

BOOKS AND BOOKMEN

By Ed Lambright, Editor Tampa Tribune

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A poet wrote of “sermons in stones” and “books in running brooks.” It may not be the exact quotation, but it conveys the idea. Anyway, what he meant to say was, one may hear and read nature.

So I am going to devote this column today to a wonderful book from which I read last Sunday – a book not printed, not paged, not bound between covers, yet, withal, beautifully written beyond the genius of mortal authors, gloriously illustrated beyond the skill of mortal artists.

I was fortunate in the time selected for my introduction to this book – one of Florida’s brightest, sunniest Easter Sundays. The Resurrection Day gave something of reverence to the reading, invested it with the impressiveness of a divine service. The title of the book is “Highlands Hammock,” the author is God. It is one of His great books, divinely published for the admiration and joy for those who read His eternal works. It is open and free to all who may wish to see and peruse it – near the shore of green-rimmed Lake Jackson, just outside the pretty little city of Sebring.

A beauty-spot, not only of Florida but of the nations, is this 1,200 acre tract of prodigal nature, set strangely, almost inconsistently, amid immediate surroundings which offer little variety. It seems as though the Creator had there contrived a striking, even startling contrast – you pass from the unvarying pine woods, where the vegetation is familiar and readily described, into a veritable jungle of riotous and unrestricted growth, baffling the knowledge of learned botanists and veteran foresters. Here one finds nature in timeless virginity, touched by the hand of man only to protect it, to make it visible to lovers of the purely beautiful.

Fact fully speaking, this hammock had been known for years to residents of the ridge region; but its possibilities as a Florida attraction were not recognized and appraised until Mrs. John Roebling discovered it, and bought it for dedication as a nature shrine for present and future generations. She envisioned it as what it always will be – a spot to which will be drawn admiring sight-seers from all states and many lands, because it is the one scenic marvel which cannot be duplicated anywhere on earth. Mrs. Roebling’s plans were temporarily interrupted by her death in 1930, but they are being carried on and financed by Mr. Roebling, sponsored by a public-spirited association headed by

Rex Beach and practically directed by J. W. Hawkins as Chief Engineer. And there is nothing “for sale” in it or in connection with it.

The purpose has been and is to encroach as little as possible upon native beauty, to preserve fully that “nature in the raw” which the Hammock contains. The tract has been fenced to exclude animal marauders and human despoilers. Motor roads and foot trails wind through its forest fastnesses and make accessible its “wildwood privacies, closets of lone desire.” Irrigation has been supplied where needed, guide-posts placed, trees and plants labeled, and the sky-roofed amphitheater cleared and seated for religious and other assembly. There are palm groves and lily pools, grottoes and rock gardens, trees, herbs and shrubbery in infinite variety, wild fruits, aquatic plants so rare that botanists have been unable to name them, clear brooks that “go on forever,” tropic fowl and harmless four-footed forest folk – and a center of interest, a massive laurel oak, 800 years old, rivaling in majesty the great trees of California. One could spend weeks, seeing new wonders each day.

It would be impossible to review this marvelous Book of Nature in this cramped space; indeed, I could not do it justice in unlimited columns. So we leave the Book, with its stories in wood and palm and vine, its poetry in leaf and frond and flower, its imperishable pictures in light and shade, resolving to return for further reading, for we have in a few hours barely sensed its sublime significance – although capably sprightly American, and Mrs. Clara I. Thomas, Secretary of the organization which plans a botanical garden and arboretum as an adjunct to the Hammock.

I felt that I would reach mortal books and a bookman before I finished this column – and here we are at the attractive Florida home of Rex Beach, author, adventurer, sportsman and farmer, where we are graciously received for a delightful visit. He is in his “writing clothes,” his favorite dog at his feet, going over the manuscript of a just-completed novel soon to be added to the series with which he has enriched the fiction treasury of the world; but not too busy to talk of his faith in Florida, his love for its woods and waters, and his enthusiasm for the beauties of Highlands Hammock.