



Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge

WRITTEN BY the late Mr. Liston Elkins

Following the creation of the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge, assuring preservation of the redoubtable Okefenokee, the next most significant and important development in the Swamp's dramatic history was the organization of the Okefenokee Association, Inc. in 1945, and the development of Okefenokee Swamp Park on Cowhouse Island, near Waycross.

In connection with a land utilization project, launched during pre-World War II days of the Works Project Administration, the Soil Conservation Service, United States Department of Agriculture, agreed to locate a park on Cowhouse Island, as part of a 40,000 acre sub-marginal land development program. With J. A. Pearson as director, the development included the construction of a causeway from the mainland, connecting historic Cowhouse Island with U. S. Route 1, at a point seven miles south of Waycross; and the building of boardwalks which penetrated into the swampland to a 75-foot observation tower, as well as other facilities, and a minimum amount of landscaping.

The entire Soil Conservation Project later was leased by the U. S. Department of Agriculture to the State of Georgia, to be used for a multiple-purpose program of wildlife protection and propagation, forestry, and recreation.

In 1945, the Tourist Bureau of the Waycross and Ware County Chamber of Commerce, with Dr. W. C. Hafford, as chairman, organized a civic, non-profit corporation which was chartered under the laws of Georgia as the Okefenokee Association, Inc., its purpose being to carry forward the Okefenokee Swamp Park development, with a goal of making the park one of the most appealing tourist attractions in America.

With the full support and encouragement of Governor Ellis Arnall, the association secured from the state a sub-lease on a 1200-acre tract which included the Okefenokee Swamp Park nucleus on Cowhouse Island. This transaction was

approved by the U. S. Department of Agriculture.

With Dr. Hafford as president, the association raised funds from interested Waycross citizens to construct the necessary park facilities, and the State paved the entrance highway which was designated by resolution of the Georgia legislature as the Vereen Bell Memorial Highway, in honor of the author of "Swamp Water", who gave his life in World War II while serving as a naval officer in the Pacific.

Okefenokee Swamp Park was formally opened on October 8, 1946, with approximately a quarter of a million dollars invested in the most unique community project on record.

The wonders of the Okefenokee were thus placed in review for the enjoyment of the public. The hitherto impenetrable "Land of the Trembling Earth" was made accessible to visitors, and a new panorama of scenic beauty was unfolded for those who delight in nature's master creations.