

# River war in pivotal battle

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Nearly 150 years after the Seminoles killed seven of Gen. Thomas Jesup's Tennessee Volunteers in the first recorded battle for control of the Loxahatchee River, the fight continues.

Today it's a paper struggle over the fate of a geographical oddity — one of the few wild things left along the Southeast Florida coast.

If all goes as planned, the little, almost hidden Loxahatchee River will become the first in Florida proclaimed a National Wild and Scenic River — a prized title that eluded its more famous northern cousin, the Suwannee.

After 17 years of lobbying by conservationists, Gov. Bob Graham and the Cabinet are to decide Tuesday whether to request the federal designation. The vote is being closely watched in Palm Beach and Martin counties, where the Loxahatchee runs, and elsewhere where rivers are at risk.

Supporters fearful of the plan's chances just a month ago now say they expect Tuesday's vote to endorse special protection for the cypress-domed river and its swampy headwaters.

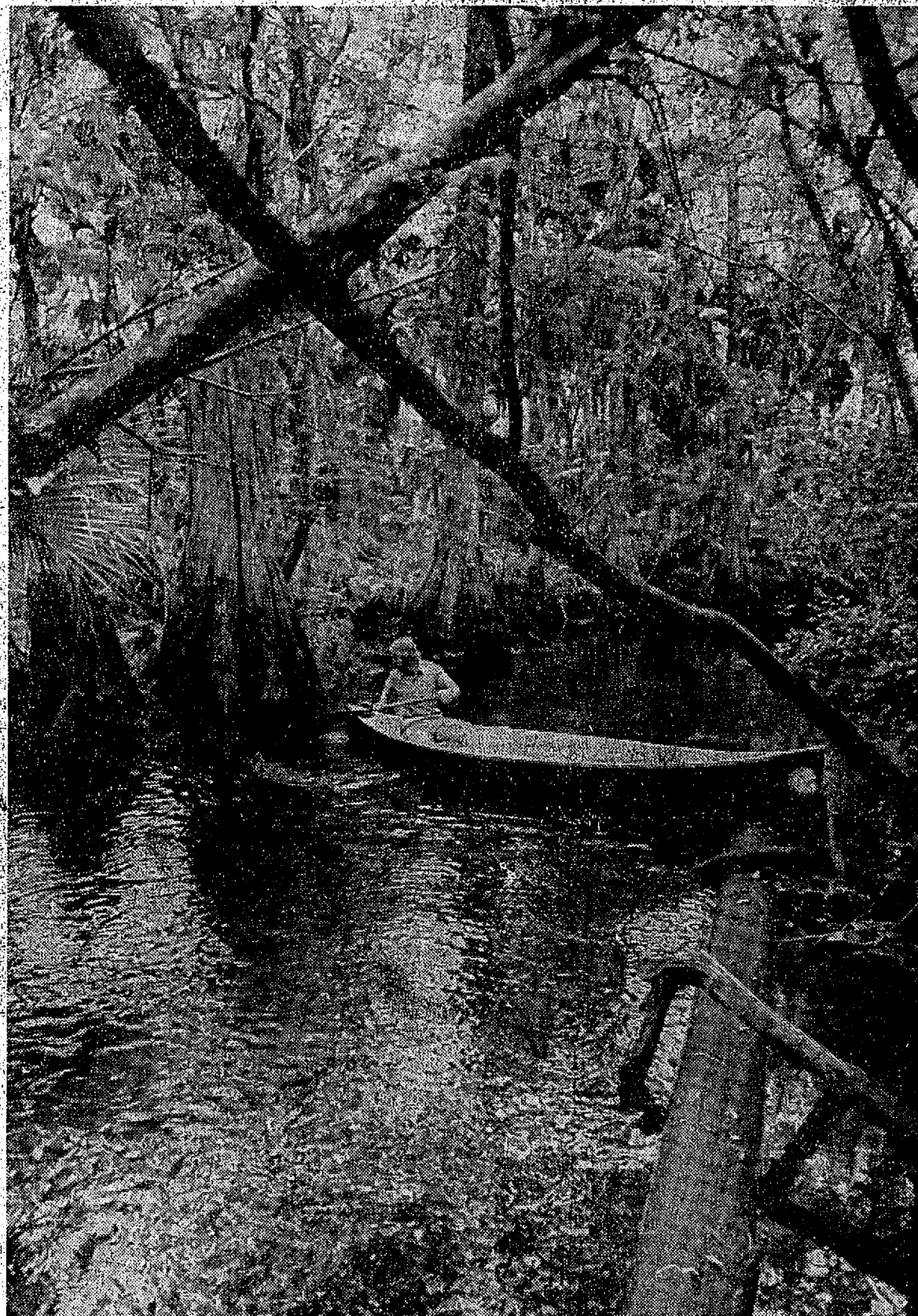
"I think it's a success story... it's my expectation that the plan will be sent on for federal approval as of Tuesday night," said Hobe Sound environmentalist Nathaniel P. Reed, who quarterbacked last-minute negotiations.

"This won't be just another little river anymore," said Capt. Dick Roberts, regional biologist with the Florida Department of Natural Resources. "It will be something the whole United States will be interested in."

Time is pressing. The state faces a self-imposed deadline of June 24, 1985, for earning the designation from the U.S. Interior Department.

The river plan calls for greater cooperation between governments and private business to avoid damage to the sensitive stream and its drainage basin. It spells out ways to control public access by canoeists and others.

The river faces development, drainage and dredging that could threaten its survival.



Miami Herald

Natural arches, formed by fallen limbs, frame a canoeist on the Loxahatchee.

Farms are suspected of polluting it. New, dirt-road subdivisions are sprouting so fast in the Loxahatchee's drainage basin that mapmakers can't keep up. William Watson, a Martin County developer seeking to build in the river basin, has sent lobbyists to Tallahassee to monitor the river plan.

Unless the builders use a

careful hand, planners say, growth could doom the river. The chance that the river might be preserved is stirring a stew of emotions. Environmentalists are gleeful, foreseeing a rare victory for protecting a sliver of wilderness in a forest of for-sale signs. Real-estate barons are anxious, wondering if the river plan will

be so rigorously enforced that it will choke future development nearby.

And small riverfront landowners who have resisted developers' purchase offers for years are skeptical of the theory that only government can save a river.

Said Doug Blankenship, whose

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# War over wild river enters final battle for scenic status

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father, William, moved to the river in the 1940s to escape what even then was urban fever on the coast. "Why buy a river that the Blankenships have preserved for the whole time they've lived here?"

Protecting the river will cost Florida taxpayers as much as \$9 million to buy 1,250 acres along the stream's banks — in many cases from reluctant owners — plus expenses for rangers and equipment.

River-lovers say the Loxahatchee is worth it.

"If we don't do it," said Mike LaTour, president of the Palm Beach Pack and Paddle Club, "it's gone forever, just another part of Florida lost. We cannot allow builders to plow under and build over everything."

The quest for federal recognition of the Loxahatchee's secret beauty has been anything but a quiet exercise among bird-watchers and canoeists.

Local officials feared Tallahassee or Washington would hand down important decisions without a South Florida voice. An early plan that seemed to urge a freeze on new roads and sewer lines near the river drew waves of protest.

The plan's authors in the Florida Department of Natural Resources apparently have calmed most of the fears.

"This is really a locally inspired process. It's a different approach for Florida," said chief author Al Gregory.

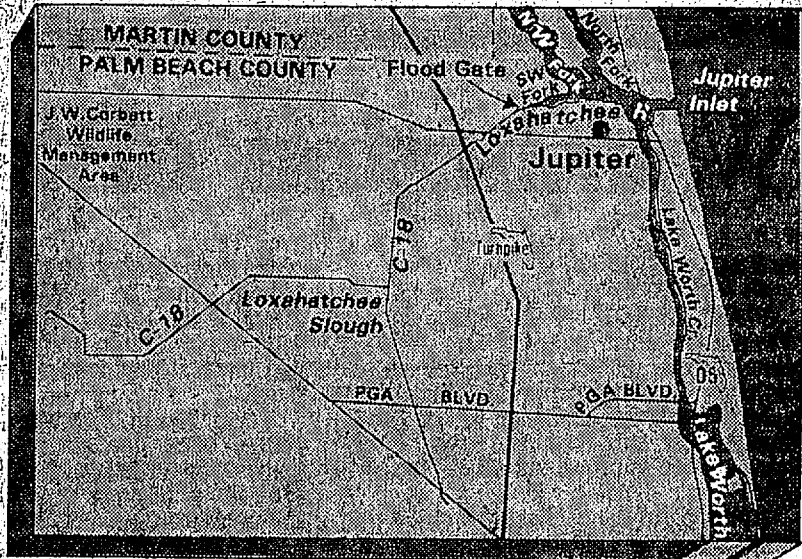
## Foundation offer

Backroom politicking over the river's fate has reached even into the Chicago board rooms of the \$2 billion John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, which has offered to donate 903 of its 50,000 acres in northern Palm Beach and southern Martin counties, a gift worth as much as \$10 million.

The 903 acres would go to the Nature Conservancy, a national environmental group. Much of the remaining land held by the late MacArthurs' enormous estate is destined for development, either by the foundation's local real-estate arm Bankers Land Co., or some future owner.

Skeptics say the foundation must want something in return — slacked environmental controls on their future projects or, at least, a tax writeoff for Bankers Land.

Bankers Land already is seeking



STEPHANIE TRUE/Miami Herald Staff

to have Martin County free up development limits on 3,000 acres near the river, County Commissioner Maggy Hurchalla said.

But Larry Martin, a foundation vice president, said the offer has no strings attached. "We're very anxious to see that stretch of river preserved," he said. State officials say they're taking the offer in good faith.

Anxious to wrap up the donation, Graham delayed the Cabinet vote on the river for two weeks, until Tuesday. Negotiations since then apparently have satisfied all parties.

"The state is giving up none of the river's protections in trade for the land donation, several officials said.

Still, some environmentalists involved in the latest talks sensed "that the [foundation's] commitment to donate the land might have cooled a bit," said Charles Lee, vice president of the Florida Audubon Society. The foundation's Martin said the offer still stands.

If it falls through, the South Florida Water Management District still intends to buy the land.

## Marshy depression

The Loxahatchee — a corruption of the Indian name "Lowchow-hatchee," or Turtle River — arose of old from the Loxahatchee Slough, a marshy depression that curled from Lake Okechobee to the wet, piney woods west of today's West Palm Beach.

The river escaped the dredges and draglines that scored much of South Florida, but it was not

untouched.

Its southern end is now a canal and its southwest fork bleeds into a giant ditch called the C-18. Florida's Turnpike crashes across the river, as will Interstate 95 in a few years.

But the northwest fork stayed much like it was when Gen. Jesup ran into the Indians in 1838.

It was a wilderness in the 1930s when it became home to Vince "Trapper" Nelson, a muscular, fervently independent hermit who built and lost a land empire. Trapper Nelson's place, where he lived off the native animals and died of a mysterious shotgun blast in 1968, still is accessible only by boat.

Local environmentalists started trying to preserve the river 17 years ago. In 1978 they persuaded Congress to authorize a federal study. The National Park Service concluded in 1982, after some initial skepticism, that 7.5 miles of the northwest fork qualified for National Wild and Scenic River status.

The river's headwaters in northern Palm Beach County west of Jupiter and its Martin County tributaries are fast becoming the Grand Central Station of local real-estate development.

When Blankenship's father carved out small fields for squash and peppers, he left alone 45 acres of majestic cypress along the river.

Now just one generation later, civilization has crept to the edge of the family's tropical jungle. Where the son remembers finding few children his own age, teen-agers now hang out at a Step-Saver convenience store near the river.