

An Introduction to the Swamp

Imagination is more important than knowledge. Knowledge is limited, imagination encircles the world.

Albert Einstein, from an interview with G.S. Viereck, Saturday Evening Post, Oct 26, 1929

I grew up in Frog Level, Alabama, on the west side of the Sipsey River and swamp. The place is called Fayette now, but it was Frog Level then. Well, some people had already begun to call it Fayette, but I always thought of it as Frog Level. The name comes from the fact that the town sits at the edge of the swamp—right down on the level with the frogs.

The river rather than the inhabitants of Frog Level long ago defined and still regularly enforces the eastern boundary of the town. Anything built closer to the river will be flooded. You may count on that. It tolerates any encroachment by man-made structures beyond the flood line only temporarily or on isolated mounds of dirt, but it is friendly so long as you respect it. The land slopes up slowly as you enter town, so no part of the town ever floods.

As you pass the main street of the business area, Temple Avenue, the land slopes up more steeply and makes a decent hill and then flattens out around the loop road at the western edge of town. Past the loop road on the way to Covin, the land eventually slopes down again into the Luxapalilla River valley. I've heard that Luxapalilla means "floating turtle" in the local Indian dialect. This valley no longer floods since the river was channelized; that is, it has been dredged out into an absolutely straight channel where the water flows swiftly and never escapes its banks. While it made the Luxapalilla valley a great place to farm, it destroyed the lush, mysterious swamp that had been there. The turtles no longer have any place to float in the fast flowing water. Most fortunately, the Sipsey River has not been channelized. They thought about it once, but the guy who made the plans died before he could bring in his dredges.

The main intersection in town is where Temple Avenue crosses Columbus Street. In the 1950s, a flagpole stood there, and from the flagpole, you could survey most of the important institutions of Frog Level: the Courthouse, the Citizens and First National Banks, Freeman's and Central drugstores, the railroad yard, and most importantly, my father's grocery store, the Jitney Jungle.

Temple Avenue was so named because of the several churches located on it. You passed the First Methodist Church, the First Baptist Church, and the Church of Christ as you drove north from downtown. At one time, maybe around the 1920s, Temple Avenue had been the most prestigious residential address, but it had been replaced before the 1950s by the loop road where our most prominent businessmen and doctors lived in large, fine houses: colonial or ante-bellum mansions, classic American brick houses, and one post-Frank-Lloyd-Wright object of art. The finest and oldest homes on Temple Avenue still seemed stately if not so modern.

My home in Frog Level was on Temple Avenue about a mile north of the business area, just opposite Pinion Street, and a few houses south of Five Points and the Garrison Brothers' General Stores. It was not one of the fine homes. It was too small and had been built too late and too far from downtown. It had only two bedrooms, but a beautiful fireplace stood on one wall of the living room, and a front porch with chairs and a swing would seat six people for a summer-night conversation. It cost all of three thousand dollars to build during the Great Depression. From our front porch, I could see the horse

barn at the Grimsley's farm. Grimsley's was the last outpost of civilization before the Sipsey Swamp took over.

The highway to Bankston, Berry, and Tuscaloosa ran almost directly east from town and served as one access way to the swamp. It was usually just called "the Tuscaloosa highway." About five miles to the north, the road to Townley and Jasper crossed the Sipsey on Ford's Bridge. Earlier a bridge had crossed the river in between the major highways on Stamps Bridge Road; but in the 1940s and 1950s, vehicles could not cross since the wooden deck was missing, yet it remained intact enough that adventurous kids could climb across its triangulated skeleton of steel beams and rods. Unofficial, private, rudimentary roads or trails had appeared wherever someone wanted to go fishing or swimming or picnicking, and they all just ended near the river. We used the dirt road through Grimsley's farm.

The Sipsey Swamp consists of a swath of flat land varying from less than a mile to a few miles in width. To the north of Frog Level, the river runs more swiftly as you head toward its origins in the Appalachian foothills. In a rare show of good sense, the federal government declared the upper part of the Sipsey to be a "Wild and Scenic River" and conveyed legal protection from pollution and development on it. In Fayette County, it is slow, lazy, and populated by several species of fish, but above all else, catfish. Several types of mussels and a few clams also call it home. In some places, dense cypress groves enclose the river, while in other places, cultivated fields run right up to the water's edge—if the farmer is willing to lose his field periodically to the floods.

Cottonmouth moccasins, a species of pit viper, find the swamp a nice place to live, and they have been fruitful and multiplied. This snake is called a cottonmouth because the inside of its mouth is white. It's a nasty creature. I know that all God's creatures are beautiful in their own way, but my opinion is that a cottonmouth is ugly. It will bite you if provoked, and the bite will be painful and take a long time to heal. It could kill you. It requires medical attention in any case, and treatments of antivenin are needed if the snake injected much venom. Often the snake infects the wound and it has to be treated with antibiotics. If you go into the swamp at all, you seriously risk being bitten by a cottonmouth, or even a rattlesnake or copperhead. Don't say you weren't warned!

On the other hand, almost anyone who doesn't go to the swamp regularly will overestimate the likelihood of encountering a cottonmouth. Not that they're scarce; they're just happy to stay away from you as you're happy to stay away from them. Swamp novices probably think the cottonmouth is aggressive, but in fact, it simply defends its territory. If you encounter a cottonmouth and give it a chance to leave you alone, it will. I advise giving it that chance.

Because of its connection to the Gulf Coast, the swamp is home to other slightly larger reptiles. The Sipsey flows into the Tombigbee River, the Tombigbee flows into the Alabama River, and the Alabama runs into Mobile Bay. Like all places on the Gulf of Mexico, alligators inhabit Mobile Bay. The alligators procreate and must find new nesting places, so some of them swim upstream into the Alabama River. As they move away from the Gulf, the winters become colder, and the overall semitropical environment becomes more semi and less tropical. Those that have lived up the river for a few generations are smaller than their ancestors due to the hardships and sparser foodstuffs. Those Daniel-Boone-type alligators that go so far as the Tombigbee evolve to yet smaller sizes. Some have even made it into the Sipsey.

While the Gulf Coast alligators grow to six feet long or more, the ones in the Sipsey measure less than three feet long. The Frog Level natives, recognizing that the Gulf Coast beasts are called *alligators*, ages ago began to refer to the smaller local reptiles as *halfgators*.

Be careful to avoid both cottonmouth moccasins and halfgators in the swamp, but the snakes are the most dangerous. I think the halfgators somehow must remember when their ancestors were bigger, and

they have an inferiority complex now. They're mostly a nuisance; usually not life-threatening. The prospect of snacks or freshly caught fish attracts them to humans, and given half a chance, they'll steal your catfish or your lunch. If seriously provoked, they might bite off a finger or two or leave a nasty wound on your leg. The best and the traditional weapon to ward off halfigators is a good stick. Whack the beast right between the eyes and he'll turn tail. If you've got a good, strong pine limb, you'll be okay. Sipsey Swamp regulars know these tricks.

Of course, the swamp has the usual complement of white-tailed deer, skunks, raccoons, opossums, bobcats, and other small mammals, amphibians, and reptiles; and it has lots of insects. The natives also have a special name for the mosquitoes. Remarking on their phenomenal size and ferocity, they are called *mostquitoes*.

So I was born into the small Alabama town I just described in 1942. Kavanaugh, my brother, had arrived three years earlier. Unlike me, he is musically and artistically talented and, as a boy, performed well at sports. Unlike him, I'm interested in science, technology, and mathematics. Both of us have vivid imaginations. As we grew older, we developed very different interests, but in the early 1950s, we were mostly interested in playing out grownup adventures.

My parents had unusual attitudes about protecting Kavanaugh and me. On the one hand, they protected us closely. We were taken to the doctor whenever we exhibited the mildest symptoms. And, of course, they warned us about "strangers." On the other hand, they allowed us to be quite adventurous if they thought it prepared us for adult life. Fortunately for us, wandering around in the Sipsey swamp was considered such preparation. My father grew up on a farm near Andalusia, Alabama, and was never more comfortable than when he rummaged about in the woods. He held the view that we should be prepared to "live off the land," and he taught us hunting and tracking skills. I once overheard my father explain to one of his friends:

"If they're not down in the swamp, they're going to be running around the streets on their bicycles or roller skates. I think they're safer chasing water moccasins and halfigators than bouncing off bumpers."

Some of these stories involve what parents of today, especially ones living in the very structured society of large cities and wealthy communities, may think of as risky and dangerous behavior. I am obliged, therefore, to offer the following observation to those parents. You're absolutely right!

Maybe I don't remember everything in great clarity after all this time. I was not a particularly perceptive youth, and many things that were obvious to some of my friends as they occurred, only dawned on me years or decades later. And finally, even though I try to get it right, I am just a bad reporter sometimes. There's one exception to these caveats; if I mention anything about burning or exploding something, it is the gospel truth.

In several situations, I mention that my family was dedicated to the Church of Christ. It was a very important part of my young life, so it will come up in some of these stories. Don't confuse it with The United Church of Christ or other similar sounding denomination. The Church of Christ is a deeply fundamentalist, Bible-believing, mostly southern denomination. I'll explain its theology as needed when it comes up in the stories.

One last note to avoid confusion: the radio station in Frog Level had the call sign, WWFL. A station near Orlando, Florida picked up this call sign in 1971 after Frog Level became Fayette. The Florida WWFL has nothing to do with this story or the Sipsey Swamp. They have only Disney World in which to live out their fantasies.