

Congaree Swamp Stories

Featured Speaker Transcript

Dr. Robert Taylor - Adventures in Hunting and Dressing Wild Game, Including Lessons on How to Butcher a Hog and Fillet a Fish, as well as Red Versus Black River Swamps, Swamp Guts, and Tree Farming

Dr. Robert Taylor: Yeah, I've been a - I was a medical doctor for forty years, and I retired, and I've been doing some tree farming - enjoy it very much. I just like getting out of doors - very refreshing. And it's something I highly recommend is just walking through these woods. You just - There's no stress. As you grow up and get in the busy working world, you'll find out you do have stress, and most of the stress occurs as people problems - people situations. But in this river swamp, you don't have people down here. Now, of course you've got to watch out for the wild hogs, and the snakes, things like that, but there's no problem getting used to that.

But I started going to these river swamps with my father many years ago. Now this was way back in the early '40's, and I remember I would bring my BB gun, and one time we were hunting in the upper part of the swamp, and I was dragging my BB gun by the barrel, and my father said "Son, c'mon its getting late." He said "If we don't get out of here before dark, got to get to this road with me and walk to the truck, because I'm not sure where we are now." And he said - and so I turned around to him and I said "Hot dog, daddy! I won't have to take a bath." But we did get out in time to the road, and so we had no problem finding the truck.

Then another time, my son was eight years old, and he wanted to shoot a hog so bad. He had a .4-.10 shotgun and he had a slug - a shell with a slug in it. And that would stop a hog, if you put that slug in the right spot. And we'd been hunting that afternoon for a couple of hours. Hadn't seen any hogs, heard any or anything. And we were walking back to the truck, and lo and behold, off to my right, I heard something out there in the leaves, and looked and there was a hog, a big hog and a shoat about 90 pounds, (unintelligible) round. I said "Son, come here now." I said "Shoot that big hog." I said "now try to shoot him right in the head. Let's ease up a little closer." So we got a little closer, he fired, the hog dropped, the shoat took off running away from us. I had some buckshot and I shot three times, and didn't hit him. And I think it's because (unintelligible). The little shoat turned and ran right towards us. And I slapped a number six shot in the chamber of my shotgun, and dropped him right at my feet. Hit him in the neck, just like a slug hit him before the shot had a chance to separate. But anyway, I said "Son, I told you to shoot the hog in the head." He said "Well, Daddy, he kept moving his head. He wouldn't hold it still, so anyway, I got mine on the first shot though Daddy." So I couldn't say anything. He hit him in the spine, just paralyzed him, and he couldn't move so - he couldn't walk at least, he could shake his legs a little bit, but he died, and so he said "Daddy, do I get my .20 gauge?" I said "Well, we'll see about that." So I got him a .20 gauge pump, which I figured was a safe gun. I like shooting automatic shotguns, but anyway...

Then we went on a dove shoot a couple of years later, and how do you try to tell someone who's never shot a dove how to hit a dove. Very difficult hitting flying, it's tricky flying. But anyway, I said "Son, it's just like you have a water hose, and you try to squirt your friend, and you've got to aim that hose in front of him while he's running. Just take that gun, come up behind

the dove, keep swinging past him, and then shoot." We ended up killing five doves that afternoon, which amazed me.

But these swamps have been here for eons of time. And this is what I call a red river swamp. A red river swamp originates in the mountains of North Carolina, and the water flows when they have heavy rains up there - flows downhill, and this is what causes swamps to flood, and brings the red clay from the upper part of the state with it, and it deposits a millimeter or two of topsoil every time it floods. And we would have floods, I know back in the early '70's we checked in at having about seven, eight floods a year, and now I think it's maybe up to about ten floods. One year, I can remember I stopped counting at 18 floods. Some years, we don't even have a flood, which is very unusual. Consequently, with all the topsoil deposited at the swamp, its very rich soil. The Congaree - all the soil in South Carolina has been typed as to its fertility. The Congaree soil is the richest soil east of the Mississippi River. That's why we have these huge trees. Things grow fast. They just have all the nutrients that they want, and it's just a fantastic area for vegetation to grow in here. And when the settlers came over from the European area, they settled up and down the coast of South Carolina, and they explored those areas, and of course they found the Santee River. The Santee River goes into the Atlantic Ocean between Charleston and Georgetown around a place called McLellanville. And now this was going back you know, into the 1600's, and so they would pole these boats up these rivers, because they didn't have highways around Hopkins and Lower Richland and so forth, and this is how they explored. And they found this rich soil, and they knew it would grow so, this is where they would clear the land and plant crops. They brought oxen in, and that used - and plowed with oxen, and people would live up in the swamps, planting the crops. Then they would take the results of the crops back down the river to the Charleston area, or Georgetown or wherever they were going. And this is how they survived. And along came - let's see what, in the 1700's, they had began moving inland. They had some roads then, and these swamps are interlaced with what we called guts, that's kind of deep ditches, what you call a canal, or what we call a overflow when the river floods water comes - brings the water in the swamp, and then as the flood recedes, it drains the water back out. And they would dig ditches from these guts, what came in close hillside. Straight hillside. These ditches are straight as an arrow. You could just shoot a rifle down them, so straight. Anywhere about five feet wide and probably about four, five feet deep. And this is how they would travel - by water. Alright in the 1700's they kind of gave up farming because they had to continue with the floods and so forth, and they divided this land up into 40-acre tracks and a mule and gave it to people living up and down the hillside.

Alright, we have the red river swamps which originate in the mountains, and water flows towards the ocean, and the black river swamps which originate in what we call the Piedmont, which is kind of a stretch of sandy area through South Carolina, about midway between the coast and the mountains. And so we have the heavy rains in the Piedmont area, the water flows towards the ocean, but it's what we call black rivers. A black river is like the Edisto, the Little Pee Dee, the Salkehatchie, goes on and on, the Cumbahee. And this land - it's not rich and fertile like this is - I call it kind of crawfish land - its boggy wa - feels kind of boggy, real soft-like. And of course you have trees growing there - nice trees, but not anything like these hardwoods and pines in the swamp. These large pines apparently were brought in - the seeds were brought in, the wind blew 'em in or maybe the floods washed 'em in and they've got to have bare ground and sunlight to regenerate, and they've been growing in here - I remember back in the early '70's, when they started cutting smaller areas of the swamp, you count the rings on some of these pine trees, they were around 165 years old at that time. Of course, they're a lot older now. There's one pine tree in here by Weston Lake that takes three adults to reach their arms out like this to reach around that tree. Huge tree. Just think of the boards you could get out of that tree, you could build a couple of houses with it possibly.

One time, I brought my son down here, we were going squirrel hunting and came down here one morning before daylight, killed some squirrels and came back to the truck and I said "Well, son, let's cook us something to eat. He looked at me kind of funny like "What do you mean cook something? You don't have an electric stove on that truck." I gathered up some small, dry wood, then some bigger wood, struck a match, got a fire going, got the frying pan out, put some bacon, cooked the bacon, took the bacon out, and then I fried a couple of eggs, so I made him a bacon and egg sandwich. He took two bites, looked up, and he says "Daddy, why don't mama's bacon and egg sandwich taste this good?" That just said it all. We were way back in the woods, you know, and it just - You couldn't hear anything related to civilization but maybe an airplane fly over. It was just so nice - great.

But the purpose of these river swamps I'd say back in the what - 17 - late 1700's, 1800's, 1900's, so forth, was grazing rights. A lot of the timber companies owned the swamps. Santee-Cypress Timber Company is one - had headquarters in Chicago, and they harvest cypress trees primarily. And it's what they would do - they would cut a ring around a cypress tree. Cypress trees tend to grow in the moist areas, around these guts, these oxbow lakes. You know what an oxbow lake is? The river is constantly changing course. Over eons of time, it goes from one hillside to the other. And has - their crooked - have these curves in it. And an oxbow lake is where the river changed course and cut through some land - the shorter section of the course over there and isolated this stretch of river, and that - all of the rivers have these curves in them like an oxbow does. And that's how they got named oxbow lakes. They're good fishing lakes, ducks like to use these lakes, and so this is what - how these lakes got formed - Like Weston Lake is an oxbow lake. Have ya'll - have any of ya'll ever been to Weston Lake?

Campers: Yeah. I did.

Dr. Robert Taylor: Alright, yeah. Of course, a nice, pretty lake now, and stays like it is - will be that way probably for centuries. But it doesn't have water flowing through it except for when we have some floods. But the waters come in pretty fast - they'll recede pretty fast too. That's one nice thing about this draining system in the swamps that the Lord provided when He performed things.

And the fishing is very good - especially this creek. I've caught some bass in the creek, weighed seven or eight pounds. We've had striped bass, rock fish, come up the creek certain times, and red breast in there, and when red take those small spinner bait, and red breast hits it, you know it's a red breast because he hits it pretty hard and he's hooked solid, and he'll give you a pretty good little fight than most of those old regular brim will. And the cottonmouth moccasins. Used to be beacoups of cottonmouth moccasins - they're harmless water snakes. But we don't see as many of those now as we used to see. And bullfrogs. Don't see many bullfrogs in the river swamp like we used to. And I'm just wondering maybe if chemicals in the environment. There are a lot of chemicals out there from - spray it on crops, spray it on vegetation. And then also, you know, they have these crop dust airplanes that will spray a soybean field to defoliate it so they can go in there and harvest it without a lot of trash in the seeds. And they fly over fields, spray this herbicide out and winds can come along and - here it comes, pick up these clouds, these chemicals and take 'em, just deposit them around the world, different places - they put 'em your backyard, my backyard, Tim Buk Tu, different places. I think a lot of this has built up and has affected some of the lower forms of life and affects their reproductive system where they don't reproduce like they used to.

But walking through these swamps, you'll notice how a lot of the trees look alike, and at night time, I mean you - all of the trees look alike. You don't recognize anything, so to speak. And so, a lot of the times we'd be in the swamp sometimes, and dark would catch us say - I wouldn't

say we were lost we'd say "Well, we don't know where we are." And you could keep walking - just kind of use your head. And you can follow some stars, or if the sun's out you can follow the sun. If you have a compass, that's great, but a lot of times I just wouldn't carry a compass. And you can tell when the river floods, the brush, the trash, kind of flows downstream, and that will wash against the trees, and that give you an idea about some direction too. And of course, you have to know like where the creek is - the river is, and there are a few deep guts in here, there's one called Deep Jackson Gut - that's very deep. And you can recognize these when you come across them at night even. But it's been a great enjoyment for me. When I was practicing medicine, around the hospital, the nurses would say "Dr. Taylor, why are you always talking about going down to the river swamps?" I'd say, "Well, you get down there and it's so peaceful and quiet, you just totally unwind and relax." It's hard to realize this unless you spend time in here. And I mean, you just forget about everything with the city - all the stress that you've had that day, the past week. And you just totally unwind and relax. It's very entertaining. Sometimes you're just walking through the swamp, identifying different trees, seeing where the hogs have been rooting, what they're feeding on, what the deer are feeding on, and identifying different birds you see. And of course, birds make several different sounds, and the reason for these - they know why they make these sounds - (airplane interrupts) - There goes civilization over the swamp now, some jet planes flying over. All these sounds have a purpose. And it's interesting if you watch wildlife long enough, you can know what these sounds are - some of them are kind of colloquial sounds, gathering sounds, where they want to gather into groups. Others are territorial sounds. Animals are very territorial at certain times. They don't want any of neighbors invading on them - (airplane interrupts) That sound will go away in a minute. Those are jets probably from Shaw Air Force Base. They're doing some fancy maneuvers now. At one time, I know the park, when it was a monument years ago - talking about not having airplanes fly over this area, just like, a lot of times, you know airplanes fly over the hospital and things like this, but it'd be nice, of course, if they could avoid this because it's not a natural sound that you would expect to hear in the woods. Anybody have any questions at this stage? Yes?

Camper: Was it hard doing what you did?

Dr. Robert Taylor: What?

Camper: Hunting your food and stuff, and raising a farm and stuff...

Dr. Robert Taylor: Raising a farm? Well, these hardwood trees in this river swamp - you cut them and you don't re-plant, because the Lord replants those with the floods. Ash seed can lie dormant for twenty-five, or thirty years and regenerate, but they've got to have bare ground and sunlight. You clear off some woods in here, get sunlight, bare ground, you're gone have pokeberry seeds to come up, because those pokeberry seeds are washed in here. The birds drop 'em. You got blackberry vines to come up. The same with blackberries. And then you get your regeneration of your normal seeds - hardwood seeds, that are natural to this area. It's just amazing how nature works, and it's just - you know, you just learn so much by observing it. Also, they tried - they've replanted some pines in these river swamps. Pines don't normally grow in the swamps, but they can if they have a chance to, and they've got these pines now - they've cloned these pines. By that, I mean they've improved the genetics of the pine seedlings. And they have two types of trees. You can get bare root trees just to plant, little small trees. The roots just dangle out. It takes them a while to kind of get organized and start growing. Then you have containerized trees, where they take the seed, put them in a container, and they have nurseries where these are grown. You buy the containerized trees - they come in a kind of like a foam-like box with little

holes in it. You pull these containerized seedlings out, and the roots are all bound together. You plant those, and they get a jumpstart on growing, because the roots and everything's bound together. Everything is organized and moves well. But I mean, it's just unreal, how fast they can grow a pine tree now, but it helps out in getting plenty of trees to replant. And actually, there are probably more trees maybe even planted now in South Carolina than when the settlers came over here. So, and the timber companies are very good at supplying seedlings to the private timber land owners to plant. And of course, the timber growers - the private land growers - they have to sell to the timber companies or else they can't do anything with these trees if they cut 'em down and so forth. And certain times of the year, you know, the market fluctuates just like other things. Right now, it's kind of a downturn because a lot of this lumber is cut and used for building houses. Of course, the housing market is very flat right now due to the economy, but it will change. We go through swings like this from time to time. Yes?

Camper: During your free time from tree farming, did you ever went back out hunting or canoeing or fishing or something?

Dr. Robert Taylor: oh yes. Yes, I enjoy hunting and fishing. I've learned a lot about fishing. People I know - a lot of my friends, if they catch a fish, they just throw it back, because they don't want to go through the trouble of dressing. It's no trouble dressing a fish. My - when my children were young, my wife didn't want a big fish - was scared she they were going to get a bone. Well, I filleted the fish. And filleting the fish, is you just take fillet of meat off and there's no bones. And I had a good, sharp knife that I thought was excellent to know, then I heard about an electric knife to fillet fish. And several years later, I said I would try an electric knife. This must have been about twenty-five years ago. I don't know where my fillet knives - they're gone, long gone. I've worn out about a half a dozen electric knives. You just push the fish down on some newspaper, right in the kitchen, on the countertop. Bring that knife blade down back behind the gills, to the backbone, but not through it, then turn the blade - or parallel to the backbone to the tail, but not through it. Flip that section over. Put the blade between the skin and the fillet and just guide it. The knife's just does all the work - you just guide it. And then take the fillet and put it in the sink and cut the rib cage bones out, and you've got a nice piece of meat - no bones. And we can broil it, you can fry it, you can fix it up in a stew - do anything you want to. And then dressing the game too, there's all kinds of ways you can dress the game. And, now first there's venison - deer. Has no cholesterol. It's the only red meat they recommend for heart patients. How about that? The wild hogs exercise all the time. They don't have fat through the meat, it's under the hide to kind of keep warm in the winter time. And it's what I did one winter - let's see I was off taking some medical training, came back in June of 1967 and I wanted to come down here and hunt a hog, so that fall, I came down one October morning, hunted for about an hour and a half, found this pack of hogs, shot this hog, weighed about 300 pounds, and I couldn't butcher the hog. So I opened the hog up, took the abdominal and chest organs out, then I could drag it maybe five or ten feet, so I went out, got several men to come in and help me drag it out, put it in the back of my truck. I got home at about eleven o'clock, hung the hog up, cut the hide off, cut the four quarters off - the loins, so forth, everything the way your supposed to, by the time I got it cut up, and put in a refrigerator I have in the garage to kind of chill it out until I can process the meat, it was five o'clock. I said "Hell, I work hard all week, and I wanted to have some time off and go hunting and enjoy it, you know, and now it's work, work, work. I said "Well, it's got to be a better way.." So this is what I started doing, was just cutting the four quarters off, put each quarter in a plastic bag. Take those plastic bags, put 'em in a 100-pound crocus sack, and then put the animal, the hog or the deer on their belly, cut the animal down the hide down their back, take the loin off the backbone, put that in a plastic bag, put that in a crocus sack, and take it home, and then drop down the tailgate of my

truck, cut the hides off the four quarters, cut the feet off, and wrap it up, put it in the refrigerator in one of the drawers to chill out until I can process it. And gosh, I can fillet three two-pound bass in one minute - that's how fast it is. And then the hogs, I can take a hog and have it four quarters off the loin in twenty minutes. Now you just kind of recycle the rest of the animal, let the possums and the buzzards and the animals and so forth have at it. And, you know it's just gosh, it's so good it's just unreal, unreal. We - the other night, we had out of the freezer - had some pork cubed steak cooked country style, with gravy and some grits - Man, it was just - you just couldn't buy it at any grocery store and have it taste that good, I believe. It was amazing. And so, I tell you, you can really - you get a lot of meat hunting these river swamps - you just - The hog population has just expanded. Its just unreal, unreal how it's expanded. There was a big hog, grown over on Bluff Road here, that probably weighed about 300, 400 pounds or something, that somebody was telling me here about six weeks ago. And they all - they're way off from the swamp - they're just kind of nomads, they just wander and - looking for feed and so forth. Squirrel is very tasty. It has a nice little distinct flavor. It's white meat, and our daughter, when I was taking residency training, let's see, the house rent was one hundred and thirty dollars a month, and I only mad a hundred ninety dollars a month, so we had to shop around - be very cautious about spending a lot of money for food. So we'd eat a lot of game - we'd eat a lot of squirrel, and I've even shot pigeons, where we were in up in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, in the backyard they would come in. I'd shoot some. And had doves, had some quail, and had duck, and then we had the pork and the venison to eat, but we bought very little meat. But it's so good for you - so good. A lot of women have not - don't know how to cook it or something like that - scared to cook something from the swamp like this, because they don't know what to do with it. And then you tell them you got some wild hog, they say "Gosh, you going to eat that wild hog from the swamp?" I said "Well, if you knew what that pork had been fed in the grocery store, all the antibiotics, the hormones, and the insecticides, and the feed that's in that animal, you'll be eating beside the road in swamp." I said "The Lord's fed my hogs." Hogs are actually very clean. There's no fat in the meat, it's just under the hide, and you trim that off when you process the meat and put it up. And very nice. And my daughter would - squirrel had a nice little distinct flavor - we'd take it off the bone for her. She'd like that. So then we started buying a few chickens and cooking them, and she said "Mmm, this doesn't taste good." We'd have to tell her it was squirrel or she wouldn't eat it.

But I tell you there's nothing more relaxing than getting out in the woods and walking and checking things. It just helps you so much in so many ways. Blackberries, my wife would make a blackberry cobbler - Gosh, it's so good, it's unreal. Unfortunately they're gone now, but we enjoyed some back in June and the first of July.

Off camera: Great. Any other questions for Dr. Taylor?

Dr. Robert Taylor: Yes?

Camper: Was it easy for your son to shoot the hog?

Dr. Robert Taylor: Well, he had been shooting some targets, you know, and so forth, and so he didn't have any problem shooting it. He knew what to do. Yes?

Camper: Have you ever camped out here before?

Dr. Robert Taylor: Not in this swamp. I've camped out, but you know, its - my advantage is, we're so close to the swamp, you can drive home and be back down here in twenty, twenty-five minutes. Nothing like sleeping in your own bed. I think it's nice if you camp out if you haven't had much

experience in the woods and so forth, but you been down here all day long, though, you're ready to go home and take a bath and eat supper and go to bed. Yes?

Camper: Did you ever cook a raccoon before?

Dr. Robert Taylor: I've never cooked a raccoon. I've eaten some. And it's very tasty. We've barbequed many coons right here in this swamp, at the old clubhouse that we have back here on the creek. And the people that ate it enjoyed it very much.

And we were talking about marshmallows when ya'll started out. A lot of people trap animals. They trap 'em for the fur, they sell the fur. And then they can sell the meat or else they can eat the meat themselves. And one thing about marshmallows, it's very good coon bait, because coons love marshmallows, but your other animals - it's sweetlike - they don't bother it. So that's what they recommend if you want to catch a coon - put some marshmallows there. Anything else?

Off camera: Alright! Thank you Dr. Taylor!

Dr. Robert Taylor: Well, this is my pleasure. I enjoyed it very much (clapping).

Off camera: Alright! [end]