
A River in Time

by Karen Mitchell

I returned home to my magical space. For the first time in a fistful of years, my size nine and-a-half feet were ecstatically clomping on the mineral-rich shores and white sands of my hometown: Edisto Island, South Carolina.

I embraced my dance with a warm, old friend—the island town that had nursed me on its seclusive, deep-fried dreams. My ancestors were buried in these rich, alluvial soils. Edisto was a holy tomb. A moor for souls both living and dead. I came home to a bedrock which continued to resonate in the tendrils, wafts, and moist humidity of the very air they once breathed.

I left one tree-filled city, Washington, D.C., and returned home to another to learn about my long forgotten friend, the natural world on the island. My childhood was peppered with memories of the murky green swamps, salt marshes, tall bald cypress, and bright green row crops lining the highway. The long, windy drive along the Carolina byways was pronounced by the towering bodies of live oaks draped in thick, gossamer-like clumps of Spanish moss. The canopy of branches and moss intertwined and stood motionless along the slip of two-lane highway. The ghost-like canopy was draped against a backdrop of moon and stars in the warm, Carolina night.

A RIVER IN TIME

On this journey, I cruised down the Edisto River on a 24-foot boat with sun-kissed biologist, Meg Hoyle, and petite but solidly built, Gullah-speaking, African American Sarah Burnell. Sarah, an 85-year-old grandma, was jovial; her teenaged spirit bounded along the river.

To bystanders, Meg and Sarah seemed unlikely best friends. The women met fifteen years ago. They shared a love for island history, the Gullah language, and preservation of the island community. They'd been riding together on the boat ever since, channeling their mutual affection for Edisto Island toward providing water tours of the Edisto River and the ACE (Ashepoo-Combahee-Edisto) Basin.

I hopped on board the slightly rocking skiff. Peering out into the distance, I saw the sagging sun light up rows and rows of dancing peaks atop the gray-blue waters. The sun-filled air was damp with humidity against my bare arms. The horizon stretched for miles, broken up by meandering pockets of steel-green sawgrass poking their heads above the vibrant surface of the Edisto River Basin.

A tri-colored heron, appearing as if its flank of pillow-soft white feathers had been dipped in an ink blotter, cut through the 92-degree air, soaring yards above the gently moving gray and brown ripples of brackish water. A yellow tennis ball sun began its slow descent, like a taffy pull, from a perch high in the sky, toward the clear, blue baseline of wet horizon. It was seven-thirty p.m., and the summer sun gradually changed shades to a fading, magenta blush. Black and

KAREN MITCHELL

white warblers and the occasional Great Blue Heron slogged their way across a sky that witnessed centuries.

A skirt of brackish tidal marsh lined the sides of the river. Lifesaver green, smooth cordgrass buried itself into the peat base of the salty, low marsh as the Carolina Skiff poked its nose further and further down the waters of the ACE.

Meg, a certified United States Coast Guard biologist, steered the boat. A tennis visor kept the sun, which was bouncing off her short-sleeved yellow polo, out of her eyes. "Oyster shells help feed the grasses and contribute to the nutrients in the river, keeping the river healthy," Meg said in a soft voice while turning the boat. The wheel had the classic look of the steering wheel on a 1955 Ford Crown Victoria: a thin strip of polished silver, gleaming in the sun. Meg was trim and athletic. Her clear, bright eyes stared forward, at the water, as if she was flipping through centuries upon the river.

The ACE Basin is a 1.1 million-acre region stretching across South Carolina, containing the Ashepoo, Combebee and Edisto Rivers. Here, three historic bodies of water come together and help form one of the largest, legally-protected, ecological spaces in South Carolina. Under the ACE Basin project, approximately 217,000 acres of land containing endangered wildlife, unique vegetation, and cultural history have all been preserved by conservation efforts and land easements.

The skiff coasted down the river and tough, skinny, green leaves poked past the water's surface. I tried

A RIVER IN TIME

pulling a single reed out of the water, and it was an act of tug-o-war. In the shallows, fifteen to twenty feet away from the boat, spike grass, salt hay, and black rush grew. The luminous plants populated areas higher up on the marsh in thick swatches of hay yellow and amber green that floated and fanned out gently in the wind. The salty marsh and vegetation created a nutrient-rich shelter for scuttling crab, pale, baby oysters, waterfowl, and juvenile fish, all slightly tugged and stirred by the high tide of the returning ocean.

The Edisto River was named by Native Americans who'd once inhabited the area. Before European settlers arrived, the soppy peat, rich mud, tidal marshes, and fresh water sources on Edisto were inhabited by the Edisto Indians, according to Dr. Charles Spencer, a political science scholar who has written several textbooks about Edisto Island. Dr. Spencer writes that fifteen thousand years ago, the first human beings set foot on the land mass that later became known as South Carolina. Fifteen thousand years ago was before the beginning of time for my family. We hailed from Liberia, Guinea-Bissau, and Wales, arriving by slave ship and as free men and women upon these coastal waters.

Biologist Lauton Sutley works with the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources, where he specializes in the ACE Basin. A few days after the boat ride, Lauton spoke to me with a soothing voice that felt like a sweaty, cold cup of iced tea on a blistering, red-hot day. His voice moved pleasantly, like jazz. "Native Americans used coastal regions as seasonal grounds. There were no permanent habitations. Most of the Native

KAREN MITCHELL

Americans didn't live in the coastal zones, because fresh water was not prevalent," Lauton said. His resonating alto and gentlemanly, southern drawl poured out like room temperature molasses. The bass in his voice hit the bottom of each vowel like the thud of a timpani.

"The theory is several groups came and met in coastal areas to trade, and have ceremonies and big feasts. Then, they discarded the oyster shells in a ring fashion," Lauton said.

The boat skirted along this distinctive feature of the Colleton County river: a roughly twenty foot mound of oyster shells created hundreds of years ago when Native Americans discarded the shells, Meg explained. The mound is protected by riprap, a man-made structure that prevents erosion. Gray and white mottled shells poked out of the dirt like marshmallows squeezing out the side of a s'more.

Sarah recalled the river and fields of her childhood from almost a century ago. Her family and she migrated to the island when Sarah was five years old. They picked cotton and cabbage to make a living. Growing up on the island, Sarah said she routinely dipped her hands into the river to retrieve moss and sawgrass. She used the salt-filled plants to make chinchillas, homemade baby dolls. As a teen, Sarah traveled approximately twelve miles from home to pastel-colored beachfront properties. In her thick Gullah accent, Sarah explained that on the beach she earned extra money as a housekeeper, maid, and nanny for White waterfront property owners. As a young girl, my mother also worked in those expensive, beachfront properties. She kept house, raised White

A RIVER IN TIME

babies, and cleaned kitchens and toilets belonging to countless strangers. White owned property lined the beach and the neighboring beach town. Black folks lived a dozen or so miles away from the Atlantic, deep within the Edisto countryside. Over the decades, not much has changed. White families and Black families live largely segregated, separated from each other on the island, according to the census.

On our boat ride, the skiff danced past waterfront homes where families and friends held court and conversation, laughing and smiling on piers and decks. Sarah continued making a chinchilla doll out of an old Pepsi-Cola bottle, a wine cork and black shoe strings. Sarah weaved and constructed the doll with dusky, black hands. She noted the moss wasn't as available as it used to be.

The boat skipped along. Meg drove closer to a conduit that seemed to marry three streams into one. She pointed down a watery path of river dappled with golden sun and described how Harriet Tubman learned to navigate the difficult Combahee River. Harriet and others freed several hundred slaves during the Combahee River Raid. As I stared out at the acres of water, I tried to imagine *the* Harriet Tubman and her stoic, five-foot-frame, working tirelessly out here in the salty, calm flanks of the Edisto River. I breathed in her air. I tried to imagine what Harriet saw.

Sarah sang softly, in a low timbre, almost to herself. Her hollow cheeks grew somber. "Everything is very beautiful out on the water. I really enjoy the boat and

KAREN MITCHELL

everything on the water," she said quietly. With a deep, rich voice, Sarah hummed a gospel-coated melody, a whisper above the sound of the water slapping the sides of the boat. The river released a slightly salty perfume of vapors. A pod of dolphins appeared, bobbing their sleek gray heads above the froth. The subtle spray was like gossamer, lightly resting on our skin. The white boat bobbed barely a foot above the high tide.

The yellow sun illuminated Meg's face as she turned the boat around and headed back in the direction of the pier. There was a knowing peace about her: restfulness from being exactly where she was meant to be. For Meg, it was on the water—the channels of the Edisto River and the ACE basin. The same difficult waters Harriet Tubman mastered.

"On the river and in the creeks, I can get back to the essence of living. The ebb and flow of the tide puts me and my life into the proper perspective," Meg explained. "The experiences I relish are turning off the motor and floating with the wind and tide, seeing six-foot sturgeon leap out of the water and hundreds of birds fly overhead on the way to roost in the evening." Meg rocked back on her heels, lightly gripping the steering wheel while she stared out into the acres and acres of darkening waters. "These events have an ancient history and are things that could be felt or seen by generations of people as far back as people have been in this landscape. It's an honor and a privilege to bear witness to the cycles of nature and to be mindful of being a part of it all."

A RIVER IN TIME

Sarah sang softly, staring intently at the water. "When we first started to ride the boat, we didn't see the dolphins. But then I started singing, and they started coming out, and we see the dolphins," Sarah gently said, her voice barely above a whisper.

Sarah sat with her hands in her lap. She stared at me with the innocence of a child. I saw my genealogy in her body: narrow shoulders flanked by strong, meaty arms that slowly swelled as they trickled downward toward blunt fingertips. A small, round head like a lima bean covered in a closely cropped fuzz of woolly, white and gray hair. I knew those breasts. I'd seen them on my grandmothers, cousins, aunts, and sisters. I saw myself in the phenotype staring back at me. I saw my grandfather's face. I saw the narrow mouth my grandfather kept knotted up like a secret while tearing through a wad of Red Man chew tobacco. Nostalgic, I absentmindedly told Sarah the names of my deceased grandparents.

"Dat your grandparents?!"

Sarah leapt out of the spell of her song. She shrieked loudly enough to make the herons and marsh wrens scramble. She sat speechless, as if she'd seen a ghost. She looked at me like she was still seeing a ghost.

I laughed nonchalantly. I gave Sarah a hug as Meg looked on knowingly, a warm smile on her face. "I wondered if y'all might be related. I wondered if you all might know each other," Meg said.

The boat docked. We all tumbled out while Meg battened down the skiff for the evening. Sarah and I

KAREN MITCHELL

hugged numerous times as we walked together toward the parking lot where her big blue truck was parked. From inside her busy blue jean satchel, Sarah pulled out a Xerox copy of an article about her history on the island. She hurriedly wrote her address and phone number on the piece of paper and gave it to me proudly between hugs.

My journey into the living history of my past was beginning. My parents and grandparents had been long dead for over twenty years. Through Sarah, I heard my grandparents' voices; I remembered the sounds they made as their slippered feet shuffle-walked across the linoleum tile in their 80-year-old home. I smelled the whiff of tobacco and bright peppermint that wrapped itself around my grandparents like a cloak. I felt the soft, fluffy, pressed hair cascading from my grandmother's hairline. I saw the chocolate and honey-brown skin that brought me popsicles, hot, blueberry cornbread, and coins for the church collection plate. I saw the giant chest freezer stored on the porch which hid a number of ice-cream treats stored under frozen ham hocks, corn, and freshly caught seafood. I knew them again like yesterday, instead of recalling them like history.

My time on the skiff was a serene homecoming. A slip through time once passed, but still carried through the air in our memory. The island held its breath above the gurgling, foggy water, and I leaned into the time that was held within that space—the space of memory, sentient experiences, and neurons firing. The air held our existence. The heavenly magic on the Edisto River was visceral. The souls of my deceased elders breathed.

A RIVER IN TIME

Their hands touched us that evening. The words of an old Christian spiritual resonated in my head:

Will the circle, be unbroken? By and by, Lord, by and by. There's better home a-waiting. In the sky, Lord, in the sky. Will the circle, be unbroken, by and by, Lord, by and by.

The hymn was often sung in the Edisto Island Presbyterian Church my grandparents and I attended. A six foot tall, plum-colored woman with a voice like a contrabassoon sang the hymn. Our circle was unbroken that night on the skiff. Enveloped by the natural world, I recalled the presence of my elders and honored soldiers like Harriet Tubman who helped establish the island as it was today. The island's children had come together once more. Meg unknowingly facilitated a family reunion. The island, in its maternal, instinctive way, spoke to Meg's intuition—she invited Sarah on my private tour. The island's collection of living and deceased audiences was united on my journey.

On the 90-minute skiff ride through the watery bones and ecological story enveloping my pre-teen and twenty-something years, I learned the island's language. It was telling me its story. I began to hear it speak in my own native tongue, the language etched in my bones, my DNA, my genealogy, and my psychology. The island was my skin. I was learning to carry her proudly.