

Retracing the route of Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings

PBS special will document writer's trip on St. Johns River

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ON THE ST. JOHNS RIVER — It would have been a familiar sight to Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings.

A wispy fog blanketed the river as the sun peeked over the horizon, spilling its golden light onto a grassy shoreline in southern Volusia County where a pair of women explorers camped the previous night.

Rawlings and her friend Dessie Smith spent 10 days on the river in 1933, an adventure retold in the "Hyacinth Drift" chapter of *Cross Creek*.

Last week, modern-day adventurers Leslie Kemp Poole and Jennifer Chase began retracing that



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Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, shown in a 1940s photo, spent 10 days on the St. Johns River in 1933, an adventure retold in a chapter of her 'Cross Creek' novel.

route for production of *In Marjorie's Wake*, a PBS special being produced by Equinox Documentaries.

Beginning on the north bank of State Road 50 near Fort Christmas, the women pattered their way north through the maze of Puzzle Lake, an Everglades-like sea of

marsh grasses laced with dead-end channels and desolate beauty.

As the river widened, they explored lakes Harney and Monroe, eventually traveling roughly 100 miles to the Ocklawaha River. Along the way, both sets of women

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came to know more about the character of the St. Johns and its people.

Writer/co-producer Bill Belleville said *In Marjorie's Wake* was inspired by Rawlings' journey and seeks to explore what he calls "a sense of place," which encompasses both the ecology and the culture of the river.

"It's not just another documentary on the St. Johns or nature; it's about how people respond to it," he said.

Poole and Chase aren't actors playing the roles of Rawlings and Smith but rather modern explorers seeing the river through their own eyes.

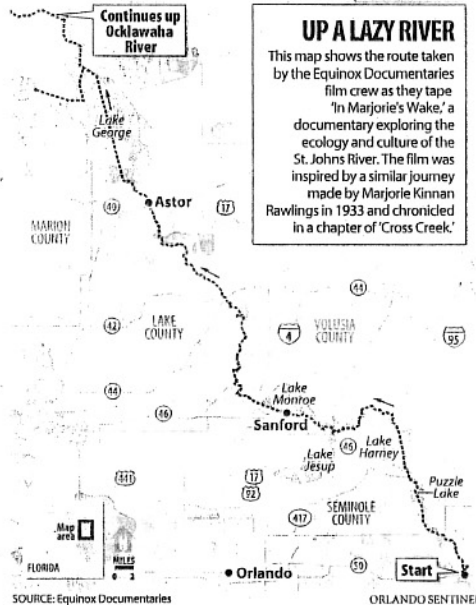
Still, Poole, 48, a fourth-generation Floridian, said she feels a certain kinship with Smith — a true frontier woman — whom she visited before her death at 95 a few years ago.

"It was such a blessing that we were able to interview her," said Poole, a freelance writer and adjunct professor of environmental studies at Rollins College. "I was in awe of her — she was like this mythical woman who could do anything. ... I connected with her sense of adventure."

Chase, a poet and musician from Jacksonville, said she feels a closer bond with Rawlings, in part because of the lyrical way in which the author described the beauty and hardships of frontier living.

"I identify with Marjorie," said Chase, 42. "She looks at things through the eyes, in my mind, of a poet."

In Rawlings' account, the women were often lost in the maze of the poorly charted channels of Puzzle Lake until it dawned on them to be still and watch as languidly drifting hyacinths revealed the direction of the current, pointing the way home and inspiring the chapter's title. They also encountered water moccasins,



About the project

Equinox Documentaries is in the process of making *In Marjorie's Wake*, a one-hour special inspired by the roughly 100-mile voyage of Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings and her close friend Dessie Smith on the St. Johns River as chronicled in the "Hyacinth Drift" chapter of Rawlings' *Cross Creek*. The film crew will document the experiences of a pair of modern women who are following roughly the same route taken by Rawlings in 1933.

Designed to explore both the ecology and the culture of the river, the special is scheduled to air on PBS stations next year.

Throughout the taping, cast and crew members are posting regular blogs to the nonprofit filmmaker's Web site, equinoxdocumentaries.org.

The film will also examine changes that have taken place on the river, including the rapid population growth that threatens its health.

"We can see some places that are as primeval as they were 5,000 years ago," said Belleville. "The mist is coming up off the water, and you think that at any time a Timucua could be paddling a dugout around the corner. Yet in 15 minutes, we can be in Sanford; so you have this typical Florida irony where you have this wonderful time-stuck sense of place, and then you have lots of people and all of the issues that they bring with them."

As the filmmakers wrap up their journey on St. Johns this weekend, Smith, who died in 2002, will begin a final voyage along the river. At a ceremony to be held near the confluence of the St. Johns and Ocklawaha rivers, family and friends will scatter her ashes into the dark, slow-moving waters and say their final goodbyes.

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and at one point had to stuff a shirt into a gap in the hull of their 18-foot wooden powerboat to keep from sinking.

Though they didn't need to plug any holes in their modern fiberglass vessel, Poole and Chase also faced challenges along their journey. Their experience on Puzzle Lake, which remains relatively unchanged since Rawlings' time, mirrored the earlier voyage in many ways.

"For the first day we didn't see a person, a house, a cell phone; we didn't hear anything, see anything except all of the wildlife," said Chase. "And we grounded ourselves a few times, which was a little unsettling."

And like the pioneers, Poole and Chase are also interacting

with the people they meet along the river.

As they camped alone at the confluence of the Econlockhatchee and St. Johns rivers the first night out, one such encounter made them nervous.

"A guy yelled something out from a boat, and I thought it was kind of ironic that what scared us more than creatures coming and everything was the potential threat of someone causing you harm," Chase said.

But there were also more positive encounters, including one Tuesday night in which deer hunters stopped by the camp to show off their kill.

Much of that interaction will appear in the film, giving viewers the opportunity to get to know the people who call the St. Johns home.



DENNIS WALL/ORLANDO SENTINEL

From left, Jacksonville artist Jim Draper, Jennifer Chase and writer Bill Belleville discuss their plans as cameraman Tom Postel and soundman Mark Howerton line up a shot at Blue Spring State Park this week. They are filming a PBS documentary, 'In Marjorie's Wake,' about 2 women who travel the St. Johns River for 10 days — a journey writer Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings made with her close friend in 1933.