

# VILLAGE VIEW

ANDREA LEONARD

Dawn's light, sweeping away cobwebs of darkness, reaches into corners of early morning to dust out shadows. As we leave Orlando, Florida, and head in a northwesterly direction, the home of Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings is our planned destination by lunchtime. We travel at a leisurely pace.

An easy hundred or so miles of by-ways stretch ahead. The four hours of driving time allowed could be halved were we to choose turnpike routes. Instead, two-lane twisting roads are ones we follow; the kinds of roads highway map publishers trace in thin black lines, with mileages shown by tiny single numbers rather than in larger red numerals to mark distances between cities. Red, orange, and green stripes on maps promise speed, heavy traffic, and toll booths. Narrow black lines hint at small towns, surprise views of lakes cupped between hillsides, cottage industries, village stores, family-style restaurants, woodlands, pasture and farms of Central Florida.

At Windermere, Lake Tibet gleams beyond abandoned railroad tracks. The town has an air of prosperity, the look of a summer resort. Something about the architecture of houses lining its streets reminds me of camp-meeting communities on Cape Cod. So, too, the way ancient live oaks spread their enormous crowns providing shady shelter from Florida sun resembles elm-lined Main Streets in New England. Here, as there, the town wears a mantle of permanence over a once-temporary cloak.

In crossing an elevation that bridges the Florida Turnpike, we hardly notice the speeding traffic flowing along its length. Flat plain gives way to steep hills; sharp curves lead around and between folding upland, into dales and valleys. Little rivers and streams sparkle in dappled sun and shadow. Skirting the southwest shore of Lake Apopka, we cruise through Mont Verde and Ferndale.

This is grove country where acre after acre of orange and grapefruit trees stand in straight unbroken rows that march like green-clad battalions beyond sight. From Astatula through Tavares, the path leads past Lake Harris and Lake Dora into Eustis. Here, fringing Lake Eustis and Lake Yale, cluster pleasant, comfortable-looking residential neighborhoods.

Due north of Eustis hunches Ocala National Forest. At its southern border we turn west toward Weirsdale, then north around Lake Weir to Oklawaha.

These names, whose syllables fall so musically to the ear, tell tales of Seminole Indian tribes to whom this land once belonged. Tacking back, now to the northeast, Moss Bluff brings us inside the National Forest, and Forest Corners draws us more deeply into wooded countryside. Men in hunting clothes and carrying shotguns roam at roadsides, their pick-up trucks are pulled into dirt and gravelled trails fading into the palmetto scrub that carpets roots of towering pines.

On the western outskirts of Silver Springs, our car climbs a steep rise to cross the high-trestled bridge spanning the Oklawaha River which drains Silver Springs. Dark water spreads wide at this point and the bridge height affords us a fine view. On through farms of Anthony and Sparr we go. Six miles of divided highway separate us from Island Grove where a left turn on yet another byway leads to Cross Creek.

Before reaching the home of the woman who wrote *The Yearling*, we pause at the Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings Park overlooking Orange Lake. Opposite, across our road and hidden behind trees and understory, lies Lochloosa Lake. Connecting the two bodies of water flows Cross Creek itself. Wandering over the grassy park toward the edge of Orange

Lake, I stoop for a plume silver-gray feather. I can but guess a crane or heron dropped this token. That, and three huge cones, each more than eight inches long and three in diameter, recently fallen from pines growing twice the height of Cape Cod pitch pines, are my trophies. The trees, their size and growth-habit, bring to mind Ottorino Respighi's tone poem, *Pini di Roma*.

Refreshed from our walk, we continue the short distance to the small farmhouse where Rawlings lived and wrote. Of her attachment to the place, she says:

We were bred of earth before we were born of our mothers. Once born we can live without mother or father, or any other kin, or any friend, or any human love. We cannot live without the earth or apart from it, and something is shrivelled in a man's heart when he turns away from it and concerns himself only with the affairs of men.

And she goes on to explain: "For myself, the Creek satisfies a thing that had gone hungry and unfed since childhood days."

The house, today, is better cared for than when Rawlings first saw it. "The farmhouse was all dinginess. It sat snugly then as now under tall orange trees, and had a simple grace of line, low, rambling and one-storied. But it was cracked and gray for lack of paint, there was a tin roof that would have ruined a mansion, and the porch was an excrescence, scarcely wide enough for one to pass in front of the chairs."

Over time, she painted the exterior white, replaced the roof, and widened the porch to accommodate her writing table. Now the table displays her battered Royal typewriter as though, in a few moments, she will return to rattle off a chapter for yet another book.

Rawlings installed two bathrooms to replace the outhouse in the yard; then she left the structure standing in full view from the dining room table where she served her guests delicious meals. Imagine sitting down to pecan-stuffed roast duck (shot on nearby marsh), soft cooked grits, small crisp biscuits, wild plum jelly, whole baby beets warmed in orange juice and butter with grated orange peel, carrot soufflé, tomato aspic salad, and tangerine sherbet for dessert.

To appreciate fully Rawling's culinary abilities, buy *Cross Creek Cookbook* (Scribners), and try her recipes. And if you enjoyed reading *The Yearling*, find her first novel, *South Moon Under*, published in 1933.

Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings was born in 1896 and died after suffering a cerebral hemorrhage in 1953. Newspaperwoman, poet, and Pulitzer Prize winning novelist (1939), she made her home at Cross Creek because, "... after long years of spiritual homelessness, of nostalgia, here is that mystic loveliness of childhood again. Here is home. An old thread, long tangled, comes straight again."

Why visit this obscure farmhouse? Why walk the rooms and feel how dismal and lonely her life here, how uncomfortable, even painful, at times? How bewildering yet challenging her adjustments to life among Floridians, black and white, who surely thought her mad?

The better to know the person who, in the depth of this nation's Great Depression, found ways to meet her needs, physical, intellectual, and spiritual, at Cross Creek. She wrote from her daily experience, from her heart, sharing her life and her loves.

Rawlings left as heritage a small number of novels and a lovely inspiration.