

It's been awhile since I've been on the Edisto River. But it runs through me in ways I cannot explain.



Some of it has a lot to do with family origins as well as personal time spent exploring many an acre of swamp on family property, a part of which lies near the edge of the northern shore of the south fork of the Edisto River.

From the murky, haunting sloughs of Snake Swamp to the sandy shores of a weird and occasionally visible atoll we called Piney Island -- which is bordered on the other side by a bottom area we called Stave Lake -- I once knew this area well. Indeed, when I was a kid, I often thought of myself as a reincarnation of the Swamp Fox. Granted, I would undoubtedly come to a hideous and panicked demise in there now, even if I were fifteen feet from U.S. 1, but back then, I spent a good bit of time getting wet and dirty in black water bottoms crowned with all kinds of hardwoods draped in Spanish moss and floored in that slurping black mud that could suck the boots right off your feet. I've been scared out of my boots by huge, yet generally disinterested snakes in the summer; I've frozen my rear end in hip-deep water, wishing I had warmer, tighter boots to hide in, trying like the devil not to rust up my trusty Remington 1100 while attempting to stalk the ever-wily woodcock and the occasional wood duck.

Yet for the longest time, always just beyond the swamp, the cypress lake, and the sand spit island lay the river, that mysterious ribbon of water blackened by oak tannins and floored with pure white sand.

It's a curious and treacherous beauty the river possesses, as innocuous and as calm on the surface as an unstirred glass of iced tea. And like a siren's song, it's quiet voice of gentle whispers and soothing burlblings have snared many an unwary soul with treacherous currents, hidden strainers and snags, and of course, the ever-changing sand bottom depths. She is not to be taken lightly, the Edisto. If you're smart, you'll treat her with the greatest respect.

But, oh, those cooling waters on a blistering July afternoon! The thrill of a homemade rope swing, taking that drop into uncharted territory, for the first time! There's no greater feeling than those silken waters rolling off a tired, sweaty body that has just spent the last six hours in a hot field stringing barbed wire or picking produce or planting pine trees or pitching hay. Rub a little cool sand onto a deer fly bite, maybe drink a cold beer half buried in the shallows, allow yourself a short float from landing to bridge, all these simple pleasures do wonders for the soul.

One of my all-time favorite memories was spring break my senior year in high school when my cousins and I spent the week floating down the Edisto from upper Colleton/Bamberg County all the way to Edisto Island, where river meets the Atlantic ocean. The trip by road is maybe 60 miles and takes about an hour and twenty minutes, depending on who is driving and how much time is spent trapped behind ancient old ladies wearing flowered hats or produce trucks. But the trip by river, essentially from the same geographic spot, takes at least five days and is about three and half times farther, mileage-wise, because of all the bends, ox bows, meanderings, and portages in the river.

It amazes me to be able to walk across the fourth largest river in South Carolina in some places, catch monstrous bass and succulent river perch in an ancient oxbow lake, and suddenly find yourself in this colossal body of water, a distant rim of brown spartina grass on either side, and dolphins bigger than your boat playing in your wake.

The most alligators I ever saw in one spot, aside from, say, a Hilton Head golf course, was in

the Edisto, at that point where fresh water first meets salt marsh. I remember looking out and seeing probably 15 alligators, as heavily armored and potentially lethal as any battleship armada, cruising lazily by our boats.

That trip was one of the great moments of my life, a memory I will always be able to re-live, even when I'm a toothless, drooling old clod sitting belligerently in some park snarling at children and squirrels.

That's the beauty of the river. She can somehow always keep you young.