

Tom Gaskins

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vanishing florida

column

by Peter B. Gallagher

PALMDALE -- There was a time, Tom Gaskins tells me, that when a man stubbed his toe, it was the fault of the man who stubbed the toe. And therein, a lesson would be learned. "But, now," roars the sage of Florida's cypress swamps, "if a man stubs his toe, it is NOT his fault. It is the fault of the person who had the bump in his backyard. And the person with the toe can sue the person with the bump for a million dollars."

Now, Tom Gaskins is an undisputed authority on stubbed toes and backyard bumps. For the past half century, he's been running barefoot through a vast backyard filled with still dark waters, knobby-backed alligators and deformed conical protuberances known as cypress knees. And, since the early 50s, when Gaskins finished clearing a thin pathway through three Florida plant communities and a mile of Fisheating Creek swamp, he estimates over a half million visitors have also wandered through his backyard swamp, circumventing the trees and dodging the knees with nary a bump, bruise or water moccasin bite.

But the other day, an overweight woman fell -- Gaskins says she "dove" -- off his catwalk and hurt herself in mysterious ways. "I asked her what was wrong. I kept asking her, 'Woman, where do you hurt?'" he

remembers. "But she just stood there and wouldn't talk to me. For the life of me, I couldn't see a damn thing wrong with the person."

Next thing Gaskins knew, however, the woman was having nightmares, could no longer service her husband and wanted to see him in court. With shoes on! Gaskins was horrified to find lawyers, insurance men and "smart fellas who can't drive a nail" inspecting his swamp. To make a long story short, there was a small settlement and the swamp was declared unsafe for any feet. Gaskins was warned to put railings on the swamp or else some other "swamp diver" might take him for everything he's got, including the cypress knee that looks like a Hippopotamus wearing a Carmen Miranda hat.

So Gaskins had to shut down the finest nature trail this side of Everglades National Park, at least until he can figure this one out. "Boy oh boy oh boy oh boy. Now I got to have insurance on the swamp," Gaskins shook his bald head so hard that the dead mosquitoes slid off. "What is happening to this world?"

When Tom Gaskins speaks, I listen. I've known this 77-year-old swamp man since I was a boy. Ever since my mother suddenly took her shoe off and hit my father on the head while he was driving us along U.S. 27, east of Lake Okeechobee. Dad looked over at her and she was pointing to a dead cypress tree emblazoned with large cut-out letters that spelled "If He Won't Stop Lady, Hit Him On Head With Shoe."

My father pulled over. And I got my first visit to Tom Gaskins' Cypress Knee Factory and Museum. A rugged shrine of flotsam and swampwood shipwrecked on either side of the highway, it is a place to discard expectations, divert worries, forget troubles, ignore timetables, do away with prejudices and unmeditated premeditations. A place to let the mind's



eye wander.

For, celebrated behind glass, leaning against walls, thrown haphazardly in corners, lying underneath the dog, preserved from the ravages of progress, living and dying about the swamps and hammocks of its surroundings and thriving in the multitudinous mind of its incredible Cracker creator, is the very essence of the vanishing Florida wetland. And what you can't learn from the museum or factory, you can surely get from spry, energetic, strange Tom Gaskins.

The old man did 79 pushups and ran 10 miles (barefoot through the swamp) the last time I saw him, a few weeks ago. The secret of his perfect health: He regularly drinks creosote runoff water and has ingested (and, uh, retrieved) the same gummy slab of cold tar since 1969 (despite warnings from the U.S. Food and Drug Administration to stop). He passionately licks the wood cell cambian fibers on freshly peeled cypress knees and dines on swamp cabbage and "sorry meat" --well done beef and ham strips cooked sideways by burning palm fronds.

Outside Florida, in the "Field and Stream world," Gaskins is revered as the maker of the world's greatest turkey call. Six of his friends, he swears, have been shot by hunters faked out by the call. He recently sold one to a hunter in British Columbia who uses it to call up moose. Among the four books he's published is the classic "Tom's Tall Turkey Tales."

Ideas and experiments bounce about this man's head like coiled springs. He has ten "working" patents, including a landmark 1937 patent on manufacturing cypress knees. His backyard swamp is filled with his private brainstorm: wierd grafting exercizes, knees growing over

bottles, trees lifting weights, etc. "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.

But, ever since he moved from hometown Arcadia to Palmdale in the mid-30s, much of his time has been spent fighting the government and damned old progress. First the feds four-laned the highway right through the middle of his swamp, then Lady Bird Johnson's agents gave him pure hell about his billboards. Then they started draining the land and growing orange groves, shopping centers and residential homes all over the place. "At one time this was all mine," he laments, swinging his arm in a wide swath that suggests where the wilderness once lay.

"Now, it belongs to hell."

I call Tom Gaskins a "sage" because he sees things others don't. Walking through his backyard one day, he spied a cypress knee that looked like Hitler, Stalin and FDR. All at the same time. That knee was displayed at the 1939 World's Fair, was leased for a dozen years by Robert Ripley and is now in the museum. A gnarled piece of deadwood smeared gray by the elements and scummed with webs and insects hangs outside his storage shed. "Take a CLOSE look at that," he likes to order visitors, in a razor voice honed with incredulity.

The horrid item immediately snares the mind's eye. Wood melts in the imagination. "Why look at that!" most everyone exclaims. Nature's gnarls and cankers have twisted a wondrous ghostly galleon. It hits the mind like the surprise illusions in a Dali painting. The deadwood is actually a great tall ship, with sails ripped and pummelled by terrific winds, floating on a grey sea heaving in jagged storm. No Abe Lincoln cloud

formation can match this!

Gaskins has been offered hundreds of dollars for that piece of old wood but "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. LOOK at it. Isn't it amazing?" He has never taken knife to the piece or altered it in any way. "The world's greatest artist carved this," he likes to say. "Nature!"

The other day, I took Gaskins on a drive to Orlando and back. From the car window, the developments of progress seemed hellbent on plowing asunder the frontier Florida of Tom Gaskins' youth. Staring at the concreted roadsides where deer and panther once roamed, I began to wax philosophical. "Tom," I gasped, waving my hand over the sprawl outside Sebring. "What does all this mean? What's going to happen to this world? What do you see out there?"

The sage of the cypress swamp squinted and smiled a wicked smile. Then he got real serious. "Boy oh boy oh boy oh boy. I see a hurricane," said Tom Gaskins. "I hope they got insurance."