

No Small Measure of Hope

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I must have been about four when I became aware of the Hillsborough River. It scared me.

It was in the mid-fifties. My family was driving across the Hillsborough Avenue Bridge, itself a looming structure of steel cables and bars. Below, the mud-black river eddied ominously, and along the shore was, of all things, a wooden pirate ship, a faded skull-and-cross-bones on its stern. It was an abandoned Gasparilla ship, left to rot along the bank after city leaders purchased a new vessel for the annual faux invasion-celebration. To me it appeared a frightening remnant of a blood-thirsty era. Its presence suggested there might still be some pirates along the brushy shore. From the start, the mysterious Hillsborough evoked in me a sense of wonder and dread.

Vandals soon burned the ship but the river figured large throughout my childhood. My family moved to Wellswood, a post-World War II neighborhood of cinderblock homes with jealousy windows. The drainage creek behind our yard wound through a wooded tract into the river, scarcely a half-mile away. It was a different era then. Neighborhood kids were free to wander through the forest, swinging on vines across the creek and playing Army amid the oak hammocks. But the river was off limits. It was polluted, deep, and deadly, our parents warned. Whenever we did defiantly venture near the river, we usually encountered something—a coiled water moccasin, a dead dog washed ashore, a disheveled old man walking alone—that affirmed our parents' fears. They occasionally read a newspaper story about some child who perished in its dark waters. (Years later, as a young journalist, I watched as the police struggled to recover the bloated and discolored body of a college student who, in a drunken frolic, had tried to swim across the river.)

I had no clue then that the Hillsborough had significance beyond its meander through my childhood. I didn't know Spanish explorers sought gold along the river or that it was named for a British colonial secretary who never laid eyes on the river but oversaw the pensions of surveyors, who understood the value of flattery. I didn't know the river snaked fifty-four miles through Polk, Pasco and Hillsborough counties before emptying into Tampa Bay in downtown Tampa. I never suspected that far upriver remained vast tangles of wilderness as wild as anything I saw on the Saturday morning adventure movies.

I knew there was a dam on the river, but didn't know its violent history. It was originally built in 1897 to generate electricity for Tampa's street cars, but ranchers, enraged that the structure flooded their pastures, blew it up. It was rebuilt, washed away by a hurricane in 1933, and built again in the mid-1940s, this time to create a reservoir that continues to supply most of the city's drinking water. I never associated the dam with the river's brackish water and often sluggish flow.

My mother warned me that the river was unhealthy, but I didn't know that some sewer lines still emptied into the river and didn't think about the oil, gas, fertilizers, chemicals and other gunk that washed off streets and yards into a drainage system that dumped the mess directly into the river. Our beloved creek, in reality, was fed by pipes that collected rainfall from surrounding streets. By the time I was in high school, it would be replaced by culverts and buried. Soon afterwards the woods were bulldozed for a school and apartments.

I didn't understand how those apartments and other projects that seawalled the river stripped it of vegetation that could soak up much of the contaminants.

I was far from alone. The public recognized the beauty of a few spots along the river—the Hillsborough River State Park; Sulphur Springs, a popular swimming hole where I once nearly drowned; and Crystal Springs—but the river in those days was largely neglected or abused.

Yet every so often the Hillsborough revealed its wonders. My Uncle Ed once caught a fifteen pound snook nearby, a sleek, silver torpedo that one never would have guessed inhabited the gritty water. He and a neighbor reported seeing a manatee, which stirred as much amazement as if they had encountered a hippopotamus. And every year, dozens of people would line up along the banks to cast snag hooks at schools of mullet that would shoot into the air as if from a cannon.

As I grew into my teens, I became a bit more adventurous. On a date, I jumped off the once-feared Hillsborough Avenue Bridge, though I always worried about the scummy water and never had the nerve to leap off the towering Buffalo Avenue Bridge, later renamed to honor Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Another time, I attempted to make a canvas canoe from one of those mail-order kits. I envisioned paddling downtown and into the bay. But my

craftsmanship and the keel were not plumb and the flimsy vessel would only turn right. When I capsized the canoe to test its buoyancy, it sank like a dagger into the river's mucky bottom. I swam ashore, my interest in boat construction and river exploration doused.

By the time I entered the University of South Florida in 1969, itself not far from the river, the Hillsborough had lost most of its magic. I took it for granted, as so many did. Then one Saturday morning a few years later, something happened that would change my attitude — and my life.

I had begun work as a copy boy for the local afternoon paper, The *Tampa Times*, coming to work at 4:00 a.m. to strip stories and photographs from the wire machines. At the copy desk, editors made caustic witticisms about Nixon's latest follies. Artists touched up the photographs and drew illustrations for stories. One young artist, Lee Cable, an aspiring outdoors painter, told me about his canoe trips on the Hillsborough and how he saw creatures — deer, turkeys, alligators — that I had never seen in the wild. He invited me to join him one day.

So one early Saturday morning, we parked on U. S. 301 and headed upriver, north of the Hillsborough River State Park. It was a revelation. The river there was entirely different than what I knew. It was narrow, overhung with trees and bordered by a dense wilderness. The water was dark, but clear, not the mucky, smelly river downstream. Its tannic water became almost gin-clear as we paddled close to where Crystal Springs roared into the river. There were even some stretches of mild rapids.

The wildlife was beyond anything I had ever imagined. Alligators and turtles sunned themselves on the banks; an otter peered at us from inside a hollow log; a turkey glided across the river; a water snake let Lee pick him up. There were countless birds — herons, hawks, anhingas, owls, warblers — that Lee, his Peterson field guide at the ready, could promptly identify. (I've loved field guides ever since, though sadly, I know only a fraction of what's in the ones I own.)

The canoe trip opened a new world to me. The magic returned to the Hillsborough. Its beauty and wonder inspired in me a lifelong passion for the outdoors.

Soon I had my own canoe and I wanted to show off this "new" river to friends. My father was no outdoorsman, but we paddled a stretch together, with me proudly identifying different birds. We capsized on a fallen log, ruining his old Army binoculars. One memory in particular remains vivid. A favorite cousin from up North visited during his college break. We canoed up from Morris Bridge Road, talking about books, fishing, college, possible careers, girls. Drowsy from a party the night before, we stopped to rest at a clearing. As we lounged on the sandy shore, a huge flock of white ibis hovered above, their white, black-tipped wings shimmering in the sunlight beneath a piercing

blue sky. It was an image of such transcendent beauty that it somehow seemed to capture the excitement and possibilities we felt before us. I still think of the hopeful anticipation of that moment.

Later I bought a jonboat with a small motor and began to regularly fish the river, usually without success. Once after class, I motored up the river near Fowler and caught some yearling bass on a Beetlespin. I went back to my apartment, fried them in cornmeal and felt like Ernest Hemingway.

With this renewed wonder came that sense of dread. Even then, apartments and homes were springing up everywhere, pushing their backs up against the river. The water level was dropping as pumping demands increased on nearby well fields. The state was increasingly buying riverfront acreage for flood-control purposes, opening the possibility for some Rube Goldberg engineering scheme like the one that turned the winding and wild Kissimmee into a polluted ditch.

Sure enough, in the seventies, engineers cooked up the Tampa Bypass Canal, a long waterway dug to divert river water to Tampa Bay and prevent Temple Terrace homes from flooding. It would have been far cheaper to buy the flood-prone properties, but no one wanted to hear that kind of talk.

Even as I tried to find my way through the river's swampy maze of Seventeen Runs or fish Lettuce Lake in darkness as the bullfrogs bellowed "rum, rum" and the mosquitoes swarmed, there was a fear that this gift of nature was in peril. In a few years, there would be too many people, too much development, too little wilderness for the magic to last.

But I was wrong.

Contrary to what I realized in my youthful arrogance, there were many other people, private citizens and public workers alike, who appreciated the river's beauty and fragility and were committed to saving it. Threats persist, but enormous improvements also have been achieved.

It turned out to be a blessing that the state purchased so much of the upper river because officials wisely decided to preserve the wilderness so that the river could ebb and flow naturally. The public property became a series of county wilderness parks. The state enhanced environmental protections for the upper river along with the Green Swamp, the mosaic of cypress swamps, pine forest and pastures that has the highest groundwater elevation in Florida and is the source of the Hillsborough, Withlacoochee, Peace and a fraction of the Ocklawaha. These are by no means foolproof safeguards, but the river's welfare must be addressed in development decisions.

Even the Tampa Bypass Canal did not prove the disaster I feared. The aquifer was breached during construction, ruining some nearby springs. Palm River and McKay Bay suffered, but the Hillsborough escaped largely unscathed.

New development continues to change the lower river, but through the years local officials adopted policies to discourage seawalls and other destructive

practices. Sewage no longer taints the river, and while it probably will never be possible to treat all the storm water that washes into the river, Tampa officials are working to install filtering systems where possible.

City officials who once gave little thought to consequences of halting the river's flow to keep the reservoir filled now are trying to figure out ways to maintain a healthy flow. They plan to use treated wastewater — cleaner than the river water — to help the river without depleting the city's water supply.

A Hillsborough River task force monitors its health, in part by keeping track of the frogs in its watershed. Volunteers are given a disc so they can learn to identify the croaks and songs of the amphibians.

So the Hillsborough River is, in many ways, in better shape and certainly better managed than it was in my childhood. The urban section is surely cleaner. City leaders finally seem to realize what an unpolished jewel it is. Mayor Pam Iorio is intent on building a riverwalk downtown to showcase the Hillsborough. The Lowry Park Zoo now offers boat trips where manatees are regularly sighted. Glassy modern homes capitalize on the waterfront view, driving up land prices in once modest neighborhoods.

More than twenty-five years after that canoe trip with Lee, I led my son's Scout troop down the same section of river. Young boys still thrill at shooting the "rapids," hearing a barred owl cry "Who cooks for you," and spotting snowy egrets, red-shouldered-hawks, and alligators. I frequently jog in one of the wilderness parks and encounter deer, turkeys, and an occasional bobcat.

Most every Memorial and Labor Day weekend, my wife and I throw the canoe on the truck at dawn and take a short paddle up from Trout Creek Park. We can count on seeing ospreys, roseate spoonbills, wood ducks, gators, prothonotary warblers and dozens of other birds. If we're lucky, we might see an otter or a bald eagle. We almost always have the river to ourselves for an hour or so. And we can be back home for breakfast.

That same evening we might hit Rick's on the River in a poor but reviving neighborhood north of downtown for a cold draft and grouper sandwich. It's a rambling waterfront bar, with docks and outside tables, where one can ease back, listen to an oldies band and watch the sluggish river as it winds toward downtown. It remains a marvel to me that scarcely a half-hour's drive from this urban waterway where nothing stays the same for long is a wilderness river that seems timeless.

Still, one can't help but worry. So many people are moving here. So many projects — malls, subdivisions, office parks — keep being built throughout the river's watershed. All these environmental wounds, however slight, have to add up. Subdivisions are planned close to that pristine stretch where I first canoed with Lee. The river itself surely will be protected but what will happen if the connected wilderness is fragmented? The state wants to buy some tracts for conservation but skyrocketing real estate prices make the purchase unlikely. It's scary.

Yet the river has endured so much abuse and neglect. And many people — including many of the newcomers who are part of the growth wave — care deeply about the river. Maybe, somehow, things will turn out for the best.

So on a mellow evening at Rick's, as I watch this contrasting river drift toward skyscrapers that glow like candles in the lingering twilight, the river rekindles the same wonder and dread that it always has. But also coursing in those dark, ominous waters, I've learned through the years, is no small measure of hope.