

A Trip to Silver Spring.

PALATKA, FLA., Jan. 24, 1876.

The Ocklawaha is a river rising in Lake Griffin in the central part of Florida and flowing a little East of North enters St. Johns river nearly opposite the little village of Welaka, twenty-five miles above Palatka.

From Palatka to Jacksonville is seventy-five miles, and from Jacksonville to the mouth of St. Johns river is about twenty-five miles.

In attempting to describe a trip "up the Ocklawaha," we are aware that our observations did not agree with the rose colored account published in Harper for January, and can only say that we will faithfully narrate it just as it appeared to us.

We left Palatka at noon Jan. 18th, on the steamer "Okahumkee," a boat of about sixty-five tons burden.

From Palatka to Welaka the St. Johns river will average about one-half mile in width, and perhaps 30 feet in depth.

Much of the way the shores are low and swampy, but in places the banks rise from five to fifteen feet above the water, and are then quite dry, being composed almost entirely of sand and small shells.

These dry places are being cleared off quite rapidly and a large portion of them devoted to the planting of orange trees.

The orange fever is now epidemic in Florida, and in many of its phases seems similar to the Oil fever of 1864. The result will I think be the same—a few (those who sell land) will make money but by far the greater number will suffer.

At 5 p. m. we reached Welaka, and in a few minutes passed into the Ocklawaha. This had been described both in print (a in Harper) and to us personally as an enchanted region—one of the wonders of the world.

It was said that the vegetation was luxuriant and magnificent beyond description during the whole year—that masses of bloom might be seen at any time—that the moss-covered trees growing on the banks of the river looked their branches across the water so that a person in a boat, gliding along the crooked channel, could look up and see serpents above and around him, and could if he desired gather centipedes, tarantulas and all kinds of tropical insects and reptiles from the branches overhanging him.

That the forests were inhabited by myriads of bright colored birds, while the waters teemed with alligators, turtle, fish, and water fowl.

Alas! that we had to be undeceived—alas! that we should find the truth so widely different.

Ocklawaha means crooked river, and well it deserves the name. Its crooks, windings, and curves are beyond description. It is generally very deep—perhaps 20 or 30 feet, and will average about 50 feet in width, though in many places it is not more than 35 or 40 feet wide.

The boats designed for navigating it, are constructed with especial reference to strength, and making abrupt turns, and go pounding along fitting first one shore and then the other, in apparently the most reckless manner.

Occasionally points of dry land run up to the river, and are timbered with yellow pine and live oak, but most of the way the forests along shore are of swamp cypress and palmetto, and instead of overhanging the stream, are very tall and the nearest perpendicular of any trees we ever saw.

Spanish moss hangs pendant from every limb, and is very beautiful indeed, but we looked up in vain for the serpents and reptiles whose presence was to diversify and enliven the scene.

In the whole of the trip up and down the river we saw but one snake—a solitary individual serenely located on a log and apparently viewing with great complacency its natural enemies the descendants of Mother Eve.

By the way, who knows or who can explain why it was that the serpent was selected as the most fitting tempter for the fair mistress of the Garden of Eden? Ladies now seem to have a great dread of snakes; can it be that they are mistaken and really admire and respect a beautiful serpent?

Of bright colored birds I saw two

Virginia crackers and three or four king-fishers. One of the passengers saw an alligator—I looked just in time to be too late and saw only the log he had been laying on.

Of turtles we saw in all, perhaps 20 or 30—they were in appearance similar to the turtle in our northern rivers. Turkey buzzards, limpkins, a couple of gray squirrels, and a few duck, white heron, blue heron and curlews made up the list of animated nature of which so much has been written. Neither did the woods or swamps show signs or bear evidence of having at any time any greater luxuriance of vegetation than our woods and wilds at home.

The climate is warm and the air is moist, but the soil is very poor, and it seems as though what vegetation gains in the climate and moisture it loses for want of a richer soil.

We gathered some yellow jessamine—very fragrant indeed,—and saw a few insignificant blossoms on vines that were inaccessible to us. We presume at a different season of the year the bloom would be much greater, but these were the only flowers we saw in this much-praised ever-blooming Florida, during the trip we are describing.

When it became dark the boatmen made a fire on top of the deck which reminded me of the head-light of an engine, as it fully illuminated the narrow channel.

The light falling on the tall moss-covered trees had a strange and weird effect. It reminded me of some of Hawthorne's writings, and made me wish that he had taken a trip up the Ocklawaha and described it in his marvellous manner.

Turkey-Buzzards and a species of bird with long legs and bill, called Limpkins, were the only birds that were abundant, and as our illuminated boat came along would fly up from the small trees in the swamps at the side of the river.

Nature at length asserted her dominion, and we (the passengers) retired for the night.

Next morning I arose as soon as it was day-light to try trolling for Bass, but in this was not very successful. The turns in the river were so abrupt that I could let out but little line, and the boat frightened the fish too much for success so soon after her passage. I trolled most of the forenoon and caught but one bass.

During the forenoon we saw two groves of the wild orange of Florida. They are sour and unfit for use, but are very beautiful. The "orange-men" are now transplanting these sour trees into regular groves and budding the sweet orange on them. In this way they get bearing trees in four or five years.

At one p. m. we reached the mouth of Silver Creek, and at three p. m. arrived at our Mecca—Silver Spring. Trolled as we went up Silver creek and caught three nice Bass. Saw thousands of bass in Silver creek and the spring, but in the spring could not catch a single one.

Silver Spring is nearly circular and has an area of perhaps three or four acres. The water is clear as crystal and rises all through the basin so that no bubbling or boiling is visible.

It is strongly impregnated with lime and is not considered very healthy to drink. The bottom of the spring is white sand, but is nearly covered with species of moss and weeds that grow under water. The sand is, however, visible in spots and the water is so perfectly clear that fish, shells, and small objects may be seen distinctly on the sand where the water is thirty or forty feet deep, and in the sunlight assumed prismatic colors and sparkled like beautiful jewels. The spring has no streams running into it, and is surrounded by low, dry, sandy banks, but the outlet is some 50 feet wide by 10 feet deep and runs with a current of about three miles an hour. It seems almost incredible that such a volume of water should come from a single spring, yet such is the case. This outlet, called Silver creek, is eight miles in length, and has all along it spots where the white sand is visible and the water preserves its perfect purity and clearness till it reaches the Ocklawaha. There the contrast is very great, as the latter is a dark and turbid stream.

While at the Silver spring some of our passengers visited a Robin and Tar establishment and found it quite a curiosity.

At six p. m. our boat pulled out of Silver spring, and soon we were again traveling on an illuminated highway.

Again we were greeted with the discordant voice of the buzzard, and the shrill cry of the limpkin. Again it seemed as though our boat and passengers constituted an immense monster, searching its way through by and forbidden fastnesses, and disturbing the winged inhabitants of the dismal swamps from their accustomed repose. But at length the eye wearies of strange sights, and the ear tires of strange sounds, and we seek relief in sleep.

Next morning we were still in the dreary mazes of the Ocklawaha, and did not reach the St. Johns till eleven a. m.

Three p. m. brought us back to the wharf at Palatka, and we came ashore well satisfied with our "Trip to Silver Spring." J. M. C.

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