

The Suwannee River Valley

By Lars Andersen

It's doubtful that many modern day school kids know Stephen Foster's song "Old Folks at Home" or, as it's commonly known, "Way Down upon the Suwannee River". Even if they did, it's doubtful they'd be moved by this plaintive ode to the "good ol' days" of cotton plantations and slavery. Nonetheless, 150 years after it was written, promoters of the Suwannee still cling to the notion that this ancient ditty is the river's greatest attribute. In reality, the plantation era is just one chapter in man's long association with this beautiful waterway.

Beginning as overflow from Okefenokee Swamp in southeast Georgia, the Suwannee rambles over the border into Florida where it carves a swaggering course, looping first to the northwest and then back to the southeast before finally flowing into the Gulf of Mexico. In all, the river's voyage from the swamp to the Gulf traces a route of about 207 miles, a journey that a straight flying hawk could make in about 110 miles. But her seemingly aimless wanderings have borne fruit.

In the process of carving a 30-foot channel through the underlying limestone, the Suwannee taps into the Floridan aquifer, the vast reservoir of pure, artesian water which flows under the entire state, and provides much of the state's drinking water. At over 200 locations along the river and its tributaries, the exposed aquifer wells up to the surface as crystal clear springs. This is nearly half of the springs in Florida, a State thought to have one of the largest concentrations of springs in the world.

For the earliest Floridians, the springs were important watering holes – both for themselves and the huge mammals, such as mammoths and mastodons around which their nomadic lives revolved. With time, the Suwannee also became an important avenue of travel and trade.

Some of the earliest historical accounts of the area come from Spanish missionaries who lived among the Indians throughout the 1600's. With their base of operations to the east at St. Augustine, the missionaries' main route of travel was by land, along the Mission Trail which forded the river near Charles Spring. Here, Indians acted as ferrymen for the Spaniards, carrying travelers and their supplies across on large canoes.

Near the river's east bank was the mission San Juan de Guacara – Guacara being the Spanish name for the Suwannee. Ironically, the name Guacara didn't stick, but San Juan did. Over the years, the name San Juan was transformed first to San Juanee and eventually to Suwannee.

Much of the early commerce on the river was delegated to the Indians. According to naturalist William Bartram, the Seminoles living near Old Town had "large canoes, which they form out of Cypress trees, some of them commodious enough to accommodate twenty or thirty warriors. In these large canoes they descend the river on trading and hunting expeditions to the sea coast, neighboring islands and keys, quite to

the point of Florida, and sometimes cross the gulph (sic), extending their navigations to the Bahama Islands and even to Cuba.”

In the mid-1800's, with the Seminoles expelled from north Florida, white settlement of the Suwannee river valley began in earnest. It was the beginning of the plantation era (O.K. now you can sing), and to serve the growing population, steam-powered riverboats made their way up the river. They didn't come in the size or numbers that were now plying the waters of her sister rivers, the St. Johns and the Appalachicola, but the Suwannee's riverboat era was considerable and brought with it a cast of colorful characters.

Notably absent from the passenger lists of the Suwannee's riverboats was songster Stephen Foster. It's believed he never even saw the Suwannee. In fact, the song was nearly complete when, in 1851, he first saw the river's name on a map. He had been considering using the Pee Dee River in South Carolina, but Suwannee had just the right sound to fit the canter of his song and the rest is history.

But the steamboat era's days were numbered. During the second half of the 19th century, steel tracks brought commerce and quick transportation into the Florida interior. Ironically, one of the last (and largest) of the Suwannee steamers, the City of Hawkinsville, helped facilitate her own descent into obsolescence. One of her last assignments was the transportation of supplies for construction of a rail bridge at Old Town. Today, the City of Hawkinsville lies intact on the river bottom, within sight of the rail-bridge she helped build.

But, just as the rails were ushering out the steamboat era, they were delivering to the banks of the Suwannee a new cargo – tourists. It was the Victorian Era, a time when people were eagerly strapping on any contraption and swilling down any “elixir” that a fast talking huckster could put in front of them. Florida's artesian springs, the fabled “fountains of youth,” quickly became meccas for well-heeled health seekers from around the country.

Perhaps the greatest demonstration of the waters 'rejuvenating powers' was in the wallets of townfolk at places like White Springs and Suwannee Springs where hotels, liveries and stores were built and economies boomed. For those who couldn't make the trip, the water was bottled and shipped north. There, on the shelves of local pharmacies, alongside 'snake oils' and 'miracle tonics' one could find bottles of Suwannee river spring water, whose labels promised relief from nearly every disorder known to mankind.

By the early 1900's, the 'wellness' craze went dry. The tourists stopped coming and the economic base reverted back to agriculture. But, for all its quirkiness, the spa era had awkwardly stumbled upon the rivers greatest asset – her springs – and foreshadowed things to come.

With a growing understanding of ecosystems and the natural world, the 1960's and '70's brought new attention to the Suwannee. With an ever-increasing awareness of the effects

of pollution, coupled with the fact that much of Florida's fresh water comes from the Floridan aquifer, the springs have taken on a new importance. As easily monitored 'windows' to the aquifer, they serve as convenient gauges to determine the health of our water supply.

As the 21st century dawns, the Suwannee is still remarkably clean. Except for a few notable exceptions, including some phosphate mines operated by Occidental Chemical company and Buckeye Cellulose company's wood processing plants, there is little industry on the river. Other pollution comes from runoff from agriculture which, covers nearly 30% of the basin, and untreated sewage. Most of the communities along the river have no sewage treatment facilities.

The Suwannee River Water Management District is currently working to buy as much sensitive land as possible along the river. Under the State's *Save Our Rivers*, *Preservation 2000* and *Florida Forever* programs, the SRWMD has bought title or conservation rights and easements to nearly a quarter of a million acres in the Suwannee basin and has plans to buy more. By allowing recreational use on over 99% of their properties, it appears to be a winning proposition for both the river and the people living on her banks.

Today, as the plantation era and the songs that went with it, fade further into the past, the Suwannee is quietly redefining herself. Steamboats have been replaced with motor boats. Canoeists and kayakers paddle the waters once reserved for Indian dugouts. And the only one humming the old tune, is the last bastion of "Old Florida" who have yet to realize that the Suwannee's greatness lies not in her past, but in her present - and, with a bit of help, her future.