

Bald Cypress The Millennial Tree

I

6/25/03

Getting up from my writing table, I stop to pick up a small black thread on the white carpet. It quickly wriggles with life and, to tell the truth, I drop it as if it were a rattler. It coils then into a tight ring at my feet, and I can see now a string of lights, six or seven yellow spots along its spiral.

If you had just walked up, you'd say it was one of those little snails, about 3/8 of an inch wide, you see along the river's edge. Going outside to drop it into the border grass by the garage door, I can see by sunlight that it has a beautiful array of golden, shiny feet that follow behind the two antennae, moving across my palm by slight gees and haws toward a desire for home.

The feet move along smoothly, like the treads of airport corridors, except noiselessly, in a wild and chaotic motion. I am watching a magical transport system for a thin long body. According to my insect guide book, it should have seventeen segments, but I can't see that well to count.

This millipede has come into our stream of consciousness as an accidental interruption, but in fact, no part of life is really out of bounds on our multi-dimensional journey. Arthropods are, of course, supremely important in the river's economy, but this little crawler fits our purpose here quite well as one of evolution's strangest locomotives.

I want to celebrate the great-souled loggers between 1890 and 1944 who extracted almost all the old growth pines and giant cypress from Wekiva and the rest of the coastal swamps of the southeast. How in the world do you haul a giant cypress out of Blackwater swamp and get it to Palatka. Wouldn't it take the equivalent of a thousand human feet to saddle up one of these hundred-foot long logs and haul it to the mill?

This is not a whiney story, simply to bemoan the loss of our ancient heroic trees, but an exploration of the fiber of the men who took them down. Their legacy will last longer than the heart pine and cypress they milled if we take from them the courage and strength to restore Wekiva and other places like it, so that the giants stand once again. Endurance is the key. Outdoors, fallen pine doesn't last that long in Florida, thanks to all the forces of compost; but cypress is as close as wood gets to immortality because it has chemical inhibitors resisting swamp decay. So we are hard put to find a worthier wood for door or shingle or majestic sign.

II

It was a strange, hot summer day at Good Counsel Camp where I had been a counselor for several years in succession. The head of the camp, Monsignor George Cummings, had arranged to erect a new sign, out on Route 41, just south of Inverness. The sign itself was a large flat piece with jagged edges that had carved onto it the simple name of the camp in a Gothic font.

This is nothing extraordinary except that the old country boy--as close to a cracker native as a priest might come--had gotten three large segments of a giant cypress tree to hold the sign. I can imagine the big grin on the Monsignor's face as he plunked down his dollars for one of the last of the old growth trees from the swamps of the Withlacoochee River. This was west central Florida about 1960.

Before we arrived for the orientation of counselors, two of these logs had been set up on end as pillars and the third of about the same size—four or five feet in diameter—was to be laid across the top and secured by hefty metal ropes. I never saw how they got the logs into the area in the first place nor how they stood up the first two, fifteen feet high, but today was the exciting conclusion to this long-held dream. The camp he had built and run for years, the signal ministry of his life, would now come to a remarkable and enduring exclamation point.

They had hauled in a special crane, larger even than the one that unloaded and stacked the pieces of the sign. Working in the bright sun that even now builds such giants, they wrapped the third log in massive cables and hooked it to the boom, working for the better part of an hour to get the balance just right so it could be lifted, swung above the columns, laid crosswise on top, and secured with chains.

I am trying, without data and the proper engineering skills, to estimate what strength it takes to lift that many cubic yards of tightly wound wood that it took a thousand years or so to grow. Have you ever looked into the freshly cut core of a mature cypress? It looks like an armature of the most finely wrapped wires, barely enough room for my penknife blade to mark one ring.

Everybody stood way back, the engine raced, and the haul began, up to a level of five or ten feet, when the tether broke loose, the log dropped, and the boom went crashing backwards, completely crushing the left side of the cab and a goodly amount of the motor housing, recoiling the whole machine in a torturous flash. My heart stopped.

Miraculously the operator got to jump away from the crumpled wreck, and we all crowded around in shock. Composure is the norm in this life, but when it gets shattered by accidents of this magnitude, the effect lasts as long as memory. The scene changed little for the rest of the summer, a testimony to a project where all the factors had not been fully calculated.

III

THE VISTA

On my doubling a long point of land, the [St. Johns] river appeared surprisingly widened, forming a large bay, of an oval form, and several miles in extent. On the West side it was bordered round with low marshes, and invested with a swamp of Cypress, the trees so lofty, as to preclude the sight of the high-land forests, beyond them; and these trees, having flat tops, and all of equal height, seemed to be a green plain, lifted up and supported upon columns in air, round the West side of the bay....

William Bartram: *Travels*

Wekiva has cypress trees at every turn, but never the kind of vista that Bartram got on the St. Johns, three miles north of Palatka, where he stopped to admire for us his most important find among the trees of Florida. Especially, in its narrow creeks and tributaries, the Wekiva turns so abruptly and is often under the canopy itself, so that one doesn't grasp the cypress world as flat-topped (hence the name, bald cypress).

When Bill and I kayak the Blackwater Creek, we usually put in at the concrete bridge that once belonged to the Carter property, but since 1990 a part of the Seminole State Forest. Whether we go up or down stream, it isn't very long before we see one of the stumps left by the Wilson Cypress Company of Palatka in the late 1930's and early 1940's. At many places along our route, you can see between the trunks of hundreds of hardwoods, their feet (and knees) in the muck, their heads it seems in the clouds. It is almost as dark as the rain forests of Alaska. Even back far off the creek, you can sometimes spot an old giant cypress cut. In the seventy years since the old growth cypress were felled, not much else has changed in Blackwater.

A fallen pine log or its sheered stump turns readily in the bottomlands to red-orange crenellations, here and there powdered with bright green mold. Sometimes a stump is populated with little white and orange mushrooms, tiny pagodas on the mountainside of a delicate Japanese screen painting.

The stumps of cypress, on the other hand, take on a more grisly aspect, often with very unusual hollows and webs. Weather and termites work diligently toward compost, but it just takes forever with a cypress because it has a chemistry to repel most of the beetles, fungi, borers, centipedes, and millipedes that want to suck on wood. Some of these trunks get covered with strangler fig and other roots, constricted by ominous snake-guardians. You'd like Adam and Eve to pop up so we could take another snapshot of the Fall.



The stump in this picture sits on the left/north side of the creek, just about ten lazy kayak minutes downstream from the bridge. Just for fun, let's put it back up on its feet and recreate the process by which the Wilson Cypress Company harvested it in 1936 or 1937.¹ Let's imagine this bounty is shipped to Boston to build a house for the descendants of Emerson. It only seems fitting, since Ralph was the one who said, in writing about the creative process, "Wisdom consists in keeping the soul liquid."

The bald cypress holds the river spirit as well as any of us because its adaptations to water are indeed its edge over the other trees of the forest. In this way, the cypress has drawn a ribbon around almost every lake in Florida and along most river banks. So this tree, fully alive, quite likely stood sentinel here, as much as a hundred and twenty-five feet straight up. That's what the crew of canoers or hikers from the Wilson Cypress Company would first see when they made their inventory of worthy specimens.

THE GIRD

...The Cupressus disticha stands in the first order of North American trees. Its majestic stature is surprising, and on approaching them, we are struck with a kind of awe, at beholding the stateliness of trunk, lifting its cumbrous top towards the skies, and casting a wide shade upon the ground, as a dark intervening cloud, which, for a time, precludes the rays of the sun. The delicacy of its colour, and texture of its leaves, exceed every thing in vegetation...

William Bartram (continued from above).

Indeed, Bartram had it right, from the first. The cypress is a poet's tree, its leaves of grass like a sweet caress. Everywhere I roam in the basin, I close my eyes and put the leaves of the forests to a lengthy test of touch. You can feel the differences. The cypress leaf has flat thin

¹ Extensive records of the Wilson operation are preserved in the Putnam County Archives in Palatka. A map book of land holdings and inventories provides a precious record of what almost all the parcels in the protected Wekiva basin once held. This forty-acre parcel is marked as "Cut" in 1936 and 1937.

bracts, soft and fine padlets, with a give to them that makes them attractive to rub and squeeze; such a contrast to the sleek, upward tower of strength the Timucuan sculptor carves, opening a six-foot log to a tribal totem vision or a river canoe.

If we simply cut this Blackwater beauty down while it is still translating sun into dewy leaflets, the weight of the river that it holds in its giga-celled, glucose factory would preclude any kind of river shipment. Indeed, if we had a crane strong enough to lift the green tree right out of the swamp, the bottom of the log where the cut had been made would gush like a waterfall, a small spring really, for about an hour, emptying like a pipette, uniformly.

I saw this once in my front yard when a relatively young laurel oak broke in half during a fierce storm and landed on my neighbor's car-port. The next day the twenty-five foot section of the still-standing trunk was cut and lifted by a crane, slowly, up over the remaining trees to be sliced like a sausage and put into a rusty old truck on the street. Sad to say, it wet its pants profusely the entire time, as though someone had turned on twenty hoses, all at once, full force.

So to extract this Blackwater cypress right, we have to hike or paddle out here at least a year in advance of harvest time and cut a clean girdle around the tree to the depth of the cambium layer, in effect short-circuiting the process of sap-flow (carbohydrate transfers) and eventually causing the whole tree to rinse itself out in advance of our return. This first little engineering trick probably halves the actual weight of the log and leaves it standing buoyant.

To make this deep six-inch gouge around the tree, we might erect a scaffold where two or three of us could wale away at the same time. In colonial times, before the invention of the steam engine, only the trees right on the water were felled and logged, so that they could be floated to a mill up or down stream and there a team of mules could haul the segments up to a table for the saw.

THE TRAM: Through the Forested Wetlands

...It generally grows in the water, or in low flat lands, near the banks of great rivers and lakes, that are covered, a great part of the year, with two or three feet depth of water, and that part of the trunk, which is subject to be under water, and four or five feet higher up, is greatly enlarged, by prodigious buttresses, or pilasters, which, in full grown trees, project on every side, to such distance, that several men might easily hide themselves in the hollows between. Each pilaster terminates under ground, in a very large, strong, serpentine root, which strikes off, and branches every way, just under the surface of the earth; and from these roots grow woody cones called cypress knees, four, five, and six feet high, and from six to eighteen inches and two feet in diameter at their bases. The large ones are hollow, and serve very well for beehives; a small space of the tree itself is hollow, nearly as high as the buttresses already mentioned....

William Bartram (continued from above).

It was simpler, hauling out the old-growth pines from the uplands, because they are much thinner, lighter, and far more plentiful. Pictures in the Florida archives show the old growth logs slung neatly to the bottom of a five-foot axle that turns a pair of 10-foot high wheels. The log

sags at both ends, some 40 feet long and 3-4 feet thick. The contraption built for this purpose dwarfs the men and their team of six or more oxen pulling it over an upland path.

The log is centered and held by a lever over the axle so that it doesn't teeter-totter at every little lump in the earth. The loggers all look weary at the enterprise and yet there has to be just as much satisfaction at the end of a hot Florida day, after hauling over the rough palmetto roots and soft sand ruts, to say that you hauled out such a river treasure from the pine flatwoods.

Often for the pines, no road building was necessary. However, to topple the giant cypress without preparation of the river bed and swamps for hauling it out would be the height of folly. So even before the girdling, a crew of laborers would have to dredge the creek or dig canals deep enough to float the logs out to the St. Johns. Then with a steam engine and a wench on the boat, they could pull the logs through the swamp to the canal.

In the Hontoon Island section of the St. Johns River, I have paddled up and down the twenty-five feet wide and perfectly straight canals through the swamp; they run for the most part east and west, at right angles to the main stream. Think about the task of cutting the trees and pulling the stumps and snags out of the swamp in order to set the dredge to work on building such a canal. I have not found any remnants of such activities in the Wekiva basin to date.

We do know that in the early days of steam-boating, they did dredge the shallow Wekiva just to get the twelve to fourteen inches of draft they would need to haul citrus, pine lumber, and people up and down the river to Clay Springs (Wekiwa's nineteenth-century name) and beyond that overland to the town of Apopka. So not even Rock Springs Run and the Upper Wekiva, occasionally found to be deep enough for such a log, would have been ready to float out our treasure. "This river is very shallow and impossible to drive logs out by it," writes William Gallagher on a color-coded map showing the densities of pine and cypress for logging purposes.²

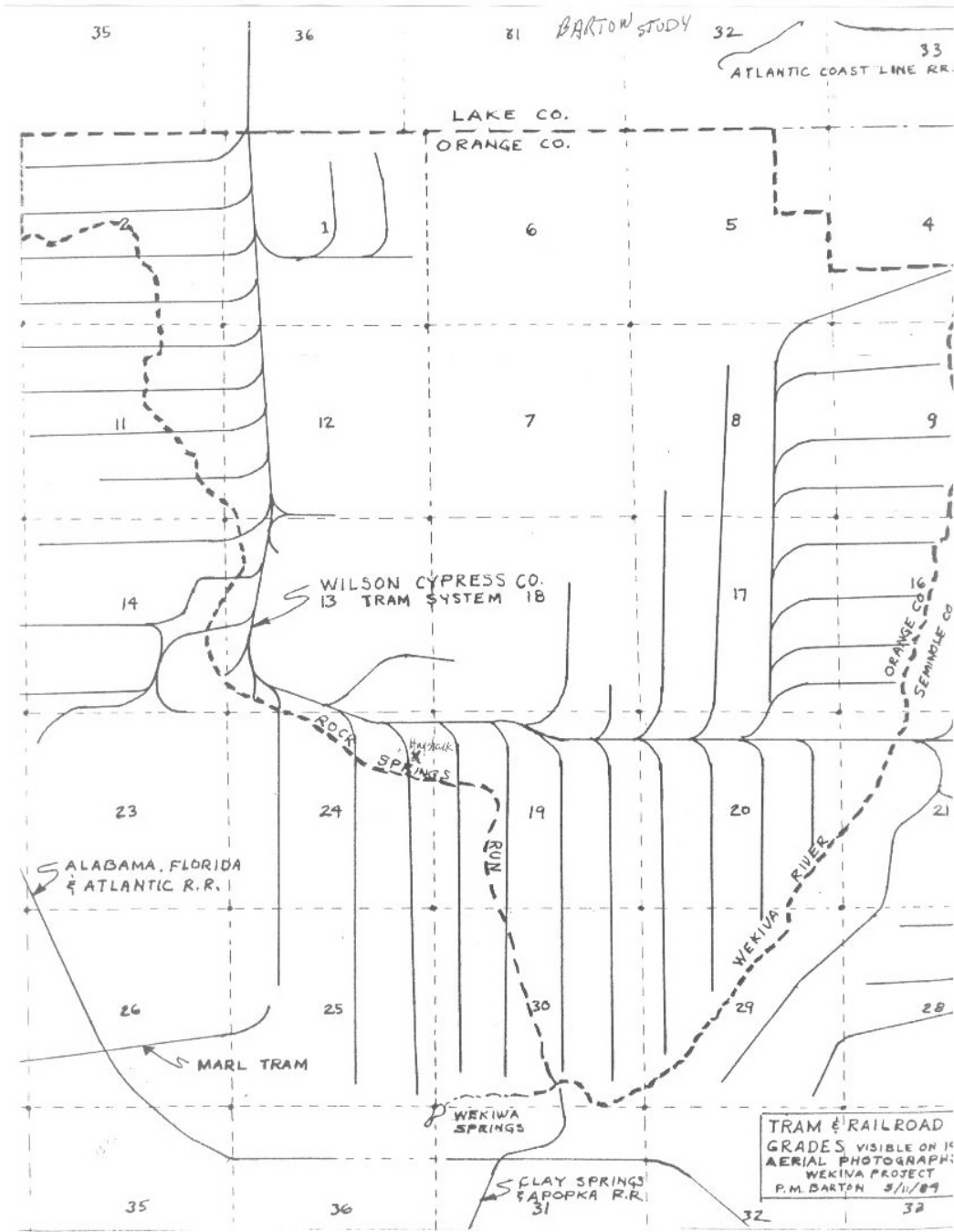
However, in the late 1930's the industry provided Wilson with a third option for hauling out our homeric logs, the railroad bed built on a causeway of debris. When the tracks across the uplands reached the swamp, they cut a narrow swatch of the forest down and laid the logs lengthwise, belly to belly. Then building up a bank around it, they laid shorter logs sideways, unslabbed. Finally, putting the narrow-gauge tracks on top of that, they brought a pile-driving tram down across the Blackwater and beyond that to the rest of the river. The swamps of the whole Wekiva basin north of the upper river were connected by tramways all the way from the St. Johns crossing at Crows Bluff near Hawkinsville.

So when Bill and I paddle two miles upstream from the bridge, we encounter two sets of wooden posts crossing the creek, about a mile below the confluence of the clear, spring-fed Seminole Creek with the dark Blackwater, fed largely by the swamps. This remnant of a railroad bridge from the logging days of the last century is our best indication about how to haul this mammoth cypress out of here.

The map below does not show Blackwater Creek and Lake County, but it gives a sense of how extensively the Wekiva swamps were harvested in Orange County. All those trees were carried north on the line between section 35 and 36 on the tramway up to Crow's Bluff.³

² *Ibid.*. Gallagher was one of Wilson's surveyors who studied the Upper Wekiva near Shell Island and scribbled this caution in the margin.

³ See Barton's study.



THE CART, THE RAFT, and the MILL

So on our topo map, the Blackwater rail spur runs from south of the creek across the dark waters above the three little patches of springs (Palm, Mud, and Moccasin). It heads straight north to a T at Grade Road, now a jeep trail crossing the middle of Sulphur Island and then Sulphur Run where it turns northeast again, following the direction of SR 44 to the St. Johns, just west of Deland.

The rest of the transport system is comparatively easy then. Another group of workers roll or crane the logs into the wide and deep St. Johns, tie them together into a raft (50 ft. wide and 10 times as long), and haul them with tugboats up to the mill in Palatka, about 40 miles away. We are talking 25-40 foot logs of cypress. Some not fully dried out by the girdling operation inevitably cause problems for the men on the raft and have to be cut loose in this journey. Many of these “sinkers” have been recovered in recent times, a prize for serious woodworkers who will gladly pay a premium price today.

When the tugboat reaches the mill in Palatka, fenders built out into the wide St. Johns accommodate the loading of logs and lumber. The individual log is set with a cluster of dog-claw hooks that help haul the unit up a long high incline and into position for a giant saw, 25ft. high, that will break the log into the desired shape for the maximum amount of board feet. After another year or more of drying in tall stacks, the 32- or 16-foot boards are loaded on barges or lighters to be taken to Jacksonville and shipped to Boston and abroad.

One giant cypress, of course, was enough lumber to build two or three whole houses so that the lengthy process at minimum wages was well worth it for the Minnesota lumber tycoon, A. E. Wilson and his brother Henry. He started operation in the 1890's, at the tail end of the pine-logging boom in Florida, by purchasing an existing mill in Palatka. When the jig was up for pine, Wilson saw the remote cypress as an even more lucrative quarry and starting in 1927, calculated that it would be worth the trouble of building the railroad to nowhere through the forested wetlands. He was a conquistador of another type and generation, navigating the swamp ecology and building America out of Florida's finest old growth.

So now, we can return to our girdled tree on Blackwater Creek, standing like an empty apartment building ten stories tall, except for the ivorybills and other woodpeckers who are taking advantage of the vacancy. Even though it's right on the creek, this cypress was probably not felled into it, but had to be hauled north about a half-mile and loaded onto a rail car. How in the world did they do it?

THE CUT

...From this place the tree, as it were, takes another beginning, forming a grand strait column eighty or ninety feet high, when it divides every way around into an extensive flat horizontal top, like an umbrella, where eagles have their secure nests, and cranes and storks their

temporary resting places; and what adds to the magnificence of their appearance, is the streamers of long moss that hang from the lofty limbs and float in the winds.

William Bartram (continued from above).

It always takes a little time to get the whole picture, and we still have quite a task to go. But why should we be less enterprising, less tough and gritty than the owner and his crews, looking at the problem of getting this particular cypress to Palatka and Concord. The job of cutting it down is not so formidable, since we can use a crosscut saw. Two strong men, working in tandem, can handle this prize in a day or two, cutting through it three or four. If the tree is much wider than our six-foot saw, then we can get two saws welded together to handle the extra girth with plenty of pull-through space.

What sound did the giant cypress make, after its seasons of desiccation, as it crashed through underbrush and crushed every sapling in its descent, down to its very knees? It is a moment for an Anglo-Saxon scop to sing his sobermost elegy for a millennium of Florida dropping in four seconds flat. But here is where my mind balances Thoreau's elegy for the Death of the Pine with Whitman's "Song of the Broad Axe." My problem is not at all with taking the tree, but with taking almost all the trees that define the ecosystem.

While the sawyers no doubt cheered for their accomplishment, the hardest part was yet to come. Of course, a chain saw would make it much easier today. Recently, a grand cypress tree at the college dried up during a five-year drought and gave up its leaves in April because it was situated too far up on the bank from the current lake levels. Pictures of that very spot in the college archives show that the lake's water used to be much closer to the tree. It was the first time I ever saw a cypress tree dead of anything other than lightning.

My students and I marveled at the splendid and eerie skeleton hung with moss, not thinking much more about it, until one day I came to work and saw that they had leveled the tree to the ground in less than an hour. I wish now that I had urged the authorities to leave the monument standing for another hundred years, especially for our ospreys and eagles to perch on and for our students to learn some ecology. The answer to the lost giant cypress, however sad, is simple: plant a new one.

By some weird precognition, perhaps, my class and I had already done so the previous semester. When Jean and I built our five-foot pond in the back yard, we peopled it with a bright purple-and-gold water lily and a small cypress tree in a five-inch pot. Pencil thin, it rose up to about four feet. Every day I would check the pond and watch for the newest little leaves to pop out of the ridges of the young bark. The tree was thriving mightily in its micro-habitat.

Entirely submerged in water, it grew up rather quickly, though not in girth, and soon, after any heady wind, we would find it toppled off its pedestal in the pond. At the time I was teaching an introductory course entitled, "I Hear America Singing." It was a first-year class who had great chemistry and a very special sense of community that I wished to celebrate. So one day at the end of the semester, we took our baby "pond" cypress down to the lakeside and planted it together, hoping it would be the start of a millennium of growth at the college.

THE SKID

It should be easier now to go back to our Blackwater cypress and not tremble so much at the gaping hole in the forest where the monument stood for centuries, a tower and a symbol worthier for the American dream than any I know.

When the sawyers dropped this tree, they had to choose a direction that would enhance their prospect for taking its tonnage through this hydric hammock, up a forty-foot incline, and onto a rail car. At regular intervals, along the grade for the tram, the men would clear a working area around a substantial spar-tree from the top of which they would attach a cable and pulleys that could reach down through the woods and the swamp a half-mile away or more. Attached to the giant log and by a navigation as complicated as heart surgery, this cable enabled the steam engine and its team of skidders to drag and jockey, lift and angle that titan through whatever openings they could find or create, until it got to the clearing and was lowered onto the tram.

Some of the giant logs Wilson lumbered were so big that they had to split them like firewood into three or four segments. Bill Dreggors, the folk historian of West Volusia County, tells of one monster that was twenty-five feet in diameter.⁴ I doubt that any man who spent a month hauling one cypress to the river tugs imagined himself bigger or better than the tree. More than likely, the spirit of the tree made each of them stronger and more resilient.

I see Wilson's men in photos standing like Lilliputians upon the huge segments of cypress, as many as twenty across the top. Weary and proud at once, they pose in testimony to the long haul through the swamp, over cypress knees, crossing deep muck pockets to the uplands where the slithery sand can swallow your weary feet and stretch your Achilles tendons to thin painful threads.

But I want to see up close the face of the man (or beast) that spends all day with his partners, pulling and hauling a saw or a cartwheel loaded with such a dense burden of centuries of Wekiva growth. Is it like the fierce-eyed Florida hunter I saw in a nineteenth-century photo the other day, a full grown panther slung over his shoulder, dead weight now, what before in triumph was light to fly through the air and crunch a human collarbone in one jawful slam? The logger of Wilson's day is largely, like the panther, gone from these woods. So let us now praise famous men.

⁴ See the documentary film, *Florida's Giants: The Bald Cypress*, narrated by folk historian Bill Dreggors (Deland: West Volusia Historical Society, 1997).

IV

ASAD EXPERIENCE?

*At times I feel as if I am spread out over
the landscape and inside things, and
am myself living in every tree, in the
splashing of the waves, in the clouds and
the animals that come and go, in the
procession of the seasons. There is
nothing...with which I am not linked.*

C. J. Jung, Memories, Dreams, and Reflections

What exactly was the ecological price of the cypress logging in Wekiva? It is difficult to tell because extensive study of cypress swamp ecology has not yet been done.⁵ One of the first losses that comes to mind is the ivory-billed woodpecker, but no one can say for sure what caused that extinction. Some thirty-five to forty species of trees, shrubs, and vines are common to this extraordinary habitat, some no doubt gainers and some losers for the dismissal of the dominant or climax species. From a human point of view, it is the experience of the giant cypress swamp which is certainly changed, and in many cases, completely lost.

We know that A. E. Wilson and his investors did quite well in their enterprise. According to Robert Tindall, who has studied the company's financial records, they declared no stock dividends for the first ten years, but for nearly fifty years thereafter, a dividend of 100% was declared for the dozen or so investors in three separate families. At its peak in 1942, Wilson's mill in Palatka was the second largest of its kind in the world, shipping forty-five million board feet of lumber, mostly cypress.

About the long-leaf pine, the lumber barons did not know what we know, that it requires fire regimes to restore their kind in the forest. The Wilsons, it seems, had no ecological concept of renewable resources and sustainable harvesting. Why weep now for the losses of the past if we know how to restore them?

Someday our children could be looking again at the four-foot wide pines of old. Take a walk out behind Rock Springs, on the trail toward Wekiwa Springs, and you will see some slash and long-leaf pines that have not been disturbed in over a hundred years and who have enjoyed the luxury of controlled burning for the past twenty years so that new generations now stand beside them, a sun-burst of needles all alone at the crown.

Fortunately for the cypress trees, the Wilson Cypress Company ran out of cheap labor in the war years and closed down its operation because, as the chairman of the board put it, "There

⁵ See "Regeneration of the Bald Cypress" by Keenan Dunham; the handbook of cypress swamp science is Myers and Ewel; for trade book representations of Florida's swamps, see Bransilver and Richardson or Larson as listed in the bibliography.

just was no more marketable timber.” Records of the company’s inventory of trees reveal why the company did not actually take every tree. Some of the maps indicate an evaluation of “poor quality” and others seem to contain no record, perhaps indicating plots they didn’t own or never did inventory. Furthermore, in some parts of the bottomland where stumps still provide us a record of their extractions, you can see a considerable stand of “new” cypress, about seventy years old.

According to Katharine C. Ewel, expert on the cypress swamps of Florida, “Cypress seeds cannot germinate when soils are flooded.” Once germinated, they cannot survive extended flooding, but depend on regular water-level fluctuations. Otherwise, they grow too slowly to survive competition from the faster growing hardwoods. We won’t know how far the extraction extended until we make a new inventory.

Looking at a map, for instance, of the familiar stretch where Blackwater and Seminole Creeks converge, the record shows clearly that in this one forty-acre plot they inventoried 550 cypress and 40 hickory trees, and then, in another hand overwritten, it says, “Cut February, 1936.” Hence, it would be useful to take such information and ground-truth some of it by walking the plot and counting the stumps versus the young trees. In this way we could learn in which terrains recovery is already underway and what the best conditions for restoration of others will be. All the Wilson records can be used as a backbone for an historical analysis that would initiate a viable plan for restoration of some of the cypress stands of old.

The giant cypress, like almost everything in Wekiva, is a hero without a name. The men who spent the months accomplishing the task of a harvest were part of an enduring legacy of the river and its contributions to our Florida culture. I have to laugh at those who make fun of tree huggers. Sometimes I think they just want to be assured, like all of us, that they get their share of human hugs. But we all have to love the tree standing, the tree as strut, the cypress as canoe, or the six-foot owl totem carved by the Timucuan native craftsman. We sing the song of the human accomplishment through grime and sweat that brings the most enduring wood from the swamp to these transformations of the tree and to the satisfaction of these basic human needs and the fulfillment of our creative spirit.

This is all despite the scale of the tree. One giant survivor of the species is alive and growing in a park nearby in Sanford. It is 47 feet in circumference, 17.5 feet in diameter, and the largest in board feet yet to be measured. The park was donated to the county in 1927 by M. O. Overstreet, a major developer of the region. The locals have named it the Senator because the donor served in the state legislature for years.

The tree has been estimated by the Forest Service to be 3000-3500 years old. This date has not been corroborated by alternate measurements, but the tree’s girth is greater than others that have been reliably measured at 1600 years of age. Therefore, it is probably at least 2500 and the oldest living creature in Florida—withstanding more hurricanes than human history tells.

Every year when I take my students out to see the Senator and to write about that tree and its sister, a thousand years younger, I tell them how it is older than the Temple of Solomon or the city of Rome. Even as a living thing, it exceeds human political endurance and parallels the most ancient enduring religious traditions. Indeed, it has seen more Christmases than the carpenter son’s Nazareth.

Such grandeur, however, can easily be matched by the fiber of the laborers' efforts in every phase of the log's felling, transport, milling, carpentry, and craft. By modern standards, they worked for nothing (a dollar or two a day, unless you operated one of the pieces of heavy equipment). It takes an enduring swamp community to raise such a tree and it calls for the same "heroism" of groups like the Audubon Society, the Rotary Club, the Defenders of Wildlife, the Sierra Club, and the Nature Conservancy to keep it so.

The workers who accomplished these incredible feats lived in communities with names like Markham, Lake Sylvan, and Cassia. The majority of them were black men. Less than fifty years or so from the Surrender, the boom years of Central Florida started. The first black township in America, Eatonville, has been sung by Zora Neale Hurston in her magnificent novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. This town is on the southern edge of the Wekiva basin, but in the railroad center of Sanford, the black communities of Goldsboro and Georgetown have similar celebrated histories of the late nineteenth century. This is where many of the cypress logging crews came from.

When I think of what their eyes were watching, it isn't the great hurricane of 1926 so much as the giant cypress, the crystal blue springs, the delicious oranges, and many of the heart-pine floors of America. Cypress logging at a dollar a day got many families in the Wekiva region through the depression and into the war years.

The river communities of trees and people go through vast changes under the pressures of a succession of land uses. A healthy ecology in the newly protected lands will allow for natural restoration of the long-leaf pine and the cypress. If we design with nature when we build the necessary roads and communities and if we help existing developments retrofit their habitats for the sake of the river and its ecology, then the legacy of those great lumberjacks will be established, even if not all their towns and communities have endured to celebrate the anonymous giants of old.

Now here's the kicker: the A in A. E. Wilson stands for Asad, and the E stands for Experience.⁶

⁶ Robert Tindall told me this in an email, insisting it's no joke.