

RIVER of LAKES
A JOURNEY ON
Florida's St. Johns River
Book by Bill Belleville

Copyright © 2000 Published by The University of Georgia Press

Parts of Chapter 4

Page 75

Just north of the mouth of the Wekiva, the St. Johns takes a spectacular dip southward, bending as classically as any oxbow ever has before deciding to continue north again. Oxbows are common when a slow current runs head on into an obstruction and, instead of bulling through it, goes back and starts again, imitating the curving, U-shaped frame that binds the head of oxen under a yoke. Back when efficiency wasn't nearly as important as it is now, riverboat captains and their passengers on the St. Johns experienced the scores of each oxbow fully on the river, deckmen with long poles often pushing away from the tight corners, bows crunching against the underbrush.

Today, though, there are at least thirty short, canal-like "cuts" made by the Army Corps of Engineers along the river, connecting the serifs at the top of each oxbow "U" to make navigation easier, as it does here at the "Wekiva Cut." Most were dredged between the 1880s and the 1930s. Since Indian middens had virtually no value during that period, it wasn't uncommon for a dragline to slice neatly through a pre-Columbian mound, leaving fragments of shell, pottery, and even bone to gurgle in the newly dredged mud.

If the cutoffs are well maintained so the current flows through them, the original oxbow corners will eventually become shallow and thick with snags, providing aquatic labyrinths in which to poke about. Given enough time, some may even separate themselves entirely from the river, natural retribution for being bypassed and ignored.

Yet it is not only engineers who alter the channel; they just do it more quickly. A river like the St. Johns follows the path of least resistance, changing course inside its flood plain when it needs to do so. The lakes themselves were created in such a way, perhaps when some prehistoric log jam drifted into a shoal on a much wider river, accumulating sand and floating islands of aquatic grasses until the water pooled up behind it. Some geologists say these sediments may have even been deposited between several different rises and falls of the prehistoric sea, when the basin was still estuarine.

At any rate, the river I see today does not flow exactly where it did when Bartram first saw it more than two centuries ago, or even when Lanier rode

Page 76

atop it a century later. Because its shift is gradual, though, we think of its path as a permanent fixture forever welded into the terrain. It is an illusion that fools us, makes us forget about where the river has been.

The poet Linda Gregg thinks that poetry is found rather than written, that the substance and theme of a poem already exist before it is put into words. That is a fine description of how a river flows as well, determining its shape by a historic collection of tiny nuances, long before its course is ever revealed to us mere mortals—who are isolated by the presumption of the *now*.

Elongated, eel-like shards of water begin to appear in the landscape here. Sometimes they eventually reconnect to the river channel, like Hontoon Dead River. Sometimes they are stranded in distant prairie lands to the west, like the Banana River. Almost always, they follow the north-south topographical contours of the land, mimicking the nascent path of the marine lagoon.

Because the channel is deeper and easier to navigate here, motorboaters frequent it more regularly- although far less so on weekdays. As a result, canoe and kayak guidebooks to rivers in the Southeast usually ignore the St. Johns altogether to protect their readers from the danger of churning wakes. Yet the backwater streams and sloughs that accompany the channel can be delightfully peaceful sojourns for small, human-powered craft. Any good map that shows the depth and configuration of waters is a gateway to those sojourns, with *shallow* and *narrow* providing the keys.

I am finding that those who usually travel on the St. Johns via combustion engine are a widely eclectic lot - from those with little river experience who rent pontoon party boats for day trips, to houseboaters on vacation, to sport fishers. Depending on how serious they are about fishing, the last group drive small john-or V-hulled aluminum boats with modest kickers- or wrangle high-powered, fleck-painted, bullet-shaped craft that rooster-tail their wakes, like kids burning rubber on their hot rods. The latter seem less inspired by the *Compleat Angler* than the Daytona 500.

The environmental sensibilities are just as eclectic, and one of the best ways to measure the responsibility factor of each is by watching how they handle the "no wake" zones set up to protect the endangered-and slow moving-West Indian manatee. Some throttle down as the law requires, but others breeze by at top end as if shooting the bird to the zone and the manatee inside it.

I used to think that all people who enjoyed being outdoors understood the

Page 77

finite, even sacred potential of that experience - that they in some way appreciated the chance for connectedness between themselves and nature, the opportunity to distance themselves from the technotransience of our contemporary world. And this is true of many who visit the St. Johns. But there are increasing numbers who simply enjoy traveling at high rates of speed on a medium that just happens to be water; others seem to relish the notion of chemically numbing themselves while the riverine environment plays a sort of natural background Muzak for the experience.

Consider this: Boat collisions are the leading cause of mortality among manatees in Florida. What's more, Florida also leads the nation in boating deaths of humans-in which speeding and drunken boaters plummet one another with bows and hulls and props. Although moderation would seem a reasonable course, there is a persistent campaign to lift or relax speed zones, engineered chiefly by a few who make money selling, renting, or berthing boats. Even one writer of a self-published boating guide to the river demands the easing of extensive manatee zones because of the "inconvenience" to boaters. Those who disagree are labeled, in advance, "extreme environmentalists."

Funny, when I think of myself at all when it comes to the St. Johns, it is usually as a fisherman, because that is what I was, long before I became a conservationist, extreme or otherwise. I suppose if I were more honest, I would admit that my fancy graphite fly rod and hand-tied flies are sophisticated props to open the door to the connection Edward O. Wilson describes so well, to satisfy my own biophilia. Without it, I would be left to stare endlessly into the water, gripping nothing.

It helps me understand why Bartram and Homer drew and painted what they saw here, why Lanier and Rawlings wrote so poetically of their experiences. They, too, entered into a gentle strife-if not with the mullet, then surely with the river-and it absorbed them, gave them a reason to exist. What would they have been without their pens and quills and oils?

Fishers, probably.

The St. Johns is layered with textures, and these textures change not only every few miles as the river meanders through its floodplain but also with season and perspective. Boating or hiking on or near the

river by day provides one perspective. Living *atop* the river for a few weeks provides another.

To explore this last texture, I set out to experience the St. Johns between here and Green Cove Springs by rented houseboat. Aboard the craft, I have

Page 78

packed kayaks and scuba tanks, both of which I plan to use to ease me back into the aquatic alleys and geological cellars of the St. Johns, outside the mainstream. I have never associated the idea of a houseboat with finesse, but that is what this lumbering thirty-eight-foot-long, single-prop vessel I am now at the helm of demands. Unlike smaller craft that simply go toward the target one aims them for, a houseboat requires one to think at least a few moments ahead, to start a turn before that turn is required. Because its sides are steep and boxy, it is also vulnerable to wind, not unlike a sailboat would be.

During my own sluggish learning curve, the boat lazily zigs and then zags on an eccentric course back and forth across the channel for a day or so until I learn the ropes. Other than that, my temporary home is much like a camper trailer mounted on a huge pontoon - or, to see it another way, a fancy raft with a steering wheel and a fathometer and a gas grill. In fact, I like seeing it the other way, as it puts me in cahoots with Huck Finn himself, who once remarked of his journey on another river, a monstrous big one: "There weren't no home like a raft, after all. Other places do seem so cramped up and smothery, but a raft don't." If the inside of my raft becomes too smothery, I simply walk outside or climb a little ladder to the roof.

As I cruise down river, I become more sympathetic to the concept of the navigational "cuts" that have been sliced through some of the oxbows. They are simply easier to navigate than the convoluted natural twists. Yet I also know the most intriguing places I have ever found on land are at the end of the worst and least-traveled roads. The cutoffs are little turnpikes, good for making time but not too much else.

Today, I am following the current northward, above where the St. Johns weaves around N. Emanuel Bend, beyond the aptly named High Banks, through the oxbow cuts that take me past other bends mapped as Dutchman and Florida and Coxetter. The last was named for Lewis Coxetter, an early steamboat captain who used his ship *Starlight* to run Yankee blockades in the Civil War, leaving it finally scuttled somewhere back in Lake Monroe. I anchor near the backside of the Snake Creek cutoff. Snake Creek itself winds northwest of here, more or less paralleling the river until it becomes a trace of itself, conflating finally with Hontoon Dead River. In between, the nautical map shows it as "unnavigable," a virtual bayou with a little branching cul-de-sac of its own mapped as "Negro Slough."

Page 79

Unnavigable always means what it says for motorboats. But **if** you happen to be in a kayak or canoe and don't mind ducking under low-hanging branches and pulling your way atop snags hidden under a few inches of water, the concept of "unnavigable" may vary depending on seasonal dryness and your personal sense of adventure.

Just south of Snake Creek, there are at least three horizontal "logging canals" that link the channel with Hontoon Dead River. I will find several other "dead rivers" along the St. Johns, and they are only *dead* nautically because they terminate somewhere off the channel; aesthetically, they may be some of the most pristine stretches of water in the entire valley. Hontoon has something else, too: the old logging canals were here for a purpose, and that purpose was to cut the biggest and oldest cypress trees the loggers could find.

I paddle up one in the kayak, back here in a matrix of leaves and vines, and see the remnant stumps of

what must have been massive, ancient trees. Loggers, who first went into the swamp in the late 1800s, "girdled" the cypress by chopping a deep groove around each tree a season or so before they planned to fell it. The grooves bleed sap-the death knell of a thousand year-old tree. When the loggers returned to finish the work, the giant, sapless conifers would float instead of sinking and thus could be towed down the river.

I look closely at several hollow stumps-each large enough for three or four people to climb inside-and see the marks of ax girdling, still in the wood, below the top of the stumpy rim. Scientists know that trees actually give off warning signals to other trees when they are being attacked by insects; what such cues would a millennium-old cypress emit when it was girdled, and for how long?

It is May and full spring now. Along with fall, it is my favorite time to be on the river, since the air is cooler and the mosquitoes and deerflies and no-see-ums are still at bay. Other insects, though, are beginning to stir, and they are the ones I most look forward to seeing. Some are from the order Lepidoptera, others from the family of Lampyridae-wings of colored feathers or lighters of lamps. By day, this means butterflies; by night, fireflies.

Back in the channel, from the deck of my boat, I am pleased to see that the tiger swallowtails are beginning to emerge from their chrysalis, their great lacy yellow wings edged with black, looking like some Rorschach test

Page 80

colorized and come to life. I sit on the stern, watching one doing its little butterfly dance, gliding from above the ever closed yellow bud of the spatterdock lily, up into the leaves of the willow and hickory. Later, I will see the muted blue spring azure and then the black swallowtail, pure ebony spotted with white and blue, a distinctive frilly tail dribbling at the bottom of each ink-blotted wing. By fall, monarchs will move down across Florida in their long migration, stopping to rest on twigs and leaf edges, pumping their little wings like arabesque fans from a Victorian parlor.

The St. Johns is as good for butterflies as it is for birds, and for many of the same reasons: there is tender leafy food for the larvae, wildflower nectar for the adults, and-along public stretches of land - few pesticides or herbicides to poison them. There are insect naturalists, in fact, who routinely identify and count butterflies, just as the Audubon Society does with birds, and I imagine rivers like this must be dandy staging grounds for such things from the spring through the summer.

By early evening, the fireflies emerge in that cusp of time between early and late. I often hear people in Florida say they see few of these lightning bugs nowadays, and perhaps that's a function of several things-from too much artificial light in their neighborhood to simply too much neighborhood. But biodiversity holds true here for fireflies as well, as there are fifty-six species in the state, more than anywhere else in North America. Maybe we don't see as many anymore because we don't take the time; but sitting on the stern of an anchored boat on the St. Johns surrounded by dark riverine swamp at night surely gives you back that time. Here, I watch for these little sparks of bioluminescence to flicker on and off at the edge of the river, never fully sure where they will flash to life next, always guessing. It is a sort of visual fishing, without the props.

Scientifically, the biochemical sparks of the fireflies are the clues of sex or hunger - males courting females, or hungry females of a different species enticing unsuspecting males into becoming a snack. But for me, the displays are far more, part of that grand connect-the-dot picture pieced together to illustrate the natural river experience, the tiny flashes surprising me each time with wonder, a serendipitous break from my ordered human-made world.

Blue Spring is ground zero for manatees along the St. Johns. Whenever the temperature of the river begins

to drop well into the sixty-degree-

Page 81

Fahrenheit range, the warm-blooded mammals flock here, to the thermal womb of the springs. From forty to sixty return here to these springs each year, much like northern vacationers revisiting their favorite Florida motel or campground.

A great, lumbering beast, *Trichechus manatus* may weigh up to three thousand pounds and measure fifteen feet from head to rounded, flipper-like tail. (Average sizes, though, are closer to twelve hundred pounds and eight to ten feet.) Bulk like this requires fuel, and manatees get it solely in the form of plants, at a rate of sixty to one hundred pounds daily - water lettuce, hyacinth, and other vegetation.

Although it can move at a fair clip when it cruises laterally underwater, the manatee does not do nearly as well when it drifts to and from the surface, which it must do to breathe. As a result, lots of manatees get run over by boats, which seems to kill more of them than anything else. The noise of a boat motor carries a surprisingly long distance when you are underwater, and manatees, which have come to know what this means, have been seen visibly cringing when they hear such sounds. Those who don't succumb can live as long as eighty years.

Jacques Cousteau and his divers visited Blue Spring when it and the Indian mound surrounding it were privately owned back in the late 1960s. The documentary that followed helped galvanize support for the public purchase of the land here, one of the favorite winter habitats of the West Indian manatee in all of Florida.

There are people who complain about too many laws, and I am sometimes among them. But before the docile manatee was protected, animals had been found with pitchforks embedded in their backs, initials carved into their bodies, and bullet holes in their blubber. At Blue Spring, Cousteau found manatees with rope burns, where harnesses had been attached by brave adventurers who rode them for sport. Even today, with criminal penalties for harassment and "no wake" zones, every manatee I have ever seen has a grid of prop scars on its back. It is how researchers have come to identify one from the other, to distinguish Brutus from Phyllis, Lucille from Lenny.

I have seen manatees underwater, have had them actually approach me when I've been snorkeling, as some manatees - like people - are simply curious. We have hung there in the clear water, briefly studying each other, and I have been struck with how human the animal's eyes seem, each a pensive pool of brown recessed inside a starburst of skin wrinkles. It is almost

Page 82

as if there is a person inside all that insulation. Perhaps the animal thinks likewise of me, that there may be a manatee in there somewhere, behind the blue eyes, underneath all that neoprene and rubber.

Billy Bartram was among the first to ever describe Blue; he visited here twice, the first time with his father in 1765, and the second time on his solitary journey up the St. Johns in 1774. Fascinated as he was by springs, Bartram described it as *diaphanous*, in which "entire tribes" of fish and alligators are easily seen from the surface. "They appear as plain as though lying on a table before your eyes," he wrote, "although [they are] many feet deep in the water."

As for the springhead, "it boils up with great force, forming immediately a vast circular basin, capacious enough for several shallows to ride in and runs with rapidity into the river three or four hundred yards distance." There are other springs in the St. Johns Basin that blowout more water than Blue, but no large ones that do so this close to the river channel itself.

The romantic poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge never laid eyes on the river and its springs. But he read Bartram's *Travels* before toking on his opium pipe. And literary historians believe it was Billy's

engaging descriptions of the springs that inspired *Kubla Khan*:

In Xanadu did Kubla Kahn
A stately pleasure-dome decree
Where Alph, the sacred river, ran
Through caverns measureless of man
Down to a sunless sea ...
A mighty fountain momentarily was forced:
Amid whose swift half-intermitted burst
Huge fragments vaulted like rebounding hail,
Or chaffy grain beneath the thresher's flail.

Coleridge was likely inspired by Bartram's specific description of Salt Springs, upcoming in the Ocala National Forest; but there's no escaping the naturalist's fascination with all the springs of the river, where tiny chunks of limestone rebound in the crystal upwelling like hail.

By my arrival, the warmer river waters of May have coaxed the manatees out of the spring, and its run today is filled with snorkelers, entire tribes of them, their skin goose-fleshed and puckered, here among the mullet and bass, gar and tilapia. I watch this panorama from a boardwalk at the top of

Page 83

the earthen basin encircling the boil, see a deep eternal blue pulse from down inside, shimmering with the electricity of the earth itself.

Along with a dive buddy, I gear up with scuba tanks and, after a strenuous slosh against the strong upstream current of the run, fin out from the shallow bottom to where the water seems actually to boil, over the gaping diaphanous maw. Just below the surface, I navigate through the forks of two immense fallen trees, giant Y's wedged against each other. Below me, the hole plunges sharply and then angles gradually back into the limestone, for at least 120 feet.

Now that I am inside it, the bottom of the spring doesn't seem as much blue as it does stark black. I fin down, pushing against an upwelling of ether, some seventy-seven million gallons of distilled water that pours out of the upper aquifer daily, from inside unseen labyrinths of limestone and dolomite. The cool current presses against my mask into my face, and countless bits of shell and sand and fossils swirl around me.

I inhale deeply from my regulator, exhaling gradually in a loud rush of bubbly air. In the few scant seconds between my own respirations, I listen for the voice of the spring in its own exhale from the deep earth. As I do so, I imagine I can hear something that sounds like a freight train roaring. But it is more likely the whoosh of water simply surging into and around my body.

I am sinking into the cellar of Florida, descending past ledges protruding from the rock, walls sculpted like gentle, vertical waves by a prehistoric water flow. I bump into one ledge, and as I push off it with my hand, I feel the softness of it, more marly clay than hard rock. The force of the spring, bottlenecked inside these narrow walls, is compressed, too strong to give much refuge to fish. Fresh from its long journey inside the earth, the water emerging directly from the rock is also low in oxygen, not nearly as desirable as the spring run for most critters who staff the great organic food chain.

But there are other constraints, too, those special to us higher mammals. Darkness and pressure and depths underwater can be particularly tricky for those of us used to breathing surface air. And for this reason, there is a sign posted at sixty feet, where the light first disappears, warning divers without special training to go no farther. It reads, "Prevent Your Death," and it is not hyperbole, as men and women without such skills have died here. I have been trained in the precautionary behaviors of

cave diving, so I turn on my underwater light and let its beam pull me downward, tethered by its narrow, dim shaft of illumination. The water I swim against is impressive in its magnitude, cool enough to chill me inside my thin wetsuit. I take my regulator out of my mouth and gulp a small mouthful, swallowing. It is pure, with the taste of innumerable eons of shell fossil and ocean bones, fresh water soaked for centuries in calcium created once by the sea.

Like other springs, Blue is recharged by rainfall seeping down through soils and rocky cracks and crevices upland from here. But the journey is not a straight or easy one, and the delay between the time water falls from the sky and emerges from the limestone vent may be wondrous. Elsewhere along the river, hydrologists have examined spring water to determine age using a carbon 14 process. At Croaker Hole, a dark, river-bottom vent I will later visit just north of Lake George, the water has been trapped in the rock for 3,900 years; at Salt Springs, 7,000 years. Generally, the deeper the vein the water comes out of, the longer it has been in the ground.

Perhaps the rain I taste now once fell when the earliest Native Americans who inhabited the river valley were still alive, even fell on and around them, all of it now a part of the *ibi*, cooling and everlasting.

At 120 feet, the water pressure surging out of the limestone is enormous. Even if the cave entrance here were larger, the force alone would keep me from penetrating any farther. I hold on with both hands to a boulder near the darkest hole and let the pressure coming from it blow my body away and up, suspending my torso in the swirling ether, moving my legs and fins like some unseen puppet master in the rebounding hail.

I am deep inside the diaphanous magic now, my exhaust bubbles becoming part of the upwelling roil of Alph that swells and finally drifts away to the surface. Off it flows, this confluence of spring water and poetry and exhalation, past the tribes of humans and fish, down the spring run to the river and toward the sea.