

Making the PBS Film “In Marjorie’s Wake”: Navigating the Territory Between the Hero’s Journey and a Floating Opera

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The golden afternoon light that settles across a water-soaked Florida river landscape seems unlike any other in the world. It particularly does right here on a spit of dry prairie where the Econlockhatchee flows into the much broader St. Johns.

The two women who are cinematically retracing a river journey Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings once made on the St. Johns are setting up their tents for the night. They are doing so inside a hammock of sabal palms, a slightly higher berm of rich earth where slender, gray trunks poke out of the rich delta like giant pipe stems, each crowned with a feathery spray of green. Nearby, the skeleton of a large cow lies almost intact, its white bones picked clean by the black-headed vultures. Three sandhill cranes glide overhead, crying to each other in that haunting way that they do. Finally, they rise

so high that they vanish into the heavens, so completely gone as a mirage.

Our film crew piles onto the flat deck of a platform boat and pushes away from the shore, continuing to film the women and their tents and the palm hammock as we go. The sky here in early autumn is wondrous, cumulus billowing out across the wide prairie just like it does down in the Glades. The low grassy marsh of this upper river has an exquisite subtropical character to it, revealed in the robust colors of plants and wildflowers that pulse in great waves of ever-changing light.

We had earlier navigated Puzzle Lake, which Rawlings had once described as a “blue smear through the marsh” during her own river journey. It is still very much of a blue smear, as sublime and enigmatic as it was 75 years ago, and in a Florida that has lost so much, that gives me great hope.

Our boat carefully follows a shallow channel, weaving its way through the walls of sedge and rush grasses, until the palm hammock and the tents and the cow skeleton disappear into the landscape, as fully gone as the sand hill cranes.

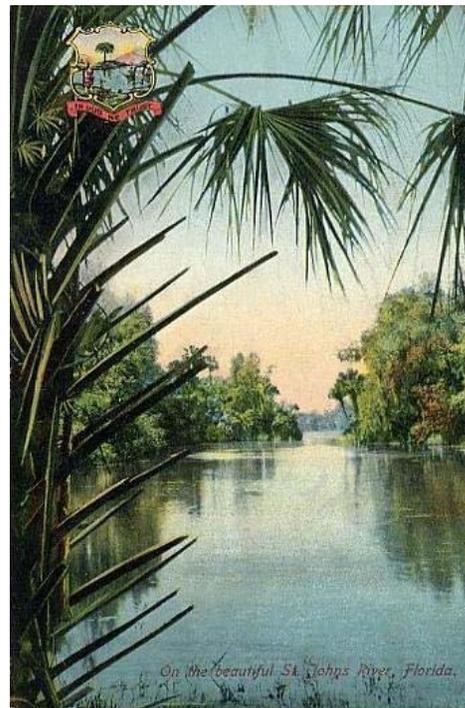
We close on the houseboat we've anchored downstream a couple of miles in deeper water. Once aboard, I walk the ladder up to the roof of the boat. It's a rise of only a few feet but it's high enough to let me see all I need of a natural world entirely comprised of wild marsh and palms and random smears of blue stretching from one end of the horizon to the other.

The sun melts into the flat wet earth and the bronze light is replaced by scarlet. Soon, there is no color at all, only darkness, and it consumes the world around me in the most complete way, creating a Florida night unlike any other you will experience in a theme park or a neighborhood or on a road. It seems as if the dark has even absorbed sound, until finally, I hear the elegiac call of the barred owls, drifting to me from somewhere far away.

Back on the palm hammock camp site, the women have huddled into their tents, using small lights to read and to write in notebooks they have brought along. Suddenly, they hear the sound of a strange outboard motor, coming closer to them on the Econ. Then a strong male voice calls out to them from the shore, asking if he can come up to visit.

This literary-nature film project, which at first seemed like a lighthearted adventure, is now more real than life itself. If there is a continuum between place and time, between recorded behaviors and human memory, then this moment in the dark river night is still searching for interpretation.

The purpose of this exercise, after all, is to produce a documentary film. And if any moment or idea or thought is to be made real, it has to be captured in the postmodern realm of high definition video. Otherwise, it drifts away into the ether, as completely gone from sight as the dark prairie and the cow skeleton and the sand hill cranes.



Colorized postcard from the book "Florida's American Heritage River: Images from the St. Johns Region," courtesy of Bill Belleville

It was the year 2000 and our fledging not-for-profit nature film group, Equinox Documentaries, Inc., was prospecting for a broadcast film idea that would express the best of our intentions. We were looking for a documentary concept that would not just celebrate the rare natural landscape of Florida. It would also address the related, if illusive, "sense of place". In that pre-Recession time, our state was growing at an alarming rate, and we were losing an average of 20 acres of natural land an hour to growth that was more often "sprawl" than not. When the native landscape vanished, the cultural component associated with "sense of place" was in jeopardy as well.

I believed the dynamic driving the loss went far deeper than just poor decisions on the part of politicians who were allowing the out-of-control growth. Three out of every four residents—the people electing these officials—were not born in Florida. From the perspective of natural history and geography, our peninsular state was off the mainland grid for most of these newcomers.

Sensibilities attuned to more solid, geologically-understood landscapes back on the continent often had trouble figuring out the biological nuances of Florida's complex system of wetlands, rivers, and springs. With little understanding or connection to this water-driven peninsula, it was simply easier to allow—or ignore—the sort of growth that was obliterating Florida's singular natural landscape.

In more closely examining the "newcomer" equation, though, I also realized that there were plenty of transplanted residents who did "get it." Indeed, most of the writers and poets who had historically created some of the best and most insightful works about Florida weren't born here. That list was a long one and included earlier "newcomers" such as William Bartram, John James Audubon, Sidney Lanier, Hart Crane, Ernest Hemingway, Elizabeth Bishop, James Merrill, Marjorie Stoneman Douglas, Archie Carr, Marjory Kinnan Rawlings, Patrick Smith and many more---and that didn't even begin to plumb the long and distinguished list of artists who came here from somewhere else and "got it." aesthetically.

Certainly, being new to Florida didn't preclude an understanding of it. Indeed, I

arrived here as a transplanted young adult seeking my own fortune. Gradually, I came to realize that my new residency status carried with it a heightened sense of responsibility that required me to both learn and to *see* in new ways. Despite all the myths and hyperbole that had been grafted onto Florida over time, there was still a very real and complex “vernacular” of nature and place at work here.

I talked with Bob Giguere, the producer who co-founded our film group about seeing Florida in a new way. I also chatted with friends and supporters on the board of our grassroots nonprofit. We all agreed that a documentary that simply “preached” would do little good to change anybody's mind about the sublime values of Florida. After all, the intent of creating a nonprofit film group was to fill the void left by a mainstream media that defaulted to the more simplistic black-and-white depictions of our state.

As a guy who made his living writing essays, articles, and books in the genre of creative nonfiction, I instinctively gravitated towards literature that relied on a fact-driven “narrative.” I figured, as humans, we had spent most of our existence as a species

telling each other *stories*---whether we did so around a campfire or more recently, through the printed word. This was not a new concept; Aristotle examined the need for *story* 2300 years ago in his *Poetics*.

More recently, mythologist Joseph Campbell suggested the human need for a story was so powerful it was almost genetically bred into us. Campbell even identified the classic story as the “hero’s journey” in which a person leaves the ordinary world and travels to an unknown and perhaps threatening place, returning with a treasure to share with the world. Metaphorically, that “treasure” could be valuable information—perhaps even wisdom.

Could we identify an intriguing and literate story about nature and sense of place in Florida that we could bring to film—one that would transcend the divisive politics of growth and appeal to the more sublime qualities of both the intellect and the emotions of our prospective audience ? If we could, we might be able to set the stage to allow viewers to connect on a deeper level with the reality of the Florida environment. From that more visceral connection might then come a true land

ethic—one that would be far more resistant to the obsession with pell-mell growth and all its destructive consequences.

Board member Leslie Poole, then an adjunct professor in the Environmental Studies Department at Rollins College, had an intriguing idea. A few years earlier, she and a good friend had launched a two-woman boat trip down the St. Johns River in imitation of the excursion that Pulitzer Prize winning author Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings once made on the St. Johns in 1933 with her friend Dessie Smith. Rawlings wrote poignantly about that trip. Her chronicle appeared first as an article in *Scribner's Monthly*, and then later as the chapter entitled "Hyacinth Drift" in her book *Cross Creek*. Poole and her friend—both veteran journalists—also co-authored their own magazine story about their modern river trip.

The concept of transporting such an excursion to film resonated right away. And, even though we then had virtually no funding for a full hour-long broadcast-quality documentary, we agreed to again retrace author Rawlings' "Hyacinth Drift" trip on the St. Johns. Except this time, we would have video cameras along to electronically record it.

This would *not* be a feature film or a historic reenactment with participants dressed in period costumes and pretending to be the original literary team. Instead, it would be a real excursion on the contemporary St. Johns by two modern women. Rawlings' connection to nature and her original trip with Smith would be referenced whenever possible. But we would also pay close attention to both the condition of the contemporary river, as well as to the culture it had shaped. There would naturally be room for real discovery in the course of the journey because rivers were anything if not organic in their flow.

I thought there would also be a fine symmetry if our trip participants reflected the personal contrasts between Rawlings and Smith. Those contrasts were grounded in the reality that author Rawlings was a Northern transplant who had only been in Florida for five years—and, while adventurous and increasingly savvy to the lay of the land and its people—was still considered a raw newcomer to her neighbors at Cross Creek. Smith, her companion on the trip, was a gritty native sportswoman who could shoot, hunt and fish as well as any of the men. Indeed, in a clear acknowledgment of the

gulf between them, Smith—who was a decade younger than Rawlings—called her new friend "Young-un." Rawlings had written that Smith did so "with much tenderness, pitying my incapacibilities."¹

Poole, a Florida native whose family owned an 18-foot center console sport boat, was a avid hiker and fisher who had spent a lot of time on the rivers of Florida at the helm of the craft. In a vague sort of way, she would naturally function as our Dessie. I searched inside my own mental Rolodex to prospect for a companion who would be both a relative newcomer as well as a good sport. The most relevant seemed to be Jennifer Chase, a talented musician, composer, and playwright from Jacksonville. Chase, a transplant from New England, also had few of the outdoor skills Poole had developed over the years in Florida. But she was sporty and up for an adventure—just as Rawlings had once been.

Certainly, it helped that the women each had a good sense of humor—as that would come in handy with the long extended hours of boating and filming on the river over eight or nine days. And, the capacity for good humor provided more symmetry: although Rawlings was afflicted by dramatic mood

swings during her adult life, those who knew her reported that she "loved to laugh." Smith had her own special brand of humor. Once she reportedly sent friends up north what she told them was an exotic, foreign dog. Her friends later responded they were having difficulty getting it to take to a leash. The "dog" turned out to be a possum.

With our river "team" in place, we then begin to consider the logistics of the trip. We would research as much of that era at the Creek as we could, even traveling to the Smathers Library at the University of Florida where Rawlings had left most of her manuscripts, papers, photos, and other mementos. We would consult with the Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings Society and more carefully study what Rawlings had written about Florida and the St. Johns vis-à-vis *Cross Creek*, *The Yearling*, and *South Moon Under* in particular.

I had also published a book about the St. Johns entitled *River of Lakes: A Journey on Florida's St. Johns River*,² so I would also revisit my own research about this stretch of the middle river. We would raise enough funding to pay for a contract film crew and associated production costs, as well as boat and gear rental. We would aim for a national

PBS market since the literary-adventure nature of the story seemed most at home there.

As we were more closely examining how we'd construct this river journey, we became aware of a very timely reality: Dessie Smith, at ninety-six, was still very much alive and living over near Crystal River. Poole, who originally had been in touch with Dessie when planning her own river excursion, suggested we do whatever we could to capture Dessie on film as soon as possible. Dessie's inimitable memories of her river trip would create a very authentic link for our story, providing valuable footage that could be woven into our contemporary river narrative.

Giguere and I made plans to meet with and film Dessie, and in 2001, we found ourselves at Smith's Wahoo Ranch on the Lake Rousseau section of the Withlacoochee River. Dessie was a remarkable woman, every bit as accomplished in her independence as Rawlings had been in her literature throughout her life. Orphaned at twelve, she not only survived, she flourished in the rough and raw interior of Florida's scrub and hammocks. Among other things, she became the first licensed female pilot

and the first female hunting and fishing guide in Florida. After serving in the military as a first lieutenant with the WAC in World War II, she returned to Florida to build her own hunting and fishing lodge.

As Rawlings' river companion in the "Hyacinth Drift" chapter of *Cross Creek*, Dessie was a strong presence indeed. When Rawlings wrote that she had "lost touch with the Creek" and became depressed, it was Dessie who came to the rescue by suggesting they undertake the epic river journey. "I talked morosely with my friend Dessie. I do not think she understood my torture because she is simple and direct and completely adjusted to all living," Rawlings wrote. "She only knew that a friend was in trouble."

In "Hyacinth Drift," Rawlings hints that her "trouble" had to do with a man. As the chapter concludes with the women completing their adventurous trip and returning to Cross Creek via the Ocklawaha, Rawlings expressed gratitude in her newly earned perspective: "...when the dry ground was under us, the world no longer fluid, I found a forgotten loveliness in all the things having nothing to do with men....Because I

had known intimately a river, the earth pulsed under me.”

That was the sort of eloquent wisdom I had always loved in Rawlings’ writing. But, in this case, it needed to be interpreted with real live facts. It was now a matter of record that Marjorie’s marriage had been breaking up then and her college sweetheart Charles Rawlings was leaving—or had left—the Creek. “Losing touch with the Creek” was not a writer’s mere construct, but a profound event in Rawlings’ life. It was an event that, thanks to the chance for a river adventure, provided context. Learning to immerse herself in the wild liquid nature of Florida helped the formally educated “Yankee” author more fully trust her senses as well as the vernacular of her newly adopted Cracker world.

When we arrived at the Wahoo Ranch, Dessie and her caretaker graciously welcomed us with a bounty of food and drink, and we sat around an oversized dinner table made of a large, polished slab of Southern red cedar and got to know each other a bit. We figured the most appropriate way to set up the video interview with Dessie was to get as close as we could to the water. So soon, we were out on a dock on

her property on the shore of the Withlacoochee.

As we prepared to shoot an interview with Dessie in a chair on the dock, Giguere realized that the dock railings obscured the natural background of water and cypress. A much higher stool was located and brought to the dock in order to raise Dessie above the obstruction. Dessie was stiff with age and unable to mount the higher stool, so I bent and put both of my arms around her and, as gently as I could, lifted her to the higher platform of the stool. When I released her, she smiled broadly and said: “Ummm-ummh...it’s been a long time since I had a man around me like that!”

I was both humored and touched by that, impressed with the endearing spirit of this woman who throughout her life had walked a fine line between being a character in a work of literature and a genuine heroine from the rugged Cracker scrub. Indeed, when Marjorie and her husband Charles first moved here, there were barely 1.3 million people in Florida, and the great majority lived along the coast. At the time, Florida was one of our country’s most sparsely settled states.

Then the camera rolled, and Dessie talked about the woman she knew as Marj. When the young Rawlings couple first settled into the Cross Creek farm home with its seventy-two acres of citrus in 1928, they had counted on the grove providing them with an income while Charles wrote his boating articles for outdoor magazines and Marj wrote her poetry and short stories. But the farm had been neglected for several years, said Dessie, and the newcomers—with little experience living off the land in Florida—“were just not going to make it.”

Dessie made it a point to befriend them and showed Marj how to hunt and fish and otherwise make a subsistence living as others did at the Creek. Marj loved to cook and entertain, sharing culinary feasts that relied on fresh garden vegetables, farm animals, wild game, and fish. And then, the Rawlings marriage fell apart.

Dessie knew of the split and saw how it affected her friend’s state of mind. As a woman of action, Dessie figured a good adventure would be the salve Marj needed to get beyond the moment. On camera, Dessie explained she suggested the St. Johns River trip to Marj after an evening of “sitting around and drinking some of Leonard

[Fiddia’s] good ‘shine.’ He aged it and it was almost like bonded whiskey.”

“We had a couple...three of those, and we’re talking about fishing. So I said: ‘Marj, I’ve had a yen to go out on the St. Johns from its head to where it turns off there to the Ocklawaha. How about it? Would you like to do that?’”

Marj thought that was a great idea—but then changed her mind in the cold sober light of the morning, “I wouldn’t let her back out,” says Dessie. Using a Dutch oven, Marj would handle the cooking chores—“by then, I knew she was a good cook”—and Dessie would drive the boat, fishing or hunting for food when needed.

While the southern edge of Puzzle Lake where the woman would launch their wooden jon boat wasn’t exactly the headwaters, a two-year drought had made much of the marshy upper river south of there nearly impassable, clogging it with shoals and vegetation. Although Marj studied the U.S.G.S. maps of the river she brought along, both women soon realized a map wasn’t up to the challenge of charting a natural channel that, at Puzzle Lake, was

more of a subtle, shape-shifting contour through a wet, shallow prairie.

When they first launched, Dessie explained, a breeze across the water riffled it enough to hide the direction of the major downstream current—and the related channel that would be below. So, she grabbed a handful of soggy debris and released it *under* the surface to see which way it would flow. Eventually the natural channel was revealed in this way.

On paper, Marj would attribute the navigational clues to following the drift of the buoyant water hyacinths—thus, the eventual river story was entitled “Hyacinth Drift.” In practical terms, the metaphor of the drift was valid either way. It helped chronicle a keystone experience in which Rawlings, the cerebral newcomer, was beginning to allow her senses and the immediacy of the moment to trump all else. If the author returned from an unknown and mythical place with a treasure that enriched her own life, she would also share her newfound wealth with the world, thus actualizing Campbell’s mythical “hero’s journey.”

In our particular moment in time, here on the edge of the Withlacoochee, it was clear that Dessie had an abiding personal connection with the Florida rivers she had hunted and fished most of her life. I asked Dessie what she found so fascinating about rivers. She paused for a moment and then looked up. Her answer was almost zen-like in its truth and simplicity: “Well...I just always like to see what’s around the corner....”

After the filming on Dessie’s dock was completed, we returned to east central Florida, buoyed with the footage we had gathered. As it all settled in, I more fully appreciated the flesh-and-blood dynamics of the trip in a time and place where females were seldom exalted for their independence. As it did, my respect for both women increased immeasurably. And then, a few months later, Dessie passed away.

Back home, Giguere and I continued to work at our “day jobs” of producing and writing while also meeting regularly to plan for the film. We had now entitled it “In Marjorie’s Wake: Rediscovering Rawlings, a River and Time.”

It began to strike me as to how many disciplines were coming to bear on this project. The list included geography, weather, cartography, navigation, sustenance living, culture, and of course literature. To those essential realities, we were also adding a whole new set of postmodern behaviors—from the use of a GPS and advanced archival research to digitally-mastered videography, scripting in a computerized format, and eventually, post-production editing. Nonetheless, if there was a single one-word concept that still connected this project to the historic journey, it was *vernacular*—of trying to understand the luxuriant particulars of nature, of culture, and of place.



Dessie Smith 1933, courtesy of the Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings Collection, George A.

*Smathers Libraries, University of Florida,
Gainesville*

Rawlings was to gradually find an intermittent joy in the comfort of nature, and in her deepening relationship with it. “I do not know how one can live without some small place of enchantment to turn to,” she wrote. “There...is an affinity between people and places.”³

More recently, Pulitzer winning biologist and author Edward O. Wilson has described this affinity as “biophilia”—an innate connection humans have with nature. It’s a visceral bond, explains Wilson, that comes from a long and deep immersion as a species in the natural world over the course of hundreds of thousands of years. “We humans need natural places to exalt,” writes Wilson, “to reconnect with the spiritual and genetic memories to help us transcend the egocentricity of our modern world.”⁴ Although often described a “regionalist” as a writer, Rawlings disdained that label in a talk to the National Council of Teachers of English in 1939. In that presentation, she drew a clear line between literature that comes from an inner reverence, love, and understanding of people and place, and literature that exploits quaint customs or local color and betrays the people it

represents. In short, Rawlings exulted in the vernacular, and by doing so, was able to communicate more universal truths we all share.

As we moved more deeply into our own film research, I made every effort to “revisit” the Cross Creek and the Florida of 60 and 70 years ago. I wanted on a deeper level to understand that connection, to allow myself the reverence that Rawlings, Smith, and others had for the particulars that enriched their place in time.

Although I had seen much of the St. Johns during the earlier research for my book on that river, I had often done so by motorized boat and sometimes, with others, including scientists, who helped me better know the boundaries of the river. Now I made it a point to return to the middle St. Johns and its tributaries by kayak, often with friends, to refresh my own sensibilities. I was more compelled than ever to *feel* the river experience than I was to collect data about it.

In this same way, Giguere and I began to travel throughout the basin of the “Hyacinth Drift” journey by ourselves to shoot what is commonly known as “B-roll” in the film

industry. B-roll is a compilation of background images that more fully paint a larger and more complex picture of the A-roll interviews and actions that actually take place during the eventual trip. B-roll in this film included underwater images of fish and aquatic plants at the springs where Rawlings would go to crab and fish, as well as terrestrial animals like wildcats and plants like the native magnolia tree and the exotic water hyacinth.

In the Ocala National Forest, we visited The Yearling Trail to film the very real historic landscape Rawlings had written of in her most popular novel, *The Yearling*. There, we carefully walked to the bottom of the steep-sided sinkhole where the fictional Baxter family went to gather their drinking water, knelt down next to the small sand boils near Silver Glen Spring where the Jody built his flutter-mill. We also saw the cemetery where the Rueben Long family was buried. The Longs, among the last homesteaders in the scrub here before it was designated as the Ocala National Forest, had generously shared stories about subsistence living with Rawlings, telling how a young boy in their clan once adopted a yearling deer. Clearly, the Longs were the archetypes for the Baxter clan of *The Yearling*.

By 2006, we received a generous matching grant of \$50,000 from the Lastinger Family Foundation and then scurried about to find a series of smaller donations to equal it. That allowed us to begin the actual on-river excursion that was required to produce “In Marjorie’s Wake.”

Despite our extensive pre-filming research and planning, the replication of the “Hyacinth Drift” adventure still had plenty of room for interpretation and discovery. We were filming a documentary so it would not be “scripted” until after real-world action, comment, and dialogue were captured on video. So, we would take great care to shoot every possible aspect of the theme while on the river over the next eight or nine days. As with nonfiction research in the print world, it was far better to compile too much than to leave anything out.

Author John Barth once wrote a farcical novel entitled *The Floating Opera*. Metaphorically, if an audience remained seated on a shore, the scenes of a theater play would gradually float past them on a river in a great aquatic parade—revealing itself in separate chunks, sometimes coherent, sometimes not. Life, as Barth

reminded us, often happened in the same way.

Indeed, we would tell our story by drifting our own rafts of narrative down this real-life river, making in-course adjustments now and then for composition, scale, and coherency. In truth, if the original Rawlings team was more representative of Campbell’s hero’s journey, our replication was likely closer to Barth’s *Floating Opera*. Certainly, on our own journey, we hoped for coherency.

Regardless, for our film to work, we needed at least three boats: a houseboat to serve as a barracks and chow room for the crew; a smaller, motorized platform-style boat from which to shoot Poole and Chase; and a boat for the two women.

More often than not, I would be aboard the boat with Poole and Chase, along with videographer Tom Postel. My role was to provide some context on the natural and cultural history of the river, while Postel’s was to capture natural dialogue between the women and to record what they saw from the boat. While our presence compromised the adventurous quality of the journey, there was simply no other way to electronically

chronicle the up close and personal action when the women were underway.



Charles and Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, courtesy of the Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings Collection, George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida, Gainesville

Our journey begins. On day one, Poole prepares to launch her center console motor boat not far from where Rawlings and Smith began their own river trip off Highway 50 near the dilapidated Midway fish camp. At the launch site, Chase comes aboard with her bag of gear after a drive down from Jacksonville.

It is a crisp and clear morning in early autumn, a near-perfect day to be on any Florida river. This is, however, one of the most difficult stretches of the St. Johns to navigate with its shallow indistinct channels braided through the wet prairie that is Puzzle Lake.

And so, with absolutely no intention of doing so, Poole actually does run aground several times in Puzzle Lake—not in imitation of the historic trip, but because the river here still holds many secrets close to its heart.

That night, Poole and Chase camp out by themselves near the mouth of the Econlockhatchee on the downstream side of Puzzle Lake. We film them setting up camp on a picturesque palm hammock in the early twilight and then return to the houseboat several miles away. Later, that evening, some men traveling the Econ in a small motor boat unexpectedly call out to the women who are alone in their tents. It is a pure and unplanned moment during which the fear of being a woman alone on a wild river is as real as it has ever been.

And so, the excursion gradually unfolds in this way, using a blend of real world encounters with some strategically planned “opportunities.”

As the women exit the broad Lake Harney in the boat, Poole lets Chase take the helm—and Chase comes within a few feet of running into a channel marker at high speed. As they prepare to set up camp along the

wild shore of a beach-hammock known as “Brickyard Slough” downstream of Lake Harney, the women run across some airboating bow-hunters. We chat with them on-camera, and then one unexpectedly takes Chase for a ride in his airboat—an event spontaneous enough that it escapes being captured on film. Later, the airboaters return in the evening to show the women a young yearling deer they had killed, and the crew is roused from the nearby houseboat to record the event.

As we continue the journey, we make sure to allow enough time for the river and its singular nature to emerge as a “character.” By doing so, it allows our modern sojourners the opportunity to honestly express their feelings about it and compare it to what Rawlings had chronicled.

At Lake Monroe, the women make a point to stop at the marina on the south shore at Sanford since one of the most characteristic moments of the original story unfolded here. Historically, the purpose of the stop was simply to refuel. But the spontaneity of that moment took on near-mythic qualities. This was the event in which a rich yachting offered to help Rawlings and Smith refuel by dispatching his limousine to a gas station.

But his “pink petticoats” wife intervened as she needed the limo to go to church.

Rawlings and Smith were refueled—but only after the church obligation was met.

Although we would sprinkle select video moments with Dessie throughout the film, this was the one in which she would retell the entire story herself, explaining how the affluent yachting stood and waved until their boat was out of sight. In the post-production editing, we switch from the real-life moment of Poole and Chase leaning against a railing in front of a large yacht to the edited take of Dessie describing her feelings about the encounter: “I bet that rich son of bitch wishes he were going with us.” And then she laughed a hearty, good natured laugh.

The filming continues in this manner, with a blend of natural happenstance intermingled with a few “scheduled” stops to illustrate relevant aspects of nature, history, and art. Near the mouth of the tributary of the Wekiva, we meet briefly with Fred Hitt, a retired judge who authored *Wekiva Winter*, a compelling book of historical fiction about the Native Americans who lived along the river during the time of early European contact.

Downstream from there, we also stop at Blue Spring State Park, the natural manatee over-wintering sanctuary. Poole points out that the 18th century naturalist and artist William Bartram had chronicled his own visit here in the 1770s. Indeed, the naturalist expressed deep awe over the mystical Florida springs after visits to Blue and Salt. Those descriptions later inspired the Romantic poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge to write “Kubla Khan.”

Our stop at Blue also gives us a chance to examine how art can be influenced by nature in many ways. In considering this, I had earlier contacted noted Jacksonville Landscape artist Jim Draper to ask him to meet us at Blue. The point was for Draper and Chase to organically chat about how the river and its springs have the capacity to inspire.

During the talk, Draper describes the essential role of the artist as a “guide” who takes images of nature to the larger community—painlessly introducing them to the aesthetics and encouraging them to appreciate it firsthand.

(Ironically, while waiting for our flotilla to arrive, Draper sketched the mouth of Blue

Spring where it flows into the St. Johns. Later he fleshed out the sketch, expanding it into a large painting. That art was later used as the cover image for an album of original songs that Chase composed and sang to express her feelings about the river journey.⁵ Like the film, the captivating album was entitled “In Marjorie’s Wake;” some of the music was used to score the film. This was, the best I could figure, a working example of life imitating art imitating life—compounded several times.)

After the women navigate their way into the enormous Lake George, they head for the home of attorney Bill Jeter and Deanne Clark on Drayton Island in the northwest corner of the lake. Jeter, then president of the Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings Society, would have a chance to chat about the author’s work—and to explain how he was living smack in the middle of the geography Rawlings once used to ground her stories in the realities of Florida’s landscape.

The overnight stop on Drayton also gave us a chance to create a dinner party in the very best spirit of Rawlings, who had elevated the act of cooking for her friends into a celebration of goodwill and abundance. As Professor Anna Lillios points out in *The*

Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings Journal of Florida Literature, Rawlings explained her own affinity for selecting and preparing food in *Cross Creek Cookery*. In that book, says Lillios, “Rawlings affirms [the] notion that food is a means of reaching the spirit.” Rawlings had written that people are “hungry for food and drink—not so much for the mouth as for the mind, not for the stomach, but for the spirit.”⁶

Scholar Carolyn Jones explores that notion even more closely in her essay, “Nature, Spirituality and Homemaking in Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings’ *Cross Creek*.” Jones claims that “Cooking and hospitality become metaphors for spirituality and are moments of self-expression....The memory of food shared and loved reveals the ritual dimension of cooking: that cooking is understanding proportion and creating order.”⁷

And so, within that context, Poole’s friend and original companion on her river trip, Heather McPherson, had spent most of the day at Jeter’s house cooking an extensive dinner using recipes from *Cross Creek Cookery*. As a journalist, McPherson had evolved into a food writer and was well

known in the region for her own culinary art.

That night, we feast on all that McPherson could find that was local—just as it had been in the kitchen of Cross Creek: blue crab, gator, hearts of palms, and much more. Jeter supplies the dinner party with fine imported wine. Local island friends, such as writer Herb Hiller and artist Mary Lee Adler, attend, as does Equinox board member Teri Sopp from Jacksonville. My friend Michelle Thatcher, who helped during the earlier river scouting, drives up to join us from Altamonte Springs. Jeter toasts the evening, and in particular, “Mrs. Rawlings,” who would have surely appreciated the ineffable, life-affirming links between the particulars of people and food and place.

In an essay about the event, I later wrote: “[Rawlings] infectious laughter would have joined with our own, a river celebration awash in a fusion of art, nature, literature, and time....I sip on a glass of wine and think of others who have been on this island before our arrival, and if the earth spins favorably, will be on it long after we leave.

And now, later in the evening on the verandah with the warm light of the house glowing from one side and the pitch-black of [Lake George] consuming the other, I think of us all as tiny life shards caught in the slow but inextricable resin-drip of time. Part of the moment surges on. But part of the moment also remains, captured forever in the golden memory light like an insect in amber—the kingfisher’s cry, the mythic river celebration of life, friends physically vanished but never fully gone.”⁸

The next day, Poole and Chase visit nearby Salt Springs where Chase snorkels in the run and around the limestone vents. Salt also gives us a chance to remember Rawlings’ penchant for coming here to catch blue crabs for her table and to use a wonderful archival photo of the author jigging a blue crab here from a small wooden boat.



Rawlings crabbing near Salt Springs, courtesy of the Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings Collection, George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida, Gainesville

Then we head out of Lake George downstream to the mouth of the Ocklawaha. Earlier we had been given a box with Dessie Smith’s ashes, and there at the river mouth in a moment of poignancy that could never be scripted, Poole gently releases them to the river’s flow. As Dessie’s ashes drift off, preparing to round the next corner, Chase—without her guitar or any enhancement—sings “Amazing Grace.”

Then, we follow this old tributary upstream until it abruptly ends at the Rodman dam, the reservoir physically preventing us from completing the historic trip route. We knew the Rodman would conclude the water portion of the trip, and so we return home,

planning to drive back to Cross Creek by car in another week.

As explained by Rawlings, the Creek itself is the “flowing of Lochloosa Lake into Orange Lake.” Orange Lake is connected by its own outflow to the Ocklawaha. “Cross Creek” is an actual creek, of course, but it is also the name of the settlement that was once sparsely clustered around it.

Once here, we film Marjorie’s old farm, now memorialized as the Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings Historic State Park. We chat on camera with some of the rangers dressed in period costume about the attraction of the historic site for visitors. We learn that the steady but modest flow of literary pilgrims to Cross Creek grew exponentially after the release of the feature film *Cross Creek* with Mary Steenburgen, Peter Coyote, Rip Torn, and others in 1983. The film itself was a ménage of the novels *Cross Creek* and *The Yearling* intermixed and retold with a good dose of creativity. As visitation to the site has increased, so has the settlement around it. We visit the garden, the rebuilt barn, the tenant house. Poole and Chase sit together on the back porch and reminisce about the journey, and what it meant to them.

From the farm, we have one last stop, but it is a significant one. It is a visit to the home of J.T. (Jake) Glisson, whose family were the closest neighbors to Rawlings when she lived at the Creek. Indeed, as an adult, Glisson wrote “The Creek” in 1993, an engaging memoir about that childhood experience.⁹

After returning from art school, Glisson has lived in the Cross Creek area all of his life and now lives on the far shore of Orange Lake only four and a half miles from where he grew up. Glisson and his wife greet us graciously, and we spend much of the afternoon talking with him about his memories of Rawlings and the Creek. Glisson credits the visit of artist N.C. Wyeth at the Creek when he was eleven as a pivotal moment that led to his own career as an illustrator.

Rawlings herself had repeatedly yearned for a young male son, a yearning that in some way was satisfied in print by Jody Baxter and in real life by Glisson and others. Certainly, Jake’s boyhood delight in building “flutter-mills” at the Creek was transferred almost intact to Jody Baxter’s affinity for them.

We spend most our time with Jake out by the fence at the back of his property overlooking Orange Lake. Jake is generous in his remembering, helping us to revisit a moment in time that, in his heart, still endures. Perceptively, he explains there are actually “four Cross Creeks.” He describes first the real Cross Creek that was far off the “grid” of both electricity and of socialization, a iconoclastic place of hardscrabble, subsistence fishers, many of whom did whatever they could to survive—legal or not—by catching, trapping or shooting fish, frogs, and alligators. A second Creek was created by Rawlings in her own “eloquent” perspective of it. A third Creek was born with the romanticizing of the successful *Cross Creek* feature film in 1983. And a fourth Creek exists that’s a fusion of the literary book and the dramatized movie. That one is mostly realized by newcomers who live here in “air conditioned houses with modern appliances while they try to create a link with a mythological time that is no longer here.”

Chase, an independent-minded artist who has traveled widely and lived abroad, says spontaneously to Glisson: “Jake, I’m a little jealous because it sounds like everyone at

Cross Creek was a *character*.” And she means it.

Jake responds, without missing a beat: “Well, we were....Everyone was an *individual* because you had *room* to be one. We were all spread out....Mrs. Rawlings seemed to know that....If you tried to be a ‘character’ today in a condominium with six inch-thick walls, well...they’d ask you to leave.”

We say goodbye to the Glissons at the end of a long day and finally shut down the A-roll portion of the filming. That night, we stay in little cottages near The Yearling Restaurant, the actual Creek itself flowing away into the darkness, only yards away



Jennifer Chase and Leslie Poole during the filming of “In Marjorie’s Wake,” courtesy of Bill Belleville

After returning to our respective homes, Giguere and I traveled one last time for a day of B-roll filming. This trip took us up to the Smathers Library's Special Collection at the University of Florida in Gainesville. I had earlier contacted archivist Flo Turcotte prior to the trip to explain our mission. By the time we arrived, boxes of photos, old letters, original manuscripts, and even home movies of Rawlings were waiting for us. Giguere and I both put on white cotton gloves so as to not afflict ourselves anymore than necessary onto the organic shards of Rawlings' life. Then he set up the camera on a tripod, and I began gently sifting through the boxes to find archival materials to weave into the film.

Here I found an astonishing 1938 map of the Ocala National Forest in which Rawlings had scribbled handwritten notes to identify the real places she had fictionalized in *The Yearling*. The map was used in the 1940s to guide the visiting Hollywood film crew shooting *The Yearling*, starring Gary Cooper as Pa Baxter and Claude Jarmon, Jr. as Jody. And then I held the original typewritten pages of *The Yearling* and *Cross Creek*, letting my fingers retrace the Courier type and penciled-in edit changes Rawlings

herself once made. The experience moved me, to be sure. It was as if the yellowed pages in my hand were far more than processed wooden fragments—for that moment, they became images capturing that ephemeral moment when information passes between the human heart and the human mind and is thrust out by the spirit into the tangible world.

The experience seemed almost ethereal, like capturing the flash of a moment when a spring first bursts forth from the limestone. Surely, the moment of artistic human *satori*, of creative realization, is no less than that. It is simply much better at pretending to be unseen.

Finally, I sat to write the script, carefully screening more than twenty hours of high definition video, excerpting real dialogue and comments, and creating a voice-over narration to fill in the blanks—to cue the audience to the story shards our Floating Opera may have missed.

When I turned it over to Giguere, he edited the A and B-roll footage (including archival images) to the scripted story and then integrates music into the final production. An extended “rough copy” of the film is

first created and then that's distilled down to the final ninety minute documentary. The completed film is premiered by the Enzian Theater in Maitland, and then released for national PBS broadcast for two years via the presenting station, Florida PBS affiliate WPBT of Miami.

Not so long ago, after "In Marjorie's Wake" completed its two-year broadcast run on national PBS stations from New York to Chicago and San Francisco, I received a telephone call. It was from the adult son of Claude Jarmon, Jr., the young actor who had played Jody so well he was awarded a special child's Oscar for his performance. Jarmon's son had seen references to our documentary and read portions of my essays in which I describe the historic landscape at the Creek and in the Ocala National Forest.

The retired actor, now in his early seventies, was visiting his son from California. They were in Florida at this moment, and the man who had once been Jody Baxter wanted to revisit the places where *The Yearling* had once been shot. It would be the first time since that film was made that he had returned to those sites. I described some of the real places—Cross Creek, the sinkhole, the spring in the "Big Scrub," and more.

After the phone call ended, I thought to myself once more about the gestalt of the stories Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings had told, thought about my own time burrowing inside the true nature of Florida, and the solace it has given me. I thought, too, about Joseph Campbell's mythical hero, and how all of us, if we're lucky, might have a chance to explore the unknown at least once in our lifetime, and then to return with a treasure to share with the world. Despite the recreated character of our story, maybe there would a few shards of wisdom revealed—maybe our film could, ever now and again, be realized as more of a Hero's Journey and less of a Floating Opera.

And because this is Florida and life sometimes is surreal, I also thought of the great irony in how the "Old Jody" had just indirectly called me to ask where the "Young Jody" had once been.

I wished Dessie could have been here for that one. We would have a hearty laugh, maybe a jolt of Leonard's good 'shine. And then gone out on the river to see what's around the next corner.

Endnotes

¹ Rawlings recounts her friendship with Dessie in the “Hyacinth Drift” chapter of *Cross Creek*. Rawlings, Marjorie. 1970. *Cross Creek*. New York: Touchstone.

² Belleville, Bill. 2000. *River of Lakes: A Journey on Florida's St. Johns River*. Athens: University of Georgia Press.

³ Rawlings writes about her affinity with place several times in the “Preface” to *Cross Creek*

⁴ These ideas can be found throughout Wilson, Edward O. *Biophilia* 1984. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

⁵ Entitled *In Marjorie's Wake*, the CD has ten songs written by Chase and performed with guitarist Goliath Flores. Songs range from the sublime (“Calderon” and “Lemon Bluff”) to the hilarious (“Brickyard Slough”) Also included is the *IMW* “theme” song, “Welaka” — the name Native Americans first gave to the river itself, and “Kubla Khan” which puts music to the Romantic poet Coleridge's poem by the same name.

⁶ Dr. Lillios' remarks can be found in Volume 14 of *The Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings Journal of Florida Literature*.

⁷ Jones' essay, “Nature, Spirituality and Homemaking in Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings' *Cross Creek*” is part of a larger study of writers and homemakers: Wiley, Catherine, and Fiona R. Barnes, eds. 1996. *Homemaking: Women Writers and the Politics and Poetics of Houses*. New York: Garland.

⁸ These musings are published as part of an *Equinox Documentaries* [Blog entry](#).

⁹ Glisson, J.T. 1993. *The Creek*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida.