

Sulphur Run Walk

4/19/01

In the canopy over Blackwater Creek you never know what magic will be suspended. Today as Bill and I paddle down to Sulphur Run, hoping to see how far we can hike up the swamp bed, I fall into a trance while Bill piles ahead out of sight.

It's early mid-morning and the sunlight through the trees from the east is at an angle conducive to spider-web detection. All through the trees the sprays of air-plants blossom with slender pink and orange flowers, highlighted by a hairnet of arachnid's work. The finest of these forest ornaments is a long thick vine, the kind that Tarzan used to swing on, that seems to have been decorated by a florist with an evenly spaced set of tilandsia spiralling around and up the pole. Each one houses its own spectacular show of sunwebs, tangleweaves that take the shape of the plant's silvery spray and build an imaginative crystal palace up from it, stretching toward the cool blue sky.

These apparitions of light spirits have harmonic resonance, play softly into the breezes from the north, spinning ever so slightly like the jeweler's prize diamond sitting in the window on a satin pedestal that turns a degree, left then right, at irregular intervals, to display fully its many virtues.

The creek bottom here today looks like an aerial view of eastern Montana at nightfall, uniform hillocks of dark brown tinged with green, neatly set in rows as if poured out like pastries on a long rich continuous oven sheet. I resist the urge to push my paddle through this mirage and prove the reality of cloudy muck. Something so perfectly imaginary should not be deconstructed.

The water is quite low again today, actually lower by an inch or two than last time, and the kayak rides below the level of the largely buttressed and intricately enrooted shore trees. Most of them now reveal large cavities and hollows one could never guess existed in the full flow of a normal late spring adventure.

As always, the creek is full of strange palm tree intrusions and curvatures, hanging out over the water. Today, however, I find the added delight of a sabal palm's crown, suspended completely upside down about ten feet above the sailing surface. Sure enough, last week or last month it was a thirty-five foot tall and healthy tree with a ball of fronds at the top, the size of a cement mixer. Today you can see that, fifteen feet from the top, the trunk broke off, exposing a foot of raw wood, and the rest hangs as by a thread directly down over the channel, all its boot-hatches upside down, but the fan-shaped branches are curling upward. They are still green, so one has to conclude that the slowly rocking and turning gyre is well enough attached to bring nutrients to the sugar factories at the bottom.

How can these mechanisms of transportation in the palm tree, built by years of adaptation to overcome considerable amounts of gravity, continue to work and not be disturbed by swinging

upside-down? This is an absurd representation, for this medievalist, of the hanged man in the Tarot deck and a symbol today of my own consternation. Suddenly after the last two elections, national and local, we hear of so many staunch reversals of sound environmental projects, tests, and rules that I don't know where to begin my protests anew. Sometimes we have to restore the political soundness of Florida's growth management process before we can restore the river and the forest ecology.

The cabbage palm (*sabal palmetto*) is a tree that squirms everywhere in Wekiva to the tune of the times, bends slightly up, over, out, down, or behind to find a place to set its sphere of fronds. But in this case the tree seems so far gone into cataclysm as to lose all bend and simply to be at the mercy and twitch of every slightest wind.



Moccasin Spring: Blackwater Creek, a mile above the bridge

We arrive at our destination and the small run is quickly blocked by too much snaggy, so we haul ourselves and our kayaks out of the water to begin our hike. The ground is very dry on top, soft but dry muck underneath. In some stretches it feels as though we are walking on a foot-thick bed of moss. In other spots where the cypress and other swamp-tree roots proliferate, we trip almost every step over little knees and arms of roots. They make a network more complicated than a three-dimensional crossword puzzle.

We are making our way along the right bank and pretty soon we start to notice that the flow and the depth are much greater and the pathway of the water too wide and free of snags to be the same run where we hauled out. We start to wish we had ported our kayaks back there and put in again because, except at the mouth of the run, we could easily have gone much further.

Joy gets in the way of reason here and we are happy to be on a crazy venture of hiking the swamp where normally we could never go without a boat or waders. Add a couple of feet of water to this base and every step could easily fall to your knee-cap. This is the way we later find the stream bed to be, even where it looks like bare sand. The foot backed up by 180 pounds of frame plunges to soggy depths that resist repetition with the strength of a gator's jaws. That's the only excuse I can offer for our failure to recognize and clearly accept that instead of walking up

Sulphur Run, we have actually been going around an island in the creek and have by now hoofed it halfway back to the bridge where we put our kayaks in.

Reality broke our joy to pieces and we emerged from our trance to accept the fact that we had, like the shades in Dante's *Inferno*, been circling a futile path. Of course, in nature no path is ultimately useless and we are happy to see our favorite kayaking creek from the land mammal's perspective. Memories and assurances abound from the first time we kayaked Sulphur Run in high water, getting a half mile or so up the run, but today—without any markers—our memory and our place are pure chaos.

The clinching fact, the undeniable discovery, comes next: several saw-cuts in the river snags. No one has a reason to take a chain saw or a crescent saw to clear the way up Sulphur Run. Then, to our complete surprise, just around the bend a party of three canoes, trailored in from Katie's Landing, goes happily by and we learn from them we are but fifteen minutes from our put-in point. Two precious hours of fun have been spent in the charade of our plan. Walking back to our kayaks, we laugh and muse and whistle in our quiet minds the jingles of our incompetence. We failed to recognize the top of the island and turned too soon.

The day is so delightfully cool and our prospect of adventure still undaunted that we decide to reenter the creek to check downstream for several other possibilities, thinking that the run might be dried up enough at the north end of Sulphur Island to no longer yield a small entering channel. With this logic, we explore several dry channels with sawgrass and other high grounds, finally imagining that we have now overshot the run. Just then we get to a slot on the left that is indeed a shallow run and, not far up on the right, we spy the fence we remember from our first excursion. It is enough to reach this small clarity and so we turn about.

In African and American native folklore, the creative spirit is often a spider from heaven who brings down from the skies a creation that is suspended. This always has amazed me, that land-borne creatures with memory and imagination would envision creation as suspended from this other world. Milton too, when he has Satan take the hero's journey from Hell to the New World, describes our planet as suspended from the palaces of the celestial sphere as "fast by hanging in a golden chain, this pendant earth." What a clever stroke against Copernican wisdom on Milton's part, the earth as a timepiece swinging like a pendulum between the two timeless realms of heaven and hell, precariously above the dark night and the watery abyss.

Here in Blackwater Creek one gets such an interworldly sense. One feels somewhat disjointed like the pendant palm, but also justified by the spider-sown and faintly spinning airplant webs. The jewels of all this wild world of the Seminole Forest are most readily seen in the bolgias of the swamp and the tiny crystalline stairways to heaven. I tuck this pocket watch neatly away, a stolen treasure.