

Rodney I

**The Wakulla Volcano**

**By**

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**Category**

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**Bibliography**

Rodney is a fifth generation native of Leon County. He is a graduate of Leon High School, and Florida State University. He also has Postgraduate Degrees from the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California, and George Washington University in Washington, D. C. He served in the United States Marine Corps for 21 years, retiring as a Lieutenant Colonel. He was a Naval Aviator and flew 289 Combat Missions in Vietnam, providing Close Air Support for Marines on the ground. He currently resides with his wife Julie at Westminster Oaks in Tallahassee, Florida

## **The Wakulla Volcano**

In 1986 my Uncle Mike passed away. Uncle Mike was a legend in his own time. Certainly he was a larger than life individual to us boys growing up in our rural environment. Stories of his exploits were told over and over again. He grew up in Madison County, Florida, an almost frontier country at the time. This part of Florida was open range country. Fence laws were not enacted in the state until 1954. Under open range rules cattle belonged to whoever put a brand on them. Just as in the old west, cattle “rustling” became commonplace and range wars ensued. In 1895 Fredrick Remington, the famed artist and sculptor, heard of the Range Wars and came to Florida to see for himself what was happening. He painted several pictures depicting the events he witnessed. One was titled “Cracker Cowboys”. The title “cracker” came from the sound made when the cowboys would crack the whips used to herd cattle. Another painting was titled “Cowboy down over a Stolen Herd”. It depicted a cowboy standing over his dead horse and firing his rifle across a clearing at the cowboys from the other ranch. (These paintings are available on the Gray Museum website.) The situation became so bad the Taylor County (Perry) Sheriff sent a telegram to the governor asking for troops to stop the War. The last sentence of the telegram stated “I quit.” The Governor sent a contingent of the State Militia to maintain law and order and the Commanding Officer of the Militia was killed in the fighting. It was some years before the Range Wars ended.

## **The Wakulla Volcano**

Uncle Mike came along a few years after the range war had ended, but the circumstances causing them still festered. He and my dad were Cracker Cowboys in their youth. Uncle Mike also became a lawman in the small frontier town of Greenville. In my early years I heard many tales of him disarming bad guys and other feats of daring. Needless to say I held Uncle Mike in very high esteem. Of Uncle Mike's many interests, one of his favorites was hunting and fishing. His favorite hunting and fishing ground was the Aucilla River. This river, separating Madison and Jefferson counties, has an unusual geologic structure. North Florida has numerous "sinkholes". These are locations where underground limestone rocks have dissolved and the earth above has fallen into the empty space. The St. Marks River to the west of the Aucilla River has a Natural Bridge. This is a place where two sinkholes are located in the river several hundred feet apart. The river goes underground into the first sinkhole and then comes up out of the second sinkhole, forming a natural bridge between the two sinkholes. The "Battle of Natural Bridge", a Civil War battle, was fought here. The Aucilla River, on the other hand has 27 of these natural bridges within a 30 mile distance. Geologists call this area the "Sinks in the Aucilla". Pioneer folks called these phenomena "Rises" for where the river arises out of the ground. So there are, "Half Mile Rise", "Little River Rise", "Two and a Half Mile Rise", and "Nutall Rise". The forest along this stretch of the river was primitive until recent times. Hunting and fishing was always good. South of Nutall Rise the Aucilla River separates into two branches for a distance of about three miles. The branches then rejoin and continue south about four miles before reaching the Gulf of

## **The Wakulla Volcano**

Mexico. This area between the two branches is called Ward Island. Ward Island was one of Uncle Mike's favorite hunting and fishing areas.

When Uncle Mike passed away in 1986, I was at home recuperating from a visit to the hospital. My younger brother, Larry came by to visit. We talked of the many memories we had from our growing up years and naturally our memories of Uncle Mike. Larry had gone on many hunting and fishing trips with Uncle Mike after I joined the Marine Corps and left home. During our conversation, Larry paused; then said “You know, now that Uncle Mike is gone I guess it’s alright if I tell you something he made me swear I would never tell anyone.” He paused again and then continued “When Uncle Mike and I were hunting on Ward Island, we weren’t hunting wild game; we were hunting Gold; Pirate Gold!” I couldn’t believe my ears. “Not Uncle Mike”, I said. “He wouldn’t play stupid games like that!” “Why would he be looking for Pirate Gold on Ward Island?” Larry then told me the story. When Uncle Mike was a boy he had a good friend his age who lived on a neighboring farm. This friend told him many times about his family, the Parker Family, and how they had come to Madison County.

## **The Legend of Mandalay**

Mandalay is a community on the Aucilla River about a mile south of Ward Island. In the late

## **The Wakulla Volcano**

1800's, Mandalay was a destination for sportsmen. Hunters and fishermen came from as far away as Gainesville and Tallahassee. The area was remote, there were no major roads or settlements. The Parker family had carved out a homestead for themselves in this rugged frontier. They cleared enough land for a garden and built a comfortable home. There was plenty of game and fish to compliment the vegetables from their garden. They were very happy in their wilderness home. The homestead was located several miles west of Mandalay and southwest of Nutall Rise.

One evening as they were sitting on their front porch, an old man staggered out of the swamps, obviously lost and exhausted. The family rushed to help him. He was carried into the house and made comfortable. They brought him food and hot drink. When he had rested he started talking. He said he had been lost in the swamps for two days and had about given up hope when he found the Parker homestead. Then he told them the rest of the story about how he had become lost. Here is his story:

## **The Legend of Pirate Gold**

“When I was a young man, I lived in Tampa. At that time, 50 years ago, Tampa Bay was home port for Pirate ships. One day, when we got old enough, my buddy and me signed on as crew members on a Pirate ships. We sailed the Gulf from Key West to Mexico looking for ships to

## **The Wakulla Volcano**

rob. When we had a good load we would return to Tampa and sell the loot to dealers. On one trip we robbed a ship that had a big load of gold. On the way home the Captain decided to bury the gold on an island rather than take it back to Tampa. He picked my buddy and me to go with him to bury the gold. We were the youngest crewmembers on the ship, but we had heard stories about what happens to the men who bury the gold: They don't live to get back to the ship! That way only the Captain knows where the gold is buried. So, after we got to the island and before we buried the gold, we jumped the Captain and killed him. Then we buried the gold and went back to the ship. We told the crew that while we were burying the gold, a monster alligator came up out of the river, grabbed the Captain and drug him into the water. The last time we saw the Captain, he was in the gator's mouth and the gator was swimming up the river. The crew believed our story and no one wanted to go looking for the Captain. We sailed back to Tampa and sold the loot. Then we sold the ship. After we divided the money we split up. My buddy and me settled in Tampa. Every year since then, we sailed back up here and got enough gold for another year. We've been doing this for 50 years. This time, when we got close to the island, my buddy got real sick. He got hot, then he got cold. Then he got hot and cold at the same time and started talking crazy. I knew that I had to get him back to Tampa in a hurry. I landed at the Island and went to dig up some gold. When I came back I found my buddy warming himself by a fire, but he had built the fire in the middle of the boat! The boat burned down to the water! That night my buddy died. The next day I buried him. There I was in the middle of nowhere with no boat and no idea where I could find anyone in this swampland. I started walking and

## **The Wakulla Volcano**

been lost for two days. I thank you folks for your kindness.” Later that night the old Pirate called the family to his bedside again. He told them that he thought he was going to die and wanted these nice people to have his treasure map showing where the gold was buried. He took the map out of his backpack and gave it to them, along with 6,000 dollars in gold coins. The next morning they found the old Pirate dead. They gave him a nice funeral and buried him in the plot they had set aside for their family cemetery. Then they decided that the oldest Parker boy, a youth in his late teens, should take the map and go find the island and see if there was any more gold buried there. The boy left with the map. He did not return. Three days later his body was found at Mandalay, floating down the Aucilla River! The boy had been shot in the back! The Treasure Map was nowhere to be found! The only details the family could remember about the Treasure Map were that the gold was buried ... “on an Island, up a river, near a volcano.”

The Parker family was so distraught at the loss of their son that they decided to leave the wilderness and go looking for a more civilized place. They packed up their wagon with all their belongings including the 6,000 dollars in gold coins and headed north. When they got to Madison County they found rolling hills and fertile soil and decided to stay. They purchased a large tract of farmland and became very successful farmers. A Parker grandson became Uncle Mike’s best friend and told him the story of Mandalay and Pirate gold many times. Uncle Mike believed the story and tried to solve the puzzle about where the “River” was, and where the

## **The Wakulla Volcano**

“Island” was, and how in the world did the “Volcano” get into the story? He finally decided that the “Island” had to be “Ward Island” and the “River” had to be the “Aucilla River” and the “Volcano” had to be a figment of his friend’s imagination. So, for many years, when he went hunting on Ward Island, he was not hunting for wild game; he was hunting for buried Pirate Gold! He firmly believed the Legend of Mandalay to be a True Story!

After my brother left that day in 1986 I spent several days thinking about the “Legend” and Uncle Mike. Something just didn’t fit! Uncle Mike was not a man to believe in fairy tales! He was a rugged individual, a no nonsense person! He had to have had some reason for believing the “Legend” that was not apparent in the story I had just heard! I sorted the facts over and over again in my mind. I finally decided that the “Volcano” was the clue. If there had ever been any phenomenon in that area which could reasonably be nicknamed a “Volcano” then there might be some truth in the “Legend of Mandalay”. I had some free time one day so I went to Tallahassee, to the Museum of Florida History (the Gray Museum). Inside, I asked for the area where I could find early history of North Florida. I was directed to the second floor, South Wing. I was really too embarrassed to admit that I was looking for information about a Volcano. I just started looking through the card catalogue and reading the index and chapter titles of books about the area. I did discover a lot of tidbits about my home state that I had not known before even though I had grown up in Tallahassee. I was learning a lot but finding out nothing about a volcano. After three days of searching, I was about ready to decide that “The Legend of Mandalay” was

## **The Wakulla Volcano**

only a fairy tale. Then, as I was about to leave the library one day, a young lady came over to my table and asked “Can I help you find something?” I was embarrassed but managed to stammer “Probably not, unless you know something about a volcano over in Jefferson County.” She got a puzzled look on her face and replied, “No. I don’t know anything about a volcano in Jefferson County.” She paused and then continued “but I have a lot of information about the Wakulla Volcano.” I almost swallowed my teeth! There were several seconds before I could speak. I followed her over to her desk. She opened the middle drawer on the right side of her desk and lifted out a plain manila folder. There was a simple label on the outside of the folder which said “Wakulla Volcano.” She handed it to me and I went back to the table and sat down. I stared at the closed folder for a long time before opening it. Consider the ramifications of this discovery! If there really had been a volcano then there really could have been an island up a river near the volcano! And, if there really had been an island up that river, near the volcano, then there had to have been Pirate Gold buried on that island! And if there really was Pirate Gold buried on that Island it might still be there! And if I can find where that Volcano was located then I can find that Island and find that Gold! I could become Rich and Famous!

## **The Wakulla Volcano**

### **The Brown Manila Folder**

I opened the manila folder with trembling fingers. Inside were newspaper clippings with dates from the early 1800s to the late 1890's. There were copies of pages from early books about life in North Florida which had been written in the 1850's and 1860's. I began to read, and I became more and more excited as I read. I just knew that I was about to become Rich and Famous!

#### **Spanish Explorers**

The story started when Spanish Explorers arrived in 1513 at what is now the small community of St. Marks. In their ship logs they recorded what they described as a "Volcano." They had observed smoke and fire in the swamps to the northeast of St Marks. The smoke could be seen in the day far out into the ocean. At night there was a pillar of fire that could be seen even further out. For hundreds of years Spanish ships had used this "Volcano" as a virtual Lighthouse for navigating in and out of St. Marks. In 1528 Cabeza de Vaca, a Spanish Captain landed with the appointed Governor of Florida and a contingent of soldiers 400 strong to claim the state in the name of the King of Spain. He kept a diary of their adventures which has been preserved. The conquering party landed somewhere near present day Sarasota. They were stranded after the landing by a hurricane which destroyed their ships. They traveled on foot and horseback up the

## **The Wakulla Volcano**

coast of Florida and passed the area near St. Marks. In his diary, Cabeza de Vaca recorded seeing fire and smoke and described it as a volcano.

### Folklore Stories

In the manila folder were excerpts from newspaper articles and books describing stories which had been told to early settlers by friendly Indians. These folklore stories described the volcano:

#### First Folklore Story

A young Indian Princess was in love with a young Brave. There was a dispute with the neighboring tribe and a war ensued. The Brave had to go to war. The Princess promised she would build a large fire and stoke it with wood until he returned so that he would always know where she was. According to the legend the brave was killed in battle, but the princess is still over there in the swamps stoking the fire.

#### Second Folklore Story

A tribe near Apalachicola had been at war with the Wakulla tribe and wanted a truce. The Apalachicola chief sent word that he wanted the Wakulla chief and a peace party to come to Apalachicola to smoke the peace pipe. The Wakulla chief agreed and took a small group to Apalachicola. Before they left, the Wakulla chief ordered his tribe to keep a big fire going with lots of smoke so he could always find his way home. It turned out to be a trap; the chief and his party were all killed; but the Wakulla tribe is still over there in the swamps stoking the fire and making a lot of smoke.

#### How Wakulla County got Its Name

According to early pioneers, Wakulla is an Indian word. It means “smoke and fog (or mist).” So

## **The Wakulla Volcano**

Wakulla County got its name (Land of Smoke and Mist) from the Volcano. Anyone who has seen fog banks roll into the county off the Gulf of Mexico can imagine what it must have been like living in the area when the smoke from the volcano mixed with the thick fog.

### **Princess Murat**

Another article was about Princess Murat, the wife of Napoleon's nephew. She frequently entertained her guests in Tallahassee by taking them up to cupola on top of her home, which was on top of a very high hill, and showing them the fireworks down in the swamps.

### **New York Evening Post Article**

Then I found a newspaper clipping from The New York Evening Post dated 1855. A reporter had visited Tallahassee and had experienced an evening as a guest of one local family. After a sumptuous meal, the group walked to the Capital Building, went up into the Dome, and watched the "fireworks" in the swamps to the southeast. Local people believed it to be a Volcano because it had been there since Spanish Days. The newspaper article was titled "The Florida Volcano." He said that the phenomenon had the appearance of a "New Moon rising out of the swamps."

### **Inaccessibility of the Volcano**

Every article and story in the folder spoke of the inaccessibility of the volcano. Many attempts were reported, but no one had ever gone into the swamp and returned to report the source of the fire and smoke. This swamp had Cypress Trees 3000 years old which were 15 feet in diameter and more than 150 feet tall. Many of the trees had blown down in hurricanes over thousands of years. The result was an impassable mass of vegetation.

## **The Wakulla Volcano**

### **Judge White's Venture**

One attempt was made by a retired Judge White after the New York Evening Post offered a reward of \$10,000 to anyone who succeeded in reaching the volcano and coming back to report their findings. Judge White took his party to St Marks and sailed his boat out into the Gulf. He then sailed east until he was due south of the volcano. Then he turned north and looked for a water passage to the volcano. He reported that when he was headed north he found himself in the Pinhook River. The river eventually narrowed and became impassable as it entered the Great Pinhook Swamp. He never reached the volcano.

### **The Charleston Earthquake**

In 1886 there was an earthquake in Charleston, S. C. The quake was a 7.9 magnitude monster! It was so powerful that it was reported as far north as New Hampshire and as far south as Jamaica. The quake shook St Augustine, FL with such force that it rang the bells in the old church tower. In Tallahassee several buildings were destroyed. Huge sinkholes opened up in the bottom of Lake Jackson, Lake Lafayette, and Lake Miccosukee. All three lakes were drained dry. After the earth stopped shaking, the smoke and fire from the Wakulla Volcano was never seen again!

### **A Revelation**

At this point I stopped reading. I had found something that excited me beyond measure! The Pinhook River is 7 miles west of the Aucilla River. Judge White was going directly north toward the volcano when he was sailing up the Pinhook River! According to the Legend, the gold had been buried "on an island, up a river, near a volcano." Uncle Mike had spent his entire life

## **The Wakulla Volcano**

looking on an island up the Aucilla River. If there was an island up the Pinhook River, then that's where the gold had been buried! I just knew that I was about to become RICH and FAMOUS! The librarian was kind enough to make me copies of the key articles. I left the Gray Museum walking on air!

Early the next morning I went to the Jefferson County Property Appraiser's office. There I found an aerial photograph of the area which included the Pinhook River. Sure enough, there about a mile up the river was a small island. I called my brother and shared the news with him! We immediately started planning an expedition. I wanted to tell everyone, and then I realized; I couldn't tell anyone! Two days later we launched our expedition; two small fishing boats; the two of us; his teenage son, Robert; and my two teenage boys, Chuck and Rod. We found the island easily enough and beached the boats. After unloading the tools we started looking. Rod was the first to find something! His metal detector had gotten a hit on the beach near where we landed our boats! We all came running! After a frantic few minutes of digging we found the 'treasure'! It was a rusty old nail head that resembled those I had seen in buildings in the old city of St Augustine. Wow! What an exciting find! Again we split up and started looking. Then Rod shouted! He had another hit. We all came running and started digging. Another nail! We eventually found 12 nails in two rows roughly parallel. Then it hit me! This was the place where the old pirate's buddy had burned his boat! These nails were all that was left of the boat. We had found THE Island. We really got excited then! Now we just knew it for sure, we were about to become Rich and Famous! We split up and started searching in earnest for that buried

## **The Wakulla Volcano**

gold. After hours of looking and digging in all the likely spots, I found it! In the center of the island was an old, old cedar tree. The tree had to have been over a hundred years old and was surrounded by palmetto trees and undergrowth. When I got through the undergrowth I found a small clearing directly under the Cedar. Then I saw it! A hole in the ground about 6 feet long and 4 feet wide which went down into the limestone. Around the hole was a pile of loose limestone rock. This had to be where the gold had been buried those many years ago. Someone had gotten there before us. It was probably someone from the hunting camp at Mandalay where the Parker boy's body had been found. The boy had probably asked someone in the camp for help finding the island. Whoever helped him then shot him in the back and took his gold. Darn! We weren't going to be Rich and Famous after all! That was a somber trip back home. None of us said a word!

So, we didn't become rich and famous; but we had proven that a hundred year old legend wasn't a myth after all! It was in fact a true story! AND, we discovered a piece of Florida history which had been lost for over a hundred years! There really had been a Florida volcano! But the real name of the volcano was "The Wakulla Volcano."

A month later I told this story at a meeting of the Jefferson County Historical Society in Monticello. After the meeting an elderly lady came up and introduced herself. She said "When I was a young girl, growing up in Gainesville, we were told a legend about gold. We were told that one of the prominent families of Gainesville acquired their wealth when their grandfather

## **The Wakulla Volcano**

returned from a hunting trip to Taylor County with an astounding amount of gold!” I was shocked when I heard this. I had not even mentioned Taylor County in my talk, but I knew that the east bank of the Aucilla River at Mandalay was in Taylor County. There had to be a connection! I searched for several years but never found anything in the literature about the Gainesville Legend. Twenty years passed and then there was GOOGLE! I typed “Pirate Gold, Gainesville, Florida” and asked Google to search. Immediately there was the whole story. Emmett Baird had returned from a trip to the “Suwannee River”, he claimed; and begun buying local businesses, paying for them with gold. He told a story about meeting an old pirate on the banks of the Suwannee River near Fowler’s Landing. The pirate had allegedly told him where the gold was buried after Baird had befriended the old man. Wow! This was real proof that Uncle Mike’s story of “The Legend of Mandalay” was not a legend at all. It was in fact a true story!

# **The Wakulla Volcano**

## **Epilogue**

Many questions remain unanswered today about the Wakulla Volcano. What was the source of fuel for the fire and smoke which burned continuously for 373 years of recorded history? From 1513 to 1886 and untold hundreds of years before that, according to Indian Folklore, the smoke and fire was always there. Geologists have been asked about this and will only say that there has never been a volcano in Florida. I have found nothing in the literature or other information available today through Google which has satisfied my curiosity. In many of the articles I read from the brown manila folder those many years ago in the Gray Museum, there were varying attempts at an explanation. Some speculated that it was a burning peat bog. But, with fire burning in the middle of an impenetrable swamp and the flames rising over 300 feet into the air, it doesn't seem plausible that it could have been from burning peat. During the Civil War it was thought by the Yankees to be a Confederate gunpowder plant and was bombarded by a ship anchored out in the Gulf of Mexico. Before the Civil War it was thought to be coming from a camp of runaway slaves. None of the explanations have ever seemed plausible. In March of 2008 I read in the newspaper where an accident had occurred in Oliver Springs Tennessee. An oil drilling rig penetrated an underground pool of natural gas. The gas was under great pressure from the depth of the pool and blew the drilling rig completely away. A

## **The Wakulla Volcano**

spark from the collapsing rig ignited the gas and resulted in a pillar of fire 300 feet high which burned for weeks before the well could be capped. Smoke from the fire could be seen 30 miles away. The description of this disaster was almost exactly the description given by those early visitors to the Tallahassee area who wrote about the volcano. The fact that it was an earthquake which stopped the fire and smoke from the volcano is further evidence that this probably was a natural "vent" from an underground pool of gas which provided the fuel under pressure to the surface. The gas was under sufficient force to propel the fuel 300 feet into the air. One of the many lightening strikes in the area could have then ignited the gas. This theory of mine was further strengthen when it was reported recently that underground testing by a large oil & gas company had discovered a pool of natural gas at 15,000 feet deep. The pool extends from the area where the volcano was located to more than 100 miles into the Gulf of Mexico. Although I believe my theory to be correct, there will probably never be a satisfactory explanation for the phenomenon known as "The Wakulla Volcano."