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**SAM WHIDDEN'S RECOLLECTIONS**  
**OF CORKSCREW SWAMP**  
as told to Ed Carlson

Sam Whidden was seven years old when his family moved into the Corkscrew area in 1910. His father was primarily a farmer and eventually established a herd of cattle on the abundant open range available in the area before 1950. Sam has carried on the tradition of grazing cattle, farming, and hunting in and around what is now Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary for over 70 years.

Because of his familiarity with the land and construction skills, Sam was employed by the National Audubon Society during the developmental stages of the sanctuary. He was hired by Hank Bennett in September, 1955. The only facility in the headquarters area at that time was Hank's tent in the palmettos where the "cabin" now stands.

Between 1955 and 1962, Sam and his brothers Bob, Stan, and Fletcher built the original boardwalk, all frame buildings, pole barns, gate house and chickees, and fenced nearly the entire sanctuary. During the period of his Audubon employment, Sam commuted daily through the swamp to his home in the village of Corkscrew eight miles northeast of the sanctuary headquarters. This trip took him through the Little Corkscrew Island area, which was added to the sanctuary in the late 1960's (Glackens tract). Sam coincidentally had been leasing that area for his cattle for many years. His lease was terminated in 1972. As a result of his many active years as a cattleman and Audubon warden, Sam has probably seen more of Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary than any other human being.

In April, 1982, Sam accompanied me on a trip from the Visitors Center to the northeast region of the sanctuary. Most of our time was spent driving all the accessible roads on Little Corkscrew Island. Some time was also spent observing marshes adjacent to Washout and Fish Farm roads. Sam had not visited these areas for approximately ten years and, as might be expected, many stories and reminiscences were related during this trip. I was particularly interested in his impressions of how the sanctuary's plant communities might be changing over time, and I asked many questions along these lines. I found Sam to be observant, and still very familiar with the area. He knew exactly where we were at all

times, recognizing trees and other landmarks, and was always able to anticipate exactly where a certain road would lead and what natural features would be there. He was fairly knowledgeable about vegetation and wildlife and generally his species identifications were accurate. I believe his recollections and impressions can add to our understanding of Corkscrew's natural systems. I will relate them in a kind of condensed itemized list.

Vegetation: Sam was astounded at the size and density of understory and shrubby vegetation along our route. He remembers the general landscape to be much more open. Myrtles (*Myrica cerifera*) and palmettos (*Serenoa repens*) in particular are much larger and more numerous now than they used to be. Sam remembered that when he was fencing the sanctuary, no clearing was needed along the proposed fence lines to facilitate construction. Now, however, the dense shrubs found in the same areas would be a severe deterrent to fence construction. Early slides of Corkscrew document this situation.

There appears to be a new generation of young "shrub stage" cabbage palms (*Sabal palmetto*) on Little Corkscrew Island. These small palms are much more common now than formerly, and together with the above mentioned shrubs, have drastically changed the character of the island. Phragmites cane is also more abundant now than formerly. Sam feels that reduction in fire frequency and elimination of cattle grazing caused the changes.

Fire and Grazing: Prior to 1950, Corkscrew Sanctuary was just a portion of the vast open range land available to cattlemen all over South Florida, and cattle were grazing the sanctuary as long as Sam can remember. Cattle were not thick throughout the entire sanctuary, but marshes like the North Marsh, which provided the best forage, and islands like Little Corkscrew Island, which provided high ground, shelter, and additional forage, were heavily used.

The cattlemen's greatest range management tool in South Florida was, and still is, the match. By burning the range, just one man could remove shrubs and accumulated litter, thereby increasing the extent of grassy areas and increasing the nutritive value and palatability of the grass over vast acreages at almost no cost. According to Sam, cattlemen tried to burn the range every year. Most areas don't produce enough litter to carry a fire every year,

but since the previous year's fire may not have been complete, the annual burning attempt kept everything burned on at least a two-year cycle. Burning was done mostly in January because (1) most

habitats were dry enough to burn by this stage of the dry season, (2) turkeys and quail had not started nesting, and (3) deer had not dropped fawns yet.

Sam witnessed a few summer lightning fires, but since everything was kept in a very low fuel condition by winter burning, these fires never burned a significant area.

According to Sam, fire was used very conservatively in the sanctuary under Hank Bennett's directorship, and not at all under Hutchinson's. He feels that this reduction in fire frequency caused a fuel buildup that allowed severe fires to enter the cypress strand in the early 1960's.

Logging: All sizable pine timber was taken from Little Corkscrew, Eagle, and Ruess islands in 1956. Saw logs had to be at least 9 inches in diameter and 17 feet long. Sam remembers stands of large pines over 24" dbh on these islands before the logging. The pine land around the sanctuary headquarters area is the only virgin stand left and, while it still has a fair density of sizable trees, it was much more impressive before hurricane Donna blew down hundreds of its large pines.

Wildlife: Sam remembers 16 to 18 active eagle nests in the largest pines of Eagle Island before the logging. He feels eagles don't nest on the island now simply because suitable large nesting trees don't exist.

Sam doesn't feel panthers were ever exterminated in the Corkscrew area. He remembers finding several calf carcasses on Little Corkscrew Island that had been killed by panthers. On at least one occasion, he lost several calves to panthers over two consecutive nights.

White tail deer were relocated from Wisconsin to the Little Corkscrew Island area after the fever tick eradication program in Florida in the 1930's. Sam observed at least one Wisconsin doe successfully reproduce for several years.

Hogs have been numerous in the area as long as Sam can remember.

**Land use:** A very active camp existed for many years on the north end of Little Corkscrew Island, where the picnic table and pitcher pump are now located. Three turkey feeders near this camp distributed up to 150 pounds of corn a week and flocks of 50-60 turkeys could be easily observed. Domestic bronze turkeys were released to maintain the population.

An oil pad and well were installed in the extreme northeast corner of the present sanctuary in 1936 or 1937. The unsuccessful well was abandoned and left open as a flowing artesian well for many months, but it was eventually plugged with concrete.

Sam farmed 12 acres in northwestern Little Corkscrew Island in the early 1960's, just east of the newly-built camp. He grew squash for one season only.

The Capelles excavated a small number of cabbage palms from northwestern Little Corkscrew for landscapers.

**Water levels:** Sam thinks that water in the Corkscrew region has been affected by drainage. He feels that dry seasons generally start earlier, last longer, and get drier than they used to. But he also acknowledges the extreme variability of South Florida wet and dry seasons. Even before any major drainage structures were built in the area, he walked dry shod across the lettuce lakes now transected by our boardwalk. He has also boated across Little Corkscrew Island during unusually high water.

Interestingly, Sam never observed the invasion of herbaceous plants into the lettuce lakes that we are now seeing after dry downs. Even after extreme dry times, the lettuce cover returned upon reflooding of the lakes.