

The Myth of Honey Island

Sometimes I think that reality is an illusion.

In April the regular meeting of the Delta Chapter was held in Fontainebleau State Park, in St. Tammany Parish. The meeting was hosted by the Honey Island Group of the Delta Chapter, and they were superb hosts: the food was great, the planning was excellent, and the excursions were fun and interesting.

However, I kept noticing that there was an aura of unreality to much that was going on.

For example, there was a canoe trip on Cane Bayou, but there is no cane on or anywhere near the bayou. Expert naturalist George Barry led a hike through the Northshore Nature Center — a heavily wooded area with a variety of trees and plants, upland and aquatic — that was originally laid out as a golf course.

Somewhere around what would have been the green of the eighteenth hole, we disturbed a couple of long-bearded wild turkeys. Wild turkeys and a nature center on a golf course?

And then I remembered we were in St. Tammany Parish, that there is no saint by that name recognized by any church, that "Tammany" is a corrupt spelling of "Tammanend," a chief of the Delaware tribe that had nothing to do with Louisiana, that St. Tammany is a place of myth and illusion.

The myths and illusions of St. Tammany abound. The town of Abita Springs sealed off its springs to keep outsiders from helping themselves to free water, thus ensuring that there are no springs in Abita Springs.

The village of Onville is marked on the map as being on Highway 25 north of Covington, but the signs on the road tell you that the name of the place is Martinville; the spookiest aspect of all this is that there is no village there at all.

Go east from Fontainebleau Park on Highway 190, and a sign announces the village of Big Branch. Not only is there no branch, there is no village.

Keep going east into the town of Lacombe (it's real), and the highway will intersect Fish Hatchery Road. There's no fish hatchery on Fish Hatchery Road.

Crossing the old concrete bridge

over Bayou Lacombe, one notices an old shed-like structure built onto the bridge, a house for a bridge-tender in the old days when boats signaled to the tender to open the bridge. I crossed that bridge several times and I cannot see that the bridge was ever made to be opened in any way.

In keeping with this spirit of St. Tammany, the Delta Sierrans of northshore Lake Pontchartrain call themselves the "Honey Island" Group. If you've read this far, you can guess that Honey Island probably does not exist.

The swamp through which the lower Pearl River flows is frequently referred to as the "Honey Island Swamp," but there is no island identified on the map by that name. My inspection of the map led me to Hog Island and Weems Island, at the southern end of the river swamp, but "Honey Island" is not to be found.

I didn't do any exploring, but I would wager at least even money that there are no hogs on Hog Island and no Weemeses on Weems Island. After all, they're part of St. Tammany Parish.

A waterway through the swamp is identified on the map as "Wastehouse Bayou." I didn't explore that one either; I just hope the "wastehouse" is as real as the rest of the places.

The Honey Island Swamp also contains the Nature Conservancy's sanctuary that includes a bald eagle nest; the area is called the "White Kitchen Preserve." Of course there is no White Kitchen.

However, at the intersection of Highways 190 and 90, at the western edge of the preserve, are the ruins of a famous "greasy spoon" roadside restaurant from the ante-interstate days of the 1940's through the 1960's.

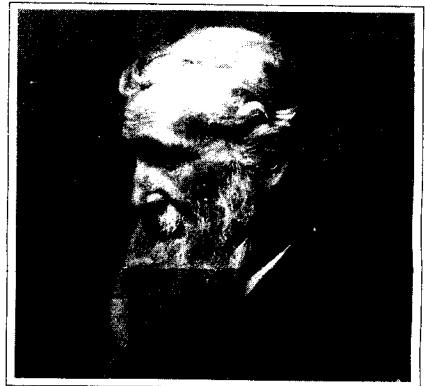
It was called the White Kitchen, and I remember eating there some of the worst food I've ever tasted. I am grateful that it does not exist. I have reason to believe that, even when the restaurant was operating, its kitchen was not white at all but varying shades of gray and brown.

The Honey Island Swamp was/is the habitat of a great creature of myth, the Honey Island Swamp monster, purported to be an aquatic southern relative of Big Foot of the Pacific

northwest. Alas, over a generation has passed without a reported sighting, and I fear that it will disappear into the mists of time as well as the mists of the swamp, leaving behind only the name for the Northshore Delta Sierrans to adopt. Δ

— Earl Higgins

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