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Fall Forestry Camp

By John Nahas

The 1994 fall camp at the Solon Dixon Forestry Education Center in southern Alabama could not have been better. Though it went quickly, the three weeks that we spent down there were unforgettable.

The camp, which was nestled in the Conecuh National Forest, had many things to offer us. There was a very diverse collection of flora and fauna as well as many geographical points of interest.

One area within the camp was the cypress swamp which was home to some of the oldest trees in the state of Alabama. The beautiful old giants had huge buttresses to keep them upright in the soft, murky bottom of the swamp. Next to the swamp we discovered a small grove of bamboo. It stood as high as twenty-five feet tall though it was only about an inch and a half in diameter. There was a three mile hike to get down to see the area, and as many of us found, it was well worth it.

Another interesting feature of the camp was the cave. Three of us attempted to explore it one night and the task proved to be more difficult than we had thought. The roof of the cave was so low that we had to crawl most of the way and were forced to turn back when the cave narrowed to a point where we couldn't get our waist through. It was a neat cave though, with a few interesting formations of stalactites and stalagmites. One of us found a flint arrowhead at the mouth of the cave, suggesting ancient Indian occupation.
Dr. Hall and Dr. Kuo did an outstanding job of planning our daily activities. While we were there we saw many different aspects of forestry in the south including the T.R. Miller Lumber Company, Georgia-Pacific plywood plant, Black Water River State Forest, Scott Paper company, and Eglin Air Force Base, as well as many other places. The highlights for me included seeing feller-buncher logging at a few of the places, plywood being peeled from southern pine logs, and boating up the alligator infested Tensaw River Delta to see a brand new half million dollar helicopter transport logs for the Scott Paper Co. logging operation.

One thing that was interesting to note about the forest products industry in the south was the enormous volumes of timber that each company would process daily and that, in many cases, they were still growing more than they were harvesting.

Some of the interesting species we encountered during our stay included the Red Cockaded Woodpecker, White Topped Pitcher Plant (which are carnivorous), Gopher Tortoise, and a few species of snakes such as the coral, rattle, and indigo... and who could forget longleaf pine.

One experience I will never forget was conducting a prescribed burn on a southern pine forest. A drip torch was used to start the fire and when the wind would take it, the ensuing conflagration would consume the forest understory. It was spectacular to see the flames crawl up the trunks of the pine trees. Later that night the forest floor could be seen still glowing with hot embers.
Our nights at Solon Dixon were spent playing ping-pong, running into town to do laundry, writing in our journals, having campfires, or sitting on the porch swing shooting the breeze.

When the weekends came, we headed down to Florida. After the first weekend, everyone came back as red as lobsters. The white sands and cool blue ocean at Fort Walton Beach made for an excellent spot to relax in the sun.

The last campfire was a perfect top off to the experience. It was held down at the cave and even Dr. Hall and Dr. Kuo decided to come. We all had a great time sitting around the campfire chatting and eating marshmallows.

The next night, before we pulled out of camp, we were given a Halloween party by the cooks who could not have treated us better during our stay.

Solon Dixon has so much to offer and it is good to know that we left a good impression on them so that future fall camps may be spent there. It is truly a great place and the memories of the experience in Alabama as well as the friendships that were forged, will last a lifetime.

Now I see the secret of making the best persons, It is to grow in the open air and to eat and sleep with the earth.

-Walt Whitman