named after Founder Owner Godwin's wife, Pearl. The restaurant features southern favorites, now with an expanded menu and more outdoor seating.

Gatorland adds Ben and Jerry the Capybaras to the Petting Zoo area. Brothers Ben and Jerry came from a sanctuary in St. Cloud and were just 20 pounds when they arrived. They are expected to double their size in adulthood. They spend their days swimming, sunning themselves and rolling in the mud.

The Pandemic Hits

2020 As the global Coronavirus Pandemic spreads throughout the world, and in March 2020 forces the closure of cities and businesses for public safety including Gatorland. A team of dedicated professionals continue to go to the park every day to care for the animals. And Gatorland launches School of Croc™ - a Facebook Live program daily. School of Croc™ host Savannah Boan and a cast of other Gatorland staff and animals educated and entertained children at home with their families around the world while the park remained closed temporarily closed for just over two months and drew a following of one million views.

Gatorland introduces The Social Distancing Skunk Ape character to remind guests during global Covid 19 pandemic to stay 6 feet apart, keep hands clean and sanitize regularly. He becomes instantly famous in Gatorland's popular YouTube show, Gatorland Vlogs and in the Gatorland School of Croc Facebook Live Program.

Gatorland School of Croc and Social Distancing Skunk Ape T-shirts sell like hot cakes online and in the park's gift shop.

Gatorland holds First Annual Holiday Ho, Ho, Ho Down Christmas event featuring the Gatorland Express, Oh No Snowmen and Gator Claws Characters, Gingerbread Trailer Park, Social Distancing Skunk Ape and Gatorland's Merry Elves.

Conservation and New Critters

2021 Gatorland acquires David, the Lake Michigan alligator, who was famously found near death with his mouth taped shut in frigid waters near Chicago, and Casanova, an American alligator who was rescued from a drug house living in a 40-gallon tank with no light or heat, as part of the park's Gatorland Global Conservation program and mission to Protect, Conserve and Educate.

Gatorland welcomes Marshall the Laughing Kookaburra to the park's family of animals. Marshall, who is two years old, comes to Gatorland from a loving home in South Florida. Kookaburras are the largest members of the Kingfisher bird family, and native to Australia. Visitors to Gatorland can see Marshall in the park's Jungle Crocs of the World where he will live near the Australian Saltwater Crocodile exhibits.

Gatorland adds Felix the Donkey and Buffy the Baby Buffalo to the Gatorland family of animals.

2022 Gatorland debuts an exciting new Capybara Encounter at Flamingo Island. The new guide led encounter allows guests in small groups to interact with Jerry, Mochi and Boba the parks resident capybara in a safe and engaging setting. Capybara have already become an internet sensation and are quickly becoming a guest favorite, its no surprise that they're topping the list of must-see attractions at Gatorland.

In December 2022 Gatorland's beloved "Chester" The Big Dog Eater, and Gatorland's first rescued alligator passed away. Gatorland experts and a team of specialized veterinarians worked around the clock and made unprecedented efforts to save the huge 13.5-foot, 1,000-pound American alligator. The local community and Gatorland fans responded to the announcement with a huge outpouring of sympathy and personal messages on social media and at the park. Chester was a favorite and longtime member of the Gatorland family.

The Adventure Continues

2023 Gatorland opens a new attraction - Croc Rock - A Three-In-One Adventure. Guests experience the challenge of rock climbing, the excitement of crossing a 150-foot swing bridge, and the thrill of ziplining all in one.