

Shadow and Shelter

Through slavery, Hollywood exploitation and suburban sprawl, the South's swamps endure. BY ANTHONY WILSON, MA'98, PHD'02

THE SWAMP occupies an intriguingly complex place in the Southern and national imaginations. As the South comes to look more and more like the rest of America, colonized by the relentless progress of strip malls and suburban sprawl, Southern wooded wetlands have come to embody the last part of the South that will always be beyond cultural dominion, however illusory that understanding may be.

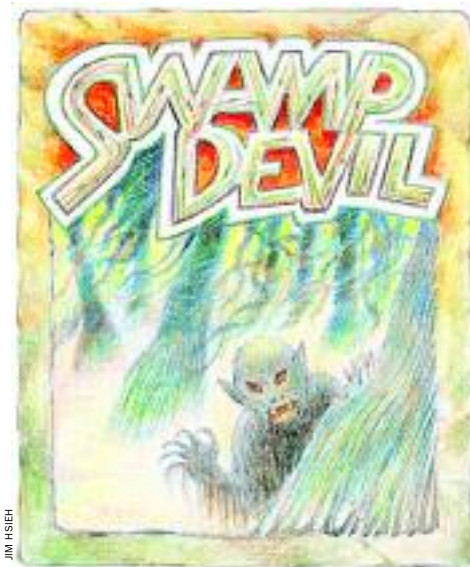
Traditionally, the term “swamp” has been used to define an area outside civilization whose geographic features—notably its treacherous mix of water and earth—render it resistant to colonization or agriculture. Swamps have represented a challenge to imposed order since well before the colonization of America. The swamps’ essential resistance to culturally viable classification was compounded by the nature of their earliest denizens. The presence of Native Americans in the swamps only underscored their wicked association for Europeans who viewed the Indian as the embodiment of savagery.

In the antebellum North, abolitionists applied disparaging images of swamps they often had never seen to describe the moral decadence of the entire South. Yet the qualities of alienation from societal order also held a profound appeal for American writers and thinkers outside the South, who elevated the swamps for the characteristics that led most people to shun them. Thoreau, for example, said that “[w]hen I would recreate myself, I seek the darkest wood, the thickest and most interminable and, to the citizen,

most dismal swamp. I enter a swamp as a sacred place, a *sanctum sanctorum*. There is the strength, the marrow of nature.” Walt Whitman, too, extolled the charms of the Southern swamps before the Civil War in his poem “O Magnet South” (1860): “O the strange fascination of these half-known half-impassable / swamps, infested by reptiles, resounding with the bellow / of the alligator, the sad noise of the rattlesnake.”

While the swamp’s figurative significance came to define it for much of the nation, for the South its physical presence as obstacle to agriculture and shelter for the dispossessed keeps its significance grounded in tangible reality. The swamp carried both a promise of freedom for escaped slaves and a threat to social order for the plantation aristocracy.

Aside from the specter of the escaped slave, swamp dwellers of various kinds emerge repeatedly as ideological and practical threats. One of the most threatening aspects of the swamp, paradoxically, is its very bounty—the effortless “living off the land.” In his famous 1856 study, *A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States*, a collection of pieces written for the *New York Daily Times* between 1853 and 1854, Frederick Law Olmsted recounts a conversation with Mr. R., a South Louisiana plantation owner, about a nearby group of Acadians: “Mr. R. described them as lazy vagabonds, doing but little work, and spending much time in shooting, fishing, and play. ... Why did he so dislike to have these poor people living near him? Because, he said, they demoralized his negroes. The slaves seeing them living in apparent comfort, without much property and without steady labor, could not



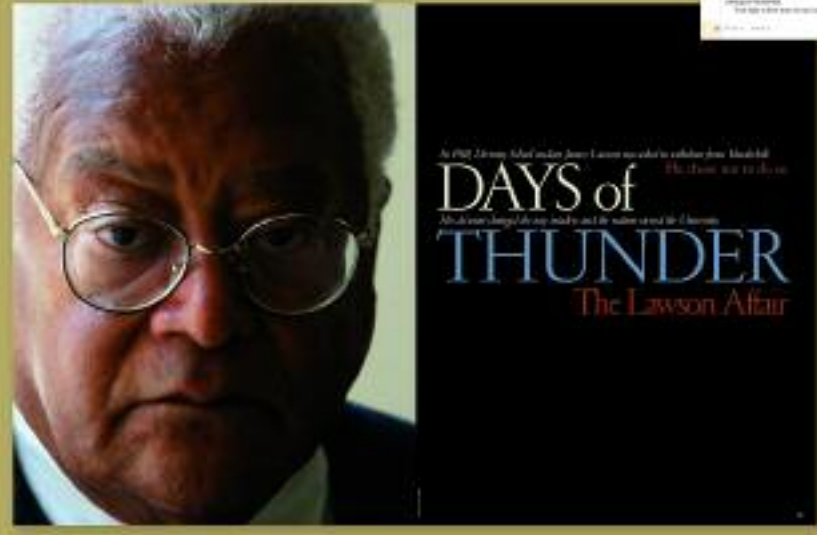
help thinking that it was not necessary for men to work so hard as they themselves were obliged to; that if they were free they would not need to work.”

The 1939 release of *Gone with the Wind*, perhaps the most influential representation of the American South in the 20th century, and its legion of less-noted precursors and ubiquitous imitators, largely redefined the nation’s concept of the antebellum South. Edward D.C. Campbell, in his 1981 study, *The Celluloid South: Hollywood and the Southern Myth*, explains that in the late 1930s and early 1940s, “plantation stories were good business, attracting Academy Awards and, most importantly, customers.” As they recreated the myths underpinning an idealized plantation South, studios also proved adept at reviving the image of the Southern swamp as breeding ground for natural and supernatural horrors.

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Even after the vogue for romanticized visions of the plantation South passed after World War II, the swamp retained its vilified status. Hollywood, particularly in B movies, perpetuated horrific versions of the Southern swamps. Hollywood bombarded the public with films about swamp monsters (*Curse of the Swamp Creature* is a typical example of the B-movie swamp craze, as is 1959's *Attack of the Giant Leeches*), lurid depictions of criminals escaping into hellish steamy swamps (*Swamp Women*, a Roger Corman effort, stands out in this genre, as do better-regarded films such as *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang*), and images of riverboat captains wrestling alligators in forbidding swamp landscapes (1956's *Swamp Fire*, starring Johnny Weissmuller, best known for his portrayals of Tarzan, is a dubious but notable entry in this category).

The current climate of ecological awareness and its valuation of wetlands as natural and cultural resources developed slowly and hesitantly. The early Southern conservation movement was acutely tied to the preservation of elements of Southern culture threatened by wetland development. Sportsmen, hunters and fishermen, often politically conservative in other respects, banded together to protect the land that enabled their activities. Even now the environmental movement in the South is made up of what might seem strange bedfellows: more traditional ecologists, academics and conservationists as well as throngs of hunters and fishermen—a group that has claimed the tongue-in-cheek designation “Bubba environmentalists.”

Southern swamps are now, for the most part, protected; many have been designated as wildlife preserves, protected from drainage, deforestation and contamination. No longer sheltered from progress by impenetrability and myth, the swamps are now shielded by federal mandate.

The wetlands have become not only national parks but theme parks. Southern swamps have spawned a surprisingly vigorous industry, particularly in Louisiana. A Web search for “swamp tours” returns more than 5,200 results, an overwhelming majority of which are hosted by Louisiana businesses. The Louisiana concentration makes sense; after the Civil War, Louisiana was one of the only

Southern states in which a significant number of the residents turned to the swamps for their livelihood in the face of agricultural decline and poverty.

While official preserves market the swamps on the basis of their freedom from human adulteration and their pristine, natural beauty, the Louisiana swamp-tour industry balances ecological appeal with promises of “extreme” encounters with primordial wildlife, appeals to myth and superstition, and claims

My urge, as conservationist and cultural critic, is to resist such an apocalyptic view. Such a total concession of the natural world to the vagaries of the human will is a dangerous, limited and potentially irresponsible move. If the natural no longer exists, is entirely a product of human imagination, then what stands in the way of practical ecological catastrophe, pollution, deforestation, and a host of other potential and current disasters?

While the mainstream contemporary South

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of cultural authenticity. Most swamp-tour companies combine the promise of easy access to unsullied nature in the confines of an artificial preserve with the kind of “extreme wildlife” showmanship mandatory for commercial success in the era of the “Crocodile Hunter.” Many companies augment the allure of the physical and factual swamp with veiled promises of swamp horrors to be viewed from the comfort and safety of Coast Guard-approved vessels. The specters of chaos that initially freighted the swamps with fear and menace have become faint evocations of movie monsters, the stuff of tongue-in-cheek entertainment and savvy marketing.

In an era when Southern identity must now be considered in terms of the urban, thriving, vital and increasingly multicultural New South, the swamps have become odd embodiments of a vanished identity, repositories of faded fears, forgotten cultural history and compromised purity. Must we then herald “the end of the swamp” as natural site and subversive space?

may regard swamps with nostalgia and idealization, cultures that continue to live in the swamps respond differently. For surviving swamp-identified cultures, natural and cultural degradation and destruction are inextricably linked. The swamps continue to signify differently for various cultures that experience them, and various views of the swamps have been influenced by technology and science as well as by ideology and culture.

The contemporary Southern swamp has taken on a new set of paradoxes and contradictions, superseding the old contradictions of water and land, purity and pollution. The swamps' physical survival is somewhat secure; their contemporary significance, though, remains an intriguing and complex question. ▼

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