

# Smokey Turns 50, Tours Honey Island Swamp

Yes, it's true. Our lovable forest friend with the big eyes and the ranger's 1918 campaign hat has been part of American culture for 50 years. Long-time readers of the Delta Sierran remember that interviews with Smokey have been published here several times, beginning with Mardi Gras 1985. In observance of Smokey's fiftieth, the Delta Sierran called the U.S. Forest Service, Smokey's employer, and set up another interview.

Smokey agreed to an interview on the condition that it be conducted on one of Kate Mytron's canoe trips in the Honey Island Swamp. Kate, the Delta Chapter's former Outings Committee chair-chere, was glad to have such a distinguished guest on one of her famous Paddle and Pig-Out adventures. After putting in at Doubloon Bayou, we popped the cap on a Dixie Voodoo beer for Smokey, who was eager to talk.

Delta Sierran: Welcome back and congratulations. I see from the Forest Service's brochure commemorating your fiftieth birthday that they call you "Smokey Bear" and not "Smokey The Bear," as we have known you for lo these many years.

Smokey the Bear: Yeah, I think some bureaucrats thought the "the" was a bit pompous, especially after I was going around telling people that I had the same middle name as Alexander the Great, Billy the Kid, and Winnie the Pooh. A lot of important people have prepositions and articles in their names. (At this point Smokey nodded and winked knowingly at New Orleans Group outings honcho Jeanne delaHoussaye.) It gives elegance to a name, like a title or something. "The" puts me in a different class. After all, if you go to Disneyworld you don't get greeted by "Mickey the Mouse" or "Donald the Duck." Middle names are important to some people — but I don't intend to be known as "Smokey Rodham Bear."

D.S.: We're honored to have you join Kate's Kozy Kanoe Krewe here on the West Pearl River. Any special reason for joining us?

S.T.B.: I wanted to see the place before the Corps of Engineers gets into its compulsive-digging mode.

D.S.: You are referring to the project to dredge the West Pearl from Bogalusa downstream so that products from the paper mill can be shipped by water when they could go as easily by truck or rail?

S.T.B.: That's the one. But don't be too hard on the Corps. Digging is who they are. They can no more quit digging than a crawfish can quit walking backwards or Edwin Edwards can quit gambling.

D.S.: You are saying that they have a

personality dysfunction, that they exhibit addictive behavior.

S.T.B.: Please! Don't talk to me in that '90's jargon! Besides, the Corps has help from Congressman Livingston. Having the Corps dig in one's district is quintessential congressional behavior, especially if the project is unnecessary.

D.S.: Speaking of Congressmen, what about Representative Tauzin's actions to try to reduce the habitat area of the endangered Louisiana black bear?

S.T.B.: Now you're getting close to home, talking about my cousins or, as you say here, coo-zans. When I hear Billy Tauzin's name, it always reminds me of "Tarzan." I am thinking that Mr. Tauzin would benefit from a trip into the forest, as his almost-namesake did. He probably won't find Jane or Cheetah in the Louisiana bottomland swamps, but he might learn that bears need a lot of room to survive. And he doesn't need to swing on vines or otherwise go ape to learn this fact. If you want that in nineties-speak, we don't want Louisiana to become an ursine-free zone.


D.S.: Smokey, you're now floating through the White Kitchen Preserve, a Nature Conservancy refuge that is home to bald eagles, only 30 minutes driving time from downtown New Orleans. Does this impress you?

S.T.B.: Burred! Sorry about that, I was remembering eating at the White Kitchen about 30 years ago. I hope the eagles are eating better now than I did. How about handing me another one of them Voodoo beers? Δ

— Earl Higgins

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