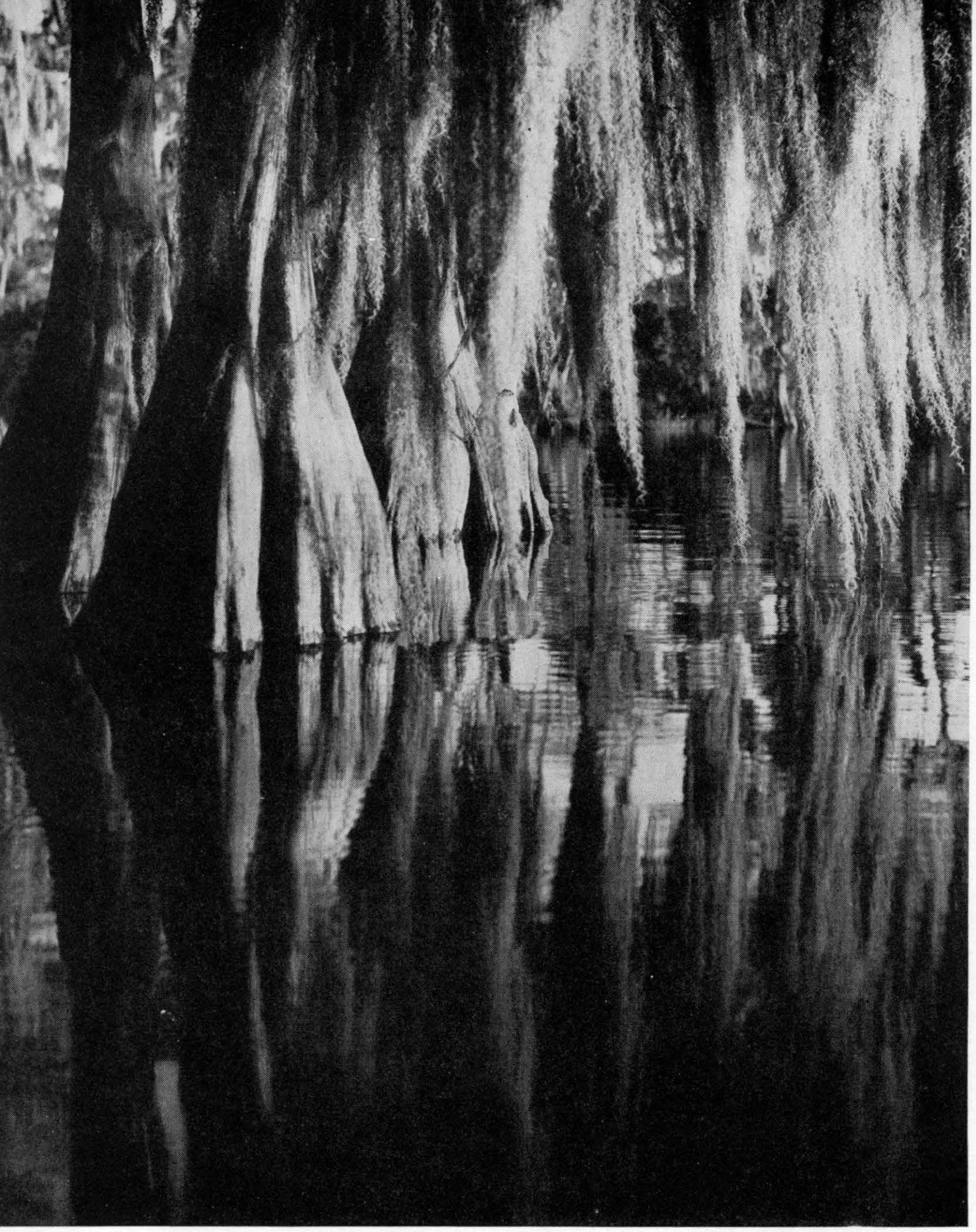


Devereux Butcher

Moss-hung, mystic beauty in the heart of the cypress swamp

THE MAGIC OF THE CYPRESS SWAMP

By R. K. WINTERS

SINCE early colonial days, the cypress swamps of the Southland have captured the imagination of men. The writings of explorers and early travelers are filled with expressions of awe and admiration inspired by the venerable trees "kneed" and buttressed in the black water, their limbs adangle with grayish waving moss. Audubon, who watched the small water animals as they paddled silently around the knees of the tall gray-green cypresses hung with tangled nets of Spanish moss, thought these knees looked like great sugar-loaves thrust up through the dark waters.

More than 150 years ago, William Bartram wrote in his diary of the cypress: "Its majestic stature is surprising; and on approaching it, we are struck with a kind of awe, at beholding the stateliness of the trunk, lifting its cumbrous top toward the skies. . . . . From this place [the swelled buttress], the tree, as it were, takes another beginning, forming a grand straight column eighty or ninety feet high, when it divides every way around into an extensive flat horizontal top, like an umbrella, where eagles have their secure nests, and cranes and storks their temporary resting-places; and what adds to the magnificence of their appearance is the streamers of long moss that hang from the lofty limbs and float in the winds."

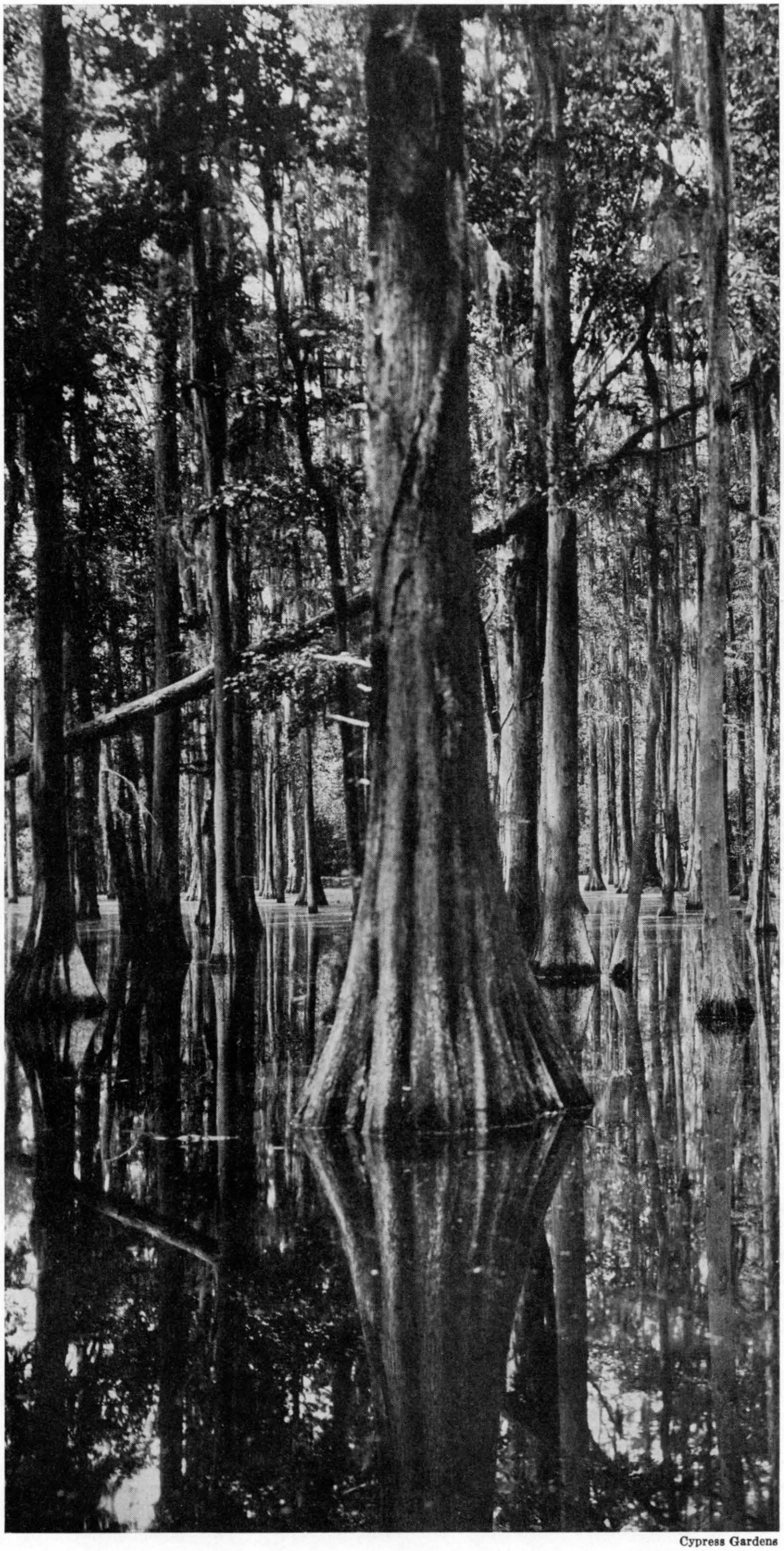
William Darby, a traveler of the early 19th Century, writes of a cypress swamp: "To have an idea of the dead silence, the awful lonesomeness, and dreary aspect of this region, it is necessary to visit the spot. Animated nature is banished; scarce a bird flits to enliven the scenery. Natural beauty is not wanting, the varied windings and intricate bendings of the lakes, relieve the sameness, whilst the rich green of the luxuriant growth of forest trees, the long line of woods melting into the distant sky, the multifarious tints of the willow, cotton, and other fluviatic trees, rendered venerable by the long train of waving moss amuse the fancy. The imagination fleets back toward the birth of nature, when a new creation started from the deep, with all the freshness of mundane youth."

To these travelers and to all who behold the sombre vistas of a cypress swamp, there is an allure, a tickling of the fancy, a stimulus to the imagination. Even the modern scene, in which the "cajun" fisherman of the Louisiana swamps in his pirogue hollowed from a cypress tree, paddle poised and dripping, glides silently

and smoothly among the sombre shadows, equally provokes the fancy. From its home in an old burned-out log, the cotton-mouth moccasin swims in a zig-zag fashion, head a few inches out of the water and tongue flicking. Above, the woodpecker drums imperiously on his hollow tree. Paddling leisurely along in a ripple-washed pirouge through the peace and tranquillity of such a scene is an experience long to be remembered. One seems to float back through the centuries to prehistoric times,—when even the sight of a dinosaur would scarcely be surprising.

Many trees now present in the southern swamps were old when Columbus discovered America. Some authorities even maintain that the Mexican cypress, a near relative of our southern species, boasts the oldest known living tree. The great cypress in the village of Santa Maria del Tule, in southern Mexico, has a diameter above the swollen and buttressed base of more than forty-one feet and an estimated age of four thousand years. In the United States, cypress sometimes reaches a diameter of fourteen feet and an estimated age of three thousand years or more.

In addition to being long-lived as individuals, the cypress family has an ancient lineage that goes far back into geologic times. In the days when primitive mammals were replacing the last dinosaurs, authorities tell us the cypress line was already established in many parts of the northern hemisphere. The leafy twigs, cone scales, and seeds that are frequently found in the rocks formed during this and later periods, record that members of the cypress family once lived in nearly all parts of North America, Europe, and northern Asia. In fact, this family was one of the important contributors to the swamp deposits that formed the brown coal so extensively utilized in Europe.



Cypress Gardens

Winter rains fill the swamps and mirror the lights and shadows

Once widely distributed, the cypress family is now fairly localized in its distribution. In our country it is practically confined to the Coastal Plain along the Atlantic Ocean and Gulf of Mexico and to the alluvial bottom lands of the Mississippi River as far north as southern Illinois. Even now the bald cypress—the chief American representative—appears to be perceptibly retreating southward from the northern limit of its range in southern Delaware and Maryland. Traces of trees are found there where live trees no longer exist, although they appear to thrive where planted.

Not only does the growing cypress capture the imagination, but almost every association with the tree is unusual. It is one of the few trees likely to have a swollen and buttressed base. Many have asked, "What causes the cypress to develop this buttressed trunk?" Although the exact cause is not known definitely, recent studies indicate that the swelling is confined to that portion of the trunk that is exposed to periodic wetting. The portions of the stem wet most frequently by lapping water swell the most. This was demonstrated in Reelfoot Lake, which was formed in 1811-12 when a considerable area of land in northwestern Tennessee sank several feet as the result of an earthquake and was promptly filled with water by the Mississippi River. The cypress trees in the more deeply inundated areas died, while the others over a period of more than a hundred years developed buttresses in the zone where the annually rising and falling water moistened the upper trunk. In 1929, phenomenally low water uncovered the cypress trunks below the normal water level, and where the trunks had for more than one hundred years been constantly wet in the absence of air, they were found to be unbuttressed and of normal size.

The knees, those conically uprising extensions of the roots that appear for no apparent or well-explained reason, are found on no other native tree species. John Bartram, writing in the late 18th Century, reports that the large knees, which are nearly always hollow, "serve very well for bee-hives." Nowadays, the cut and inverted hollow knees are more likely to be used as attractive plant baskets for rustic porches.

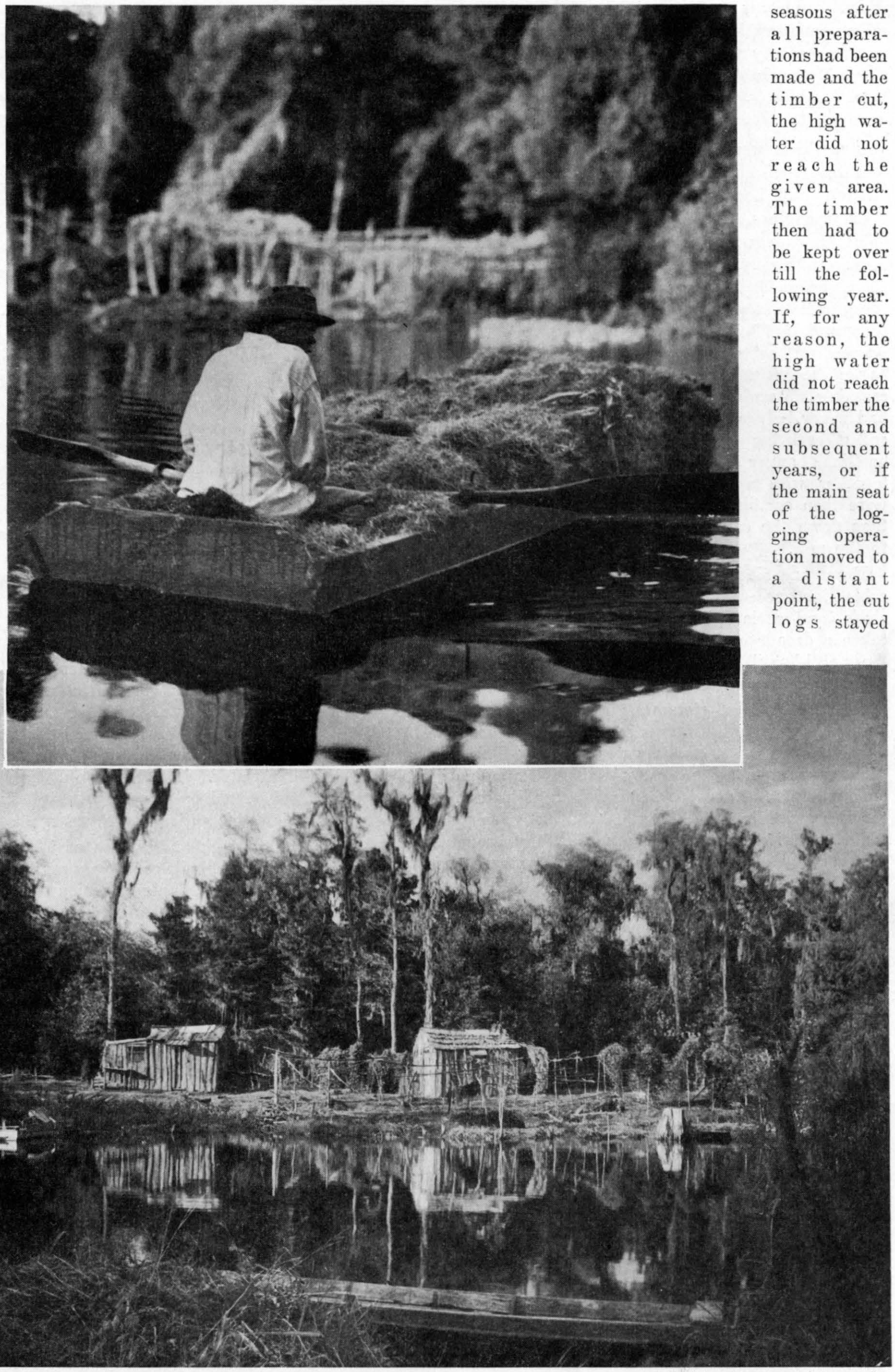
The baffling problem of logging the cypress swamps has led to many an ingenious device. From earliest Colonial times till about 1890 it was common practice to float cypress logs to the sawmill. To guarantee that the logs would be light enough to float, the standing trees were girdled about a year before felling. Thus the trees died standing, while the leaves, drawing moisture from the trunk, lightened its weight. Timber fallers have employed various means to fell the heavily buttressed trunks. In practically all cases the cut was made above the buttress. In dry weather the fallers cut two notches four to seven feet above ground and on opposite sides of the trunk. Into each of these they inserted a short "spring board" on which they stood while felling the tree. Working in deep swamps in wet weather they sometimes worked from pirogues, one pirogue to each faller. Technique depended upon local conditions and the preference of the individuals. Some paddled their pirogues to the tree to be felled, where each sank an ax into the trunk at a point convenient to serve as a foothold during the cutting. Then standing with one foot on the axes and the other in the pirogues they made the undercut and felled

Forest Service

Into the woods of stunted moss-hung cypress floats a carpet of water hyacinth

the tree, moving the ax foothold when necessary for efficient working. As the tree toppled, each faller, observing the direction of the fall, gave his pirogue a push to safety before the trunk landed with a splash in the water.

In the early days of primitive logging, the felling was usually done in the dry months of late summer and early fall. Paths were cleared through the woods to the nearest natural waterway, and in periods of high water these paths became the "float roads" or forest canals down which the logs were floated. In some seasons after all preparations had been made and the timber cut, the high water did not reach the given area. The timber then had to be kept over till the following year. If, for any reason, the high water did not reach the timber the second and subsequent years, or if the main seat of the logging operation moved to a distant point, the cut logs stayed on the ground, where they were known locally as "choctaws." Because of the resistance of cypress heartwood to decay these "choctaws" remained sound for many



Louisiana Department of Conservation

The moss picker approaches his simple home by the black bayou waters. Note the fences, especially prepared for curing the moss

years. In fact, as much as one-fifth of the cut of some sawmills now operating is from "choctaws" left in the woods fifty to seventy years ago and only recently made economically available through changes in logging conditions.

For with the coming of machine-logging methods during the last fifty years, the old system was changed and new methods were put into operation. Under certain conditions railroads and power skidders were used; in others, "pull boats," i.e., large barges carrying steam donkey engines, were floated into the swamp forest. Where natural waterways did not suffice, artificial channels were dug by steam shovels also mounted on barges. Thus equipped, the steam monsters cut their way into every nook and cranny of the forest. At strategic points the "pull boat" anchored itself with cables to trees or stumps, put out one to four thousand feet of cable, and began dragging in the logs with such a snorting and crashing of underbrush as the sombre cypress swamp had never before experienced. At the "pull boat," one end of each log was bored through with a two and one-half-inch auger and eight to ten logs were bound together with a chain, making a crib. Several cribs were then combined in tandem fashion and towed with tugs down the canal to the main waterway and thence to the mill.

From one sitting the "pull boat" would put out its cable line successively in all directions like radii of a circle, and aerial photographs of logged swamp areas taken a decade or more after logging still show plainly the "pull-boat" sittings, each with its radiating drag paths extending in all directions.

One of the most glamorous features of some of the present-day cypress swamps is the dense cover of water hyacinths over most of the water surface. This floating plant during spring and early summer bears showy lavender flower clusters that bring a dash of brilliance into the otherwise austere picture. Curiously enough this plant, a native of Brazil, was accidentally brought into this country and set free in southern waters, where it has multiplied and extended its range until, in some localities, it is a menace to inland-waterway navigation. Boat propellers become entangled in the floating vegetation, and water progress is as effectively stopped as if the boat were caught in the midst of the famed Sargasso Sea. Many devices have been used to free the waterways of these obstructions, ranging from spreading plant poisons on the water to grinding the plants up in great choppers. These devices are all to no avail, however, because the beautiful transgressor seems to multiply faster than the ingenuity of man can destroy it.

Although the field crews of the Forest Survey upon more than one occasion, when estimating the stand of timber in the Grand Lake Swamp in southern Louisiana, may have cursed the pesky weed right soundly, on many another occasion they were thankful for its presence. These woodsmen, who lived on a house-boat and were taken to and from work in boats, floundered steadily through mud and water along a compass line mile after soggy mile. When they came upon an icy bayou that had to be crossed, they were fortunate to find it choked with water hyacinths, for they knew that in place of a shivery bath they could take a five-foot stick in each hand, lay it flat upon the plants and on all fours crawl safely across the deep water on a carpet of hyacinths.

The hyacinth and the tupelo gum, common associates of cypress in southern swamplands, sometimes give rise to a novel swamp industry. Honey bees working on the flowers of these two species produce honey of a very fine quality. In the extensive Grand Lake Swamp, one enterprising bee keeper has several hundred hives distributed in groups of twenty or more and mounted on platforms along the bayous well above the reach of high water. Living on a houseboat, he periodically makes the rounds of his hives in a motor boat which during the blooming season gradually fills with honey.

Spanish moss, another of the by-products of the swamp, produces rest for man's body, if not for his soul. Tufts of this weirdly waving moss, for many years called "Spanish beard" because of its resemblance to the beards of the Spanish explorers, blow from the trees in times of storm. These, along with other readily accessible bunches, are gathered by solitary "moss pickers" who flounder through the swamp, load their gleanings into flat-bottomed boats, and in the evening twilight row slowly and silently homeward with the pile of hard-earned moss beside them. Here the moss is cured in preparation for the market. The fresh moss is first piled in compact piles, where the soft, grey outer coating is partially decomposed. Then it is hung on fences, where subsequent rains sluff away this outer covering and leave a firm, wiry, black inner fibre, which after cleaning in a moss gin is widely used as a cheap filler of mattresses and stuffed furniture.

The wood of the ancient cypress, mellowed in the deep southern swamps, has also through the years played a varied and important role in the lives of men. From the time that, as a newborn babe he was tenderly laid in the home-made cypress cradle until, when his course was run, he was again tenderly laid in the hastily constructed cypress coffin, the early settler depended upon the wood of this tree for many of the necessities of life. From it he fashioned his hewn pirogue and the elevated wooden cistern from which he drew his drinking water. The hand-split cypress shingles of a roof supported by hewn cypress beams sheltered him. Oftentimes his entire house was made with cypress.

These were the necessities of life on which his body thrived, but the pioneer also wrought objects of beauty created first in his imagination on which thrived his soul. Many of these ornaments were made from the soft-textured, easily carved wood of the veterans of the deep cypress swamps. Almost always the austerely simple or the ornately carved woodwork in the homes of wealth were of cypress.

In my imagination I like to picture a simple, dignified Louisiana plantation home facing a garden, and across the field, the black waters of a cypress slough. On the veranda there sits in the slanting rays of the late summer sun the aged grandfather, gazing across the garden at the cypress trees, bearded and venerable like himself. As the gently moving festoons of Spanish moss cast distorted shadows on the quiet, black waters below, his mind turns to the alternately turbulent and peaceful past—a long, long past when there was no man and the earth was young—to the time when huge dinosaurs in place of bull-frogs thrashed and muddied the water beneath the cypress trees. With his mind's eye he also sees the majestic cypress giants coming down through the centuries, while their early and ephemeral plant and animal associates have passed one by one from the scene. Today, he sees the cypress still standing, still enduring, and still venerable. And in his fancy he turns the wheel of time ahead to future ages and finds the cypress race still vigorous on the earth, perhaps long after the last of the family of men have passed from off its face. Thus the sun sets and the twilight deepens, only to intensify the magic and the mystery of the cypress swamp.