

VILLAGE VIEW

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When the wind in Florida comes from the north, it's sweater weather. On the Sunday in January we took a picnic lunch to Jonathan Dickinson State Park in Martin County, the north wind blew so briskly we brought windbreakers as well.

With ham-and-cheese sandwiches on pumpernickel bread, a jar of cold milk, and red delicious snacking apples packed in our cooler, we joined the stream of cars on I-95 to explore some of the more than 10,000 acres of sand pine scrub, pine flatwoods, mangrove, river swamp, and the Loxahatchee River that make up the park.

Named for a castaway off the barkentine, REFORMATION, a ship that foundered on a nearby beach in 1696, the park preserves the natural wildlife of this Florida coastal area. The man whose name the park perpetuates was a young Quaker merchant en route from Port Royal, Jamaica, to his home in Philadelphia.

Survivors of the shipwreck, including Dickinson's wife and infant son, found themselves on a deserted beach, south of Jupiter Inlet, when their ship was driven ashore in a storm the night of September 23. Two months later, after weeks of deprivation and inhumane treatment at the hands of native Indians (who had suffered cruelties from Englishmen and Spaniards and who hated all Europeans), most of the party reached St. Augustine, 230 miles to the north. It was not until spring of 1697 that they finally arrived in Philadelphia; five of Dickinson's original party of twenty had died of exposure and exhaustion before reaching St. Augustine.

Dickinson recorded the travails of the journey in a diary first published in 1699. The survivors of the shipwreck were held captive in an Indian village for two weeks before being allowed to begin their long struggle to safety. His account gives historians a unique description of the Indians' lives, rituals and customs.

The park that bears Jonathan Dickinson's name contains many varied plant communities which, together with its size, support diverse and abundant wildlife. Endangered birds are among the species native to the area and include the bald eagle, scrub jay, red cockaded woodpecker, and the Florida sandhill crane. The manatee, too, is found in the Loxahatchee River.

For park visitors there are interpretive campfire programs and guided walks of the three scenic nature trails; rental bicycles, canoes and horses; a boat ramp and a swimming area. Tent sites and cabins are available for those who wish to spend several days. For day-trippers like us, the park opens at 8 a.m. and closes at sundown.

Of particular interest is the boat trip on the scenic Loxahatchee River aboard the 30-passenger LOXAHATCHEE QUEEN to the isolated camp of Trapper Nelson.

Born in Trenton, New Jersey in 1909, Nelson was a 20th century adventurer. Vincent Nostokovich was his name at birth. The son of a Polish immigrant, he ran away from home as a boy, supporting himself trapping muskrats in New Jersey swamps and selling their pelts. He soon found hopping freight trains opened to him the exciting wide world of the west. Before reaching his majority, Trapper Nelson spent a stretch in a Mexican jail for gun-running and, after escaping, began shooting craps with road bums for his living. His winnings earned a stake that brought him east again, but his travels were far from over.

Harsh weather drove Trapper Nelson to Florida while he was still a young man. With two partners, his step-brother and his best friend, a camp was established near Jupiter Inlet. In a drunken rage, the step-brother shot Trapper's friend in the back. Trapper turned state's witness, and his step-brother spent 20 years in a Florida jail.

As civilization began making itself felt on Jupiter Island, Trapper abandoned the beach and moved inland, settling in the wilderness on a wide bend of the Loxahatchee River's northwest fork. Even here, however, he was not beyond the reach of laws which limited his trapping to seasonal activities.

While Palm Beach became a mecca for the wealthy, Trapper began building his famous zoo. Soon excursion boats carried sightseers among Palm Beach society upriver. His visitors included heiresses, counts, and celebrities such as heavyweight champion Gene Tunney, who is quoted as having said that compared to Trapper's, his own hands were "like a lady's." Women of fashion were strongly attracted to the mysterious and powerful man who wrestled alligators and devoured raw possum.

During World War II, Camp Murphy disrupted life on the quiet river. To escape the draft, and against his better judgment, Trapper took a wife; he was later inducted in spite of his married status and stationed in Texas. Transferred back to Florida, he discovered his wife had run off with another man. Vowing never again to be hurt by a woman, he bought his lady-friends cars on the installment plan to insure some degree of loyalty.

When the war ended, Camp Murphy was dismantled and quiet was restored to the Loxahatchee. Property values were soaring, and Trapper traded pelts for the Wall Street Journal. His attention concentrated on real estate; land deals made him a wealthy man.

As his property grew, he faced the problems of a man of means. After health officials closed his zoo, the flow of visitors slowed to a trickle. Trapper retreated into isolation, felling trees across the river to block the approach to his camp and allowing visits only from those with a written appointment. The uninvited were greeted by a 12-gauge shotgun and ordered off.

In 1968, after ten years of near-isolation, Trapper failed to appear for a date with an old friend. Dead of a shotgun wound, his body was found in his camp, and his death ruled a suicide. Those who knew him well never accepted the decision. Trapper Nelson's heirs found he had begun negotiations to sell his land to the state of Florida; they completed the arrangements which eventually made his holdings a part of Jonathan Dickinson State Park.

Our lunch consumed, we rode to the foot of the hill called Hobe Mountain and climbed the 30-foot wooden tower topping the rise. We looked east over Jupiter Inlet, Jupiter Island, and far out over the heaving Atlantic Ocean. The view south was hazy, but we watched cars zipping along I-95, their occupants unaware of Trapper Nelson's hide-away or Jonathan Dickinson's misery. To the north we caught glimpses, twists and bends glittering in the sun, of the Loxahatchee River. And spreading to the western horizon lay miles of unbroken woodland under the blue tropical sky.

As our first visit to Jonathan Dickinson State Park came to an end, we headed homeward taking peculiar satisfaction in the knowledge that this slice of Florida is preserved in its original, natural, and isolated beauty.