

# WAKULLA, A STORY OF ADVENTURE IN FLORIDA



## Chapter 12: The Great Mill Picnic

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The rates of ferriage were fixed at twenty-five cents for a team, fifteen cents for a man on horseback, ten cents for a single animal, and five cents for a foot-passenger. Two cards, with these rates neatly printed on them by Ruth in large letters, were tacked up on the anchorage posts, so that passengers might not have any chance to dispute with the ferryman, or “superintendent of ferries,” as he liked to be called.

Leaving him in charge of the boat—for he was not yet strong enough for more active work—and leaving Mr. March at work upon the house, Mr. Elmer, Mark, Jan, and four colored men, taking the mules with them, set out bright and early on Tuesday morning for the mill, to begin work on the dam.

They found the pond empty, and exposing a large surface of black mud studded with the stumps of old trees, and the stream from the sulphur spring rippling along merrily in a channel it had cut for itself through the broken portion of the dam. While two men were set to digging a new channel for this stream, so as to lead it through the sluice-way, and leave the place where the work was to be done free from water, the others began to cut down half a dozen tall pines, and hew them into squared timbers.

A deep trench was dug along the whole length of the broken part of the dam for a foundation, and into this was lowered one of the great squared timbers, forty feet long, that had six mortice-holes cut in its upper side. Into these holes were set six uprights, each ten feet long, and on top of these was placed as a stringer, another forty-foot timber. To this framework was spiked, on the inside, a close sheathing of plank. Heavy timber braces, the outer ends of which were let into mud-sills set in trenches dug thirty feet outside the dam, were sunk into the stringer, and the work of filling in with earth on the inside was begun. In two weeks the work was finished; the whole dam had been raised and strengthened, the floodgates were closed, and the pond began slowly to fill up.

In the mean time the saw-mill machinery had been bought, the frame for the saw-mill had been cut and raised, and Mr. March, having finished the repairs on the house, was busy setting up the machinery and putting it in order.

By the middle of February, or six weeks after the Elmers had landed in Wakulla, their influence had become very decidedly felt in the community. With their building, fencing,

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ploughing, and clearing, they had given employment to most of the working population of the place, and had put more money into circulation than had been seen there at any one time for years. Their house was now as neat and pretty as any in the county. The ten-acre field in front was ploughed, fenced, and planted, half in corn and half—no, not with orange-trees, but half was set out with young cabbage-plants; a homely crop, but one which Mr. Elmer had been advised would bring in good returns. The ferry was running regularly and was already much used by travelers from considerable distances on both sides of the river. The mill was finished and ready for business, and the millpond, instead of a mud flat, was a pretty sheet of water, fringed with palms and other beautiful trees. Above all, Mr. Elmer's health had so improved that he said he felt like a young man again, and able to do any amount of outdoor work.

One Sunday morning after all this had been accomplished, Mr. Elmer announced to the Sunday-school that on the following Wednesday a grand picnic would be given in a pine grove midway between the Elmer Mill and the big sulphur spring, that the ferry would be run free all that day, and that all were cordially invited to come and enjoy themselves. He also said that the Elmer Mill would be opened for business on that day, and would grind, free of charge, one bushel of corn for every family in Wakulla who should bring it with them.

This announcement created such a buzz of excitement that it was well it had not been made until after the exercises of the morning were over, for there could certainly have been no more Sunday-school that day.

For the next two days the picnic was the all-absorbing topic of conversation, and wonderful stories were told and circulated of the quantities of goodies that were being made in the "Go Bang" kitchen. Aunt Chloe was frequently interviewed, and begged to tell exactly how much of these stories might be believed; but the old woman only shook her gayly turbaned head, and answered,

"You's gwine see, chillun! you's gwine see; only jes' hab pashuns, an' you's gwine be 'warded by sich a sight ob fixin's as make yo' tink ole times back come, sho nuff."

At last the eagerly expected morning dawned, and though a thick fog hid one bank of the river from the other, sounds of active stir and bustle announced to each community that the other was making ready for the great event.

By nine o'clock the fog had lifted, and the sun shone out bright and warm. Before this Jan and the mules had made several trips between the house and the mill, each time with a heavy wagon load of—something. Mr. Elmer, Mr. March, and Mark had gone to

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the mill as soon as breakfast was over, and had not been seen since.

Aunt Chloe had been bustling about her kitchen “sence de risin’ ob de mo’nin’ star,” and was, in her own estimation, the most important person on the place that day. As for Bruce he was wild with excitement, and dashed at full speed from the house to the mill, and back again, barking furiously, and trying to tell volumes of, what seemed to him, important news.

As soon as the fog lifted, the horn on the opposite side of the river began to blow impatient summonses for the “superintendent of ferries,” and busy times immediately began for Frank.

What funny loads of black people he brought over! Old gray-headed uncles, leaning on canes, who told stories of “de good ole times long befo’ de wah”; middle-aged men and women who rejoiced in the present good times of freedom, and comical little pickaninnies, who looked forward with eagerness to the good times to come to them within an hour or so.

And then the teams, the queer home-made carts, most of them drawn by a single steer or cow hitched into shafts, in which the bushels of corn were brought; for everybody who could obtain a bushel of corn had taken Mr. Elmer at his word, and brought it along to be ground free of charge.

One of the men, after seeing his wife and numerous family of children safely on board the boat, went up to Frank with a beaming face, and said,

“Misto Frank, I’se bought a ok. Dar he is hitched into dat ar kyart, an’ oh! he do plough splendid!”

The “ok,” which poor Joe thought was the proper singular of “oxes,” as he would have called a pair of them, was a meek-looking little creature, harnessed to an old two-wheeled cart by a perfect tangle of ropes and chains. He was so small that even Frank, accustomed as he was to the ways of the country, almost smiled at the idea of its “ploughing splendid.”

He didn’t, though; for honest Joe was waiting to hear his purchase praised, and Frank praised it by saying it was one of the handsomest oxen of its size he had ever seen. Joe was fully satisfied with this, and when the boat reached the other side, hurried off to find new admirers for this first piece of actual property he had ever owned, and to tell them that “Misto Frank March, who know all about oxes, say dis yere ok de han’somes’ he ebber seed.”

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Of course the Bevils and Carters came over to the picnic. Grace Bevil, of whom Ruth had already made a great friend, waited with her at the house until the last boat-load of people had been ferried across. Then Frank called them, and after helping them into the canoe and telling them to sit quiet as 'possums, paddled it up the wild, beautiful river to the mill.

This was a novel experience to the little Wakulla girl, who had never in her life before traveled so easily and swiftly. She afterwards told her mother that, as she looked far down into the clear depths of the water above which they glided, she thought she knew how angels felt flying through the air.

By the time they reached the mill more than a hundred persons were assembled near it, and Mr. Elmer was talking to them from the steps. They were in time to hear him say,

“The Elmer Mill is now about to be opened for business and set to work. A bushel of corn belonging to Uncle Silas Brim, the oldest man present, has been placed in the hopper, and will be the first ground.”

Then Mark, who, as president of the Elmer Mill and Ferry Company, was allowed the honor of so doing, pressed a lever that opened the floodgates. A stream of water dashed through the race, the great wheel began to turn, and, as they heard the whir of the machinery, the crowd cheered again and again. In a little while Uncle Silas Brim's corn was returned to him in the form of a sack of fine yellow meal. After that the bushels of corn poured in thick and fast, and for the rest of the day the Elmer Mill continued its pleasant work of charity.

As the novelty of watching the mill at work wore off, the people began to stroll towards the grove near the sulphur spring, in which an odd-looking structure had been erected the day before, and now attracted much attention. It was a long, low shed, or booth, built of poles thatched with palm-leaves woven so close that its interior was completely hidden. Mrs. Elmer, Mrs. Bevil, Mrs. Carter, Ruth, Grace, and Aunt Chloe were known to be inside, but what they were doing was a mystery that no one could solve.

“Reckon dey's a-fixin' up sandwiches,” said one.

“Yo' g'way, chile! Who ebber heerd ob sich nonsens? 'Tain't no witches ob no kine; hits somefin' to eat, I tell yo'. I kin smell hit,” said an old aunty, who sniffed the air vigorously as she spoke.

This opinion was strengthened when Aunt Chloe appeared at the entrance of the booth, before which hung a curtain of white muslin, and in a loud voice commanded

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all present to provide themselves “wif palmetter leafs fo’ plateses, an’ magnole leafs fo’ cupses.”

When all had so provided themselves, they were formed, two by two, into a long procession by several young colored men whom Mr. Elmer had appointed to act as marshals, the white curtain was drawn aside, and they were invited to march into the booth. As they did so, a sight greeted their eyes that caused them to give a sort of suppressed cheer of delight. The interior was hung and trimmed with great bunches of sweet-scented swamp azalea, yellow jasmine, and other wild spring flowers, of which the woods were full. But it was not towards the flowers that all eyes were turned, nor they that drew forth the exclamations of delight; it was the table, and what it bore. It reached from one end of the booth to the other, and was loaded with such a variety and quantity of good things as none of them had ever seen before. On freshly-cut palm leaves were heaped huge piles of brown crullers, and these were flanked by pans of baked beans. Boiled hams appeared in such quantities that Uncle Silas Brim was heard to say, “Hit do my ole heart good to see sich a sight ob hog meat.”

Every bit of space not otherwise occupied was filled with pies and cakes. Knives and forks had been provided for everybody, and there were a few tin cups which were reserved for coffee. As plates were very scarce, palmetto leaves had to be used instead; and for those who wished to drink water, the magnolia leaves, bent so that the ends lapped, made excellent cups.

How they did enjoy that dinner! How savagely the hams were attacked! How the beans and crullers were appreciated, and how rapidly the pies and cakes disappeared! How the coffee, with plenty of “sweet’nin” in it, was relished. In other words, what a grand feast it was to them. How much and how quickly they ate on that occasion can still be learned from any resident of Wakulla; for they talk of “de feed at de openin’ ob dat ar Elmer Mill” to this day.

Mark says it was the opening of about a hundred mills, all provided with excellent machinery for grinding.

After dinner they sang, and listened to the music of Ruth’s organ, which had been brought from the house for the occasion, and placed at one end of the booth. Then some one produced a fiddle, and they danced. Not only a few danced, but all danced—old and young; and those who stopped to rest patted time on their knees to encourage the others.

About four o’clock in the afternoon, or about “two hour by sun in the evening,” as the Wakulla people say, the last bushel of corn was ground. What remained uneaten of

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the dinner was distributed among those who needed it most, and the picnic was ended. With many bows and courtesies to their hosts, the happy company began to troop, or squeak along in their little ungreased carts, towards the ferry, where Frank was already on hand waiting to set them across the river.