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The Alapaha

Depending on the amount of rain we get upriver each year, the Alapaha rises and falls at random, and sometimes it seems to swell and shrink for no reason. A mystery that alleviates the oft-times dullness of living in Echols County, Georgia, where little else changes except the weather.

My grandmother crossed that river to marry my grandfather when the nineteenth century was new. And she wore a path through the South Georgia flatwoods, clear across the river, going back for visits.

In the 1930's, my daddy and his brother used to jump into the swollen Alapaha at the Statenville bridge and swim south with the rushing current, eight river miles, to their old homeplace near the Georgia-Florida line. Just for the heck of it.

Later, in the 50's and 60's, my husband and his friends would swim across at the Mayday bridge, ten miles north of Statenville, when the Alapaha was out of banks and the black water boiled from shore to shore and wrung the submerged branches of the tupelos, birches and cypresses. They would dive from the bridge at high-water and come up with handfuls of sand that they hadn't had to plant, hoe or plow.

In summer, when the river was low, a mere creek-width stream the color of melted copper, they would bathe in the evenings, following long hot days picking tobacco or dipping gum in the turpentine woods. And they would fish--catfish, brim and bass are to Echols Countians what manna from heaven was to the Israelites during the exodus.

One young man, who lived in Statenville in the fifties, would go out to the bridge before school each morning and measure the depth of the river and take test samples of the tannic water to send to Atlanta. A real state job, with pay, and those were as scarce as new cars in those days.

My brother once floated a bottle with a message in it downriver from the Statenville bridge and got an answer by mail from a man who lived along the Florida Gulf. The vessel could have ended up as just another bottle on a sandbar between here and there. A herd of swamp cattle, belonging to my grandfather, got hemmed in by the rising river and were spotted swimming downstream with their heads lifted high. And I had a cousin who climbed up on an alligator's back, supposing it was a log.

In Echols County, there are more river tales than snake tales. More traditions than routines.

Sunday afternoons, following dinners-on-the ground at area churches, preachers would wade out with their black Bibles and baptize the newly-saved in the sacred waters of our homeland. Under the shade of an ancient, lone sweetgum, church members would sing "Shall We Gather At the River." Then pray.

Race skirmishes have taken place on this hallowed ground; Indian battles have been fought here. Lessons have been learned, and forgotten.

In the good old days, before sunning was bad for your skin, I used to bake whole days with my friends on the coarse white sand near the Mayday bridge. I picnicked there with my three children, and scouted for driftwood and dug mussels with day-moon eyes. My children are born of the blackwater; they are essence of river and sun.

That was before drugs, before murder and rape became sports.

The same banks I sunned on soon became littered with beer bottles and paper and objects it won't do to name. Still, a couple of times a year, the river would come up and flush the riffraff from beneath the bridge and the rubbish downriver where it would lodge on tussocks and snags and decorate the Alapaha for Fourth of July celebrations.

But things are looking up: last summer, two local men decided to clean up the beach at the Mayday bridge. Each evening, after work, they would canvass the sandy shores and even the steep banks where tree roots metamorphose into moccasins. Gathering trash in white plastic bags. They would wade out into the slips of dark water and feel with their bare feet for broken bottle necks. Martins wheeping and wheeling in the topaz light, then flying to roost among the steel girders of the concrete bridge with its woom-shish woom-shish sounds of traffic passing seam to seam overhead. Shallows streaming over scalloped sand would burn hot as the setting sun. The men would stay till they had to leave, with their truck lights sweeping out across the clean sand and shadowy gullies and the white bridge with its

painted names of lovers who have long since become enemies. Next day, the two men would come back and pick up after the night crew of party-people. They hung trash bags from tree limbs to encourage the violators to drop their Solo cups inside. All summer the two men kept up their patrol; and for once, last fall, when the river came up again, and the red tupelo berries floated downriver with the cupped gold leaves of the maples, Echols County hadn't contributed to the riot of colorful garbage along the river route to the sea.