



ON THE ST. JOHNS RIVER

I have been watching the morning sunrise since its first rays warmed the darkened skies, glittering into the smoke rising from glass-calm water. Colors I think have never been described lift overhead, slowly fading into a bright blue canopy. As the light brightens, so do the activities of nearby birds. A bald eagle screams over a morsel it defends from black vultures. Wading birds stalk through the tea-colored waters – one eye on me, the other on potential breakfast. Cattle stare back, slowly chewing and waiting to reclaim the grassy spot where I camped last night.

I sit in the misty chill and ponder two questions: has there ever been a more glorious time or place? And, did Marjorie and Dessie see the same thing?

Seventy-five years ago, Pulitzer-Prize-winning author Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings and her friend Dessie Smith camped somewhere in this marshy expanse of the upper St. Johns River. Traveling in a small wooden boat, they became lost in the vast maze of tall golden grass and shallow, serpentine channels and, as the day lengthened, they were forced to set up camp, frustrated with their inability to find their way. The women awoke to a glorious day and to the realization that they were not lost – that if they stilled their worries and quietly watched the movement of the river’s vegetation, they could find their way into its main current.

“Forever after, where the river sprawled in confusion, we might shut off the motor and study the floating hyacinths until we caught, in one direction, a swifter pulsing, as though we put our hands close and closer to the river’s heart,” Rawlings later wrote in *Cross Creek*, named after the small north Florida hamlet where she lived. “It was very simple. Like all simple facts, it was necessary to discover it for oneself.”

I have come to the St. Johns to discover Rawlings and Smith for myself – and to help other less adventuresome folks do the same. Good-natured Jennifer Chase, a Jacksonville playwright and musician, has joined me on this voyage – two modern women retracing the same



100-mile path along the north-flowing St. Johns River from Christmas to the Ocklawaha River. We camped here last night, unnerved by the complete darkness and the knowledge that we were utterly alone. In the warmth of the rising sun, we are elated to be the only humans at this spot, with this view.

Soon, our all-male camera crew will join us, ready for our second day of filming *In Marjorie’s Wake*, a documentary about Rawlings, the river, and the culture it has inspired throughout Florida’s history. The hour-long film is being produced by Equinox Documentaries, an Orlando non-profit group, of which I am a board member. We are trying to reach state residents through the film and teach them about the value of the river – indeed, of all of Florida’s ecosystems – and inspire them to become its stewards.

In coming years, the river is going to need all the friends it can get. With Florida’s population increasing by 6,000 people per week, pressure is on to find water resources to sate a thirsty populace. Conflict already has erupted between communities and counties that border the St. Johns – some of which want to siphon millions of gallons of water from it. The battle is likely to end up in state courts. Who will be the winners and losers? Today’s residents are likely to make those decisions and we want them to be well-informed.

Rawlings, who came to Florida from New York in 1928, learned to love the state and its natural areas. In return, she found intellectual and spiritual nourishment that led to her successful writing career, culminating with her 1939 Pulitzer Prize for *The Yearling*, a novel set in the Florida scrub. Through her writing and her tale of the river trip, a chapter in *Cross Creek* called “Hyacinth Drift,” we hope to translate and transmit Rawlings’ exquisite sense of place into today’s Floridians.

As I sit near the river’s bank, I remember my last visit with Smith, who enthusiastically agreed to be part of the movie project, offering her advice and memories that will become part of the film. Sadly, she died before the movie was completed but later this week we will scatter her ashes into the river. Smith was the adventurer who talked Rawlings into the trip. She had always wanted to travel the river and she realized that Rawlings, on the verge of a divorce and suffering from writer’s block, needed to get away to the finest remedy that exists – nature.

“We need above all, I think, a certain remoteness from urban confusion,” Rawlings wrote of herself and her rural neighbors. In today’s chaos of traffic snarls, suburban sprawl, and disappearing landscapes, that may be the remedy that all Floridians need. That is the message of Rawlings and our film.

In Marjorie’s Wake will be aired on WMFE Monday, April 14 at 9:00 PM and Wednesday, April 23 at 11:00 PM • www.equinoxdocumentaries.org

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PHOTOS: COURTESY BILL RANDOLPH