Shark Valley is not a canyon in the coral reef, beset by toothy monsters. It is the very heart of the River of Grass, the Everglades. Even today, crossing Shark Valley away from roads and paths is a mythical adventure, a challenge worth the exhaustion, and a setting worthy of the lost hero in a B-grade melodrama. Like the giant octopus in the old diving films, the sawgrass Everglades is the perfect scenery for a hero’s courage or a villain’s panic.

It was an even more romantic adventure back in the 1800s, when it simply wasn’t done.

In 1897, in spite of his belief in giant serpents, Captain Hugh Willoughby poled a canoe from the Harney River on Florida’s lower west coast to the rapids on the Miami River. It was the first documented crossing of Shark Valley by other than Indians (no one liked to talk about the Indians, because they made it seem so easy).

By the 1920s, the Tamiami Trail was on its way across the Glades from the east and west, with a large space of sawgrass in the middle. The route was better defined than Willoughby’s, but no less daunting. In Marjory Stoneman Douglas’ only novel, Road to the Sun, Jason, the hero, makes a desperate crossing to help a friend.

Captain Willoughby was nothing if not prepared. He took his trusty guide, Brewer, two specially built canoes, salted crawfish, kerosene, a brush hook, two Newhouse traps, two cheesecloth mosquito bars, pots and pans, three varieties of portable soups, tea, root beer and sarsaparilla put up in tablets, a good supply of chewing gum containing cola nut, lots of cans with rubber-tight gaskets containing sugar, flour, salt, pepper, oatmeal, cocoa leaves, cocoa, paint, and varnish for the canoes; and a “sealed can of whiskey exclusively for snakebite.”

Clearly, the Captain was a planner. His lists go on and on, including: “an octant, an aluminum aneroid barometer, a maximum and minimum registering thermometer mounted on aluminum, an artificial horizon, a shock level, a light but very accurate azimuth compass with a four inch dial, and two watches in a waterproof case, the watches themselves being waterproof, running with an accuracy that was something marvelous, one having a rate of four tenths of a second a day, and the other eight tenths of a second ...” Willoughby didn’t mess around with second-rate equipment.

He was armed to the upper teeth with rifles, pistols, and knives.
He wore a Norfolk jacket, flannel shirt, and knickerbockers, and carried rubber hip boots: "These I consider absolutely dispensable for a white man traveling through the Everglades." He brought a bicycle repair kit to patch sawgrass cuts in the rubber boots.

Marjory Stoneman Douglas' fictional hero of the 1920s walked. Jason took only chocolate, coffee, bacon, one pan, one rifle, one machete, and extra boots.

The barefoot Indians in dugout canoes took less.

Crossing the Everglades on foot is still relatively rare. After two and half days trekking from the Flaming Road to the Shark Valley Tower, I can tell you why. It takes more patience and optimism than courage, but after 91 years, it hasn't gotten any easier to get through sawgrass. Along the way, it's fascinating to compare Willoughby in 1987, Douglas' hero Jason in the 1920s, and Mark and Maggy in 1988.

On April 30, 1988, South Florida stood at the end of the driest April in recorded history. It was a Gunga Din day: "Where the heat would make your bloomin' eyebrows crawl."

My brother, Mark, and I set out from the Ingraham Highway, headed northwest. Armed only with a pocket knife, we carried a little more than Jason and a lot less than Willoughby.

Just off the road, pine and poisonwood gave way to prairie. Every step raised dust from the dry marl and curled periphyton (an algal mat that grows in the Everglades). In spite of dust and drought, wildflowers were blooming - orange red milkweed and grasspink orchids.

Little hammock islands were surrounded by minefields of pinnacle rock. Pinnacle rock is gray, jagged, and mean. It grabs ankles and eats shoes, and makes knees wobble from fear of falling. The rough hell-holes are the result of humic acid eating away at the limestone and leaving the frightening skeletons of bedrock.

Jason didn't mention pinnacle rock. Hugh Willoughby met it and hated it. It has not changed in 91 years.

Walking through rock and sun and marl prairie, we were fifteen miles south-southeast of the tower on the other side of Shark Valley.

"The two men had only Frank's compass and the sun and their own shrewd experience." - Marjory Stoneman Douglas

We had a two-dollar Wal-Mart compass, U.S. Geological Sur-
vey (U.S.G.S.) charts, and a family history of being lost or stuck in every South Florida wilderness. We set out across the prairie.

Prairie is the world’s most startling flowers against the drabdest background. Wet prairie is wet and dry. That day it was bone dry. I think we could have walked dry footed all the way to Naples.

It was an Everglades without water, with the flowers blooming in memory of past wetness. Even as the sawgrass patches grew taller and thicker, and the prairie slide into slough, the dust kept rising.

On the U.S.G.S. maps, the prairie shows light brown and Shark Valley Slough sweeps through as a wide blue river. The colors are misleading. There is no riverbank or sudden change to mark the edge.

The sawgrass got thicker. The ground got softer. The sun burned down like it does in all the melodramas, and we ran out of water. We ran out of water in the Everglades.

“The mud may be a trifle soft, but pure drinking water is running over it.” – Hugh Willoughby

We dug and found gray water in the soft mud. Even with iodine pills, it tasted delicious.

Now we had softer ground, sparkling gray water, and shade. In the west, blue-black clouds eclipsed the sun.

We had no watch and without the sun, we had no time. There is something called “foot time” that says one can’t go any further.

“It seemed to Jason, after what must have been hours, that ten more strides was all in the world he could manage.” – Marjory Stoneman Douglas

We thought we could claim the nearest tree island as home, till a flock of buzzards made it clear that it belonged to them. Ten more strides was all in the world I could go. That left us exiled to an islet of willow and wax myrtle barely wide enough to string the mosquito net. The six-foot gator in the nearby pickerel patch was preferable to the buzzards. He didn’t smell.

If the soul of the Everglades is water, its glory is the sky. Out in the sawgrass, there is more sky than anywhere in the world. On stormy days, it is blacker than anywhere else.

“One of the most important things in a life out of doors, is the selection of a tent.” – Hugh Willoughby

We didn’t have one. But sleep was easy.

Thunder rocked the earth and lightning split the sky. All the silence became rattling, booming noise. All the emptiness was filled with blasts and zigzags of light. The whole wide ho-

rizon was a sound and light show, and the windows of Heaven opened. The Everglades rose up a foot and the desert turned back into a river.

In addition to a good tent, Hugh Willoughby had blue heron eggs for breakfast. We had Cheersios.

We walked out into a world that wasn’t there the day before. We dripped and sloshed and splashed, wet through and wet all around. It was a Masefield day. “Sinking in the sucking quagmires to the sunburn on our breasts.”

There have probably been few such days and nights when one could so clearly see and feel what water does to the Everglades.

“The popular impression has always been that the Everglades is a huge swamp, full of malaria and disease germs.” – Hugh Willoughby

In spite of popular imagination, this is no stagnant swamp, but a moving sheet of water. It is the where and when of water that make it work, not the depth or even quantity.

The vegetation of the Everglades reflects fire and drought, as well as water. It reflects a cycle primed by rain, that no simple plumbing system can imitate.

“We had great springs and lakes to be found as a source of all this water, which cannot alone be accounted for by rainfall?” – Hugh Willoughby

The broad river of water that starts above Lake Okeechobee in the Kissimmee marshes and broadens out in the great sweep of sawgrass below the lake, is still mysterious in its cycles of wet and dry. The Everglades are in trouble, but we are beginning to understand the subtleties of how wet and dry can both be normal.

On that wet Sunday morning, we saw the Everglades come alive and realized that the dusts of dry seasons hold the life brought out by rain. The periphyton expanded to a six-inch pad under the water. The frogs began peeping under the muck. The limpkin called.

“If an English snipe were three feet high, he would look very much like this bird. [limpkin]” – Hugh Willoughby

A dozen wood ibis flew over.
We were in the middle of Shark Valley and now it was wet.

The tree islands seemed like an armada of ships large and small, afloat in the sawgrass sea. They run with the current downstream toward Florida Bay. The little islets are tadpole shaped havens for willows. The large islands have hammock trees on their northern end: mastic, gumbo limbo, ficus. The south end of the big tree islands are low and willow filled, trailing off in whip-like tails of tall sawgrass.

"This is the great barrier to Everglades travel: it pays better to go twenty-five miles around than half a mile through." – Hugh Willoughby

Willoughby spent weeks going around the sawgrass. We went through sawgrass, but skirted the tangled tree islands. All the shrubs there are, weave together with all the vines there are, to build fences at the edge of these islands. Saltbush, myrtle, holly, willow, grape vines, poison ivy, and Virginia creeper. It's too low to crawl under and too high to crawl over.

Here and there, tucked into the head of a tree island like the eye in a needle, was a water hole so alive as to be a little scary. The trails of beaten down sawgrass that led in were as wide as airboat trails. The water was full of all the life that had abandoned the dusty desert and had not yet spread out on the flood. Everything that was hungry and thirsty was there.

"We could not get by that terrible strip of grass into which I did not dare venture and to penetrate even a short distance might take weeks of trying labor." – Hugh Willoughby

We kept venturing through it [the sawgrass]. The tree islands were worse.

It is easier to get through sawgrass on foot that it is by canoe. You can walk through sawgrass without rubber waders and a bicycle repair kit.

At first, it seems to take only a certain amount of care and patience. Flailing panic would quickly bring bloody disaster. The realization that if you don't fight the sawgrass, it won't fight you, brings on naive optimism.

The more you do it, the less optimistic you are. When the sawgrass is over head-high, in thick clumps that have to be pushed through by brute force, it helps to have a leader who is taller and stronger and has bigger feet. Willoughby had his guide, Brewer. Jason had his friend, Frank. I had my little brother, Mark.

"The superb pluck of Brewer always dissipated any latent misgivings in my own mind as to the ultimate results of our undertaking." – Hugh Willoughby

Hurry and panic are the obvious enemies of the sawgrass traveler, but exhaustion is the ultimate danger. It’s hard to be patient and careful when you are exhausted. It’s even hard to lift your feet high enough when you are that tired.

Finally, it’s hard to move at all. Add hordes of buzzing deerflies and a pack that is soaking wet and weighs five pounds more than when you started.

"It was a matter of not thinking at all, only going on. Nothing but dropping face down in the muck and giving up, would have helped." – Marjory Stoneman Douglas

Jason was right about the feeling, but wrong about the direction. Face down is not good.

The thing to do is to set your pack on a tussack above the water, and lie down on your back. Here is the most perfect relief of all. The sawgrass makes a soft, springy resting place, damp and cool. For whatever reason, the deerflies don't follow into this wonderful cocoon. There was perfect silence from eternal buzzing. Over it all was a window of sky.

The heroism of a modern day walk through the Everglades is getting up and walking on.

Toward evening of the second day we spotted the tower. We might have made it that night if I had been willing to swim through the moat of alligators in the dark. I wasn't. One can be a coward and walk across the Everglades.

We stopped at Pot Hammock, a large and handsome tree island which reared its head well above the sawgrass. The edges were surrounded by blooming sweetbay trees, as if in invitation.

There was no trail in taller than a raccoon. Once through the seemingly impenetrable bushes and vines, there was a clearing. Inside it, the hammock was magic.

There was no overtaking underbrush under the big trees. There was not a single sign of modern man. There was only a great black pot with the abandoned air that tells one that man was there and only ghosts remain.

Giant mastic and gumbo limbo loomed above. A barred owl stationed himself overhead and hooted at the moon. We slept.

Monday was a golden day. The sun was up in the sky, a cool breeze was blowing, and we could see the end of the road. We circled the tower and found a footbridge over the moat full of alligators.

We arrived just after the first morning tram. The ranger and six birdwatchers were up on the tower. We dropped our packs and loosened our shoes and took a place on the tram.

"At last they floundered up on the hard road and stood gasping under the astonished eyes of a young man fishing in the canal. The young man, occasionally taking glances sideways out of his rounded eyes, took them in." – Marjory Stoneman Douglas

So much the same. The ranger didn't know what to do with us. The birdwatchers couldn't help staring sideways.

After two and half days in the Everglades, culture shock reminds you of why you went there. You know that more than once on the trek, you have found the place that Marjory Stoneman Douglas writes about: "that has known not one single human thing, only the beasts and snakes and birds and insects that know nothing else since their time began."

Walking across the Everglades is a wonderful thing to have done.

Editor’s note: We have it on good authority (Dan Austin) that Ms. Hurchalla, a member of the Martin County Chapter FNPS, handles hot treks with great field aplomb: she simply falls backward into a waiting pool of cool water.