The Odditorium

Like many Floridians, we have an abundance of winter visitors who show up when the snow begins to fall up north. It only takes a week or so after the first blizzard strikes New England before the phone rings and a cousin asks if a spare room is available.

We hadn’t seen the cranky uncle and his extra-sized wife in some time, so it was with some trepidation that we agreed to a visit just before Easter.

The problem with the cranky uncle was that he had seen it all: Disney World, Cape Canaveral, the Everglades, and fishing off the Florida Keys. We’d be hard-pressed to entertain them again, especially as the extra-sized wife was sensitive to the sun and detested the beach.

But one morning at the gas station, I saw a handbill stuck on the side of the soda machine that announced:

The Odditorium

Since 1958

Closing at the End of the Season – Visit Soon

No one in our social circle had heard of The Odditorium until one of the old geezers at the end of the street told me it was on the far side of Immokalee, beyond the orange groves and past the sugar cane fields.

“Good luck finding it,” he said.

Before we set off, my wife suggested feeding the cranky uncle and his extra-sized wife a large breakfast. “That should keep them happy for part of the day,” she remarked. So, French toast, pancakes, eggs, bacon, sausages, and fried potatoes were served.

“Eat up,” I said. “We have a special destination today.”

Finding myself somewhat lost, I was losing hope when we turned north at Lake Okeechobee, and I saw a faded sign that read, “The Odditorium – 1 mile.”

We drove along a dirt track next to one of those ubiquitous canals that dot central Florida. The views across the open expanse were stunning, but the cranky uncle and his extra-sized wife were fast asleep in the back seat, the result of my wife’s clever breakfast ploy.

Ahead was a dirt parking lot with several old, yellow school buses parked at what appeared to be the entrance. Pickup trucks, camper vans, and cars were scattered around the area.

In front was a large Florida wood stork standing at attention. I swear I heard him say, “Go straight through this gate.” We walked in, and ahead was an announcement board:

*Enclosure 1 – Branson Garden Club*

*Enclosure 2 – St. Alphonsus Alumnae Association*

*Enclosure 3 – Louisville Junior Baseball Team*

*Enclosure 4 – Residents with Northern Guests*

“Oh, that must be us,” exclaimed the extra-sized wife, who was finally coming to life. “We’re your Northern Guests to be sure.”

Two Florida panthers, sitting in lounge chairs and wearing sunglasses, pointed with their paws to the opening by Enclosure 4.

We joined several other families. The enclosure was pleasant, and two young bobcats dressed in tuxedos showed us to our seats. Soon, we heard the door click behind us, and the lights dimmed.

Suddenly, outside, a parade of animals walked past the window. The scene looked like something from Noah’s Ark, with different types of animals walking in pairs and small groups.

A few were holding cameras, snapping pictures of us sitting inside. Several owls stopped in front, turning their heads back and forth. A pelican swooped low, dropping a smelly fish. A small group of mules pressed their noses against the glass. Seeing us, they broke into laughter, their big teeth showing. Some sandhill cranes flapped their wings in what appeared to be an obscene gesture. At the end of the parade, a golf cart passed by, driven by an alligator sitting up on his tail with earplugs in.

The lights came back on, and the door clicked open.

My wife, the sensible one in the family, said, “I guess we’ve had the tables turned on us. This probably means that Mother Nature will have the last word on the last day.”

The extra-sized wife said, “That was scary. I felt like a … a … trapped beast.”

On our way out, a black bear was standing by the exit. He was wearing a Stetson hat and smoking a cigar.

“Why is The Odditorium closing?” I asked.

The bear flicked his cigar ash at me and replied, “A developer has bought all this land, so we are leaving. This is the only place in Florida where we can be ourselves. Soon, this area will be a shopping mall. The wetlands, mangrove forests, and sawgrass marshes will be parking lots. The developers are unstoppable, so we will be moving to the great swamp to the north. Have a good day.”

The cranky old uncle muttered, “I’ll be damned. Never seen such a strange place. I’ll be glad to be going home.”