

Twin Mounds

In 1983 the state purchased most of the land between Rock Springs Run and the Upper Wekiva, including a number of important midden sites that belonged to native cultures going back some five thousand years. The two most important mounds sit right on the edge of the mainstream, a half mile north of the entrance of the Little Wekiva. The following describes one of many field trips I have taken with my environmental literature classes to this special place.



Human Bone Mask found near Orange City

*From **Indian Art of Ancient Florida** by permission of Barbara A. Purdy and the University Press of Florida; photography by Roy C. Craven.*

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We are a small tribe of water-watchers as we leave the Wekiva Falls canoe launch: Alicia and Jesse, Marla and James, Laina and Norah, Hanna and Sarah, Ryan and I. Our fading yellow

canoes move out over the sulphurous well water, a snake in five segments, slipping along the narrow channel. This is my River Community honors class, heading out toward the south edge of the mile-long flats just south of Route 46. Turning right, upstream, we pass quite soon the USGS water-flow measuring station and then immediately the river narrows and the tree line rises and the cold 15-20 mph winds recede.

Very soon it appears to be a day of birds rather than bears. I have worn my Florida Black Bear Festival tee-shirt and I must confess, I even rubbed my petoskey-stone bear at the office in the hopes of seeing just once this elusive icon of my Florida dreams. My friend Phares often sees and talks about finding them in this, his neck of the middle Wekiva.

We see immediately an osprey crossing over us on his way to a nest we find later in the second flats. A great blue rises in the air ahead, banking into a back channel, and later we spot him at the foot of the osprey's nest. Crouching in complete neck retrenchment, legs also hidden, he seems a grey stump with a small white flag on top. A little blue heron flies right down river over us and veers off to the west just before encountering the tail end of our now lengthening, now contracting five-segment reptile.

When we gather together the first time, I talk about how the Timucuan natives made their canoes out of pine or cypress logs, carved with stone tools and burnt hollow. They were entirely river people, eating almost exclusively the shellfish and other river critters. Their word for water in all its forms is *ibi* and the canoe they called *tico*.

A pair of buzzards now in the sky to the east are watching each other more than us. The sky is grey and white and black with low billows and only occasional patches of sun. No gators and few turtles are out on the banks or snags. The water feels a little bit warmer than the 60-65 degree air temperature with a wind chill to bristle it. A snowy egret, motionless and tight in the spatterdock, contemplates the higher dimensions of food not eaten. Loping through to a clearing at the right, an American egret, silent in surplice, defines the substance of grace.

It is impossible not to feel excitement at this achievement of our little band of scholar-activists, finally reaching the pinnacle of our field study in this course. We have read all about the history and development of America in *The Land of Rivers* and have tasted the finest literary breads and cakes from *The River Reader*. Tuesday we sat in the archives at Rollins amid treasures of the Florida Collection and just before that studied *The River of Grass* by one of Florida's premiere defenders of our natural heritage. Finally, we have taken the measure of William Bartram's colonial Florida against Bill Belleville's contemporary vision of the St. Johns River so as to build an immediate sense of the flora and fauna.

We have hiked the Seminole Forest uplands, discovering small spring runs, have tasted the flow of the primary boil at Wekiwa Springs State Park, have driven now three times through the full-fast triple lanes of I-4 that support the second worst case of contemporary sprawl east of the Mississippi. All that was prelude to the archaeological evidence of the Wekiva basin and

especially these two mounds which were studied carefully in the early 1990's by Dr. Brent Weisman and his team from the University of South Florida. So today the focus of attention and the heart of our community of the river course is intact, as we seek out the archaeological site called Twin Mounds.

Hanna and Sarah are bringing up the rear and spot our first limpkin. They describe it well as a big brown bird with white specks. I ask if it had a long, slightly curved beak and they confirm what I later can hear, that unique sqawking, "keerieowwww," the accent on the "ow" curving like his beak and tailing off at the end.

Ryan and I stop to scope out a bird, hiding in the low broken sticks of a tree, camouflaged with new green leaves. It looks like a small hawk to me, light streaked breast but no red shoulders. I can't see the tail and it seems to have a hawk's beak, but then when it flies out, its wings are lighter and thinner and wider than a hawk's span. The slender legs show from behind and appear yellow. It seems to have features of two kinds of river dwellers.

When we get near to the location of the mounds—by land, enter the Rock Springs Run State Reserve and go east, down Shell Mound Road (jeep trail) until it ends in a hydric hammock—I shout ahead for the front runners to wait for my lead. From the river, the mounds are not so easy to find. We move behind a large island to the right, past a snag I recognize from before, and under a beautiful fat arch, eight feet high and about as wide, the thick bark of an oak that has fallen since the last time I came this way with a class.

The mighty St. Johns is often miles wide and in spots fills huge lakes such as Monroe and George, but the Wekiva recedes from that magnitude to a stream that averages the width of my quarter-acre lot. But once we step outside the main channel, behind these many islands, the river becomes entirely intimate, both banks overgrown with trees and snags that can easily reach all the way across. No one has any reason to come back here with a saw and open the spaces of the forest bending down over ten to thirty feet of river.

Back here we frighten up four, then six or more, wood ducks. Only Hanna and I get to see them flash off in unison, another river tribe moving up and down the Wekiva day by day. No need to raise any boxes here for their reproduction because dead trees and pileated woodpecker holes are abundant.

I am looking ahead for the mound and think I see it, straight ahead, but then the water turns us right and the elevated brown patch is just dead branches on the left side. The ground rises a little on the right and it seems low to me, but just ahead a huge tree has snapped off in the water, right where Bill and I once saw a large black snake, presumably a moccasin, swim over to the south side of the mound. The large tree at the base of the mound and the actual landing space are familiar, so I am sure now this is the right place.

We have arrived quite quickly in just an hour and I am relieved that we have plenty of time to explore. After we all do some stretching, I give a brief talk about the preciousness of this place, the state's program for preservation of such sites from unlicensed digging, and my own excitement of making contact with ancient inhabitants. I mention the 2000 year-old mortar which Barbara Purdy has documented from the Wekiva river¹ as a reminder of the antiquity and the perdurance of the river community that flourished on this very spot.

Our academic tribe wanders back and forth over the completely overgrown hill. This is called ground-truthing. They have read Brent Weisman's article on his dig here, but now the imagination has a place, a habitat to live in. Signs of the digs that were done are apparent. Pretty soon we are examining pieces of pottery and a stone that looks like the head of a tool for hacking out a canoe. The students are just foraging the surface, perhaps lately eroded by some heavy rains. I keep insisting that nothing should be absconded.

Sooner than I wish, it is time to return. No one wants to explore further upstream because of other commitments, other courses, so we load back up and start to return at top speed. I am always a little disappointed on field trips that students have lives to live beyond a pair of Timucuan shell middens. I count on these experiences to engender the passion to learn more and to write about it in useful ways. We try to imagine what the life of the natives was like and some of us take the measure of the spirits that remain in this wilderness abode.²

¹ *Art and Archaeology of Florida's Wetlands*, p.304-5. Purdy does not mention where it was found.

² Until 2009, the work of these students on behalf of the river was available on the FOWR website as part of The River Classroom.