

# Beautiful Bluffton

No place its size in South Carolina has inspired more praise from famous boosters than the quiet, restful little resort town of Bluffton. It is located, not on a noisy railroad, not on a busy highway, but on the "most beautiful estuary in all the world." The quote is from "Thoughts by Blufftonians."

Men of great wealth and culture, such as Cornelius Vanderbilt and his brother-in-law, Richard T. Wilson Jr. — who could have built their palatial winter homes anywhere on earth — chose the unmatched charms of Bluffton for the view from their spacious verandahs across that "beautiful estuary."

Dr. James Mellichamp, the beloved physician and botanist, lived and worked in Bluffton and attracted the attention of the world's greatest biologists to the unusual variety of the flora in the vicinity which he collected and classified.

The distinguished historian, James Henry Rice Jr., spent many happy hours in Bluffton gathering material for his unexcelled book on "The Glories Of The Carolina Coast"; and his poetic praise of the wonders of the South Carolina Lowcountry particularly in and around Bluffton — made critics all over the nation voice the sentiment, one way or another, that "every private and public library, every home, school and college should have a copy of this fascinating book."

Picturesqueness and variety, which characterize the lower coast, Rice said, "reach perfection at Bluffton on the River May. All the country, indeed, from North Edisto to Savannah, exhibits the same richness and variety in its flora, the same opulence in its fauna, save for regrettable waste places here and there. But at Bluffton the live oaks are uniformly larger and more symmetrical in the unfolding of their mighty crowns. The limbspread is enormous, one limb measured recently 84 feet, 2 inches." (That limb was measured over 40 years ago. It probably would measure 84 feet, 3 inches today.)

Rice goes on to say that "white cottages nestle beneath the live oaks, each with its clean-swept yard, bordered with evergreen, among which the Sabal palmetto and the Magnolia grandiflora are conspicuous, though the azaleas and the Camellia japonicas may not be slighted with their shy and impelling lure."

Then, with true insight, he observes that Bluffton "retains enough flavor of old days to let one know he is within the pale, surrounded by the purple-born, who, through storm and stress, war and misfortune,

have clung tenaciously to their birthright. Only on Edisto and along the Pon Pon does one get so fragrant an aroma of our Golden Prime."

Clinging to their birthrights is a perfectly natural habit for proud Blufftonians, even among the children. When asked his name, one little Bluffton boy, descendant of an illustrious patriot who affixed his signature to the famous document of 1776, straightened to his full height and replied: "Sir, my name is Thomas Declaration of Independence Heyward."

Along about the same time that historian Rice was jotting down his loving lines, another distinguished author, Marie Conway Oemler of Savannah, had become so completely captivated by the glories of Bluffton (her fictional "Appleboro" and "Riverton") that she couldn't stop pushing her prolific pen until she had completed two exciting novels about the town. What she saw and felt and even smelled in Bluffton were given expression in her books, which, unfortunately, have been long out of print.

Unlike some of the present day bluff dwellers, Marie Conway Oemler had no quips for the odors from a Bluffton crab plant. She was concerned only with "smells that came from over the cove, of pine trees, and sassafras, and bays, and that indescribable and clear odor which the winds bring out of the woods."

Nor was that charming and talented lady bothered with outboards whining up and down the river while she was taking her afternoon nap. To her artist's ears, the "whole place was full of pleasant noises, dear and familiar sounds of water running seaward or surging back landward, always with odd gurglings and chucklings and small sucking noises, and runs and rushes; and the myriad rustlings of the huge live oaks hung with long gray moss; and the sycamores frou-frouing like ladies' dresses; the palmettos rattled and clashed, with a sound like rain; the pines swayed one to another, and only in wild weather did they speak loudly, and then their voices were very high and airy."

As for a July morning in Bluffton, it was "always beautiful, was at its best, the air sweet with the warm breath of summer. The elder was white with flowers, and in moist places, where the ditches dipped, huge cattails swayed to the light wind. Roses rioted in every garden; when one passed the little houses of the Negroes every yard was gay with pink crape myrtle and white and lilac Rose of Sharon trees. All along the worm fences the vetches and the butterfly-pea trailed their purple; everywhere the horse-nettle showed its lovely milk-white stars, and the orange-red milkweed invited all the butterflies of South Carolina to come dine at her table."

At night in Bluffton, a little boy dreaming of the purple heights slipped out of his room into a "big, white enchanted world, and saw

things that are to be seen only by an imaginative and beauty-loving little boy in the light of the midsummer moon. Big hawk-moths, swift and sudden, darted by him with owl-like wings. Mocking-birds broke into silvery, irrepresible singing, and water-birds croaked and rustled in the cove, where the tidewater lipped the land.

"The slim, black pine trees nodded and bent to one another, with the moon looking over their shoulders. Something wild and sweet and secret invaded the little boy's spirit, and stayed on in his heart. Maybe it was the heart-shaking call of the whippoorwill, or the song of the mocking-bird, truest voices of the summer night; or perhaps it was the spirit of the great green luna-moth, loveliest of all the daughters of the dark."

No matter by what name it was called, whether "Kirk's Bluff," as in the beginning; or "Appleboro" or "Riverton"; or even the French "Bellefont," as it was called in Margaret Fuller's "One World At A Time" — a delightful novel about a little girl in the latter years of the nineteenth century — Bluffton's unsurpassed charms always evoked inspired boosts.

As far back as 1562, more than two centuries before the planters of St. Luke's parish began building summer cottages on the high bluff overlooking the "most beautiful estuary in all the world," a famous traveler from across the sea sailed his vessel into the cool shadows of the tall pines along the shoreline and dropped anchor.

How long Jean Ribault remained there admiring the new world's Garden of Eden, which some two hundred and fifty years later would be called Bluffton, history has not recorded. But this much is known; he did not weigh anchor until he had taken one long last look at Bluffton's beautiful river and proclaimed it for all future generations, "La Belle Riviere de Mai!"