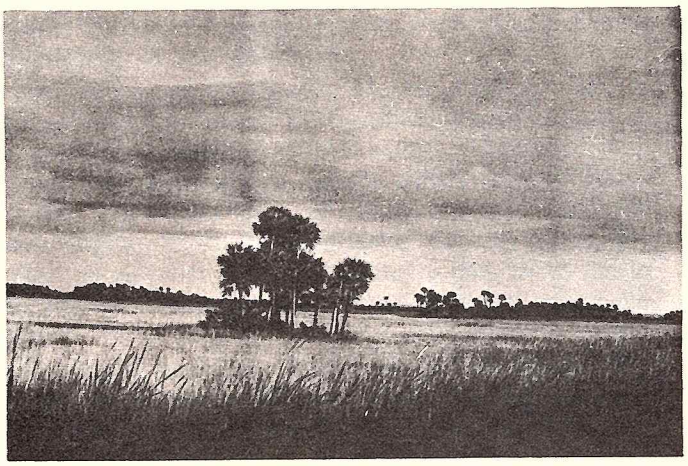
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FOR FAHKAHATCHEE STRAND...THE TIME IS NOW!

By MELVIN A. FINN



Rain clouds forming over the prairie, Fahkahatchee Strand, October 17, 1964.

Fahkahatchee Strand—to those who know her—is an enchanting paradise, a wilderness of magic and mystery; yet a friendly place where orchids and alligators, palms and panthers, live together, wild, shy and free.

For uncounted thousands of years, Fahkahatchee was dominated by giant centuries-old bald cypresses thriving in favorite habitat. A swampy watershed, her clear waters move slowly southerly from an area in central Collier County out to the Gulf of Mexico near Everglades City, Florida.

Fahkahatchee shelters the largest stand of wild native royal palms in the world, some towering 150 feet or more; clusters of rare, burlap-barked, slender paurotis palms; over seventy species of orchids; rare ferns and bromeliads; hammocks of temperate hardwoods—oak, holly, ash and maple-intermingled with the subtropical West Indian gumbo limbo, tamarind, cabbage palm and fig.

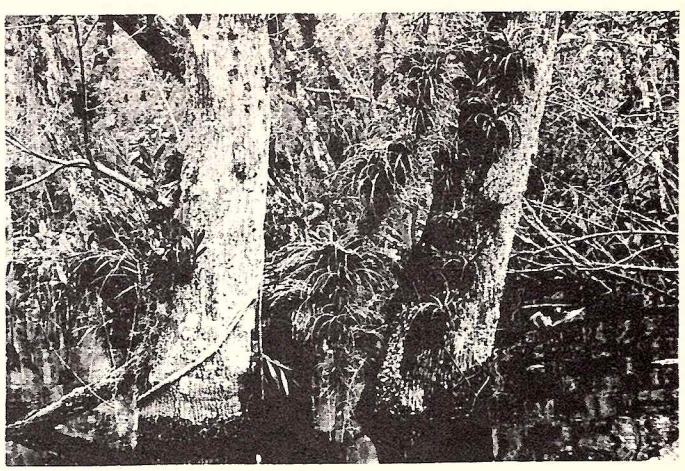
There the shy, elusive panther, hovering on the verge of extinction, makes his last stand east of the Mississippi. There, alligator and otter, bear and bobcat, 'coon and 'possum, muskrat and mink, deer and turkey, fox and squirrel—all find living room and home in a sheltering environment ideal for their survival.

Fahkahatchee conjures up to those who love her, the vast sweep of open prairie where larks complete their nesting before the inundating summer rains. Fahkahatchee is fingers or strands of pond cypress in the wet places. At slightly higher elevations, it is the hammocks of mixed hardwoods. Where subject to periodic burn, it is the open pineland. It is at places, quaking bogs where orchids grow, lettuce ponds, lakes and hidden pools with water clear and pure. Fahkahatchee is the quiet broken by the splash of an alligator disturbed, the songs of cardinals, vireos, wrens and warblers, the hammering of the Pileated Woodpecker, the hooting of the Barred Owl, the haunting cry of the Limpkin, the croaking of a community of frogs, the busy rookery or roost of herons, egrets and storks.

Above all, Fahkahatchee is a hospitable and friendly wilderness, a sanctuary for countless living species of animals and plants which everywhere are inexorably being crowded out of existence.

Before the twenties, few had witnessed the wonders of Fahkahatchee. In those days, one could travel southward by canoe for over fifty miles in the cool half-light under the towering canopy of cypress giants, down through a maze of watercourses, pools, ponds and lakes out to the Gulf of Mexico. Protected from above by the kingly cypresses, one could wander amidst rings of huge gnarled and grotesque pond apple and pop ash trees circling the deeper water of pools, ponds and lakes. In such "cypress heads," covering the branches, were orchids, bromeliads and ferns in unbelievable lushness and profusion—a phenomenon, unique in North America. The sight was of eerie wonder and majesty, as awesome and enveloping as a glimpse of a Yellowstone or a Grand Canyon. Nowhere else in the world could such display of nature's living grandeur be surpassed.

Thoughts of preserving the Fahkahatchee could have been born in the hearts of those few who first experienced her hidden wonders. Before the Tamiami Trail was built during the early twenties, Henry Ford was reported interested in buying the Big Cypress Swamp to give to the State of Florida as a park, but the State was not able to accept the financial responsibilities involved. In 1932, David Graham Copeland, general manager of the Collier Properties, and member of the Everglades Park Commission, supported the idea of a park, as did the president of the Lee Tidewater Cypress Company, who owned the area.



Typical scene with Pop Ash and Pond Apple trees covered with orchids, ferns and bromeliads, Fahkahatchee Strand.

But the early attempts to establish the Fahkahatchee as a park failed. Later, roads and canals constructed during the twenties and thirties blocked off and drained the water courses, greatly disturbing the delicate ecology of the watershed.

Then following World War II, came the holocaust. Demand and high prices for durable cypress prompted the lumbering invasion of this quiet, hidden fastness by man, machines and a hastily constructed railroad network. With the buzz of chain saw and clank of steam engine, down in thundering crashes came the ageless patriarchs. The cypresses, having been living long before Columbus discovered America, were no more.

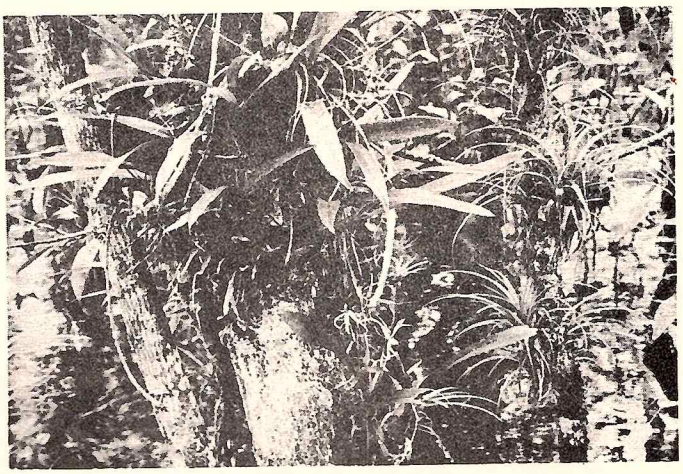
Dan Beard and Ray Vinten of the National Park Service, riding one of the trains over the logging railroad while lumbering was in progress, described the sight as a "green hell" where a million years of natural miracle was being systematically and unmercifully destroyed. They "counted" over 10,000 royal Palms amidst the man-wrought devastation. When the cypresses fell, into the water plunged the crowns of orchids, some specimens so large as to require the room of an entire car to carry one.



Exploring the watercourses of the central drainage axis, showing orchids, bromeliads and ferns on Pond Apple trees, Fahkahatchee Strand.

Alas, war had belatedly stricken the Fahkahatchee. She suffered a grevious loss, but was not dead. Today, sheltered by willow thickets and dense undergrowth, little cypress seedlings, which if allowed to live over the passing centuries, will again someday become lords of their domain. Fahkahatchee changed, still lives on, wild and mysterious and free, but her days seem numbered as new pressures from drainage, roads, urbanization and industrialization close in.

In the early nineteen sixties, a real estate development company purchased a large area of the Big Cypress Swamp west of Fahkahatchee and began draining the area by construction of an elaborate system of drainage canals. The natural fresh water reservoirs are now being drained into the sea without regard to the deleterious consequencies. Here, the 100 million dollar lessons learned seventy miles east by the Corps

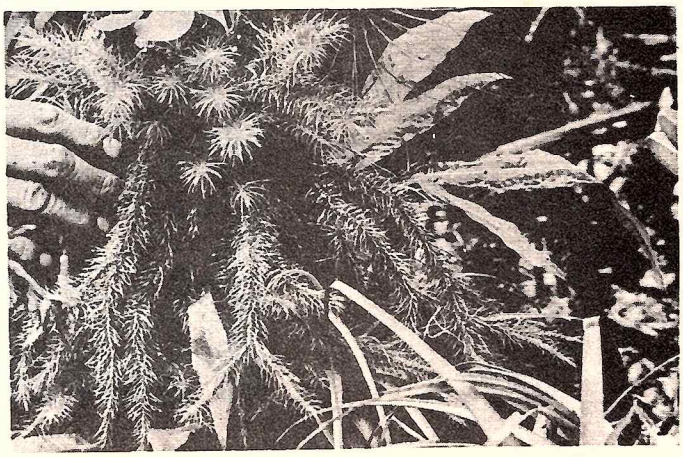


Branches heavy with orchids, ferns and bromeliads in Fahkahatchee Strand, with *Epidendrum cochleatum* in bloom.

of Engineers in the Central and Southern Flood Control District, are being disregarded. The early and costly mistakes of draining away fresh water to the sea in the east coast counties, are being repeated in Collier County. In early 1964, the same real estate company began dredging operations at the mouth of the Fakaunion. Their draglines are advancing northward from the Gulf, threatening the entire Fahkahatchee watershed from the west.

Then in the late 1964, the Florida State Road Department began construction of the controversial Fort Lauderdale-Naples toll highway. Dubbed "Alligator Alley" by critics because of its being thrust across a virgin swampy wilderness. This expressway will cut off the northern region of Fahkahatchee. The effects of these man-made "improvements" have sealed the fate of the Fahkahatchee. Unless prompt and effective action can be taken to insure her survival, her doom is certain.

Recognizing the urgency in 1962, the Fahkahatchee Strand Committee was organized to spearhead a drive to have the Fahkahatchee acquired for preservation as a unique sample of natural America. The present owners are favorable. The Florida Nature Conservancy and Florida Audubon Society, other conservation societies, women's clubs, garden clubs, jaycees, cham-

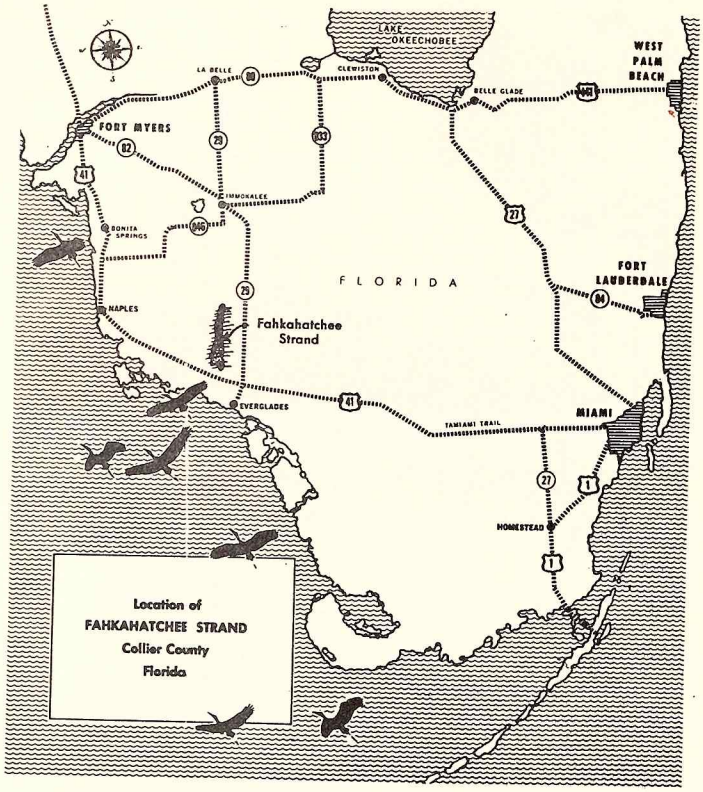


Rare club moss, *Lycopodium dichotomum,* Fahkahatchee Strand.

ers of commerce, boy and girl scouts and many other civic clubs, organizations and individuals—are joining in a last ditch effort, demanding positive action.

In November, 1963, Florida passed the milestone FLORIDA RECREATION AND CONSERVATION ACT, which now offers a practical vehicle for acquisition of Fahkahatchee by the state. Then in September, 1964, the U. S. 88th "Conservation" Congress passed the great conservation legislation known as the WILDERNESS ACT and LAND AND WATER CONSERVATION FUND ACT. These three state and federal acts have at last given legislative recognition of the need of wilderness preservation as well as a practical means of acquisition of the Fahkahatchee. One encouraging spark has been ignited. During the summer of 1964, at the request of Senators Holland and Smathers, Representatives Fascell and Rogers, the Secretary of Interior undertook a study of the possibility of establishing a Fahkahatchee Strand Wilderness National Monument. What remains now is the effort to acquire and preserve the Fahkahatchee under the spirit and provisions of these acts.

Those who understand the delicate and fragile world of orchids know more than most how desirable and worthy is the cause of Fahkahatchee, which embodies hope for the world's first wild orchid sanctuary. Maybe other countries will take similar measures to preserve some of the vanishing treasures of unique flora and fauna, before all are lost. But to us, our one challenge—our great opportunity—is to save the Fahkahatchee. Here's to the Fahkahatchee — enchanting paradise, a wilderness of magic and mystery —may it remain forever wild!



Those who desire more information may write to the Fahkahatchee Strand Committee with headquarters in Miami and Naples, Florida: c/o Mrs. Ben Parks, 865 Fifth Ave., So., Naples, Florida; c/o M. A. Finn, Esq., 310 Biscayne Building, 19 West Flagler Street, Miami, Florida.

