

THE WAKULLA VOLCANO



Whoever goes to Tallahassee will hear of the mysterious smoke of Wakulla. It was first talked of in the early days when St. Marks was just beginning to be known as a landing-place for Gulf-coast vessels. The sailors saw it, from far out on the water, a tall, slender column, now black like pitch-smoke, now gray like the smoke from burningleaves, and anon white like steam. Its apparent location is in the midst of a swamp, very little above tide-water, wherein grow every conceivable aquatic weed and grass and bush and tree,-a jungle a hundred-fold more difficult to penetrate than any in Africa or India.

Every newspaper attache who happens to get into Middle Florida feels in duty bound to "write up" this smoky phenomenon, but always at a distance, and mostly from hearsay evidence.

He gets upon some high, windy hill near Tallahassee, and looking southeast, sees, or what is quite the same, imagines he sees, the lifting jet trembling against the sky, and he writes. He goes and sees Judge White, and writes more. He sees Col. Brevard, or Mayor Lewis, or Capt. Dyke, and adds some interesting particulars. He interviews an aged darky, who remembers 'when de fus' house wus built in Tallahassee," and prolongs the account. For the rest he draws upon his imagination, or if his imagination should chance to be slow to move, he whets it with a bottle of scuppernong.

The older inhabitants of Tallahassee may, if you are an intimate friend, tell you that once the New York Herald sent a man to explore the swamp, and explain the smoke of Wakulla. You will hear that this man got lost in the jungle, and came near dying, and saw wonderful things, and went away a wiser and silenter correspondent than was ever in that region before or since. You may get from Judge White-a genial and genuinely interesting gentleman-some account of his own effort to reach the foot of that tall smoke-column; how he floundered for miles through mud-slush, water, sawgrass, swampweeds, and bay thickets, millions of mosquitoes and legions of snakes, till, at last he reached a tall pine on a tussock; how he nailed cleats and climbed, and nailed cleats and climbed, up this tree, for a hundred feet or more, and with a field-glass looked at the smoke, still six miles distant; and how his assistants all gave up and deserted him, and how wild jungle was utterly impassable any farther, and how he came down from his tree, and floundered and splashed and swam and dragged and fought his way back to terra firma, sick, discouraged, but more than ever impressed with the strangeness of that smoke rising from the awful quagmire.

And it is no hoax, no illusion, no creation of a vivid Southern imagination. The smoke is there. It has been noted and commented on for nearly fifty years. It has been seen, almost constantly, from the north, the east, the south, and the west. Its location has been

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(Continued)

accurately determined by intelligent observations. It is a permanent and persistent mystery. It is the greatest physical phenomenon in Florida. It is a standing temptation to inquisitive and adventure-some folk,--a constant taunt and banter which nature flaunts in the faces of scientific explorers, and it offers the reward of fame for high achievement to whomsoever will solve its riddle.

It was, as has been said, first noticed by sailors on the Gulf coast, and by sponge-fishers; afterwards it came to be a source of considerable speculation by the early inhabitants of Leon and Wakulla counties. For a time it was believed that it was a sort of beacon or signal made by a band of smugglers or pirates, who had a rendezvous there. Some would explain it by supposing that runaway negroes had a camp in the swamp. During the war it was held to be a colony of deserters from the Confederate army. Since the war it has been dubbed a volcano. Such, in short, is the history of the Wakulla smoke.

(Excerpts from A TALLAHASSEE GIRL, by Maurice Thompson, published in 1881.)

An article on the Wakulla Volcano appeared in the March 15, 1964 issue of THE TALLAHASSEE DEMOCRAT in which writer Hallie Boyles states that the volcano, mentioned so often in novels and other chronicles of Territorial Florida, disappeared after an earthquake in 1886 struck Charleston, S. C. and killed 60 people. The same quake rang churchbells in St. Augustine, caused water to disappear in Lake Jackson north of Tallahassee, and a dry well to start flowing in Graceville.

There were many theories about the column of smoke. Some people thought it was bandits or pirates hiding out in the swamps, and during the Civil War they were deserters....or escaped slaves. Slaves themselves thought it was the Devil's tar pit.

Four men claim to have seen the volcano. One, William Wyatt of Tallahassee, who likes to argue that "The Tallahassee Girl" was Ellen Call Long and her father in the book the girl's real father, Richard Keith Call (who he died in 1862 and the book concerned Tallahassee in 1880) went with Fred Wimpee to the area about 1932. He says they started out with a Model T Ford, a machete, a hand-ax, flashlight, and some sandwiches. The car took them as far as it could and they went on foot past two abandoned sawmills at Flint Rock and Fanlew, then hacked their way southwest to the Gulf. They finally found rocks as big as houses strewn over a four-mile area. Some boulders looked like solid stone walls. They slept overnight on top a rock, battled mosquitoes, and when returning to Tallahassee agreed with a man in Wacissa who told them they were dam' fools.

Judge A. L. Porter of Crawfordville and James Kirkland preceded Wyatt and Wimpee to the place, finding it while thrashing thru the Pinhook on a hunting trip, in the late 1920's. "We saw a rocky knoll with a small crater in it," said Judge Porter, and it appeared to be burned." He thought gas had escaped and been set on fire. He also added, "I hate to give anything away that belongs to Wakulla County, by re-apportionment or anything else, but I have to say the volcano was in Jefferson County."