

## A Fascination with Rice Creek

Richard Franz

### Introduction: Greetings from the Creek

11 December 2020

*Dear Hikers and Bicyclists,*

*“Returning home from Palatka, I decide to pull into the small parking area along side of the Palatka-Lake Butler bike trail where it crosses Rice Creek. As I parked, one of the Bartram Trail signs announces that John and William Bartram had explored Rice Creek during their early explorations on the St. Johns River. This whetted my appetite for more exploration of the Rice Creek area.*

*The modern bike bridge that transverses Rice Creek here enables bicyclists and hikers to cross Rice Creek without getting their feet wet. This bridge replaces the original wooden railroad trestle that historically bridged the creek, which had enabled trains to travel between Lake City and Palatka.*

*The first days of December and their accompanying signs of winter have snuck upon us once again in Putnam County. On December 2nd we had our first light freeze. Since then, our early morning temperatures have been vacillating between the mid-30s and mid-50s.*

*It is now 4 o'clock on this cool December afternoon. Today, the winter sun lights up the brilliant yellow, orange, and red foliage of the red maples, black gums, sumac, grape vines, and sweetgums along the margins of the creek. Their magnificent colors contrast strongly with the more somber tan needles of their cypress neighbors and the rich green of the mature slash and loblolly pines. Ole Jack Frost has done an amazing job.*

*As I lean on my elbows on the bridge's metal railings, I watch the reflective flashes of passing cars, pickups, and logging trucks through the swamp's living screen on SR 100. The local sounds of running water, breezes in the swamp trees, and the raucous calls of crows, are greatly diminished by the constant grinding of truck engines, roars of motorcycles, thumping basses of audio-speakers, and occasional horns and distant sirens. But still, despite all of these intrusive noises, I am able to appreciate the natural beauty that emanates from the Rice Creek valley.*

*Waking from my aesthetic stupor, I cross over the bike bridge to its east side. There I am greeted by Florida Trail's wooden McKinney boardwalk that directs hikers to the highway. This path provides a safe access for hikers, who must await breaks in traffic, to safely cross SR 100 and continue their hike on the Florida Trail. But, BE WISE! and wait your turn; this is a seriously dangerous road."*

*Best Wishes,*

*Dick Franz*

## The Plan

Tom Hallock had asked me to join him in developing stories about the Florida Trail for publication in a collected publication. This notion immediately intrigued me! It only took a few minutes to visualize stories about the Florida Trail section that passed through the Rice Creek basin in southwestern Putnam County. This area was ideal for such a chapter with its historically-rich and biologically-diverse attributes. I asked my friend Joe Foy to join me in this venture. He had been actively exploring these woods for years, as part of his search for Bartram's route between the Spalding's Lower Store on the St. Johns River and the Alachua Savanna.

In mid-December, Tom and his son Zack joined me on a two-mile bicycle trip into the heart of the Rice Creek Conservation Area (RCCA) (Figure 1). A metal gate at the RCCA entrance blocks motorized vehicles from entering the East Trail (Figure 2). Once inside the gate, we passed stands of slash pines



**Fig. 1-** Map of the Rice Creek Conservation Area (RCCA) showing the Rice Creek Swamp and Creek, Highways 100 & 20, Palatka-Lake Butler Bike Trail (P-LB), The Florida Trail, Associated Trails and Interior Roads, and Major Cultural Sites. Map was adapted from SJRWM Trail Map for RCCA.



**Fig. 2-** Rice Creek Conservation Area, East Trail Parking (photograph by R. Franz)

with thick under-stories of wax myrtle and gallberry. The pineland on the west side of the road eventually gave way to a clear-cut section that had been recently replanted with longleaf pines. The entry road eventually merged with the Florida Trail at the Big Oak picnic/camp area (site of the Rice Creek “Hilton”). We dismounted to explore these trail-side amenities and to walk along levees that enclosed the former rice plantation.

After traveling back to my place on Putnam Prairie, we were joined by Joe Foy. The four of us sat around a camp fire to discuss the possible inclusion of the Rice Creek region in Tom’s proposed project on the Florida Trail. We quickly realized that the project, as initially conceived, was much too large, and we needed to pare it down. With some discussion, we agreed on a 7-mile stretch of the Florida Trail along the east side of Rice Creek, between SR100 and SR 20. This segment we arbitrarily dubbed the Mid-Rice Creek Trail Section. At this meeting, we divided up tasks. Joe would be the historian, botanist, and pathfinder, and I, the coordinator and natural historian. Zack expressed a desire to participate in this effort, possibly contributing a piece about the Rice Creek “Hilton.” We chose mid-February 2021, as our completion date.

### **Florida Trail Intercepts the Palatka-Lake Butler State Trail**

The Florida Trail extends south from the Etoniah Creek State Forest, following several rural roads, and eventually merging with the Palatka-to-Lake Butler State Trail (P-LB Bike Trail) at Carraway Church Road. From this point, the Florida Trail and the state trail co-exist as one for about three miles. The Florida Trail splits from the state trail on the east side of the Rice Creek bridge (Figure 3). At this departure, the hiking trail descends down the state trail embankment to the McKinney boardwalk and SR 100.



**Fig. 3-** P-LB Bike bridge over Rice Creek at SR 100 (photograph by R. Franz)

The state bike trail is built on the former bed of the Georgia Southern & Florida Railroad. This rail line, completed between Lake City and Palatka in 1890, went bankrupt in 1891, probably in response to the building of additional railroad lines connecting Palatka directly with Jacksonville. The bankrupted RR was reorganized by the Southern Railroad Company in 1895, which maintained sporadic operations up until the 1980s. The ownership of the right-of-way now shifted to the state of Florida for the construction of the Palatka-Lake Butler State Trail (Wikipedia, “Georgia Southern and Florida Railway”).

In its present incarnation, this part of the P-LB State Trail extends from Keystone Heights, to about the St. Johns River Water Management District offices (4049 Reid St, Palatka, FL 32177). It is anticipated that the completed path would extend from Lake City to St. Augustine. It is hoped that in the future the remaining section west of Lake Butler will be purchased by the state. This bike path is part of the state's Rails-to-Trails program, which joins an extensive network of the statewide public recreational greenways and the bike trail system. The current parts of the right-of-way were purchased with Preservation 2000 funds through the Office of Greenways and Trails Acquisition Program (Wikipedia, "Palatka-Lake Butler State Trail").

### **The Rice Creek Conservation Area (RCCA)**

We stopped at the conservation entry gate to copy the following information from the existing kiosk about the RCCA property:

*"This 4,200-acre conservation area was purchased by the SJRWM District in 2002 to protect significant water resources, wetlands and wildlife habitat. Most of the Rice Creek Swamp is located within the conservation area and covers approximately 70 percent of the property. Palmetto Branch, Oldtown Branch, and Hickory Branch all flow into the swamp just west of the conservation area. Together these three tributaries and the Rice Creek Swamp form the headwaters of Rice Creek. Rice Creek Conservation Area is a significant parcel within the Etoniah/Cross Florida Greenway Florida Forever Project. The parcel is necessary for the possible connection of Etoniah Creek State Forest to the Cross Florida Greenway. In turn, this connection is essential to the possible linking of the Ocala National Forest to the Osceola National Forest."*

### **Permit**

We applied for a Special Use (SUA) permit from the St. Johns Water Management District (SJRWM) to photograph the proposed area for our article. This permit was necessary in order for us to drive to some of the more remote areas on RCCA.

### **Public Access to RCCA**

Two public entry points intrude onto the RCCA property along SR 100: (1) Florida Trail at the SR 100 bike trail bridge over Rice Creek and (2) the RCCA East Trail beginning at the conservation gate. Safe parking is available at each of these access points off of SR 100. Signage along the highway adequately identify them. In addition, Sam Carr and the "Bartram Trail in

Putnam County” organization have placed Bartram Trail signs (with QR codes) at each of the two parking lots to remind us of the historic significance of these sites that document John and William Bartram’s exploration of the lower reaches of the Rice Creek. One local Bartram scholar has suggested that the Bartrams may have traveled upstream on Rice Creek, for about 7 miles in 1766, placing them close to the current SR 100 bridge, although there are other interpretations.

### **The East Trail**

Access to the East Trail has a pass-through gap in the fence at the gate, which allows easy entry for foot or bike traffic, and possibly horses. The East Trail road bifurcates, at about a half mile, with the main track continuing on to the Big Oak area. The secondary spur, marked as the White Trail, trends westward toward the floodplain swamp and Florida Trail. This track is a multi-purpose road, which also serves as an equestrian trail. The Big Oak area with its “Rice Creek Hilton” can also be reached via the White Trail.

The West Trail forms the western RCCA property boundary, which abuts private lands, and is generally unavailable to hikers. The Florida Trail parallels the east side of Rice Creek, lying just inside the forest fringe, bordering the margins of an extensive clear-cut pinelands. The path continues through parts of the rice plantation, traverses Hoffman’s Crossing, and then connects to an internal road system, which eventually leads to a FDOT retention pond on SR 20.

The internal road system near the southern part of the tract is called 9-Mile Swamp Road and owned by Ben and Louann Williams. The Williams family also owns all of the land to the west of Rice Creek as well. Mr. Williams is the President of the North Florida Prescribed Burn Association. The property, all of which is protected by a Forever Florida Conservation Easement, is known as the Wetland Preserve. Florida Trail Association has a perpetual agreement with the Williams to allow trail access on their property which carries forward with the land to all future owners.

The East and White Trails pass through cleared slash pine plantations. This acreage was recently replanted with longleaf pines. Several isolated cypress and tupelo ponds are now visible in these clear-cut areas. Tramping

out across the newly replanted pinelands, visitors are greeted with a special type of wetland habitat, home to many unusual plants. The ponds there generally lack fish because of the isolation. These ponds serve as breeding habitats for specialized amphibians, such as oak toads, least chorus frogs, pinewoods and barking tree frogs, and striped newts, who are intolerant of predatory fishes.

The White Trail eventually intersects the Florida Trail about a thousand feet south of SR 100. At this junction, there is a plaque with a map and a mail box, containing a notebook for hikers to write comments. One entry in the book notes that “*Emily fell in the ditch.*” The White Trail then turns south, skirting the replanted pinelands, and paralleling the wooded Florida Trail. In the past, annual fires kept the original flatwoods in an open savanna-like condition. Later, in the mid-twentieth century, with the advent of modern forestry practices, these natural pine flatwoods communities were converted to row-planting of slash pine and the establishment of unnatural pine plantations.

### **Follow the Bright Orange Blazes**

The path of the Florida Trail through the Mid-Rice Creek section is well marked with vertical orange “blazes” on trees, fences, and road sign posts (Figure 4). We encountered them at the Carraway Church Road, along the three-mile stretch of the P-LB State Trail where it approaches the bike trail bridge, and along the Woodland Florida Trail south of SR 100. On the south side of SR 100, hikers are greeted with one of the familiar Florida Trail signs, showing the site for the local entry to



**Fig. 4-** Orange “blazes” on trees along the Florida Trail vegetation, with tree-like saw palmettos (photograph by J. Foy)

Florida Trail. The orange-colored blazes direct visitors along the well-defined woodland path to SR 20. After about a mile south of SR 100, hikers will encounter the first of several trail-side attractions, including the Rice Creek “Hilton,” the loop trail, and the colonial rice plantation.

### **A Botanical Collage**

A mesic forest lines much of the first mile or so of the Florida Trail, including selections of evergreen and deciduous hammock trees, including sabal palms, loblolly pines, and at least five species of oaks (Shumard, laurel, water, swamp chestnut, and live oaks). Saw palmettos form massive understory thickets, sporadically beneath the canopy, some with trunks 10 feet or more tall. During the spring, flowering shrubs, such as wild azaleas, hawthorn, swamp dogwood, and viburnum, bloom along the trail margins. Ferns, mosses, epiphytic orchids and bromeliads grow in great profusion on the trunks and branches of the larger trees. Poison ivy is also abundant in warmer weather, but dies back during winter.

### **Arching Oaks**

Along the first part of the Florida Trail, there are mature water oaks that arch over the path. Their trunks are festooned with lush growths of resurrection ferns, ball moss with stale bloom spikes from the previous year, and occasionally greenfly orchids. In winter, after the canopy foliage had fallen, the trail is dappled with sunlight. In brighter patches, we observed green anoles making dashes toward swarming flies that were doing touch-and-go flights on the leaves of the ground-trailing Sarsaparilla vines.

### **Palmettos in the Mist**

Did you know that individual stem of mature saw palmettos can grow to 15 or more feet tall (Figure 5) and may be thousands of years old? Long-term studies, using genetic analyses, at Archbold Biological Station near Lake Placid, have documented extreme ages for



**Fig. 5-** Giant Saw palmettos. Dick Franz standing next a 15-foot tall saw palmetto. (photograph by J. Foy)

these understory palms, possibly 5 to 10 thousand years old, The Archbold researcher Dr. Warren G. Abrahamson suggested that “We have an old-growth forest right here” (Jennifer Reed, 2019, “Ancient Forests in Southwest Florida” [<https://www.naplesgarden.org/ancient-forests-in-southwest-florida/>]).

Now, imagine that the saw palmettos at Rice Creek witnessed Timucuan hunters stalking deer and bear in the 1600s, or plantation workers during the Second Spanish period in the 1790s, preparing the Rice Creek bottomlands for rice production, or Seminole warriors pushing through the palmetto thickets in preparation for their attack on Palatka during the Second Seminole War in 1835. These palms probably also listened to the loud, fire-belching steam locomotives in the 1890s as they chugged between Lake City to Palatka. Now they oversee quiet hikers as they navigate the Florida Trail.

### The Rice Creek “Hilton”

The Hilton was designed and built by Jake Hoffman and is truly a unique structure (Figure 6).

We could envision ourselves sitting there warmed by a camp fire in front of the cabin, cooking the evening meal, while tree bats zipped around the clearing, keeping the mosquitoes at bay, and the squirrel tree frogs calling from cavities in the widely-spaced oak trees.



**Fig. 6-** Rice Creek “Hilton,” camping area on the Florida Trail (photograph by J. Foy)

*A Visit to the “Hilton.” We were walking down the trail and took a side spur to the campsite when we actually saw what was a “camp site.” My father Thomas said under his breath “that’s luxurious!” And he was not lying*

*The cabin was two stories, it was screened on both floors. The bottom floor being for eating with a picnic table and a set of pots and pans. Above the door as you walk in is a box turtle shell that is very complete. On the outer side of the cabin on the bottom floor there was a bow saw for collecting firewood. To get to the second floor there was a ladder on either side of the cabin up to a trapdoor that was 8*

*feet above the ground. As you climbed the ladder the handholds were staggered so that you could get a good grip as needed. The second floor has a set of cushions that were for sleeping on and slept twelve. In the inside there were also hooks for backpacks to hang on as well as room to stand up straight.*

*On the outside on the second floor there were hooks for the food that you brought so that it was safe from the wildlife. As you walk away from the cabin there is a pair of benches around a metal fire ring as well as a water pump and a mailbox. In the mailbox was a notebook where people wrote who they were and something that happened or a fiction to make people to laugh. Overall the campsite was one of the nicest little unexpected discoveries I've ever made while hiking and I would definitely love to stay a night or two and see what it's like. (Trail Notes by Zack Hallock)*

### **Colonial Rice Plantation**

The Florida Trail forms a 2.4-mile loop around the perimeter of the old rice planting area. Much of this oblong loop trail conforms to the historic canal levees that enclosed the 1790s rice production area. The rice plantation basin is now covered with mature forest, varying from mesic hammock to lower basin swamp habitats. Red maples in the basin put on a colorful show in the fall, and again in spring, with their red buds and seeds. Bald cypress tower above them. The overhead canopy is closed with foliage during the spring and summer, giving the forested swamp the feel of being in a cathedral. During the winter, the canopy is bare, with the sun lighting up the forest floor.

The current levees have frequent breaks in them, from both erosion and tree falls, which permits water flow between the rice depression and the creek. Each of these gaps are now bridged by narrow wooden walk ways and two suspension (swinging) bridges. On the south end of the loop, a wooden pier, built by Jake Hoffman and friends, juts out into the floodplain swamp to provide access to the giant cypress viewing area.

**A Brief History.** *The British took control of Florida from the Spanish in 1763. During the British colonial period, John Bartram along with his son William and several others rowed a boat up Rice Creek on January 30th, 1766. At that time the creek was called Gray's Creek. The Bartram group navigated up the creek supposedly about seven miles, until fallen trees blocked passage. Bartram reported that the creek at that point was seven foot deep and about ten or twelve yards wide with four-foot-high banks. Seven miles up the creek would be at about where the SR 100 Bridge is today. However, Bartram's description*

*of the creek would better match a spot about two miles downstream and east of Springside Shortcut Road. That spot is shown as a boat landing on survey data from 1849. The Spanish re-gained control of Florida in 1783. During their second occupation, the Spanish decided they could best hold the territory by settling it. They began issuing land grants in 1790. Pantón, Leslie & Company was a trading company that operated in Spanish Florida during that time. Two partners in that company, William Pantón and Thomas Forbes, received a total of five land grants along Rice Creek. The old rice field levees that can be seen in Rice Creek Swamp are on land granted to William Pantón. Oldtown Branch Creek on the west side of the Pantón land grant indicates a settlement, possibly for workers on the rice plantation. Two other adjacent land grants extended Pantón's holdings northeast to the above-mentioned boat landing on Rice Creek. William Pantón died in 1801.*

*The United States gained control of Florida in 1821. An 1823 map identifies the area as Bell's Savanna, which might have referred to what remained of the old rice plantation. During the US territorial period, Rice Creek was also known as Cedar Creek. Harvesting cedar trees was an important industry during that time. The old rice levees outlasted the cedar industry, so the creek is now known solely as Rice Creek. In the nineteenth century, turpentine and timber became the prime industries of the area. Turpentine was still being produced from pines on the west side of Rice Creek Swamp up until the 1980s. Pine plantations currently border the swamp.*

Further Considerations. *We know from "LeConte's Report on East Florida" that LeConte's family had a profitable rice plantation in Georgia. He knew rice production and was not impressed with the possibility of growing rice in the Florida swamps. That was in 1822. He does not mention a rice plantation at Rice Creek. That plantation must have been abandoned a long time ago.*

*In 1823 Vignoles reported that Florida swamps would only support rice for two years, and then would need rotation to another crop. That leads me to believe the Rice Creek plantation must have been a fast failure, if even that. A lot of work was done constructing levees, but the plantation might never have produced any rice. One piece of evidence of no production is the large dead cypress standing inside the levee loop. That tree would have been alive two hundred years ago. Why would they leave a huge tree in the middle of their rice paddy if they actually got to the point of growing rice?*

*(Le Conte's Report on East Florida. Edited by Richard Adicks. Orlando: University Presses of Florida, 1978.) (Historic Notes by Joe Foy)*



**Fig. 7-** Rice Creek giant cypress. Dick Franz next to the cypress tree along the Loop Trail (photograph by J. Foy)

### **That Giant Cypress Tree**

Our Rice Creek cypress giant is listed as the seventh largest bald cypress tree known (Figure 7). As a species, bald cypress trees can grow to immense sizes, both in height and girth, and they can live a long time. This live giant is positioned out beyond the rice levee, about 40 feet from Rice Creek. It lies near the point where Old Town Branch enters the primary stream flow. A sign on the loop trail identifies the trail spur to the tree. This immense bald cypress is recorded as 107 feet tall, 24 feet 9 inches in circumference, with a crown spread of 48 feet by 42 feet. The floodplain around the tree is muddy and cluttered with an abundance of cypress knees.

*The Rice Creek Giant: A Personal Story.* *I first saw it several decades ago before a trail was cut to it. Ankle deep in water, I pushed through brush and there it was right in front of me, a giant monster. It surprised me as if the monster had snuck up on me. The circumference measured 25'- 8." I went home and got my wife, and I carried her on my back through the muddy water to see the giant. She got a thrill out of that. Years later, I read an article by a woman whose husband had just carried her on his back to see the same tree. I couldn't help but laugh and wonder how many guys over the centuries have carried their gals on their back to see that giant tree. Having that huge tree suddenly appear out of the mass of brush and smaller trees gave it grandeur. The magnitude of the tree is somewhat*

*diminished now when viewed from the deck that has been built a distance from the tree. The giant cypress is best viewed up close. But, beware of moccasins if you venture past the viewing deck. One bit the heel of my boot further downstream.*  
(A personal note from Joe Foy).

### Suspension Bridges

A recent suspension bridge on the Loop Trail passes over a side branch of Rice Creek (Figure 8). A friend, Carol McDonald, reported the presence of the shrubby Parsley Hawthorn (Haw), from the Rice Creek swamp, near the newer suspension bridge. It's a species that I had never seen before. This small woody tree, a member of the Rose Family, gets 18-25 feet tall and has its branchlets armored with slender thorns. Its small leaves are deltoid-shaped, slightly-lobed, with serrated margins. It produces half-inch wide white flowers in spring, developing bright red fruits later in the year. Joe and I plan this spring to go "a-roaming," looking for it along the loop trail.

About half way around the levee loop trail, a second trail, blazed with yellow, splits from the primary loop. This spur is labeled as the Cedar Swamp



**Fig. 8-** Suspension bridge, on Loop Trail around the rice plantation  
(photograph by J. Foy)

Trail and includes an older suspension bridge. This trail also passes near a large dead cypress (circumference 22.5 feet). The cedar part of the trail's name is misleading since no cedars are visible now in that portion of the swamp.

## **A Nest of Sulphur Springs Plus One**

Joe parked his truck on an old logging road that branched off of the East Trail. We could not go any farther, because of dead pine logs strewn across the road (possibly bark beetle infestations). We left the truck and walked over to a substantial spring run that flowed through a culvert under the road. This site was also where the Florida Trail emerged from the Loop Trail. The Florida Trail then followed the logging road, eastward for several hundred feet, before plunging back into the swamp forest. Joe and I stood next to the truck watching the clear, lightly-stained clear water coursed past us. Joe was recounting a previous trip to this site:

Spring Run. *I followed this run upstream for about 1,500 feet, requiring me to push through tangles of palm fronds and vines and to step over small cypress knees to find a place where the run divides into at least nine branches, all leading to small isolated springs. The sulfur smell was very strong at several of these springs and the odor followed me as I left the swamp. Too late I realized that sulfur mud had clung to my boots and pant-legs and was the source of the odor. I saw several more springs having an abundance of the sulfur-fixing bacteria coating their bottom.* (Notes from Joe Foy)

### **Plus One Spring**

A small spring, located at the south portal to the Hoffman Crossing, is particularly odoriferous with the smell of sulfur dioxide. Wandering anywhere near it, you smell its bubbling water shouting at you “Sulfur Spring!” The bottom of the spring and its accompanying run is coated with thick deposits of stringy sulfur-fixing bacteria, clinging to wood, dead leaves, and other debris that form the bottom substrate (Figure 9). Its most peculiar



**Fig. 9-** Plus-One Sulfur Spring, on the south end of the Hoffman Crossing. Note the spring pool and the rosy-red growths on the sulfur bacteria in the spring run (photograph by R. Franz)

feature, however, is a thin veneer of a rosy-red colored bacteria (perhaps genus *Serratia*, a rod-shaped, anaerobic, rosy red bacteria in the family Yersiniaceae), sitting atop the white bacterial mat, creating a most unexpected appearance. The small spring run flows directly into the basin swamp, inundating small sections of Hoffman's wooden walkway.

### Hoffman Crossing

The 1,886-foot narrow boardwalk, named for Jake Hoffman, takes hikers across a lateral extension of the Rice Creek Swamp. The walkway is



**Fig. 10-** A section of Hoffman Crossing near the south end.  
(photograph by R. Franz)

two timbers wide with a hand rail (Figure 10). The trail planks are well-seated in wet soils and have been patched with both metal screening and roofing shingles presumably to reduce their slippery surfaces. The type of vegetation, crossed by Hoffman plank path, is reminiscent of a basin swamp environment, with a preponderance of swamp oaks, red maples, sweetbay magnolia, and scattered loblolly pines. This condition is quite different from the cypress-filled swamp along Rice Creek.

### Jake's Construction Crew

We had conversations with Helen Hoffman, Jake's wife, Doyle Wells, and Willy TheLosen about their experiences with Jake and the Florida Trail

project at Rice Creek. Joe Foy had also talked to Helen, who still resides in Palatka, with Doyle, Willy and me. Talking with Jake himself would have been the ultimate conversation, but unfortunately he passed away in 2019.

We learned that Doyle and Jake had worked together at the Georgia Pacific mill in Palatka, and before that, at Hudson Pulp and Paper Company. Jake was an electrical engineer and Doyle an electrician. Following their retirements in 2002, they began volunteering to build the Florida Trail's infrastructure at Rice Creek. Willy, a well-known conservationist in north Florida, volunteered as a member of Jake's Rice Creek construction team. Work on this trail section is continuing to this day by Jeff Glenn, Abe Christian, and other members of the Florida Trail Association.

One of the intriguing aspects of Jake's story is his innovative invention of the Bardin Booger Bike for use on the Rice Creek Florida Trail. Previously, the Florida Trail crew had to hand-carry heavy timbers from arriving lumber trucks to the place where the timbers were needed. Jake's invention eventually became known the Bardin Booger Bike (BBB).

Description of Jake's Booger: *It's been about 15 years since I last used the BBB so my memory is a bit fuzzy. It had two motorcycle wheels that are in the same orientation as on a motorcycle. I think the timbers were loaded on top. The BBB was pushed, not motorized. I can't remember all the other details. I do remember when Hoffman's Crossing was being built we "drove" (pushed) it down the completed portion of the boardwalk to the end where it was being extended. It was a bit tricky getting it around corners because the wheels are fixed, they don't turn. At least once I accidentally dumped a full load of timbers into the swamp. (Memories of Willy TheLosen)*



**Fig. 11-** Jake's Bardin Booger Bike. Notice the image of the real Bardin Booger on Dick's T-shirt (photograph by M. Wegner)

We found that the BBB was stored at the Florida Trails Association warehouse in Gainesville. Jeff Glenn, a staff member, invited us to photograph it (Figure 11). What a beast! Just maneuvering the bike from the warehouse to the parking lot at the FTA office was a challenge. No wonder Willy lost a heavy load of timbers as he pushed the Booger through the swamp. There are no real ways of steering it.

### **The Myth of the Bardin Booger**

For more than 50 years, residents have circulated stories about an ape-like creature, who lived under the Etoniah Creek bridge, and roamed the surrounding pinelands and swamps near the village of Bardin. Many stories were spun by locals, hanging out at Bud's Grocery near Bardin. The store operators are continuing to sell t-shirts advertising the home-town Booger. I bought shirts the other day for both Joe and me. The creature's name was popularized by Jody Delzell, a columnist for the local Palatka Daily News. Through Jody's efforts, the myth of the Booger was kept alive. Delzell first wrote about the Booger in 1981. Realizing the mysterious Bardin swamp creature had no name, Jody nicknamed him the Bardin Booger. Delzell also wrote a book entitled, *The Enigmatic Bardin Booger*. Jody told about meetings with the Booger in the woods. The Booger would sit on a stump and gave his opinions on politics to Jody, who dutifully reported them in the newspaper. Years later, people asked Jody why he kept writing about the Booger, and he replied, "I keep him alive because he's fun..." and "people love to hear about his antics." (Francheska Russo & Jamie Swann <https://www.jacksonville.com/2016-05-19/legend-bardin-booger>). The Booger lost his stump buddy, with Jody Delzell's passing at age 90 on Nov. 10, 2017. So far, we have not encountered the Booger at Rice Creek, although sometimes as we push through the thick swamp vegetation, we get the feeling that he is out there watching us. The town of Bardin, after all, is only a couple of miles north of the Rice Creek trails, but we have no data on the beast's current whereabouts. The only thing we know is that the Booger's bridge is now being totally reconstructed by Putnam County. Our 10-foot-tall ape friend is probably now homeless, having been evicted from his home under the bridge. But there are other bridges nearby. So, watch out for his gleaming red eyes and awful stench when you are driving at night on CR 309D.

## **Rice Creek Ditch**

Rice Creek at the SR 20 bridge flows north through a nearly straight ditch for 2.8 miles. This is a human artifact. But there is little information about its origin. A few basic questions remain: Who dug it? When? Why?

The channelized creek is not shown on a 1915 road map, but is quite visible on a 1943 aerial photo, along with the Oklawaha Valley Railroad bed, Hunter Road, and SR 20, all crossing the Rice Creek Swamp. The aerial photo also shows the ditch, running north from SR 20, up through the middle of the Rice Creek swamp. The margins of the creek are thickly vegetated, and there is no obvious fresh dirt visible on the ditch banks, both conditions suggesting that the ditch had been there for years prior to the early 1940s. This photo also shows the surrounding lands beyond the creek bed to be an open savanna with scattered pines and a landscape dotted with cypress and tupelo ponds. These flatwoods/savannas were probably burnt annually for cattle grazing. Cattle trails are visible throughout the savanna portion of the photograph. These lands had been ranched by three local families who owned most of that area. In more recent times, the flatwoods have been replanted in pines.

One common story for the ditch's presence is that it had been excavated by the Hudson Pulp and Paper company, but no, that can't be; the pulp and paper company didn't move to Palatka until 1947. Another suggestion was that it was a drainage easement, created to divert swamp water away from the newly constructed highway. Is there someone out there who knows the history?

## **Exit onto State Road 20**

The southern end of the Mid-Rice Creek Section of Florida Trail terminates at an unlocked, chain-linked gate, next to a FDOT retention pond, on the north side of SR 20. The re-entry point for the southward continuation of Florida Trail lies directly across SR 20, both about one mile east of the main channel of Rice Creek (also known as Nine-Mile Creek) and two miles west from the community of Francis. We encourage hikers to continue on their Florida Trail trek across SR 20 towards Hunter Road and the Caravelle Ranch.

The two access points for the Florida Trail on 20 are directly across from another, requiring only a short hike between them. Unfortunately, there are no designated Florida Trail parking areas on either side of the road, which means using the broad road shoulders for parking vehicles. The one other issue on the south side is a water-filled ditch separating the road shoulder from the Florida Trail gate. This could be easily remedied with a metal culvert.

*A Word About SR 20. This highway was first cut through the Rice Creek Swamp in the early 20th-century. Then it was known as Hwy 14 and was a two-lane road. Today, it is a four-lane highway, with eight foot high fences along each side, designed to funnel wildlife through an underpass on the west side of the east retention pond. The woods on both sides of the highway are so thick that there is little evidence that wildlife can locate the underpass. It would be more available for deer, bear, and other wildlife, if its paths could be opened leading to the highway tunnels. (Historic Notes by Joe Foy)*

### **The Other Side of the Road**

Hikers leaving the Mid-Rice Creek Section will discover a well-defined Florida Trail path on the other side of SR 20. This extended woodland path follows the east side of 9-Mile Swamp, to Hunter Road (an ancient road, which later became the Old Gainesville Highway), and onto the Caravelle Ranch WMA tract. By the way, hikers may want to be ready to shift from good-old American English to the King's English, in case they are met by William Bartram and some of his British comrades, or maybe even hostile Seminoles, when they cross this antique route, dating back to the British period. Good luck with that!

### **Impressions of an Aging Hiker**

Even though we oldsters have the time available for getting on the trails, aging hikers face various physical challenges as they wander parts of the Florida Trail system. Some younger hikers may ask, "Well, why not choose walking paths in more accessible, safer environments, and leave the rougher hikes for us younger, more adventuresome individuals."

*I am one of these aging hikers, pushing 80 years of age and having severe leg neuropathy. Yet, I, as well as other octogenarians, still want to wander wilderness paths and experience unique animals, plants, unusual plant communities, and*

*historic sites. We ask for no special accommodations, except possibly for the establishment of multi-purpose access points and places to park vehicles. This is particularly crucial where the Florida Trail emerges onto SR 20.*

*The Mid-Rice Creek Florida Trail segment is a wonderful example of compatible uses. First, this part of the trail can be accessed from multiple spots from SR 100 and SR 20. For example, the southward-directed RCCA road allows easy approaches on foot or by bicycles to the Florida Trail picnic area, the overnight camp site, historic rice paddies, and the giant cypress. Some additional accommodations for people with disabilities or other special-use travelers might include: keeping the gate on the East Trail unlocked to allow visitor to have vehicle access to the picnic area; a few more small rest benches along the trails; and maybe wayfarer signage (with compass directions, distances, and elevations). (Thoughts of Dick Franz)*

*“HAPPY TRAILS TO YOU!” (Song of Roy Rogers and Dale Evans,  
a moment from Dick’s childhood songbook).*

## **DEDICATION:**

We wish to recognize Jacob (Jake) Hoffman (deceased) for his incredible efforts to enhance the infrastructure of the Rice Creek segment of the Florida Trail. We also congratulate the Florida Trail Association and the SJRWM for protecting these marvelous natural features and preserving the area’s historic heritage.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

We would like to thank the St. Johns River Water Management, particularly Christopher Kinslow, Brian Emanuel, and Elwin (Woody) Boynton, for a SUA permit to access water management properties by truck. We also appreciate Helen Hoffman, Doyle Wells, Willy TheLosen (Putnam Land Conservancy), and Jeff Glenn (Florida Trail Association), for providing information about construction crews, facts about Florida Trail, and continual maintenance of the Rice Creek trail infrastructure, including the numerous wooden walkways, two suspension bridges, Hoffman’s Crossing, and the Rice Creek “Hilton.” We further acknowledge Jeff Glenn and Abe Christian (Florida Trail Association) for providing us with an opportunity to photograph the Booger Bike. We also give special thanks to Thomas Hallock and the staff of the Journal of Florida Studies for the opportunity to be part of this special “Florida Trails” issue in the Journal of Florida Studies.

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