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Conservative Rebels: Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings and Cracker Cultureⁱ

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The Big Scrub

While the riverbanks and lakeshores offer an alluring peace and quiet amid luxuriant beauty, surrounding them is an area of severe contrast: The Big Scrub, a land where a species of scrawny trees, the Sand Pine, has won a battle for existence in a nearly sterile soil. Through apparently nothing but sheer persistence it has fought its stunted way through an almost impenetrable mass of tangled growth. The Big Scrub: well-named, unfriendly to man, scarred by abandoned homes of forgotten pioneers...

This narration, taken from a film produced by the United States

Department of Agriculture, imparts the resistance to civilization that provides the essence of the "Big Scrub" within the Ocala National Forest, located in north-central Florida (OCALA).ⁱⁱ Except for a handful of recreational areas built by the Civilian Conservation Corps in the early-twentieth century, the Big Scrub area within the forest has remained virtually untouched. Florida author, Patrick Smith, describes this place as nearly primordial, evoking a time "when Adam was tempted by Eve to taste the fatal apple" (1). But the Big Scrub is hardly a bountiful Eden. Its sandy soil is fruitless; its enveloping heat is unquestionably inhumane; its various inhabitants, including alligators and bears, are vicious and unwelcoming. As Smith depicts it, the scrub contains "everything that nature can use to attempt to destroy the will of man" (1). Yet, those "forgotten pioneers," whose ancestors hailed from the backwoods of Georgia and the Carolinas, managed to subsist for

generations in this Big Scrub Country. They farmed, fished, and hunted freely, sustained by a pioneer spirit and an innate awareness of the vicissitudes of the climate and landscape.

These pioneers, known as the Crackers, were uneducated, impoverished, and traditionally ostracized by scholars and sophisticated urbanites for their antiquated customs. These people shunned the Crackers and belittled them as “white trash,” or, at best, “poor whites” (Smith 13). Historically, the term ‘Cracker’ itself has often had a pejorative connotation. One colorful definition calls it “a derogatory term for an ignorant or illiterate southern white bigot, especially a smart-mouthed, boastful, or swaggering rural racist who often exacerbates local disharmony” (qtd. in Ste. Claire 33). In the early-twentieth century, however, “*cracker* ameliorated to become a regionally affectionate term” for rural whites, especially in the Florida backwoods (Ste. Claire 35).ⁱⁱⁱ Despite their questionable appeal, these Crackers eventually found a comrade in a spunky Yankee journalist

named Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, who discovered in them the material to jumpstart her literary career.

In 1928, Rawlings moved with her husband Charles to Cross Creek, Florida, a small village just north of the Ocala National Forest. Both were writers, and they hoped this secluded hamlet would inspire more and better material. The property also offered a citrus grove that would provide them an alternate source of income. Fascinated by her seemingly eccentric neighbors and their rural customs, Rawlings quickly became enchanted with the landscape and remoteness of the Creek. She published several short stories based on her experiences with these people and later compiled many of these episodes in her semi-autobiographical book, *Cross Creek*. It was her fascination with the pioneer families who inhabited the nearby Big Scrub, however, that provided the best material for her writing. Rawlings went on to win the Pulitzer Prize for Literature in 1939 for *The Yearling*, the classic novel about a young Cracker boy and his pet fawn in the scrub.

Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings arrived in Florida at a time of economic transition for the state, particularly in the growth of formal agriculture and an incipient tourism industry. The magnitude of these changes directly impacted the Crackers, who lived near prime marketable land for recreational and commercial ventures, like hunting, fishing, and farming. Rawlings understood that resistance to these changes, and the political and judicial intrusions that accompanied them, was essential to the origin and preservation of Cracker culture. Among these intrusions were the appropriation of a great deal of the scrubland into a federally managed national forest, the enforcement of private property laws by state officials, the fencing of pastureland, and the imposition of new hunting and fishing laws. Seeing progress as inevitable, Rawlings lamented that "the true Florida Crackers are almost gone, and I regret it because they are an integral part of their background, and beautiful in their repose, their dignity, their self respect" ("On Florida" 2-3). She noted the fencing in of cattle and other husbandry laws signaled "the end of the old regime," and because of

this, she was eager to chronicle and portray their customs before modernity depleted them (*Max and Marjorie* 44).

Rawlings is the ideal lens through which to study Cracker culture not only because of the bounty of material she produced about them, but because she was both an observer and a participant of their life in the scrub. Her biographer Gordon E. Bigelow notes, "she always maintained the detachment of an interested observer but... her deepest motives went beyond a search for adventure to a search for truth of the people and the way of life she had decided to make into literature" (Bigelow 58). Rawlings also conducted extensive *in-situ* research, such as experiencing life at a moonshining still with a Cracker family. As the first writer to undertake a comprehensive portrayal of the Cracker people, Rawlings offered a sympathetic vision of a much-maligned segment of the Southern agrarian population of early-twentieth century America.

The Invisible Florida

It is the Florida where a man can still make a living with an axe and a gun... the Florida... of the hammock, the piney-woods, the great silent scrub... This is the Florida, wild and natural, that I'm calling 'the invisible Florida.' Not because it's remote or inaccessible and can't be seen, because there it is, a physical sight plain to anyone. But it is invisible because its beauty must be seen with the spiritual as well as the physical eye... I've longed to re-create, to make visible, this invisible beauty. ("On Florida" 5)

Much of Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings' love for the Florida scrubland is rooted in her quest to bring to life the "pastoral myth" of the model American husbandman, "tilling the fertile garden of the symbolic middle landscape" (Bigelow 146). In her work, this myth existed in the Cracker people who lived directly off the land, provided for their families, and cared for the environment that offered them such sustenance and splendor. While

the natural, physical beauty of north-central Florida inspired the descriptive passages for which she is so well known, it was the Crackers and their relationship to the land that fascinated her the most. A common theme throughout her stories, such as in *Cross Creek* and *South Moon Under*, is each person's obligation to maintain both good faith and responsible stewardship towards his or her environment. In *Cross Creek*, she writes:

We are bred from the 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 shriveled in a man's heart when he turns away from it and concerns himself only with the affairs of men. (11)

At the time of Rawlings' arrival in Florida, the majority of Crackers and many other independent poor people, both white and black, throughout the South kept cattle and other domesticates and maintained small

farms, supplemented by a fisher-hunter-gatherer subsistence pattern (Weston 5). It was common for families to adapt to extreme conditions, such as uncultivable soil or a shortage of timber, in order to survive. Rawlings' former neighbor, J.T. Glisson, writes in his memoir, *The Creek*, "It is... impossible for me to separate the place from the people because surviving necessitated taking on the ways of nature" (2). The environmental commitment of the Cracker people is highlighted in the extreme conditions of the scrub forest, where according to Rawlings, the dire conditions of the forest "repelled all human living" (*Selected Letters* 49). In *South Moon Under*, Rawlings introduces the inherent resistant nature of the scrub forest, and the first impressions of the Jacklin family who would soon call this place home:

Within these deep watery
lines the scrub stood
aloof, uninhabited
through its wider
reaches....The soil was
tawny sand, from whose
parched infertility there
reared, indifferent to
water, so dense a growth
of scrub pine—the
Southern spruce—that
the effect of the massed

thin trunks was of a
limitless, canopied
stockade. It seemed
impenetrable... wide
areas, indeed, admitted
of no human passage. (4)

The isolation of the Crackers and their lack of concern for the outside world also contributed to the realization of the pastoral myth. Mastering the rugged terrain—and surviving in it—was the priority. In observing Rawlings' portrayal of the simple, pragmatic Cracker women, Florence Turcotte notes that it seemed "lack of food and other threats to their survival mattered more to the women than laws and even family relationships" (496). Yet, despite the formidable nature of the north-central Florida backwoods, the Crackers did not leave the scrub or any of the other surrounding areas along the Ocklawaha River. Rather, they yielded to the changes of the environment in order to uphold their subsistence practices. As Dana Ste. Claire writes in his study of Florida Cracker culture,

...self-sufficiency was a
signature characteristic of
Crackers. The tenacity and
self-reliance of these 19th
century and early 20th century
pioneers helped them

adapt to and settle the diverse environs of Florida, some considered largely uninhabitable.” (68)

One example of their self-reliance and adaptation to the challenging environment is their practice of deadhead logging. When commercial logging companies in Florida harvested cypress trees for lumber, they transported cut logs by floating them down river streams. Eventually, many of the forests were depleted by these industry practices, so the Crackers in the scrub resorted to retrieving the logs from the rivers that had sunk during transport. This practice, known as deadhead logging, was unlawful in the state, and ownership over the sunken logs was repeatedly contested. The Crackers, who usually managed to get away with this practice, argued they had a customary right to the sunken logs. In other words, they believed their rights to the logs were acquired by custom and local traditions, rather than by the command of superior bodies of government (Slota).

Often living near waterways and lakes, the Crackers also depended heavily

upon fishing to survive. In *The Creek*, Glisson discusses the ways in which his neighbors divided Orange Lake into equal-sized trap fishing territories for each respective fisherman. Therefore, each family would theoretically have equal chances of catching their meals for the day without worrying about another fisherman’s trap interfering. In addition, the Crackers also practiced seine fishing, which similarly caught fish in large nets, rather than cages. This way, they could catch not only a bounty for themselves, but also enough to ship them to market. The State of Florida, knowing Orange Lake had one of the most abundant fishing populations, required fishermen to attain licenses to fish there. Naturally, notes Glisson, the Crackers did without them (172-216).

Perhaps the most defiant of their customs was the practice of moonshining. Although moonshining utilized corn and other resources, Rawlings argued that this practice in no way harmed the environment. To the Crackers, moonshining was a necessary supplement to their method of subsistence, especially when other

natural resources were lacking (Turcotte 495). This practice is typical of Florida pioneers, who made and sold their corn liquor against the law, evaded arrest by the revenueurs and managed, hardly, to make a living. In one instance, Rawlings wrote to the editor of the *Ocala Evening Star* to rebut an editorial published in the newspaper that criticized her portrayal of these rural whites living just east of the city:

And how astonishing to call a Florida moonshiner a weakling! This hardy breed made Florida famous long before the day of hard roads and modern hotels, and will, I do not question, in fame outlive them. No, my dear sir, do not let us hustle and deny out of existence the last of Florida's frontier. The state will soon be like any other. Before they have been quite swallowed up, let us know and enjoy these picturesque people, pioneer remains. They are much more vital than you and I (*Uncollected Writings* 255).

In addition to economic isolation, the Crackers also desired judicial isolation.

Ste. Claire adds, "rarely was justice served by due process or by outside authorities" (89). In *South Moon Under*, Rawlings writes: "When a man was caught stealing or lying to another's harm, he was dealt with... they knew what they would tolerate and what they would not" (213). In "Cracker Chidlings," Rawlings characterizes 'Shiner Tim, an outlaw, who was exceptionally self-reliant in solving his legal issues: "His protection against the sheriff and his deputies is only his readiness to use his shotgun at the first sight of them" (129). In his chronicle of life at the Creek, J.T. Glisson also notes the self-regulating function of "justice" at the Creek, which existed so that people could be preoccupied with taking care of each other rather than having drawn-out disputes (45).

It is difficult to determine whether the Crackers lived in secluded areas because they sought to evade civilization, or if living there inspired that need. However, since areas like the scrub were unattractive for any quality except their remoteness, and because many of the inhabitants were in fact fleeing from something in their

past, we will assume the former. As Rawlings writes of the east bank of the Ocklawaha River, "The clear dark stream divided one world from another" (*South Moon Under* 6). In *Cracker Chidlings*, she writes of 'Shiner Tim:

He outlawed himself
deliberately, trusting to a
tri-weekly moving of his
apparatus to evade the
government agents.
Acres of swamp, of
branch-fed hammock, of
the deep marsh the
Cracker calls a prairie,
gave him a choice of
impenetrable covers
(129).

In *South Moon Under*, the patriarch, Lantry Jacklin, moves to the backwoods of Florida to find safety after killing a revenuer in the Carolinas. Similarly, Penny Baxter in *The Yearling* moves to Florida to escape his painful history as a Confederate soldier during the Civil War. Like her literary characters, Rawlings and her neighbors understood and obeyed their elemental need to live in the valley of the Ocklawaha River and accepted what she considered to be their psychosis for willingly staying put

there. She writes, "Madness is only a variety of mental nonconformity and we are all individualists here" (*Cross Creek* 10). In *Cross Creek*, she discusses the significance of place and the human connection to it, rather than place as an arbitrary happenstance. For the Crackers, rural north-central Florida not only suited their agrarian customs, but also fulfilled a "deeper sense of what should pass for security—a sense of safety achieved through isolation" (Smith 14).

Though the Crackers and their culture were at the center of Rawlings' internationally best-selling books, there is little evidence that they sought to be visible and tie directly with mainstream society. Isolation was at the core of their culture, and specifically, at the core of their rebellious ways. By examining the foundation of their customs, which was rooted in a customary right to their land, we can see how the Crackers justify their defiance. In *The Creek*, Glisson discusses the self-regulating customs of the people at the Creek, noting, "in most things, the State and the Creek folks didn't see

eye to eye" (9). According to Glisson (Rawlings' "tragic little cripple" neighbor in *Cross Creek*) many locals saw rules and regulations as applicable only to the outsiders who came into the Creek to exploit and deplete its natural resources; the inhabitants themselves believed they knew well the limitations of their natural environment and therefore could be trusted to live off of it responsibly. More importantly, they needed the resources of their environment for survival, not recreation. He says:

The State annually sold us commercial fishing licenses with full knowledge that trapping and seining were the only methods we had to catch enough to make a living, and both these methods were against the law. It then committed itself to catch us when we did it. It's not surprising that young'uns growing up at the Creek had a weird concept of government (171).

Some of these Cracker families managed to form deals with law enforcement officials, particularly the local game wardens, in which the

wardens adopted what was essentially a "out of sight, out of mind" mentality toward their illegal activities. Without these arrangements, the Crackers would have had to drastically change their methods of subsistence, because as Glisson writes: "with the exception of [their] resident writer... the entire community derived some or all of its living from fishing (illegally, in the opinion of outsiders) and hunting frogs and alligators" (2).^{iv}

The Crackers represented several dichotomies of the agrarian lifestyle. For one, their code was independence, especially from a rapidly urbanizing post-Civil War society. However, one exception was the symbiotic community dynamic they also adopted at Cross Creek and in the scrub, which made them dependent upon one another for certain tasks. These included emergency repairs, the killing of predatory animals like snakes, protecting one another from intruders, and participating in the underground market for their moonshine liquor. After Rawlings reluctantly agreed to help her workers pay for much needed repairs to their living quarters she realized, "I did not yet understand

that in this way of life, one is obliged to share, back and forth and that as long as I had money for screens and a new floor, I was morally obligated to put out a portion of it to give some comfort to those who worked for me" (*Cross Creek* 75). In a sense, their codependence reinforced the individual freedoms that were at the center of their traditional, self-reliant ways.

On one hand, this culture was admirably idyllic; on the other hand, the Crackers were highly rebellious in maintaining the integrity of their traditions and customs. They followed few laws, particularly those pertaining to private property, husbandry, or hunting. One character that wholly embodies this lawlessness is Grampa Hicks in "Cracker Chidlings," who has an unmatched ability to circumvent the law:

He exists only by the illegal trapping of fish... and by renting other Crackers' rowboats, without permission, to fishermen from Jacksonville. If a customer's outboard motor lacks gas, he shuffles mysteriously to

the other side of the narrow bridge across the creek, where lie beached other boats and motors, and returns with fuel.... If a stranger to these parts needs liquor... Grampa is gone unto the underbrush beyond his shack, though the palmetto scrub, under the moss hanging from the live oaks; returning with a catsup bottle of 'shine made from cane skimming. If catfish are scarce on his own lines, he runs the other fellow's. (133)

Because they threatened the whole foundation of Cracker culture in north-central Florida, visitors looking to exploit the environment faced resistance and disapproval from Rawlings and her neighbors. Although Rawlings herself was a "Yankee" from New York, she came to be trusted by most of her neighbors at the Creek due to her respect, integrity, and earnest desire to capture their life so accurately. Of course, some Crackers, especially in the scrub, were quite skeptical of her.

The sons and daughters of one of those old hunters were frankly

mistrustful of me. For all they knew, I was about to tell a scandalous tale of their father's life, while reaping millions of dollars in profit. (*Uncollected Writings* 350)

However, she generally supported the Cracker people in resisting "outsiders" who came in to fish, hunt, or harvest trees irresponsibly.

Considering they had existed for generations with open range cattle, the Crackers were particularly sensitive to the modern concept of fenced in pastureland. Rawlings wrote stories of strife between the local Crackers and northern businessmen buying up land and raising fences. In *South Moon Under*, the Cracker families faced the impositions of a new family, the Streeters, who moved to the scrub from Arkansas and abused the new fence law recently passed in the area:

The section had always been "open range." Miles of unfarmed, often ownerless land, valueless for crops.... Almost no one could afford to fence miles of pasture.... Now the Streeters were intruding violently on the

community agreement. They were impounding cattle with a reckless abandon. (208-209)

In her short story, "The Enemy," Rawlings describes the conflict between an elder passionate Cracker called Old Man Wilson, and Dixon, a Yankee who had bought up several thousand acres of land near the Creek. Dixon decides to fence in his land, which includes parts of the riverbed upon which Wilson's cattle had historically grazed. Needless to say, Dixon and the concept of fenced-in cattle are portrayed as "the enemy" in this story. Old Man Wilson is plaintively fighting for his land, and in the end must accept that the ways of Old Florida were fading away. He exclaims to Dixon and his convoy of land developers:

You can't do this to honest men just because they're poor! We've ranged our stock in these woods since before your ma changed your diddies. You can't take a pocketful of dirty Yankee money and run our cattle outen our own woods! (*When the Whippoowill* 146)

This presents the most conflicting

juxtaposition: the traditions of the Crackers, or the traditions of Old Florida, against the growing market-driven economy of the state. In this context, preserving traditional customs, resisting those of the modern market economy, and insisting upon isolation, were inherently rebellious elements within Cracker culture. They often named their history with the land, along with their natural familiarity with it, as a claim for a customary right to their undisturbed dominance over it. The more modernity imposed upon their customs, the more insistent the Crackers became in continuing their traditions. As a people who wanted little but simplicity and practicality in their lifestyle, the Crackers remained fundamentally at odds with what they viewed as an increasingly intrusive state government.

Customary Consciousness at Cross Creek

Custom passes... into areas altogether indistinct - in unwritten beliefs, sociological norms, and usages asserted in practice but never enrolled in any by-

law. This area...belongs only to practice and oral tradition. It may be the area most significant for the livelihood of the poor and the marginal people in the village community. (*Customs in Common* 100)

In studying Cracker culture, Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings sought to describe customs that seemed in opposition to modernity and the significance of those customs to the people who practiced them. J.T. Glisson, Rawlings' former neighbor, said the time period in north-central Florida that she captured so romantically represented "pre-WWII America," when society's preoccupations were more elemental and pragmatic (Interview). As these characteristics grew increasingly incongruent with an incipient capitalistic economy in Florida, Rawlings recognized the need to preserve the customs and values of the Cracker people. According to E.P. Thompson, the preservation and practice of traditional customs "are clearly connected to, and rooted in, the material and social realities of life and work...serving as a boundary to exclude outsiders" (*Customs in*

Common 13). By applying the theories of Thompson, it is clear that the Crackers' defiance as an act of preservation would fit into a larger universal struggle of lower agrarian classes against what they viewed as state intrusion into their self-contained world. In this way, a parallel can be drawn between the phenomenon described by Thompson regarding the eighteenth-century rural class in England and early twentieth-century Crackers in Florida.

In *Customs in Common*, Thompson examines the vanishing of lower class rural customs of eighteenth-century England. He calls for the strengthening of a "customary consciousness" among lower class traditionalists in order to facilitate a more equal distribution of materials and a greater level of cultural satisfaction; this consciousness would reinforce their customs especially when they grew to be challenged by state regulations, such as enclosure laws in his country, which he says is the most visible occasion of grievance in sixteenth and seventeenth-century England (15).

Historians have noted that the great age of parliamentary enclosure, between 1760 and 1820, is testimony not only to the rage for improvement but also the tenacity with which "humoursome" or "spiteful" fellows blocked the way to enclosure by agreement, holding out to the last for the old customary. (110)

Thompson's work highlights the conflicts that arose between classes during this time of transition, and the inevitable consequences on the part of the lower orders. Obviously, those commoners against enclosure were the minority, but they brought to the forefront the importance of protecting their customs of husbandry and open range cattle. In one example, he states the protest of the people "was too near London not to be common discourse" (110). Thompson outlines the customary use claims the plebeian class used to protest enclosure, which created a standard in which "rights by prescription and rights by usage had become altogether indistinct" (125). He exemplifies the strengthening and preservation of rural customs by the fundamentally defiant actions of the

plebeian class in defending their rights, which German Marxist historian Hans Medick says were innately alarming to the higher orders:

The term 'plebeian culture' is taken to designate as a better, a more specific term the common people's ways of life and experience during the transition to capitalism, than the vaguer and much used phrase 'popular culture'. 'Plebeian' evokes well that obstinacy of behaviour and expression characteristic of the 'lower orders', as it was seen with a mixture of contempt and fear 'from above.' (85)

Although the objection to the rise of fences in north-central Florida was more subdued compared to the riotous and uncontained response of the English peasantry, the Cracker people claimed similar rights to the land, and similar grievances that the end of open range was detrimental to their cherished lifestyle and general survival in the harsh Florida wilderness. For instance, Thompson highlights one example where the peasants rioted over the closing in of a

marsh, which they claimed robbed them of access to natural resources and water (*Customs in Common* 117). This is analogous to the "fence law" which the Crackers faced in north-central Florida.

As in eighteenth-century England, these protests in Florida sometimes manifested themselves in the form of mob violence. An October 1930 issue of the Palatka *Daily News* features reports of mob attacks protesting the state's new "Cow Law," or the fence enclosure law. However, with the exception of a few sporadic instances, mob violence was not common in north central Florida. As Thompson notes of the peasantry in England, visible unrest over customary rights was not a major occurrence, although it was fairly common. More often, he says, it was "sullen" rather than "vibrant," perhaps suggesting an inability to devote resources away from production due to economic circumstances (*Customs in Common* 115).

The new capitalistic rules and innovations in early-twentieth century Florida removed the Crackers from

their means of production at various levels, and introduced various new technologies to simplify their rugged lifestyles. Thus, it seemed these members of the lower agrarian class would either have to adapt to these changes or move. Rather than leave, they tried to incorporate particular elements of Florida's new market economy into their lifestyles—on their own terms. For instance, the Crackers began purchasing cars, partaking in the market-driven sale of liquor, buying modern tools, particularly for farming, and using the Sears Roebuck catalog. Despite the riots of Thompson's accounts and the few examples of violent protest in Florida, opposition to modern economic impositions was more subtle and circumventive.

The Crackers also had limited participation in modern concepts of social structure as well. Although the local issues in the north-central Florida backwoods allowed for more fluid race relations, the Crackers still mostly upheld the racial stratification of the South at that time. Rawlings herself maintained a separate house for her African-American workers, and would

call on them to entertain her company with song and dance. In one encounter, Rawlings accidentally insults an impoverished white woman by offering to pay her in exchange for laundry services—a job that was strictly to be performed by the African-American workers. The woman's husband, Tim, angrily responds, "A white woman don't ask another white woman to do her washin' for her, nor to carry her slops" (*Cross Creek* 67). There is certainly an eccentricity that separates the Crackers from other whites at that time, and a neighborliness that broke some traditional racial barriers; however, the white at the Creek still maintained mainstream ideas, such as obligating black people to white people's beneficence. Carolyn M. Jones asserts that the world in which Rawlings arrived in 1928 had not drastically changed since the days of slavery in terms of race and class relations. She notes that the system of slavery "permitted a conflation of race and class domination that emphasized class," which would eventually create "a class hierarchy defined by race" (Jones 216).

Ste. Claire describes the development of behaviors that increasingly assimilated the Cracker people into the market economy. A visit to the general store in town, for instance, provided the opportunity to purchase some indulgences such as whiskey, tobacco, and "real" coffee (104). Perhaps, this can be viewed as very limited participation in consumerism (limited in that they did not promote materialism). In this way, the Crackers demonstrated they were selecting particular areas of modernity to benefit them. Similarly, the Crackers' contribution to the commercial fishing market on Orange Lake, near Cross Creek gave them limited exposure to the modern market-driven economy. While the families at the Creek did fish for sustenance, they also unlawfully participated in shipping their fish to market in Georgia. Glisson's father, Tom, was particularly instrumental in establishing this trade, eventually making a decent living for his family, as far as Creek standards are concerned. J.T. Glisson outlines his family's adoption of modern conveniences in the 1940s:

First, they bought a gasoline-powered washing machine that usually required as much labor to start as doing the washing by hand. Then Mamma bought a gasoline iron that had to be pumped up with air... Dad bought a kerosene refrigerator, and for several months we had ice cream frozen in the ice trays every day. (151)

Once the Cracker people were integrated into the capitalist economy, however, they had little control over the pace of incorporation, which alarmed Rawlings. Despite the fact that she was a patron of this capitalistic society, she was very aware of the burden imposed upon the Crackers due to their lack of control over these changes. Her goal then became to preserve their customs through her writing in order to impart their importance in Florida's history and contemporary culture.

Rawlings starkly diverges from these earlier accounts of Cracker impressions, such as those in "The Florida Cracker Before the Civil War As Seen Through Travelers' Accounts,"

which state that “the perpetual presence of their destitution was alleviated by an absence of moral standards; and inasmuch as no form of law coerced Crackers” (qtd. in Ste. Claire 47). Instead, she validates their necessity of breaking the law in order to survive in these backwoods:

These people are “lawless” by an anomaly. They are living an entirely natural, and very hard life, disturbing no one. Civilization has no concern with them, except to buy their excellent corn liquor, and to hunt, with abandon. Yet almost everything they do is illegal. And everything they do is necessary to sustain life in that place. The old clearings have been farmed out and will not “make” good crops anymore. The big timber is gone. The trapping is poor. They `shine, because `shining is the only business they know that can be carried on in the country they know, and would be unwilling to leave. (*Selected Letters* 49)

To Rawlings, the Crackers’ digression from the law did not equate to a digression from morality.

Thus, to a certain level, Rawlings echoes the notion of Thompson’s “moral economy” theory. In the context of widespread riots over food prices in the English countryside in the late eighteenth century, Thompson says the peasant community utilized a “moral economy” over a “political economy,” in which prices were not gauged in a manner that prevented the peasant community from being able to afford their basic needs. This defense of their rights is rooted in the idea that these customs have been passed down through tradition and oral teaching, in a dominant “moral economy,” and therefore have a wider consensus among the lower classes that practice such customs. In *Customs in Common*, Thompson says:

It is possible to detect in almost every eighteenth-century crowd action some legitimising notion. By the notion of legitimation I mean that the men and women in the crowd were informed

by the belief that they were defending traditional rights or customs; and, in general, that they were supported by the wider consensus of the community. On occasion this popular consensus was endorsed by some measure of license afforded by the authorities. More commonly, the consensus was so strong that it overrode motives of fear or deference. (188)

By providing the distinction between this moral economy, in which justice and tradition ruled the prices of goods, over the political economy, in which prices were determined by the market supply and demand, Thompson shows the motivation behind the defiant actions of the poor classes: a sense of fairness, rather than individual profit or advantage.

The Crackers within and outside Rawlings' work also defend their traditions with the idea that there is a moral obligation that existed outside their prescribed laws. In *South Moon Under*, some of the Crackers in the scrub debate the legality, or morality of the new fence law, to which one of

them says "they's things beyond the law is right and wrong, accordin' to how many folks they he'ps or harms" (210). Lee Townsend, descendent of the Townsend family featured in Rawlings' *Cross Creek* stories, similarly said of illegal hunting at night, "just because it wasn't legal, didn't mean it was immoral" (Interview). This concept of fairness shows the community-minded, and perhaps non-capitalist mentality of the Cracker people, which stood in opposition to the increasingly capitalist-driven markets in twentieth-century Florida.

Like her Cracker subjects, Rawlings took an approach against the popular conceptions of Cracker Florida. Rawlings has often been praised for bringing a sympathetic light to the Cracker people and, perhaps, the poor rural classes in general. Rawlings found beauty in both the customs and defiance of this culture.

There is a tenderness in Mrs. Rawlings' novels of the Florida orange country that may outlast the psychopathic hate with which other Southern writers have lifted the despised Cracker into literature.

Her books explain, what is a mystery in others, why the poor white loves his soil, why, indeed, he is worth writing about at all except as a psychological phenomenon. (Smith 97)

Rawlings sought to preserve what she saw was left of this culture before it vanished and wanted her reader to understand and appreciate the value of its customs. Like Thompson, her goals were not to promote a renewed installment of these traditional customs, but rather to promote an awareness, or "consciousness" of them.

Thompson and Rawlings sought to preserve these traditions because they provided significant protections for a lifestyle increasingly under siege from an expanding market economy. Thompson says, "We shall not ever return to pre-capitalist human nature, yet a reminder of its alternative needs, expectations and codes may renew our sense of our nature's range of possibilities" (*Customs in Common* 15). Rawlings did not want her beloved Crackers to revert back to the harsh, dangerous, and unstable subsistence

farming traditions; rather, she did not want the pastoral and pragmatic notions of the Cracker lifestyle to be carelessly discarded in Florida's transition to modernity. In her writing, Rawlings did not seek to capture the disappearing customs of the Crackers as a call for the economic restoration of Old Florida, but rather, she wanted to show her readers the values of a simpler time, and to acknowledge the needs of those living on the peripheries of this new, dominant economy.

Conclusions

The pioneer homesteads in the Big Scrub have long been abandoned, and the Cross Creek of Rawlings' day has since been transformed into a nostalgic recreation of the simple, backcountry community depicted in her beloved stories. The days of the Florida Crackers, in their true, authentic existence, have essentially disappeared. Yet, their fight to preserve their customs chronicles the experience of lower-class agrarian communities in the transition to capitalism in Florida. As modernity crept into the state during the early-

twentieth century, a paradox arose in which the Crackers, who had practiced the same methods of survival for generations upon generations, would become rebellious in preserving their customs. The common daily practices that allowed for the perpetuation of Cracker culture were transformed into a form of disagreement with the introduction of the new, capitalist economy. With an insistence on protecting the economic interest of Florida, the state government continued to impose more constraints on the Crackers, essentially forcing them to either conform to or defy the government. In an article for *Transatlantic Magazine*, Rawlings presents "Florida: A Land of Contrasts" in which she notes the inherent contradictory nature of the state's culture:

The idealists and the money-makers have been brought up short against the terrain and been obliged to adapt themselves to it, or fail.... Florida began and has continued as a combination of man's dreams and man's greediness. (12)

These contradictions Rawlings describes connect her to the work of E.P. Thompson, especially his theory that the preservation of traditional customs in the wake of capitalism is inherently rebellious. Furthermore, Rawlings echoes his suggestion that legality does not necessarily equate to morality, a claim Rawlings used to defend the defiant customs of the poor Cracker people, who believed they were simply trying to continue the lifestyle they had maintained for generations, rather than carry out angry acts of rebellion toward their government. As Rawlings puts it, the importance of their story is to encourage the preservation of the impressions of Old Florida, as a new, modern Florida was in the making. It was not the intention of either Rawlings or Thompson to suggest that people should revert back to these antiquated customs; rather, both writers aimed to remind people of the worldview represented within these same customs. An understanding of the dissent and reaction of poorer classes to the increasing constraints from the modern, capitalistic economy can be applied elsewhere to understand the process of social and

cultural change in the increasingly globalized society.

However, the Crackers and Rawlings also further complicated the paradox, by understanding that modernity was inevitable. This made their resistance an act of holding on as long as possible, rather than a winner-take-all defiance. Rawlings and the Crackers recognized that Florida, as this land of contrasts, required a balance between conservation and development:

Those of us who prefer Florida's lush wildness to profitable commercialization regret the increasing so-called "development." But it would be selfish to deny a share in the bland sunshine, in the enjoyment of the palm trees, the exotic birds, the fishing and the hunting, to "transients," and it is only to be hoped that while more and more travellers come inevitably to the State, the natural beauties, the native flora and fauna, will be preserved. ("Florida: A Land of Contrasts" 16)

For some in the state, the flora and fauna was a method of escape, for others, it was an opportunity for exploitation.

Although she realized the Cracker people maintained their traditions for the sake of survival, Rawlings developed a sense of environmental stewardship in learning about them and advocating for their preservation. It becomes clear through her writing that it is not only the people and their traditions she hoped would persevere, but also the delicate land around her she grew to love. For example, of the practice of moonshining Rawlings depicted in *South Moon Under*, Florence Turcotte writes:

...the main focus was not to deceive the revenueurs or defy the law. Neither was it to furnish themselves with cheap corn liquor: it was to provide for the basic needs of food, clothing and shelter for their families.... Furthermore, Rawlings maintained, moonshining did nothing to harm the land of deplete its natural resources. (495)

Both *Transatlantic Magazine* and *Collier's* commissioned Rawlings to write articles about the preservation of

Florida wilderness; she knew the state's unmatched beauty and rich resources would attract even more human interference and destruction than she had already witnessed. According to Turcotte, Rawlings understood her role as a writer could educate the masses and influence these capitalists to be sensible toward the Florida environment.^v Nonetheless, the concern was one of identity and survival, rather than from a social issue perspective.

Although the Crackers and their legal transgressions fit into a broader picture of the struggle to preserve customs of the lower classes, there is little evidence they had any awareness of this. The Cracker people were simply concerned with their survival in the Florida backwoods, even if it meant circumventing the law. In speaking with Crackers and their descendants, it is clear they were unaware that their defiance of the law had any widespread implications. Their struggle, however, is a part of a larger one of lower agrarian resistance to seemingly unfair market changes that affect their fair shot at making a living in Florida.

Rawlings sought to record and accurately depict the lifestyle of the Crackers in her literature. She interpreted the meanings of practices and behavior of the Cracker people in terms of their local ideologies. Through this, she could demonstrate the ways in which they stood in opposition to the impositions of the emerging market economy in Florida. The precision in Rawlings' chronicles of the Crackers in north-central Florida, along with her sympathetic vision of their fleeting customs, places her work into a broader context within the historiography of lower-class traditionalists during the transition to capitalism.

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Endnotes

ⁱ This article is an updated and revised version of my undergraduate honors thesis, presented to the history department at the University of Florida in 2013. I would like to thank my advisor, Dr. Steven Noll, along with Florence Turcotte and Dr. Andrea Sterk for their help on this project.

ⁱⁱ An extensive description of the scrub habitat can be found in "Ecosystems: Florida Scrub." Cathy Vogelsong writes: "The dwarfed, gnarled shrubby appearance of the scrub may be due in part to low nutrients, since scrub soil is almost devoid of clay and organic matter. But the most direct factor that keeps the scrub low is fire.... Most plant species in scrub are evergreen. This is probably an adaptation to retain nutrients, since the nutrients in litter are rapidly leached out of the sand, and so are lost to the system. Scrub plants have many adaptations to the desert-like conditions (both nutrient and water) that they live in. These include the stunted habit of the plants, and development of very deep taproots, and/or a disproportionately large system of shallow hair roots.... The only tall canopy tree found in scrub is pine, chiefly the sand pine (*Pinus clausa*), which may be dense, sparse, or lacking entirely.... The dominant shrubby layer (to 30') may also be dense and impenetrable, or open with visible patches of sand." Vogelsong writes: "The dwarfed, gnarled shrubby appearance of the scrub may be due in part to low nutrients, since scrub soil is almost devoid of clay and organic matter. But the most direct factor that keeps the scrub low is fire.... Most plant species in scrub are evergreen. This is probably an adaptation to retain nutrients, since the nutrients in litter are rapidly leached out of the sand, and so are lost to the system. Scrub plants have many adaptations to the desert-like conditions (both nutrient and water) that they live in. These include the stunted habit of the

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ⁱⁱⁱ Italics in original text. Unless otherwise noted, I will be using the prideful definition of this term in this article.

^{iv} Parenthesis in original text.

^v For a comprehensive assessment of Rawling's growing environmental sensibilities throughout her career in Florida, read "For this is an Enchanted Land: Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings and the Florida Environment" by Florence M. Turcotte. Turcotte discusses the evolution of Rawling's view on sustainability, environmental stewardship, and facing the inevitable development of the land around her.