



Weeki Wachee Springs State Park

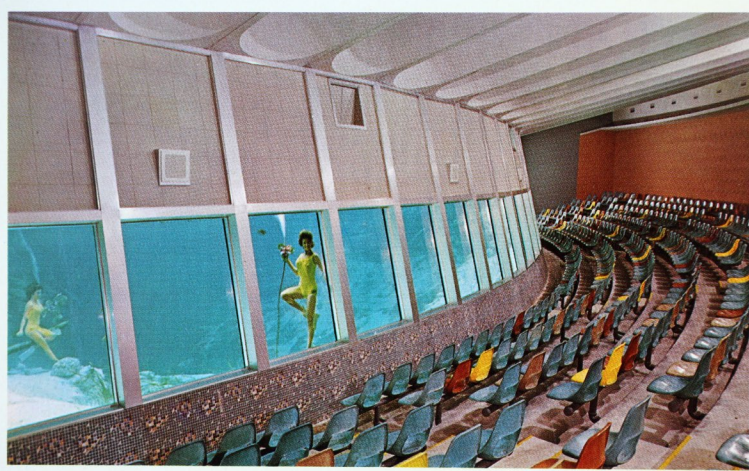
Mermaids have been part of the world's mythology for millennia, but it wasn't until 1947 that mermaids became a centerpiece of one of Florida's classic tourist attractions at Weeki Wachee Springs. Walton Hall Smith and Newt Perry created the attraction and hired local teens to play the mermaid roles but without the tails. Mermaid tails came later, in the mid-1960s.

Perry was a pioneer in the development of underwater performances using air locks and air hoses as well as in underwater photography and cinematography that he first honed at Wakulla Springs and Silver Springs. Besides the elaborate underwater ballets that were developed, underwater stunts and illusions included smoking cigarettes and drinking sodas underwater.



The first Weeki Wachee mermaids received hamburgers, hotdogs and publicity, but no pay. They also waved at passersby along the highway in their bathing suits to lure drivers into the attraction. Later, they often sat on the clamshell roof of the mermaid theater to attract the attention of passing cars.

The 1948 movie, *Mr. Peabody and the Mermaid*, was largely filmed at the springs. The attraction's performers assisted with the movie promotion and it melded the mermaid image with Weeki Wachee to the present day. A few male performers were also fea-



The Fabulous Underwater Aquaz Theatre, Weeki Wachee, Florida

ured in the early days and they still play key roles in the performances.

A Weeki Wachee mermaid once said that to dive into the strong current of the spring was like trying to swim up a waterfall. It took fortitude, and the performers had to smile and make it look effortless. Today's mermaids must be scuba certified and undergo a rigorous training program before being allowed to perform.

In 1959, the attraction was purchased by the American Broadcasting Company (ABC). They built the current 400-seat theater 16 feet below the spring's surface where visitors felt they were inside a flowing spring. ABC created themes for the mermaid shows such as Peter Pan, Snow White, Alice in Wonderland, and the Wizard of Oz, and they built large underwater props. By the early 1960s, Weeki Wachee reached its zenith. The eight shows a day were often sold out, luring up to half a million visitors a year. But when I-75 was completed, it began to siphon visitors away, and the emergence of mega-theme parks in the Orlando area also took a toll. Weeki Wachee fell on hard times. Starting in 1984, the attraction was bought and sold several times before becoming Florida's 160th state park in 2008.

About 30 mermaids are currently employed at the park. Four shows a day are offered during the summer and three a day after Labor Day. Park attendance is steadily rising and shows are often filled to capacity. Summer is especially busy, partly because of another park feature: the Buccaneer Bay water park just downstream of the mermaid



theater. Visitors can also take a river boat cruise or canoe or kayak the river by launching at the park. Rentals and shuttles are available. A popular attraction are periodic shows featuring former mermaids, many of whom performed on a regular basis in the 1960s, 70s and 80s. They embrace the motto “once a mermaid, always a mermaid.” After all, Weeki Wachee still boasts the only underwater mermaid theater in the world.

Several promotional films were made of the Weeki Wachee mermaids, including this one from 1961 entitled “[Beauty in the Deep.](#)” courtesy of the Archives of Florida.

Here’s another 1961 promotional film from the Archives of Florida that covers the training of a new mermaid. It is entitled “[Care and Feeding of a Mermaid.](#)”

This promotional film entitled “[Have Circus, Won’t Travel!](#)” from the late 1950s/early 60s features part of an underwater show of the era. Courtesy of the Archives of Florida.



