

## Hidden Cypress Acres A Dramatic Monologue

**[The camera is fixed and the world is a single room cleared to accommodate a few too many. All motion is itself and unrelated to the viewer. Sound, on the other hand, is coming from all sorts of places in the room, most of which are off-screen, just beyond a set of knees lacking a torso or behind the camera itself. The river is only fifty feet from the cottage, but its energies are all outside, neither seen nor heard, as it flows down to the right and on into the lower Wekiva.]**

**Enter Russ Fisher in a plaid flannel shirt and jeans, snapping a roll of white paper into his fist, and leaning at times on the counter. His smile engages his audience and the words roll softly from his great, barrel-chested mind. Just as he goes to start his story, Pat Harden comes in late and he proudly introduces her as “one of our own, now the Chair of the Board of the St. Johns River Water Management District.” The group of fifteen applauds. Russ begins his speech by describing with a variety of gestures the dwelling where we sit and its relationship to the habitat.]**

**Rush Fisher:** In 1968 or '69, where we're sitting now was a swamp, right here. The Wekiva Swamp. The river here **[he points to his right]**, all the way back to this great big cypress tree over here **[100 yards to the east, directly behind the camera]**. All this was like the Florida Everglades, a river of grass: no canoe traffic, no boat traffic.

So, the fathers to be, decided it had to be opened up. And they got this guy from up in Lake Mary, come in with his dredging equipment, what was his name? **["Griffin," someone volunteers]** to dredge from about a quarter mile down, on up past the landing bridge. I encourage you to go see it. It's the only iron bridge up here before the highway. He dredged and it was eighteen foot deep, right out here, and the spoil was thrown over here on this bank **[the east side of the Little Wekiva]**, so when Eleanor and I first purchased this property it was just a pile of rubble and debris, busted stumps and dead trees--and sa-a-a-nd **[he laughs to himself]**.

But anyway, that's what it looked like, the pond over here **[he points directly south to a half-acre pond on the other side of a homemade bridge you cross to drive up to the house]** was just a drainage canal. My friend and I arranged to have that dredged and the spoil is that nice land on this side and the pond that goes down toward the swamp.

**[Now he decides to begin his presentation and starts with an apology that Eleanor is not able to be there—but she wants him to encourage folks to send in their nominations for awards at the next banquet.]**

I have often been credited with being the one who got this started. I was only one guy. This thing wouldn't have gotten off the ground without all of these **[he points to individuals all around the room]**.

My contribution was this, when we bought this land, four separate parcels over the years, including fifty acres across the river---but this little piece right here, the Baptist church in Longwood poured a foundation and put up some block walls, was going to build a recreation place for the youth. But it just came at a bad financial time and they were having trouble raising the money, and also **[pause for an afterthought]** several parents came down here and said, “No way,” saw the swamp, alligators, everything else, the conditions, and snakes. They said, “Not my kid!” **[general laughter]**. And it was a condition of sale that if they didn't follow through with it, the property returned back to the owners, and old Mr. Norris put it up for bid with the two neighbors. It was offered at a closed bid and I out-bid him.

Anyhow, when I was building this **[short pause]** Well, a builder would do it in thirty days; it took me two years. I did it myself, never having done anything like this before. One step ahead and two back. But it was a sheer pleasure and a joy out here by myself. Every thing that was built was hauled in on the top of my car, strapped down, the wall board, the lumber **[he laughs at himself]**. Came in a little bit at a time. Some times I took sleeping bags, with daughter Julie, but finally she said, “Dad, I gotta get some sleep.” It was the over-powering noise of the frogs **[a giant grin]**.

Friends of the Wekiva really had its beginning in the Audubon Society, believe it or not. Most of the people that had been instrumental came from Audubon ... Jim Thomas, I followed him, then Fred **[he lists Orange Audubon presidents]**.

What would happen... **[pause, while he switches us back to the river scene, the gist of it all. Memory once again trumps the present purpose]**. We called this our river. **[He pulls out a journal book that his daughter Julie had given him for his birthday, April 26, 1982, and reads the title.]** The River at Hidden Cypress Acres **[Eleanor's name for their property with the giant cypress on it]**: “Dear dad, This little book will soon have history that we will cherish, the history of our own river.”

She said that because back in those days, there was no one livin' back here. Russ Moncrief was not here yet. All these developments up stream had not been started. Up at the Springs Landing bridge now was one of the absolute treasures, you come on down through there and enjoy it. And there was nothing downstream until the trestle **[the old Atlantic Coast Railroad crossing four miles downstream]** and then highway 46.

We used to put in with rubber tubes up there at The Springs; we'd have a little caboose, too, another tube with wine and cheese and stuff. And the river was open. There was a little quiet growth along the sides, both sides. The only thing we had was a canoe paddle, only to push us away from the banks along a curve. It was wonderful; we would take guests down the same way.

By 1978, Orange Audubon, I think Fred was president then (I was program chairman), we decided to have a canoe trip. We put in way down there at the highway 436 bridge, in Russ and Katie's canoes. We got started and we had this stra-a-a-nge smell.... Smellt like oranges. It was a Saturday. Jim Hulbert was with us, and said, "Something's wrong here." It was the Hi Acres Citrus plant and what they were doing--on Saturday! **[a knowing look all around]**--they were discharging, **[here he gestures vehemently and his glasses fly out of his hands, to everyone's laughter. Polly says, "Think of it as orange peels."]** so they didn't expect anyone would find out, but Jim excused himself and later reported them and they got fined **[Jim is a limnologist who worked for the DEP for many years]**.

We had scheduled another trip for October of that year and through the summer I could see something happening. Our playground was being spoiled. There was an unusual, dramatic increase in the aquatic hydrilla in the river and all this beautiful open space was closing in. It was the 18<sup>th</sup> of October that the trip was scheduled. As we got into September, I could see things were happening beyond our control. We had to call it off because the river had closed in that much.

The Altamonte Springs' new waste-water treatment plant had gone on line and they discharged the output into Spring Lake and in a year they had killed it. Because of the protest of many people, they arranged then to put the effluent into the Little Wekiva. Ran a pipe. This was before Alex's time, and DEP or DER had approved it, based on a three-day study! To see if the water could assimilate waste **[tones of disbelief]**.

So, this nutrient rich water--secondary treatment--was coming into the river. And the weeds were lovin' it, aquatic growth. About that time, 1979, Earl Downs who had developed the Springs and his partner Gary?...Graham had this property, which is Springs Landing now, on both sides of the river. On the west side of the river, they couldn't build. They were locked in because by that time Sweetwater Oaks was developing on the other side. So the only access to the rest of it was to cross the river with a bridge.

It was absolutely devastating. Jim Thomas was engaged as the environmental consultant. The bridge was planned for 220 feet. We consulted with Orange Audubon and Jim persuaded them that that bridge had to be 300 feet long and span the basin. Which they did and the county commission approved. We protested it. The bridge was built.

When we first got the impact of it, come the Army Corps of Engineers--by that time they had assumed the responsibility to keep the river open--they went up stream and came to the bridge and zappo! It was too low for the air-boat to go under. And so for years from the Springs Landing up to the bridge, there was no maintenance at all and the river was clogged.

Jim Oliver made an effort and was very instrumental to arrange for a crane to park on the bridge and lift the Corps' airboat on to the other side so they could spray. But soon the Corps of Engineers took a dim view of this and said that until such time as there is public access, they are not going to get involved. There's still no public access.

We saw this happening and Eleanor kept saying, "Why doesn't somebody do something? Why doesn't somebody do something?" I heard this so long I got tired of it," and we started to do something **[general uproar]**.

**Nancy Prine:** "Oh, so it's not you. It's Eleanor!"  
**[a laughter grows, seeking to displace credit.]**

**Fred Harden:** "The truth comes out."

**Russ Moncrief:** "It was Eleanor's nagging that got it all started."  
**[Colonel Fisher hurries to quell this insurrection.]**

**Russ Fisher:** So we got talking about it a few of us and Russ and I were members of the Markham Woods Home Owners Association. It was formed in the early 70's. I'm charter member. It was on the banks of the Little Wekiva, right up here on Delk Road. Lamar Williams was the first chair. Later on, we were meeting up here in the church; Bobby Brantley, who later became Lt. Governor, was president. I was trying to get some people together to get something started. I asked him for two people. They didn't care about the river; they were mainly interested in development, one unit to an acre and controlling it up and down Markham Woods Road. But he gave me two people, thank God, one was Russ Moncrief and the other Bill Riske. They have both been influential.

The thing we had to do was to approach this pollution problem. We had to get something done **[now his pace switches from casual to urgent, as though we are his squadron being briefed for a critical mission]**. We weren't then formed as the Friends of the Wekiva River, just a loose group. We prepared a letter. We decided we needed something that spelled it out very carefully and we decided too: no use sending it to the local authorities or for that matter Vicky Tschinkel who was secretary of DER and we bypassed her, too--we sent it to the regional director in Atlanta.

Well, then, who was going to sign it **[pause]**. We had no standing. We got George Schufel (Springs Home Owner president), Bob Johnson from Springs Landing representing Earl Down, the Markham Woods president, and the President of Orange Audubon, Greg Bretz. Our three-page letter spelled it out, and eventually it came back to Vicky Tschinkel and a public hearing was scheduled. And when we learned this, we knew we were in business and we knew it was our golden opportunity to do something **[a swelling of pride and a deep breath]**. And we went to work. By that time our people were assembled and people really gave their hearts.

We decided we had to approach this two ways. One, we had to have facts to present. That was the time we formed this technical committee. And Al Stewart, was a professional engineer, I think the company was Amasac, made a presentation to us that we were impressed with, about hyacinths, and we learned about a demonstration down here in a lake. They were showing us how the hyacinths were taking out the nutrients and the machines were taking out the hyacinths **[ironic eyebrow elevation and general laughter]** and Al became one of our stalwarts.

So he was really the one, a professional engineer, who produced a study **[he waves the thirty-two page booklet: *A Position Statement upon the Environmental Quality of the Little Wekiva River, 1982*]**. Al paid for producing this study out of his own pocket and we agreed to pay for the copies.

I went to Everett Huskey **[the developer of Sweetwater Oaks]**, and said, “We need some seed money.” He said, “How much are you thinking about?” I said, “five hundred dollars,” and he said, “How about three?” We didn’t have any account, so Orange Audubon “laundered” our money for us **[a rumble of laughter]**.

But this public hearing, we had to approach it two ways: we had to have our facts, do our study, and secondly we had to have good public relations. Our committee was formed with that two-headed thought in mind. We got help really in the press. We decided we had to have people come from the various environmental organizations in the state. Without exception, every one responded **[a pause for pride in the larger community]**.

We not only got the facts together, we met Sunday in th’afternoon for a dry run. We decided Jim Thomas would be our spokesman, and he gave his speech and we critiqued it thoroughly, tore it apart and put things back together and he was ready---boy, he was ready. Al Stewart’s desperately working to have this paper ready and he had copies on hand--all ready.

You know how these meetings go: first all the public officials have to make their speeches and then finally our turn comes. Jim, you know, with his beautiful head of white hair, had his nice gray suit on, and he looked for all the world like a Philadelphia or a New York attorney (I think a lot of ‘em, they thought he was!) and after that all these booklets were passed out to everyone. Then after Jim’s presentation, all the rest of the environmental groups stood up, one by one, and spoke. **[Pause...smile...a deep breath of doubt and tightening of lips.]** There just was no question.

The city manager was Jeff Etchberger. And Jeff knew it was where his bread was buttered. He had spent a little time trying to find out who this upstart group was (because we were staying very low key), who the leadership was; and he finally went over to Russ Moncrief, starting to ask him **[low laughter, at this mistake, from those in the know]**. After the presentation, Jeff came up to me and said, “Let’s talk.” Later we became very good friends with the commissioner of the City of Altamonte Springs.

Shortly after that—meeting, discussing, drafting ideas-- we presented them a letter and attached to that letter were ten specific recommendations. One of those recommendations is to take that wastewater treatment plant and immediately turn it to tertiary treatment and reduce the amount of nutrients going into the river, a great deal of phosphorus and nitrogen. Another recommendation was to study the capacity of the river to absorb this load.

Well, the city council adopted all ten recommendations, and that's when the FOWR started to establish their credibility. The next question was: who would we get to do the study. City Commission put up \$240,000 over a three-year period--as opposed to the three-day study--and the University of Florida did the work.

That report was the first comprehensive study of flowing rivers in the southeast, of its kind, and in the course of it ten other rivers were included because they had to have controls in their study. So they came up with this plan called Apricot, and it was adopted. When you go down I-4, you see that huge tank along SR 436, you can see, it's a part of that reuse program and a major change.

The wastewater still flows in, but they are limited to so many pounds per day into the river. Ideally, it should be zero discharge, but we are also realists enough to know the non-point source pollution is equally, if not more damaging, and that's the runoff, parking lots, and so on.

Really that's how we got started.

**[Russ shows the book with the first minutes, beginning in 1981, remarking that they should be preserved and recorded. Then after some verbal horseplay, teasing, and laughter involving the Hardens getting a property downstream, he reads from the minutes of the first meeting and goes over the names of the nineteen charter members. Then he launches into a description of the First annual Wekiva River Awareness Day.]**

Our plan was to go from the church on 436. Canoes. Katie was to lead **[laughter because she's notorious for being a fast paddler]**, with Mayor Ray Ambrose in lead canoe all way to the confluence, then to Sabal Point landing there, and Russ was to take us back to the church. It was supposed to be a nice leisurely trip downstream, but it got to be the damnedest race you ever saw and Katie got passed like a train past a tramp and everybody was down there about an hour before they're supposed to be and poor ole Russ was down there late trying to get them all transported back.

We didn't know the superintendent of parks, Benson **[that he was not a naturalist]**, and put him in with Carol Heinz and well they got started and the canoe tipped over and she had on these-- what kind of shoes?—Gucci. Lost that.

**Polly Miller:** "Scott Henderson and I fished them out."

**Russ Fisher:** [Now he jumps to the effort to have the State name the Wekiva as one of its Outstanding Florida Waters]

Outstanding Florida Waters. Two people I want to recognize, Pat and Fred Harden, [adding then with help from the audience] Jim Hulbert, Nancy, and Phyllis Saarinen. Nineteen pounds of material [he gestures to indicate the size of the parcel mailed] to the Environmental Regulation Commission meeting in Miami. So they accepted it and put it on the agenda. Then we had to get to work again to make the presentation. Here's where the public relations comes into play. We invited them [Environmental Regulation Commission] to go down Rock Springs Run and Fred had George Barley, the chairman of the OAC and he managed to tip over the canoe. [More laughter as Fred explains that his charge wanted to race and didn't listen: "Only place in the river where the water's ten feet deep." More laughter]

The other case was when Pastor Webber had his wife with him-- tipped over four times. When we had our awards presentation, Fred introduced him and said, "He's the only man came down the river that day who spent more time upside down."

Brent Magic [a new board member]: "So is this the official tactic, that if somebody presents any political opposition, you take 'em out on the river and try to drown 'em?"

Russ Fisher: That's the word that we put out when we took Governor Graham and we told him it was no politics and anyone who got into business was dumped overboard.

Outstanding Florida Water, again, was an outstanding effort. [Russ holds up the report.] We petitioned, we are the ones who did it. Pat Harden provided the technical details. [He reads a letter from the state and shows the pages of all those whom the FOWR got to support the effort.] Mr. Parks, the chairman of DER and a true friend, said in his letter of acceptance, thanking us that it was the most letters ever received on behalf of a river and the best presentation ever presented.

**Russ Moncrief:** "and the heaviest."

*[The preceding is an edited transcript of a presentation Russ Fisher gave at an FOWR retreat in 1996. The idea of the retreat was to help new board members get acclimated to their work by presenting an overview of the history and the work of the Friends of the Wekiva River, Inc. Jim Lee conducted the meeting in the family room of Russ and Eleanor's cottage on the Little Wekiva, and Russ gave the first talk on "How the Friends Got Started." Pat Harden, Nancy Prine, Fred Harden, and Jim Lee followed. The whole three hours and forty minutes was recorded on video by John Parker and is available in the FOWR Archives in the Olin Library at Rollins College. ]*

## Hidden Cypress Acres: Eight Years Later

4/24/04

When I visited Julie at the river cottage to get my bearings for this transcript, she generously shared with me that river log with its many entries from Russ and Eleanor and herself. In it you can read the excitement of wildlife stories (like the antics of a nesting gator) as well as the frustrations of meetings with developers where Russ's idea was to find common ground before an official meeting.

Some of the entries have to do with cleaning out the river and restoring the landscape. On February 8, 1885 Russ writes: "I am now committed to remove and destroy the exotics and stick with the native species." Regular entries express his chagrin with the "creeping sand" and indeed even today a large sandbar opposite the cottage has recently risen up and created a double channel. Small trees are growing up on the island where old aerial photos of the property show only a widening of the channel. Twenty-five years after the dredging operation to deepen the channel, other forces have built up a counterpoint.

But the most telling part of the journal is Russ's entry for May 8, 1985. It is the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his release from the Eighth Air Force in England, after completing his long duty: eighteen months as a squadron leader in a B-17 Flying Fortress and twenty-three missions as division commander, including, at the end of his tour, missions over Berlin. He was 28 years old, then, and the long entry in the river log describes in detail his return to Eleanor and his relief at no longer having to sign those letters that started out, "It is with deep regret..." He concludes this powerful memory of a great turning point in his life with the telling observation, "and I was one of the lucky ones." The Great War seems to have enhanced the energies of conservation in many who survived, both at home and abroad.

The spirit of Russ Fisher is palpable in this river home where Julie and her three daughters live today. When I walk down to the giant cypress, just off the driveway through the swamp, the light-tan palmetto branches lying over crayfish mounds and resting on cypress knees crunch and



**What camera angle  
can contain a giant?**



crackle under my steps. It would take three or four of me to embrace the trunk of this tree. I look up to the April green patchwork in sunlight to find the courage and light-heartedness that Russ brought back from the war to his family and to this little river. He died of a massive heart attack on July 4, 1996.