

## Palm Key: Between Earth and Moon

Written by Mark Shaffer

Tuesday, 15 March 2011 09:29

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*(Editor's note: the following originally appeared in two parts in Oct 2008)*



The earthworks of the abandoned railroad trestle split the marsh for more than a mile before ending abruptly in the dark tidal currents of the Broad River. The tracks are long gone. A rough washboard road remains flanked by scrub and brush and volunteer oaks tall and thick enough to form brief canopies. The trestle itself, or what's left of it, looks like the victim of an air strike, whole sections missing, toothsome pylons jutting up out of the black water all askew.

The full moon hangs bright and yellow just above Palm Key to the west. Beyond the ruined bridge a glow builds on the eastern horizon.

“We’d better get in the water.”

A soft breeze blows in, cooler than it has been, almost chilly. We pull the kayaks off of Judy’s pickup, snap paddles together, clip on life jackets.

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“Watch where you step,” she warns, “it’s a little tricky.”

Somehow I make it down to the oyster shell beach toting my end of the boat without exhibiting any



hint of my usual cat-like dexterity. In the gray half-light I get the distinct impression that the beach is *moving*. A carpet of tiny crabs flee before us over shell and drifts of cordgrass in a unified sideways scuttle. They make a sound like rain drops on palm fronds as they fade into the marsh.

We climb into the boats and paddle out into the wind and soft chop of the rising river, the first lipstick smear of sunrise silhouettes the ruined trestle. I back paddle for a better view, turning the bow into the current, port side east, starboard to the west. The sepia moon fades behind the key as the sun appears on the opposite horizon in a searing crimson arc. A dolphin breaks the surface just yards off my bow, spouts and briefly eyes us as if to say “tourists” before slipping back beneath the surface.

For an instant – a deeply, nearly indescribably sensual moment - we are suspended between night and day, literally floating between sun and moon, inundated with the perfume of sweet grass and salt air. There is no man-made noise – no sirens, no cars, no lawn equipment or power tools – only the sound of water, the wind on the river and the shore birds heralding the fresh morning. This is a perfect moment, like a June snowstorm in Yellowstone or a fall sunset on the Oregon coast - sunrise at Palm Key.

### Art and Symbiosis



Judy Rigg sums up Palm Key in two words, “good energy.” Judy and her husband, Emil, stumbled upon the 350-acre island as newly retired residents of Hilton Head back in the early 1980’s. After years in the D.C. rat race (where Emil spent 3 decades at the National Institutes of Health) they were pondering the future with friends when the question of “what to do with the rest of our lives came up.”

Disillusioned with what was happening to Hilton Head, the Riggs knew they wanted to create something that didn’t exist in the Lowcountry: a place where people could experience nature, explore, discover, heal and create.

“So, we made a list of things we wanted,” says Judy, “and we wanted a marsh island and we wanted to be able to get to fresh water, we wanted a road to it, and blah, blah, blah – just talking. And this woman came up behind us – she was catering the dinner – and says ‘my ex-husband has an option on a piece of land just like you’re talking about...’ And this is it!”

More than two decades later Palm Key is an eco-friendly colony of modern cottages and meeting facilities clustered among moss-covered oaks, surrounded by hundreds of acres of salt marsh and

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