



Our beloved Tamiami Trail has been in the news a lot lately, and not for the best reasons. So I thought I'd share a story that's a little lighter and a lot more heartwarming. It's about a landmark along that road that's meant a great deal to Ray and me over the years. Not just because any road traversing a national park is special to us, but because of the memories tied to one very specific spot.

For over forty years now, Ray and I have had this quirky little tradition on our drives to Naples. Every time we pass a certain spot just down and across from the tiny Ochopee Post Office, we both say, "Beer Worms." Out loud. Every time. It started thanks to this handmade sign on a wooden bridge. We never knew who put it there or why, but it stuck. It became our thing. Our good-luck ritual. If we forget to say it, the drive just feels... off, like we left something behind.

We always thought the sign was kind of weird, *pero* that's as far as our curiosity went. We just figured someone must have sold beer and worms there. Honestly, I'm slightly embarrassed *que* it took me four decades to finally ask, "What's the deal with the Beer Worms?" What I found was a fascinating slice of Florida's history. The story of Clara and Sam McKay.

Back in the 1950s, way before Big Cypress National Preserve was even a thing, their five-acre place—Ochopee Farms—was a go-to stop for travelers. They had a few chickee huts, *un* little trailer camp for folks passing through, and they sold everything from fishing worms and beer to whatever else people on the road might need.

After Sam passed away, Clara (better known as Mama Hokie) kept the place going for more than 30 years. This woman was tough as nails. At 81, she was attacked by an alligator and lost part of her arm, but she bounced back and learned to do life with one hand. Five years later, floodwaters from Tropical Depression Jerry nearly claimed her life again. She fought through that too, but the ordeal left her frail, and she passed away in December 1996. Fun fact: there's even a song about her called "*Mama Hokie's Beer Worms*" by GaterNate the

Glazemen. Which makes me feel a little less weird about randomly saying “Beer Worms” in my car for four decades. At least there’s a soundtrack. ☐

The sign, the chickee huts, and the old compound are long gone now, but a weathered old house and a familiar cluster of palm trees still mark the spot for us. These days, our drive to Naples is a weekly occasion, and every time we drive by, Ray and I still say, “Beer Worms,” just like we always have.

It’s funny how something so random can become part of your own story. So, on this Thankful Thursday, I’m especially grateful for traditions like that. The silly simple ones that end up weaving themselves into the fabric of your life and make shared memories even sweeter.

And, of course, for Clara McKay, a true Everglades trailblazer and a strong, well-loved woman who touched everyone she met.

How about you? Do you have any quirky traditions that came out of a random piece of history? If you don’t, I highly recommend starting one.

*“It takes an endless amount of history to make even a little tradition.”*

*-H. James*



[Sources: *Florida Weekly* (Naples Edition); *Florida Memory*, State Library & Archives of Florida.]



[Source: Me, taken August 19, 2017, Ochopee, FL]

[Note: In case you are not Spanglish-speaking, “si Dios quiere” means God-willing. Mom finished most of her sentences with that phrase. After her passing, I added it to my sendoff in her honor.]

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