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# Awakening Days at Dead River

Edward Curry Woodward

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Awakening Days at Dead River

by

Edward Curry Woodward

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
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## Awakening Days at Dead River

Edward C. Woodward

### ABSTRACT

*Awakening Days at Dead River* traces the history of a remote public park in north Hillsborough County that was once a privately-owned riverside enclave with modest cabins, and home to a popular fish camp on the Hillsborough River. The timeframe focuses on the mid-twentieth century to present, with a contextual background of earlier history in the immediate area. The story recounts the adventures and challenges of a select group of homeowners and visitors who experienced life on the Hillsborough and Dead Rivers during that timeframe. It also shows how the area evolved into a public property when regional flood control trumped private landownership, in some cases through eminent domain. Finally, the story shows how this event altered Dead River's course from Florida developed, to Florida reclaimed, the clues of the former often hidden by the growth of the woods.

Research entails: interviews with former Dead River homeowners and their families (some shared photographs), and people who frequented the fish camp; a journal with text and photographs by Dead River homeowner Arthur Yates; interviews with two year-round live-in rangers who have overseen Dead River since it became a park; studying records of the Southwest Florida Water Management District (SWFWMD or Swiftmud), the state-run agency that acquired the property to manage regional flooding , including detailed appraisals, maps and correspondence; interviews with Swiftmud

officials associated with Dead River; and keeping a first-hand journal of observances walking the woods at Dead River and paddling its waters.

As offered above, Dead River Park has many intriguing themes worth studying. That several of its former residents and weekenders are still living, are still Floridians, and have distinct memories of their “Old Florida” fun, makes it a timely study, as well. Finally, since Dead River Park is a public entity, it is worth knowing its history; park-goers might embrace its legacy as theirs.

## INTRODUCTION

With his jeans rolled up to his knees, a dog by his side, and a flat boat to pole about, Ron Yates, in a family journal picture evoking images of Tom Sawyer, had a carefree smile in September 1960.<sup>1</sup> A few days earlier, Hurricane Donna had swept through Florida and up the United States East Coast, causing \$387 million in property damage. But for a young boy with a boat, flood waters meant fun at Dead River, a secluded weekend village named for the branch whose confluence with the Hillsborough River bordered the settlement. The village was populated more by sabal palms than people: ten homes, two miles from the nearest paved road, Tampa about a half-hour drive southwestward. Glancing at the black-and-white photograph, Ron and “Butch,” next door neighbor “Pa” Corbitt’s mutt, appear to be poling across the Hillsborough. But the picture’s caption explains otherwise: “Ron Yates is poling from “Pa” Corbetts [*sic*] back yard to Yates’ back step. This was the height of the flood.”<sup>2</sup>

The flood would also be a catalyst to closing Dead River as a private retreat. Within six years of Hurricane Donna, and just over a decade after Dead River opened, a new state-agency would acquire the property for flood control. Donna came on the heels of heavy spring flooding. For four days in mid-March 1960, twenty-seven inches of rain soaked the west central region of Florida. “Worst Flood Batters Tampa Area,” proclaimed the 18 March front page headline of the *Tampa Tribune*; flood waters rushed

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<sup>1</sup> Arthur Yates, “Dead River Chronicles, June 2000,” Yates family collection, Tampa, FL. Dead River homeowner Arthur Yates compiled an unpublished journal with pictures, maps and captions, known to his family, who shared their copies, as the “Dead River Chronicles.” Several family members have copies, including his son, Ron Yates, of Tampa, FL, whose copy is cited here.

<sup>2</sup>; Sun-Sentinel.com, “1960 – Hurricane Donna,” South Florida Sun-Sentinel, <http://www.sun-sentinel.com/news/weather/hurricane/sfl-1960-hurricane,0,113082.story>; Arthur Yates, “Dead River Chronicles.”

over the Hillsborough Dam. A dim outlook followed, as the *Tribune* reported, “swirling waters, still on the increase above and below the Hillsborough River dam and in the North Tampa area, yesterday had sent more than 1000 families fleeing from their homes.” Photographs show a boy standing atop a submerged car in a north Tampa neighborhood, Town ‘n’ Country Park. And Memorial Highway, a popular route linking Tampa and Clearwater, became a cascading waterfall.<sup>3</sup>

By 1962, the United States Congress had initiated the Four River Basins, Florida Project, designed to control flood waters from the Hillsborough, Oklawaha, Peace, and Withlacoochee rivers, which share the same central Florida source, the Green Swamp. Co-sponsored by the United States Army Corps of Engineers (ACOE), plans called for an “extensive network of flood storage reservoirs and control facilities,” between the four rivers and the Green Swamp.<sup>4</sup> The Florida legislature created the Southwest Florida Water Management District, commonly known as Swiftmud (or SWFWMD), to oversee the project locally.<sup>5</sup> By the mid 1960s, Swiftmud had begun acquiring the Dead River properties, as well as others within the rural Hillsborough River flood plain. About fifteen years and 17,000 acres later, the Lower Hillsborough Flood Detention Area would double as a densely-wooded recreation site for a booming region.<sup>6</sup> Meanwhile, from July 1966 to

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<sup>3</sup> Southwest Florida Water Management District (SWFWMD), *A Plan for the Use and Management of the Lower Hillsborough Flood Detention Area* (Brooksville: SWFWMD, 1989), 4; SWFWMD, *A Plan for the Use and Management of the Tampa Bypass/Harney Canal* (Brooksville, FL: SWFWMD, 1990), 1; “Worst Flood Batters Tampa Area,” *The Tampa Tribune*, 19 March 1960, sec. 1A.; Vernon Bradford and Duane Bradford, “Flow Still Increasing in River,” *The Tampa Tribune*, 20 March 1960, sec. 1A.; *The Tampa Tribune*, 20 March 1960, sec. 1B; *The Tampa Tribune*, 20 March 1960, sec. 1A..

<sup>4</sup> *A Plan for Tampa Bypass/Harney Canal*, 1.

<sup>5</sup> Johanne Alexander, *A History of Water Management at the SWFWMD*, (Brooksville: SWFWMD, n.d.).

<sup>6</sup> *A Plan for the Lower Hillsborough Flood Detention Area*, 4.

mid-1981, the Tampa Bypass Canal was built to divert Hillsborough River flood waters around the cities of Temple Terrace and Tampa to MacKay Bay.<sup>7</sup>

About twenty years ago, Dead River was improved as a park, and maintained by Hillsborough County. Razed homes and four decades of forest growth have camouflaged clues of its incarnation as a remote village. Upriver, on park grounds, an elevated view of the Hillsborough suggests a gathering spot, but nothing remains of the fish camp that once beckoned boaters, swimmers, and fishermen. In roadside woods leading to the park, an abandoned John Deere tractor is now a makeshift planter: four leaf ferns and moss sprout from its front wheels. It's no longer the John Henry of machines tirelessly grading an unpaved road or pulling out stuck cars. At the main picnic grounds, two riverside concrete steps attached to nothing lead nowhere; they once led "Pa" Corbitt from his house to the river. Across the way, in the woods, a pile of debris hints that items were discarded decades ago: old bottles and beer cans; a rusted child's wagon; a tricycle wedged between two laurel oaks; a blue toddler cup with twisted top intact; and a crackled tea cup with yellow flowers.<sup>8</sup>

These clues gain greater context when animated by the memories of Dead River's onetime homeowners and weekenders. Though some have died, those living readily share their memories, often with bursts of spontaneous, infectious laughter. Public ownership of Dead River has sparked stories, too. Some are somber, and some are surprising. Since Dead River became a park, there have been two unrelated suicides from the same limb

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<sup>7</sup> *A Plan for Tampa Bypass/Harney Canal*, 1.

<sup>8</sup> Alan Bailey, interview by author, Tampa, FL, 28 September 2006 (all subsequent quotes or stories attributed to Bailey stem from this interview); SWFWMD and Board of County Commissioners of Hillsborough County, "Interlocal Agreement," Wilderness Park file, Hillsborough County Parks, Recreation and Conservation.; Ken Kramer, interview by author, Tampa, FL, 1 May 2006 (all quotes and stories attributed to Kramer stem from this interview); Craig Miller, interviews by author, 17 May 2006 and 18 September 2006, Zephyrhills, FL (all subsequent quotes, stories, and photos attributed to Miller stem from these interviews or follow-up questions); Arthur Yates, "Dead River Chronicles."

near the main gate.<sup>9</sup> On the quirky side, the park has an obscure history in pop-culture: Dead River is perhaps the closest degree linking Linda Gray of *Dallas* fame and the band Anthrax, who both filmed on location at the park.<sup>10</sup> A more relevant link, though, is Dead River as home. Since the early 1980s, two live-in rangers revived family life on the river. They've also tapped the same deep well of experience as those before them, recapturing the charm of a lost age.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Jack Coleman, interviews by author, Thonotosassa, FL, 14 April 2006, 10 May 2006, and 4 August 2006 (all subsequent quotes and stories attributed to Coleman stem from these interviews or follow-up questions).

<sup>10</sup> Lester Truman, interview by author, Lithia, FL, 9 August 2006 (all subsequent quotes and stories attributed to Truman stem from this interview or follow-up questions); Coleman interview; Linda Gray Official Website, "Film Credits," <http://www.lindagrays.com/filmography.htm>.

<sup>11</sup> Truman and Coleman interviews.

## CHAPTER ONE

### DETECTING DEAD RIVER

Study Dead River homeowner Arthur Yates's hand-drawn map listing his neighbors' occupations, and you quickly realize the difference between second homes in Florida fifty years ago and those of today: you could have one on a middle-class income. Dead River had a policeman, a warehouse manager, a carpenter, a rancher, an engineer, a jeweler, and an insurance agent, among other professions. They lived nearby in Tampa, Zephyrhills, Brandon, or other parts of rural Hillsborough County. And though few knew each other before buying lots at Dead River, close proximity, a "barn-raising" attitude for building homes, and monthly maintenance on a two-mile access road fostered quick friendships. "It was like the old barn-raising," explained Ron Yates, who was about eight-years-old when his family moved to from Plant City to Dead River. When Arthur, a jeweler, built a pole barn, "everybody helped out," Ron recalled. "Friends [would] come out and help. Everybody that had a house there would generally come out on the weekends, they would organize, maybe one weekend a month to work on the road. That was the constant battle . . . 'cause it's all swamp."<sup>12</sup>

The Yates story serves as a springboard into Dead River's past. By June 2000, in his late 70s and a little over a year before he died, Arthur Yates had completed a 32-page

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<sup>12</sup> Arthur Yates, "Dead River Chronicles"; SWFWMD, "Certificate of Appraisal, Legal Description," Lower Hillsborough Flood (LHF)/Dead River files 13-300-118 to 13-300-134, SWFWMD Land Resources Department; Dottie West, interview by author, Chipley, FL, 23 August 2006 (all subsequent quotes, stories, and photos attributed to West stem from this interview or follow-up questions); Betty Garton, interview by author, Lakeland, FL, 12 June 2006 (all subsequent quotes, stories, and photos attributed to Garton stem from this interview or follow-up questions); Ron Yates, interviews by author, Tampa, FL, 9 May 2006 and 18 July 2006 (all subsequent quotes and stories attributed to Yates stem from these interviews or follow-up questions).

collection of photographs with captions and maps chronicling his family's nine years at Dead River. Though untitled, his family calls the journal the "Dead River Chronicles." A pencil-drawn map with the disclaimer "Not to Scale" pinpoints Dead River west of U.S. Highway 301, south of Hillsborough River State Park and east of the Hillsborough River (see Appendix A for Yates map). Landmarks arising in Dead River stories are noted on the journal map: "Gumbo Blvd.," the access road off of Highway 301 that led to the bridge and homes; "Tractor Remains," beyond the second curve on Gumbo Blvd.; "Sparkman's Fence," which bordered the access road and Dead River; "George Birds [sic] Fish Camp," whose owner subdivided Dead River for sale; and "Horse Shoe Bend," a narrow, scenic peninsula on the Hillsborough owned by a Tampa resident.<sup>13</sup>

A second map, entitled "Map of Dead River Fla.," also "Not Exactly To Scale," shows the layout of the original homeowners from the mid-1950s to the early 1960s: five homes on Dead River belonging to the Carters, Yates, Hayes, Spiveys, and Bakers; five homes on the Hillsborough River owned by the Lashleys, an unnamed owner, the Corbitts, Woods, and Buchanans.<sup>14</sup>

While maps help to place Dead River, its "place" is told through the stories of its inhabitants. But to appreciate Dead River's evolution from the mid-twentieth century to present, consider the history of the nearby area, where, among others, Indians, Spanish explorers, pioneers and soldiers have passed. For instance, a 1979 archeological study and historic document review of the proposed recreation sites within the Lower Hillsborough Flood Detention Area uncovered evidence of Indians in the Lower

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<sup>13</sup> Arthur Yates, "Dead River Chronicles"; "Yates, Arthur Lee Jr.," *St. Petersburg Times*, 22 August 2001, sec B, p. 7; Yates interview; SWFWMD, "Certificate of Appraisal," file 13-300-124, p.9, SWFWMD Land Resources Department; SWFWMD, "Certificate of Appraisal," LHF/Dead River file 13-300-121, SWFWMD Land Resources Department.

<sup>14</sup> Arthur Yates, "Dead River Chronicles."

Hillsborough believed to be of the Archaic Period between 8,000 and 2,000 B.C. In many ways, wrote the study's authors, their era was similar to ours: "Other than the sea level being anywhere from 1 to 10 feet below what is today (Sholl, Craighead and Stiver 1967: 447) the environment in undisturbed areas of Hillsborough County has changed little since the Archaic."<sup>15</sup>

Archaic Period Indians would have experienced a rainy season from June through September. Their woods in the Lower Hillsborough were our woods, with wax myrtles and water oaks, cabbage palms and hickories, maples and gallberry, live oaks and pond cypress. There were bobcats and gray foxes, black bears and panthers, raccoons and opossums, and white-tailed deer, its featured name coming quickly to mind when seen bouncing into the brush. Catfish, largemouth bass, and gar were among the fish then and now - as were herons and vultures, wild turkey, and hawks. These Archaic-Period Indians were hunters and gatherers who benefited from their abundant surroundings. A survey of 5.6 acres at Dead River uncovered fifty lithic artifacts believed to be of the Archaic-Period.<sup>16</sup>

Although no sites within Dead River have qualified for the National Register of Historic Places, the park was undoubtedly in the shadows of other historic happenings. In 1757, a Spanish expedition led by Don Francisco Maria Celi charted the Hillsborough River and its resources (timber for ship parts such as masts) upriver to a point recognized as the rapids of the Hillsborough River State Park, about a mile north of Dead River. At the time, Celi named the waterway the River of Saint Julian de Arriaga. Still, the river

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<sup>15</sup> Randy Daniel, Michael Wisenbaker, and Mildred Fryman, *An Archaeological and Historical Survey of Seven Proposed Recreation Sites in the Lower Hillsborough River Flood Detention Area Hillsborough County, Florida* (Tallahassee: Bureau of Historic Sites and Properties, Florida Division of Archives, History, and Records Management, Department of State, 1979), 6, 13, 78.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 6, 16, 17, 81.

had been known by another name before Celi. The Timucua called the river the Mocosó, its earliest known name – the name for their settlement near the mouth of the river, as well. Post-Celi, and in British hands, it would be known as the Hillsborough, named for Lord Hillsborough, appointed Britain’s Colonial Secretary in 1768. However, the river had a different name among Indians of that era: the Lockcha-popka-chiska, meaning “river where one crosses to eat acorns.”<sup>17</sup>

But it is Celi’s upriver account that links his era to ours. Walk the woods or riverbanks of Dead River Park or the state park and you might see a similar setting that Celi wrote about, including “laurels, walnut and live oaks with their acorns, and the arbor of vines entwined on the trees along the banks of this river with its shoals.” Captain John D. Ware translated Celi’s journal about forty years ago. Ware characterized the three-day journey as a “considerable effort in pushing, pulling and hauling the longboat over and past some of the shoals below and in the vicinity of what is now the Hillsborough River State Park. Their forward progress was finally halted completely by the outcropping of rocks which Celi called “El Salto” – the waterfall.”<sup>18</sup>

In the ensuing decades, Spain and Britain played warfare’s version of musical chairs, with Florida the winning seat. The game’s end came in 1819 when the United States acquired the territory from Spain, which was losing ground to eager pioneers and run-ins with emboldened General Andrew Jackson; in Pensacola, he replaced Spanish civil authorities with Americans.<sup>19</sup> By the mid-1820s, with Florida under United States

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 81; Don Francisco Maria Celi, *From Havana to the Port of Tampa Year of 1757 A Journal of Surveys Atlantic Ocean – Northern Part*, in *A View of Celi’s Journal of Surveys and Chart of 1757*, ed. John D. Ware, (Tampa.: Hillsborough County Historical Commission), 113-114; Gloria Jahoda , *River of the Golden Ibis*, (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1973), 14, 78, 81, 86.

<sup>18</sup> Celi, *From Havana to the Port of Tampa*, 34, 113-114.

<sup>19</sup> Federal Writers’ Project of the Work Projects Administration. *Florida: A Guide to the Southernmost State*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1939), 53-55.

control, work began on the Fort Brooke-Fort King Road (later known as Fort King Road), that would link two military posts between what are today downtown Tampa and Ocala.<sup>20</sup> The road also created a popular travel route for mail, supplies and newcomers settling around Fort Brooke.<sup>21</sup> At one stretch, as historian Mildred Fryman wrote, the road: “roughly paralleled the Hillsborough River for part of its length. At the point where it skirted the northwest shore of Lake Thonotosassa, its route lay only a short distance,” from the Lower Hillsborough and Dead River.<sup>22</sup> Along this same route, in late December 1835, passed Major Francis Dade and some one hundred men ambushed by Seminole Indians more than half way to Fort King.<sup>23</sup> Only a few of Dade’s men survived the fight, which sparked the Second Seminole War.<sup>24</sup> Day two of that fateful six-day march passed east of the Dead River area. Dade’s men broke for a lunch of meat, bread, and coffee at Lake Thonotosassa before camping later that night by the Hillsborough.<sup>25</sup>

By 1843, Dead River and other Lower Hillsborough properties were platted for sale; the first survey of public land in that area. But it wasn’t until the mid-1850s that large tracts of land in that region sold. Cattleman acquired property. Fryman explained why: “In the 1840s and 1850s, the cattle industry began to flourish in Hillsborough County. In fact, during the Civil War, the area’s cattle herds became very important to the Confederate government [*sic*] in its struggle to feed its armies.” By the mid-1850s, a handful of hardy pioneers had settled a few miles southeast of Dead River around Lake

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<sup>20</sup> Daniel, Wisenbaker, and Fryman, *An Archaeological and Historical Survey*, 83-84; Ernest L. Robinson, *History of Hillsborough County Florida* (Saint Augustine: The Record Company-Printers, 1928), 104.

<sup>21</sup> Ernest L. Robinson, *History of Hillsborough County Florida* (Saint Augustine: The Record Company-Printers, 1928), 104.

<sup>22</sup> Daniel, Wisenbaker, and Fryman, *An Archaeological and Historical Survey*, 83-84.

<sup>23</sup> Frank Laumer, *Massacre!*, (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1968), xx, 128.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, xx, 1, 156; for more about the second Seminole War, read John Mahon’s *History of the Second Seminole War, 1835-1842* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1985).

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 53, 68.

Thonotosassa. Before then, fear of Indian attacks had thwarted large settlements. For hundreds of years Indians had occupied the same lake, which they called “Tenotosassa,” or “Lake of Flints,” for its plentiful flint deposits from which they shaped weapons and tools. As late as 1842, following the end of the Second Seminole War, Seminole chief Billy Bowlegs settled his village by the lake.<sup>26</sup>

An invaluable resource compiled by A.A. Robinson, Commissioner of State Bureau of Immigration, tracks Hillsborough County’s development from the 1840s to the early 1880s. “Prepared in the Interest of Immigration,” as touted on the title page, the 1882 guide is a snapshot of growth in those four decades. The county’s population in 1840 was 452. By 1880, it had climbed to 5,814, nearly doubling since 1860. However the county’s 21,223 cattle still outnumbered its human population by a wide margin. Despite this trend of growth, the area surrounding Dead River, excluding Thonotosassa and a handful of settlements, remained remote. W.C. Brown of Tampa, who submitted a report for Mr. Robinson, wrote: “Around the Thonotasassa . . . the settlements are numerous. This obtains also in regard to the Cork and Shiloh sections in the northeastern part of the county, though between these localities – the Hillsborough River and the northern boundary of the county – there is a large territory almost uninhabited.”<sup>27</sup>

By the 1880s, the state had granted large tracts of land to railroad companies, a boost in their capital for constructing railroad lines.<sup>28</sup> Swiftmud title records show the Plant Investment Company, developer and railroad magnate Henry Plant’s land

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<sup>26</sup> Daniel, Wisenbaker, and Fryman, *An Archaeological and Historical Survey*, 86-87; Robinson, *History of Hillsborough*, 104-105, 107; for more about the well-known and re-enacted Levi Starling ambush of 1856, see an article by Susan M. Green in the *Tampa Tribune*, 23 April 2006.

<sup>27</sup> A.A. Robinson, ed., *Florida, A Pamphlet Descriptive of its History, Topography, Climate, Soil, Resources and Natural Advantages* (Tallahassee: Floridian Book and Job Office, 1882), 123-126.

<sup>28</sup> Daniel, Wisenbaker, and Fryman, *An Archaeological and Historical Survey*, 94.

acquisition and resale company, owned a large tract of Dead River property in 1886; Plant also acquired other tracts in the area.<sup>29</sup> Seven years later the new 13.33 mile Tampa and Thonotosassa Railroad line linked the area with Plant's network of lines.<sup>30</sup> The spur sparked growth and attracted more newcomers. As Fryman wrote: "Land for citrus groves, for utilization of forest resources (timber and naval stores, turpentine especially) and for cattle grazing were the main attractions. In the 1880s, most of the remaining public land within the project area [Lower Hillsborough, including Dead River] passed into private hands. The state yielded title to the remaining tracts to the Florida Central and Peninsular Railroad Company in 1890s (Florida DNR, Bureau of State Lands, Tract Books, Vol 17)." <sup>31</sup>

Despite this trend of activity, other than the Civilian Conservation Corps constructing nearby Hillsborough River State Park, which opened in 1938, Dead River remained remote. In the early 1950s, however, a modest fish camp changed that when its owner, selling riverfront lots, sparked the short-lived village known as Dead River. <sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> SWFWMD Land Resources Department, "Certificate Chain of Title, Schedule D," LHF/Dead River file 13-300-118, SWFWMD Land Resources Department.; and Daniel, Wisenbaker, and Fryman, *An Archaeological and Historical Survey*, 97.

<sup>30</sup> George W. Pettengill Jr., *The Story of the Florida Railroads 1834-1903* (Boston: The Railway and Locomotive Historical Society, Inc., 195), 93; and Daniel, Wisenbaker, and Fryman, *An Archaeological and Historical Survey*, 95.

<sup>31</sup> Daniel, Wisenbaker, and Fryman, *An Archaeological and Historical Survey*, 95-96.

<sup>32</sup> Florida Park Service Information Center, "Florida Online Park Guide," Florida Park Service, <http://www.floridastateparks.org/hillsborough/default.cfm>; SWFWMD Land Resources Department, "Certificate of Appraisal," file 13-300-124, p. 9.

## CHAPTER TWO

### FISH CAMP

Before the clustered cabins of Dead River, George Bird's fish camp anchored activity on the Hillsborough River a mile or so south of the state park. Mr. Bird passed away in 1975, but his venture can be reconstructed through the memories of others. As 70-year-old Craig Miller recalled, his dad, George Miller, helped the Birds purchase their riverfront property and adjoining pastureland: "Dad did that to a lot of people. He'd finance 'em and then he'd have the use of it and didn't have to do all the work . . . we had run of the whole thing." The Millers kept cattle in pastureland behind the fish camp and built stables to house their horses. Craig, raised in Zephyrhills about ten miles northeast of Dead River, frequented the fish camp in the late 1940s into the 1950s.<sup>33</sup>

The fish camp was a side venture for Mr. Bird, Craig remembered: "In fact hardly anybody [would] ever go out there except maybe on weekends or something like that. Most of them were just people that casually knew him. It was not a money maker at all . . . nah if he had to do that he would have starved to death . . . he just had it because he liked it." The Birds' house doubled as a bait shop: "In the front they just had bait and a little tackle and some cane poles and stuff like that and then behind was living quarters . . . in fact, if I'm not mistaken, you could even get your fishing license there." Others came to simply hang out: "It seemed to me they had a bench in the front because a lot of time

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<sup>33</sup> Steve Bird, interview by author, 29 September 2006 (all subsequent quotes and stories attributed to Bird stem from this interview); Craig Miller interview.

people'd go out there and they'd just sit there and shoot the bull and be there at . . . the river."<sup>34</sup>

Cypress boats were for rent, some with motors, others without for those who brought their own, remembered Steve Bird. He was in first grade for part of the two to three years that he lived on the river with his parents and a cousin, who was raised with him like a brother. Though Steve only had a handful of memories, they were memorable. The time his mother warded away a black snake with shaving cream; later some ladies fishing said they'd spotted a rabid snake. While some parents harness their children in large crowds to keep them nearby, Steve's parents did likewise with a rope tied to a tree to keep him from falling into the river. He recalled a lady questioning his mom's tactic. Her response? "He didn't fall in the river," said Steve, adding, "Nowadays they [would] probably put you in jail when they saw that. It was effective." Steve picked up arrowheads on the graded road when walking to the bus stop, and a lasting affinity for open pit barbecue often cooked at the camp.<sup>35</sup>

Kids were entertained at the camp, too, springing from two diving boards, one about 10 feet above the water. A pontoon on 55-gallon barrels floated in the river, which widened, having snaked down from the state park. "We'd swim out there and lay around on it," said Craig. "That was fun time of life, boy. If I could have had that all the way through my life . . . great!" A black-and-white photograph from the late 1940s or early 1950s shows Craig standing in the crook of a sweet gum, beaming, ready to jump into the river: "The south side of that slough had some big 'ol sweet gum trees . . . We had the

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<sup>34</sup> Miller interview.

<sup>35</sup> Bird interview.

limbs cleared out, we'd dive in that hole," that was about twenty to twenty-five feet deep."<sup>36</sup>

A sweet gum tree where the fish camp stood still towers over the river on the south bank, about fifteen feet above the water. Combined with the limbs of two nearby red maples the trees frame a vista, its shape seemingly a maple leaf itself: three rounded coves resembling the leaf's three points; the narrowing river a stem shaped on one side by a patch of water hemlock and water hyacinth, on the other by the river's wooded bank. It's easy to envision Craig and others flocking to the fish camp to beat the summer heat or catch the day's dinner, which they did: "Mom would take me, Dad was in the service . . . [within] a half hour, forty-five minutes I could get all the bream we needed to eat." A black-and-white photograph shows Craig as a sturdily built teenager "back when I had some hair," showcasing a three-foot long string of bream. Other times he'd rig a cane pole to a palm tree leaning over the river, and leave it. That's how he landed a thirty-five pound catfish: "We'd take a cane pole and then wrap the line about half way down and . . . tied it and just left the line out with a shiner on it. Next morning that pole went down in the water . . . we couldn't pull it in, we had to go get the boat over there to help get the pole up, and we had that big 'ol cat fish on there." Cane poles with multiple hooks baited with hog skin hanging from line wrapped three to five feet across the pole lured bass near the shore line. It was called "Dibblin'" and the best time was early morning or late evening, when the bass were aggressive. One person paddled the boat while the other shook the pole, "Dibblin'" for bass near the banks.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Miller interview.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

If Craig wasn't fishing, often he set out for solitude in the surrounding woods: "I would take, like holidays and stuff like that, I'd take my horse, my dog, and the gun and the fishing pole and a blanket and I'd go back down along the river there and stay for two, three, four days, and I'd just live off the land. I never took anything [food] with me." He rarely saw anyone on his outings: "It's nothing like it is now. You never saw anyone back in there, never. Once in a while in hunting season George [Mr. Bird], or my dad would let people go in there hunting."<sup>38</sup>

The east bank of the Hillsborough River was clear enough to ride nearly as far as Dead River, along the same route as the park's present-day Fort King Trail. But wandering the woods could be challenging: "A lot of places was so thick I'd take my horses and the most open spot you'd [still] have to put your legs up on the sides of the saddle cause you squeezed through 'em just about. It was thick in a lot of that area . . . . But like, across the river there, and all those palm trees and big oaks, and stuff like that, it was pretty clear in a lot of that area. You'd be surprised how clear it was." The setting was ideal for squirrel hunting: "I could go back in there and then probably an hour, I'd come out with ten, twelve, fourteen squirrels. You got in those big 'ol palms, boy that was just like telegraphing. Those squirrels would just jump into those palms and you could hear it all over . . . . I've sat right there in a tree . . . squatting down there and just not moving and shooting squirrels. I've got eight, ten of 'em without even moving . . . just where they fell and just not moved. You know they'll check on the other ones and look and see what happened and [you can] pop 'em off as long as you don't get up and

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

walk and don't disturb 'em." Craig sighed contently recalling the memory: "They were so thick in there it was pathetic."<sup>39</sup>

Craig picked tangerines on his trips, and knew to get the fruit before the squirrels: "I'd make a point of going by there and I'd climb up there, pretty good sized tree . . . they'd [tangerines] get real ripe, boy them squirrels would go in there just to get the seeds out of 'em . . . . And you'd be surprised, coons love 'em."<sup>40</sup>

In a pasture behind the fish camp, Craig and his family hunted wood ducks at dusk, when flocks left the feeding grounds to roost: "They'd come across that pasture probably twenty foot off of the ground and they would come right to these bay heads and then they'd shoot right up over the bay heads right at dusk. Back then they didn't have a whole lot of limit on 'em, and we'd get there in the evenings . . . they'd come across that pasture and as they'd shoot up over, you'd sit right there and pop those suckers off. They'd come through there, by the, oh, more than the hundreds. You could turn your barrel red hot I believe."<sup>41</sup>

Alligator and turtle were a good source of food, too. Whether hunting the Dead River woods, the Green Swamp, or some other favored spot, the Millers' menu often came from the woods: "We were raised on turtle and alligator . . . the three of us boys [his brothers], we was always bringing gators in." But they varied the way it was cooked: "You can roast it, grind it, use it for hamburger, put with chili, all kind of stuff like that. It's just about fat free." Surplus meat was stored in a Zephyrhills ice house: "Before all these freezers and everything we had a cold storage place here which made the big 'ol block ice, but they had 'em, what they called cold storage, they had baskets . . . and it had

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

numbers on there and so, you rented a locker and you put your meat and stuff like that and you went there once a week, or whatever, and got what meat you wanted.” Life was good he recalled, especially the eating: “We didn’t know we was poor ‘till all these Yankees came down here and told us how poor we were. We thought we was doing pretty good eating alligator and wild hog [he laughed heartily] and turtle, and stuff like that. We thought we were high on the hog.”<sup>42</sup>

Sometimes Craig lured alligators within the Hillsborough River by throwing in rabbit pelts. The pelts were left over from rabbit meat he sold: “Didn’t have much go to waste.” Some kids have paper routes. Craig had a rabbit route, and with the proceeds paid for his first two years of college: “I had some people that every week they wanted meat. And then some people every other week.” Others came by the house to request rabbit: “Mainly, Fridays when I got out of school, I made sure that I knew how many I had to . . . butcher that week, so I would go around and make sure everybody wanted their rabbits. And then Saturday when I would get done milking the cows . . . I’d come in and butcher the rabbits I had that was for order, and then I’d have breakfast, and then I’d deliver ‘em and I got my money.” His resourcefulness didn’t stop there: “Back then didn’t have commercial fertilizers and stuff like that and so I used to save all the rabbit manure and I bagged it. And out on the street I had the bags there . . . well I didn’t have trouble selling it. People come by and they’d get a bag and that paid for my feed. And so my rabbit, the meat, was my profit. And so it worked out real well.” The pelts weren’t worth the time it took to salvage them: “If you got ten cents a piece you were doing good, and that’s a lot of work . . . for a pelt, so that’s why I’d take ‘em down and take ‘em to the river.”<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

## No Close Calls

Considering how much time Craig spent in the woods, you might expect riveting stories of close calls with the wild. But more often than not he was with his two younger brothers, Glenn and Larry - particularly if they were hunting alligators. “At least we were smart enough to not go by ourselves,” Craig laughed. Despite safety in numbers, a four-foot alligator once latched onto Larry’s arm. Craig’s story reveals either the brothers’ unmatched backwoods tenacity, or a penchant for episodic short-term memory loss: “We pulled the boat, got up on shore, ‘cause the gator kept wanting to turn like they’re known for . . . and laid the gator on its back and my brother just lay there with his arm,” in the gator’s mouth. Craig pressured the gator’s mouth open until it was wide enough so Larry could release his arm. Larry had a puncture wound, but didn’t fret, Craig recalled: “He was gritting his teeth hard, but, nah, he wasn’t screaming or hollering or nothing.” They even planned to keep hunting after returning home to treat the wound with mercurochrome. But their father saw them treating the wound, asked about it, and grounded them from hunting alligators for a month.<sup>44</sup>

The Miller boys hunted turtles, too. Soft-shell meat was a favorite: “We used to eat them all the time . . . They claim there’s seven different kind of flavor meat in a turtle . . . some light, some dark, some chicken, some say it taste like lamb.” But to eat them, you had to know how to handle them: “He’d [the turtle] reach all the way back and get you. What we used to do with them, we’d catch them . . . take our knife and slit the

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

back of their shell and . . . make a handle. And then we could carry it, but you'd have to carry it out here [arms length] 'cause he'd stretch his neck and get you."<sup>45</sup>

Other turtles provided fun, not food - think water scooters. Turtle shells were handle bars, their strong legs motors. Drifting downriver, the Miller boys collected "big 'ol stink pot turtles, with the painted red ear, or yellow ear," as Craig described them. Often, the turtles they collected were trapped in a wire-mesh net his dad built. The net straddled both sides of a tree leaning over the river: "They would plop over and they'd go right into that net and then they couldn't get back out of it and periodically we'd go down there and get 'em out of it." Craig, animated, relived the rides: "That's the greatest thing in the world." His palms open and arms held out wide, Craig swept the air behind him, demonstrating the turtle's strength to propel a rider: "They're just going like mad and you can . . . turn 'em up, down, dive with them . . . use them like a scooter." The rides lasted as long as 20 minutes, or, Craig confessed, "'till the turtle'd get tired." Craig and his brothers kept a supply of water scooters at the camp in a pen: "The hardest part was catching 'em. But after we caught 'em, see we'd pen some of 'em up, and we always had some around there."<sup>46</sup>

Craig, sitting by his car port in his rural Zephyrhills yard, often relived his memories in the moment. His voice gained pitch as the stories unfolded. His full-faced smile, beneath a baseball cap weathered with work dirt, was contagious like a yawn: "People say 'how in the world did you live as long as you have with all the crazy things you did. But, I mean, that was just normal everyday things for us, then. And although

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

then, they didn't have Nintendo, they didn't have TV . . . we created our own entertainment."<sup>47</sup>

Craig's enviable antics aside, there were tragic moments on the river: "One Sunday morning my two brothers and my dad and I was hunting on the other side of the river and it was probably eleven, twelve o'clock . . . and Dad I was walking and all the sudden we heard screaming and hollering . . . so we took off running and we got to the river and there was a boat capsized and there were kids all over . . . there were seven kids in that boat and two men. One boy could swim, and one guy could swim, and they had one of them old outboard motors and somebody I guess said 'let's see how fast it'd go' and he revved up and it nosed under . . . so my two brothers and myself was in the Boy Scouts and we stripped off our clothes and just jumped in and we started pulling kids out and everything, and we got all of them out except three boys. And we kept diving and finally got 'em, but it was too late. But even then we did the artificial respiration, the old pushing on the back and pulling on the shoulder," method. The closest phone was at the state park upriver, which connected to Plant City, not Tampa: "So finally they got the fire department in Plant City and they came out." Word reached a Zephyrhills doctor and the town's fire department, which showed up, too.<sup>48</sup>

Rescues extended to the state park, as well: "In fact when somebody'd get lost they'd [state park officials] call my two brothers and myself because we knew that area like the back of our hand. We stayed in the state park as much as we did our home, and we'd go over there to help 'em hunt for people that'd wander off the trail and get lost back in there." Some of Craig's fondest memories are rooted in those woods -

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

particularly involving his dad: “Dad always liked to go in March or April when the gobblers are calling and the fish are on bed, too. And we just lay there early in the morning and Dad said ‘Listen over there, listen to that tom there’ . . . . We’d just lay there and listen to turkey . . . my dad and I was so close. We fished and hunted together more than my other two brothers. But even [bob]cat hunting, he’d come up about two o’clock in the morning in my room . . . and he’d already have the dogs loaded and everything like that. And I’d hit the floor and we’d take off because [it was] the best time to hunt. You see early in the evening the cat would usually make his kill and eat and then he wouldn’t run as far. He’d climb a tree . . . and he wouldn’t run for six, seven hours, he had a belly full . . . so we’d go out and let the strike dog out about two o’clock, two thirty and then we’d hunt, but a lot of times we’d hear a race going, so dad and I, we knew when they were in a certain area where the cat would usually go, and so we’d take the truck, he’d park, and him and I would lay on the hood of the truck and watch the stars and . . . every once in a while see a shooting star . . . . We just talked for hours.”<sup>49</sup>

### **Returning to Dead River**

In the mid-1950s, Mr. Bird sold his fish camp to the Reagans. Steve Bird said his dad was ready for a change: “Running a fish camp is somewhat time-consuming . . . . Also, Sunday, my folks liked to go to church and stuff . . . it was pretty much a seven day a week job.” They bought 300 acres in another part of rural Hillsborough County. In 1957, they sold that property and moved to Gulf Hammock, where Steve still lives.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> SWFWMD “Certificate Chain of Title,” LHF/Dead River file 13-300-118, p. 16, SWFWMD Land Resources Department; Bird interview.

After reading a newspaper feature about Dead River Park, Craig returned to the riverside setting for the first time in about 50 years; he had stopped going when the Birds sold the fish camp, about the same time he graduated from Zephyrhills School. Walking the Fort King Trail upriver sparked fond memories, but a recurring eyesore baffled him: “We were taught that when you went in the woods you brought out what you put in . . . I went there [Dead River] I saw trash here, there, paper wrappers, bottle caps, and plastic bottles and fish worm boxes and stuff like that. I found a plastic bag and as I went I picked it up. I come out with over a half a bag full of trash. People nowadays they don’t respect.”<sup>51</sup>

On a lighter note, some park-goers’ fishing techniques were amusing: “I seen people last Saturday using great big ‘ol sinkers and dead sinkers and throwing across the river and stuff like that, and then they was hung up, and then, shoot, I told ‘em, I said, ‘You know, there’s just as many fish if you let your line drift down, just a natural drift down. I said, ‘What happens when a fish is looking for something. A bug falls out of a tree . . . that thing floats down and they come up and nail it.’”<sup>52</sup>

An avid outdoorsman still, Craig prefers the Hillsborough’s less-frequented upriver stretches near his Zephyrhills home. Sargeant Park and downriver are too crowded for him. “It’s not fun anymore,” Craig explained. “Every time you start looking for something here comes another canoe or two, you have to get out of the way because they don’t know how to paddle.” He often escapes to re-energize, walking the less-frequented stretch of the Hillsborough north of the state park: “I get to the point that people start getting on my nerves and then I can . . . go down to the river and go back in

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<sup>51</sup> Miller interview.

<sup>52</sup> Miller interview.

there and disappear, and don't get bothered by anybody." Craig laughed contently: "A good life I've had." He paused: "I have. I have." He laughed again: "I hope to keep it going, too."<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

## CHAPTER THREE

### DEAD RIVER DEVELOPS

From December 1954 to June 1957, George Bird sold eleven lots at the confluence of the Hillsborough and Dead Rivers, about a mile downstream from his camp. He subdivided 2.76 acres into plots ranging from .11 to .39 acres, most priced at \$500. The Yates bought their lot on Dead River in 1954. As Arthur Yates wrote in his journal, the transaction was a “\$500 Horse Trade: a diamond watch for his wife, and \$150.00 cash.” Trading was a welcome pastime for the jeweler. “Art was a trader,” said 81-year-old Betty Garton, his first wife. Once he traded a piece of jewelry for a dog. “And a calf, another time,” she marveled.<sup>54</sup>

In his journal, Arthur Yates described how the cabin was built: “Family and friends were there every Sunday, giving advice and nailing up boards in the wrong place.” Cypress siding covered pine framing, the wood bought from a Zephyrhills sawmill. When completed, the Yates family had an 18’ by 24’ cabin with a screened-in front porch. In later years, they added a 10’ by 24’ back porch with a bedroom and bathroom on either end. “Our cabin, when completed, including pump and septic tank, had a total cost of \$950, we sold it 9 year later (1963) for \$7500.00,” wrote Arthur Yates. The septic tank, recalled Ron, was homemade: a ditch with gravel, pipes spaced apart and wrapped in tar paper, leading to a fifty gallon drum buried in the ground. Three months after the Yates completed their cabin, and with winter approaching, Tampa Electric Company ran lines to the riverside retreat. “All ten lots had been sold,” wrote Arthur

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<sup>54</sup> SWFWMD Land Resources Department, “Certificate of Appraisal,” file 13-300-124, p. 9; Arthur Yates, “Dead River Chronicles”; Garton interview.

Yates, “and the cost to bring the power line was \$750.00, we each had to pay \$175.00 up front, but TECO gave each of us credit for that, and we didn’t pay any electric bills for almost 3 years. (average monthly bill about \$7.00)”.<sup>55</sup>

When homeowners needed repairs, work was often a group effort. “It was just like a little community,” said Betty. “When we built out there, everybody helped each other, you know what I mean?” Though people were friendly, Betty said living at Dead River was challenging. She was familiar with the area, having camped at Hillsborough River State Park with her husband’s relatives. But now she lived in the depth of the woods, without electricity the first three months, and without indoor plumbing the first few years. An outdoor horse trough passed for a bath tub, the water heated on a gas stove. At night they used kerosene lamps and otherwise passed time playing games, reading, and cooking hot dogs and marshmallows over an outdoor fire. Nancy Salazar, Betty’s niece who lived next door with her mother, step-father, and younger brother, recalled showering outside in the summer: “We hooked a hose to a palm tree and [we’d] sit under it with our bathing suits on.” But Betty overlooked the uncertainties of a new experience: “I married him, like you say for better or worse, sickness and health and all that other jazz. I wanted to please him and I did what he wanted to do. It made him happy and that was more important than anything else, but what can I say?”<sup>56</sup>

Ron said it for her: “My mother, Mumsy, she’s an excellent, good sport.” He recalled “a basic, homemade house,” with “a two-holer. It was a bonafide outhouse.” At least Betty was acclimated to Florida. Mosquito netting covered windowless openings in her Plant City home. To understand how far she had come to this point, it helps to hear

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<sup>55</sup> Arthur Yates, “Dead River Chronicles”; Yates interview.

<sup>56</sup> Garton interview; Nancy Salazar, interview by author, 31 August 2006, Tampa, FL (all subsequent quotes and stories attributed to Nancy Salazar stem from this interview or follow-up questions).

where she had been before she met Arthur Yates. As she explained: “I was working at the Pentagon, and he was in the Navy. And we met in a bar. And I liked the guy he was with, and the girlfriend that I was [with], she liked Art. But we ended up opposite. I ended up with Arthur, she ended up with the other guy. And then we started dating, about six months, and then I went back home and he got discharged from the service, the War [World War II] was over. And then about six months later he wanted me to come down here and get married. Well I came on the train, and man, coming through Georgia [where she saw dilapidated houses in poor rural areas], this lady that was on the train with me, she said, ‘You see what that looks like? That’s what Plant City looks like.’ I said, [draws breath in] ‘Oh my goodness, what am I getting myself into?’” Nancy was seven when she met her aunt: “My gosh, she dressed [laughed] like she was going to high tea, or something, every day, just to go to town. Hat, gloves, stockings, high-heeled shoes. And I can remember my grandmother saying, ‘This isn’t going to last very long.’ It wasn’t long before she realized she wasn’t going to be able to dress like that, because nobody dressed like that, because it was too hot. It was simply too hot.”<sup>57</sup>

Betty’s first foray as a Floridian was temporary: “I came down here, got married, then six months later Arthur lost his job. And then we decided to go back to Poughkeepsie [her hometown in New York], and stay with my mother and father, I was pregnant with Ronnie when we left. He was born up there, at Vassar, in Poughkeepsie, then about 6 months later, Arthur couldn’t stand the cold weather.” So the Yates moved back to Plant City and began a Florida adventure that would lead to Dead River. When Arthur Yates convinced his wife to live at Dead River, it helped that his sister, Margie Hayes [Nancy’s mother], would be a year-round resident with her family, too. The

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<sup>57</sup> Yates, Garton, and Salazar interviews.

members of another family, the Bakers, were fulltime residents, as well. And Betty quickly learned having a place on the river, though two miles deep in the woods, is far from isolated when city-dwelling friends visit on weekends: “Arthur was a great one to invite [people],” she said. “It didn’t take me long [to acclimate], because we had a lot of friends, and you know when you’ve got a place like that friends like to go out and visit . . . and we’d always have fish frys, or they’d bring something and we’d cook it outside.” About every other month the Yates hosted the Tampa watchmakers guild. “One time we had 150 people,” recalled Betty. The fish came straight from the river. “Back then,” said Ron, “you could invite fifty people to a fish fry, and you went that morning and caught fish, and you were going to have fish.” One picture of a guild gathering shows people mingling under a pole barn. Arthur Yates described the day’s details in his journal: “The tub under the shed belonged to “Pa” Corbitt. He loaned it to us to keep drinks cold. He used the tub alternately for washing his dog, Butch, and keeping the giant catfish he caught [*sic*] alive. We had about 150 people at the fish fry. The road was good that week end, we had graded it to perfection, and it didn’t rain. Ron Yates entertained everybody with boat rides in our aluminum boat and 7 ½ horse [power] Johnson motor. He was about 11 years old.”<sup>58</sup>

Dead River families gathered, as well, particularly when working on the road, which was often. “They worked on the road as much as they could,” said Betty, “because they had to get graded for the next flood . . . for the next rainy day.” Sundays were work days, followed by a community cook out. Ernest Buchanan, whose parents owned a place at Dead River, relived the tastes and smells of those gatherings some fifty years later:

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<sup>58</sup> Garton and Yates interviews; Arthur Yates, “Dead River Chronicles.”

“Man you’re making me hungry! . . . . Hushpuppies? I don’t know who used to make ‘em but ahhhhhh, they’d melt in your mouth.”<sup>59</sup>

### **Fish Tales**

As would be expected, fishing is a recurring theme at Dead River: trying to outsmart big bass; pictures of strung stump knockers lined closely like abacus beads, stretched between fishermen; fishing with guns and homemade spears; and playing practical jokes. Rodney Mitchell, Nancy Salazar’s brother, recalled impromptu meals, too: “I remember one day her [his mom] and Nancy and I had caught some fish, and we were up the river somewhere between Dead River and the state park, and she wanted to cook the fish, so we had all of the big skillets and . . . got a fire . . . and started cooking the fish and it started raining, and I remember Nancy and I getting some palm fronds and holding over mother, so she wouldn’t [laughs], so she wouldn’t get wet while she was cooking the fish.” Other times, they ate the ends of palm fronds, recalled Nancy: “I can remember eating the palmetto fronds, the young ones, you could pull them out of the plant and we would eat the ends of ‘em because they were very tender.” Palm fronds worked well for stringing fish, too. Larger fronds, two to three feet long, were cleared, one end buried in the shoreline, the other left in the water and strung with smaller fish, such as perch and yellow-bellied bream.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Garton interview; Ernest Buchanan, interview by author, 7 July 2006, Thonotosassa, FL (all subsequent quotes and stories attributed to Buchanan stem from this interview or follow-up questions).

<sup>60</sup> West interview; Arthur Yates, “Dead River Chronicles”; A.V. Williams, interview by author, 5 July 2006, Tampa, FL (all subsequent quotes and stories attributed to Williams stem from this interview); Rodney Mitchell, interview by author, 17 July 2006, Orlando, FL (all subsequent quotes and stories attributed to Mitchell stem from this interview or follow-up questions); Salazar interview.

Despite enjoying her surroundings, Nancy wasn't one for "tramping around in the woods." She laughed, confessing: "I was definitely scared of snakes and I still am." She didn't care for swamp cabbage, either, unlike her brother Rodney, who compared the taste to cauliflower. "It was mushy and green," Nancy explained. "It doesn't even taste like cabbage. It's got a very distinctive taste . . . I think a little bit on the strong side." However, she fondly recalled the smell of fish: "I just love fish . . . My main thing was fishing off the bridge and staying away [from the bank] because there was an alligator out in front of the house, in the creek part, the Dead River part, so I didn't fish near anything [else]. I was usually on the bridge." Though fifty years later, she still recalled the heartbreak of seeing a family friend land a fish she'd been eyeing.<sup>61</sup>

Betty suffered the same fish fate, or so she thought. She was determined to catch a bass on bed. "I go out there every day and try to catch this bass," she recalled. "Well I didn't have no luck. So Arthur told Vickers [a family friend] that I was trying to catch him, so what he did, is he went and got a mullet, and he put it on a hook and a pole and went out there and said, 'Hey, Betty I caught your fish!' So I took a broom and I was hitting him over the head. I said, 'You were not supposed to catch my fish!' . . . He was the kind that played tricks on me."<sup>62</sup>

Sometimes fish humor came from unexpected consequences. "I had a spear gun," said Ron, "and we used to go out and spear mud fish. And we loaded the boat, man. One time we speared a lot of mud fish and my dad said, 'What are you going to do with those things?' . . . so "Pa" Corbitt, said 'Man bring 'em over here. I'll bury them in the back yard and plant plants on top of them,' because that's what the Indians did, so we hauled

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<sup>61</sup> Salazar and Mitchell interviews.

<sup>62</sup> Garton interview.

them over there and he planted them and the raccoons dug ‘em all up.” Ron laughed about being able to fish with a spear gun: “It was flagrantly against the law . . . . We’d always keep our eyes peeled in case a ranger came by, we had it figured out we’d just turn that thing loose and let it go to the bottom.” Sometimes, added Rodney, Ron’s older cousin, they tried homemade fish spears: “When the water was clear the gar fish would gather for some reason around that hole there [the Bird fish camp] and . . . we’d make us a spear . . . [with] like a tree limb or something, you know, or like a fishing pole, you put a little point on . . . a cane pole.” Did it work? “No,” laughed Rodney. The water was clear, but depth perception threw him off: “You could see clear to the bottom . . . it was a nice green color down there . . . really the whole river, down Dead River and past, it was as clear as it could be.” It wasn’t spring water clear, “but it had a bluish green tint to it” Rodney declared. Ron remembered the northern confluence of Hillsborough and Dead Rivers being particularly clear and deep: “That place right there . . . it was fifty, sixty, seventy-five foot deep . . . bass looked like a submarine. But they were hard to catch.”<sup>63</sup>

Some twenty years earlier, before Dead River had homes, A.V. Williams saw three-foot-long blue channel catfish swimming sixteen to twenty feet below in the same area. Even today, the spot is a popular place to cast a line, though not as clear. A.V., who grew up at nearby Cow House Creek and Antioch, hunted, trapped, and fished Dead River, and the surrounding region in the early and mid-1930s, about the same time he also helped build Hillsborough River State Park as a member of the Civilian Conservation Corps. A.V., interviewed at his West Tampa kitchen table beneath a sign that read, “I Would Rather Be Lost In The Woods . . . Than Found At Home,” relived those early Dead River days: “Over on the west side of Dead River is a high bank there,

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<sup>63</sup> Yates and Mitchell interviews.

and it kept a high bank for at least a half-a-mile down the river, and we use to kind of outlaw . . . and we kind of giggered fish.” He also climbed up a tree outstretched over Dead River and shot “bass and catfish with a twenty-five fifty [a high powered rifle].” Then he retrieved the fish by hand: “They would finally come up and . . . we always skinny dipped and went down and got ‘em.”<sup>64</sup>

The Yates swam in Dead River in front of their cabin. But their swimming hole sometimes needed a little prep work. They used the family boat to clear the bottom, Ron recalled: “Dead River’s more like a little crick . . . around the corner, there’s a little shallow place there and we’d take the outboard motor and push it up, run it [the boat] up against the beach and give it the gas and it’d blow all the silt, had a pretty white sand bottom.” A photo in the Yates journal shows nine people clustered in the swimming hole, among them Betty, Ron, Margie Hayes, Nancy, and Rodney. One person is holding Dilly, a pet duck that according to Yates’s journal was the “only duck in history that was afraid of water.” Yates chronicled how the duck developed its peculiar trait:

The duck was a gift to Ronnie from Dick Lynagh, the diamond salesman that helped put us in the diamond business. It was only a chick and Easter was chilly so we let Ronnie keep the duck in his bedroom. After about 3 months the room smelled like a chicken yard. The duck had never been in water. I picked him up carried him to the river bank and threw him in. He literally walked on water. It scared him so bad, he would never go near the water, unless there was a group of kids, then he’d stay right in their middle, and would run for the bank when they left water. We gave him to Mr. Reagan, at the dairy when we moved to town, and I am sure they served him for dinner.<sup>65</sup>

As odd as it is that a duck would avoid water, it would seemingly make sense that swimmers would fear sharing the river with alligators. But Ron didn’t recall any run-ins during his time at Dead River, though they kept a gun nearby: “Everybody would swim

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<sup>64</sup> Williams interview.

<sup>65</sup> Yates interview; Arthur Yates, “Dead River Chronicles.”

all the time, we never even gave a thought about gators. We saw a gator [makes shooting noise], dropped it,” he insisted. “They eat people [he laughs], I mean they do, they’ve known that for years. I don’t know how the hell we got so many gators [nowadays]. There’s no shortage of gators is what my observation has been, everywhere you look. I was riding my motorcycle on Morris Bridge Road [a few miles west of Dead River], I stopped to ease down the bridge to take a little whiz, there’s a damn gator right there, and that whole, the water’s dry, that little creek’s all dried up except for about twenty-five feet. Just a little puddle there, and there’s a damn gator sitting there in the puddle.”<sup>66</sup>

Gators were handled; if they were small. Hatchlings could be found along the two-mile or so riverside service road en route to Dead River from the school bus stop at the state park. “Shoot, we’d always find something to do along the way,” laughed Rodney. “We’d go rob alligator’s nest, we’d find ones that had little alligators. We’d bring ‘em home for a little while and then we’d take them back down to the nest . . . they were about a foot long.” If the road was washed out, Ron and his cousins met the bus by boat, docking at the state park after the mile or so cruise upriver. Ron has fond memories of the boat, whiling away time exploring the river: “Man I’d get in that thing, I’d take off down the river, go here, go there, I mean it was like, not Jungle Jim, but it was really quite a idyllic experience . . . for a young kid.” Despite the freedom and an open river, Ron never felt the need for speed: “We never thought about having a motor that would go, you know, one hundred miles an hour. But now that’s the whole [appeal].”<sup>67</sup>

Ron hunted by boat as well. By night it was for frogs. He’d perch on the front of the boat, ever ready to slam with a paddle a frog head spotted by flashlight: “This will

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<sup>66</sup> Yates interview.

<sup>67</sup> Mitchell interview.

prove beyond any shadow of a doubt that we're bonafide, sure enough red necks," he joked. "Dad would pole the boat and his buddy ["Pa" Corbitt] would hold the flash light and I'd be up on front . . . we had a croaker sack, and I'd be up leaning way out over the front of the boat, this is at dark, after dark, and they'd shine that thing like at a big frog and man, you'd take that paddle, and go balap! And then knock him out cold and you throw him in the bag and then they stay alive, you don't have to clean 'em that night . . . man we'd load that big with those big 'ol frogs, man." The next weekend they'd have fried frog legs.<sup>68</sup>

Others hunted squirrel with elaborate plans for their pelts. "One year I bagged 72 squirrels," Ernest Buchanan claimed. He spread the hides on a board on the front porch. Once they cured, he planned to make a fur coat he could wear while driving his 1930 Model A. But his dad had other plans. "My dad got mad 'cause they stunk," Ernest recalled. "And stupid me left it on the front porch all the time and my father done away with them." But the meat didn't go to waste: "We didn't eat squirrel but the guy next to us did . . . he had a freezer on his front porch, so what I would do was clean 'em up and go put the squirrels in his freezer. He was happy about that."<sup>69</sup>

Though Ron and Ernest had impressive hauls, Ron recalled that Roy West, who lived three doors down with his wife and three young boys, was Dead River's quintessential outdoorsman: "We [Ron and his dad] were going down the river with this guy [Roy] in his boat, I guess heading up to the state park. And he just pealed off, just drove that boat right up on the bank, and jumped out and caught a snapping turtle that was damn near [extends arms out], I mean it, of course being a little tyke everything's

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<sup>68</sup> Yates interview.

<sup>69</sup> Buchanan interview.

bigger, but it had to be that big [extends arms out wide beyond shoulders] and he grabbed it by the hind leg, and man that thing was trying to bite him, and he cut off his head . . . we did eat that [turtle].” Roy passed away in 2001.<sup>70</sup>

His wife, Dottie West, now living in Chipley, Florida, recalled the turtle episode, adding that it was stuck on a limb on the bank. She shared another story about how her husband, bare-handed, caught a bass stuck in a bush, not only startling the bass, but two ladies down by boat from the Bird fish camp: “The time that he caught the fish, these two ladies was out there, and he peeled off out of the boat, and caught this fish and they thought he had had a heart attack.” The ladies asked Roy if he was okay. Dottie laughed, recalling her husband’s answer: ““Well, yes ma’am. I had to catch the fish.””<sup>71</sup>

More predictable, packaged food was found in Zephyrhills. Adventurous in their own right, Betty and her sister-in-law, Margie Hayes, rode into town in their version of a hybrid: an old Chevrolet truck fused together with a dump body of another truck, separate junk yards, the year of the truck unknown. “It had no body to it, no back body, just a front seat, you know,” recalled Betty. “And Margie would drive it ‘cause she liked to drive . . . and she would drive us to Zephyrhills and we’d go buy groceries, we’d do that once a week, and we’d be driving down [Highway] 301 with our hair blowing . . . all over the place . . . and no top or nothing, you didn’t have no way to [secure yourself], you just sat in the seat and held on, that’s it.”<sup>72</sup>

Hearing all these “wild-ass tales,” as Ron calls them, it would seem someone, sometime, would have had a life-threatening injury, or at least a broken limb other than the ones climbed, or a snake bite, or at least a fish hooked somewhere other than a fish.

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<sup>70</sup> Ron Yates and West interviews.

<sup>71</sup> West interview.

<sup>72</sup> Garton interview; Arthur Yates, “Dead River Chronicles.”

But rarely did those stories arise. Ernest Buchanan remembered Mrs. Corbitt bumping her head when she fell out of a boat. An ambulance met her at Highway 301, and she was fine. Rodney recalled cutting his foot on a cypress knee at the fish camp and going to Plant City for stitches. Maybe they were protected by the kerosene in their blood, which Ron claimed cured cuts: “It worked good . . . you got cut, pour a little kerosene on there, bandage you up, next thing you know, no problem. That’s just what they did.”<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Yates, Buchanan, and Mitchell interviews.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### ROAD WORK AND FLOODS: BOGGED DOWN BUT BONDING

When Dead River homeowners had to clear a road to reach their cabins, for the most part it was a community-led effort. Maintaining the road was their responsibility, too. “We built the road and nobody helped us,” recalled Ernest. He worked on the road from his late teens to his early twenties: “The state didn’t help us or county or nobody because it was private road.” Homeowners had a key to a lock on a common gate, or used a key hidden in a post-hole plug. From the gate, the road ran through swamp land. “That’s all swamp out there,” said Ron. “The whole thing is swamp. Just sometimes it’s wetter than others.” A.V. Williams recalled a similar setting when he tromped through the woods twenty-five to thirty years before Yates: “The water on the ground at that time even in dry weather was always, always . . . anywhere from just damp to a foot of water all over the territory.”<sup>74</sup>

Sundays were work days when homeowners reinforced the road with cypress logs covered by “Gumbo” scooped from a roadside ditch, explained Ron: “That’s all, what they called gumbo . . . a mixture of sand and clay and funk, and they just took that stuff and piled up, and it looks fine as long as it’s dry.” But when it was wet, it was “like that clay in Georgia,” Ron remembered. “It’s slippery as hell, man you’d fall down on that stuff.” While “Pa” Corbitt had a four-wheel drive to manage the muck, lesser-equipped cars had to improvise: “What you’d do, you kind of ease up there and look at it, and then

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<sup>74</sup> Buchanan, West, Yates, and Williams interviews.

you'd back up about one hundred yards and floor it," said Ron. "It really worked pretty good, seriously."<sup>75</sup>

Repairing the road became a well-honed routine. "Somebody had given us, it was either a tractor pulled or mule-drawn grader, motor grader, it's got four wheels with a long wheel-base thing, had like a blade in the middle, somebody gave us that," Ron recalled. "They would beg, borrow, steal . . . big trucks that you could load all these [wood] slabs on there, and go to the sawmill and they would give 'em the slabs, they're probably ten bucks for a whole load of 'em." Two guys in the truck would hand the slabs to two guys on the ground, who laid them on the road: "Then someone, they'd come along and spread dirt over 'em."<sup>76</sup>

They built the road, "probably five, six inches at a time," estimated Ernest, "and kept building it up 'til we covered up the gumbo." The park road nowadays, built up and lined with crushed shell, is about three feet higher than its earlier version. Though maintaining the road was hard work, Ernest didn't recall any arguing among homeowners, but he did mention one family that "wanted to come out here, but they sure didn't want to help build the road." In fact, Arthur Yates mentioned the same family in his journal, noting the Zephyrhills insurance man "always gave money, but never worked." A question mark on another lot from Arthur Yates's informal map stated: "never saw this man but 3 or 4 times. He never showed up for road work."<sup>77</sup>

Though road work was a Sisyphean task, rolling the rock was a rite of passage. Study the photos of the flooded road in Yates's journal and you quickly appreciate the futility they experienced. A picture of the road completely immersed after Hurricane

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<sup>75</sup> Yates interview.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Buchanan interview; Arthur Yates, "Dead River Chronicles."

Donna could be mistaken for the river, high grass and sabal palms its banks. And to think this was *after* the waters had receded. Arthur Yates wrote: “When we came through the swamp on the way in, the water was up to Ron’s chest, and Butch had to swim.” Another journal photo shows the river with submerged banks, its waters seemingly creased by a quick current. The photo’s caption describes a precarious outing: “The river crested, and we got in ‘Pa’ Corbitts [*sic*] boat, with him and Butch (his dog), and headed upriver. We got almost to Horse shoe bend and came to a big swirl. We started to cross it, and it started to suck the little boat down, scared the liver out of us, and we were no longer curious about high water.” Arthur Yates continued: “Ron Yates will remember this day.” And Ron does: “We got our butts back to the cabin. Forget that man, we don’t need to go anyplace that bad.” Ron looked at his picture with Butch, flood waters surrounding them, and laughed: “More than one occasion it was like that . . . Almost every year.” And it didn’t take a hurricane to wash out Dead River: “It used to flood . . . if it just got some good rain.” As Ron flipped through the Dead River Chronicles, he relived his memories: “Oh yeah, it was just fun to be with my dad. Yeah, I mean you’d go back and forth between the houses . . . I don’t think people really thought much about building their house really up. They were just enough where you can, you know step out the back door, jump in the boat and go over to here, go there. You just had to watch out . . . you stay out of the river, ‘cause it would definitely wash you away.” This actually happened to a boat that Ron found and thought he could claim: “I found a boat one time just floating down the river after the hurricane or something . . . I brought that dude up, built me like a cabin on that thing and next thing I know here comes a guy from the fish camp, he says, ‘Ah ‘Sonny? That’s my boat.’” Ron apologized and returned the boat.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Arthur Yates, “Dead River Chronicles”; Yates interview.

Despite the repeated floods, the Yates home stayed dry inside. “It’d get right up to the edge,” Ron recalled. The threshold between wet and dry was illustrated in a journal photo entitled “5<sup>th</sup> Day of the Flood.” The photo, taken outside the Yates cabin, shows “Pa” Corbitt and Arthur Yates surveying the flood waters. Yates has his pants rolled up to his knees. He wrote: “The flood waters had receded about two feet. Before this day we used ‘Pa’s’ flat-bottomed boat to go between his house and ours. The high point of the flood was the day we walked in, two days after the hurricane ended. ‘Pa’ had a good supply of beer, and his freezer and ours were well stocked. The day after this we waded out.”<sup>79</sup>

More journal photographs show standing water in gumbo ruts that forecast a considerable work load in dryer weather. Arthur Yates described the mess: “All our sand was gone and all our cypress slabs were across Sparkman’s fence. We were two months getting all the slabs back on our side and covered with sand.” A final photo shows Betty’s 1951 Ford: “parked outside the gate so nobody would drive in and get stuck since the tractor was not available at the time.”<sup>80</sup>

As the Yates journal suggests, water never deterred Dead River homeowners from reaching their beloved cabins. Ron described how homeowners reached their cabins: “They’d put all their stuff in a flat-bottomed boat and drag that dude in there, walk right down the road . . . just to go for the weekend.” Ernest remembered one instance when a friend’s car floated like a boat: “My buddy had a little Volkswagen and we had to cross a

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<sup>79</sup> Yates interview; Arthur Yates, “Dead River Chronicles.”

<sup>80</sup> Arthur Yates, “Dead River Chronicles.”

little ravine because the water was crossing both sides [of the road] and we floated across [the ravine] . . . we actually floated across.”<sup>81</sup>

Some run-ins with the road led to tense moments. Once, Betty’s car got stuck and she had to huff it to the cabin: “One time, when my mother was here, David [her middle child] was a baby, and . . . I was supposed to go down there and take my mother. Well it rained, but Arthur was supposed to call me and tell me not to come because the road was not passable . . . so he didn’t call me . . . so I just tried. Went down there and got stuck. I walked all the way from [Highway] 301 down to the road, across the bridge, and Ronnie saw me and he said, ‘Dad, you won’t believe. Mom’s coming across the bridge and she is mad as hell. And guess what, she just got a new perm and . . . she’s got all little ringlets all over it.’” Betty laughed about the incident - forty years later: “I was so mad. I said, ‘You were supposed to call me!’ He said ‘Oh I forgot.’ Well when he got with Corbitt, and Buchanan, and Spivey and all of ‘em they all drank beer and he just forgot.’ But anyway it was no big catastrophe. I lived through it, you know.” As she did during another trying episode involving wild boars. Betty was hanging laundry with Margie Hayes, when “all of the sudden Margie, she says, ‘Uh oh, Betty get inside.’ I said, ‘What for? I got to hang these clothes up.’ She said ‘There’s a wild boar coming, and they are wild.’ And they come stomping, and when I ran inside, they come right up to the house, you know, right up against your wall or door, you know.” Betty seemed as unnerved reliving the memory during the interview at her daughter’s Lakeland home, as she was when the incident actually occurred: “They were wild, oooooo. I was scared to death of ‘em.” She continued: “See, they make a lot of noise, you know, and when we heard them

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<sup>81</sup> Yates and Buchanan interviews.

we ran because I knew the better to get the hell out of the way, because I didn't want to get eaten up by 'em, you know?"<sup>82</sup>

### **Leaving, but Not Gone**

Three years after their Dead River adventure had begun, Arthur Yates asked his wife if she wanted to move back to Tampa. "Arthur just got tired of driving back and forth to work every day," Betty explained. His jewelry store was in south Tampa: "It was 30 miles there and 30 miles back, you know, and he just got tired of it. He asked me, 'You want to move back to town?' I said, 'Well, that's all right if everybody else wants to go.'"<sup>83</sup>

To appreciate Betty's progression from wilderness neophyte to seasoned Floridian, consider two stories as bookends to her Dead River experience. When The Yates built their cabin, Betty insisted that the windows be high enough so cows of the wild couldn't look in: "I didn't want to be attacked by a cow. You know it was all wildlife out there." But after living in the woods, Betty actually curtailed the fears of others: "My sister came to see me one time and we went out there and we were sitting on the bed and . . . reminiscing and passing old times . . . and all of the sudden this roach flew across the room and she said, 'What was that.' And I said, 'What, I didn't see anything,' cause I wasn't going to have her scared . . . and she said, 'Well, what was that?' I said, 'It was just a roach. You're bigger than it, it won't eat you, it won't worry you, it won't hurt you.'" This was the same woman who moved to Florida as a newlywed, afraid of what she might find: "I thought there was Indians and everything. Me a city girl

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<sup>82</sup> Garton interview.

<sup>83</sup> Arthur Yates, "Dead River Chronicles"; Garton interview.

from New York, to come down here.” She laughed recalling her mother’s same fears of Florida. When Betty’s mother visited her in Plant City, she slept with an ax under the bed in case of Indian attacks. And staying at Dead River was out of the question: “No, she thought that’s all we had down there was Indians.” Betty laughed heartily: “Ahh, a lot of memories, a lot of, whoa, how do you say it, water under the bridge?” In her case, literally and figuratively the Dead River bridge. Betty wouldn’t cross the bridge when she and her son visited Dead River in the 1980s: “David and I drove out there one time, but I didn’t want to . . . cross the bridge at all, ‘cause, you know . . . memories, you know? So I didn’t go. I just stayed in the car.”<sup>84</sup>

Ron has returned to Dead River many times, once with his wife and two daughters. His daughters, raised in Tampa, marveled at Dead River’s remoteness. Ron notices how the main grounds at the park differ from the manicured yards and mowed lawns he remembers as a child: “It’s all, all very overgrown out there . . . It was quite a nice retreat.” And one he can only imagine having today: “Man I would, boy I tell ya, man I would love to own that son of a bitch now. Ho, ho, ho. One hour from Tampa? You’re talking about boon-docks-o-rama.” Ron can imagine weekends at Dead River if his family still owned their home: “I’d be there every Friday night, six o’clock I’d be standing tall out there . . . It’s hard to believe it was 50 years ago.”<sup>85</sup>

Arthur Yates was sad to sell the cottage, Ron remembered: “Dad hated it when he did sell it because they really loved it out there, it was a great place.” However, he said his father was aware that the state agency Swiftmud planned to buy the land for flood control, so he sold it to a new owner: “As I understood it, Swiftmud had notified him in

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Yates interview.

five years we're going to be buying everybody out, so I guess dad had somebody come along who wanted to buy it." Dead River would remain on Arthur Yates's mind. That impression stayed with Ron's wife, Mary Jo Yates: "I've known Ron almost forty years, and I can always remember his dad, no matter the occasion, he would always bring it up." Despite daydreaming about what Dead River would have meant to his family over the years [Ron has a north Georgia mountain home] Ron appreciates Dead River as a park: "When you get over being pissed off that they did snap it up, it has, that is, it's as I remember it out there."<sup>86</sup>

### **Land Lost, but Memories Remain**

Ernest Buchanan resents Swiftmud for buying his family home: "I still consider this place my place." The Buchanans built their family cabin in a couple of months, working weekends: "Me and my two brothers and mom and dad built the house . . . . My dad could do everything . . . mom took care of us three boys and he'd work two or three jobs to keep food on the table and a home and of course this was his treasure out here. Fishing, hunting, it's a man's dream, you know?" An air-condition window unit cooled down the cabin while Ernest slept on the sofa, his youngest brother in a sleeping bag on the floor, and his parents in the one bedroom [his middle brother married young and didn't frequent Dead River]. Meanwhile, his grandfather stayed in the guest cabin: "He was a real Christian man and he loved the Nature and the beauty of what the Lord gave us."<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Yates interview; Mary Jo Yates, interview by author 9 May 2006, Tampa, FL.

<sup>87</sup> Buchanan interview.

With his six-year-old grandson in tote, Ernest toured the Dead River Park picnic grounds, reliving a half-dozen years' worth of stories about weekends at the river. He talked tersely about Swiftmud, which paid his parents \$7440 for their cottage and guest home on a lot fronting the Hillsborough River: "I think my parents were going to retire out here. But of course Swiftmud said either you take this or we condemn you and take it away from you. You know, it's just like, you know what are you going to fight, city hall? If I win the Lotto I'll fight 'em."<sup>88</sup>

Ernest is particularly upset when he watches his grandson amble about Dead River, picking up bleached shells from the road, sizing up a grasshopper, or throwing rocks in the river by the bridge: "See now how my grandkids could be enjoying this? And my daughter's husband and son and their kids could be enjoying it." Talk turned again to thoughts of reclaiming his family's property: "Of course I'd hire the meanest and highest expensive attorney in the state." He seemed to be only half-joking.<sup>89</sup>

Despite lamenting his loss, Ernest could laugh and smile about Dead River memories. He was the oldest of three boys, in his late teens to early twenties, and hunted the Dead River woods down through Seventeen Runs, named for the many fingers the Hillsborough River breaks into before emerging again downstream: "Back in them days it wasn't like it is now. It's all grown up." If they were hungry, they ate what they found. Oranges were popular, and populate the woods still today: "Some were sour and some were sweet, but when you were out there and it was lunch time or supper time . . . you didn't care what it tasted like, you wanted something in your belly." They also stumbled upon Indian artifacts: "Of course somewhere, I don't remember where, it's been so long,

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<sup>88</sup> Buchanan interview; SWFWMD, "Certificate of Appraisal," LHF/Dead River file 134, SWFWMD Land Resources Department.

<sup>89</sup> Buchanan interview.

somewhere there's Indian mounds in [there]. And I wouldn't even know which way to go. But of course the cypress trees were in there and if it started raining I'd go in there, you know, and hide," in hollowed out stumps. The late 1800s were good to the lumber industry, which harvested the Lower Hillsborough area.<sup>90</sup>

Ernest also saw his share of snakes: "One year I was hunting, I never will forget this. I had two boxes of ammunition, twenty gauge, I come across this ditch and there was a little bit of water in there and oh about three, four foot high of old logs and grasses, there must have been over a hundred moccasins, and I shot them, two boxes. I'd have given anything if I'd had of had my camera." One snake he *didn't* shoot was just as memorable. He saw a python in a ditch along the access road: "I was going to shoot it, I swear it was twenty-foot long, and it must have been ten inches in circumference, and I was getting ready to shoot and my dad said, "Unt ah, don't shoot that guy.' And he said 'He's not harming nobody, he's living out here by himself.' So I didn't."<sup>91</sup>

Although familiar with the woods, Ernest and a friend once got lost: "I knew my way just about all the time except one time we crossed the Seventeen Runs and we ended up in Morris Bridge Road, which is about five to ten miles west." One of the sons of the Branch family, who lived on the west side of the Hillsborough River, pulled off the road to help, Ernest recalled: "He stopped because he recognized me, because we were out here all the time, you know. And to be honest with you I never saw him [before that day]. I don't know if he was peaking around the bushes or trees or what they were doing, but I told him my name and he said 'Okay I know where to take ya.' And, you know, he could

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<sup>90</sup> Buchanan interview; Daniel, Wisenbaker, and Fryman, *An Archaeological and Historical Survey*, 99; for more about Seventeen Runs, see Sandy Huff's *Paddler's Guide to the Sunshine State* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida: 2001), 288.

<sup>91</sup> Buchanan interview.

have chopped my head off out in the woods, for all I know, you know, but of course, I always carried a thirty eight (gun) on my side and of course I had a big 'ol knife, you know, and of course I had a twenty gauge shot gun with me.” Within a half hour or so, Ernest and his friend walked home.<sup>92</sup>

Asked if he ever felt unsafe in the depths of the woods, or staying at Dead River, Ernest said no. He didn't recall any burglaries. And in fact, during the Cuban Missile Crisis, he depended on Dead River as a safe haven for his family: “I told my wife if it happened, I'll be at the river and you come as soon as you can. And I always carried my shotgun and all kinds of food in there [his car], you know can goods? Course Mom and Dad had food out here anyway. Yeah, that was during the Cuban Crisis, and I think everybody had the same idea out here because this was safe area.” At the time, Ernest lived in Seminole Heights, a Tampa neighborhood.<sup>93</sup>

### **Among the Last to Live at Dead River**

The West family lived at Dead River from November 1959 to the summer of 1965, when they left and leased a ranch on Orient Road near the Florida State Fairgrounds. However, they were still weekenders at “The River,” as Dottie West called it. The West home on the south end of Dead River had been owned by the Bakers, lifelong family friends who were aging: “They were getting to the point where they needed to get closer into town,” Dottie explained. You might think a young couple with a four-year-old and a newborn would be wary of life in the woods, but the Wests were both

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<sup>92</sup> Buchanan interview; SWFWMD, LHF/Dead River file 13-300-135, SWFWMD Land Resources Department.

<sup>93</sup> Buchanan interview.

raised on farms, and relished the opportunity to live on the water in a remote setting: “That was just ideal for us . . . . Being around water and animals and fish, it’s in your blood. You can acquire this as you get older and move into it. But the way we were, it was always a part of us from the time we were born . . . . We were secluded, we enjoyed that. We were never the type of people, you know, to have to have a lot of people around us. The boys are the same way. They never went to other people’s homes, because we always had everything at our house, because we always had wall-to-wall people, just like we have wall-to-wall people here [in Chipley where she now lives], because we can fish, we can hunt, we can walk in the woods, target practice, you could do all of that there [Dead River] . . . everywhere we’ve lived we’ve been in that element.” Dottie’s husband Roy was particularly familiar with Dead River: “He and his dad hunted hogs and stuff in the area, what they call the Hillsborough County swamp, and he was very familiar with everything up there. Of course, it was an interesting place to live.” Dottie laughed heartily, as she would often while sitting at her dining room table reliving life at Dead River through family photos and memories. Though about twenty-five years ago her family relocated to a 560-acre tract in Chipley, about an hour and a half west of Tallahassee, she still visits relatives in Hillsborough County. She and Roy never planned to live in Chipley. As they hadn’t planned to sell their Dead River home, or leave their native Hillsborough County and beloved ranch where they raised cows and trained horses. But Swiftmud dictated their Dead River decision. And urban growth combined with a scarce inventory of large-tract land sent them to the panhandle, or what Dottie called, “Florida’s last frontier.”<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> West interview.

However, the Wests were indelibly influenced by their Dead River days: “Like Neil [one of her three sons] said at Roy’s memorial . . . ‘You couldn’t buy the life they lived.’ They had their horses, they had their cows . . . they still live around water . . . and it started at the Hillsborough River . . . . We had a lot of good times.” That included riding out Hurricane Donna at Dead River. For water people, the storm could be an adventure, if prepared. Leaving wasn’t an option: “We just stayed and we enjoyed [it]. We had the gas stove, the camping stove, we had kerosene lamps . . . we went to each house and . . . threw away what was spoiled, we canned their meat and when they come in we gave them their meat . . . we puttered around.” Dottie’s picture of the flood shows water near the house, but not in it: “It got in the yards, but the houses was never in danger of flooding . . . . In our little settlement we didn’t have any trees down, we didn’t have any trees across the road, it was just that the water came, and just a little while it [Donna] was gone. But the road was impassable, see.” That concerned their family, who couldn’t get in touch with them: “And that’s when Roy’s dad and his brother-in-law walked in, course they didn’t have any way to get out . . . . I’m sure they were anxious.” Dottie laughed remembering her father-in-law’s reaction when he reached Dead River: “when he found us having a ball down there, he said he would never do that again and he didn’t. Of course we didn’t have another hurricane.”<sup>95</sup>

Why wasn’t Dottie concerned about the hurricane or its aftermath? “We’ve always lived around the water,” she explained. “We saw no danger in it, even though we had the children. I mean, we thought we were very capable of taking care of our children. And we always did and always have. We were not the type of people to, if something happened, we had to get the whole neighborhood involved in ‘what do we do, what do we

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<sup>95</sup> West interview.

do.’ We were knowledgeable in every area to take care of our children. And very confident and maybe sometimes overconfident, but we were just raised that way to do what we had to do for ourself.”<sup>96</sup>

To better understand Dottie’s attitude, it helps to know part of her work background. Her father was a carpenter and painter, two professions Dottie tapped into as well. Growing up on a farm, Dottie learned to repair irrigation motors, breeding confidence to repair other things, such as her washer or well pump at Dead River: “It would mess up. I would take it apart and go get the parts and come home and fix it.” She also repaired their Dead River house: “I re-did the floors. I did hardwood floors. They (Bakers) had vinyl on everything. And I went up there and I stripped it all down . . . it was already hardwood, but it was covered up, so I sanded ‘em and redone the floors. And then the top [roof] was flat . . . so we had to redo the tar.” In the summer, they kept the roof wet to cool down the house: “Before we got the air conditioner in there, we ran the sprinklers on top of the house.” There were other benefits to watering the roof, too. “You knew when you had a leak,” Dottie laughed.<sup>97</sup>

At her Chipley home, Dottie runs a bulldozer. She “pushed” her own pond in front of the house and stocked it with catfish. So while life at Dead River could be challenging, it was welcomed and adventurous. Take for instance the time she and two sons heading to the doctor got stuck in their English Ford on the Dead River access road. Dottie pulled the car out with the community truck: “Chet was sitting at the steering

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

wheel [of the Ford] and I went and got the big truck and pulled ourself out, and we'd go on to town and do, you know, what we had to do."<sup>98</sup>

When Dottie heard the communal John Deere tractor remained in the woods, she laughed. She and Roy operated the tractor if the road needed work before the weekend: "I've always said I could drive anything that had a shift gear, and still do." Dottie agreed with other road warriors that community workdays were a bonding experience: "I think that brought the people together. If you had never worked with anybody, see, you never would have gotten acquainted with them." That bond was evident when Dottie, reading Arthur Yates' journal, laughed at the description of the Zephyrhills insurance man who never worked on the road: "That's the truth, he never worked. Never, never, never worked." Seeing "Gumbo Blvd." on the journal map brought a chuckle too - gumbo followed them to Chipley: "We have it here . . . when it's wet, and you get stuck, you stay stuck."<sup>99</sup>

The Dead River bridge was memorable not for what happened, but what *could* have happened - it didn't have rails. "That bridge was famous," Dottie laughed. "And one night . . . we went to Thonotosassa Baptist Church and they were redoing the floors in the church and they were putting varnish and everything on 'em, they had the windows up . . . and the preacher and Roy and two or three of the other Deacons was painting the floors. Well, the preacher's wife, they had gotten finished, and the preacher's wife called me and said, 'Dottie? They're out there laying in the ground just a laughing.' They'd inhaled that stuff." The preacher's wife was afraid Roy wouldn't make it over the bridge and wanted

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> West Interview; Arthur Yates, "Dead River Chronicles."

Dottie to call her when Roy arrived home. “He got home,” Dottie laughed. “I called her.”<sup>100</sup>

### **Dead River Living Lessons**

While Roy worked at Continental Can, Dottie kept the boys busy outdoors: “They fished, and they played in the mud, and they swam.” But more importantly, she taught them to respect and revere their surroundings, including wildlife: “They grow up with such a sense of reality that this is what God made. And I think any kid that is born and raised in a atmosphere like that, you have a certain type of child that grows up to be a fantastic young man or young lady.” That respect extended to common space shared with animals, too: “Our kids grew up knowing that there’s things you didn’t bother and when they were there [alligators for instance] you didn’t get in the water, stuff like that. But, see, people that’s never been in the woods, this bothers ‘em. They think that that’s something out there that’s gonna hurt ‘em.” On a lighter note, wildlife in *their* space sometimes had to be re-directed. As happened with a rat snake that wandered in from the back of the house: “We were in the living room watching TV one night and I saw this snake coming down . . . and it was coming out from the dining room into the living room and I hollered at Chet, ‘Open the door.’ So I swept the snake out the door . . . Of course now, you know, when mamma sweeps the snake out, boy her validity, she goes up high on that radar, man.”<sup>101</sup>

While humorous anecdotes abound, there were tense moments. Dottie helped put a fire out that could have destroyed the village. One evening she was alone with her

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<sup>100</sup> West Interview.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

children. Roy was working the second shift at Continental Can and wasn't due back until about 11:30 pm: "I heard this noise . . . and I lay down across the bed and I saw the ball of fire hit the grounds [at a nearby house], and I knew that . . . it wasn't good. So I got up and called him ["Pa" Corbitt, who stayed at Dead River during the week, as well.] and I got the kids up, and it was probably around . . . eight o'clock." The fire was two cabins up Dead River from the West home, neighbored by the Yates home on one side. Dottie and "Pa" Corbitt hosed down the two houses closest to the fire, but were prepared to leave if the fire spread: "I had the kids in the car at the bridge and knew that if anything else went up I'd cross the bridge with my kids and him ["Pa" Corbitt] and we would be safe. Always being safe." The cabin on fire was lost. A pot was left on the stove. The Yates cabin escaped with a melted screen, and the other neighboring cabin, farther away, was fine. The Hillsborough County fire department arrived, with Roy behind them: "He [Arthur Yates] gave me a charm bracelet with a fireman's cap, hat on it. And over the years I lost it. I often wondered where it went. But that was so many years ago and so many moves."<sup>102</sup>

The Wests were surprised when they learned that Swiftmud would acquire their Dead River home. Though they were living at their ranch, they still frequented Dead River, and never intended to sell the property: "Oh yeah, we would have kept it. We were never going to leave Hillsborough. And then after we sold the river place, and we lived on the ranch in Tampa, just off of Orient Road, it had grown up so much, until we knew that one day we were gonna to lose the lease on that place, see." While living at the ranch, they sold a two-year lease option on their Dead River home, which gave the holder, for a fee, the right to buy the property. The Wests retained ownership and use of

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

the home. The lease option expired the week they learned Swiftmud would buy their property. Even more unnerving, they learned that the person with the lease option on their property worked for the state: “He knew the value of the place. And there’s a good chance he worked on it, he worked on the appraisals . . . because it takes a long time for them to go in there and do stuff. So he knew.” Though frustrated with the situation, the Wests were relieved the lease option had expired: “We got quite a bit more negotiating with the state than we would have gotten from him, but his lease option slipped up on him.” Swiftmud paid the Wests \$6,675. What became of the money? “That went into cows,” Dottie laughed.<sup>103</sup>

Reflecting on Dead River, Dottie misses certain things not readily found in her part of the panhandle. Swamp cabbage for one, made with the heart cut from a sabal palm: When I go out here to fish, I think, ‘Oh, gee.’ You know there’s that one element that you miss. Of course, we was raised on that.” She mixed sausage and cream in her swamp cabbage, and could stretch three to four meals from one tree. Stripping a palm frond also made a nice skewer to cook bacon over a campfire.<sup>104</sup>

Dottie retained some of her Dead River specialties, such as a fine-tuned technique for catching bass on bed, a challenging task: “When you found the bed you would go down and you would bait ‘em about two, three afternoons, you know, and throw these loose worms in and they would get the loose worms. Well then the next time you go down there you’d throw a couple more, and then the third time you would throw that hook, and it didn’t have anything on it now, just the weight of the worm, you would throw it in the bed and [snaps her fingers] you got ‘em. And that I enjoyed, because you

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<sup>103</sup> West Interview; SWFWMD, “Opinion on Title,” Lower Hillsborough Flood /Dead River file 13-300-128, SWFWMD Land Resources Department.

<sup>104</sup> West interview.

did that late in the afternoon and then you'd take it home, and you'd clean 'em and cook supper, put the rest in the freezer."<sup>105</sup>

As Dottie sorted through her Dead River family photos, more stories emerged. One photo shows her mother with a dog on the bank of Dead River. Dottie's mother fished avidly into her nineties, and died one month shy of 99: "The last time she was here [Dead River], she was sitting down there on the fish bank in her chair, and I think my brother-in-law was . . . there. He would bait the hook and she'd throw it out. And that's all he did, was take her fish off and bait her hook." Another photo shows Dottie in an arm chair, fishing in Dead River: "It was just an old arm chair. Just almost everybody had something that they set out there." Dottie came across a photo of the family boat crushed beneath a large tree. The irony? The Wests pulled the boat from the water when they left town, thinking it was safer in their yard than bobbing amid the busy weekend boating traffic at Dead River: "That was Roy's big, big thing, you know. They teased him, 'Where did the tree fall?'" A more recent photo taken at Dead River in the late 1990s shows Dottie and Roy dressed in lightweight blue jackets standing next to all that remains at their lot - a cross tie. "That was the corner of the fence to keep the kids in, out of the water."<sup>106</sup>

Dottie doesn't regret that her family couldn't stay at Dead River. Rather, she was meant to be there at that time, she said. And was meant to move to Chipley, as well: "I'd often said that it was God's will to put us where we are. If not, what else could have happened, you know? It was just like, it just worked itself totally okay. And that's how we live our life, you know?" Learning along the way: "Every place you live you learn.

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

You grow, in whatever atmosphere. And God tells us to be content in whatever situation that we're in. And when you learn that young, you carry that the rest of your life, and they [her sons] did," too.<sup>107</sup>

Chet West, the oldest boy, remembers feeling like he had "the run of the world," at Dead River: "It made me very confident and comfortable ... because I knew the woods, there was always things to be respected but nothing to be scared of." Growing up in the swamp prepared him for twenty-five years of service in the United States Army Special Forces. So ingrained is his woodsy upbringing that during parts of his service, "if I didn't go sleep in the woods at least once a month, I'd get cranky," he said. As a child, he also learned what was edible in the woods. He and his dad walked an abandoned carriage trail paralleling the east side of the Hillsborough River. They tasted sour oranges and sought sabal palms for swamp cabbage. Chet also learned what plants were safe to eat. For instance, the leaf of a poke weed was fine when small and could be cooked like turnip greens, but became poisonous when the leaf grew.<sup>108</sup>

Chet learned some lessons on his own. Though his parents told him not to handle wild animals, he couldn't resist catching a raccoon on the access road riding his bike home from school one day. He planned to make the raccoon, which was crossing the road with its family, a pet: "As I rounded the corner they were all in single file across the road, they started scurrying towards a tree." Chet, age six or seven at the time, threw his Levi jacket on the smallest raccoon as the others escaped up maple trees. Chet tied his jacket with the raccoon inside and placed it in the basket of his bicycle. But when he got

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> Chet West, interview by author, 1 September 2006, Tampa, FL (all subsequent quotes and stories attributed to Chet West stem from this interview or follow-up questions).

home, the raccoon had suffocated. Not all was lost, though. His dad taught him how to skin an animal. He dried the hide and used it as rug in front of his bed.<sup>109</sup>

Chet enjoyed his thirty to forty minute bike rides to the bus stop at Highway 301. He saw mice, hoot owls, hawks, turkey, snakes and deer. He got caught in down pours. And even had to walk for a while when his bike was stolen. That early independence led to bold outings, such as the time he went for a horse ride - solo, at about age six: “I remember my dad growing this absolutely humongous buck [skin color] horse.” Chet had to climb a picnic table to bridle the horse and set a saddle in place. After some effort, he was ready to ride: “I went and told mamma I’m going horse riding and she said ‘What?’” He mounted the horse and rode down the access road towards the highway and back.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### SWIFTMUD EMERGES

While Dead River's families enjoyed the waning years of their private paradise, federal action targeted flooding problems in central Florida. In 1962, the United States Congress approved the Four River Basins, Florida project.<sup>111</sup> Plans called for a network of dams and canals to control flooding in the areas surrounding the Hillsborough, Withlacoochee, Peace and Oklawaha Rivers.<sup>112</sup> Though environmental concerns halted structural projects in the 1970s for the Peace, Withlacoochee and Oklawaha Rivers, the Hillsborough River drainage basin was configured with a network of dams and canals known as the Tampa Bypass Canal, which would re-route flood waters around Temple Terrace and Tampa.<sup>113</sup> Swiftmud could buy floodplain land as an alternative to structural flood control in the rural areas surrounding the Peace, Withlacoochee and Oklawaha Rivers, noted Swiftmud's Dale Ravencraft, who oversees operation of the Tampa Bypass Canal.<sup>114</sup> The ACOE designed the Tampa Bypass Canal.<sup>115</sup> Swiftmud acquired the land for the project and operated the structure when completed.<sup>116</sup> Swiftmud would eventually acquire 17,000-acres that could hold flood waters until diverted by the Tampa Bypass Canal through Palm River to McKay Bay.<sup>117</sup>

By 1963, records indicate at least two landowners knew Swiftmud planned to buy their land. E.W. Stanley, Jr. and Richard Mulholland co-owned nearly forty acres at Dead

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<sup>111</sup> *A Plan for the Lower Hillsborough Flood Detention Area*, 4

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>113</sup> *Tampa Bypass/Harney Canal*, 1.

<sup>114</sup> Dale Ravencraft, interview by author, 11 April 2005, Brooksville, FL.

<sup>115</sup> *Tampa Bypass/Harney Canal*, 16

<sup>116</sup> *Lower Hillsborough Flood Detention Area*, 4.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, *Tampa Bypass/Harney Canal*, 1.

River, of which about twenty-five were riverfront. The land was acquired from George Bird in 1962. In a December 1968 letter regarding an eminent domain case, a realtor-appraiser recounted the landowners' plans for the parcels and calculated its value:

According to the owners, the property was purchased for immediate resale of waterfront lots in a developed subdivision area. Considerable time and effort were expended in the planning of the subdivision development during the year after acquisition at which time the owners were advised that the Southwest Florida Water Management District would take over property for its reservoir area. Since that date, which was in 1963, the owners have been unable to dispose of the land. The subject waterfront lots are highly desirable for weekend cottage locations and would have been readily salable at any time since 1963. The owners have stated that they were approached numerous times by various individuals who desired to buy a waterfront lot near the existing subdivision at the junction of the Hillsborough River and Dead River. It is the opinion of your appraiser that due to the desirability of the subject lands coupled with the favorable economic conditions of recent years, the essential factors were provided which would have permitted a ready quick sale of all waterfront lots in the subject lands.<sup>118</sup>

Swiftmud's offers to acquire land at Dead River didn't materialize until 1965, but if its records could be recorded in decibels, the sounds would range from shouting to silence. Some landowners accepted the agency's first offer. Others sent terse letters through attorneys lambasting seemingly low appraisals. Even today, some descendants of Dead River property owners are bitter about losing their land.<sup>119</sup>

The eleven collective Dead River lots and cottages were appraised at \$53,930 by Swiftmud's Robert Watson, head of the land acquisition department. Swiftmud sent each owner a letter dated 23 November 1965 with an offer to buy their property. In some cases, Swiftmud closed on the properties within a year of their offer. For instance, on the

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<sup>118</sup> E.S. Thompson, Jr., Tampa, to Joseph A. McClain, Jr., Tampa, Florida, TLS, 11 December 1968, LHF/Dead River file 13-300-124, Land Resources Department, SWFWMD, Brooksville, FL.

<sup>119</sup> SWFWMD LHF/Dead River files 13-300-121 to 13-300-134, SWFWMD Land Resources Department; Robert L. Watson, Brooksville, to Dale Twachtmann & Clint Schultz, Brooksville, TL, 26 January 1966, LHF/Dead River file 13-300-121, SWFWMD Land Resources Department, Brooksville, FL; Raymond Sheldon, Tampa, to Robert L. Watson, Brooksville, TLS, 8 December 1966, LHF/Dead River file 13-300-127, SWFWMD Land Resources Department, Brooksville, FL; Buchanan interview.

higher end, Benjamin Carter and his wife Willie, of Kensington Avenue in south Tampa, accepted \$7,900 for two lots with one cottage [about 840 square feet] facing Dead River. The property included a six foot by twelve foot shed, a ten foot by twenty foot grape arbor, and three citrus trees. On the lower end, Swiftmud offered a Brandon couple \$800 for a lot with, what its appraisal described as, a small “12’ x 15’ shed in good condition.” The lot fronted Dead River, but was not connected for electricity or water. Miffed, Lawrence and Katherine Miley directed correspondence to their lawyer. In part, a letter from their lawyer, Raymond Sheldon, stated that the Miley’s “turned down \$2,500 on two occasions and they are not considering your \$800.00 offer as anywhere near the value of their property.” If Swiftmud’s appraisers revised their figures, wrote Sheldon, “we may be able to work out a settlement.” Touting the property’s merits, Sheldon concluded: “This property consists of River [*sic*] front, private easement, private driveway, a well, a cabin and a very lovely setting for this couple to use on their week-ends and pleasure trips of camping and fishing. They advise me that they consider \$800.00 far from the real value of the property.” In fact, the Miley’s and two other Dead River homeowners awaited a court decision in an eminent domain case to garner greater gains. The Miley’s eventually received \$1,600 for their property as stated in court records, November 1967.<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> Robert L. Watson, Brooksville, to Dale Twachtmann, Brooksville, TLS, 1 November 1965, LHF/Dead River file 13-300-122, Land Resources Department, SWFWMD, Brooksville, FL.; Robert L. Watson, Brooksville, Florida, to Benjamin C. Carter, Tampa, TL, 23 November 1965, LHF/Dead River file 13-300-122, Land Resources Department, Brooksville, FL; SWFWMD, “As to Parcel No. 13-300-122.1” 1, LHF/Dead River file 13-300-122, SWFWMD Land Resources Department; SWFWMD, “Closing Statement,” LHF/Dead River file 13-300-122, SWFWMD Land Resources Department; SWFWMD, “Certificate of Appraisal,” 5, LHF/Dead River file 13-300-122, SWFWMD Land Resources Department; SWFWMD, “Certificate of Appraisal,” 18, LHF/Dead River file 13-300-127, SWFWMD Land Resources Department; Raymond Sheldon, Tampa, to Robert L. Watson, Brooksville, TLS; SWFWMD, “Verdict for parcel 13-300-130.1,” LHF/Dead River file 13-300-130, SWFWMD Land Resources Department.

The Lashley home, a true weekend cottage at the confluence of the Hillsborough and Dead Rivers, was typical of others at Dead River. The appraisal described a “small frame weekend cottage, finished on the exterior and unfinished on the interior,” and built on concrete block piers. A pump pulled water from the river for the bathroom and kitchen sink. In lieu of windows, the house had plywood shutters. Swiftmud bought the property for \$3,500.<sup>121</sup>

Swiftmud also acquired a few parcels of varying size surrounding Dead River. Surprisingly, one of the parcels was Horseshoe Bend, as it’s known locally. The narrow peninsula juts into the Hillsborough River. J.W.B Shaw of south Tampa owned Horseshoe Bend, and accepted \$500 from Swiftmud, which based the land’s value on an appraisal by C.L. Knight. In the 1965 appraisal, Knight described the property as “a long narrow peninsular of land that has access only across lands belonging to others or via the Hillsborough River. It could perhaps be used as a small home site or for a fishing or hunting camp and would in my opinion be saleable for recreational purposes for approximately \$500.00 on today’s market.” Once Swiftmud acquired Horseshoe Bend, it chose not to survey the land. A memo stated why: “it would cost as much as what we would have to pay for the property.”<sup>122</sup>

Once Swiftmud acquired the Dead River properties, some homeowners salvaged materials, such as landscaping. In December 1965, homeowner Gordon Dean, concerned about his dying azaleas, requested the bushes in a letter to Swiftmud’s Robert Watson:

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<sup>121</sup> SWFWMD, “Certificate of Appraisal,” 26 LHF/Dead River file 13-300-129, SWFWMD Land Resources Department; SWFWMD, “Opinion on Title,” LHF/Dead River file 13-300-129, SWFWMD Land Resources Department.

<sup>122</sup> Robert L. Watson, Brooksville, to Dale Twachtmann & Clint Schultz, Brooksville, TL; SWFWMD “Certificate of Appraisal,” LHF/Dead River file 13-300-121, SWFWMD Land Resources Department; “Memo, Re: Lower Hillsborough Reservoir 13-300, Parcel #121.1,” TL, 19 April 1966, LHF/Dead River file 13-300-121, SWFWMD Land Resources Department, Brooksville, FL.

“You remember we ask [*sic*] about getting some of our flowers, And [*sic*] you said go ahead, well I haven’t taken any yet – But [*sic*] it is so dry, they are dying for lack of being watered and will die out completely if not moved or kept watered. The main thing I wanted was My [*sic*]... Azaleas [*sic*], which require lots of water – and some of them are really suffering. If it is still alright . . . I will get them rather than see them die.” Watson responded: “As I discussed with you earlier, based on the appraisal you are not allowed to remove all the shrubbery located on this property, but you may move some of the azaleas as you requested. If you should like to purchase the balance of the shrubbery at a reasonable price, I will be happy to meet with you at the property and negotiate this transaction.” A Swiftmud receipt showed “Pa” Corbitt also claimed “(1) item of shrubbery,” for \$2.06.<sup>123</sup>

### **Collapse of the Cabins**

Into the 1970s, scouting groups leased several of the Dead River cabins. But by the mid-1970s, Swiftmud decided to tear the houses down. Outsiders partying at the cabins and vandalism had become increasing problems. Arthur Yates wrote about seeing his beloved cabin in shambles during an early 1970s visit: “The screens were all punched out, doors hanging loose, windows all broken, plumbing yanked from the walls and linoleum on the floor all curled up . . . it was a very sad day for Arthur Yates.”<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> Gordon Dean, Lithia, to Robert L. Watson, Brooksville, LS, 14 December 1965, LHF/Dead River file 13-300-125, SWFWMD Land Resources Department, Brooksville, FL; Robert L. Watson, Brooksville, to Gordon Dean, Lithia, TL, 16 December 1965, LHF/Dead River file 13-300-125, SWFWMD Land Resources Department, Brooksville, FL; “Shrubbery Receipt,” Lower Hillsborough/Dead River file 13-300-134, SWFWMD.

<sup>124</sup> Robert L. Watson, Brooksville, to Wilbur Tepper, Tampa, TL, 6 August 1969, LHF/Dead River file 13-300-131, SWFWMD Land Resources Department, Brooksville, FL; Robert L. Watson, Brooksville, to

Swiftmud land manager Ken Kramer, retired from the agency, said the dilapidated Dead River homes looked like a scene out of John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*: "They were just shacks, they were in various states of disrepair . . . . They looked like they were put up pretty inexpensively because the place flooded back there all the time." Swiftmud officials decided to raze the homes: "We got with the local fire departments, like Thonotosassa Volunteer Fire Department, and they used them for training." Ken recalled the scene: "They'd burn them down, and put roofing felt over the windows and maybe hide a baby doll . . . underneath one of the beds and get a fire going in one and . . . send the guys in there for a search and rescue type thing." What debris they could bury on site was pushed into septic tanks and covered with four inches of dirt: "But it was all clean debris." Kevin Love, Ken's first assistant at the time who later became director of land management when Ken retired, oversaw the pyrotechnics. "It was thrilling," Kevin laughed. "It was fun for a 21-year old guy, you know, to go out there and burn houses."<sup>125</sup>

Meanwhile, other parts of Dead River were a mess, Ken recalled: "Towards the Reagan place that had to be . . . Hillsborough County's Maytag burial grounds.<sup>126</sup> There was more washing machines, that kind of things, appliances, refrigerators." In fact, Swiftmud records reveal a pattern of problems with the Reagan property it acquired: a refuse fire, cut hickory, cows in an abandoned car port and goat pens in an abandoned home.<sup>127</sup> Several Swiftmud memorandums point the finger for their problems at Mr.

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Lewis H. Hill, Tampa, TL, 24 February 1972, LHF/Dead River file 13-300-129, SWFWMD Land Resources Department, Brooksville, FL; Kramer interview; Arthur Yates, "Dead River Chronicles."

<sup>125</sup> Kramer interview; Kevin Love, interview by author, 28 April 2006 (all quotes and stories attributed to Love stem from this interview or follow-up questions).

<sup>126</sup> Kramer interview.

<sup>127</sup> John M. Duddy, Brooksville, to Robert L. Watson, Brooksville, TL, 4 February 1969, LHF/Dead River file 13-300-118, SWFWMD Land Resources Department, Brooksville, FL; Emil B. Meier, Brooksville, to

Reagan or someone he knew: Mr. Reagan retained a dairy farm abutting the property, which Swiftmud acquired from him through eminent domain.<sup>128</sup> A July 1976 memorandum from B.R. Laseter, director of the department of operations, to Executive Director Donald R. Feaster, reveals the challenges of land management without day-to-day supervision:

After the ... parcels were acquired we built a 4-strand barbed wire fence along our common boundary with the Reagan's. Over the years this fence has been repeatedly cut, with cattle and goats being run on District land. It got to the point last March that Ken Kramer, Supervisor of Land Management, sent Mr. Reagan a certified letter formally requesting that his cattle be removed. They were removed, but then goats were run through the gap. On June 24, 1976, Ken happened to check this area and found Mr. Johns, one of Mr. Reagan's workers, nailing wire over the windows of the "Old Reagan House" which is on the property we purchased from Mr. Reagan. When asked what he was doing, he informed Ken that he was building goat pens. Ken then proceeded to speak with Mr. Reagan – who, in so many words, indicated that he was not going to stop his worker from completing the pens and that he was going to continue to use the land.<sup>129</sup>

Soon after, Swiftmud records indicate plans to build a ditch across a road that led to Reagan's property.<sup>130</sup>

Problems arose at the Dead River cabin camp grounds as well. A Swiftmud official in the real estate division wrote to Robert Watson: "We found eighteen head of cattle roaming around the camp area. The fence between our property and Sparkman property on the South had been cut, and planks had been laid for a vehicle to travel across." Though maintaining boundaries was difficult, Kevin worked around the

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Robert L. Watson, Brooksville, TL, 25 August 1971, LHF/Dead River file 13-300-118, SWFWMD Land Resources Department, Brooksville, FL; B.R. Laseter, Brooksville, to Donald R. Feaster, Brooksville, TL, 2 July 1976, LHF/Dead River file 13-300-118, SWFWMD Land Resources Department, Brooksville, FL.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.; SWFWMD, "Verdict for parcel 13-300-118," LHF/Dead River file 13-300-130, SWFWMD Land Resources Department.

<sup>129</sup> B.R. Laseter, Brooksville, to Donald R. Feaster, Brooksville, TL.

<sup>130</sup> Robert L. Watson, Brooksville, FL, to Dale Twachtmann, Brooksville, TL, 22 September 1971, LHF/Dead River file 13-300-118, SWFWMD Land Resources Department, Brooksville, FL; R.J.S., Brooksville, FL, to Robert L. Watson, Brooksville, TL, 26 October 1971, LHF/Dead River file 13-300-118, SWFWMD Land Resources Department, Brooksville, FL.

problem: “The best thing to do was to acknowledge it and just establish a relationship with these guys.” Which Kevin felt he did, with time: “A lot of the old-timers that I met with . . . I got to where I could relate to them pretty well . . . . A lot of them had a real skepticism and mistrust of government and the District (Swiftmud), but one on one, on the ground, out in the woods, they had a different perspective about you personally. After a while if you did it right, and I think I did, they didn’t see you as the District. They saw you as the guy who works for the District that’s pretty reasonable.” Kevin also learned a few things about local land management. A horse dragging a croaker sack on fire passed for prescribed burns: “They would tie it [croaker sack] on a rope behind a horse and just ride that horse all day long, just dragging and stringing fire . . . hundreds and hundreds of acres . . . . There wasn’t much controlling to it, it was just all wide open country. Some of this stuff was probably not long after fence laws and the area probably wasn’t riddled with barbed wire fences.”<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> Ron Daniel, Brooksville, FL, to Robert L. Watson, Brooksville, TLS, 1 June 1972, LHF/Dead River file 13-300-134, SWFWMD Land Resources Department, Brooksville, FL; Love interview.

## CHAPTER SIX

### DEAD RIVER BECOMES A PARK

Working with Hillsborough County and the ACOE, Swiftmud planned to turn Dead River and other sites throughout the 17,000 acre Lower Hillsborough River Detention Area into a chain of public parks known as the Lower Hillsborough Wilderness Park. The ACOE coordinated construction of Wilderness Park and paid for half its cost. Swiftmud paid the other half, and Hillsborough County agreed to maintain the parks once opened.<sup>132</sup>

In the spring of 1985, construction began at Dead River Park (see Appendix B for Dead River Park map). The road was improved, the bridge replaced and a washhouse built, among other projects.<sup>133</sup> A few setbacks, such as Hurricane Elena, delayed the project.<sup>134</sup> It was completed by the summer of 1986 and cost \$648,000, which included design, inspection, construction, and land costs.<sup>135</sup> “There was no need to do much at Dead River,” recalled ACOE Civil Engineer Alan Bailey, who worked on the Wilderness Park project. “It was already pretty nice.” The access road, as it had been in the past, was difficult to maintain - particularly after flood waters from Hurricane Elena exposed some of the old wood the original homeowners had laid down as a foundation.<sup>136</sup> The upside? Alan said they “identified all the bad places in the road.” Afterwards, the contractor had a solution. As Alan recalled: “He [the contractor] went to a cement, a concrete block plant

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<sup>132</sup> *Lower Hillsborough Flood Detention Area*, 4; SWFWMD and Board of County Commissioners of Hillsborough County, “Interlocal Agreement.”

<sup>133</sup> Bailey interview.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>135</sup> James L. Garland, n.p., to Gary Kuhl, Brooksville, TL, 16 December 1986, Dead River Site Records file 13-300-701X, SWFWMD Land Resources Department, Brooksville, FL.

<sup>136</sup> Bailey interview; Arthur Yates, “Dead River Chronicles.”

and got a lot of their waste concrete, it'd be a lot of broken blocks, and even just sweepings and stuff, and he went along there and put that in those ruts and that's really when that road firmed up and actually became what I'd call an all season road." Crushed shell was laid on top of that.<sup>137</sup>

Throughout the project, Alan drove in with his windows down and radio off "in the hope of seeing something." But it was by foot, wading into the park in rubber boots after Hurricane Elena, that Alan was struck by an indelible image: "I think they were Monarch butterfly and they were just, they had covered that road, they were flying all around it," by the thousands, he estimated. "That was the most amazing butterfly encounter out in the wild I ever had." Another time, farther down the road, Alan recognized the old John Deere tractor left in the woods as a 2-cylinder "Poppin' Johnny," dubbed so for the sound of its engine: "When they ran they'd sound like [baritone voice] 'blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah,' because it was only two cylinders."<sup>138</sup>

### **Family Life Returns**

Meanwhile, in the years leading up to park construction, family life had returned to Dead River for the first time in some fifteen years. In 1980, Lester Truman, the first of only two live-in rangers at Dead River Park since its inception, moved in with his wife and infant daughter. Lester was one of three candidates for the job. He and his wife drove to Dead River to scout the life they would lead. His wife's reaction? "She said no way in hell," he recalled. "But it comes with a free house," he countered. The pre-fabricated

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<sup>137</sup> Bailey interview.

<sup>138</sup> Bailey interview; Robert N. Pripps, *Big Green John Deere GP Tractors*, (WI: Motorbooks International Publishers &Wholesalers, 1994), 115.

concrete and steel one bedroom one bath house, about 900 square feet, was put together on site. “She got used to it after a while,” he said. Turns out, Lester was the only one interested in the job: “One of the people . . . they quit the county, the other person decided they didn’t want it, so guess who got it?” Day-in and day-out, literally, was a challenge: “We had to use a four-wheel drive, big four-wheel drive to go in and out, with a wench when you got stuck, you had to pull yourself out.” They also didn’t have a telephone. The cost to run a line to the cabin was \$7,000, which the County wasn’t willing to pay the first few years. A line was eventually installed. Until then, Lester had a radio connected to a fellow ranger at a County site downriver, now known as John B. Sargeant Park.<sup>139</sup>

Lester and the downriver ranger oversaw the Lower Hillsborough Flood Detention Area. Lester’s assignment was Flatwoods, a park northwest of Dead River. He also learned to maintain the road and preferred to build a crown in the middle. The contractor hired to prepare the park for public use graded the road flat, but flat collects water. So Lester maintained the crown, and when stuck attached his wench to roadside trees for leverage to pull himself out. At one point, the contractor’s heavy equipment made such a mess of the road that Lester asked Mr. Reagan if he could cross his land where it met the state-owned service road bordering the Hillsborough River. Mr. Reagan obliged, and Lester, with a key to the gate, could come and go as needed. For a while, it was his only route to and from home. Lose that road and Lester would have to take a boat to the state park to reach Highway 301.<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> West and Truman interviews.

<sup>140</sup> Truman interview.

There were other challenges to Dead River, such cooling down the new house. Large exhaust fans pulled out hot air, but they couldn't combat the damp humidity. A window air-condition unit made the bedroom bearable. Inconveniences aside, Lester reveled in the remote setting. He showed animals for schools and had a veritable zoo of fifteen to twenty creatures he cared for, some injured and rehabilitated, others taken on when they needed a home in the woods. Lester had raccoons, deer, an owl, alligators, skunks, a pig, a horse for his daughter, snakes, bobcats, a ring-tailed coatimundi, and even a California timberland wolf dropped off by a military family transferred to MacDill Airforce base: "You name it I pretty much had it out there." Most animals roamed free: "They stayed close to the house. They knew where the food was." Snakes and bobcats were the caged exceptions.<sup>141</sup>

Lester, whose gruff baritone voice sounds part Barry White, part Wolfman Jack, was particularly fond of his pig, named Pig: "My daughter used to ride him and stuff, had big 'ol tusks. He was a friendly one." But Pig wasn't just a pet. He controlled the poisonous snake population by Lester's home on the bank of Dead River, a breeding ground for moccasins. In fact, that's the reason Lester got Pig: "I was talking to one of the old-timers out there and he said what you do is you go catch one of them little pigs out there, one of them little wild ones and you just make a pet out of it. Because, actually the pigs will eat the snakes. It doesn't bother them if they get bit by a poisonous snake because they've got so much fat on 'em. And he was right, man."<sup>142</sup>

Animals lived inside Lester's cabin as well, which led to laughable moments. When baby possums escape cages, they like warm hands. Warm sleeping wife hands, in

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<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

particular: “He got in her hand, and boy I mean, scared the shit out of her . . . and she slung him, boy. Didn’t hurt him, luckily.” Another night Lester awoke to an overturned lamp and found company in his chair: a raccoon eating a baby alligator. Lester left a seemingly inaccessible high window open next to a utility meter that the critter scaled for a late-night snack. Lester chased the raccoon out with a broom.<sup>143</sup>

Other unexpected late-night disturbances, such as poaching, ended ugly. Five dogs attacked Lester’s horse and Pig and wouldn’t let go: “It was about two o’clock in the morning, I mean the pig’s hollering, the horse is hollering and stuff, and I hear all the animals outside going crazy and open up the door and there’s these dogs out there. Got a hold of my pig. Got a hold of my daughter’s horse . . . I grabbed a broom and tried to hit ‘em and get ‘em off the pig and the horse and . . . they wouldn’t let go, and I tried to hit ‘em with a hose and . . . they wouldn’t let go.” Lester went inside his cabin and got his .357 “and shot every one of ‘em. Took the collars off and threw the dogs in the river. I figured the gator would eat them, you know.” Lester called the owner listed on the collar. The owner, who lived about fifteen miles south of Dead River, told Lester that the dogs ran away. Lester didn’t believe him: “I said man, there ain’t no way all five of your dogs stayed together and made it all the way out here.” Most poachers that hunted pigs, turkey, or deer, for instance, would drop their dogs and an accomplice off at Highway 301 near the park and meet later at an agreed time to avoid being caught. Usually, Lester could tell a poacher to leave peacefully and he would. But because his animals were maimed, Lester contacted the Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission to press charges. However, Lester couldn’t prove the dog owner was involved. When the owner asked about his dogs, Lester told him they were dead. The owner asked how Lester knew.

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<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

Lester said: “I’m the one that shot ‘em.” The dog owner asked for the collars, but Lester kept them as evidence. About two months later, Pig died from his injuries. He was about four-and-a-half years old and 600 pounds.<sup>144</sup>

### **Dead River Duties**

Lester retrieved his share of canoeists lost in Seventeen Runs, including Boy Scouts and their leaders. He also helped errant paddle-boaters from the state park who paddled as far as Dead River by mistake. Their explanation? The wayward often told Lester that they heard the river circled back to the state park. Lester would call state park officials, who would retrieve the boat and its paddlers, by car.<sup>145</sup>

Otherwise, Lester and his family usually had Dead River to themselves. Camping trips meant a quick paddle upriver to the landing across from Horseshoe Bend. Forget something and it was just a short paddle back to the cabin. They swam in the river, too, but weren’t concerned about alligators: “they really didn’t bother you because people wasn’t around them back then. Not like now. Now I’d worry about it because it’s open to the public and there’s the possibility people are feeding ‘em.” Fed alligators might associate people with food; they lose their fear and might attack. That was Lester’s concern with one alligator he tried to release at Dead River. The six to seven foot gator came from Nature’s Classroom, an interactive outdoors educational center staged on the Hillsborough River. But this particular gator was a troublemaker, fighting his brethren gators: “We get him taped up and tied up and everything and get him in the back of the Ram Charger [truck] . . . and the next thing you know he’s got the tape off his legs and

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<sup>144</sup> Ibid.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

stuff and he's coming over that back end, he was pissed, boy. I mean he was a huffing and a puffing . . . . We just got maybe a mile or two down the road and . . . finally, Steve [the ranger driving] pulled over real quick . . . . I jumped in the back and grabbed him before he . . . got the tape off his mouth . . . and I just sat on the back of him until we got him all the way to Dead River." The rangers released the alligator in the Hillsborough River. But the alligator returned to Lester's house, expecting to be fed: "he grabbed one of my dogs, and I worried about my daughter being by the river 'cause the house is so close to the river." Lester also watched the alligator "pluck a raccoon out of a tree that's hanging over the water." The gator came half the length of its body out of the water to reach the limb, which was about two to three feet high: "It was that quick. It was straight up. It was almost like one of those Shamu things." After talking to state officials, they concurred that the alligator was domesticated by being fed at Nature's Classroom. Lester had permission to shoot the alligator, and did.<sup>146</sup>

### **Leaving Dead River**

By 1986, Lester accepted a promotion to assistant park manager at Lithia Springs, a job he didn't expect to take. He and his family were comfortable at Dead River, but when the new job was offered, he said yes, surprising not only his wife, but himself. Most of his animals went to Nature's Classroom. Within two years he was managing Lithia Springs and still does. By leaving Dead River, he left a remote setting for one of the County's busiest parks. Instead of re-routing poachers on a remote road, he'd be rooting

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<sup>146</sup> Truman interview; "Alligator Attacks Fact Sheet," 2, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, [website] (Tallahassee, FL, 29 November 2005, accessed 24 October 2006) available from <http://www.floridaconservation.org/gators/nuisance/Attack%20Sheet.pdf>; Internet.

out teenagers stashed in hot car trunks trying to save a buck a head on park entrance fees, waved anyway to discourage the stunt.<sup>147</sup>

“It [Dead River] was an experience I wouldn’t give it up for nothing” said Lester. “Some ways I wish I was still there, bit it’s not the same as it was when I was there. Everything’s going to change, you know.” He reflected on Dead River for another moment. Then added: “It was nice when it was closed.” Lester laughed: “It really was. You didn’t have to worry about nothing.”<sup>148</sup>

When Lester left Dead River, he had a handful of tips for the new ranger, Jack Coleman: be firm with poachers and call state authorities; call me if you have questions; and above all, maintain the road yourself and keep that crown. Lester told Jack he had it made: he wouldn’t be without a telephone.<sup>149</sup>

### **Dead River’s Second Ranger**

When Jack Coleman became ranger at Dead River, he recalled someone doubting his knack for isolation. Little did that person know a secluded park is Jack’s briar patch - he grew up in a Massachusetts state park on the outskirts of Boston: “Someone said I wouldn’t last two weeks, and I’ve been here 20 years.” Jack is relaxed, his pace of speech as calm and unhurried as the park’s rivers. His accent is Florida cracker subtly laced with a northern pitch. Touring the park or pulling up a picnic bench with the gnome-bearded-

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<sup>147</sup> Truman interview.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid.

Confederate-soldier-re-enacting-Red Sox-fan-Harley-motorcycled husband and father of three boys elicits stories that only that combination could create.<sup>150</sup>

Some stories, like dog-eared pages in a book, mark Jack's "place" at Dead River. Amid the picnic grounds, the two-foot high river retention wall is laced with Boston fern and the last remnants of green paint, a tribute to the Green Monster of Fenway Park fame. "I had some green masonry paint leftover," explained Jack. "I was just making myself at home here." His boss wasn't amused. Nearby, a rifle pit made of piled wood debris is an unmarked monument. It honors Jack's re-enactment friend, who introduced him to the historical hobby, then died young in a car crash after United States Marine Corps boot camp. The rifle pit is used for capture the flag outings among scout groups or the occasional re-enactments Jack hosts with his friends.<sup>151</sup>

In one case, "place" is as much what *isn't* there as what is. Speculation had a 378-acre tract bordering Dead River Park slated for development. Jack photographed an Eastern Indigo snake, a species protected by both federal and state regulations, and a Gopher Tortoise on the land, then contacted the Audubon Society and Hillsborough County's Environmental Lands Acquisition and Protection Program to take over. "Thank God we saved that," said Jack. Otherwise, he envisioned a taste of New Tampa in his back yard: "I could go into Starbucks, but it wouldn't be the same." It's one of his proudest achievements: "Other than . . . returning lost children to their parents, the second best thing I did was to preserve that 378 acres through the help of Rob Heath and the

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<sup>150</sup> Coleman interview.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid.

Audubon Society because they did the paper work, I just took a couple of pictures and got the ball rolling.” The area is now a restored wetland.<sup>152</sup>

Still, other signs of “place” are unnoticed until Jack points them out. A closed cut on an oak tree near the park entrance is all that remains of the limb Jack cut down after two unrelated hangings in the same spot. On the main grounds, an oak trunk some thirty-foot long and leaning is leftover from a lightning strike that nearly nailed Jack and “put the fear of God in me.” Letting the trunk stand as a resource for pileated wood peckers and raccoons also reflects Jack’s untamed approach to the woods: “I don’t cut that down ... there’s a purpose for everything and people forget that a lot of times.” It’s an anti-Disney approach, Jack explained. “Here it’s different. If it doesn’t die ...” He laughed, letting his statement speak for itself.<sup>153</sup>

Day to day, Jack’s duties vary at Dead River. After a heavy rain, the road needs work. A large pile of crushed shell in the parking lot provides fill. Scanning the road sometimes provides prehistoric surprises: “If you’re lucky you’ll find like manatee ribs or maybe a shark’s tooth,” Jack said. “Maybe a tooth from the primitive horses back in the day.” Other duties range from mowing and landscaping to maintenance and transplanting trees. Sometimes Jack patrols the park on his Harley-Davidson motorcycle. He also clears the trails wide enough for emergency vehicles. And he ventures into Seventeen Runs for countless lost canoeists: “I’ve lost count – the main thing is we’ve found them all.” But one canoeist impressed him most, a ten year-old girl with adults who covered her skin in

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<sup>152</sup> Paul E. Moler, “Delicate Balance,” Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, [http://research.myfwc.com/engine/download\\_redirection\\_process.asp?file=87moler%5F2640%2Epdf&objid=45149&dltype=publication](http://research.myfwc.com/engine/download_redirection_process.asp?file=87moler%5F2640%2Epdf&objid=45149&dltype=publication); Coleman interview.

<sup>153</sup> Coleman interview.

mud to ward off mosquitoes: “She was real tough . . . more energy than the adults . . . . I told her she’d be a Navy Seal one day.”<sup>154</sup>

As a live-in ranger, Jack’s work sometimes comes home: “I’m here 24/7. Even on my day off somebody cut the chain at the front gate. I had to go get a chain. I was on my way to a Lynyrd Skynyrd concert, but I had to drop everything, get extra locks which I had, piece it back together.” He made it to the concert. The front gate has been rammed about a dozen times in twenty years. His mail box has been shot at and he’s had a knife pulled on him: “Every once in a while you have a tendency to irritate people who are over-reactive.” But meeting some people is a pleasant surprise, from former Dead River homeowners to locals who hunted and fished the area before it became a park. A pair of brothers claimed they planted the sour orange trees, sometimes clustered, sometimes solitary, scattered throughout the Dead River woods. Other antics had them atop an oak tree outstretched over the Hillsborough, shooting fish. “Like most of the old-timers in here,” explained Jack, “they owned everything and did everything . . . you couldn’t out-story them.” Jack still isn’t sure about who owned the John Deere tractor in the woods: “Everybody said they owned it . . . so I still call it a community tractor . . . . I’m surprised I haven’t called it mine yet.”<sup>155</sup>

Seeing the park through Jack’s eyes is to sense his connectedness to Dead River. He’s a Willy Wonka of the woods. Immerse yourself in these woods and you might easily feel like a wide-eyed kid discovering mystical delights: bard owls, stealth watchers of the woods glimpsed by chance or pin-pointed by their familiar call that sounds like they’re asking “Who cooks for you? Who cooks for you all?”; a swallow-tailed kite swooping

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<sup>154</sup> Coleman interview.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

down from soaring heights, a slight shift of its tail enabling a nimble turn after a quick descent to glide over the tops of towering oak trees; a regatta of butterflies with white folded wings, an oak limb their waterway; the wet sneeze, or huff of a buck heard, but not seen; seeing the sun-filtered leaf shadows of the park road canopy washed out by cloud cover, the bleached crushed shell road a shaken Etch a Sketch awaiting another design; fallen gargantuan oak trees and sabal palms snapped in half (see Appendix C for author's journal of observations).

### **Woods and Wildlife**

In the mid-1980s, Jack raised a rescued fawn for several years. The fawn's mother had been poached and a game warden entrusted Jack to raise it: "We fed him sweet feed and water, raised him right outside our house." The park hadn't opened, so the setting was ideal: "He became a button buck, you know [his antlers] the size of your thumb nails, and then he became a spike . . . he rubbed the velvet off on that water fountain right there [points to the washroom at the main picnic grounds]." The park soon opened, and the buck became territorial: "We opened up to the public and he was like a billy goat. He'd go plow into the park patrons." Jack's boss told him to release the deer in the woods: "So I brought him out two miles to the state park boundary, let him go and he was back at our front steps before I made it back." Eventually, the deer took to the woods. But Jack suspected he saw him years later: "One time . . . a buck stopped and was looking at me and I was looking at him, and I just . . . had a premonition that maybe he's the one, he

just kind of looked at me and then moved on.” Jack has also released red-shouldered hawks and bard owls in the park.<sup>156</sup>

Animals aren’t the only ones recuperating at Dead River: “It’s also recreational use for people who might be stressed out. I’ve had people come out here [and] work off bad news by hiking . . . it’s been pretty therapeutic for a lot people to come out here.” Jack included. If he needs a break while lopping palm fronds along the park entrance road, he’ll “just take off through the woods,” he said. Jack doesn’t worry about getting lost: “I don’t take a compass or a GPS. I usually find a certain point to walk to, and really you’re gonna find the power lines or the river or 301 [nearby boundaries]. Eventually you’re going to get to . . . one boundary or the other . . . you have to remain calm and not spiral.”<sup>157</sup>

Jack developed his woods wandering habit at his state park home in the Blue Hills Reservation, where his father was stationed as an officer in the Metropolitan District Commission Police: “As a kid I used to just run that area, and my friends that I grew up with used to joke about me ‘cause I was like a deer . . . when they first spotted me I’d just peak at ‘em and took off. You know I could run pretty good back then.”<sup>158</sup>

Jack’s childhood home was a farm house with, among other things, a wood stove, a four-legged bath tub, and a toilet with a septic system that he said was “basically a cess pool, it just was wooden timbers over a hole.” He laughed: “You know, it wouldn’t pass inspection anymore.” Canvas tents and a Dutch oven sufficed on camping trips. His early life of modest means prepared him for park life as an adult. He and his wife Jeri raised three boys in their 900 square-foot park home, enclosing a porch and dividing it into two

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<sup>156</sup> Ibid.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

rooms. Jack and Jeri's sons have names that befit their father's adventurous spirit and favored western outlaw: Jesse, James, and Joseph [whose middle and last name spelled backwards is Coleman Younger, a member of the Jesse James gang]. "I've got the outlaw element in the group here," Jack quipped. He showed his sons the film *Long Riders* so they would learn the Jesse James story. On a trip out West, the family saw where Jesse James was gunned down in Saint Joseph, Missouri: "I was going to name the first one Jesse James . . . they said, don't do that because he'll get in too many fight." In true Jesse James fashion, Jack has re-enacted robbing a train in Parrish, Florida. Re-enacting, he notes, is a good way to lawfully blow-off steam: "It's a good hobby, kind of like hockey, you get to vent a little bit and you don't have anger management issues."<sup>159</sup>

At Dead River, Jack feels safe in the woods, validating his feelings whenever he ventures out of the park: "Our lives are much more at risk driving down [Highway] 301 or I-4." He doesn't worry about isolation. "Even as a kid I spent so much time in the woods. I don't think it hurt me that bad," he laughed. "I know my parents made sure I did social programs like the Boy Scouts and sports and things to acclimate." Jack and his wife have done the same for their sons: "Other people were wary that they might . . . not interact with other kids as easy, but they still go off . . . to public school and interact everyday, so I think they've had really the best of both worlds. Of course I'm partial, but I've noticed they'd rather live out here now, then in a neighborhood. They like their situation out here." It's probably helpful that his sons haven't missed out on a modern adolescent rite of passage - video games: "I call my youngest the couch potato, but he

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<sup>159</sup> Coleman interview; Pony Express Historical Association, "Owners and Operators of the Patee House Museum and Jesse James Home," Pony Express Historical Association, <http://www.stjoseph.net/ponyexpress/index.shtml>.

still wins archery and shooting events at his church. It [living in the woods] still rubs off on him.”<sup>160</sup>

Jack is, however, careful to keep a close eye on his sons: “The difference with me is I ran the woods growing up as a kid. Down here you have gators, moccasins, and I hate to say this, but everybody in Florida knows now a certain type of people that shouldn’t be around youth camps, so I’ve kept my kids on a tight reign.” Jack laments the leash, but fishes and canoes with his sons: “Just a sign of the times, kind of a shame.” Meanwhile, his “country alarm” works well: a pit bull and a chow-labrador mix that quickly bark if you pass his house.<sup>161</sup>

### **Anthrax to Alligators**

On the lighter side, the Colemans have plenty of stories that only a family living twenty years deep in the woods could. For instance, the oldest son submerged Jack’s jeep south of the park along a stretch of the Hillsborough River once crossed by swamp buggies: “I was befuddled. He got a GMC truck to pull him to [Highway] 301, and all he told me was the jeep was broke down, and I was wondering. And then a year later, two fishermen came up to the bridge [at Dead River] and went, ‘There’s the jeep that was sunk in the river.’ And I go, ‘Do you know Jesse Coleman?’ And they went, ‘Yeah, yeah, he’s the guy who sunk the jeep.’ So I called my boy, he was living away from us at the time . . . He admitted to it a year later.” Then there’s the recurring anecdote courtesy of the road. Jeri could truthfully use the same excuse more than once for being late to work in downtown Tampa, where she spent 13 years with Price Waterhouse. Laughing, she

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<sup>160</sup> Coleman interview.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid.

recalled the telephone conversation with her boss: “There’s a tree down across the road and I can’t get out ‘til Jack gets the chainsaw and cuts it up.” Her boss didn’t doubt her. Downed trees weren’t the only challenges. While the ACOE completed work on the bridge, planks enabled Jeri and her children to cross by foot. A boat was a backup. And a wheel barrow passed for a grocery cart to haul food from the parking lot to the house, several hundred yards away. Jeri fondly recalled those early days. When her middle son napped as an infant, Jeri’s baby monitor was an open door a stone’s throw from Dead River, where she fished. In recent years, she and a son spotted a bobcat grooming itself underneath a roadside tree on the park entrance road. They pulled over and watched the undisturbed cat for ten to fifteen minutes.<sup>162</sup>

On the outskirts of the park entrance road, Jack and his sons watched the heavy metal band Anthrax, in town for a concert, shoot a video. One of the band’s crew happened upon Dead River and took to the setting. The band paid the County \$100 to use the site. Jack built a bridge from the park road into the woods so the band could transport their equipment. He and his son even ran the smoke machine and fans to the beat of the music. And when a band member lost a guitar pick in the woods, Jack’s son gave his to the guitarist. Watch the final production of “Room for One More,” where the band jams amid light-enhanced sabal palms and swamp underbrush in a series of scenes a few seconds long, and it’s hard to believe the shoot took twelve hours. By 3:00 A.M. the band, which halted production at one point when a member got spooked by a large moth, was done. As, for now, is Dead River’s unexpected but curious brush with pop culture. In the late 1970s, Lee Majors starred as a 11<sup>th</sup> century Nordic prince searching for his father,

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<sup>162</sup> Coleman interview; Jeri Coleman, interview by author, 4 August 2006. Dead River Park, Thonotosassa, FL.

who was being held prison by Indians in “Vineland,” otherwise known as neighboring Hillsborough River State Park, where part of the movie was filmed. In 1980, Linda Gray headed the cast of “The Wild and the Free,” a movie about gifted chimpanzees, that was shot where the Bird fish camp once stood.<sup>163</sup>

### **Unexpected Meals**

Just when you think the well of anecdotal stories has run dry, Jack and Jeri talk about unexpected meals: salvaging animals victimized by poachers; collecting turkeys that darted across the park entrance road at the wrong time; retrieving and injured deer that drowned. In the poaching case, a game warden had to kill a hog that was injured by hunting dogs. Rather than let it go to waste, the game warden offered it to Jack. Luckily, Jeri’s grandfather, a butcher, was in town. “He and Jack cleaned it up,” said Jeri. “And we had hog meat for probably three or four months.” Disposing the discarded hog parts proved comical, though. Jack said: “Remember I dropped the guts in your old suit case?” Jeri laughed: “Yeah.” Jack explained his choice of trash can: “Her old suit case was the nearest thing.” Next, Jack had to dump the guts outside: “So I walked by the bridge, and there were two guys fishing off the bridge and . . . the latches popped open on the suitcase. So the guys saw me and a bunch of intestines dropping out of a suitcase and they reeled in their fishing rods and took off.” Jack laughed: “I was like, ‘Wait a minute,’ you know, trying to explain, and their car was gone.” Potentially as damning was the time

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<sup>163</sup> Coleman interview; Anthrax, “Room for One More,” Anthrax, <http://youtube.com/watch?v=8Rfq9CSJtV0&mode=related&search=>; *The Norseman*, writ. and dir. by Charles B. Pierce, 90 min., American International Pictures, 1978, The Movie Channel; The Internet Movie Database (IMDb), “Filming Locations for The Norseman,” IMDb, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0078007/locations>; Linda Gray Official Website; Truman interview.

Jack salvaged a drowned deer near an alligator. He spotted the deer when it climbed up the river bank at the picnic grounds, its hind leg apparently broken. The deer then stumbled back into the river and drowned: “And I fished it out and tied it to my canoe, which was stupid, because here comes the gator. And I had visions, of, you know there’s blood in the water, I’ve got a deer latched to the canoe, and the gator pulling me in with the deer, then just eating everything.” Jack’s boss soon showed up: “I had it [the deer] suspended from the County front-end loader, I had goggles and a reciprocating saw and he was just having a fit, he goes, ‘If a reporter sees you cleaning out a deer!’” Jack laughed: “I said ‘It was gonna die anyhow.’”<sup>164</sup>

In the same area, Jack and a professional trapper corralled an alligator about twelve feet long that had eaten his dog and approached park-goers on the river bank. For bait, they ran cow meat on a tri-hook attached to rope anchored to rebar hammered five feet into the ground. “He watched it three days and he finally hit,” Jack recalled. They killed the alligator with a bang stick, a type of weapon on a log rod that discharges a slug on impact. When they loaded the alligator into a full-sized pick-up truck, its tale hung over the tail gate. Jack salvaged ten pounds of gator meat, which he shared with reenactors at a Tennessee gathering. The first-time gator-meat eaters said it tasted like chicken, of course, but on the rubbery side.<sup>165</sup>

### **Dead River Full Circle**

Just as Jack has visited his Massachusetts home park from time to time, he plans to do the same with Dead River when he retires: “I’ll probably just come in as a regular park

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<sup>164</sup> Jeri Coleman interview, Jack Coleman interview.

<sup>165</sup> Coleman interview.

patron . . . go canoeing, I'll have my boat out of the water at five just like I've been asking people to do for years and years . . . but at least I'll still be able to get on the river and I might be able to even enjoy a little bit more in a sense, you know, if I'm retired." Jack owns land off nearby McIntosh Road. And yes, he thinks about retirement, regardless of his fondness for Dead River: "I'm starting to think of it now more and more."<sup>166</sup>

During the unprecedented 2004 hurricane season, the Coleman family members split their time between Dead River, where they preferred to stay, and their church's annex, a back-up when County officials asked them to evacuate during two storms. Fittingly, Jack used his green sconce hurricane candle holder, the same one he used during Hurricane Donna when it hit his Massachusetts home post-Florida more than forty-five years ago (it also survived being bounced from a shelf when his wife was dusting). Little did Jack know that Donna's domino effect transforming Dead River from a private enclave to a public park would also sustain his livelihood in the woods: "I think this [Dead River] has been a great extension. Now I'm actually living here longer than the park [that] I was born and raised in." Jack, like those who have known Dead River before him, reveres this place and the rich experiences awaiting in these woods.<sup>167</sup>

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<sup>166</sup> Ibid.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid.

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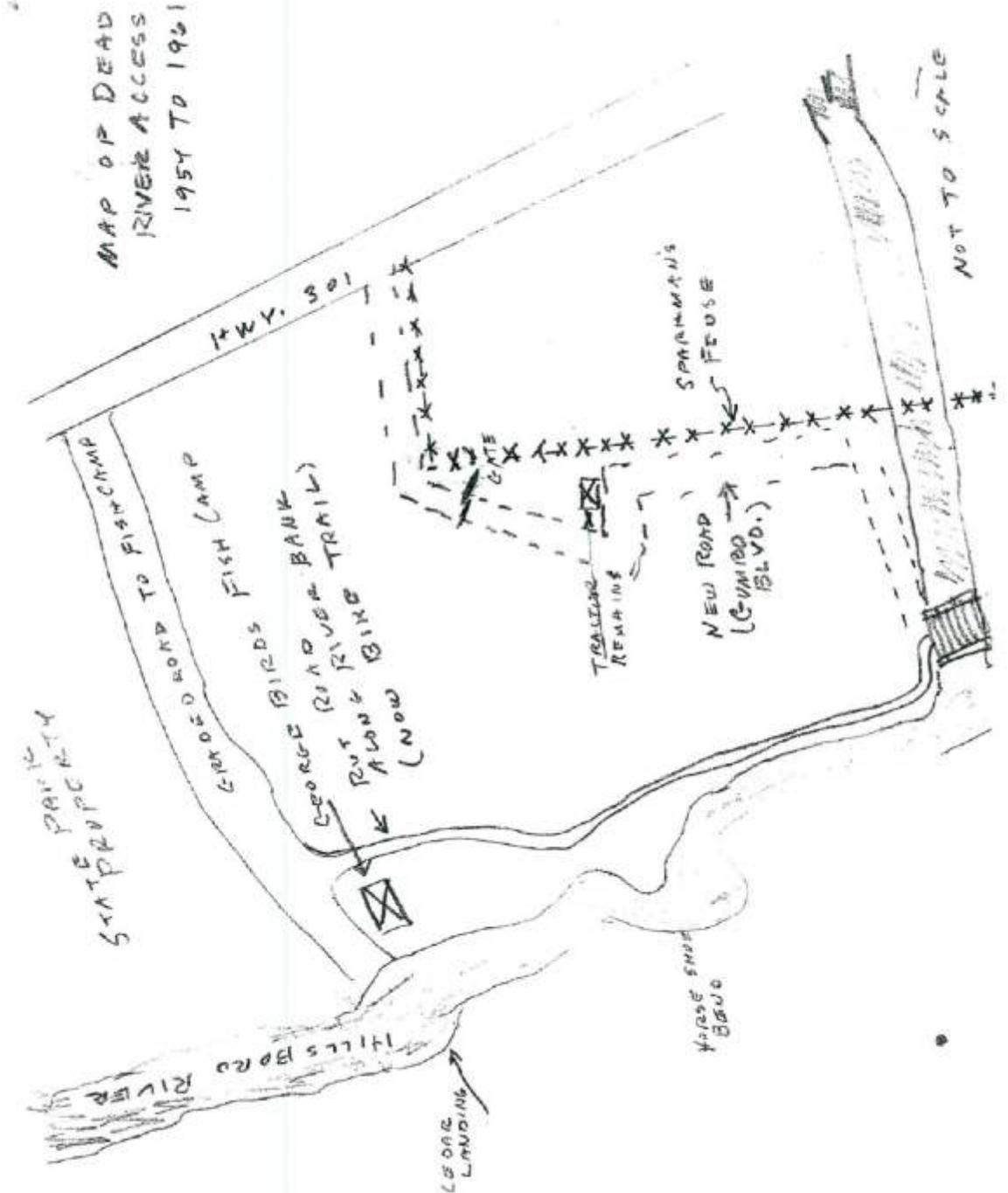
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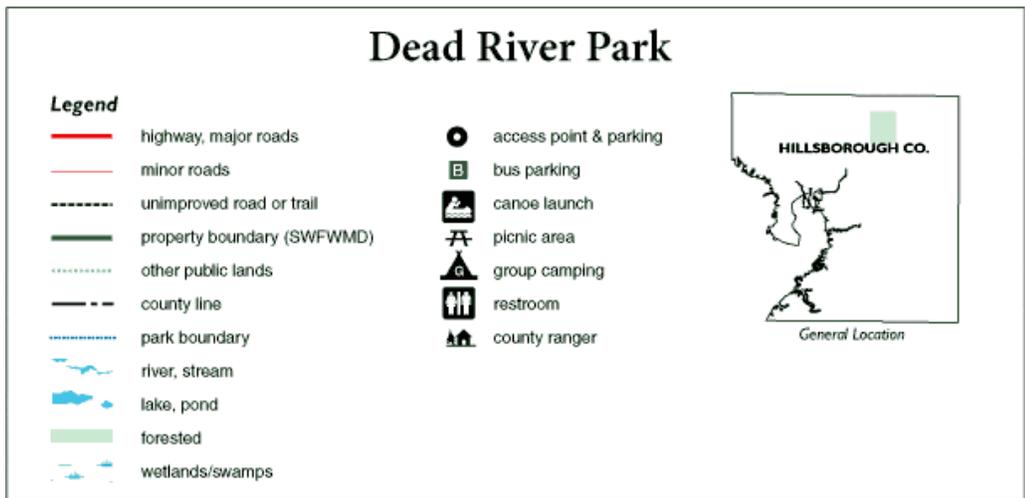
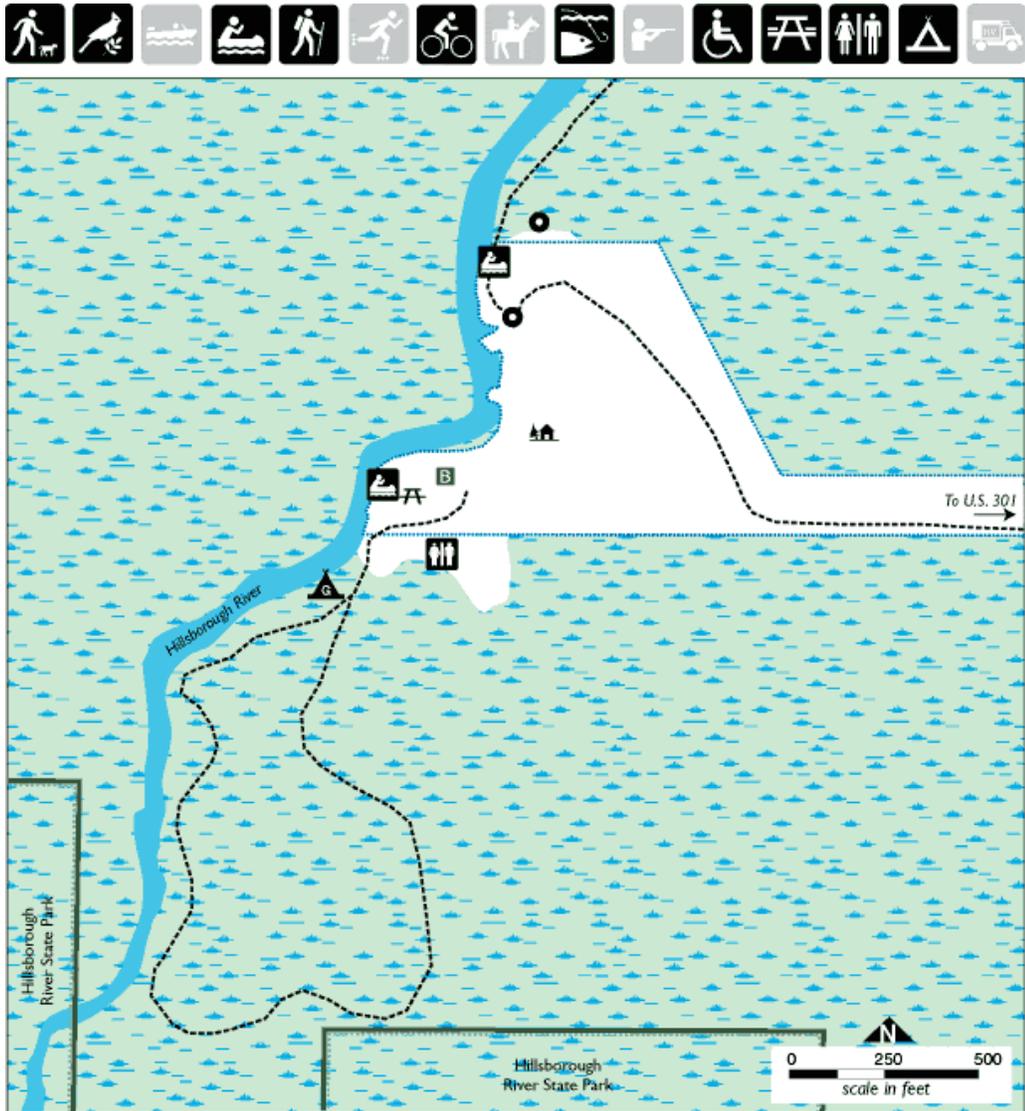
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## Appendices

Appendix A: Yates Map ("Dead River Chronicles," June 2000)



## Appendix B: SWFWMD Map of Dead River Park



Appendix C: Arise at Dead River - A Journal by Edward C. Woodward

4/13/06

Though bicycling down the Dead River Park entrance road, driving still pedaled my pace. Interstates and highways shuttled me from my south Tampa home to the park, about a thirty minute drive northeast within Hillsborough County. But here I was, five minutes removed from my car, bike unloaded and back pack secured, pedaling quickly to reach the river at the expense of the ride. Credit a quiet sensibility within, though, for tugging my conscious as I passed a furry white something dangling in the middle of the road.

“Slow down, city boy!”

“Disclaimer: I’m from the rural panhandle on indefinite sabbatical in Tampa.”

“Then stop thinking the river’s the only thing worth seeing.”

“Short-cycled green arrows at backed up intersections are attitude altering.”

“But you’re *here*, not *there*. Out here it’s green lights all the time. Look around.”

I scanned the green leaves of live oaks that line this crush-shelled road running about two miles to the Hillsborough River, then I rode back to that furry something that caught my eye, and got off my bike. A white caterpillar dangled from a roadside oak about five feet above the ground. Black tufts ran the length of its body, its face whiskered like a samurai fighting fish. It was seemingly suspended in midair like a trapeze artist. Then it fell. Next, the caterpillar scaled my shoe and crossed the road, well camouflaged by the bleached shells. Soon after, a green caterpillar with a black beaded line the length of its body decided to scale my shoe, too. Apparently I’m a caterpillar whisperer, but I doubt there’s a movie here: a caterpillar’s short life-span saps bonding time and a hoofing

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scene would take too long. However, this creature’s got an admirable mane: a top each bead are tufts of hair, mini-Don Kings exploding in green.

Standing here, three people have passed me. The first two were an older man and woman leaving the park by bike and medical scooter, respectively. The third another bicyclist, probably in his mid-twenties, who passed me on his way in and out during a twenty-minute span, my “progress” in that time about one hundred yards; post-caterpillars I’ve been more in the moment, seeing the details that dictate place. It’s entertaining and inspiring. My thoughts range from reverent to irreverent. Wind-swept oaks creak like rusty-hinged heavy doors. The young bicyclist resembled Jeff Gordon with a thin mustache a la Burt Reynolds circa *Smokey and the Bandit* (a fine film). He rode a blue Pee Wee Herman bike, free of gears, loud with the clatter of metal and rubber peddled at a high-speed on a hard surface. I rode on, too, and noticed an ironic transition as the woods enveloped me. The collective sound of tiny crickets overcame the high-pitched whine of sixteen-wheelers barreling down nearby U.S. Highway 301. If the woods could wink, they would. Then again, shadows caste are more than good shade.

Sabal palms at Dead River are like the popular footwear Crocs: they’re everywhere. In the shadows of oaks trees. Twisting and turning, seeking light and room to grow. Panoramically scanning the riverside picnic grounds, I stopped counting at fifty. But one sabal stood out - in my mind, not at Dead River. In the past year we renovated our house, adding a second story with a landing that overlooked the neighborhood tree tops. For the first time, from a two-story vantage point, I noticed a towering solitary sabal a block away, its backdrop at its peek height the sky and nothing else. Most days when I

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walked the landing I paused for a moment to enjoy the tree. But recently, I noticed the palm was gone. I stopped and stared. Was I looking in the wrong direction? No, though I hoped that was the case scanning the horizon. I felt robbed. Though it wasn't on my property, it was part of my panorama. I told my daughter about it, and she asked why it was gone. Good question. Maybe it was diseased. Doubtlessly, it was harvested for swamp cabbage by some urban pioneer; the tree's "heart" is edible. I won't know for sure, but we went on a walk soon after and passed the sabal stump, mere inches above the ground. I pointed it out to my daughter. She said she would get me a new one. Ironically, a good answer for a priceless view.

Leaving Dead River's picnic area, I followed a foot path wide enough for my bike. The path bordered the Hillsborough River. Smaller, worn paths diverted to the river from the main trail. The ground cover was dense and varied. What's great about the woods are the weeds, uninhibited growth. It's bemusing how fertilizer companies can criminalize dandelions and clover: yellow and purple bloom, bad. Green grass, good. My tangent ended at the river, snapped by the site of a large oak tree growing at a forty-five degree angle from the bank of the Hillsborough River. It stretched nearly half way across the river, a span of about twenty feet, and beckoned to be climbed. The first set of branches diverted about twenty feet above the trunk, forming a worn seat that it seemed others have sought. I'll call it the booty tree.

Resurrection vine, a ubiquitous plant in these woods that appears dead but revives, cloaked the limbs like arm hair. Epiphytes, air plants that thrive on oaks as well, sprouted tufts of gray hair. In some cases, epiphytes lodged themselves where branches

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diverted from the trunk, sparking in my mind a winning name for an environmentally conscientious band: The Arm-Pit Epiphytes.

Feeling the tree’s aura, I was ready to climb. I snapped the chin strap on my bike helmet, reasoning with flawed logic that, worst case scenario, if I plunged into the river, head butting an alligator with a thin plastic shell might dissuade an attack. I climbed. One foot on the trunk, then another, my hands ahead of me. About six feet up the tree, the water now below me, my cat-like confidence when it comes to climbing things, crashed. I turned shore-bound and leapt to the bank. Though I’d acutely watched my nimble cat Colonel Mustard scale the outer limbs of our neighbor’s live oak to commune with pigeons, my cumbersome climbing skills hadn’t improved. Maybe I needed a pigeon to coax me upward. Maybe I needed nine lives to dismiss losing one. Although certain a second climb would probably end the same way, I tried anyway. A third time, too, just for perseverance sake. Each time I jumped back to the bank, resigned to admire the tree from a gator-free zone.

But something caught my eye and lifted my spirits: a white a green bungee cord with a black hook anchored in the ground about six feet from the base of the booty tree. Kicking it with my foot, I recalled on my climb seeing what looked like a nail lodged about three feet below the tree’s seat. Clever, running a taught line between the two points to pull oneself upward, I supposed.

Back on the path, I wove through the woods about ten minutes. But I wanted to see more than the trail ahead. So I dropped my bike and started walking through ankle-high underbrush. I forgot my helmet was on, but absentmindedness has its benefits: I walked into a spider web. Abruptly, I jumped back. Though alone, my reaction

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embarrassed me: I grew up tromping through the woods of Gadsden County, and just a few years ago spent a summer and fall immersed in state parks during a stint with AmeriCorps and the Florida Park Service. But then I recalled the size of the spiders I encountered as a kid: Twix-sized golden-silk spiders known to us as banana spiders that, though not poisonous, I’d always heard packed quite a bite. At age thirty-four I was in no hurry to experience knowingly my first spider bite. Being embarrassed I could live with.

I decided to turn back while the path was still in sight. Dead River was new to me, but getting lost wasn’t; I’d tried finding my way from a mountain once and ended up five miles or so off course. A better option was to follow old ditches off the park entrance road; a good way in the woods to lose oneself without getting lost.

I pedaled back towards the park entrance, stopping at the river one more time. My eyes fell on a girth-gifted gator about eight feet long, partially submerged snout to hind legs in a few inches of water, his tail hidden behind a clump of trees and vines. He claimed this stretch of the Hillsborough vacated by a “twelve-something” foot gator Dead River Park Ranger Jack Coleman helped trap. That gator had grown too comfortable with park-goers, Jack said. He crossed the river once when a child neared the bank. Before that he’d snatched a dog.

While I’m wildlife watching, I’ve decided to pick up litter, too. Maybe I’ll unravel some quirky trend about who frequents the park, or at least frequents the park and litters. For you consumer-oriented think tanks out there, here’s my initial findings: Pepsi can; Dr. Pepper can, Natural Light can; Coca-Cola can; one package for a “Tru-Turn” hook, line test two to eight pound, rig, live bait, made in Canada with the quirky disclaimer “Warning: All Fish hooks are inherently dangerous!” (would anyone who

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thought otherwise know what inherent means?); one package for strawberry Royal Blunts; one Berkley Pro Select hook package; an enriched hamburger bun package from Kash N’ Karry; a Miller High Life can, pull tab; a hook package, brand unknown, but apparently “#1 since 1877” from what’s left of it; a green balloon; red plastic straw; face tissue package; Accardo “Spook” hook package; and a short broken strand of red beads. Good luck nailing that demographic.

4/17/06

Finding a solitary sabal palm with a blue sky backdrop and scattered clouds is a fresh find every time. It’s an auditory experience too, as a good breeze makes sabal palm fronds snap like bacon grease. I’ve pulled my bike off the Fort King Trail that runs between the Hillsborough River State Park and Dead River. Now I’m sitting just off the trail, the sabal’s lone audience. Place your arm below your eyes so that the grass-line and sabal trunk are blocked from view and you can see the tree anew: the greenish-yellowish-brownish burst of fronds is a sun, their tips finger-like rays. Imagine the sabal sun as a backdrop to the sky and you, behind it, are infinite. It’s a practice in perspective that creates a landscape anew. It also shows how frighteningly easy frame of mind can veil everyday wonders.

I’m always dumbfounded by finding more litter the closer I get to the river, particularly in pristine spots. It’s a frustrating disconnect. Following the Fort King Trail towards Dead River, I found a UFO – unidentified fishing object. Many of the short paths off the main trail where I’ve found litter lead to prime casting spots overlooking the

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Hillsborough River. One park-goer who later saw me cataloging my trash blamed the fishermen for the park’s eyesores. I’m leery of generalizations and quick conclusions, but it doesn’t take Columbo to equate discarded hook bags and packaging with people fishing.

I’ve also found beer cans galore, but the mess has inspired my unconventional anti-litter campaign that might work: beer brands named after well-known naturalists, their sneering likeness or some saying on the can a littering deterrent. Carr’s Light could replace Coors Light. Bring back Billy Beer, but name it after William Bartram. Bold letters could scream: “Behold this Beer! And don’t litter here!” Let Old Milwaukee become Old Muir, borrow the Busch slogan, and give real meaning to “Head for the mountains.” Why not Leopold Blue instead of Labatt Blue? And finally, how about Naturalist’s Light instead of Natural Light. Plaster the can with elementary school drawings of the clean sunny outdoors - the ultimate guilt trip.

Litter Found: Corner of Blue Diamond nut package; Coors Light sixteen ounce can in brown paper bag; Gatorade plastic bottle, Melon Fierce flavor; Barqs can; Newport cigarette package; Hawaiian Punch drink pouch; Middleton’s Black and Mild Cigar package; “Eagle Claw” hook package.

4/18/06

I’ve followed south one of the many ditches at Dead River that wind through the woods. This one is about ten to twelve feet at its widest, narrowing with fallen limbs and logs at points along the way. Above, the wind as waterfall cascaded from tree to tree. To

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my side I saw fallen leaves lodged in a clump of palmetto fronds. The image seemed familiar. Then it hit me: the leaves resemble locust shells that I picked as a kid from pine trees atop the slope of a hill fronting our house. The light-weight hollow shells, about the size of my thumb, always intrigued me. The insect inside was alive when it shed its shell. But not knowing that, you might imagine that the shell marked the end of the bug’s life. Quiet the mind, adopt a divine-colored lens, and your surroundings become clues to a spiritual scavenger hunt. The patterned, pitched callings of song birds aren’t repetitious, but rather revelations. Wind is a waterfall.

I sat on a log to read a book, but my attention was elsewhere: today’s text was unwritten. So I walked.

Litter found: Nine Aquafina bottles; one piece of red plastic wrap, one piece of clear plastic wrap; one piece of Styrofoam at base of trash can; one Budweiser can; one plastic bag; one Amber Bock can; one Coors Light can; one Pabts Blue Ribbon can; one twelve ounce Mountain Top coffee “Freshly Brewed,” with lid; one bottle that looks like Malt Liquor; one “Crown Jewels” \$5 Lotto Card, top prize “\$100,000!”; one Gatorade drink cap; one receipt for a salad that cost \$3.47; one napkin; one Sprite can; another piece of plastic wrap; one gum wrapper; one “Cheese Heads,” string cheese wrapper; one Bernie’s coffee cup with lid nearby; several beer bottles, brand unknown; Coke can commemorating 1996 Olympics; one plastic motor oil bottle with bottom cut out, probably for bait; another Bernie’s Styrofoam coffee cup; one Bud Light sixteen ounce can; one Amber Bock beer bottle.

“Appendix C (Continued)”

4/25/06

I left my bike at home, determined to slow my pace even more. A butterfly wing with a black background and orange, lavender and white accents is my first find of the day along the park entrance road. I bag it in a Ziploc, figuring I'll write about it later. Later I'll learn that postponing the moment wasn't such a good idea.

Reaching the culvert I walked last week, I head right, or north, off of the road. The woods of Dead River can be deceiving: just when you feel as if you're covering ground others have not for years, you'll find a beer can, a balloon or a snack bag. This area being a flood plain, it's always possible that the litter I find was elsewhere first, but filling up a plastic grocery bag or two every outing reminds me these woods are fairly popular, despite walking its depths in solitude. Seeing a four-and-a-half foot PVC pole laying in what looks like a gopher tortoise hole reminds me of this. And I wonder: what jackass shoves a pole into a hole that's clearly a home? Is it for fun or food?

Curiosity lured me from the culvert into the woods where there's no discernable path beyond a few clearings and narrow trails where animals have traveled. I'm willing to explore a few hundred feet beyond the path I know, but I'm in no hurry to get lost. It's worthwhile though: I found, or stumbled upon, a four-to-five-story oak tree. By far it's the tallest oak tree I've ever seen. A makeshift orange grove of twenty sour orange trees – tried one and its tart beyond taste – surrounds the oak. Stand under an oak like this and you're wrapped in reverence. Backwards my mind tracks through centuries envisioning other people who've stood beneath this tree. Seminole Indians? Cattlemen? Huck Finn-esque locals who knew these woods as their backyard? Who else has peeled and pitched a

“Appendix C (Continued)”

sour orange? Longevity and permanence is refreshing in a frenetic age like ours. I look at this oak and think of Mr. Wharton, a 90-something year old neighbor who lives a few blocks north of us. Yesterday, I met him by chance in his neighborhood. He was retrieving his recycle bins. I was riding my bike to the park to play pick-up basketball. I passed him and offered to help with the bins, but he didn't need it. We started talking and he told me he lived on the same street for about fifty years. He talked about his days as principal at Plant High School. I recalled another Hillsborough County high school that carried his name, and he confirmed it was named for him. His eyes were kind and often he smiled. As a father of a young child, I'm up on my Disney movies. One of my daughter's favorites is *Pocahontas*, which features an aged and wise talking tree, Grandmother Willow, who nurtures Pocahontas. Sounds corny but I'd love to be startled by a talking Dead River Oak, just to hear about who has passed before me, or maybe to give guidance to my thesis. Personified, the tree lives - you just have to stumble upon him after recycling day.

Vibrating cell phones are nerve racking in the woods, particularly when you're about to cross a log that's been methodically scouted for its optimum snake-free crossing zone. That zone is a wide clearing on the other side, itself a challenge to reach given my proven ineptitude at long jumping. It was second or third grade. The skit: Jack Be Nimble. I was Jack with an audience. All I had to do was clear the candle stick, maybe six inches high, and I clumsily clipped the thing. It wasn't even lit; perhaps that's the motivation I needed. That's valuable background some twenty-seven years later, an indelible memory I haven't revisited in a while. And now that I think about it, perhaps

“Appendix C (Continued)”

that’s why votive candle-lined walkways bring on cold sweats. What does this have to do with Dead River? There are a lot of fallen logs and a lot of leaps. And cell phones that vibrate in snake-crossing moments translate as rattles in your pocket.

I carry the cell phone so I can be in touch if needed. If I wasn’t responsible for others, I doubt I’d have one. In this case, it brought a little needed levity. My wife told me a story about our daughter biting her friend. When my wife asked our daughter’s friend if he was okay, he said, “I had pizza for lunch!” That trumped the annoyance of being startled. But bitten, how comically ironic would it have been that my link to help was instead my downfall? Not very. But five months removed from the incident and rewriting this journal entry in the comfort of my backyard tends to give me the confidence to leap over hubris, even though I can’t jump worth a damn.

Litter found: big red soda can; several Miller Lite beer cans; Busch beer cap and Busch can; Mountain Dew can; Michelob Ultra can; coffee cup; Red Strip beer bottle, full and unopened.

4/28/06

The butterfly wing I found a few days earlier is falling apart. When I found it I put it in a plastic bag, thinking I’d write about it later. But now that the wing is broken, I realize that I have to be in the moment. It reminds me of one of my favorite sayings I picked up from my brother a few years back, who picked it up from a friend. It goes something like this: “If you’ve got one leg in the past and one leg in the future, you’re pissing on the present.”

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The wing’s still intriguing. It has circular patterns, lavender and black, on a royal blue background. Where the wing would connect to the butterfly’s body is a cherry red, oblong potato shape. Touched, the colors smear like ink, but as I rub my fingertips, they retain their sand-like shape and size. This seamless art sparks an idea: what if we could dye our sweat so that perspiring was inspiring, a colorful outlet for energy? Arrange your pores so they create patterns. It might put tattoo artists out of business, but better health via exercise seems to be worthwhile upside. It would bring the artist out in everyone, a boon for the humanities, the fundraising possibilities endless, government funding no longer a lynchpin for survival. Now that’s American.

I’ve crossed Dead River at a shallow point, the bank apparently worn by erosion and foot traffic, probably two-legged and four. Scanning the trees above, my eyes meet a bard owl’s eyes. We look at each other for a few seconds before it silently swoops to an oak tree on the other side of Dead River. I’m fascinated when wild animals hold eye-contact. You might think that the unspoken experience of eye-contact would breed familiarity, not fear, with animals. I don’t expect people to nuzzle up to Grizzly bears, but would it be farfetched to give those moments of eye-contact the respect most people give to a household pet, a bond strengthened by eye-contact, with the seemingly added *disincentives* of slobber and bad breath? Wild animals just want space. You don’t have to sleep like a contortionist or succeed the foot of your bed to appease them. It gives me a greater appreciation for land conservation; and king-sized beds.

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Litter found: two plastic bags/wrappers; Mountain Dew can; Pepsi can; Crystal Light lemonade packet; Bud Light bottle; beer bottle; Anheuser-Busch bottle; Circle K fountain drink cup with blue straw; Tyson’s chicken livers plastic can (110 calories per three pieces); bag of hooks with four left, manufactured in Norway.

5/2/06

I’m on the hoot-owl-sighting side of Dead River again, but dirtier. I fell into Dead River, shin-high, trying to cross a downed sabal palm three feet over the water. Add balance issues to my growing list of *devolving* survival skills. But I climbed the sabal again, eased across, and here I am. Take that, Darwin. About thirty yards west of where I am the Hillsborough and Dead Rivers reconnect downstream. Eyeing Dead River as I neared the Hillsborough, I noticed a low muddy crossing about two-feet wide, the water some six inches deep. Darwin’s up one, again. Now at the Hillsborough, I follow the bank downstream, dodging thick spider webs attached to palm fronds, watching my way waste up instead of the ground six to eight feet in front of me, which, when attentive, is how I’ve been walking these woods. Something slithered. “God! Jesus Christ!” I said instinctively, ashamed in the aftermath by what I blurted, but reasoning it was my subconscious’ impromptu prayer compensating for my coordination. After retreating about ten feet, I watched the snake, about three feet long, nonchalantly head for a riverside palm tree that it disappeared behind. The snake was dark brownish-black with pale yellowish-brown bands. My first thought was moccasin. I gained my thoughts and crossed Dead River to read my field guide in the middle of a well-worn sandy foot path where things were clearly visible. My description matched part of my guide’s for

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moccasin. Later, at home, I checked out several websites and wondered if I hadn't seen a banded water snake instead – it's very similar in color and size to the moccasin. My snake encounter heightened my awareness for the rest of the day. Ideally, I'd remain calm and aware crossing a snake outdoors. Ideally, I wouldn't cross one.

There are armadillos a plenty in Dead River's woods. Had I never seen one, I still would know they run rampant: their droppings, distinctive piles of gray marble, dot the ditches. But I've seen them. No offense to their kind, but often I've waited patiently to see what's rustling in the underbrush only to see the familiar gray-armored one waddle out, then scamper away when it saw me, perhaps cursing under its breath about seeing another one of my kind.

So when riding my bike I heard a louder-than-armadillo rustling in the park's roadside ditch, I expected to see something else. But not an alligator. Not in a *dry* ditch I've fetched litter from. It's about four feet long and a mile or so from the river. But it's mating season, and there is an acre-sized pool of swampy water near the park entrance. Flabbergasted, I rode past the gator about twenty yards where I stopped in the road to wait and watch. A few minutes later, a jogger emerged from a nearby trail. I gave him a heads up about the gator. He said he runs the swamps throughout the area, including nearby Flatwoods Park, where he once passed an alligator sunning by the side of the path. The jogger eased closer to the gator, within ten feet. I reminded him they're pretty fast on land, but he was unfazed. “I better keep going before I seize up,” he said, and jogged away. I rode my bike past the gator once or twice, but it didn't budge. I wanted to out-

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wait the gator to see where it went, but I’d already planned to meet someone with Swiftmud, so I left.

Litter found: Pepsi cup; twelve ounce plastic Sprite bottle; Busch can, pull-top; Gatorade bottle, lemonade flavor; Natural Ice can; Budweiser can; Anheuser-Busch brown bottle.

5/12/06

I’ve picked up a walking stick about four feet long. It’s wide and blunt at the bottom, narrow at the top and sharp enough for piercing hard to reach litter. It also bows slightly, about the same bend as someone rising from bed to bend their back inward and stretch. At that angle, I can flip the bottom of the stick out to secure my step, then twist it 180 degrees propelling myself forward. I don’t need the stick, but it sets my rhythm as I follow another ditch deep into the woods.

Ten to fifteen minutes in, an accidental ornament catches my eye. A sour orange still attached to its limb is lodged between two fingers of a full-sized neighboring palm frond. The coupling creates an image of a one-eyed crab and raises interesting questions. Did the wind swing the orange forward into the palm frond, its fingers strong enough to snag the fruit on its back-swing? Or did the bud of the flower bloom between the fingers, the orange growing in place? Was the palm frond blown back into the orange, whereas the orange is in place and the palm frond stuck? It’s a profound realization that an orange and a palm frond, two common items in Florida, stand out when rearranged by chance. I often overlook the everyday, but imagine how many of these happenings go unnoticed

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unless stumbled upon? Amazing that incidental art can serve as a springboard to renewal. Like the butterfly wing, it lifts the mind to new places. It also enlivens my senses that too often are dulled by routines that act like sponges soaking up my sensibilities.

I find a deflated red helium balloon next to an old barbed-wired fence about a half-mile into the woods. Just when it feels like I’m in the middle of nowhere, litter reminds me otherwise. Knowing this area is prone to flooding, the balloon could have just as easily floated here by land than air. Maybe it came from a birthday party at Dead River or the nearby state park. Without knowing if the litter in the woods floated here or was dropped, it’s hard to get a sense of how often people walk these ditches. I haven’t seen many foot prints in muddy areas. But litter becomes the gnat that won’t go away, momentarily distracting, leaving and returning.

Up ahead a massive fallen oak, its trunk four to five feet in diameter, blocks the ditch. A decapitated sabal palm, its trunk still reaching twenty five to fifty feet high, probably felt the fall. I’ve learned to look for headless sabals around downed large trees; it seems to be a common pairing. I’m tempted to climb and walk the oak, but it’s surrounded by knee-high grass. An indelible memory comes to mind. During a controlled burn at Myakka River State Park during my AmeriCorps days, I watched a five foot or so diamond-back rattler slither from thick brush. So I bypassed the brush before me, and followed a subtle path around a cluster of limbs through the woods. When the ditch has been blocked before, I’ve learned to look for subtle trails like this one, detours created by animal traffic, most likely.

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Beyond the oak tree, about seventy-five yards ahead, I saw a clearing washed out by sunlight. Something raised and large was behind the clearing. It peaked my curiosity. So far I'd only seen flat ground and ditches. A topography shift of five feet or more might as well have been a mountain.

The path had petered out between here and there, but I was able to climb about ten feet up a twenty to twenty-five foot high elm tree, and look for the clearest path to the sun-lit opening ahead. I'd have to walk through some thick grass and over logs, but I figured I'd sweep the ground ahead with my walking stick to startle anything unseen. Like my experience with the orange and palm frond, the sun had slipped into the backdrop until it was redirected and shaped in my line of sight. Now I neared it with a sense of excitement, the raised mound of earth still a mystery. But what I saw before I reached the clearing confused me. A power line? As if suffering the walker's equivalent of bends, I'd emerged from the solitude of the woods too soon. I was disoriented. One moment my path was blocked, thick woods everywhere. Now I was walking past a power line, through the light, to a clearing and up the side of what turned out to be a service road. Completely confused. I'd never walked these woods without turning around. Now I didn't know where I was. I walked towards a gate on the road and read a sign: “Park Boundary NO TRESPASSING Florida Department of Environmental Protection.” The gate was closed but an opening was wide enough to pass by foot or bike. As far as I knew I'd never left Swiftmud land, and the signs threw me off, but I walked past the gate anyway. Within a few hundred feet, I saw a sign marking the area as Dead River Park and realized what I'd done: The service road was the Fort King Trail linking Dead River

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and the state park. I’ve ridden my bike down the path on past outings. I felt like an idiot, but laughed at myself: it made sense that a boundary would break my frame of mind.

Litter found: Lipton pull tab can; Coke can; plastic bag.