

The Kissimmee Valley: An Appreciation

By Ruby Jane Hancock*

Even at the turn of the century there was still a geographical frontier in the United States, uncharted and for the most part unchallenged. An unwilling and inhospitable wilderness, pristine and primeval. To most outside of it, it was practically impenetrable – The KISSIMMEE RIVER VALLEY – the lower valley just north of the big Lake Okeechobee (*Okee*, water; *chobee*, big, in Seminole language).

It was not a valley in the usual sense, for in south-central Florida there are no mountains, but to the west of the valley there were pure white sand hills thrown up eons ago from the bottom of the sea. When one left them behind, out before him was a broad depression, flat, green, and watery. This trough was shallow, treacherous, and unpredictable, the natural watershed for the southern half of the Florida peninsula. It was dominated by a crazy winding and wandering river, often multichanneled with swift currents as it flowed toward the big lake, its water the color of strong tea from the many roots and wild growth it had struggled through, natural filters that kept the water fresh and pure in spite of its color.

The river began in central Florida at the Blue Cypress Swamp and ended in the Gulf of Mexico where the Caloosahatchee River took it from the southwest rim of the lake. Here at Blue Cypress there is a “hump” in the peninsula’s topography; the Kissimmee River – a “drain” river – flowed southward, draining this part of it, the northern part of the peninsula being drained by way of the St. Johns River which, flows northward as does the Nile, and empties into the Atlantic Ocean just off of Jacksonville.

North of this “divide,” civilization and development had flourished at

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the turn of the century in comparison to that of the southern half of the state. In fact, at that point in time if one perchanced to wander into the Kissimmee River Valley, he would have found a "frontier" in the ultimate sense of the word — the last in the whole United States (before Alaska) — well after the "West was won."

This river valley fed by the way of the big lake the mystical mysterious fastness of the Florida Everglades, a unique geographical phenomenon unlike anything anywhere else in the world. Here was a strange land that, once penetrated and conquered, would lose its proud hostility and would become abasely docile, succumbing to the impact of the twentieth century. (It did happen, and so rapidly that there were no lusty bards and few others to note the transition.)

In the time of its sparse human habitation, none gave much thought that there should be any social organization of any consequence; it was pretty much each for himself, at least, any group for itself. They were content that they had escaped from the outside world to a land where nature still dominated: no dikes, no fences, no roads, no land titles, and no imminent danger of real estate developers. Here they were, the Seminoles, the military deserters, a few others who had dared to invade the hostile region because of dire personal reasons, and they lived together at the dictates of the valley instead of trying to impose their will on it. Here they found nature's bounties to take care of their needs: climate, food easily obtained from the river and the land; plenty of saplings to provide forked props for their crude shelters covered with palm fans from the ubiquitous sabal palms — called by them "cabbage palms." And there was nobody who challenged their right to live as they pleased as long as they did not violate the simple code of not interfering with anybody else's freedom of will.

In spite of its domination by the sun, the wind, and the water, the valley did offer a variety in its topography. There was the flat sandy "pra'ry country," much of it covered with yellow-tinged palmettoes revealing its lack of nutrients; dotted here and there were small pines growing close together, descriptively called "pine islands"; and where the soil was alluvial there were cypress heads and baygalls; then, where the palmettoes grew tall and were rich green in color, were stands of the towering majestic Caribbean pines, the finest source of virgin lumber. Interspersed were the circumscribed areas of high rich ground, the hammocks where oak trees were draped with beards of Spanish moss as they stood deep in luxuriant leaf mold; everywhere were the cabbage palms (sabal) which grew abundantly and took over old Indian burns in the

clearings of switch grass like tree tribes. These were called “cabbage woods.” The heart of the young palms was cut and peeled down to the tender white succulent part, sliced and boiled with sidemeat, not taking too long to be tender morsels, better than boiled cabbage. Years later these would be in demand by the finest hotels and restaurants in the north that catered to sophisticated palates and served as “hearts of palm salad” and as garnishes.

And there were the great marshes: some were sinkholes of acres of a sedge known as sawgrass that could cut one to pieces if he tried to go through them; others were islands of lush grasses that fattened the herders’ long-legged, reddish native steers (descendants of the Spanish cattle left to roam over the region four hundred years ago) that they drove in the spring to a rude port far down on the west coast of Florida just below Whiskey Creek, Punta Rassa, where dirty boats loaded them to sell in Cuban and other Latin ports.

The herders were paid in Spanish gold pieces. Having little to spend them on, when they returned home they threw these coarse sacks of coins up under the high wooden bedsteads where they slept with their wives. It is well to mention that locks to the valley houses were unheard of, but this gold was useless as tender in their primitive economy. Years later it was not uncommon to find holes dug around the early settlers’ domains where people searched in hopes of finding buried gold, and the metal did become in many instances the capital for banks and other enterprises for the descendants of these early herders.

But these marshes and the margins of the river with their luxuriant growth of maiden cane, cattails, willows, elders, and myriad weeds that liked damp ground attracted innumerable birds, ducks, frogs, and the omnipresent little brown rabbits and other rodents where snarling bobcats came frequently on the prowl to dine sumptuously on them.

As the serpentine river wound its way through the valley, its margins, flat for the most part, were determined by the rainfall, and along its way this phenomenon created lakes, dead rivers, creeks, lagoons, and ponds; in droughts they either dried up or became low in water level, but during the rains they swelled until sometimes the entire region seemed to be more water than land.

Much of the marshland was covered with the sedge, sawgrass – aptly named, being swordlike – and at night in the moonlight the moonvines draped like huge blankets over the growth, especially the apple custard trees, made eerie contours and a ghostly sight. The vines’ blooms were large white trumpets that opened only at night, thus the name of the vines.

This wild river flowed on to cut concavely for a few miles now and then making a single strong current channel that formed “bluffs,” nothing to compare with the Mississippi’s, but high enough that the first settlers chose them to settle on and built their palmetto shacks there, then later sturdier houses beneath the giant moss-draped oaks, the majestic pines, and the ever present cabbage trees. But the unpredictable river flowed on to its unrestrained delta and emptied into the giant lake. If one followed the primitive river to its delta, there he would have found no iota of human habitation where one would feel that he was the only human being in the whole wide world.

Along this unruly stream it might seem to be a flat monotonous silent part of the world, but actually there were many noises: the calls and screams of the birds, both waterfowl and birds of the air; the ominous bellows of the alligators, especially at mating time; the barking of the raccoons and the otters; the angry growls of the bobcats; the grunts of the roly-poly black bears; the high-pitched cry of the lithe tawny green-eyed panthers; and, of course, the chorale of the frogs and the chirps and buzzings of the insects.

It was a paradise for the waterfowl, “pond birds” the earliest settlers called them. Nowhere outside of Egypt did the ibis live in such great numbers: the solid white graceful birds, the glossies (solid black), and the white ones with blacktipped wings. These often perched in the tip-tops of young trees, balancing with the wind, then they would soar at eventide with their flocks rising suddenly in a muted rustle and fly off in a V formation toward a blazing setting sun to spend the night wherever ibises do – the sight of them was unforgettable!

And there were the egrets perched lightly on the myrtles and the willows like tree ornaments – the snowies and the larger and plainer ones with their curling tails. There is nothing uglier than a baby egret, but nothing lovelier than a mature one with its snow-white fluffy feathers (a prize for the stylish hats at the turn of the century until the Audubon Society *et al* decried the poachers trafficking in these feathers). Then everywhere, it seemed, in this watery green world was a multitude of cranes, herons and waterfowl of all colors and sizes. Here they stood on one of their long wading legs, watchful and silent; however, at the slightest movement of a small frog or crustacean in the ooze, on two legs they pounced and their sharp beaks plunged accurately, then they gulped their prey. The shiny purple gallinule with its yellow legs shared their marshy domain as did the dun-colored speckled funny limpkin, a bittern, with its eyes high in its head and long legs set back beneath its swaggering body, a scold of a bird, a busybody that wailed at the slightest movement. And

above them was the handsome Everglades kite (now extinct), flying in its swallow-tailed dark feathers and diving down with panache and a shriek for its particular food, the Everglades snail, (when it disappeared, so did the kite). Across the way in an oozy marsh would be a flock that looked like a pink cloud had fallen from the sky, the exquisitely pink spoonbills, only their scooping broad bills detracting from their perfection as the most beautiful bird on earth. Near a slough where a stand of cypresses stood would be a semicircle of large dingy birds with rusty topknots which gave them the name among the natives of "ironheads." There they stood silently like praying deacons, but their eyes were riveted on the small fish, frogs and crustaceans in the dark mud. These ungainly birds belonged to the stork family, the only true stork in the western hemisphere. But the strangest of these "pond birds" was the anhinga, or "snake bird." Somehow the Creator forgot it in the process of evolution – it has no oil in its feather glands, no fluid in its eyes, and it resembles a snake with its long slender black crooked neck above the water when it swims. Onland it spreads out its wide dark wings on elder bushes like a Seminole's wash to dry in the sun. Also these waterways abounded with ducks: teals, wood ducks, mallards (called "greenheads"), and the plainer Florida duck, which are quite good if properly cooked, and, of course, the flocks of comical coots, diving and squawking. And out on the prairie it was not uncommon to come upon a family of tall bluish-gunmetal sandhill cranes, always in pairs, but if there was a young one, it was along, too. Startled, they would fly off together sounding as if a chain were rattling.

Birds! Birds! Too numerous to name them all – mockingbirds, bluejays, cardinals, kingfishers, catbirds, "rice birds" (redwinged blackbirds), crows and grackles, warblers of every description including the exquisite painted buntings, and the bullbats (nighthawks) that cried incessantly "chuck-wills's-widow" when night fell. And the woodpeckers! The common flickers, speckled and redheaded, the stately crested pileated woodpeckers, and at the turn of the century before human beings took over the valley, the now all-but-extinct ivory bills were still around. Then there were the owls: great hoot owls, big cross-eyed birds the settlers said presaged a death in the family when one perched near a household; and the smaller and more sociable screech owl that, too, augured bad luck unless one turned his shoe upside down at their cries. The small burrowing owls that lived in deep holes in the prairies into which horses often stumbled and sometimes broke a leg, but this little owl was affectionately called "the 'howdy' owl" because it liked to sit on high stumps or broken trees and bowed at passersby. Hawks, too! Plain chicken hawks, red-shouldered and red-tailed ones, and the peregrine falcons known in the

valley not by that fancy name but as “duck hawks.” Certainly, one must mention the vultures: the much maligned black buzzard, a big ungainly bird that flaps its wings and does not soar or sail gracefully as does its cousin, the turkey buzzard; however, both are valuable to the valley as scavengers; with their keen eyesight they can see the carrion while flying high above the ground – the black vulture like the fish crow is an enemy of the herons and ibises raiding their nests. Then there is Audubon’s *caracara* commonly known as the Mexican eagle, a large handsome bird with buff and lightcolored feathers and a regal white head, actually a large hawk, but because it, too, is a scavenger, it is generally classed by those who do not know as a vulture; the Kissimmee River Valley is the only region east of the Mississippi River where it is found in great numbers.

Nobody had to starve in this unique wilderness. Game birds were abundant: quail that sent echoes all through the valley with their “bob-white” calls; the doves, many preferred them for their dark meat, it being a New Year’s tradition to serve huge dove pies; wild turkeys strutted in the hammocks; small wild chickens abounded on the prairie country; and the Indians often threw in a limpkin in their sofkee pots. The river and its tributaries teemed with fish: the basses, the big black-mouthed ones all fishermen prized; the perches, bream and croppies. All through the valley the graceful white-tailed deer roamed and grazed, so plentiful for venison, and not then an endangered species.

And there were the bears, the most prized animal to the Seminoles, who used every part of them for food and raiment, grease for cooking and to groom their bodies and hair, and bear skins for dress; wild boars, raccoons, opossums, squirrels, all sorts of turtles (the big soft-shelled ones were a mainstay of the Seminole’s sofkee); alligators, their tails a delicacy, and some dared to eat the meat of the great serpents, the diamondback rattlesnakes. Of course, there was beef dried into jerky from the herders’ hardy stocks that had been rounded up from the stray reddish long-legged and long-horned cattle that had been left by the Spaniards centuries ago. With so much natural pasturage, these animals had multiplied in such great numbers that they later became the generative animals for the region’s thriving cattle industry.

Water, water everywhere! A paradise for the many species of frogs: tiny green damp ones that invaded the households, then going to sleep and their tiny dried carcasses to be thrown out the next morning. From the ponds and lagoons came a chorale of these creatures as if a maestro had given the downbeat; small speckled ones that chirped soprano and tenor, others that barked and grunted contralto with the jumbo bullfrogs croaking

a loud bass, and as if an obbligato to this pond chorus, the bullbats nestled on the ground or in young cabbage palms monotonously cried "chuck-will's-widow."

Insects, too: moths, butterflies, flying roaches, many varieties of ants, mosquitoes, it seemed that anything that crawled or flew was there. The mosquitoes buzzed and bit but were not disease bearing. This was not an unhealthful malarial region but one where the water was pure and free-flowing and naturally filtered.

Snakes and snakes! The largest serpent in the United States, the diamondback rattler; an aggressive reptile, it could swim and climb trees; preferred high ground where the palmettoes were thickest, crawled in the spring and copulated en masse, and its bite deadly, destroying the nervous system of a human being in a short time. And there was the small ground rattler or pygmy rattler, a hog-nosed viper that often crawled into houses; its bite would kill a dog or a young child and make a grown-up suffer much pain, a nuisance snake. More deadly than the rattlers were the cotton-mouth moccasins whose bite rotted the flesh. They liked to lie in slimy piles on the receding margins of water where dead fish were plentiful and, with their great white-lined mouths agape, snatched the dying fish. But the deadliest of them all was the pretty little coral snake whose bite was equal to that of the cobra. It had another pretty harmless imitator, a colorful little ringed grass snake that oftentimes lured children not knowing the difference. However, there were many snakes friendly to man: the ubiquitous black snake, which ate other snakes and rattlers and took to gopher holes (the homes of the big crusty land tortoises) when they crawled in their territory; the bright blue indigo snakes and the bull snakes (king snake), to mention two others friendly to man. One of the strangest snakes in the world was the water snake that clung upside down to the growth that stood in water, and had eyes in its head where it could see up. There were slender light-colored serpents that, like the rattlers, moccasins, and coral snakes, were not killed by the Indians but were avoided, and it was their advice that it was best just to leave all snakes alone when one encountered them.

Here was an Eden where diverse souls lived in harmony and peace with each other as well with its flora and fauna. Even the lithe tawny panthers emerged now and then from the recesses of the cypress heads to kill a deer within sight of a human being.

No doctor had penetrated the valley carrying his little black bag; the whites depended on a "healing woman" who was called as a midwife if a difficult birth occurred, which was seldom; the Indians had their medicine man; the nomadic whites never learned to need any healer. There was no

preacher to tell them they were in perdition of their souls; and no teacher to make them aware of educational and social adjustments. They lived and let live.

There were the Seminoles General Zachary Taylor thought he had chased into oblivion; and the soldier deserters he had left behind, some too trifling for good soldiering but others who saw the opportunity to possess land and felt that the Mexican War was none of the United States' business. And others dared to penetrate the fastness of the valley where they could lose their identities – at the present time there are those accepting names with no records of them beyond the valley. Many of these obliterated their past and became prosperous herders, citrus growers, and officials of the new county carved when the legislature in Tallahassee realized the state's sources of revenue could be enhanced by such moves.

As all isolated societies, these unrelated settlers had lived and shared their insulated world in common: there were those who had gathered their herds of cattle, built sturdy square pioneer houses and welcomed the little side-wheeler on its unpredictable journey from Kissimmee down the meandering river – one became an entrepreneur and built a log structure for his store, trading deer skins, raccoon and alligator hides for barrels of flour, sugar, coffee, and other commodities the little riverboat could bring.

These herders became the nucleus of a firmer social organization in the region. Although not converted themselves, they did not resist the Methodist and Baptist missionaries who came after Flagler's railroad spur penetrated their world – church missions and small schools for their children were welcomed. But there were other whites with pure Anglo-Saxon names, probably descendants of military deserters either from Taylor or who might have been from General Oglethorpe's motley band. These "river rats," as they were called by the more respectable settlers, were impervious to any civilizing efforts, even the missionaries left them up to the Lord. But the third group, the Seminoles, lived in peace with their neighbors – although they, like the more prosperous herders, looked down on the roving band of whites. But they, too, interrelated to their clans the religious practices, beliefs, and folkways of their people. Totemistic, this showed in their work, worship, and amusements. In this world where they had been cruelly driven, they found existence convenient, minding their own culture and not in the least perturbed that a new century for the world had begun.

Whiskey was essential to these valley people. It was their medicine and anodyne when they needed something beyond their folk remedies. There were those who had fled Georgia who knew how to distill it. They went to the outside world on the little riverboat and bought copper

cookers, distilling equipment, and stoneware jugs, set themselves up in business in the palmettoes, and had no fears where there were no revenueurs to descend on their operations. There were plenty of lighter knots to keep the kettles boiling furiously as whiskey mash is supposed to cook. Oak chips had to be substituted for hickory chips used back in Georgia, and by the time the liquid was poured into the jugs it was a two-hundred-proof concoction — snake bites and labor pains yielded to its potency. Somebody among the whiskey makers evidently was from Louisiana, for it was called “Packin’ ham.” These were moonshiners but not bootleggers, a term they were not to hear until sometime after J. Andrew Volstead went to Congress and passed his act in 1919.

Outside of a shooting now and then, usually for good reasons, there was no crime of consequence in this isolated valley, and no formal legal justice was necessary. If one transgressed the unwritten code of mores and manners, he was quickly dispatched to the bottom of the river and forgotten. Verbal agreements were honored but not over handshakes, a custom not yet practiced by these independent folk, a “yep” or a “no” was sufficient, and if reneged, the fellow was treated as a pariah. Men were much like desert chieftans who had a peculiar comradeship at their cowcamps and on the long drovin’s to Punta Rassa; they spent much time away from their homes and families. They were men of hearty appetites, good digestions, and sexual prowess but in general were faithful to their wives. They sat straight in their saddles, cracking their long hide whips, shooting their guns accurately, and could hold the strong whiskey they drank. But there were times when they left the woods and gathered their clans for barbeques, fish fries, and frolics, at the latter not missing a figure when the caller announced it.

Other riverboats began to ply the river and each trip brought more outsiders, but they still were those who appreciated the lack of inquisitiveness of those already in the valley, and they did not offer any information about themselves. The tenor of the valley folk was to accept them as long as they did not transgress the simple rules of the region. At the time, there was room for everybody.

And there was communal concern for everyone when the hurricanes blew in, and for the river rats, too, whose flimsy palmetto shacks were flattened when they returned to them. Although wet and looking much like their nickname, they were safe, having taken refuge on the high ground in the dense hammocks. They soon dried themselves by an open fire, not even surveying their flattened shacks. They set about cooking food on the same fire and with bare hands scooped fish from the river’s fresh ponds from beneath the pickerel weeds and duck weeds, cut young

cabbage trees to strip for their “swamp cabbage” and munched on the ripe guavas littered on the ground (a fruit richer in vitamin C than even the wild sour oranges and lemons and the pawpaws – the oranges and lemons growing from seeds the Spanish had brought). Boisterously they ate and talked loudly, mostly in monosyllables, and had a jolly time selecting cast-off clothing brought to them from the prosperous herders’ households.

The Indians, too, had survived, huddling on the high platforms of their sturdy chickees, they had managed to save their precious fire, and gathered fresh wood for it that they placed under the big sofkee pot in the shape of a swastika, a good luck symbol old as time. Soon the braves were off on a great hunt leaving their women, children, and shamans behind to the endless chores of their village life.

The herders, too, had come through pretty well unscathed. Their houses were crude pioneer dwellings but were built of heart pine and handpegged with wooden nails. A few drowned chickens and a flooded garden was about all of the damage, and soon hens would be setting again and gardens replanted to grow without much attention in the rich soil and plenty of sunshine. Besides, it was guava jelly time with all of the smelly fruit on the ground that would become deliciously fragrant as jelly.

In most of the households a new baby was on its way, but the men had to leave their wives to manage as best they could (most of them did very well), going to their camps in the woods, for there would be many of their cattle marooned on the islands in the river – although the beasts could swim, most would stay on them dumbly to starve until they could be driven off. New calves would have to be rounded up and branded. The *echoluccos* (Seminole, *echo* for deer, *lucco* for big), small but quick delicate-looking cow ponies, descendants, too, of the Spanish horses, would also have to be rounded up and the wranglers’ job among the cow pokes was to break them into fast cutting animals for the big spring drovin’.

When the river’s waters began to recede and the myriad birds sang or made their usual sounds again, when the animals again came out of their lairs to prowl and hunt, and when the deer, cattle, and horses grazed peacefully on the lush grassy meadows, the big howling ‘cane with its deluge of rain was forgotten. The men returned from their cow camps and the big communal cowpens now were empty. They greeted their wives with little ceremony but smiled at the wail of a new-born and were glad to hang up their guns for awhile and store their branding irons in the lean-tos of their houses. There came an expectant glow on all of the faces, even on the immobile expressions of the Seminole, for any day now there would

come the most welcomed noise in the valley – the toot of the riverboat coming around the bend.

At the present time there are no riverboats coming down the once wild and wandering river, but raw sewage is flowing down a huge ditch that drains it from all the development in Central Florida. The river has been “straightened” by engineers who knew how to do it. The “braids” are no longer there, nor are the undisciplined margins and the natural watersheds which have been blocked by more of man’s engineering. Most of the lush marshes where the myriad birds, turtles, alligators, and frogs reigned are gone, lost forever. The pioneer cowman has been replaced by the graduate of an agricultural school rancher who fences his land and keeps careful records on his herd and pays a veterinarian a monthly stipend to keep the animals free of disease, to be sold at auction pens brought in by truck and hauled away in great trucks of the packing houses.

Big landholding companies bought up the land cheaply and sold it dearly. The developer has made subdivisions, well ditched and dyked, with ultra-modern homes built on them.

The water level of the huge but shallow Lake Okeechobee, its drain which once fed the River of Grass – the lifeblood of the unique Everglades – is now artificially controlled, and not as well by man as it had been by Nature. Great fires burn the rich peat created by centuries of matted vegetation and droughts are far more to dread than floods. And the water of the big lake that once was so pure it could be drunk without treatment is now polluted, and the southern tip of Florida that depends on it for its water supply worries about it and the fact that the water table could become so low that salt water will seep in – in some places it has already – and deprive them of fresh water.

The flora and fauna, formerly so rich and interesting, have been affected. The bears are decimated; the panther is gone; and many of the birds are extinct such as the handsome Everglades kite, the ivory-billed woodpecker, and only a few of the stunningly beautiful roseate spoonbills are left, as well as the majestic bald eagle in spite of the efforts of the Audubon Society and their supporters.

When the first commercial fishermen descended on the region of the big lake (Booth Fisheries of Chicago was one who came in with a million-dollar-a-year business, besides other fisheries), they were welcomed because there were too many fish in the lake. Silurids were shipped to northern cities by the hundreds of barrels and the industry brought the first ice plant into the region. The bad blood that later developed with the commercial fishermen and the sports fishermen had no reason for this

argument then. But now the sports fishermen, who in the main won it, say that they have to go farther and farther and to deeper water to catch the famous big-mouth bass and the perches.

But Florida just north of the once strange and beautiful valley and the big lake is the entertainment capital of the land (the once golden lower East coast has been tarnished by this fact)! And there are sprawling expensive energy-consuming houses in the carefully laid-out developments, but these do not stand to the fury of the hurricanes as well as the rude, square heart pine houses of the pioneers. These are no more, and few remember!