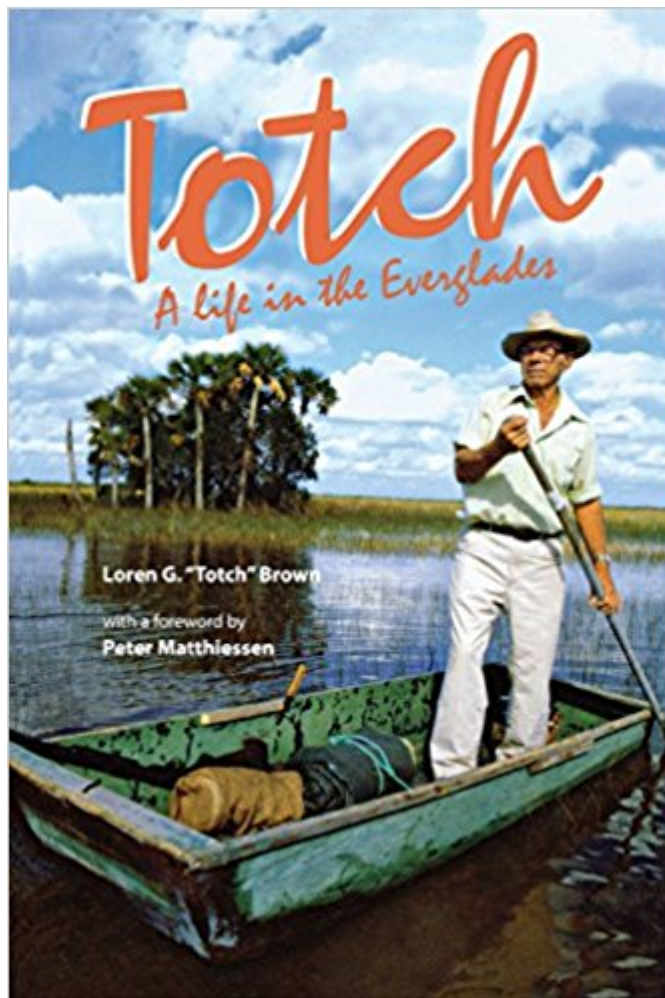


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# Totch: A Life In The Everglades



## Synopsis

"Totch Brown's memoirs of vanished days in the Ten Thousand Islands and the Everglades--the last real frontier in Florida, and even today the greatest roadless wilderness in the United States--are invaluable as well as vivid and entertaining, for Totch is a natural-born story-teller, and his accounts of fishing and gator hunting as well as his life beyond the law as gator poacher and drug runner are evocative and colorful, fresh and exciting."--from the foreword by Peter Matthiessen

In the mysterious wilderness of swamps, marshes, and rivers that conceals life in the Florida Everglades, Totch Brown hung up his career as alligator hunter and commercial fisherman to become a self-confessed pot smuggler. Before the marijuana money rolled in, he survived excruciating poverty in one of the most primitive and beautiful spots on earth, Chokoloskee Island, in the mangrove keys known as the Ten Thousand Islands located at the western gateway to the Everglades National Park. Until he wrote this memoir--recollections from his childhood in the twenties that merge with reflections on a way of life dying at the hands of progress in the nineties--Totch had never read a book in his life. Still, his writing conveys the tension he experienced from trying to live off the land and within the laws of the land. Told with energy and authenticity, his story begins with the handful of souls who came to the area a hundred years ago to homestead on the high ground formed from oyster mounds built and left by the Calusa Indians. They lived close to nature in shacks built of tin or palmetto fans; they ate wild meat, Chokoloskee chicken (white ibis), swamp cabbage, even--when they were desperate--manatee; and they weathered all manner of natural disaster from hurricanes to swarms of "swamp angels" (mosquitoes). In his grandpa's day, Totch writes, outlaws and cutthroats would "shoot a man down just as quick as they'd knock down an egret, especially if he came between them and the plume birds." His grandparents were both contemporaries of Ed J. Watson, the subject of Peter Matthiessen's best-selling *Killing Mr. Watson*, and Totch is featured in the recent award-winning PBS film *Lost Man's River: An Everglades Adventure with Peter Matthiessen*. He also appeared in *Wind Across the Everglades*, the 1957 Budd Schulberg movie in which Totch and Burl Ives sing some of Totch's Florida cracker songs.

Loren G. "Totch" Brown was born in Chokoloskee, Florida, in 1920. After purchasing his first motorboat at the age of thirteen (and retiring from formal schooling after the seventh grade) he worked as an alligator hunter, commercial fisherman, crabber, professional guide, poacher, marijuana runner, singer, and songwriter.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

A commercial fisherman, marijuana smuggler, and alligator hunter and poacher, Totch is a native son of Florida's southwesternmost coast, the Ten Thousand Islands. His natural-style storytelling enlivens his and his family's history of eking out a living on the edge of the Everglades. These memoirs--which begin with his pioneer grandparents in 1880, proceed to his childhood in the 1920s, and end up in the 1990s--give us a glimpse of a hard life of poverty and pride, honesty and crime. Totch lives by his own rules; he doesn't glorify or excuse his lifestyle but lays it out for us so that we can understand the strength it takes to survive on the edge. Recommended for folklore, ecology, and Florida history collections.- Susan Hamburger, Univ. of Virginia Lib., Charlottesville  
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The colorful recollections of an Everglades old-timer, Loren "Totch" Brown, whose father was a moonshiner and who, himself, hunted alligators and smuggled marijuana. It was a hardscrabble life--particularly when it involved farming or fishing on the shell islands. Then again, it was a wonderful life; Totch always had a great time, it seems, hiring out to Hollywood and getting to know Peter Falk and Burl Ives, or running a charter and watching Richard Nixon fall from the boat and Ted Simmons stop to play ball with local school children. Totch was a principal source for Peter Matthiessen's 1990 Everglades novel, *Killing Mister Watson*, and Matthiessen contributes a heartfelt introduction. John Mort --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

I have struggled with how to review this book. For me, it is so much bigger and richer because of

how it confirms and supports details in several other books I've read on south Florida recently (see Killing Mr. Watson, Shadow Country and A Land Remembered in earlier book reviews. Also see Last Train to Paradise, the story of Henry Flagler's overseas railroad and Black Cloud, the story of the 1928 hurricane that destroyed the city of Belle Glade and led to the construction of the Herbert Hoover Dike that rings the south end of Lake Okechobee.) Totch: A Life In the Everglades is an autobiography written by Loren G. Brown, known as Totch. Totch was born in 1920 on Chokoloskee Island (three years after my father). He was one of five children born to J.J Brown and Alice Jane McKinney. There isn't a page in this book that doesn't connect with a person, location or event in one of the other books I have mentioned, or to places I have been on my paddling trips in the area. Yet this account is not historical fiction or researched non-fiction as the other books are. This is a first person account of life in the Everglades seen through the eyes and experiences of one man, that bridges the generations between Ed Watson's time and the time of Collier, Flagler and the other important figures of the 19th and 20th centuries. For example, the Daniels family is prominent in Killing Mister Watson, mainly because two Daniels sisters served as Watson's live in housekeepers at Chatham Bend after his first wife died and another became ill and had to move to Fort Meyers. He had a daughter named Minnie with the older sister, Josie, and two children, Pearl and an infant son who died in the 1910 hurricane, with Netta, the younger Daniels sister. The connection is that Totch's aunts married two Daniels brothers whose children were Totch's cousins. Another example is the connection between Watson's youngest surviving son Lucius, Totch and Totch's older brother Peg. They were close friends for over forty years. Totch was either an admirable survivalist, living as best he could off the land, a decorated war hero and devoted husband, or he was a moonshiner, poacher, drug runner and convicted IRS tax dodger. All of the above are true, depending on how you want to make your value judgements. He was also an author, actor, singer and songwriter. Before there was an Everglades National Park (before 1947), Totch and his family lived on what they could take out of the Everglades. They trapped raccoons for fur and killed alligators for hides. These they sold for the few necessities they could not secure for themselves in the wild. Interestingly, they did not eat raccoon or alligator meat. They saw these animals as a source of hides generating cash, not as food. They simply tossed the skinned carcasses in the river and let the swamp creatures take care of the remains. They killed salt birds and caught fish for meat. They collected many fruits that grew in the Glades for food and raised vegetables where they could. Totch's Dad had stills hidden in the Glades where he made moonshine all through prohibition, selling it to the locals. When Everglades National

Park was established and hunting, especially gator hunting was banned, Totch only saw this as an inconvenience to his continuing the way of life he'd been born to. He delighted in evading capture by the park rangers when on his gator hunts, just as he got an adrenaline rush out of evading the Columbian and US Coast Guards in his drug running days. I must say that I could sympathize with the poaching in the National Park because it had been his way of life for many years. But I had a lot of trouble with the drug running. It seemed out of character and unnecessary. Three generations of Browns and McKinneys disdained game hunters, folks who came to the Glades just to hunt and kill animals for the thrill of it. They took pride in the fact that they never killed an animal they didn't need to survive. And none of them had the stomach for plume hunting. The vivid descriptions of this awful process evoke images of clubbing baby seals for their pure white skins. The Browns and McKinneys shared the values of the Seminole Indians for whom they had great respect on this topic. The book illustrates just how strong and hardy these men and women were. Life was hard, really hard physically with few modern comforts. Swamp Angles, is the Glade native term for mosquitoes. They were a constant scourge, sometimes bad, sometimes not so bad, but always present. Totch's most idillic period came in the early 1930's when his family joined his uncle's family living in Ed Watson's big house at Chatham Bend (Chatham Bend is a beautiful spot. I have camped there.) Even though it was the depth of the Depression, the family thrived by living off the land, and selling moonshine. Their biggest luxury was the big screened in front porch of the Watson house. With a little repair and ingenuity they were able to get some relief from the swamp angles and sand flees (which we call Noseeums). An example of just how hard the work could be is exemplified by wash day. When I grew up, Monday was wash day and it took much of the day to complete. For these pioneer women wash day started with hauling water to several large wash tubs under which fires were kept burning. Clothes were boiled in soapy water then rinsed once in a second tub. Next they were scrubbed on a coarse board to remove stains and rinsed again. After a final rinse and wringing out, the clothes were hung in the open to dry in the sun and wind. Left over wash and rinse water became bath water. Women and children washed first, then it was the men's turn. All the while this process was going on, the women were expected to prepare three meals for their families. The men's days were even more demanding and often dangerous, working in the fields or wading through the swamps hunting gators or checking traps. I found it curious and even hard to believe that no one wore shoes, or even owned a pair (I read this in several books. Totch Brown confirmed it). Whether working in the fields, wading in the swamps or hiking across oyster bars, they wore no shoes. I can't walk

across my lawn without something on my feet! These people were tough! There are a few things that this book confirms that I read in the historical fiction accounts. Totch mentions the stills and moonshine but makes almost no mention of drinking and the part it played in pioneer culture. Yet excessive alcohol consumption plays a big roll in all the other books. It's a curious omission and perhaps a bit self-serving. Another area of interest is the Glades people's relationship with the Seminoles. In the Watson book, the Seminoles are treated with great caution. One Seminole woman is banned from the tribe for mixing with whites. She is raped by a field hand on the Watson farm and hangs herself. Totch Brown confirms that mixing was banned and Seminoles were driven from the tribe because of it. In the book, *A Land Remembered*, there is what seemed to me an unrealistic friendship that developed between a group of Seminoles and the hero of the book. However, while not as symbiotic a relationship as this one, the Browns and McKinnys had good relationships with the Seminoles and showed them great respect. Totch's father could even speak the Seminole language. This respect seemed to be true of their relationships with the negro population as well, although this too could be self-serving. As you can see, I got a lot out of this book, much more than I will try to add here. I don't know if you would get as much from Totch's story as I did, but it is a wonderful window into a way of life that is not so far back in time, a time when south Florida was a wilderness and Glades people like the Browns and McKinnys scratched out a living in the wilderness through determination, persistence and incredibly hard work.

The story of Totch Brown has touched my heart. I have camped, canoed, and fished throughout the area, but never knew the background and history as unfolded in this book. I met Glenn Simmons years ago and read his book *The Gladesman*, which covers the eastern glades and some of the history. This book filled in the blanks for me, but in a very personal and deep way. I had to get the 6 DVD series of the unedited version of *The Sage of Chokoloskee*. In this series, a very full picture of life in the Glades is presented as it was! I grew to respect Totch more as I watched each section and I regret not meeting him all the times I was over there fishing in his old backyard. Combine the book with the DVDs is my suggestion, especially if you plan on visiting or regularly fish in the area.

A good read and a wonderful book of historical data regarding the Everglades.

Always enjoyed reading / researching true history of an area I live in. This book was recommended to me by a stranger I met in a Borders Bookstore. Said he knew Loren "Totch" Brown whose memoirs has brought life to this book. Very easy and interesting reading about a true Everglades

frontier man, family and their friends. Once you begin reading, this book will not find itself resting on your bookshelf anytime soon. ENJOY !!!

I thoroughly enjoyed reading this book. I am a Floridian since 1940's and can remember how Florida used to be. Totch and his family were true pioneers. I wish everyone would still have a love for the land and the desire to preserve it for future generations. It is so tragic that governmental agencies ravage land that they have no feel for and destroy what God has so beautifully created.

Good book. I had a hardcover that got lost. This was for a friend. Nothing like firsthand account. A+

The entertaining life story of a south Florida legend. As a third generation Floridian, it kind of made me wish I was here in the times of my Grandfather! Could not put this book down.

I wanted to read this book because I had been to Chokoloskee/ Thousand Islands area before and was going back on vacation. Totch was born in the Everglades in 1920 and tells very colorful stories of life in "Old Florida". A great book about a beautiful place.

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