

2 women re-create Rawlings' 'Cross Creek' journey on the St. Johns River

By Melissa E. Holsman

Friday, April 18, 2008

Imagine taking a weeklong journey 100 miles along Florida's scenic St. Johns River, tracking the same route traveled 76 years ago by noted outdoorswoman Dessie Smith and Pulitzer Prize-winning author Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, detailed in her novel "Cross Creek."

That's exactly what Florida native Leslie Poole and Jacksonville resident Jennifer Chase did during the making of the documentary "In Marjorie's Wake," airing tonight at 9 on WPBT.

Emmy Award-winning producer Bob Giguere, who directed the 55-minute film, said Earth Day weekend is an ideal time to tell this story, which follows Poole and Chase along the St. Johns River, beginning at State Road 50 near Christmas to Rodman Dam, near Palatka.

"Earth Day is a time when we reflect and look at God's great gifts around us ... and do those things that illustrate we care," he said. "With this documentary, that's what we're talking about, too ... and within 'In Marjorie's Wake,' Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings of course did that."

Giguere, co-founder of Equinox Documentaries, which produced the film, said the story also is about connecting people with the environment.

"Everyone has something that inspires and motivates them," he said. "And we feel if we can get them to connect on that level -- that's really what affects change."

The St. Johns River stretches 310 miles, making it the longest river in Florida and home to alligators, Eastern indigo snakes, spotted turtles, Florida black bears and snowy egrets.

Its northward flow begins in Indian River County and travels to the ocean through Duval County.

In retracing Rawlings' and Smith's 1933 journey, Poole and Chase camped in the wilderness of conservation land in the watershed, and stayed overnight at fish camps and marinas.

Poole, an adjunct professor for environmental studies at Rollins College and a self-described "fanatic Rawlings fan," said part of their mission in making "In Marjorie's Wake" was to instill a sense of place in people and inspire others to actively protect Florida's environment.

"We are hoping now to make this an armchair trip for all of our viewers to inspire them to get out there and take the same trip," she said. "I firmly believe once you're out there and have the experience with this river, you fall in love with it and you become committed to preserving it and making good choices in the future."

Poole and Chase -- a musician, playwright and professor at Florida Community College in Jacksonville -- met only once before starting the trip.

"She ended up writing a CD of music inspired from the trip," Poole said. "You can see her learning about the river as we go along."

The journey had its challenges, Poole recalled, including getting stuck on a sand bar,

and briefly losing their way while navigating Puzzle Lake -- the same marshy spot that caused confusion for Rawlings and Smith.

Of course, Poole and Chase didn't have to hunt and fish for their dinner, or chase off a wild bear, as Smith and Rawlings did while camping on the riverbanks.

In fact, Smith's trip with Rawlings landed her a role in Rawlings' award-winning short story "The Yearling," which later was adapted into an award-winning movie.

"I think this is a marvelous way of telling a story," Poole said. "Not of just these women ... but also of the trip we took and the trip that anybody can take and discover all the beauty of the St. Johns, and the influence its had on our state history and culture."

What: "In Marjorie's Wake"

When: 9 p.m. today

Network: PBS (WPBT)

Online: www.equinoxdocumentaries.org/project_marjories_wake.php



© 2008 Scripps Treasure Coast Newspapers