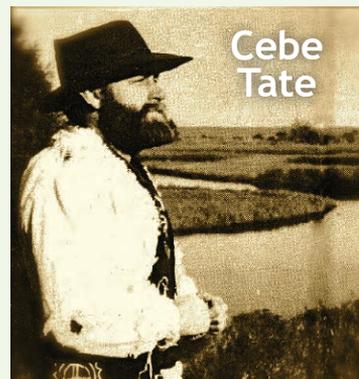


The Forgotten Legend *of the* Forgotten Coast

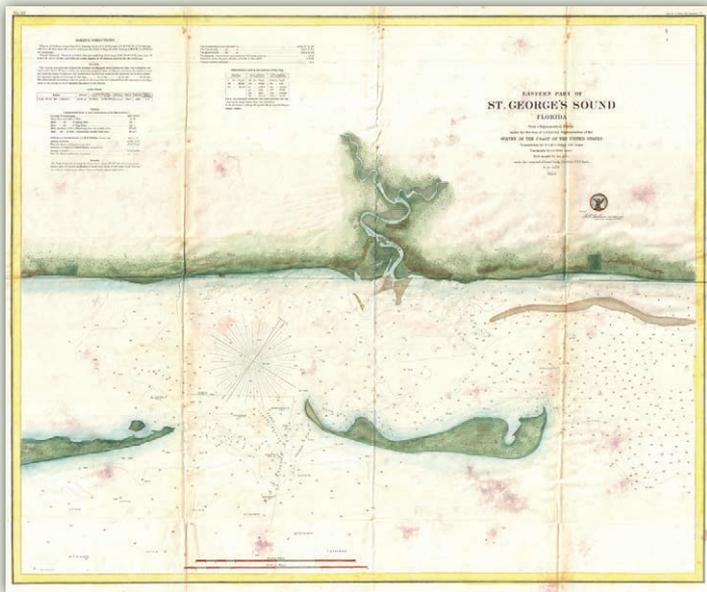
Most folks familiar with the Forgotten Coast have heard the fable of ole man Cebe Tate and his remarkable adventure through Raccoon Swamp. What originated as a simple declaration has transformed over a century and resulted in the birth of a legend. Simply told, in 1885, a farmer from Sumatra ventured into one of the panhandle's treacherous swamps in the pursuit of a panther responsible for terrorizing his cattle. Ten days into his mission, he emerged into Carrabelle, snake bitten, exhausted, and near death; there, he declared "My name is Cebe Tate, and I've been in hell."

The basic elements of this local tale survived and flourished for generations and in 1995 inspired the State of Florida to rename the land "Tate's Hell State Forest." As early as the 1960s, the legend was captured and recorded by the father of Florida folk music, Will McLean. McLean's and other versions thrived amongst the deep pines and cypress groves of the Forgotten Coast; these common threads echoed from the front porches and pathways for more than a century.

A recently published account of oral histories adds color and background to Tate's tale. William Holcomb's 2012 book, "Boardwalks and Long Walks," relays a version that portrays Tate as a superstitious old farmer who would trade a pig with a Native American medicine man each year in exchange for good fortune. One spring, the swap doesn't happen; driven by his carping, mail order bride, he ventures into the forbidden swamp to settle the score, thus, sealing his destiny.



In the early 1980s, just as the legend seemed to be fading from common memory, the tale became the inspiration for a short film produced by Florida State University's Department of Communications. The production explored the roots of the local lore through a haunting ghost story, adapted from oral



and written accounts of Tate's fate. These threads were captured by Thomas Hoffer, an FSU film professor, in a 40 minute motion picture accompanied by what we now refer to as that classic 80s electronic soundtrack. The magic of Tate's misadventure and the resulting docudrama established the legend in film for generations to come. A mysterious Creek Indian work tune served as a haunting expression of the curse that doomed the 1980s ghostly incarnation of the ill-fated Tate to roam the deep bogs and unnatural depths of the murky swamp for eternity. In 1983, "A Tale from Tate's Hell" premiered at the Florida Seafood Festival, nearly one hundred years after Cebe was said to have stumbled out of the swamp, into the area now known as Carrabelle.

The film received favorable reviews; it was noted that the release of the film suffered considerably from an inadequate venue more than a lack of interest. In one attempt at building wide support for the project, Hoffer incorporated a 20 minute documentary about the film and presented the combined docudrama through the Public Broadcasting Stations across North Florida. Unfortunately, and not for lack of trying, the film was nearly forgotten over the next decade.

In 1993, Hoffer released a series of historic articles celebrating the 100th birthday of Carrabelle. In conjunction with these pieces, he announced a rerelease of his docudrama on VHS. The documentary portion focused on the fading tradition of storytelling, the classic elements of legends, his partners and behind the scenes challenges of transforming the legend into film. Over the ensuing months, more articles fleshed out additional details of the film project, including interviews with local historians, episodes that occurred while filming within the formidable swamp and revelations about the survival of Cebe Tate and his decedents. Even though multiple copies of the rereleased film were distributed to the public, it again disappeared into the woodwork and remained dormant for the next two decades.

The most recent rediscovery of the forgotten legend occurred when Tate's tale was selected as the theme for the 26th Annual Carrabelle Riverfront Festival. As a large supporter of the event, the Carrabelle History Museum started a renewed focus on research of the legend. There was little buzz about the story, and except for the 1963 Will McLean song, most folks had forgotten about it altogether.

Festival coordinators and museum staff unearthed a variety of more detailed expressions of the tale, ranging from new to old. Between combing the internet and talking to old folks in hardware stores, they happened upon an obscure reference to the film in an archived copy of the Franklin Chronicle from the spring of 1993. In a surprising turn of events, it was uncovered that the actor who portrayed Cebe Tate in the 1983 film, Bill Gwynn, happened to be a good friend of the museum's curator. Within hours of its rediscovery, the museum had identified and located a copy of the 32-year-old movie.

Subsequent efforts to gather additional background on the numerous versions of the legend uncovered a number of fascinating leads. Gathering and re-presenting the entire breadth of this story is now part of the ongoing endeavors of the Carrabelle History Museum. The legend naturally intersects with a number of the existing exhibits in the museum. The 3,000-year-old, prehistoric Indian relics and artifacts on display, as well as the history of logging and lumber mills in the area are also a substantial part of the history of Carrabelle and the folks who lived and worked in the area. The mission of Hoffer's film complements that of the Carrabelle History Museum; both strive to promote the appreciation of sights, sounds, and rich cultural heritage of the forgotten coast.

"In terms of the movie, it is as if 32 years ago, Thomas Hoffer and his crew captured a fading, century old legend, and despite their best intentions otherwise, successfully lost and preserved it in a time capsule, forgotten and to be discovered again today."

Steve Allen

See this unique film about the Legend of Tate's Hell at the Carrabelle History Museum at 106 Avenue B, SE, in the heart of downtown Carrabelle. The museum is one block south of US 98, and is open Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays from 10 am to 5 pm. It is also available by appointment. Call 850-697-2141 to arrange a tour or for any other information. Field trips and buses are welcome. 🌳

By Joan Matey, Curator, Carrabelle History Museum and Steve Allen, Board Director, Carrabelle History Museum

