

## Atlantic Beach: Dagley Junkyards

by [Tim Gilmore](#), 4/10/2022

One morning before sunrise in the late 1940s, Ray Dagley took his oldest boy still at home (Lyle Lee had signed up for the Air Force and left) out to the woods [along Floral Bluff just east of the St. Johns River](#) to go squirrel hunting. Raymond, Jr. watched the squirrels scamper down from the treetops and popped eight or 10 of them before he wondered where his father had gone.



They were on Raymond's grandfather Henry's land where Ray had started parking his cars. Soon enough, Raymond found his father in the shrubs and tall weeds pulling a transmission from a clunker. The open hood of the old car had called Ray Dagley out of bed that morning. The squirrel hunting trip was more of a ruse, the gun a babysitter for Raymond.



[Burdette-Clarke House, built in 1887, Floral Bluff](#)

When Raymond asked his father, "Whose car is this, Daddy?" he said, "It's my car." A little ways off in the woods Raymond found another junker and asked whose car it was. That was his father's too. It was the same with the third car he found. So he asked his daddy why he had all these old cars out here on his grandfather's land, and Ray said, "If you had a bunch of old cars, where would you put 'em?"



[Bigelow Mansion, burnt to the ground on New Year's Eve, 1950, Floral Bluff](#)

And that became the most pertinent question, a question of origins, of genesis. Ray Dagley couldn't stop buying old cars and you had to put them someplace. Granddaddy, however, was getting tired of his growing collection taking up space on his land.



"Well," says Raymond, Jr., 68 years old, seated beside an open car hood beneath the corrugated tin roof of a tall garage with walls on two sides, "my Daddy'd got run over when he was a little boy. He was a cripple. He got run over by a car and his leg was stiff as a board, so he couldn't do a lot of regular kind of jobs, but it never stopped him from doin' his own thing."



Raymond Dagley, Jr., photo by Jeff Whipple

He found a stretch of low lying sand and rock in the marshes near the beach, land nobody wanted, and parked a couple cars there. It didn't solve the problem. Purchases kept happening, there were more and more cars, and the land wasn't getting any bigger. Still Ray built a garage and a little house here in a corner pocket off Mayport Road and Atlantic Boulevard and moved his wife Mabel out to the marshes.



"I don't know what I'm gonna do," Ray told Old Henry Dagley one day. "The cars just keeps growin' and I'm run out of land. I guess I'm gonna have to start stackin' 'em one on top of the other."

The kids had swingsets and treehouses in amongst the parked Chevy pickups and Ford coupes, so their grandfather said, "You can't start stackin' cars out here, not with them little kids runnin' around. You need more land."



Ray conceded he needed more land, but said he didn't have the money. "Well," Old Henry Dagley said, "You pick the land and I'll provide the means."



The Dagley family junkyards stretch across the lowlands and the hills that cover the old Atlantic Beach Landfill on both sides of West Sixth Street. Each brother has 44 lots on his own side of the road. Donald Dagley's junkyard stretches from Tulip Street to the marshes along Kestner Creek, from West Sixth back to West Ninth, while Raymond's Auto Salvage and Junkyard spreads from Tulip across Begonia Street just toward Jasmine, west of West Sixth to the Intracoastal Waterway.



Donald Dagley is as terse as his brother is talkative. Over on his side of West Sixth, he doesn't care to say much about his 65 years out here. As for what it was like to grow up on these 88 lots, he just says, "You learn a lotta shit." Thinner than his brother, slightly stooped and with a overbite, his shoulder length hair swept back from his face, Donald stands up from the pimped out 1980s Chevy sedan he's working on his garage and looks at his visitors with suspicion.



"I don't usually let nobody walk around back here," Donald says. "Don't fall down. Don't leave no windows open or doors open. I don't need raccoons in the cars. I don't need to talk. I don't need no publicity."



Donald Dagley, photo by Jeff Whipple

Artists Jeff Whipple and Liz Gibson wander past squat oaks that throw branches like tentacles over the salt water and old Chevrolet vans, half a sky blue Volkswagen Bug perched on top, pickups with rusted beds piled with ancient engine blocks, perched like they might fly off over the marshes, all *Thelma and Louise*, if their wheels weren't sunk in the earth. Jeff and Liz usually go to a different junkyard on Valentine's Day, but they missed it this year. So here they are with the Dagleys on St. Patrick's.



"Look," Liz says, identifying with a particular pickup. "If I'm this truck, I'll just retire right here and look out at the water. That's my view every day!" A strange toxic irony obtains in the fact that these junkyards protect the wetlands from real estate development.



"I don't usually let nobody walk around back here," Raymond says on the opposite side of West Sixth, then sits back, wearing a gray t-shirt and jean shorts beneath a sign that says, "Warning: Fart Zone" and starts to tell the whole Biblical backstory.



Though the old patriarch Henry Dagley bought all these acres, both sides of West Sixth from West Third to West Ninth, for Raymond, Sr. to park his clunkers and junkers and raise his family, and though Raymond, Sr. always looked for ways to serve his community, Atlantic Beach, says Raymond, Jr., has never wanted them here. For decades, Ray Dagley was a Boy Scout leader with Troop 37 and when the City of Atlantic Beach asked him if it could use some of his land for the town dump, he let them. Still, Raymond, Jr. says, "The leaders invited us to leave."



He didn't want to go with his father to the City Council meetings. He wanted to stay home and watch TV or play outside, but Ray told him he was going, that he needed to see how these things worked. It was 1965. "They told us, they said, 'We're not gonna have a junkyard at Atlantic Beach,' and my dad said, 'Guess what? There's already a junkyard at Atlantic Beach. I've been here for 15 years.'"



Somebody told Ray Dagley he needed a lawyer. Somebody else recommended Scott Jensen, who had just opened an office around the corner on Mayport Road. "And that lawyer, he was young," Raymond says, "and he went in there and he said, 'Well I'm this lawyer and I'm gonna tell you how things are gonna be. And there's such-and-such a case that was so-and-so versus so-and-so from this year and that and here's what this law says and that law and this junkyard is grandfathered in and if you don't like it, we'll see you in court.'



"And then finally what did it, he found the maps and he could show 'em and he said, 'All this part of the junkyard is technically in the City of Atlantic Beach, but this corner right here is actually in Jacksonville and that's gonna be the address.' And that was it. And Bingo was his name-oh."



Out on the grassy sides of each dirt lane, cars sit side by side and wait silently and rust and corrode in the salt air and host snakes and rats and bobcats. The particular collection of cars on each side of West Sixth differs from the other as much as the brothers do. On Raymond's side, the cars parked closer to the road are closer to drivable. Dating back to the 1980s, they wait to be towed away and scrapped, while cars further back toward the 'dump hill' and the hidden house lie more deeply buried in jungle than on Donald's side. On Donald's side are older cars, more muscle cars, numerous chassis of Corvettes tossed atop vans and trucks like misplaced Frisbees. The rear ends of contoured sportscars on Donald's side stick up in the air, balanced on rusted-out oil drums, campers on leaning stacks of cinderblocks.



Beside the rusted corpse of a once elegant Ford that oxidizes red into the earth like the Bonnie and Clyde Death Car, Liz refers to the junkyard as a library. Everyone of these cars is a story, she says. "The junkyard needs to be your next book." She's right. The new Edgar Lee Masters *Spoon River Anthology*, the 1915 collection of poems, each a narrative that tells the life attached to a particular gravestone. This one's *Dagley Junkyard Anthology*: each junked car is a short story.



Everybody says Raymond, Jr. is more like Raymond, Sr. than Donald is. Or at least Raymond, Jr. says they do. "Now my dad, he was always giving to everybody," Raymond adds. "And me, I give away more than I sell. My brother don't give away nothin'. And he's got lots of money and I don't have any." Raymond and Donald each inherited half of their father's land, one hill from the old town dump on each side, but Raymond's side is where the house where they grew up used to stand. "And," he adds, "it's where Little Raymond lives now."



Little Raymond "ain't little," he adds. "He's a big ole boy." Little Raymond's house is back toward the Intracoastal, across from the dump hill, but it's hard to see because there are so many cars piled up in front of it and the cars are so grown over with vines and saplings and weeds and grasses. The house Raymond and Donald grew up in is gone, but Ray built Little Raymond's house too. It was Ray and Mabel's house first.



"Then one day my older sister, she'd married this fella and they had Little Raymond, and she stabbed this fella with a pair of scissors and dropped Little Raymond off with my mother in that house. My mother said, 'Okay, I'll watch him, but let's not make this a habit.' Then my sister left and she never came back. So when my mom died and my dad died, they left the house to Little Raymond." Little Raymond called Ray Dagley, "Uncle Senior." He calls Raymond, "Uncle Junior."



High overhead circle vultures. They sweep out over the marshes, bank against invisible currents and hang back over the school buses and full sized vans and Dodge Chargers sunken into unstable earth atop decades of garbage from beach homes. An osprey glides over a tall pine and a power line.

"Them ospreys," Raymond says, "they're protected species. But the power lines kill 'em. Scorch 'em." His brother watched an osprey catch fire on a power line and crash to the earth like Lucifer. Donald watched the carcass for a few weeks as the feathers and the flesh fell away from the bones and finally Donald cut off the bird's feet. He took one foot, fashioned the talons around a steel ball bearing, and hung it up in his garage.



Another day a young girl approached Raymond and asked him if he'd drive her somewhere to take care of another osprey the power lines had fried. The bird was still alive, its wing broken, bones protruding and turned the wrong way. She tried putting its wing right while the osprey tried to bite her. Raymond told her he was busy and besides it was a felony "to mess with an endangered species." He says, "She kept trying to stuff the bird in her backpack and it didn't wanna go in that backpack." Finally she flagged down some people who agreed to drive her to the Mayport Ferry and across the river to BEAKS (Bird Aid and Kare Sanctuary) on Big Talbot Island.



These junkyards are home to armadillos, who leave their divots in trails through the mud, raccoons and the occasional coyote. The only fox Raymond's ever seen hopped out of the dirt in the back of a pickup truck hauled off a golf course.



Raymond says town leaders still don't want the Dagley boys here, that a few years ago some plainclothesmen dressed all in black arrived in a black Dodge Charger with black rims and demanded to see his licenses. They acted mysteriously and menacingly, "looked just like the Men in Black" of urban legends. When Raymond handed them his recently renewed business license, he says, one of them snatched it out of his hands and threw it on the ground.



The men cursed him and threatened him, he says, "and it turned out what they was wantin' was the *al*-griculture license. I didn't even know I had to have a *al*-griculture license. So I says, 'Well, how much is it?' and the man says, 'How the fuck am I supposed to know?'" The MIB said they'd be back, but they've never returned.



It doesn't matter either way to Raymond. All these acres are Dagley land and he's got all he needs. If mysterious government figures want to show up and harass him, just tell him what petty bureaucratic papers they want him to buy and he'll do it. The junkyard's been here for 75 years and it's not going anywhere. Real estate developers menace the Dagleys too. It's a waterfront junkyard, looking over marsh grass and forking creeks, prime development land. Doesn't matter.



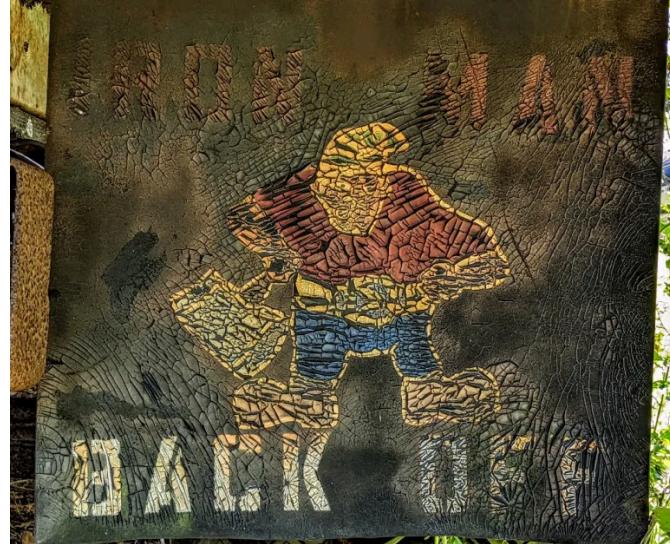
"What do I need their money for?" Raymond asks. He just junked 240 cars, mostly for the steel, and got \$85,000. He pulled the catalytic converters and raked in a few thousand more.



Out among the palm trees and oaks, the found joke of a "Reduced Speed Ahead" sign propped against a minivan with a boat on top, the camphor tree forked out of riprap, a rusted wrecker wrecked and subsumed in overgrowth, the messages on mud flaps and bumper stickers constitute their own library, a *vox populi*, The Voice of America.



Exhibit no. 1: "I ♥ Guns & Titties." (Someone placed the sticker backwards, so that it reads forward only from inside the cab of the pickup.) Or "Bill Thompson, Electric." Or any of several alligator depictions. Or "Iron Man. Back Off."



Raymond and Donald may own opposite sides of West Sixth, but when Men in Black drive their dark cars into the muck and limestone, Ray Dagley's ghost drags his stiff leg through these wetlands, his land purchased all those years ago by the patriarch, Old Henry, grandfathering the wet stinking fertile earth against the government bogeyman.



It's an old American story. Life on the godforsaken Promised Land. Cycles of destruction and creation. Puerile politics threatening all progress.



For the 40-some percent of Americans who believe the Bible mentions the United States, the Old Testament began on Northeast Florida marshes. Didn't it? Mightn't it as well have?



The earth carved itself from deep-time. We the people, just smarter apes, built the world from the earth, propped it up with a mythos. The world rises from the earth and ever falls back. Dying and newborn ancient, junkyard Jacksonville corrupts the Garden of Eden. And still the earth reabsorbs the world. It is its own and only hope.

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