

# *Okefenokee*

## A N A T I O N A L W I L D L I F E R E F U G E

THE OKEFENOKEE NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE is famed as one of the most primitive swamps in America. It is located in southeastern Georgia along the Florida boundary. East-west, Okefenokee extends about 25 miles, north-south, 40 miles. The total area, embracing nearly 700 square miles, is largely shallow water covered with aquatic blooms, and bordered by moss-bearded trees. The combination produces scenic effects of haunting, mysterious beauty.

There is a report that Ferdinand De Soto looked upon this land of "trembling earth" as early as 1539, although Okefenokee was still a blank space on the map when France laid claim to the region two centuries later. In 1750 the Seminole Indians were known to have villages on what are now Mitchell's, Billy's, and Floyd's Islands. Friendly at first, the Indians finally turned against the encroaching white settlers, using the vast, dark swamp as a hiding place between raids and massacres. This bloody era came to an end in 1838 when General Floyd reported to the War Department that he had marched through the swamp and had broken up the hide-outs of the marauding natives.

Okefenokee at that time was a dense forest rising above an understory of tangled vines and

brush, interspersed with mirror-like lakes and grassy marshes. The hammering of the now all-but-extinct ivory-billed woodpecker resounded among the dead cypress tops. Alligators roared from the dark-brown waters. Egrets and ibises flapped and soared. Bears, deer, and wildcats were abundant. The swamp was fairly alive with wildlife of many varieties. It was a paradise for hunters and trappers.

Okefenokee's natural beauty was first threatened in 1889 when attempts were made to drain the swamp with a view to facilitating timber removal and providing farm lands. But a costly canal—"Jackson's Folly"—dug 14 miles into Okefenokee from Camp Cornelia on its eastern edge resulted in more water flowing into the swamp instead of out. The project was abandoned. Loggers went ahead with other plans. Tram roads were built on piling driven through the soft muck into firm sand and soon the spurs of a narrow-gage railroad penetrated deep into the wild mystery of the swamp. The ring of loggers' axes, the crashing and splashing of falling trees, the tooting of cabbage-head locomotives, drove the wildlife from one timber stand to another. Millions of board feet of cypress, pine, red bay, and gum came out of Okefenokee dur-