

Congaree Swamp Stories

Featured Speaker Transcript

Sam Watson - Recollections of Precarious Visits to Kingville and Working Beside the Railroad at the Commissary Store, In Addition to Fond Remembrances of Smells and of Seeing Television for the First Time

Sam Watson: Let me ask you something. What do you notice about my front teeth?

Campers: They crooked? Um, they're green. They're a little bit dark. There's nothing stuck in 'em. No they're not. I know something else. One teeth is covering the other.

Sam Watson: What?

Campers: One teeth is covering the other.

Sam Watson: Yeah, that's right. That's right. You know where that came from?

Camper: Smoking?

Sam Watson: That came from Kingville, South Carolina. When I was two years old, I was running in the front yard - the front of the house, with a Co-Cola bottle in my mouth. And I fell, and that Co-Cola bottle went up into that gum. And it took the germ of a adult tooth - I still had baby teeth at the time, and spilt it in two, and what should have been one tooth came in as two teeth, and so I've been snaggle-toothed ever since, and that's because of Kingville, South Carolina. But I want to tell you, also, about the very first time I went to Kingville. I don't remember this story, but it was told in my family, and retold and retold. You got stories like that in your family? Where there's things that you might not remember - you might be young or you might not be, but you don't remember 'em, but they - people tell 'em and tell 'em and tell 'em and tell 'em again? You got that? Well, what happened to me was that my mama had grown up on a farm out of Holly Hill, and she married my daddy, who grew up on a farm out of Orangeburg, and that's where they lived. And then World War II came along, and Daddy had to go off to war. And he had to teach Mama how to run a farm, and he only had a couple months to do it. He also had to teach her how to drive a car, because she never had driven a car before. So he taught her how to drive a car. And he cut a good many corners in his education of her, but she had a good memory, and she remembered to do what he told her. Daddy went off to World War II. Mama and several of her sisters, and her mother got in the car and drove up to visit Aunt Dotty in Kingville. And Mama was driving. And back in those days, if you were going to visit family, you loaded up the car with food - every kind of food you could think of to bring, and homemade stuff that you've made, even though you were about to visit the best cook in the whole family, Aunt Dotty - and flowers. You went around the yard and cut flowers - and you could bring them, and decorate the house when you got there. So they were driving to Kingville.

with delco or with electricity is to go after it when you're wet - or when you've got a wet cloth in your hand. And I remember she brought a ladder inside the house, and was screwing that bulb out, and my cousin, Boyd, her son, who was about ten years older than I was, saw her "Mama, don't do that! Why are you doing that?" "Well, I was trying to keep from getting shocked." "No, Mama, that's not the way to do that." I do remember Boyd - like I say, he was about ten years older than I was, and he had a sister, Doris, who was a little bit younger than Boyd, and they were both in High School when I started coming to Kingville. And that was in the mid-1940's. And Boyd would work in eth store. And if you go down to Kingville now, which we did over lunch while ya'll were eating that bologna and cheese - we were in Kingville, looking around. There's a dirt road that goes up to the railroad tracks and that's all there is left of Kingville now. It used to be that the Holly Hill Company - the Holly Hill Lumber Company Store was just to the left of road and the house where Aunt Dot lived was just to the left of it. And across that dirt road was a sawmill, and there was another sawmill back in the swamp somewhere. I remember coming through the woods and passing it. But that's all there was in Kingville. That's all there was to it. The store was right next to the house, and the store was owned by the Holly Hill Lumber Company, and my Uncle Eutsy worked for them running the store and the old store had the kind of door that - no lock on it, but you'd go up the back steps up to Uncle Eutsy's office, and then through this door to open it up, and there was a big, heavy, wooden beam across the door. You'd have to lift that beam and get it out of the tracks, put it to one side, and then you could open the doors, and windows, likewise - same thing. And Boyd's job was to help work behind the counter in the store. One side of the store was dry goods - clothes - work clothes, and probably pots and pans, that kind of thing. The other side was canned goods, and produce, and other kinds of food, and at the back of the store was a meat counter with various kinds of meats in it and soft drink machines. What I remember about it was the whole place smelled like fatback and soft drinks. And my job, when I was up there visiting, was to put the soft drinks out, and crate up the empty bottles so that they could be shipped back and refilled again. My cousin Boyd, like I said - he was about ten years older than I was, and he loved to kid me, and he knew he could always get the best of me - always, every time! And I remember one time, it was about ten minutes until twelve, and twelve o'clock, we were going to go over to the house to eat. And Boyd said "Sam," he says "I bet you can't stay for five minutes - I bet you can't stay in that circle." And he drew kind of an imaginary circle around my feet. "Yeah I can." "I bet you can't." I stayed there for about two minutes. And then Boyd looked down and said "Oh, it's time to go to Dot's." I got right out of that circle. He said "I told you you couldn't do it." He could fool me anytime he wanted to do something.

The old house in Kingville. The one thing about the store was that it was run by the Holly Hill Lumber Company, and people who were working for the lumber company would come in and buy bologna and cheese for lunch, or buy clothes they needed or whatever, and all of that was put on accounts, and come Saturday afternoon - that was the one time that I could not go into the office back in the back of the store. You know why? Because Uncle Eutsy was back there settling up with people. And he'd have a ledger with all the things they'd bought that week, and how much the lumber company owed them for working that week, and he'd figure out what they owed to the store, and whatever was left, if anything was after that, that's the money they got to live on for the next week. So I could never go into that store - or into the back of the store on Saturday afternoons. Sunday afternoons, there wasn't a thing to do. The store was closed - I always enjoyed being in the store - But the store was closed. We're not talking any television. The only thing to do was to read the funny papers, and it's hard to sit on a front porch and make the funny papers last all afternoon. But I did it more than one time.

I also saw the first television in my life somewhere near Kingville. Boyd had a friend named Eric. I have no idea where he lived - he lived somewhere out in the swamp. Or what he'd do or how long he'd been there, but Boyd took me over to see Eric's television set one night. And I

remember, the screen was about that big around (motioning), and you look into it, and every now and then you could make out somebody moving around, but man, did it look like you were watching snow through the bottom of a milk jar. That's about all you saw, but it was the first time I ever saw television.

The engineers would stop the railroad - would stop the train in front of the store, so that they could put water on the train. You know why trains wanted water? Why?

Camper: Because the job might get hot and you could drink water.

Sam Watson: Well, I'm sure they drank that water. They wanted it for another reason too, though. You know what those old locomotives ran on?

Campers: Steam. Steam?

Sam Watson: They ran on steam. Where you get wat - steam from?

Campers: Water. Pepper. Hot and cold water put together.

Sam Watson: There you go. Any kind of water. Well, you get cold - You can get cold water, and you put it over fire, and it will create steam once it gets hot, and that's what runs the - ran the locomotives. And so, they had to keep a big supply of water with them, and there was a water tank at the store, and - or, just down the tracks from the store. And so they pulled the train ov - of, well you don't pull the train over, you just stop it - to load up with water and come over to the store and get some bologna, and some cheese, and some crackers, and a Nehi orange or grape or RC Cola, and that was lunch - Sit there and tell tall tales, and eat lunch while they were waiting for the water to fill.

They had an old gas pump in the front of the store for people who needed gasoline, and it looked like - I bet you've never seen one of these - it looked like it was about as high as that roof, and the top several feet of it was a glass cylinder about this big around and about that tall (motioning). And the way you found out you know how much gas you're getting, is you move the pump handle back and forth, and it pumps gas into that cylinder, and there's marks on the outside of that cylinder - how many gallons at what mark. And you pump - if you want five gallons, you pump five gallons up there, and then release a valve and it wooshes down into your gas can or gas tank. And I remember that gas looked beautiful, amber, absolutely pure. And I loved watching that being pumped up in that tank.

But I mainly - Well, I remember two smells from Kingville especially. One of 'em - you heard me talk about Aunt Dot's cooking this morning, well one of 'em was Aunt Dot's cooking, especially when she would make homemade coconut cake. She would go up to Eastover to buy eggs from somebody named Mr. Sykes, and she would come home and make those things into a coconut cake, and then if we were lucky we got to eat some of it, and the rest of it went to the store to be sold by the slice. The other thing I remember about Kingville, just real vividly, is the smell of that old store. And if you ever want to smell a smell like that, get a Nehi orange and open it up and hold it out here, and get you piece of fatback, and open that up, and hold it here, and smell both of 'em at the same time, and if you can, add a little bit of a smell of wood to the background, like an old wooden wall, and that's the Kingville Commissary store. It was a place of fond memories, but early ones for me - and it ended, My Uncle Eutsy died in the mid 1950's, and my Aunt Dot moved to Columbia, and married another grocer, and kept running a grocery store in Columbia. Those are pretty much my memories of Kingville. Ya'll got any questions you want to ask? Not that I can answer them, but I'll be glad to try.

Camper: Did you like going to Kingville with your aunt?

Sam Watson: I did. I really did. I really did. Now, I think mainly it was because I really enjoyed being around my cousin Boyd, even though he would kid me, I knew he would do that. But he also taught me a lot of thing, and I loved being in that old store. I loved being in the old store. And as my cousin Belton puts it right now, Kingville's about as far from anyplace as you can get in South Carolina, and that was kind of fun too. Yes m'am?

Camper: While you were there what did your cousin teach you?

Sam Watson: What did my cousin do? He was in high school and then in college. He went to the University of South Carolina and became a school teacher. And my other cousin, Doris, I think she went to USC also. She got married after that, lived in Columbia. Yeah - let me get her first. Yes m'am?

Camper: Did you spend most of your younger years at that store?

Sam Watson: No, but I would come up there for maybe a week or two weeks at a time over the summer, and my mama and daddy and I would visit over Christmas and that kind of thing, pretty often. Yes sir?

Camper: Was - Is the Doris you're talking about Doris Plunkett?

Sam Watson: No, she was Doris Asba.

Camper: Oh, I though that was Doris Plunkett because that's my old teacher's name and her married name is Waddell.

Sam Watson: Waddell? Really? Okay. [end]