

OrlandoSentinel.com

Florida FLASHBACK

Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings' river ride - through 21st-century eyes at Rollins College

Joy Wallace Dickinson

Florida Flashback

March 9, 2008

"We had, in a moment, the feel of the river; a wisdom for its vagaries. . . . The strangeness of flowing water was gone, for it was all there was of living.

Often photos of Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings (1896-1953) show her late in her life, a rather formidable middle-aged woman, perhaps posed behind her typewriter.

A few such pictures survive in a worn blue folder in the Sentinel's files. Perhaps as long as 50 years ago, someone neatly typed on it the word "authoress" under her name.

Not "author," but authoress. A woman author, perhaps in her day not to be taken as seriously as [Ernest Hemingway](#) or [F. Scott Fitzgerald](#), whose work Rawlings' editor, Max Perkins, also fostered.

Today, of course, plenty of us take the Pulitzer-Prize winner seriously, including the U.S. Postal Service, which issued a stamp in her honor in February at her Cross Creek home in Alachua County, now part of the Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings Historic State Park.

And this is cool: On the stamp, she's a younger Marjorie, maybe a bit more the way she looked 75 years ago, when she took the daring trip down the St. Johns River that would inspire her essay "Hyacinth Drift," the next-to-last chapter of her book Cross Creek.

Boy, is it good writing.

During March weather in 1933 that was "fresh and wind-washed," Marj and her pal Dessie Prescott slipped an 18-foot boat into the St. Johns in east Orange County near Christmas and traveled, ultimately, into the hearts of folks who love the untrammled beauty of our state -- what's left of it.

And one of the great things Leslie Kemp Poole of [Winter Park](#) has to report after revisiting Rawlings' trip is that wild Florida does survive along the river.

Poole, an environmental historian (and former Sentinel reporter) who teaches at [Rollins College](#), has done Rawlings' trip twice: first in the 1990s with her longtime friend from [University of Florida](#) days, Heather McPherson (the Sentinel's food editor), and again during the making of a recently released documentary, In Marjorie's Wake.

Produced by the Orlando-based nonprofit Equinox Documentaries, the film doesn't re-enact Rawlings' 1933 adventure but seeks to revisit it through 21st-century eyes, Poole said last week.

Featuring a soundtrack by Jennifer Chase of Jacksonville, who joined Poole for the two-woman film revisitation, In Marjorie's Wake is being presented to a national PBS audience by the Miami affiliate, WPBT -- but Central Floridians can see it at Rollins on March 19, during a program with author and environmentalist Bill Belleville, one of the film's producers.

Talking with Dessie

In the mid-1990s, When Poole and McPherson prepared for their "Marjorie" trip on the river, they made the great discovery that Dessie Prescott was living near Crystal River.

They wrote about her memorably in the Sentinel in 1995, as well as writing about their trip in an essay article titled "Return to the River."

Dessie, who was 88 in 1995, "has run hunting and fishing camps; hunted wild boar, turkey and antelope; earned a pilots license ([Amelia Earhart](#) hadn't even been heard of, she wants you to know); gone through several husbands and traipsed across Africa on safaris," as well as providing inspiration for one of Florida's most celebrated authors, Poole and McPherson wrote.

The Marjorie's Wake filmmakers were able to interview Prescott before she died at 95; a larger-than-life figure, she "gets all the laughs in the movie," Poole said.

But back to what hasn't changed about the river. During the filming of In Marjorie's Wake, on "certain days we hardly saw anyone else," Poole said. And "the wildlife we saw was amazing to me."

That included eagles, a black bear on the river bank, an otter under their boat, wild turkeys and legions of alligators.

"What the film tries to convey is that less than an hour from complete urban chaos, you can be on the river in a real, natural setting," looking at what Rawlings and Prescott might have seen 75 years ago, Poole said.

Rawlings was morose and sick at heart when she went to the river, she wrote in "Hyacinth Drift." But the surroundings worked their magic.

"If I could have, to hold forever, one brief place and time of beauty," she wrote, "I think I might choose the night on that high lonely bank above the St. Johns River."

DATEBOOK

Friday night is Retro Game Night at the [Orange County Regional History Center](#), and it sounds like a bunch of fun.

From 6 p.m. to midnight, for an admission of \$5 cash at the door, folks can play an assortment of classic board games and video games throughout the museum. Retro attire is encouraged but not essential, and a cash bar will be available; the event is geared toward grown-ups.

For details and reservations, call 407-836-8580.

