

Foreword

Voices of the Apalachicola appears as the latest volume in a series devoted to the study of Florida history and culture. During the past half century, the burgeoning population and increased national and international visibility of Florida have sparked a great deal of popular interest in the state's past, present, and future. As the favorite destination of hordes of tourists and as the new home for millions of retirees, immigrants, and transplants, modern Florida has become a demographic, political, and cultural bellwether.

A state of vast distances and distant strangers, Florida needs more citizens who care about the welfare of this special place and its people. We hope this series helps newcomers and old-timers appreciate and understand Florida. The University Press of Florida established the Florida History and Culture Series in an effort to provide an accessible and attractive format for the publication of works related to the Sunshine State.

As coeditors of the series, we are deeply committed to the creation of an eclectic but carefully crafted set of books that will provide the field of Florida studies with a fresh focus and encourage Florida researchers and writers to consider the broader implications and context of their work. The series includes monographs, works of synthesis, memoirs, and anthologies. And, while the series features books of historical interest, we encourage authors researching Florida's environment, politics, and popular or material culture to submit their manuscripts as well. We want each book to retain a distinct personality and voice, but at the same time we hope to foster a sense of community and collaboration among Florida scholars.

Voices of the Apalachicola is an extraordinary achievement. Faith Eidse and her team of transcribers and interviewers have compiled one of the finest collections of oral histories ever completed in Florida; indeed, the individual life histories simply soar, taking the reader to special places: Whiskey George Creek, Tate's Hell, Alligator Point, and Johnson's Slough.

"Tell us about the river." Thus begins a magical relationship between interviewer and interviewee. Soulful and sonorous, bittersweet and melancholic, the personal reminiscences represent soundings from the Apalachicola River. The British historian Arnold Toynbee once remarked that the riverbank marked one of the best vantage points to study history. From Jack-

son, Gadsden, Calhoun, Liberty, Gulf, and Franklin county sloughs, steep-head ravines, and barrier islands, voices tell of American gunboats, stern-wheelers, and oyster skiffs. Voices include Creek chief Andrew Boggs Ramsey, who “walks softly in two worlds”; Neel Yent’s memories of panthers; Judge David Taunton, “defender of swamp dwellers”; Tom Corley, the Mark Twain of the Apalachicola; Billy Kersey, “road builder through Hell”; the Walkers, “catfish trap makers”; L. L. Lanier, “honey philosopher”; Boncyle Land, “turpentine legend”; and Don Ingram, who milled “old-as-Christ cypresses.”

The Apalachicola is neither the longest nor the most celebrated Florida river, but it is Florida’s first in flow and it is certainly the richest. In the sheer vitality and variety of its flora and fauna, its commerce and people, the Apalachicola is a mighty river. Its history is equally compelling. *Voices of the Apalachicola* eloquently illustrates the confluence of humanity and nature. The book proudly takes its place alongside a growing list of Florida river studies.

The Apalachicola River Valley is a parable of modern Florida. Life on and along the river was hard, but the locale was remarkable in its fertility. Men and women adapted to and imposed upon the forest and water a rich and unique culture and lifestyle. Alas, as is happening all too often in Florida, a way of life is vanishing. *Voices of the Apalachicola* allows us to remember tall tales of oystermen and turpentiners, deadhead loggers and worm grunTERS.

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Preface

In Praise of Natural Wonders

Three exquisite moments during my travels along the Apalachicola reveal the natural wonders of this near-pristine, but threatened, river valley, so often extolled in these oral histories.

One was the black bear raised up on hind legs, feeding at dusk on a golden branch in the Apalachicola National Forest. Lucinda Scott slowed the truck. She had transcribed many of these oral histories, and we both longed to see a bear, once so populous that early settlers baked biscuits with their grease.

The bear dropped onto four huge paws and turned, ears pricked, eyes shiny onyx. It was about 3 feet high, medium-sized, half-grown. As if sensing our delight, it sauntered across State Road 65 in front of us. It paused along a trail leading to East Bay and turned again, engaging our animated faces inside our rolling cage. I could have sworn it skipped as it disappeared into the forest. We had not brought a camera, but it didn't matter. The moment lives on.

Another pure moment was the day my son, his friend, and I slogged into a vast pitcher plant prairie 4 miles north of Sumatra. At first I saw only the yellow-green trumpet pitcher plants awash in sunlight, many still bearing heavy blossoms. But my son's friend had studied carnivorous plants in sixth grade, and he looked closer, deeper. He found tiny sundew rosettes and glistening dew threads in the mud all around us. Here and there northern pitcher plants grew, their flared bronze lips luring bugs to a bowl filled with rainwater. Wetlands are disappearing at alarming rates, and my heart leaped at the resilience of these rare gems.

A third awe-inspiring moment was experiencing the river vista opening on the Garden of Eden Trail atop the Apalachicola Bluffs and Ravines Preserve, which felt like gazing into eternity. Here Kodiak-sized beardedogs, giant ground sloths, and armadillos the size of small cars once roamed. Then, as now, rainwater flowed from high in the Appalachians over the ancient "fall line" at Columbus, which had erupted when the supercontinent of Gondwanaland collided with the supercontinent of Laurasia and formed the even larger Pangaea. This continent, for many millions of years, included all the

land on earth. Raindrops fell, and I inhaled their earthy scent. Time and petty concerns receded. Cares melted away.

This Apalachicola River and Bay oral history project reached out to dozens of longtime residents of the river basin and recorded their spoken histories before their experiential knowledge of the river could pass from memory.

In the sense that you can't "hear" their words, these aren't technically "oral" histories. But we listened and wrote the text to reflect spoken dialect. Also, in the sense that we directed their reminiscences to the river and bay, these memories are specifically focused. In addition, we edited for relevance to life on the river and bay. Contributors approved the final cuts, so we eliminated distracting ellipses that indicated missing words.

Exceptions to oral reminiscences are those of Neel Yent and Pearl Porter Marshall, who wrote down their stories and the stories that were passed down orally to them. We thank their heirs for giving us permission to publish excerpts here. Boncyle Land recorded an oral history before she died, and her heirs have made that transcript available to us as well. Other interviews were provided by river and bay researchers (James Barkuloo) and project managers (Dan Tonsmeire and Ace Haddock). Several were recorded by Frances Ingram and Maria Parsley of the Apalachicola National Estuarine Research Reserve.

We are aware that local knowledge sometimes gets lost, and that memory is sometimes unreliable. We acknowledge that oral histories are subject to error, since experience is subject to interpretation and events can be altered by memory lapse. Also, hearsay, or secondhand tellings, such as, "My father said . . .," further remove readers from the experience. We tried to verify accounts with historical records, often relying on the dedicated librarians at the State Library of Florida. Northwest Florida Water Management District directors and staff also reviewed and edited this project. Thank you, Georgann Penson, Douglas Barr, Duncan Cairns, Maria Culbertson, Graham Lewis, George Fisher, Tyler Macmillan, and Dan Tonsmeire.

As an extra precaution, since taped speech is sometimes misunderstood, we sent written oral histories to speakers to verify their accuracy. We thank them for their diligence and spirit. They know the river better than outsiders ever could.

Our method was to identify lifestyle communities and their notable or veteran members. We asked open-ended or specific questions that permitted wide-ranging or detailed responses. Our request to "tell us about the river" encouraged free-flowing perceptions of life and changes on the river. "What do you remember about the 1929 flood?" elicited vivid, five-sense recall.

How people traveled before bridges and paved roads, where they went by rail or ferry, and what they packed, revealed lives that were once more survivalist, isolated, and localized.

Oral histories encouraged lively, subjective responses in character-enlarging vernacular rather than a textbook delivery of “just the facts.” By ordering chapters according to livelihood, we attempted to deliver cohesive contexts. We tried to focus on each interviewee’s special knowledge, to probe deeply, and to convey a living, breathing journey along the Apalachicola River and Bay.

Introduction

Stories of Historic Change

The wise, hardy, often amusing stories of average families who have spent most of their lives on the Apalachicola River and Bay reveal firsthand how the river has changed over time. These families have seen cycles of diminished river flow as the century turned, threatening both plant and animal life. During winter and spring floods, the river's flow may be abundant. Yet during drought, and when upriver demands result in even lower flows for extended periods, Florida must fight for water to keep fish and oysters alive in the bay.

The system once ran deep, swift, and narrow, seasonally contributing a majority of its flow to surrounding floodplains. But natural river scouring and deposition processes—combined with human impacts such as damming, channel dredging, and spoil banking—have decreased slope and increased meander. They have disconnected sloughs and tributaries needed for freshwater nurseries and spawning. Also, because dams tend to block detritus (organic particles) required for the food chain, flooding below the Jim Woodruff Lock and Dam is ever more essential to restart detrital transport to the bay.

This oral history is intended to illuminate practical local wisdom and insights that might otherwise be lost. The people who spent much of the last century on the river and bay, or in its forests, swamps, and floodplains, describe the basin's historical, ecological, health, and environmental changes. This project recognizes their valuable perceptions and often unique takes on a myriad of issues. Seafood workers, who have netted shrimp for decades, know the influence of freshwater inflows and aquatic plant and animal life on the size and quantity of their catch, as well as the pressures of overfishing. Their stories increase our awareness and reshape fragmented knowledge of this remarkable system.

Basin management has been directed by human hands, yet for those managers there is often no substitute for practical, observed local knowledge, which all too often disappears. Tom Corley, the last Apalachicola steamboat pilot licensed as first-class, and Edward Tolliver, Apalachicola's first black mayor, died within weeks of telling their stories. Laverne Walker,

Joe McMillan, and General Robert Howell followed, though their stories live on in these pages. Neel Yent, Pearl Porter Marshall, and Boncyle S. Land recorded their stories shortly before their deaths, and their heirs permitted us to include them, as well.

Stories of a river as it existed in the 1930s and 1940s, before major development in upstream states impacted the Apalachicola basin, are preserved here. The advent of hydropower and the age of dams reveal how our desire to manage water flow for electricity, transportation, recreation, safety, and the economy sometimes came at the price of natural resources. Our purpose is to record, listen, and provide a public forum as development impacts Apalachicola's historic way of life. Perhaps these memories will help guide our actions in the future and teach us not to repeat our errors.