

**Reclaiming the Everglades:  
South Florida's Natural History, 1884-1934**

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Sapulpa, Okla.  
June 14, 1922.

*Big  
Concerning in  
file*

Mrs. R. D. DeFord,  
Savannah, Tenn.

Dear Sister:

When you left me at Tupelo, you told me to write you about my trip to Florida and I have thought several times since my return home of doing so, but have neglected it.

After we parted at Tupelo, I continued on my journey and arrived at Jacksonville Monday morning at eight o'clock, changing trains there, and arrived at Miami about two o'clock Tuesday morning. After getting a few hours sleep, we got up and went to the office, and after getting breakfast, started out to buy some things that we needed for the camping trip; a rain coat, some puttees and various other things.

We had a hard rain Tuesday morning and it had been raining for several days and we thought the regular Florida summer, rainy season had set in. About two o'clock in the afternoon on Tuesday, the 2nd, we left Miami and drove out to where the dredge is building the road across the Everglades. This road has been completed from Miami a distance of about thirty miles. The big tractor and trailer with our outfit, had already been sent the day before to the dredge, so we camped near the dredge that night in the Everglades.

We were told by different people in Miami that it would be impossible to get across the Everglades, and we were also told that it was full of rattlesnakes and all kinds of reptiles. When we arrived at the tractor near the dredge and were fixing to put up our tents near a little hammock, one of the men called out, "Here's a big snake." Some of them started to kill it, but one of the men in the crowd said, "O! that is just a King Snake. I would not kill him. He's a good fellow to have around." So, he caught the snake in his hands and carried him off about fifty or one hundred steps and turned him loose. We never saw anything more of it. It was a large yellow and red spotted snake and a very pretty one, altho I am not an admirer of snakes whatever their color may be.

Speaking of snakes and what we had been told about the Glades being full of them, this snake that we saw the first night, was the only one that we saw on the entire trip until we got across the State over on the west side, and as soon as we arrived at our temporary camp there, we were greeted by another big King Snake. The friend of the King Snake was not present this time to take him in his arms and save his life, so the boys killed him. On all our trip through the Everglades across the state, and we were out more than a week, I never saw but two snakes and they were both King Snakes. One member of our party said that he killed a small Rattler one day, but I did not see it and we never heard of anyone of the party seeing anyother snakes than these three.

Wednesday morning, May 3rd, we started on our trip with an 8000 pound Topp-Stewart, Four wheel drive tractor, pulling a trailer that had about a 6000 pound load on it, and we made about ten miles that day. We had to dig the tractor and trailer out of the mud two or three times during the day, as we would sometimes strike soft spots and go down so deep that we had to take a shovel and remove all the mud from in front of the wheels and underneath the tractor and then cut poles and put under the front wheels of the tractor to give it something to climb out of the hole on.

We carried with us, three barrels of gasoline, one barrel of oil, one barrel of water, a heavy iron ditcher and a lot of canned goods and supplies, bedding, etc. There were ten of us in the party when we started; Dr. Groom and Mr. Freeland, whom you met on the train, from Bristow, Hugh and myself, Capt. Cook, the secretary of the

company, and his son, Erben, from Miami, Florida, and four hired men, Will Catlow, Mr. Neelly, Hurford Kline and Lester Craine.

Will Catlow is a University student who is working for our company now, but is preparing to go back to the University in the fall. He is a pretty good engineer and a very handy man at any kind of work.

Mr. Neelly was formerly an Oklahoma cattleman and is said to have lost about \$50,000 when the slump in cattle happened a few years ago. He is now at Miami, working for our company. He is a very useful man, very intelligent, and besides doing about as much of the general work as any of them, does the cooking for the outfit, and it is no small job to cook three times a day for ten hungry men, and have to cook everything in one frying pan.

Hurford Kline, a young man who lives at Miami, drove the tractor most of the time. Lester Craine, was a young fellow from North Carolina, uneducated, illiterate, good natured and a hard worker. Taken in all, the crew of men are all good workers, good natured and willing at any time to do whatever comes to hand, and are exceedingly loyal and seem to take as much interest in the company as if it belonged to them.

Thursday morning, May 4th, Will Catlow started back to Miami on foot to bring the boat around to the West side to take us back to Miami, as we expected to leave the tractor over on the west side. He left the Ford car at the dredge, so he only had to walk about ten miles, and then he had a car to ride into Miami.

Thursday morning we broke camp and had a little more trouble and worse ground to travel over than we had the day before. At noon, we cooked our dinner by the roadside, where we found a well about two feet deep that supplied us with plenty of fresh water. This well had been dug sometime before by some of our men who passed through there on foot. We mired down before dinner and the water cooler fell off the trailer and broke. After dinner, we put in a full evening's work, and late in the afternoon, mired down again, so we stopped right there where we had mired down and pitched our camp for the night. We had made about eight miles that day after a hard day's work.

A Seminole Indian, named Captain Tony, came to our camp late that evening. He had a camp about a mile from where we were. We gave him something to eat, and he stayed around our camp for about an hour. He examined the tractor very minutely, went all around it and felt of the wheels and different parts of it. He called it the "White man's Canoe." He said he had a canoe up at his camp, but he could not get it out, as there was not water there now. He came back to our camp early the next morning and had twenty eggs he wanted to sell us. We gave him a dollar for his eggs and also gave him his breakfast and got him to promise to come to our camp over on the West Side on Sunday.

Friday morning, May 5th, we started out and had soft going from the very first. The tractor would get almost buried in the mud and we would have to dig it out and cut poles for it to climb out of the hole and in a little while, it would be down again. We made about a mile before dinner.

Mr. Freeland dug a well in the edge of a little hammock and we cooked and ate dinner there. We named the place, "Camp Freeland" and tacked up a marker made out of a part of the broken water cooler with "Camp Freeland" carved on it.

In the afternoon, we built a track for the tractor, cutting small cypress poles, putting them in front of the wheels, and when they had passed over, moving the poles around to the front for them to pass over again. It was slow traveling but it was easier than digging out so often. By this means, we kept the tractor on top of the ground.

Just before sundown, a heavy rain and thunder storm came up just as we got mired down. We hurriedly pulled a tent cover off the trailer and held it over us until the rain was over. Then we pitched our camp in a small hammock near by where we found some pine, the first pine trees we had seen. We found some dead pine trees and had a great bonfire where we cooked our supper and dried ourselves out. Freeland found a deer's bed in the edge of the hammock, but the deer was nowhere to be seen.

Saturday morning, May 6th, we started out again building track as before and had not gone more than a mile or two and had just gotten across the soft ground into the scrub cypress where the tractor was keeping on top of the ground and running over small cypress and bending them down, when we discovered the king bolt was broken. As we were about fifty miles from anywhere and no way to get repairs or parts to fix the tractor; we had to leave it there.

We cooked and ate our noonday meal there at the tractor and after eating, walked on ahead about half a mile and came to an Indian camp, but the Indians were not at home. So we had a good comfortable place to stay, a well of good water, about two feet deep, and shelter from the rain; so we took possession of the camp and stayed there Saturday afternoon and night.

We had to transfer our baggage, food and supplies over to the Indian camp, a distance of about one-half mile, which was rather a warm job, as it took quite a number of trips to carry the things over. We stayed at the Indian Camp Saturday night and on Sunday, continued our journey over to the West coast where we had a temporary camp, located on Alligator Bay. We learned afterwards that the Indian camp we occupied belonged to Charlie Jumper, and while Charlie's belongings, bedding, and other household goods, including an old fashioned hand sewing machine, were left there at the camp, Charlie and his family did not return during our stay; tho I understand that is the custom of these Seminole Indians to visit around from place to place and sometimes be gone for several weeks. He had a very comfortable camp, consisting of a thatched roof on poles with no ~~shelter~~ <sup>poles</sup> on the side walls, everything being open from the ground up to the roof.

A large bed was built in the camp, standing on stout posts about eighteen inches high, and made of pine logs that were split half into with the flat sides turned up, so it made a fairly, smooth, even and comfortable bed.

We heard a wild cat near the camp Saturday night at Charlie Jumper's place, but by mutual agreement, we did not disturb him and he did not disturb us. There are some Panthers in that part of the country also, but we did not make the acquaintance of any; in fact, had not lost any and were not looking for them.

When we got to our temporary camp on the West coast, Sunday, we found that it had been visited by a thief who had stolen part of the provisions that had been brought into the camp from the West side a week or two before we got there; but on investigation, we were convinced that it was some animal and not a human being who had taken advantage of our absence to help himself to the provisions.

Sunday afternoon, we rested and took a bath and washed our clothes, as we had not had a chance to have any laundry work done since we left Miami. As I did not have but one shirt, I had to go with out while mine was drying.

Captain Tony came to our camp Sunday afternoon and stayed with us Sunday night. He left camp the next morning before daylight with his rifle and returned about nine o'clock with a fine, fat, young deer and a big fat wild turkey on his back. We had just about run out of meat and you may guess that he was a welcome visitor.

Monday afternoon, he announced that he was going back to

the Big Cypress to hunt alligators. He returned in about three hours with three alligator skins, a very large terrapin and another wild turkey. He said he saw six turkeys and ~~a wild~~ deer besides the ones he killed.

Hugh and Erben Cook went out Monday to do some surveying and did not return until after dark. As we had expected that Will Catlow would arrive at camp on the West side by the time we got over there, and as he did not show up Sunday or Monday, we became uneasy about him, and Tuesday morning we started Hugh, Erben and Capt. Tony over to the Bay to get a small boat that is propelled by poles, to go up to the Watson Place where we have a large two-story ten room house, which is the only house on this tract of land, with instructions that if Catlow had not arrived at the Watson Place by the time they got there, they should go on to Chokoloskee, fifteen miles north of the Watson Place, and get a boat to take us around the south end of the state back to Miami, and also to find out what had become of Catlow. It is twelve miles by water from our camp up to the Watson Place. Just before noon, the boys came back, accompanied by Catlow. His boat had become disabled down near Florida City, and he had to leave it and go back to Miami and get another boat, which caused his delay.

After eating our lunch, we started down to the Bay and had to carry a lot of baggage with us, a distance of about two miles across soft, marshy, muck land and through alligator holes to get down to the Bay where we could take the boat up to the Watson Place.

I carried an officer's trunk which, with its contents, weighed about sixty pounds, for about a mile through the soft ground. When I started with it, the boys said I would lay it down within an hundred yards, but there were other things to carry, so I felt like I wanted to do my part. It was a hot afternoon and hard work walking through soft mud and Saw Grass.

I will enclose some pictures that were taken while we were on this trip.

We arrived at the Watson Place about sundown and spent the night there and left early Wednesday morning in a small motor boat about as large as the motor boat that carries the mail from Savannah to Pittsburgh. We were on the water all day and traveled about eighty or ninety miles. We had a number of hard rainstorms and some wind and rough water. Got rained on several times, but the sun would come out and dry us. We did not reach our destination until about an hour after dark and got hung upon a reef once but were not on it long when we got off and started on our way again. We were out of sight of land for about three or four hours in the afternoon and the waves would sometimes dash over our little boat and get us wet, but the boat seemed to be strong and safe.

We arrived at Islamorada, an island at the south end of the mainland, but had difficulty in finding anybody or finding anything to eat. Finally we found a little store about a mile north of where we had landed and got some salmon and sardines and crackers and ate our supper. After supper, I lay down in the little waiting room of the railroad station and went to sleep on the floor, as I saw no prospect of getting a bed to sleep in that night. However, Erben Cook and one or two of the other boys were out scouting around on the island and they came back about midnight and woke me up saying they had found a place that would take care of me and Mr. Freeland that night and also where we could get some gasoline for the boat, as we had been out of gasoline when we arrived at Islamorada.

Mr. Freeland and I went about one-half mile and spent the night at a lovely place right at the water's edge facing the Atlantic Ocean. We had a good bed to sleep in and a good nice sea breeze which made it very delightful.

The next morning just after sun up, a shoal of sharks seemed to have gotten too far inland with the rising tide and one of them about ten feet long was floundering around in shallow water near the shore, but he managed to get back into deep water and disappeared.

We had to stay on the island until one o'clock <sup>that</sup> ~~the next~~ day before a train came along that we could board for Miami. Hugh, Dr. Groom, Capt. Cook, Erben and another boy, after getting gasoline about midnight Wednesday night, proceeded by boat, on up the east coast and arrived at Miami before we did. They stopped at Florida City and towed the boat that Catlow had left there that was broken down.

We arrived at Miami about 4 o'clock Thursday, May 11th, and Freeland received a wire on his arrival, telling him about a new well that was brought in during his absence that was making 25,000 or 30,000 barrels of oil per day. It has been producing now for more than a month, and is still making 7,000 or 8,000 barrels per day.

We stayed at Miami until Sunday morning, when Freeland, Dr. Groom, Hugh and Erben took my car and started for Orlando up in the central part of the state, about 250 miles north of Miami. I stayed over to attend to some business matters and left Miami on Tuesday night May 16th, and they joined me on the train at New Smyrna, about 100 miles south of Jacksonville. We spent one-half day Thursday in Jacksonville and left there early Thursday night and arrived at home, Saturday afternoon at two o'clock.

On our trip across the Glades, we got sun burned until our necks and faces peeled off. We got bitten by millions of chiggers and when we got over on the west coast, we found millions of mosquitoes. But with all of the inconveniences, we had a good trip and when we got back to Miami, I found that I had gained two pounds and some members of the party had gained five pounds on the trip.

Groom and Freeland were very highly pleased with what they saw and said they would accept my proposition to buy one-half of my interest, but we have not closed anything definitely yet.

I am going to make several copies of this letter and will send to the other members of the family who would probably like to read an account of a trip across the Everglades, the first that was ever made by a tractor or in fact, by any kind of a conveyance except a small car that was especially built for the trip.

Hoping that you are all well, and with love to all the folks, I am

Affectionately your brother,

McD:S  
ENC.