

## Wells, Ray: There's A Man For You <sup>[1]</sup>

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# Ray Wells: There's A Man For You

by David Cecelski. "[Listening to History](#) <sup>[2]</sup>," *News & Observer*. Published 11/8/1998. Copyrighted. Reprinted with permission.

Nobody can skin a snake, make friends with a bear or navigate a swamp at night better than Ray Wells. Though he has made his living as a timber cruiser, fish spotter, heavy-equipment operator, railroad worker and garage owner, his real passion is for the woods. He is at home in the wildest places of the Lower Cape Fear: Angola Bay, the Black River swamps, Holly Shelter Pocosin. He has also been introducing Boy Scouts to that wilderness for 43 years.

I first met Ray during a paddling trip at Shelter Creek, in Pender County. That night we talked and ate fried catfish till all hours. Later, Ray and I spent a day poking around his favorite haunts along the Black River, by small towns like Ivanhoe, Atkinson and Point Caswell. He has seen the woods and swamps change a great deal over his lifetime. Just recently, one of his favorite boyhood places, Watkins' Seine Hole, a fishing beach on the Northeast [Cape Fear River](#) <sup>[3]</sup>, was bought and developed by a corporate hog company. "You wouldn't know the place now," he told me. "It was beautiful country."

Rheumatoid arthritis keeps him out of the woods these days, but Ray's stories are a powerful reminder that we still have many wild places worth fighting to preserve. And some of those places, it turns out, are in the human heart.



**Ray Wells.** Photo by Chris Seward, 1998. To request permission for further use or to purchase a print, please contact the News & Observer.

### In Ray Wells's words:

Adventure has always been the thing I live for. My wife's idea of excitement is singing in the choir or playing the organ or piano in church. And all that's fine. Thank goodness somebody wants to do it. But when I hear the organ playing, I get so sleepy I can't stand up. When they get to playing church music, I get to sleeping.

Truth is, I never feel any closer to God than when I'm paddling down the river at night by myself. I don't know if it's sacrilegious, but I feel much closer to God in a swamp or the deep woods than in any church I've ever been in.

I was raised on the Northeast Cape Fear River. That's home. I roamed the woods all my life by myself. Well, since I was about 10 years old. I'd run away and go five miles to the river, and when I got home, my mama would beat the devil out of me. This woods was full of old longleaf heart pine, just full of it. It was all beautiful longleaf pine. I guess there's nothing hotter than a pine forest, but by gosh they're beautiful. When I was young, that was as pretty as girls to me, that's the only way you also see a lot of white ibis down there. I especially love the last few moments of daylight and the first few moments of daylight. The animals don't seem to be afraid of man at dusk-dark and at twilight.

It does my heart good to see alligators. There's an alligator down there - I won't tell where - that's a little bit longer than my boat. My boat is 16 feet long. He's longer than my boat by probably six or eight inches. I had heard about that alligator. One day my old friend Dr. Pate and me were out there picking huckleberries and we run up on this humongous bear track. Doc said, "Let's go!"

We went on to a different place, but curiosity got the best of me. I got to roaming around down there by myself to find out where they stayed. I saw some tracks and I found out that was home base for them. That was where the bears were sleeping. I walked back through there, oh, many a time. At night I'd walk by and the bears would be out there in the woods and you could hear them. You could tell by their walking what it was. They knew I was there. They just GGRRRAWGRRWWAAW.

I just roamed around in the woods. I didn't trap, didn't hunt. I gave up hunting back in '60. The only thing I would dare shoot now would be a poisonous snake, and I'd also eat that poisonous snake. If you ever cook a rattlesnake, parboil and fry. Don't parboil water moccasin - add moisture. Take two big water moccasin. Boil them just enough that you can flake the meat off the bone and make a salad, like a chicken salad. It's real good.

I had no intention of ending my life like this, and here I am a half-invalid. Can't work, can't do much of anything. I told my wife Gloria "I was hoping that I'd just be paddling down the river and have a heart attack and roll out of my boat backward." She said, "Oh no, that's foolish." And I said, "No, honey, you don't understand. If I ever got eaten by an alligator, I would be in the alligator line, part of me, forever and ever. And if I ever got to be an alligator, I'd never have anything to do for me." She said, "There's a man for you."

This is an excerpt from the "[Listening for A Change](#) <sup>[4]</sup>" project of the [Southern Oral History Program](#) <sup>[5]</sup> at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

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