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Searching for the WAKULLA VOLCANO

After four years of exploring libraries and mosquito-infested swampland, talk-radio personality Sonny Branch says he's found the site of the mythical Wakulla Volcano. But others, including state geologists, aren't so sure.



Sonny Branch, the Round Man, points down the road to the site of the so-called called Wakulla Volcano. He's accompanied by, from left, fellow volcano explorer Dennis Pitts and state geologists Harley Means and Tom Scott.

MARK WALLHEISER/Democrat

By Kathleen Laufenberg
DEMOCRAT STAFF WRITER

Sonny Branch flips down the tailgate of his Blazer



Sonny Branch flips down the tailgate of his Blazer and quickly organizes his wares: maps, photos, letters, a black rock, and stacks and stacks of articles copied from books, magazines and newspapers. Some articles bear Branch's garbled scribbles in the margins. Others are numbered like a treasure map. But all are on his favorite topic: the Wakulla Volcano.

"Now y'all see here," he tells a restless group of would-be volcano explorers gathered outside of Ouzts' Oyster Bar in Newport. "I'm not about to take you out there to the spot until you hear what it's taken me four long years to learn."

Then Branch, a former talk-radio host and used-car salesman, goes to work.

"This all got started four years ago when a lady called me after the earthquake in California," Branch says of a call to his radio show. "She wanted to know if we ever had anything like that happen here."

Branch offered his homespun version of the mythical Wakulla Volcano. Although geologists say a volcano isn't geologically possible here, local folklore has it differently. Beginning about 1830, the legend goes, Tallahasseeans regularly climbed onto rooftops — and, later, atop the Old Capitol — to watch smoke belch from a mysterious volcano hidden deep in the Wacissa Swamp. Most accounts say the smoke disappeared in 1886, following a South Carolina earthquake.

Moments after he told the volcano tale, Branch says, his phone panel lit up.

"It began as a joke, and then it became a quest," he explains. "I've turned into an amateur archaeologist and a private detective because of this."

Branch — a sort of down-home, Southern-fried version of Rush Limbaugh — promised his listeners he would solve the mystery. He's led countless volunteers on several different expeditions in search of what he calls "The Big Belch," and given two seminars on the topic at the Leon County library.

And on this sunny morning in late winter, as black swallowtails zigzag through the air, he is determined to convince the world — or at least two skeptical state geologists, a wildlife officer and a news team — that he has fulfilled that vow.

"You got to have a little Colombo in you, a little vision, a little imagination," he cautions his listeners, "or you won't find nothing."



MIKE EWEN/Democrat files

Branch has "turned into an amateur archaeologist and a private detective because of this."

Then Branch folds up his volcano show, plops into his four-wheel-drive sports truck and rumbles onto U.S. Highway 98. Trailing behind are a green Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish vehicle and two geologists in an Isuzu bearing the license plate "Rock Dox."

Let the expedition begin.

To boldly go where others have gone before

But first, some lava lore. For the 56-year-old Branch is not the first brave heart to strike out in search of the Wakulla Volcano.

One previous adventurer reportedly died in the mosquito- and snake-infested swamplands trying to find it. Others endured exhaustion and barely made it back. And at least one explorer fell out of a high tree he'd climbed, trying to eyeball the source of the smoke.

Who first ventured into the Wacissa swamps to find the smoke's source, however, is unclear.

"No one knows when this supposed volcano first attracted notice," wrote Wilfred Neill in a June 1963 edition of *Florida Wildlife*. "According to Indian legend, it had always been there."

But during the 1830s, people reportedly began talking about the smoke almost as much as they did about the weather.

Some speculated it came from American Indian campfires. Others said it rose from a settlement of runaway slaves. Still others claimed it was outlaw moonshiners, nurturing the granddaddy of all stills. (And according to one account, you could leave a quarter and an empty jug in an accessible area of the swamp, and return the next day to find your money gone but your jug brimming with whiskey.)

But it took the honed skills of a



MARK WALLHEISER/Democrat

Geologist Harley Means displays a sample of organic muck found in the swamp. "It would burn if it was dry enough," says Means.

journalist to transform the mysterious column of smoke into a lava-belching volcano. The dubious distinction belongs to Barton Jones, who, while penning a piece for *Lippincott's Magazine* in 1882, dubbed the smoke the "Wakulla Volcano."

A legend was born. Soon men — manly men, of course, afraid of neither snakebite nor malaria — began eagerly lining up to find it.

Mosquitoes, moccasins and a dead reporter

One of the first daredevils to venture into the swamps was yet another reporter. In the 1870s, according to several accounts, *The New York Herald Tribune* reportedly sent a news correspondent to investigate the smoke.

"He formed an expedition and hired several guides," wrote Neill. "The group fought sawgrass, briarvines, mud, water, mosquitoes and cottonmouth moccasins ... (but) the swamp finally became impenetrable and the party turned back. The newspaper correspondent inexplicably sickened and died before high land could be reached."

Next came explorers C.L. Norton and J.H. Staley, who set out in 1891. According to Neill, they also ended up turning back, with Norton later reporting that he "nearly lost his life in the attempt."

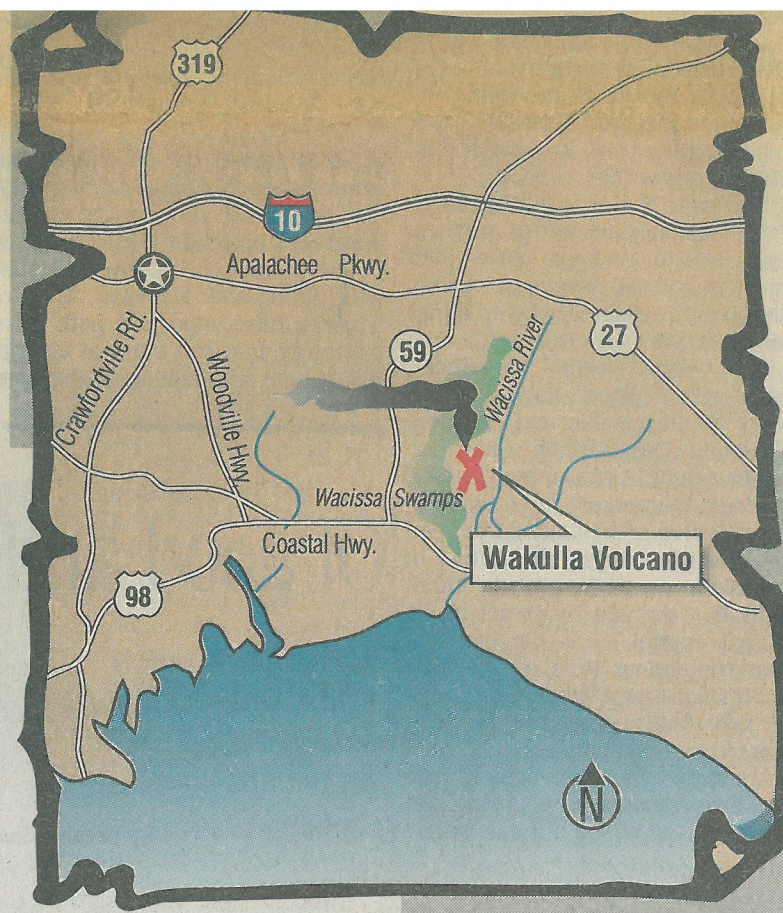
Later that year, Staley guided two more men into the swamp. But the swamp defeated them, too.

But during the next century, at different times, two pairs of men did traverse the depths of the Wacissa swamp and reported finding earthly curiosities there. One pair: A.L. Porter, a Wakulla County judge, and James Kirkland, a forester. The other: William Wyatt, a Tallahassee office-supply businessman, and Fred Wimpee, a Jacksonville businessman.

'We started out in a Model T Ford'

Porter and Kirkland reported stumbling upon a crater while deer hunting in the 1920s.

The two were in Jefferson County's Gum Swamp, near the Pinhook River, when Porter climbed a rocky



David Whitt/Democrat



State geologist Tom Scott inspects a rock sample. The large rock is porous limestone and is very common in the area. There was no sign of boulders as big as "a solid stone wall," as was noted in a report of a 1932 expedition.

VOLCANO:

Bill Wyatt, who led an expedition in the 1930s, said there was 'something eerie' about the place

From 1E

knoll and discovered the strange crater. Later, in a September 1956 letter to the *Democrat*, he described the crater as "the size of a dishpan" with a bottom too black and too deep to fathom.

Neither man ever attempted to return, though, because "a dense growth of jack pines, wire grass and other vegetation has covered the entire area and it would be difficult for Jim and me to find our crater again," Porter wrote.

Wyatt and Wimpee, on the other hand, deliberately set out to find the volcano in about 1932.

Before going, they conferred with W.T. Cash, the state librarian, and professors Raymond Bellamy and Leland Lewis, then department heads of sociology and chemistry at Florida State University.

"They were real interested in the mystery of the volcano," Wyatt told the *Democrat* in 1964. "But if they had known the danger we faced they would not have encouraged us to go."

The men followed directions left by a Chicago newsman, who had reportedly gotten close to the smoke but turned back in exhaustion.

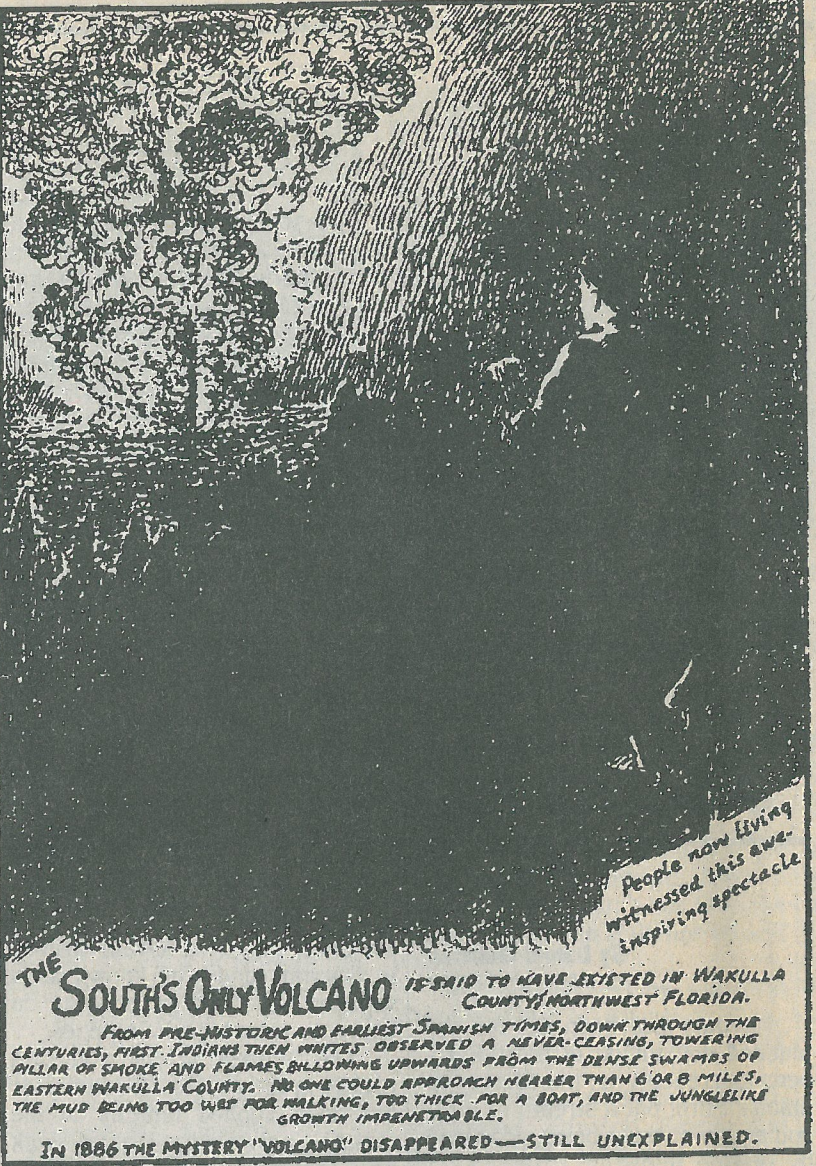
"Were we crazy!" Wyatt said. "We started out in a Model T Ford with a machete, a hand-ax, a flashlight and a small bag of sandwiches."

'There was something eerie about the place'

After driving as far as they could, they hiked to an abandoned sawmill roughly 30 miles southeast of Tallahassee. Then they hacked their way through the swamp.

Wyatt said they soon came upon rocks as big as houses, strewn over a four-mile area.

"The boulders were so big we would chop through undergrowth and come face to face with what appeared to be a solid stone wall,"



This sketch and description of the Wakulla Volcano appeared in the *Mobile Press Register* dated Jan. 22, 1950. The "Southland Sketches" were drawn by Walter Overton.

Wyatt told a *Democrat* reporter. "Some queer work of nature had gone on there. Right by great sinks, there were piles of rock that appeared to have been blown out of the ground. There was something eerie about the place because there were no trees as in the surrounding land, yet it had never been logged because there were no stumps."

Exhausted, the two young men collapsed on top of the boulders. In the morning, they fought their way out again.

No need for boots on the Branch expedition

Compared with those conducted

by past explorers, the Branch expedition is a cakewalk. Roads now allow access to swamps earlier adven-

turers had to hack their way into. And that's good luck for the portly Branch, who is fond of describing himself as the Round Man.

Branch — who has the letter S tattooed on his arm, a memento of his Army days when a fellow recruit drunkenly offered to tattoo "Sonny" there, but stopped when a likewise liquefied Branch yowled that it hurt too much — leads his entourage along Highway 98, through Wakulla County into Jefferson County.

About four miles inside the Jefferson county line, Branch (now a non-drinker) turns northeast onto an unmarked road used by hunters, toward swampland known as Hell's Half Acre.

After five bumpy miles, the explorers pile out.

A red-tailed hawk swirls overhead. An owl hoots from its hideaway. And the swamp's green arms entwine everywhere around the land, making it nearly impenetrable.

"This is it," Branch announces, sweeping his hand to indicate perhaps a football-field-sized area of swamp.

But, at least from the road, there is no crater to be seen. No giant boulders. Nothing that sets this piece of swamp apart from any other within a 10-mile radius.

For a moment, the explorers are silent. Then:

"This is it?" asks photographer Mark Wallheiser, incredulous. "I'm supposed to take a picture of this?"

"I hit the history books, I hit the library, I hit the newspaper files," Branch says firmly, "and everything points to this spot."

"The Wakulla Volcano is in Jefferson County, not Wakulla, and it's not a volcano," he continues, pulling down the rim of his National Rifle Association ball cap. "My theory is

that it was a peat-bog fire that started in one place and burnt different types of vegetation."

Branch has no evidence that the smoke came from a smoldering peat fire — but it's a theory others have entertained. And it could explain why historical accounts of the smoke column describe it as changing colors: Sometimes it appeared to be inky black, other times gray and still other times almost white.

"If you had a serious drought and the water table dropped, you could have something like that (peat fire)," says state geologist Tom Scott, who wears his long hair pulled back in a ponytail and a small gold hoop in his left ear.

Geologist Harley Means, who has been slogging around in the bordering swamp, now returns, holding a handful of swamp muck aloft.

"It's organic and rich," he says, "and, yes, it would burn if it was dry enough."

"I wish it was a volcano," says Branch. "But if I'd found a volcano, I wouldn't have called the *Democrat*. I would have called David Letterman."

'There's a lot of strange things out in that swamp'

The big boulders were blasted apart years ago to make way for Highway 98, Branch contends. And the Gum Swamp and Pinhook River, used by the Porter expedition as landmarks, are nearby.

"All we have to go on is what the old people said and common sense," Branch says. "I am 99.9-percent sure I have found where the smoke came from. How else can you explain someone doing this for four years?"

Geologists Scott and Means shake their heads and shrug. They are not convinced. And they look a

trifle downcast that they will not be asked to tromp through the swamp and look at rocks. But they try to be polite and not pummel Branch's theory.

"For years we've been fielding questions about the Wakulla Volcano and telling people that, geologically, it's not possible," says Scott, who wears an arresting picture of a hungry T-Rex on his T-shirt. "I'd like to think that this would put to rest the myth of the volcano, but I'm afraid that five years from now, it will come back up again."

Rather than tell people the site of the smoke has finally been discovered, Scott says he'll leave that to Branch. (And Branch invites anyone with a volcano question to call him on his "groupie, death-threat and stalker line": 893-6241.)

Veteran Wildlife Officer Robert Daniels — on the trek, he says, only to ensure no city folk get lost in the swamp or step on a water moccasin — allows that he's not convinced by Branch's story either. But he strives for neutrality.

"There's a lot of strange things out in that swamp no man has ever seen," he says amiably.

Though surrounded by doubting Thomases, the Round Man remains confident. He maintains that a plaque should be erected on this spot someday, to memorialize the site of the smoke. With his name prominently included, of course, as the man who solved the mystery.

But for now, he's on to his next excellent adventure.

"You ever heard of Billy Bowlegs?" he asks, a twinkle in his eye. "He was an ex-slave who was a pirate. He buried some gold in a chest somewhere in Franklin County."

"That's my next project: I'm going to find Billy Bowlegs' treasure."

Coming Tuesday in . . .

Families

Meet Domino, the pet of the week!

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SECTION D