



Perspective

By JAMIE BUCKINGHAM

The Econlockhatchee River is one of 10 rivers officially designated as Wilderness Canoe Trails by the Florida Division of Parks and Recreation. It begins south of State Road 50 east of Orlando and terminates at the St. Johns, 28 miles downstream. Estimated time to cover the distance in a canoe is nine hours.

Early last Friday morning my two boys, Bruce, 16, and Timmy, 11, helped me put the canoe in the water at the starting point. "What happens if you're not at the finish by dark?" my wife said as she turned the car around to head back home.

"We've given ourselves an extra hour," I said, "so we'll probably be there before you are to pick us up."

With Bruce at the bow paddle and Timmy in the middle we shoved off. Immediately we were swallowed up in some of the most beautiful cypress swamp I'd ever seen. But something was wrong. The little brochure we'd received from the Division of Parks and Recreation failed to mention that a lot of trees had fallen down across the river. By a lot I mean about 40, all of which we had to get out and carry the canoe around.

By noon we had gone two miles and were muddy, scratched and exhausted from all the pulling, tugging, carrying and occasional paddling. "We'll never make it," Bruce said.

He was right. When night falls in the Florida swamps, it falls like Ker-Boom! The river had grown swifter and deeper, the windfalls were more plentiful, and the last log we'd tried to squeeze the canoe under had dislodged a cottonmouth moccasin as big around as my arm. We estimated we had traveled six miles in 10 hours. The safest thing to do was to beach the canoe and walk out.

We knew that four miles on downstream was a bridge. But have you ever tried to walk four miles in a cypress swamp — in the dark? The half moon gave us just enough light to see the sink holes, but not enough to keep from tripping over logs or running into huge spider webs. I had heard of people going mad when lost in the swamps, and I was gradually beginning to believe it could happen.

We followed the twisting river the best we could in the dark, stepping in deep mudholes and sometimes battling our way through saw palmettos over our heads. The mud helped cake the blood from the scratches, so we weren't too bad off. But after getting lost and crossing the same log three times, Timmy said, "Daddy, I think we ought to stop and pray."

Well, I had been doing a lot of praying already, but I agreed. Bruce put the final touch on the prayer by saying, "And by the way, Lord, thank you it's not raining."

At 9:30 p.m., we finally burst out of the woods on Highway 419 east of Oviedo. A scraggly trio, we thumbed a ride into the little town and called home. My wife was already in bed asleep. "I talked to a man where you were supposed to come out," she mumbled, "and he said he made that trip last year and it took him 2½ days to get out of the swamp. I decided to come on home and go to bed."

"Well, send somebody after us," I said. "We'll be sitting here on the curb at the gas station."

"Don't you think someone might steal the canoe?" she asked.

"Not a chance," I said. "No one but a fool would try to paddle down that river."