

The True Story of Monkey Island

Monkey Island is one of the most unique sights along the Nature Coast. Thousands of people come to see the island and marvel at the antics of the monkeys each year. What many people don't know is that the island itself came to be in the Homosassa River as the result of a misunderstanding, and the monkeys were originally put on the island to keep them out of mischief. Here is the true story of Monkey Island.....

G.A. "Furgy" Furgason was a major influence in the development of the Homosassa area in the 1950's and 1960's. He worked for the Florida-based Norris Cattle Company for nearly forty years. Together with Bruce Norris, Furgy put together land deals that resulted in the development of the Homosassa Riverside Resort property, and what is now the Homosassa Wildlife State Park, as well as the Crow's Nest, Sugarmill Woods, and Riverhaven Village. Because of Furgy's extensive involvement in planning and directing the development of the area, he became known as "Mr. Homosassa."

In the 1960's, Furgy traveled to Africa on an extended trip for the Cattle Company. At that time, Monkey Island was not an island at all. Instead, it was a pile of rocks hiding just below the surface that could not be seen at high tide. Many boaters discovered the rocks just a moment too late when they crashed over them – losing the bottom of the boat in the process! Furgy left instructions with a dragline operator who was working for him at the Crow's Nest to "pile some dirt around those rocks so the boaters would see them better." Apparently the dragline operator got a bit carried away – when Furgy returned to Homosassa, he found that a small barren island had appeared in the river just outside the Yardarm! In an effort to dress up what he considered to be an eyesore, he first built a small lighthouse on the island.

Meanwhile, Furgy had another business venture going further upstream. This was a wildlife attraction (which later became the Homosassa Wildlife State Park) featuring imported plants and exotic animals. Included in the attraction was a group of monkeys who were brought to America by Dr. John Hamlet, a naturalist who had worked at Weeki Wachee before working for Furgy at the wildlife attraction. Dr. Hamlet had originally captured those monkeys for use in perfecting the polio vaccine in America. Some of those monkeys were prone to causing trouble, including escaping, stealing candy, getting into visitor cars, and biting tourists. Furgy said that he had often thought of "sending them to Alcatraz."

Now, gazing upon the new island with its lighthouse, Furgy realized he had his own little Alcatraz, and the mischievous monkeys found a new home! The original inhabitants included three spider monkeys and two squirrel monkeys. Huts were constructed for them and palm trees were planted. However, the monkeys continued to cause problems by eating the palm hearts and killing the trees. Fortunately, cedar trees volunteered and continue to prosper. The island became quite an attraction and soon became known as Monkey Island.

Today, five spider monkeys live on the island: Ralph, Sassy, Ebony, Eve, and Emily. Ralph is the alpha male, Sassy is the matriarch, and Ebony is the daughter of Ralph and Sassy. These three monkeys are part of the original group placed on Monkey Island by Furgy. The two original squirrel monkeys, Tiny and Tim, lived for many happy years on Monkey Island before passing away from old age in 2003 and 2005. Eve and Emily were adopted and put on the island in 2006.

While it may seem that life on a small island would get dull, the monkey's habitat is changed regularly in both large ways (such as the redesign and movement of their buildings and play areas) and small ways (such as changing the placement of their feeders on a daily basis and the grass heights and patterns on a weekly basis). In addition, visitors to the river are a constant source of entertainment for our monkey family. The monkeys are under the care of the Homosassa Riverside Resort. They are fed twice a day from a menu designed specifically for them, including green leafy vegetables, bananas, oranges, sweet potatoes, raw peanuts, and monkey chow. They are also regularly examined by a specially qualified primate veterinarian. Because monkeys prefer not to swim, the river acts as a natural barrier. The island is therefore a perfect home for them – allowing them to play freely and watch the river activity without being overly confined or caged.

Thanks to an eager dragline operator, Dr. Hamlet, our own Furgy and the Homosassa Riverside Resort Monkey Island has been a delight to visitors and local residents alike for over forty years!