

BEAUTY, TO TOM GASKINS, IS THE conical cypress knee rising from black swamp water, crabbed with knots and cankers. Beauty, to this man of the swamp, is the everyday chopped-off, dirt-clogged pine stump, bulldozed from the earth to decay in root-rot rigor mortis. The man sees not only beauty but truth, he says, in a gnarled piece of discarded deadwood smeared gray by the elements and scummed with webs and insects.

"Bee-you-tiful," says Tom Gaskins, when he describes such items. "Fas-cinating."

His is a gifted eye, and cypress knees seem to lurk about him everywhere. He can show you one knee that resembles a dancing hippopotamus wearing a Carmen Miranda hat. As for Florida's unofficial state tree -- the bulldozed pine stump -- the last one Gaskins hauled in was turned upside down, brushed with a broom, sprayed with water and sold for \$1,200 to a restaurateur looking for a conversation piece.

The first impulse is to discount the shape. But if he is nearby, Gaskin's face will break out with the sort of grin only Cheshire cats and redhanded Florida crackers can manage. "Take a CLOSE look at that," the old man will order in a razor-sharp voice honed with childish incredulity. "Look CLOSE-ly!"

The wood immediately melts into the imagination. Well, look at that! Nature's gnarls and twists have fashioned a wondrous ghostly galleon. Like the surprise illusions in a Dali painting, the wood is a great tall ship, with sails ripped and pummeled by a terrific wind, floating on a gray sea.

Gaskins has been offered hundreds of dollars for that piece of old wood. "I won't sell it," he smiles. "A guy had it in his hands and was just about to toss it on a fire. Something flashed across my mind and I screamed at him to stop." Gaskins has never taken a knife to the piece or altered it in any way.

For the past 51 years, Gaskins has displayed nature's artwork at a peculiar emporium of Floridiana known as the Tom Gaskins Cypress Knee Factory and Museum. It's located at the point where U.S. 27 crosses Fisheating Creek in rural Glades County, but driving anywhere west of Lake Okeechobee it's hard to miss Gaskins' zany cypress tree "billboards," with enticing come-ons such as "If He Won't Stop, Lady, Hit Him on Head With Shoe."

A SPRY, BALDING cypress knob of a man who wears shoes only to funerals, Gaskins is as bohemian as his great collection of mysterious woodstuffs. He is the quintessential Florida swamp cracker and he means to stay that way. At 77, he begins each day by jogging 10 miles through the swamp and pumping at least 75 pushups. "I don't know how many pushups I can do," he says. "If I can

do 75 pushups, why can't I do 76? If I do 76, why not 77? If I can do 'em today, why not tomorrow? Why not the next day?"

Gaskins cleans out his digestive system and heals various aches and pains with a creosote recipe that the U.S. Food and Drug Administration has declared highly carcinogenic in a personal letter

to him. He has eaten and later "retrieved" the same slab of black cold tar for years, keeping it wrapped in tinfoil in a back pocket when it's not passing through his intestines.

Each day, Gaskins passionately licks the wood cell fibers on freshly peeled cypress knees and dines almost exclusively on swamp cabbage and "sorry meat" -- well-done beef and ham strips cooked sideways by burning Florida cabbage palm fronds. He washes this all down with a few sips of what he calls "gook water." It is watery creosote run-off that once put him in the hospital, near death.

"I drank a quart of it to see if it would heal a stone bruise on my foot. I overdosed but I learned my lesson," he says. "It only makes common sense. A sip of whiskey will do one thing for you. A whole quart will do something altogether different."

Gaskins describes himself as "stingy. I don't spend money on foolishness. I'm cheap. My wife cuts my hair -- I understand it costs \$3 now. I go barefooted. I drink a little whiskey, that's all."

Despite this, the swampman has contributed thousands of dollars to the campaigns of conservative politicians. His love of nature is approached only by a fondness for ultra right-wing politics. He markets the John Birch Society Blue Book in his gift shop, declares himself a "selfish reactionary," and does not hide his disgust for government handouts or intervention.

Though he has lived his entire life in the Florida cypress swamps, Gaskins sports an expertise in a number of unlikely areas. He has been granted 10 patents by the Patent Office; among his inventions are a helicopter, drill bit, boat motor, saw, tire pressure gauge and grass cutter. "They all work," he notes with pride.

Gaskins is also one of the nation's foremost experts on hunting turkeys. He has published three books on the subject and, since 1947, has manufactured and sold what he claims is "the finest turkey call ever made." Gaskins claims six of his friends have been shot by other hunters while using the "Gaskins Call," and that the strange gobbling noises have also called up elk, moose, bear and deer for lucky hunters. He and his turkey call have been featured many times in such magazines as Field and Stream and American Hunter.

IDEAS AND EXPERIMENTS bounce about this man's head like constantly recoiling springs. He has made videotaped records of his projects and plans to someday write the definitive book on the Florida swamp. "I've got so many other things floating around in my head, if I ever get my ducks in a row, you'll see some amazing inventions," he says. "People laugh at me but I'm used to it. They said I was crazy when I took out my first patent. And look what happened."

That was in 1937. The patent was for articles manufactured from cypress knees -- those mysterious root bumps that poke above the land and water surfaces near most (but not all) bald cypress trees. The idea was born when his mother-in-law mentioned one day that she'd like to make a flower vase out of a cypress knee.

"Something clicked in my head. I'm a salesman, see. I believe anything can be sold. I turned to my wife and said, 'That's something else that will sell.' But it wasn't as easy as you think. I

figured, like everyone else in the world, including encyclopedias and Webster's Dictionary, that cypress knees were hollow. They aren't."

While lying in bed one night, Gaskins says, he devised a method for cutting, boiling, peeling and gouging out a dry-hole inside the normally solid knees. That "Gaskins cavity" is what gives the commercial cypress knee its texture and preservation. It was the beginning of the cypress products industry, a phenomenon that still decorates Florida roadsides.

At one time, Gaskins shipped his lamps, clocks, vases, birdhouses, tables, furniture, bookholders, wall plaques and decorative knees across the United States. With the help of son Tom Jr., he still maintains a tiny factory to service roadside customers and exclusive accounts.

GASKINS MOVED FROM his hometown of Arcadia to his present location in Palmdale in the mid-1930s, on land provided for him free by the Lykes Brothers Co. Smack on the edge of wild Fisheating Creek, "it was exactly what I was looking for -- a beautiful swamp. I had a million cypress knees in my backyard. It was a perfect laboratory for me to work out of."

His museum was officially opened in 1951. Then, as now, the admission was a dollar. "Stupid, ain't it?" Gaskins shakes his head. "We've stayed at a dollar. But I look at it this way: We don't have any animals to feed. We got no high-priced talent to pay off. Our thing has been aesthetic and we have capitalized on leaving it like it was. Hundreds of thousands -- maybe millions, I don't know, we've let so many school and church groups in for free -- have visited us."

Hundreds of Gaskins' eccentric objects are displayed for tourists in a haphazard conglomeration. There are gigantic cypress knees taller than a man, a turpentine pine tree, the legendary "stump" where hunters used to meet in the Big Cypress and, above all, cypress knee museum pieces that nature has carved and Gaskins has given apt title to, no matter how strange. There is a knee that looks like an atomic bomb blast, one that resembles Flipper the dolphin, one titled "Bona Lisa," ballet dancer feet, several presidents and a few that look like Gaskins himself. The latest edition of Roadside America lists his little empire as one of the "seven wonders" of America's roadsides. ACROSS THE HIGHWAY, behind the woodpiles and kneestacks littered about the cypress factory, a wondrous 3/4-mile catwalk disappears into the Fisheating Creek swamp. A skinny, two-plank walkway (not built for high heels), it was erected in the early '50s through three classic Florida plant communities: an oak and cabbage hammock, a cypress swamp and a bay head.

Undoubtedly, it is the finest "swamp walk" in the state, as close to a pristine Florida swamp experience as one can get without getting too wet. But the side effects of progress are now threatening to curtail the trail, which took Gaskins and his friends seven years to build. The old man is currently haggling with the Hartford Insurance Co., which wants him to either put up railings or close it to the public. A recent injury on the catwalk -- which Gaskins claims was faked -- has brought the issue to a head in court action. Gaskins had to get a lawyer to defend his swamp.

"It used to be if a man stubbed his toe, then it was his fault and he would learn to be more careful," Gaskins says bitterly. "But now, if a man stubs his toe, it's not his fault but the fault of

the person who had a bump out in the yard. And the person with the bumpy yard can be sued for a million dollars. Boy oh boy, what is the world coming to?"

He points a forefinger. "You see that maple tree? That's a New York maple. What the hell is it doing in a Florida cypress swamp? There are oaks in here, too. Hundreds of 'em. And cabbage palms. They aren't supposed to be here. They weren't here 25 years ago. What the hell is going on? You want to know? It's obvious -- the water table has dropped. Man and his ditches. But there's nothing I can do about it, except cry. I could cry all day about the fish being gone. But crying won't get me nowhere. I plan on surviving around here for a long time. If I turn on my tap and get salt water, I'll sell the salt."

More than anything else, Tom Gaskins is a salesman, and he knows his product better than any man alive. Come hell or high water, he will survive to his dying day on the enigmatic edge of a Florida roadside cypress swamp. Who better to officiate at the requiem to a Florida that has almost disappeared? And who better to celebrate a sad, mysterious world that most of us will never ever really know?