

The Acquisition and Development of the Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary, 1952-1967

by Carl W. Buchheister

In southwestern Florida in the beginning of the century, the strands of bald cypress extended miles and miles. In those virgin bald cypress stands were giants towering 130 feet, with girths of 25 feet -- an awesome sight before the onslaught of the lumbermen in the 1920's. A remnant of that virgin forest, now the Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary, a veritable living museum piece, escaped the destruction in the nick of time just as the cutting crews were coming upon it. It is now the largest remaining stand of virgin bald cypress in the country.

Joe Brown, a long-time resident near the Sanctuary, described the area:

"The average person has an erroneous impression of the Big Cypress. They think of it as one big huge cypress swamp with water and creeks and animals, which is not true. The Big Cypress area is roughly 50 miles wide and 75 miles long. That is the Big Cypress Swamp. In the old days, before they ruined this country by drainage and roads and building subdivisions where they shouldn't have ever built them -- before that day there were pine islands dotted all through the cypress. What we call a pine island is a high ridge with palmettos on it, and pine trees. The waterways where the cypress lay, starting at the headwaters of the Corkscrew Swamp, which we know as a sanctuary now -- that went all the way to the Tamiami Trail, some twenty-five miles long, one big strand that you had to cross to get across it and it was impassable in those days with a vehicle until you cut a way through it.

"Back in the olden days when they used to come up out of the salt water into what is now know as the Imperial River to get fresh water for their boats -- they didn't have any wells in those days -- they'd have to take a cask and come up into the headwaters of that creek to get the fresh rain water, and it was so twisty that they called it Corkscrew Creek, or Corkscrew River, at that time. Actually, the headwaters of that was what is now known as Corkscrew Swamp.

"Raleigh (Dyess) used to tell me how they'd kill the plume birds in the 'Glades -- he was a plume bird hunter back in 1915 and along in there -- and they'd kill them by the thousands down there and bring them out, and like he said, they'd skin them out and put paper backing on them to hold them in shape, and they'd ship them to New York

where they put them on the women's hats for decoration. He said he saw it go from where you could kill hundreds of them in a day to where you couldn't find any of them -- they just got scarce." (*from an interview with Mr. Joe P. Brown at Immokalee, Florida, January 31, 1977*)

Audubon wardens & wading birds...

As early as 1912, National Audubon Society had seasonal wardens in the Corkscrew swamp area to protect the then nesting colonies of wood storks, egrets, and other wading birds. In that year, B. Rhett Green of Fort Myers served as warden of the nesting colonies of the Corkscrew area of the Big Cypress. That was long before there was any cutting. The wood stork colony was estimated to contain about 1,000 birds, and even smaller was the number of great egrets. Those population estimates reveal strikingly the low numbers to which the wading birds of south Florida had been reduced by the plume hunters. According to its Sanctuary records, the Society continued warden patrol in the Corkscrew from 1912 through 1917.

The following is an eye-witness account of an unpaid agent of the National Association of Audubon Societies camping in south Florida, dated February 27, 1912:

"I spent two days and nights camped here, and made three counts of the Egrets as they came in to roost or left in the morning. The first time I saw 522, the next 534, and the last evening counted 541.

"This is the scene where we shortly found that the plumers were shooting them, and the last night, as I was counting, shooting commenced on the other side of the Cypress, at least a mile from camp, and we counted 123 shots. Evidently four men with shotguns were shooting them at their roost, which is two miles from where they will nest.

"We waded over a mile, waist deep, to find the camp of the hunters, and found it just deserted, the fire still burning, and showing that four men had just departed on horseback.

"I trust you can prevail on some of the patrons and humane people to put a stop to this. It can be done easily with a little money, and, as there must be 600 birds that will begin nesting in two weeks, if unprotected there will not be a single bird left.

"I can get a man to watch it -- a good man who lives in the woods and knows all the plume-hunters, and who will put a stop to it if you can raise enough money to engage him. We can get him deputized here also, and he will then tell all the hunters he is a

warden to guard the Big Cypress until the birds leave. He will also guard the ---- Rookery and the ----- Rookery (names purposely omitted)."

The inclusion of the local names of the rookeries would have pinpointed their location for plume hunters. According to this account in *Bird-Lore*, the two unnamed rookeries contained about 200 egrets and were the largest colonies on which the Association could get any positive information. The account is indicative to what an extent the once great colonies, even in the remote Big Cypress, had been reduced.

In happy contrast to this picture of the tragically reduced wading bird numbers of 1912 is the following later day observation of James Callaghan:

"While vacationing in South Florida about February, 1941, it was recommended to my wife Alice and me that we cross the old Tamiami Trail to a point roughly halfway between Naples and Miami and remain there until dark. We did so and as the sun settled and the first signs of dusk appeared, we looked southward and observed many small flights of plume birds, mainly Snowy and American Egrets, coming in to settle in the dense mangrove and swamp growth north of the Trail.

"As dark slowly descended, the flights grew steadily larger and more numerous, until it seemed as though veritable sheets of feathered bodies were blanketing the swamp growth to the north. As darkness continued to fall, the flights diminished in size and numbers but, by then one could look across the entire northeast to northwest quadrants and observe an almost unbroken sea of white. It is safe to say the swamp growth settled by several feet in height as the weight of the birds increased.

"By sitting or standing on the car's hood, one could see for great distances, limited only by increasing darkness. Under the circumstances, it was impossible to accurately assess the numbers but, certainly they were in the tens if not hundreds of thousands."
(from *Bird-Lore*, Vol. 14, pp.135-136)

Saving the Corkscrew...

In 1952 more and more persons became concerned over the lumbering of the very northern end of the great stand in which the Corkscrew Swamp section is located. One of these was Joe Brown himself who, writing a letter to the editor of the *Miami Herald*, claimed to have raised the "first hue and cry." One of the earliest ones actively to work for saving the Corkscrew, according to O. Earle Frye, Jr., then the Assistant Director of the Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission, was Ernest A. Taylor of Tampa, Florida. An elderly gentleman, amateur naturalist and nature photographer, he urged Frye to do something to save the Corkscrew. Taylor carried on a one-man crusade by giving talks to sundry groups, illustrating them with his own

slides. In 1953, Jack and Jeanne Holmes of Coral Gables, both writers and he a photographer, were actively campaigning to save the virgin Bald Cypress area. An article by Jeanne describing the present cutting and how little of the virgin cypress remained appeared in the *Saturday Evening Post*, May 29, 1954. This gave widespread national publicity.

On March 20, 1954, under the leadership of John H. Baker, President of National Audubon Society, and O. Earle Frye, a meeting was held in Tampa at which the Corkscrew Cypress Rookery Association was formed. Frye was elected Secretary and Baker, Chairman of the Finance Committee. Organizations represented at this meeting included Florida Federation of State Garden Clubs, Florida Audubon Society, Tampa Bird Club, Florida Board of Parks and Historic Memorials, and Collier Enterprises. Mr. Frye was instructed to enlist a number of Florida and national civic and conservation organizations to support the new association by becoming members. success in that endeavor was certainly assured because many of the Florida and national conservation organizations had already expressed their support to save the cypress.

The Corkscrew Cypress Rookery Association was "established for the acquisition and preservation of the greatest remaining bald cypress swamp and its associated plant and animal life."

The meeting then learned of the work that Baker and Frye had been doing during the past several years to further their objectives. From the beginning of their efforts, it was clear that the specific areas that had to be acquired and preserved were owned by the Collier Enterprises and Lee Tidewater Cypress Company. Those of the latter were being cut at that very moment; therefore, there was an urgency to acquire a sizable remnant of the virgin stand as fast as possible. Baker, who had met frequently with Mr. J. Arthur Currey, president of Lee Cypress, gave an encouraging report of what his negotiations had produced. The following is from the report given by Mr. Baker:

"He stated that the president of Lee Cypress, Mr. J. Arthur Currey, generously offered to give approximately 640 acres on the eastern side and including portions of a large interior lake or marsh, provided satisfactory assurances were given that the area would be protected; offered to refrain from cutting a fringe of cypress on the western side of the interior lake; granted an option until April 1 on 160 acres of the most valuable timber; and offered to give an additional 800 acres prior to being cut. He stated that until current surveys are completed within a few weeks, his company would not be in a position to name a price. Mr. Baker expressed the opinion that the price of all the land involved would be somewhere in the neighborhood of \$100,000 and also that Mr. Currey could be expected to deal very fairly in establishing this price.

"Mr. Baker stated that he had been in communication with Mr. Miles Collier and Mr. Norman Herren, of Collier Enterprises, and that Mr. Collier assured Mr. Baker that his company would be equally generous with regard to certain lands owned by it and considered to be an essential part of the Sanctuary."

Mr. Baker emphasized that the Corkscrew Swamp was the last remaining stand of virgin and merchantable cypress in the United States. Also, he declared that the very area the new Association was seeking to save was the largest rookery of wood storks and egrets in the country, numbering from 8,000 to 10,000 birds. Therefore, the tremendous importance of saving it.

Mr. Baker then stated that the National Audubon Society was prepared to accept title to the land, maintain it, and provide warden and interpretive personnel. But the money needed to purchase the land, construct buildings and other facilities, would have to be raised by other organizations, especially those in Florida. It is of great interest to note here that, at that time, Mr. Baker thought that the National Audubon Society's custodianship would be only a temporary one and that the land should be owned and maintained by the Florida Board of Parks or another state agency.

In his negotiations with President Currey of the Lee Cypress Company, Mr. Baker found that the former had been disturbed and angered at times by the charges that were being made against his company -- that it was without conscience destroying a great relic of the virgin forest. Even if such accusations were not spelled out exactly in letters to the press, newspaper articles, speeches, etc., they were insinuated. The following from a letter of Currey to Baker in October, 1953, describes his feelings:

"Once again I want to make it clear that I have not obligated our Company in any fashion to you or anyone else regarding the preservation of any part of the Corkscrew. I am sure you will agree that inasmuch as I am the only one who ever made any effort to save the Corkscrew, it has a decidedly adverse effect on me to read some of the letters that have been written and some of the articles in the newspapers regarding the Corkscrew. At least 50% of the timber in the main swamp which we have largely logged over was destroyed by fire. I have every reason to believe that within another twenty years all of the timber in that area would have been destroyed. There weren't many people in Florida who were concerned about the enormous damage done by fires in that area."

Baker soon won Currey's respect and confidence by the manner and spirit with which he presented the case of the conservationists. Having been a businessman himself, Baker agreed that a lumber company that had purchased a given forest area for cutting purposes could hardly be expected to give it up without full compensation. After all, the company had to realize a profit on its investment, maintain a payroll, and consider

the interest of its stockholders. He made it clear to Currey that he would hope that the company would set a price that it would accept on the land and timber comprising the desired Corkscrew Swamp area; that the National Audubon Society and associated organizations would try to raise the amount.

Corkscrew Cypress Rookery Association & raising the funds...

Once the Corkscrew Cypress Rookery Association had been founded, Baker and others stepped up their efforts to raise the money. Mrs. Eugene A. Smith, president of the Florida Federation of Garden Clubs and a zealous worker from the beginning, succeeded in getting the Federation to pledge \$5,000. This was one of the very first gifts and, indeed, influenced other organizations. Florida Power and Light Company pledged \$1,000; Charles Brookfield, Tropical Florida Representative of the National Audubon Society, got gifts of \$30,000 from Bradford Crane and \$10,000 from Arthur Vining Davis, respectively. Davis was Chairman of the Board of the Aluminum Company of America.

Richard H. Pough, president of The Nature Conservancy, who knew the Corkscrew Swamp well and had long advocated that it be saved, not only got moral and some financial support from The Nature Conservancy itself, but persuaded Theodore Edison to make a very substantial gift. Other sizable gifts came from Mr. John D. Rockefeller Jr. through the Jackson Hold Preserve, Inc.; the Old Dominion Foundation; and the National Audubon Society itself. Two hundred and six individuals, of whom eighty-five were from the nearby communities of Naples, Bonita Springs, and Fort Myers, had raised the purchase price of \$25,000 for the 160 acres that contained some of the largest cypress trees.

By December, 1954, the money was raised and the Corkscrew Swamp was saved, just in the nick of time. And that was because of the outstanding work of the following: John H. Baker, O. Earle Frye, Richard H. Pough, Mrs. Eugene A. Smith of Ft. Lauderdale and president of the Federation of Garden Clubs, many individual clubs themselves, and Bill Piper of the Everglades Wonder Gardens. In his President's Report in the January-February, 1955, issue of *Audubon* magazine, John Baker paid the following special tribute:

"Credit for the inauguration of this Sanctuary goes to J. Arthur Currey, president of the Lee Tidewater Cypress Company who, early last spring, offered to give to the Society 640 acres containing an integral part of the rookery, and is making a Christmas present of this acreage. Truly, the acquisition of these lands and the setting up of this Sanctuary have been a most cooperative undertaking, and the Cypress

Company and its officials deserve the greatest credit for their wholehearted participation in this important conservation enterprise."

This tribute, with its generous expression of credit to President Currey and his company, was indeed well-deserved, for the officials of the company were more than willing to cease cutting the great trees once a receipt of the total cash value of investment in land and timber was assured.

Also most helpful were the Collier Enterprises (now Collier Company) that owned much of the desired land. In 1955, Collier leased to the Society, at \$1 a year rental, 3,200 acres with the condition that the lessor shall donate the land to the Society subject to the Society's purchasing the standing timber for a total of \$25,000. From 1963 to 1966 the Society purchased the timber at the stated price and received a magnificent gift of 2,880 of the original 3,200 acres.

These purchased and contributed properties became one of the Society's finest and most spectacular sanctuaries. Little time was lost in establishing it. Henry P. (Hank) Bennett, one of the Society's wardens and Wildlife Tour leaders, was assigned as a protective representative of the Society and as an interpreter for the Sanctuary.

There being no housing accommodations in that wilderness, a one-room cabin with screen porch was quickly constructed. It was made by Sam Whidden, a native of the area who knew the Corkscrew Swamp, having hunted in it for years. That became Hank Bennett's dwelling, a remote one to be sure, without phone and electricity. Furthermore, it was accessible only by jeep. At that time, there was no road into the Corkscrew Swamp from any county road in the area. One had to cross several fenced cattle ranches to reach it. Not until 1959, five years later, was there an access road from what is now Immokalee Road.

The rescue of the Corkscrew and its acquisition by the Society, destined to become one of the greatest of its Sanctuaries, aroused great interest, happiness, and excitement among staff, directors, and donors. Its very remoteness, wildness, and the tales of 700-year-old trees actually lured persons to undergo any difficulty to see it.

First tours into the sanctuary, and stops along the way...

John Baker, who master-minded the rescue effort with such success, was happy to lead select parties of Directors and others to the new Sanctuary. One such visit was a memorable one because of the character of the individuals of the group. Among them were Mrs. Carll (Marcia) Tucker, a one-time former Board Member, a very generous donor, and an ardent birder; Gardner Stout, Chairman of the Executive Committee of the Society's Board of Directors; Dr. Melville Grosvenor, president of

National Geographic Society, and Mrs. Grosvenor. None of the party were young. Mrs. Tucker was in her 70's.

To get into the heart of the Swamp, to see the great trees, the lettuce lake with its lovely floating lettuce-like plants, one had to wade, not ankle-deep, not knee-deep, but often waist-deep. Neither deep water nor rough footing deterred that little group. They came out of the great swamp dripping wet, but excited and starry-eyed. After a quick change of clothes, they made their way by jeep over the intervening cattle ranches to their parked cars.

On the return trip to Miami, the lead car was Mrs. Tucker's, a large spotless shiny grey Daimler, a product of the United Kingdom complete with liveried chauffeur and footman. The little caravan was making its way eastward when suddenly the Daimler stopped, much to the utter surprise of those in the rear, in front of a rather miserable looking roadside bar. The occupants of the cars in the rear, of course, were looking towards the Daimler. Mr. Stout rushed up to Mrs. Tucker's car to find out why they had stopped, and was told that she wanted her martinis. A dry martini was her favorite drink, and she had one every afternoon. To the amazement of all those in the rear, they saw the liveried footman walk up to, and into, the bar. In a few minutes he reappeared, walking very straight, holding aloft a tray with a sparkling martini on it. This simply incredible sight, and the act of getting the martini, was repeated. Mrs. Tucker had to have two. All traffic had stopped in the little village and the itinerant farm workers hanging about had their eyes glued on a scene they had never seen before. They had never seen a martini, and they had never seen a Daimler. Soon Mrs. Tucker, happily satisfied, ordered the car on and the caravan made its way to Miami. For that little group of select visitors, the virgin cypress was not the only rare sight.

The boardwalk begins...

Soon after Hank Bennett was in residence, in 1955, the Society decided to construct a boardwalk into the swamp to be an easy and safe means for visitors to enter the area of the giant virgin cypress, a wonderland of plants and animals, and to do so without leaving even a footprint in the unspoiled wilderness. So, in October 1955, Sam, Bob, and Fletcher Whidden, all brothers, began the construction job. Hank Bennett and Alexander (Sandy) Sprunt IV helped. The latter, then in the Research Department, devoted three days a week to the boardwalk and two to making an inventory of plants and animals of the Sanctuary.

The most difficult job involved making holes for the posts. Where the water was shallow, conventional posthole diggers sufficed. With those one could easily get down into the sand which provided firm footing for the posts. Out in the deep water where

there was more peat and muck, the poles had to be driven through those soft deposits down into the sand below them. It required three men to hold and drive the poles down through the soft material as far as possible and into the sand. Then, with a handmade water jet arrangement -- a little gasoline pump in a canoe pumping water into a garden hose -- would wash away the sand under the sharpened pointed end of the pole. Only by such means could the poles be lowered firmly into the sand.

All through October, November, and December, and into January the next year, the work continued. In the lettuce lake area, the post-setting crew worked in the water all the time, up to their waists and often to their chests. They were not frightened or deterred by cottonmouth water moccasins or alligators. What, however, bothered the men most were little diving beetles that the crackers called "gator fleas" which would, at times, get down into their high-topped tennis shoes. As Sandy Sprunt describes them, "Normally they don't bite, but when they get into a confined situation like that, they've got a great sucking proboscis and they'd whack into you with that. The language was somewhat colorful, and whoever it was had to take off his shoes and get rid of the damn gator flea." (*from an interview with Alexander Sprunt IV by Carl W. Buchheister*)

The original boardwalk, totaling 5,600 feet, was completed in the fall of 1956, the first one thousand feet in 1955 and the rest in 1956. When it crossed the first and second lettuce lakes, all in the heavy swamp, the work was really laborious. Sandy Sprunt described it: "Crossing the second lettuce lake, for instance, was the most difficult part of the whole boardwalk to construct. Poor Hank, who was a rather short person -- I think he stood about 5'6" or 5'7" -- was up to his chin a lot of the time crossing that, whereas the rest of us had a little more altitude. That was the only place we ever ran afoul of an alligator, too. There was a big female that lived in there and we kept a wary eye out for her. But Hank and I always felt that the alligator was at a distinct disadvantage in attacking a Whidden because the Whiddens had lived off the swamp and trapped and taken furs and alligator hides for all of their lives and we figured it was unequal difficulties for the alligator -- she would have been overwhelmed very shortly. As it was, we didn't really have any trouble." (*Sprunt interview*)

Until 1959, there was little development in the Sanctuary. However, visitor pressure was building up once the boardwalk was constructed. Then, with the completion of Rt. 846 from Immokalee to U.S. 41 and an access road, two years later, finished from Rt. 846 to the Sanctuary gate, a building program was started in earnest. Opening up this remote, wild, unspoiled area to visitors, and even encouraging them, was hard for Warden Hank Bennett to take. It was his deep conviction that increasing visitation would change the wilderness character of the Corkscrew, so he resigned, giving up a career with the Society which had been a distinguished one. And to this Sanctuary he had made a substantial contribution, establishing, protecting and winning friends for

it. He liked the wilderness so much that in the wet season he didn't mind walking in knee-deep water for a long way to reach his little one-room cabin.

Getting ready for visitors...

In November, 1959, James Callaghan, director of the Society's Roosevelt Memorial Sanctuary at Oyster Bay, L.I., was sent down to the Corkscrew. He served not only as a Sanctuary Superintendent, but as a builder equal to the demands of any kind of construction. He was Acting Director, and of course, was in charge of the construction program. One of the first projects completed was the 900-foot road from the entrance of the Sanctuary to the boardwalk. No longer did one have to walk in ankle- or knee-deep water in wet seasons. Callaghan had made an advantageous deal with the same contractor who built the access road from 846 to construct the road in the Sanctuary itself. The gatehouse was completed. It was fashioned as a Seminole chickee, but with shingled instead of a thatched roof. It was designed as a chickee to conform to the history of South Florida and the Seminole Indians who had lived there in the past. It served as the admission center and sales department. The Whidden brothers, builders of the boardwalk, built the chickee also.

In January, 1960, with the completion of the gatehouse and road from it to the boardwalk, the Sanctuary was opened to the public. The admission charge was \$1 a head, and children under twelve free. Further development continued with construction of a pump house, other small buildings, and signs. The original boardwalk, completed in January, 1956, had deteriorated badly by 1960. So to rebuild it wherever necessary, Callaghan himself with one helper, David Hill, did the job. Again, since it was a very wet winter, the two men worked in waist-deep water. When all the construction was finished, it was necessary for Callaghan to return to his Sanctuary in Long Island. A young man by the name of Graham, having been recommended, was engaged as director. He turned out to be quite inadequate and was soon dismissed.

Upon Mr. Baker's recommendation, a man by the name of Lane, who had worked on his mother's farm in New England, was hired as Director. The story of his short tenure is best told by Callaghan:

"Anyway, later that Spring we had to inch him out of jail and fire him on the spot. He spent one or two nights in the clink -- he got himself soused up in some gin mill up in Immokalee and made the sad mistake of aiming a coke bottle at one of the deputy sheriffs. The deputy sheriff was not about to submit to that kind of action from somebody from up north. He immediately clobbered this man on top of the head and threw him into jail. He stayed there until he was bailed out 24 or 36 hours later, at

which time Mr. Buchheister said, 'Get him out of here' and, of course, he left."
(interview with James Callaghan by Carl W. Buchheister)

Weather attacks: pluses & minuses...

What an eventful year 1960 was for the Corkscrew. During its first eight months it had its ephemeral directors, but it also acquired the new road and buildings which were constructed by Jim Callaghan. September brought the most destructive of visitors, Hurricane Donna. It wreaked tremendous damage in the Naples and Everglades areas. Over the Keys and South Florida, it cut a great swath. The Corkscrew suffered devastating damage. Happily, the buildings suffered the least. One little trailer, however, which was used for part-time help and visitors, was sliced in half. And out in the swamp, some of the great cypress trees were blown down, here and there, over the boardwalk itself. On the high ground area around the dwellings and sheds, approximately 60,000 board feet of prime timber were blown down like so many jackstraws. Hutchinson and Sam Whidden, with little additional help, sawed the downed giants in the swamp and repaired the boardwalk. It was back-breaking labor, but they gave it freely.

The downed timber, a real problem, and the need for additional construction again demanded the knowledge and skills of Jim Callaghan, so President Buchheister sent him down. He soon succeeded in making a most advantageous deal with a sawmill operator in Bonita Springs. The latter would remove all of the felled trees, even the stumps, saw the logs into lumber, and give on-half of it to the Society. That he did, and the Society received one-half of 60,000 board feet. So some good resulted from Lady Donna's blow. With the increase in staff, additional housing was required. Callaghan designed a dormitory type building which could accommodate several couples. He also had a large building erected for the storage of such equipment as tractor, truck, and swamp buggy. Sam Whidden did most of the carpentry work, but Jim also did a lot as he is an excellent carpenter. The lumber required for all this new construction was cut according to specifications given by Callaghan, and the entire lot came from the Society's share of the hurricane-felled timber.

During 1961 and the events of 1962, the appearance of the administration area was constantly being improved. More and more visitors were coming to see the Sanctuary. They could now make a mile round trip on the boardwalk. Hutchinson and his helpers took turns serving as guides and interpreters on the boardwalk. When the wood storks nested, the boardwalk section under their nests was closed off. The interpreter stationed at the lettuce lake, with the aid of a telescope, would show the nesting storks to visitors.

1961 was a very dry year. Very little rain fell in the summer, the rainy season, none fell in the fall, and none in the winter of 1962. The set Corkscrew Swamp had virtually dried up. The fire hazard was tremendous and in May it started in the Sanctuary. It burned until June. Phil Owens later described it:

"And, of course, all south Florida was on fire. Down in the Everglades National Park, there were hundreds of acres burning. Corkscrew lost hundreds of acres of pond cypress and some few acres up at the north end of the big timber -- maybe seven to twelve acres. It still stands, but the trees are dead. At that time everybody in this state turned out. They volunteered help. Even the prison stockade sent crews here. Contractors sent in a dragline. On the south end they dug deep holes to get water to fill their tanks, both their back-pack tanks and other fire fighting equipment where water was used. But just everybody -- high school boys turned out and came here. They just couldn't begin to use the people they had. You can't fight that fire by hand anyhow. It just took the rains to put it out. They had airplanes in here also dropping water and also trying to seed the clouds here at that time, but to no avail." (*interview with Phil Owens by Carl W. Buchheister at the Corkscrew Sanctuary*)

The care and concern of so many agencies and individuals in loaning equipment, providing planes, and in actual hand labor to save the Corkscrew was most heartening and gratifying. It manifested a widespread appreciation of the Society's rescue and preservation of the Corkscrew with its remnant of virgin cypress.

More improvements...

In 1962, a modern spacious house was built by a Naples contractor. It was designed especially for the use of the Sanctuary Director and has been so used ever since.

On January 1, 1963, the Corkscrew was fortunate in acquiring as a full-time staff member Phil Owens. He was accompanied by his wife. The two were to make great contributions to the further development and success of the Sanctuary. By trade, Phil was a plumber, so he was handy with tools and was a skilled and responsible worker.

The experience of a long period of dryness and a devastating fire moved the Society to drive wells in the swamp to supply fresh water during future dry spells. The first was drilled after the fire. Phil Owens helped with the installation of the pump and a diesel powered generator to supply electricity for its operation. Later one, four more wells were drilled that were used in the spring when the swamp became dry.

Again the boardwalk had deteriorated and was badly in need of repair. During his first two years, Phil Owens almost single-handedly reconstructed the existing boardwalk.

The job, as always, required working in the water. When asked if he encountered any snakes or alligators, Phil answered,

"Enough to worry about. Of course, the Whiddens built the first one. You'd just get in the water with them. The only thing that would bother you at all there would be the leeches, so we would tie our pant cuffs tight. Leeches worked just about the surface of the water, so if you are in it up to your waist, you had to keep a tight belt and a tee shirt to keep the leeches off. A couple of times we were run out by an old female gator that had young in that first lettuce lake. We had to work around her and we kept a stepladder mighty handy. I scrambled out of there a couple of times. She'd take a rush at you with her mouth open and hissing. I'd just come out from Pennsylvania at that time and was not well acquainted with alligators, so I left, up the ladder. She was a good nine or ten feet." (*interview with Phil Owens by Carl W. Buchheister at the Corkscrew Sanctuary*)

When asked if he saw any water moccasins, he replied, "Occasionally, but they are not aggressive in any way. When you first get in to work, you look around, and if there is nothing there, you can be sure there won't be -- with all the pounding and sawing and carrying on, they are not going to come in to you."

Much was being accomplished despite a constant turnover in personnel. Director Hutchinson had many good qualities, was a devoted worker, but simply could not get along with the person under him. Even Sam Whidden, who had long been one of the most faithful and helpful of workers for the Corkscrew, gave up because of Hutchinson. Phil Owens described him: "He'd been in the British Army and the Miami Fire Department. He was just all spit and polish and the place was run more like a military post than it was a wildlife sanctuary. Numbers of men would tell you the same thing, any of the old-timers who ever spent any time here. It was too bad, because he had an awful lot on the ball."

Matters literally came to a head when tensions between Hutchinson and Owens led to physical combat in which the two aimed blows at each other's heads. That moved President Buchheister to come down and demand Hutchinson's resignation. He immediately appointed Phil Owens as Acting Director. Phil said he would not like to be the Director because he lacked formal or college education, which he thought the job required.

It was about this time that Alexander Sprunt, Jr., having retired from National Audubon Society, and whose career had been an outstanding one, ran tours to the Corkscrew from the Caribbean Gardens in Naples. He brought station wagon loads of tourists to the Sanctuary three or four times a week. He led them into the Sanctuary the length of the boardwalk, giving highly instructive commentary all along the way.

No one knew the history of the Swamp better, even from before any of the big cypress was cut, and he knew the plants and animal life. When Caribbean Gardens gave up the tours, Mr. and Mrs. Sprunt were engaged as interpreters on the boardwalk. They lived in the dormitory. After Alexander Sprunt died, his widow Margaret continued for several years. Those two contributed tremendously. In addition to giving excellent interpretation, they provided a charming courtesy. Their contribution was, in reality, a very fine education and public relations program.

Among the very helpful local friends of the Sanctuary were Dutch Bailie and Bill Piper. Dutch had a half-section adjoining the Sanctuary up on the northeast corner. Formerly a stone mason and plasterer in Miami, Dutch came here, bought property, and went into the cattle business. Before there were any roads in the early days, he would bring visitors down to the Sanctuary in his jeep. He constantly watched out for the Corkscrew as if he were warden on the north end of it. If he saw anyone entering the Sanctuary, he saddled a horse and went after them. He was a very good neighbor. He died in the 1960's.

Bill Piper, native of Florida, had spent most of his life nearby in Collier County. Besides a large ranch, he owned the Everglades Wonder Gardens in Bonita Springs. In the Gardens, he had a number of the mammals of Florida. They were very well kept. He had even raised panthers and had given their cubs to the National Park Service to release in the Everglades National Park. He was an ardent conservationist and helped in the early efforts to save the Corkscrew. He gave generously himself, and solicited funds from his associates. Because of his influence in the community, he won many friends for the Society and its Corkscrew Sanctuary.

In the spring of 1965, Jim Callaghan and Sam Whidden tackled a herculean kind of job and completed it in ten days. That was the construction of one mile of fencing on the west end, which all had to be done on foot through the rankest underbrush. Posts that had previously been cut by Sam Whidden and stockpiled had to be carried long distances. Before they did the fencing itself, they had to complete a survey of the boundary by finding old slashes on the trees. Many miles of walking were required to fence the west end and give further protection to the Sanctuary.



On March 23, 1965, the United States Department of the Interior sent Stanley Joseph, Superintendent of the Everglades National Park, to dedicate the Corkscrew Sanctuary as a Natural Historic Landmark. In acknowledging this distinction on behalf of the Society, President Buchheister mentioned quite frankly one of its fears: "We hope this plaque will not turn out to be a

grave marker but will remain a marker for one of the most beautiful, most ineffable natural history landmarks in the United States." After the ceremony a crowd of over 100 local and county officials, members and friends, stayed for a barbecue supper.

Carl Buchheister, left, accepts the plaque designating Corkscrew as a National Historic Landmark from M. Stanley Joseph, right.

By 1965, the constant threat of drainage became a reality. The Gulf American Land Corporation announced its plan to establish a huge housing development, Golden Gate Estates, south of the Sanctuary. To create such a development on wet land would necessitate extensive drainage by a system of canals. They, in turn, would suit the developers perfectly for they could then offer "water front properties." The threat was real. The only way to meet it was to acquire additional land adjacent to the southern borders of the Sanctuary, between it and the proposed development. To buy such additional property would take a huge sum of money. Happily, the Ford Foundation came through with a matching grant of \$232,000. To match that, the Society would have to raise \$500,000. It did just that, in due course, and then purchased 2,640 acres adjacent to the Sanctuary's southern border.

To meet the threat of drainage to the south end and on the west, the Society planned a system of dykes to contain and control the run-off of the water in the swamp. Jim Callaghan came down, drew the plans, hired the rag lines, and supervised the construction of the dykes, a masterful achievement. To a considerable extent, the existing tramways over which formerly the logging trains had hauled out the timber were used, and linked together. The dykes were equipped with sluice gates to let out excess water. The canals of Golden Gate did their draining, but the dykes held water on the Corkscrew. At great expense of labor and money, the Corkscrew had been rescued a second time, and was safe, that is until a possible future threat should arise.

Despite all the difficulties -- fires, drainage threats, turnover of help -- the years had been good to the Corkscrew. It had become the beneficiary of much affectionate devotion, of the magnificently generous gift of lands from the Collier Company, of the Ford Foundation grant, of contributions from members and friends, of increasing support of the County officials, and of the outstandingly loyal, devoted and skilled services of Phil Owens, who finally became Director, and of his wife. The Corkscrew Swamp, with all its appointments by way of wells, dykes, boardwalk, visitors' center, parking lot, buildings, safeguards of all kinds, and excellent personnel, had become securely established -- a jewel among wildlife sanctuaries -- and a monument to the dedicated concern of the the National Audubon Society.

This history ends with the year 1967.

