

Appendix 104 to
THE HISTORY OF CHEHAW COUNCIL

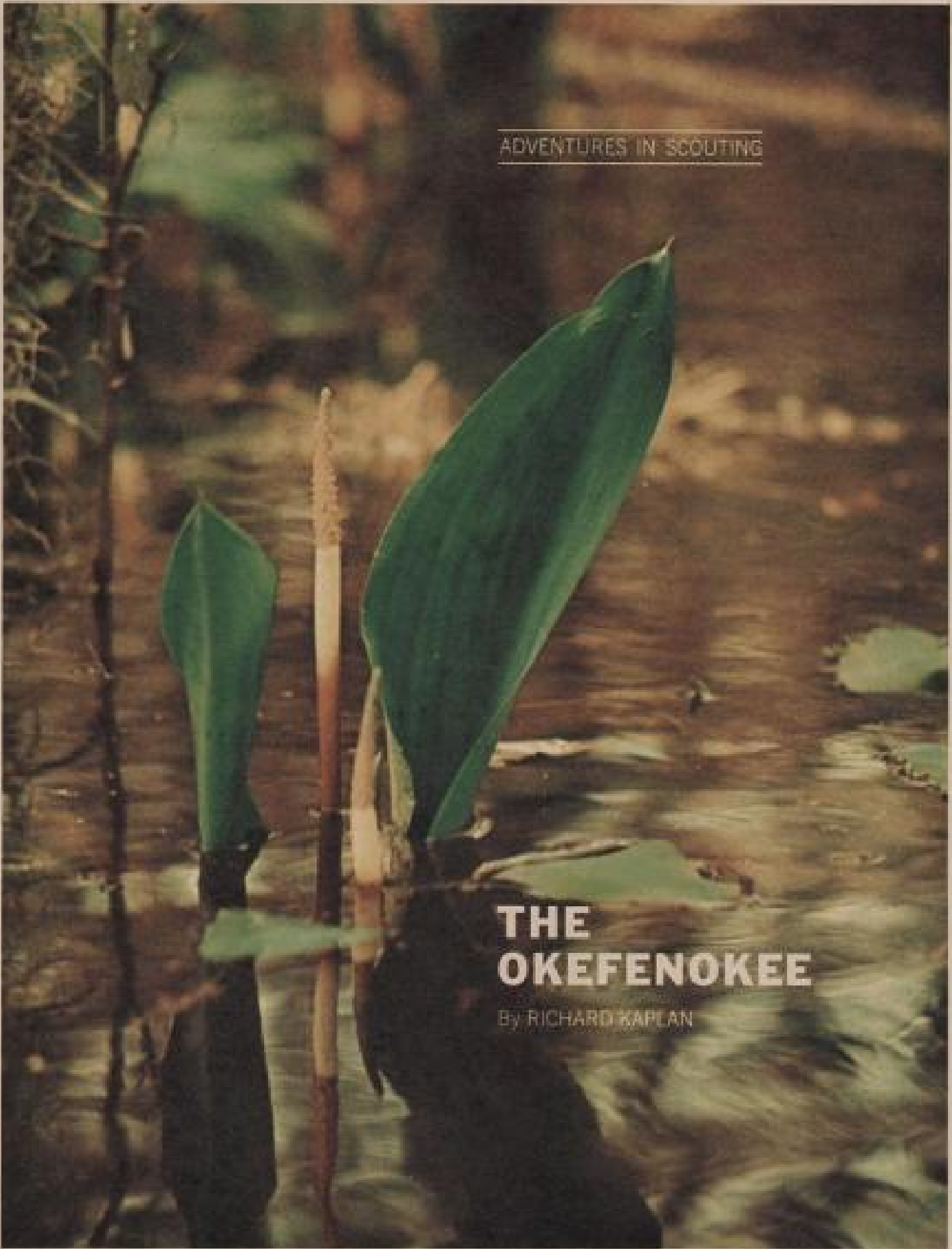
Boys Life Article
about the
1966 Okefenokee Expedition

The 1966 Okefenokee Expedition included professional photographer Norman Leaner who documented the trip for *Boys Life*.

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Notes from scouts:

- 1. Bill Huggins emailed that the outboard motor, which they seem to be having trouble starting, is an Elgin by Sears Roebuck**



ADVENTURES IN SCOUTING

THE OKEFENOKEE

By RICHARD KAPLAN

A lost world covers four counties in the southeast corner of Georgia and straggles down across the state line into two counties of neighboring Florida. It is a legendary lost world of savage, prehistoric grandeur—a world seemingly unmarked by the fingers of time, a world populated by an incredible variety of strange birds and beasts.

This lost world is Georgia's famous Okefenokee Swamp, "The Land of the Trembling Earth," 700 square miles of forbidding, semi-tropical wilderness—the likes of which, naturalists insist, cannot be duplicated elsewhere. For generations, Okefenokee was one of the most exciting, most inaccessible spots in America. Thus what more perfect—and unusual—location for an adventurous band of Boy Scouts to spend a weekend in the rough?

That's exactly what approximately 100 Explorers and Senior Boy Scouts from Albany, Ga., did on their annual Okefenokee Swamp expedition, plunging deep into the swamp for a memorable, four-day three-night camping trip.

The Scouts had already begun to learn some facts about their destination—even before they reached Okefenokee. They discovered that, technically, this celebrated swamp is not a swamp at all. By definition, a swamp must act as a low drainage basin for its surrounding area. This means it is almost always filled with stagnant water. But Okefenokee is not low at all. It is 110 to 130 feet above sea level—much higher than the region all around it—and it is far from stagnant. Instead it is fed by many underground freshwater springs.

The boys were soon introduced to the single most striking feature of Okefenokee: its superabundant wildlife. Even as they loaded their aluminum outboard motorboats for the 20-minute, three-mile trip to their campsite in the swamp's interior, a raiding party of one—a brash, bright-eyed raccoon—ransacked the assembled haversacks and escaped with a loaf of sliced white bread. The Scouts quickly noticed that the swamp's denizens are not afraid of human beings. They have no reason to be. While fishing is permitted in Okefenokee, hunting is not. Since 1937, the Federal government has governed the bulk of the swamp, preserving its natural beauty and wildlife within the Okefenokee Wildlife Refuge. (In Okefenokee can be found 180 species of birds, 20 species of frogs and toads, 28 species of snakes, 12 of turtles and 45 various mammals.)

A base camp had to be set up, so the Scouts pitched their tents on the dry soil of Billys Island—which was named after Billy Bowlegs, a great war chief of the Seminole Indians, who once dominated Okefenokee. The island is about one mile wide and 12 miles long. Before the turn of the 20th century, it was a major logging town.

Ready to explore, the Scouts clambered back into their boats for their first voyage down some of Okefenokee's thousands of narrow waterways. The swamp is a barbaric Venice; all the "streets" are



filled with water. But Okefenokee has its skyscrapers—endless rows of cypress trees, 60 to 90 feet high, some of them intertwining so that in many places sunlight rarely penetrates. Long banners of Spanish moss trail down sorrowfully to complete a picture of tropical lushness.

The Scouts glided down a water route that sliced through a towering cathedral arch of bottle-shaped cypresses. Then, without warning, they came into a clearing and nosed up against what appeared to be a solid expanse of dry land, out of which sprouted scores of brilliant yellow lilies, called "bonnets."

"This," said Scout Leader Josh Molder, "is what is called a 'floating prairie' here in Okefenokee." He explained that while these prairies look solid, they are not. In these open patches, huge, gnarled cypress roots join with other dense swamp vegetation to form a thick, soft, semi-floating carpet of earth. The Seminoles found that they could walk on this carpet; it was strong enough to support a man's weight. But with each step, the Indians found, the earth rippled under their

Camping in "The Land of the Trembling Earth" is fun—





River and into Okofenokee—manned by a crew of skeletons, chains clanking. And as if that apparition were not enough, how about the phantom deer and panthers that are said to haunt the swamp—ghosts that cannot be killed by ordinary bullets, but only by pellets made of cowhair and horsehair?

The following morning, the expedition got down to exploring the swamp in earnest. As they poled along the waterways, the Scouts saw big alligators drowsily taking the sun on the riverbanks. They scuttled into the water with startling speed the moment they sensed the presence of human beings.

Once the Scouts had satisfied their curiosity about 'gators, they got down to some fishing. Those who did not fish had a field day investigating the backwaters and identifying the myriad forms of wild life: cranes, hawks, white egret, osprey, wood ibis, water turkeys, blue and green herons, and one of the rarest birds known—the great pileated woodpecker, extinct except in Okofenokee and a few Louisiana swamps. There were also otters, 'possums, bears—but, oddly, no beavers. The Scouts asked why, and were told a beautiful legend.

It seems that long, long ago, beavers were plentiful in Okofenokee. But the Seminoles would not let the beavers live in peace. The Indians kept stealing infant beavers to raise as pets. The king of the beavers finally went to the Seminoles. He promised to build dams for the tribe if the Indians would stop kidnapping baby beavers. The Seminoles agreed, but later broke the treaty. A war broke out and the beavers were slaughtered.

As a last resort, the little animals chewed through their dams, stopping one bite short of opening holes large enough to let the pent-up water cascade through. When at last the beavers saw the Seminole war canoes approach, the king of the beavers slapped his broad tail against the water noisily. The loud thwacking signalled the other beavers to complete the destruction of the dams. The resulting torrent drowned the Seminoles, as the beavers swam out of Okofenokee for good. Ever since then, the swamp has been flooded. To this day, it is said, beavers slap the water with their tails to warn of danger.

During their days in the swamp, the Scouts saw no sign of the picturesque "swamp folk," who once lived there—and were made famous in such movies as "Swamp Water." These swamp families, mostly of English and Scottish descent, spoke a unique language that traced back to the Old English used by Shakespeare and Chaucer. Now the descendants of these "swamp folk" make their homes outside Okofenokee, on the edge of the marsh, although a few reportedly still follow the old ways deep inside it.

When the time came for the Scouts to leave, they carefully poled Billys Island and left it spotlessly clean—for other Boy Scouts would surely be exploring this fascinating area. ■

foot and sent land waves out in widening circles, as if a pebble had been dropped in a still pond; and the giant cypresses trembled.

The Seminoles called the region *ocunbau tinocau*, which in their dialect meant "The Land of the Trembling Earth." Over the years, white settlers mispronounced *ocunbau tinocau*, gradually corrupting it to Okofenokee.

All the Scouts returned to their camp as the sun began to set over the swamp. Okofenokee is no place to be out after dark. Its twisting avenues can look terribly alike in broad daylight; at night they can become a fatal maze.

But everyone's spirits were soon lifted by a hot meal, served around a warm, crackling campfire. Like Scouts everywhere, the boys sang songs, then leaned back lazily to listen to some of the stories and legends that rise out of the Okofenokee mists.

The Scouts heard of the ghostly Spanish slave ship, *La Estrella*. On stormy nights she supposedly sails up the crooked St. Mary's

and a lesson in natural history and local mythology.



Photos by MICHAEL LEONARD