

Homage to a Place and loss. Storytelling, recognizing fallacies of memory. Five generations of story, with wisdom of the old ones, presided over by Thomas and his code of self-serving: the land, the fields, the woods, the work, the food.

## **Magnolia Elegy: Place In the Edisto Fork**

By Tom T Traywick

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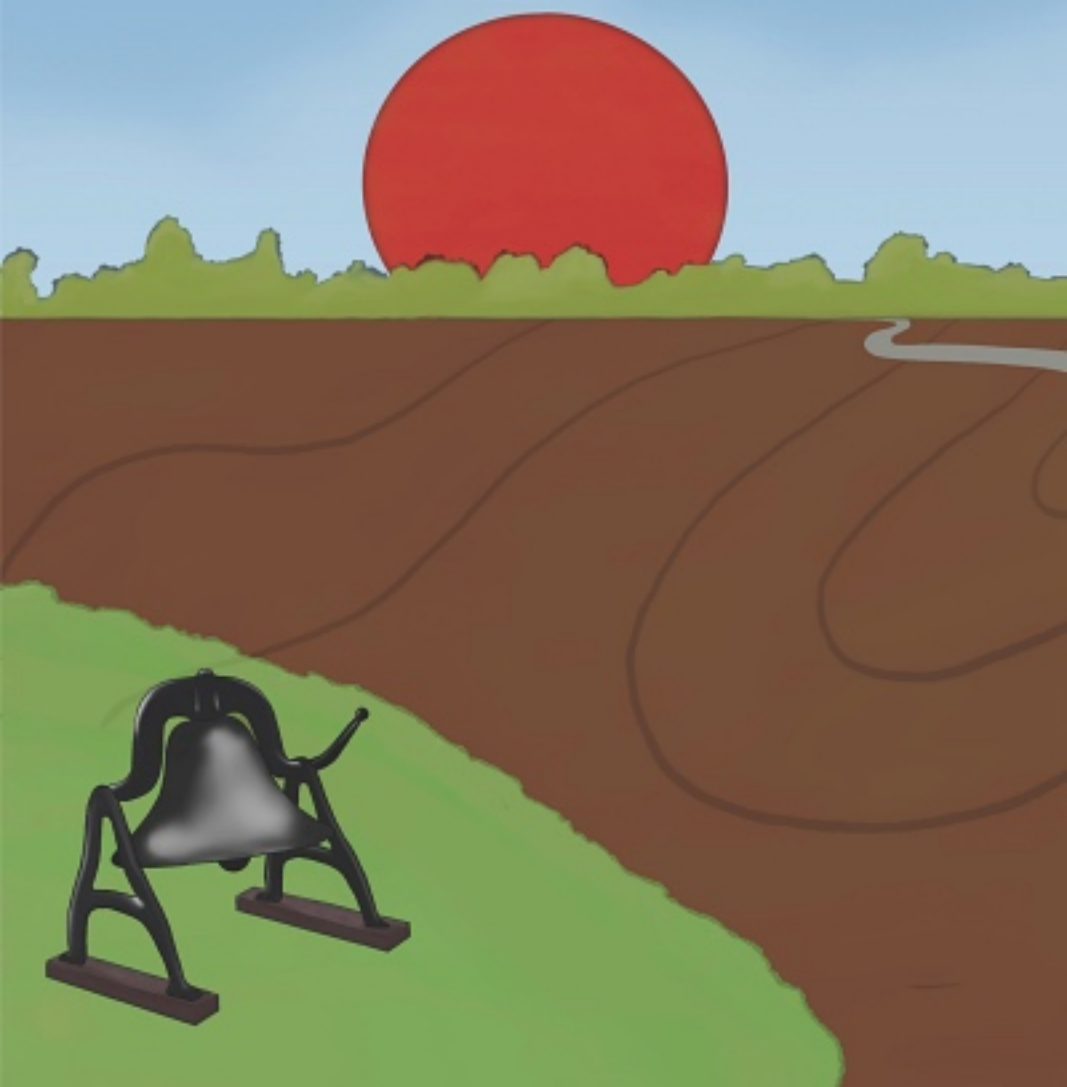
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# *Magnolia Elegy*

Place In the Edisto Fork

Tom T. Traywick



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Print ISBN: 978-1-64719-943-2

Ebook ISBN: 978-1-64719-944-9

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Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., Trenton, Georgia.

Printed on acid-free paper.

BookLocker.com, Inc.

2022

First Edition

Cover design by Greer Gunby

Due to the dynamic nature of the internet, web addresses and links contained in this book may no longer be valid. The views expressed in this work are solely those of the author.

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication Data

Traywick, Tom T

Magnolia Elegy: Place In the Edisto Fork by Tom T Traywick

Library of Congress Control Number: 2021923948

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# **Elegy**

*This is the place in which  
the living live in the absence  
of all who once were here,  
their stories kept a while  
in memories soon to be gone  
the way of the untongued stories  
preceding ours, reduced  
to graves mostly lost  
and a few found strayed  
artifacts of stone.*

*—Wendell Berry, *The Art of Loading Brush**

*We owe respect to the living; to the dead we owe only truth.*

*—Voltaire*

There was a bell. At the center of the world was the farm on the foot of the Orangeburg Scarp, and out on the corner of the farmyard—the direction from which the vital summer rains approached—where the reddish sandy loam soil sloped upward gradual and evenly to the Northwest, sat the large cast-iron bell. The bell used to signal the start and finish of the workday, the noon dinner hour, and emergencies such as fire. The beginning of my conscious recall, my first memory, pictured in monochrome, is here near that bell where an old barn had been in collapse for as long as Libba could *endure*. Thomas was away that day, and Libba took command and rounded up a crew that cheerfully cleaned up the structural remains while gaining warmth from work and from the fires consuming the less salvageable wood. The job was all done by the time Thomas returned. No after-story is recalled. Thomas made no mention of it or took no notice—or else it played out off stage?



According to Libba, this day took place during late winter. I was born a month or so later in the spring—the year of the attack on Pearl Harbor.

### **Memory at Work**

I have walked into my ninth decade. My memory is incomplete and overfull. There is reason to believe that there are experiences in my recall, and knowledge that I hold, about which I am mistaken—or that my memory of any event might in fact be combined memory of two or more events—or a dream. My clumsy recall of events sometimes triggers the fleeting thought, “I need to ask mother,” but Libba is gone.

No longer are family stories told and retold around our meals together and in our other gatherings and celebrations—although sometimes at funerals—but that is too late. Stories have been lost that were told 65 and 165 years ago because nobody “took them down” and then technology crowded into the oral tradition, distracting everyone from the real stories, and the real stories overflowed and were lost to memory.

Some family and friends might think that I should not have written some of this—that it is disloyal or untrue or both—however, I did not write for them but for their grandchildren, our Others on ahead, and indeed our future Old Ones.

Dysfunction in family dynamic is to be expected, is perfectly natural, and urges excellence among its heirs. Not shame, but pride of survival should be its product. I think that for whatever empathy and understanding can be gained by the telling of the stories, the stories should be told. “What it is” is not necessarily so. What happened might have happened, as near as we can tell, subject to the fallibility of memory. It is Life. Truth or Parable—it is Light.

This work, although memoir, is not my memoir, but a memory of the Place—and the People and the Animals and their integral smaller Places.

A Place it is—but only in our Memory. It is our space, our Place, our cove, our cave, mother earth; and it is gone. The Big House and Joe B's Magnolia Center office are the end all and the be all. Nothing else remains. All of the other buildings have been destroyed. The grounds are nearly unrecognizable now, a half century later.

This work, although about the Place, must first be about Memory—how it works—how it fails.

When I conceived of building a weblog and taking up "blogging," I had some notions about how that would work. *Watch out!* I had a notion that the blog could work like "team memory," in that others (notably friends and family) would chip in with feedback and comments, some critical, thus fueling the process and making the effort a creative community of sorts, enhancing, thereby, the accuracy of the stories told. So far that hasn't happened; which is of course because I haven't figured out how to cultivate feedback and comments. I can see many blogs that have that limitation, and some still-visible blogs that appear to have died on the vine; they have not been posted to in months or years. Perhaps the bottom line is, receiving no feedback increases the content of the writer's self, and decreases the amount of material and ideas about which to write.

I (there's that word again) had a notion that I would not like the self-absorption element of blogging. I was correct. The 1983 movie, "The Big Chill," is considered the ultimate 1980s baby boomer movie and includes wonderful music and acting. The story tells about a few days in the mid-life of old friends who were schoolmates in Ann Arbor, and who have gathered at a country church at Beaufort, South Carolina, for the funeral of a dear friend who has taken his own life. There is a brief conversation among three of the men as to whether the ultimate act of

self-absorption is suicide or auto-eroticism (not the word they used). That was before Facebook and blogging came along. I don't need anything in my life to make me more self-absorbed, so I have some work to do.

I had a notion that family stories could be told (chatted together) in a weblog. I did not realize how much more and more folk are turned off by the internet. Turned off by the incessant noise and the tsunami of bogus (synthetic, artificial) stuff, and by the very real security threats; turned off so much they really don't care to winnow the wheat and the chaff, and they, more and more, refuse to click on a link to anything. Some observers are using the Boston Marathon Bombing story as an illustration that those who can read would have been much more accurately served had they read the Times or the Globe each day and never turned on anything electric.

I had a notion that writers get up every morning and write for three hours; and then do whatever else needs to be done with a focus on social activities (face-to-face live-in person), correspondence, and reading (hard copy). Well, there you go again. I do have some work to do.

### **Thomas's Buck**

I've not often come to tears in my life—and that is a flaw—but when I have teared up, it has often had to do with a heroic animal; the stretch run of a horse race, the “putting down” of animals I've lived with, or reading of the “putting down” at the track of the filly Ruffian; or sometimes the live performance of great music Bach, Sondheim and Bernstein, or Darrell Scott—or Lady Gaga singing the national anthem for the 2021 Presidential Inauguration. It is reaction, no doubt, to some old dispossession.

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When I read again “The Bear” among the Big Woods stories of William Faulkner, I was reminded of Prissy, our Tennessee saddle mare, and I was reminded of Thomas’s Buck.

“The Bear ...”

Lord...! What a story! When I read the line “He died at sundown” it finished pulling me apart inside like the great dog had ripped open Major de Spain’s colt. That story; of Old Ben, young Ike McCaslin and his mentor, old Sam Fathers; of Major de Spain, Boon Hogganbeck and Lion; that story became so much more important to me at this age than it was at readings 30 and 50 years ago. I can now see the End through the eyes of the “Old One” Sam Fathers, as well as understand how young Ike McCaslin will see it for the remainder of his four-score years.

Thomas’s wall was adorned with the mounted head of a handsome whitetail buck he killed when he was about 10. Thomas seemed to do almost everything when he was 9; he read the Encyclopedia Britannica entire, travelled to Yellowstone National Park on the train with his mother, got his first pair of shoes, and so forth; but those are other stories. Perhaps he was not invited on a deer hunt until he became 10 in the Fall of 1919. Ike McCaslin was not allowed to go on the Big Woods hunt until his age was of “two digits.” Thomas became 10 in September 1919 and went on the hunt. He entered college when he was 15.

I don’t remember hearing who his mentor was on the day of his first hunt. I didn’t ask, but now I wish I knew that part of the story. The suspects are his Uncle W. O. Tatum, or his cousin and neighbor Wilmot Tatum Jennings, or the farm overseer and family friend Burton Ashe; his father had been dead for 8 years. Because Whitetail deer were not proliferated then as they are now, it was necessary to travel to the lower coastal plain river swamps to hunt. By the late 1940s, the local deer hunting was done in “The Corner” (the fork of the North and South

Edisto), which was about 15 miles from the farm. His kill took place at The Ridge Hunt Club, which was (and is) on Highway 61 about 5 miles east of the US 21 intersection on the Edisto River. He would have travelled from the farm (about 25 miles) by horse or buggy or Model T Ford on roads and bridges of a hundred years ago, dirt roads and wooden bridges.<sup>1</sup>

The story goes that Thomas was assigned a “stand” and he dozed off. When he awoke, the deer was there, and he killed him. He was “bloodied” (a ritual in which the veterans smear the first-time killer with the blood of his kill). He got a trophy head, and never hunted deer again.

Ike McCaslin, however, had not dozed off because Sam Fathers’ hand was on his shoulder, Faulkner says:

“At first there was nothing. ... Then the buck was there. He did not come into sight: he was just there, ...seen first as you always see the deer, in that split second after he has already seen you...”

Ike got his buck “...quick, and slow” and Thomas got his; and I believe the circumstances were similar—as if the woods “exhaled”, and the buck was there.

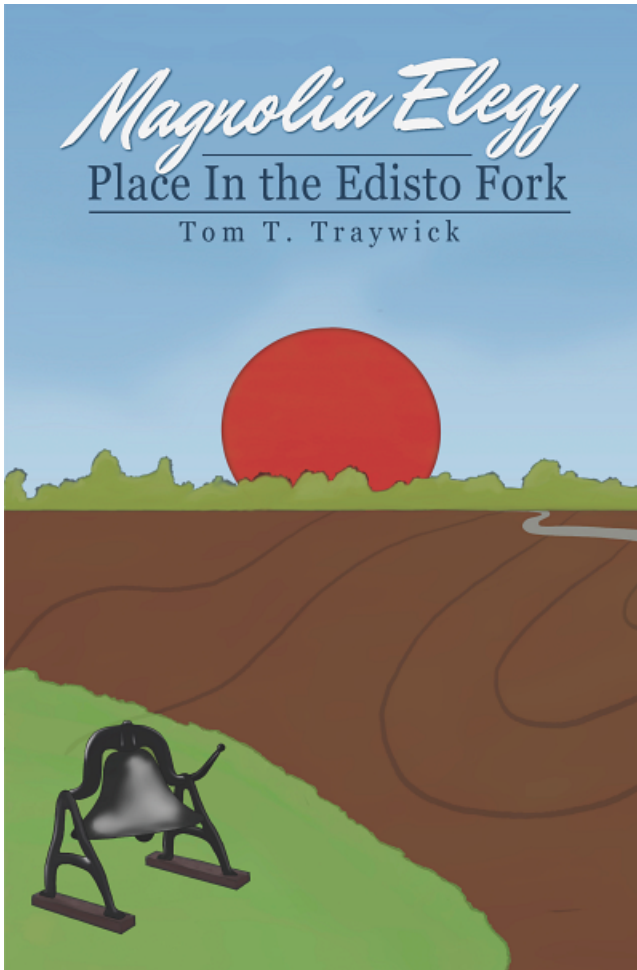
I doubt the head of Thomas’s buck has survived. I wonder. I hope it hasn’t. That stolen totem had nothing to do with the essence of the buck—his breath—still in the woods.

### **The Hickory Glade**

We walked out of the barn together. I was 30 years and she was 31. It was November 1971.

We walked together southwest from the farmyard through the Pecan orchards toward Cooper Swamp. She perked up and shook the lead line. I imagine she was thinking...

“Well, together again. Let’s go!”



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