OUR WILD AND SCENIC RIVERS

The Suwannee

By JACK and ANNE RUDLOE
Photographs by JODI COBB

Lazy as a summer day, the Suwannee slides around a bend, wandering from the Okefenokee Swamp to the Gulf of Mexico.

“People think there’s something awfully magic about the Suwannee River,” Al Head, director of the Stephen Foster Center at White Springs, Florida, told us. “They come and want to touch it, hold it, or take it back in a jar.”

The center is a state-operated park that honors the composer of “Old Folks at Home,” better known as “Way Down Upon the Swanee River.” A native of Pittsburgh, Foster never saw the river but chose the name from a map, shortening it to fit his tune. Fortunately it replaced an earlier choice, “Way Down Upon the Pedee River.”

Foster couldn’t have chosen a better river to immortalize. It has mood, variety, and grandeur. Emerging from Okefenokee Swamp in Georgia, the Suwannee slices through Florida’s sand hills and limestone cliffs, rushes over
shoals, and widens into vast coastal swamps before flowing into the Gulf of Mexico (map, page 23). The water begins the color of overbrewed tea as the result of tannic acid leached from the bark and fallen leaves of cypress and other swamp trees. During its journey, the dark waters are nourished by numerous crystal-clear springs, creating transparent pools where shells gleam twenty feet below the surface.

Launching our canoes in the Suwannee just below Okefenokee Swamp, we began our journey of 230 miles to the Gulf. It was August and hot, and we were allowing a leisurely three weeks.

As the Suwannee leaves the Okefenokee, it gradually coalesces, flowing through an eerie wilderness of stunted Ogeechee tupelo trees and scattered cypresses, giving little shade from the brutal sun. Only the occasional splash of a bowfin or the bellow of an alligator breaks the silence.

In this region Okefenokee swampers first settled in 1853, and their descendants still live along the river, their lives closely tied to its wilderness. Swamper Allen Sirmans, a sandy-haired teenager who worked for the Youth Conservation Corps at the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge, pointed to a huge alligator on the bank of the boat canal. He chuckled: “They got onto me the other day about grunting up that old gator. He’s crazy acting. I got him rocking, slapping the water with his tail. They said I had to quit, I was a bad influence on the tourists.” “Grunting” is an old technique used by hunters to attract gators by imitating their calls.

Allen lives in his family’s original pre-Civil War log cabin near the banks of the river. (Continued on page 25)
Way down upon de old plantation
Way down upon de Pedee river
Far far away
Here's where my heart is turning o'er,
Here's where my troubles lay
Way down upon de Pedee river

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"Way down upon de Suwanee ribber," a homesteader awaits a catch of bass or catfish. Such a restful scene plays back the wistful notes of Stephen Foster's "Old Folks at Home," the ballad that made the Suwannee one of the most celebrated rivers in America. Truth is, Foster never saw the Suwannee. Searching for a river name befitting a new song about the South, the composer in 1851 first chose the Pee Dee, a stream in the Carolinas. He later scratched it out (left). Despite its fame, the 265-mile-long Suwannee remains uncrowded and largely undeveloped. In earlier times Spanish soldiers splashed across its fords, Seminole Indians and gator hunters roamed along its banks, and moonshiners toiled furtively in its swamps. Today conservationists are active, trying to preserve the river's antique quiet.
His calling card could read: “John L. Colson, Sr.—crabber, sturgeon fisher, turtle trapper, and bulkhead builder.”

Juggling river jobs since childhood, Jake, 45, still fashions a living almost entirely from the Suwannee. On a warm day he might load his boat with traps (left) and search for logs where cooters—turtles—bake in the sun. A catch of 40 can bring $100.

Jake also fashions concrete slabs that brace shoreline in the town of Suwannee. His offspring and in-laws lend muscle (below). At times as many as ten crowd the Colsons’ tiny cottage.

After a full day, Jake sinks into exhausted reverie (right).
above Fargo. He earns pocket money from the swamp by collecting snakes for hobbyists and crayfish for fish bait. The porch is often covered with drying deer’s tongue, a plant that he and his father pick in the woods and sell.

Rube Altman was the local buyer until his recent death. A sprightly old Georgia cracker, Rube sat in his garage surrounded by piles of the fragrant drying leaves, which are used as flavoring for pipe tobacco and as medicine. “The poor people, they’ll go out and get deer’s tongue when they ain’t got nothin’ else to do,” Rube said. A hundred pounds of dry deer’s tongue can be produced in a week of hard work and brings as much as eighty cents a pound.

Like many other people along this section of the river, Rube was also a beekeeper. “Gallberry blossoms, that’s where you get your best honey,” he informed us through a chaw of tobacco. “Palmetto and tupelo’s good too. My granddaddy used to have a bunch of bees in old log hives, and he got them out of the woods.”

Beekeepers along the Suwannee are frequently unwilling hosts to the honey bear, a black bear that has learned to demolish hives for their sticky golden treasure. “The bee man and the bear don’t get along good,” Rube laughed.

We paddled on, ducking low-hanging branches, watching for snakes among the contorted tree roots, and wondering
if the occasional abandoned shack hidden in the foliage wasn’t a defunct moonshine operation. Stills were once as common as cottonmouths in the swamp, but high sugar prices and the efficiency of lawmen and revenuers ended most moonshining.

Below Fargo the river loses its swampy character, cutting through sand hills covered with pine-and-oak scrub. As we drifted in the late afternoons, we began looking for campsites on the stark white sandbars that rose along the river bends. We swam in the cool waters of the Suwannee and built our fires with “fat-lighter” pine knots. Even on damp rainy nights the resin-soaked wood blazed cheerfully.

Outside our campfires the eyes of wild creatures gleamed, owls hooted, and bats swooped. On one sandbar near the Georgia-Florida line, we camped near a wild-bee tree, listening to the ominous buzzing that came from the monumental oak. About thirty miles across the Florida border, the Suwannee roared, if only briefly. Even before the sign, “DANGER—SHOALS 500 FEET AHEAD,” we could hear the sound of rushing waters.

We paddled ashore just above the shoals and made camp. Only the thunderstorm that descended on us could obscure the noise of the water.

We awoke in sunshine, and in the morning light the white water boiled magnificently over rocks and ledges. Who could have thought that this peaceful stream that filtered through tree roots and swamps a few miles upriver was capable of such violence?

We portaged our gear around the rapids, pushed our lightened canoes off the bank, and were sucked up and swept along. Fighting desperately to retain control, we saw we were approaching rocks, swerved, plunged nose first into the water, paddled through air, and swamped. Laughing and exhilarated, we swam our canoes to shore to reload and press on past water-sculptured white limestone outcrops to White Springs, several hours downstream.

A picturesque small town with well-kept Victorian mansions rising above the river bluffs, White Springs is also the Florida headquarters of Occidental Chemical Company, which operates an extensive phosphate strip mine and holds mineral rights along miles of Suwannee shoreline. Five miles inland, towering draglines rip holes into the earth, extracting phosphate for shipment as fertilizer for overseas as well as for domestic use.

Occidental has agreed not to mine to the shores of the river, but it was cited by Florida State pollution-control officials in 1975 for excessive turbidity and runoff resulting from unauthorized dredge-and-fill operations around a Suwannee tributary.

The citation was withdrawn when the company signed an agreement to alleviate the problem, but a bigger concern remains: Occidental’s 20-year plan for strip mining will destroy thousands of acres of swamplands and pine plantations in the Suwannee Basin.

Even with land reclamation, this will greatly influence the future of the Suwannee River Basin. Under present Florida law, little can be done to stop strip mining on private lands.

The Suwannee was recommended for inclusion in the Wild and Scenic Rivers System in 1974 by the Department of the Interior, which suggested that it be administered by the states. The proposal was opposed by property owners who feared loss of their land and development rights, and by those who wanted local control. Now the Florida government is working closely with several local agencies to provide protection.

Surefire proof of marsh gas requires only a match, as Andre Clewell, botanist at Florida State University, demonstrates in a Suwannee Basin stream. The match briefly ignites bubbles of methane rising from decaying vegetation below.
from uncontrolled development for this nationally acclaimed river.

Downstream at Suwannee Springs, the river speeds around and through the remains of the Suwannee River Authority's damsite, abandoned in the early 1960's. The porous limestone banks proved an engineer's nightmare. The bulk of the dam was removed, but unsightly piles of debris were left.

Except for remnants of the dam, the Suwannee shows few traces of its past. Several early Spanish missions were located along the river. During the Second Seminole War in 1835, the Army introduced steamboats, and they remained the major means of travel until the early 1900's, carrying lumber, passengers, and farm products. The remains of the steamer Madison, sunk in 1863 in Troy Springs, are still visible.

Before the turn of the century and with the coming of railroads, White Springs and Suwannee Springs became major health spas. People came from all over the South for the mineral waters. Little remains of these resorts except massive stone walls built around the clear springs to keep dark river water from flooding in.

Several miles below Branford the river widens, and the Sante Fe joins it. Our canoe glided through marshes of water hyacinths, lily pads, and quaking maiden cane. Scooping a net under the vegetation, we found it swarming with crayfish, snails, insect larvae, transparent grass shrimp. Here, too, the first signs of the coast appeared. Sturgeon splashed, gars gulped air, and a mullet leaped before our boat.

As we paddled mile after mile to the Gulf, the high sandy banks and levees gradually subsided into vast freshwater swamps. The river more than doubled in width, with endless red bay, river cypress, tupelo, and ash trees rising
from mats of water lilies, wild rice, and maiden cane along the shore.

At the town of Suwannee near the river mouth, we met Jake Colson, a commercial fisherman whose sons help him net sturgeon and mullet, trap blue crabs, and gather oysters. “I got that river from here to the Santa Fe right here,” he said, tapping his head. “I ain’t got to think of it. I know every crook and creek.”

Suwannee River turtles, commonly known as cooters, are a great delicacy, and Jake sells them to restaurants. “You see a log that’s loaded with ten or twelve cooters. Well, you just go up and run your cooters off, put your basket trap beside it, and be gone for thirty or forty minutes and then come back. The cooters climb back onto the log, and when your boat comes up the second time, they jump into the basket.”

We asked him how he knew which side of the log to set the basket on, and he replied, “You got to think like a turtle, that’s what makes a good hunter.”

The vast swamplands at the mouth of the Suwannee are also good alligator habitat and were once a center of gator poaching. Some Suwannee residents still boast of their past exploits in hunting the big reptiles.

“I’ll tell you the truth,” one man declared. “They wasn’t nearly as extinct as they figured down there. They said there was only about five hundred gators in Florida, and some months I was killing five hundred. I got caught, and it cost me a thousand dollars.”

The game wardens never managed to stop the poaching, but elimination of domestic markets and laws prohibiting interstate transport of hides did. Alligators are now increasing, adding to the wonder of one of the few undammed, free-flowing rivers in the Southeast, a river of swamps and springs, of history and legends.

*tributary of the Suwannee, which is nourished by more than fifty springs.*