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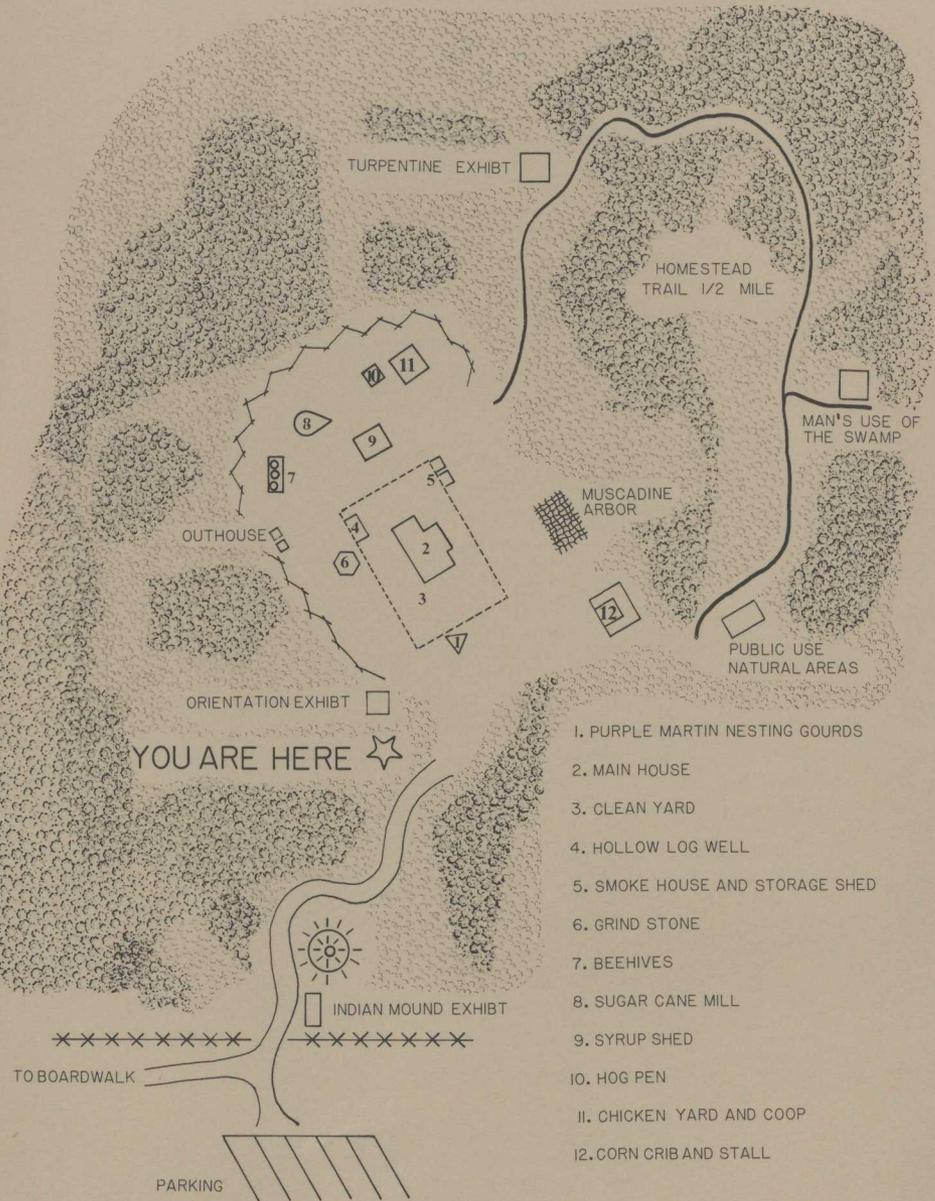
# CHESSER ISLAND HOMESTEAD

A PIONEER FAMILY'S PRODUCTIVE WAY OF LIVING



OKEFENOKEE NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

FOLKSTON, GEORGIA



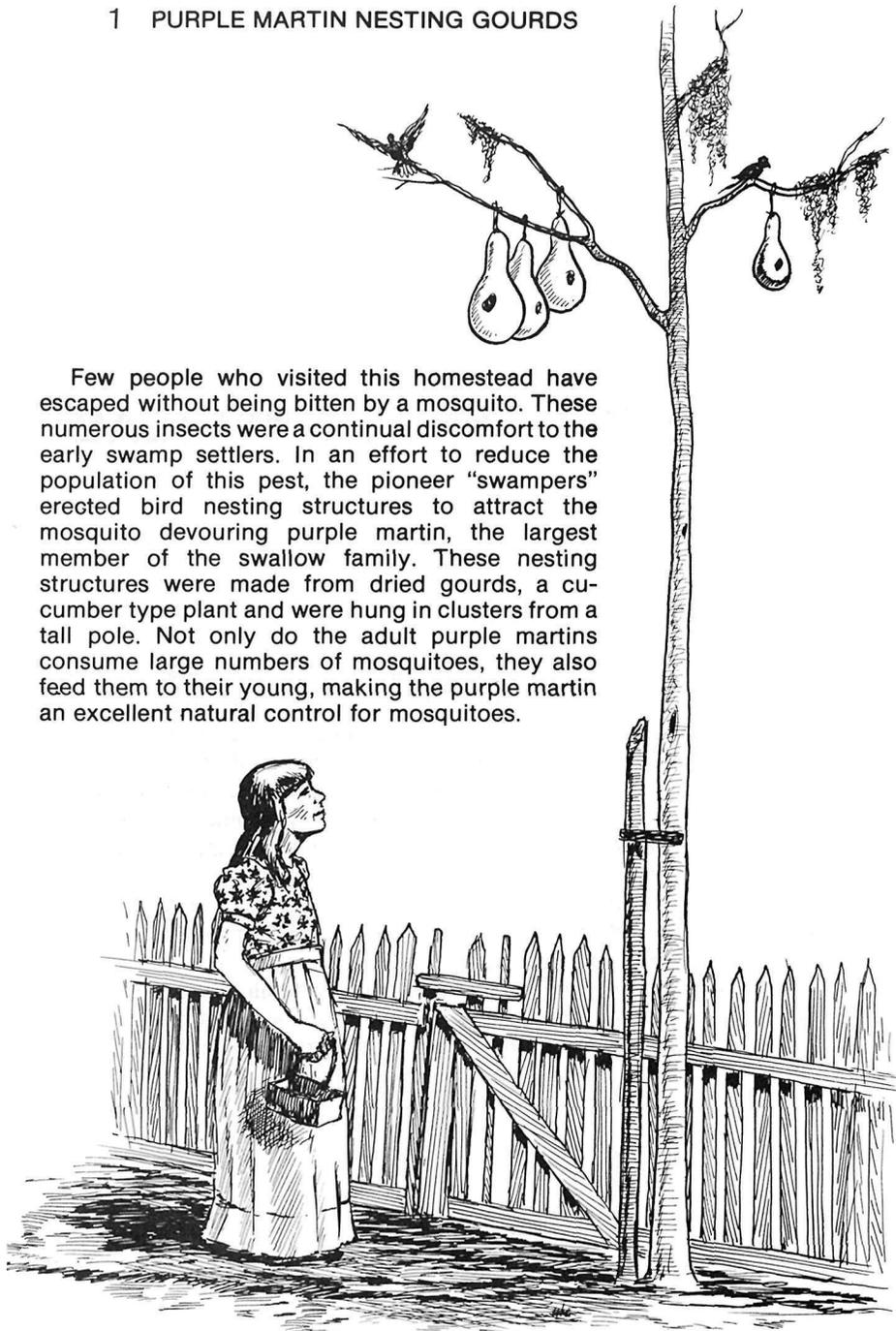
## CHESSER ISLAND HOMESTEAD

Welcome to the Chesser Island Homestead, a historic place where you can learn a great deal about typical pioneer life that once unfolded along the periphery of the great Okefenokee Swamp. The Chesser family settled Chesser Island in 1858; and from that date until a very few years ago, much of the history you will see and enjoy today was taking place. In addition to the features described in some detail in this booklet, take sufficient time and enjoy the sheltered exhibits that tell about early Indian life in the swamp, the wilderness values of Okefenokee, the utilization of the swamp's vast wildlife resources by early pioneers, and a naval stores operation (commonly referred to as "turpentine").

We hope you will enjoy your visit, and we will appreciate any suggestions that you may wish to make. Please leave everything as you find it so that others who follow may share your experience.

1. PURPLE MARTIN NESTING GOURDS
2. MAIN HOUSE
3. CLEAN YARD
4. HOLLOW LOG WELL
5. SMOKE HOUSE AND STORAGE SHED
6. GRIND STONE
7. BEEHIVES
8. SUGAR CANE MILL
9. SYRUP SHED
10. HOG PEN
11. CHICKEN YARD AND COOP
12. CORN CRIB AND STALL

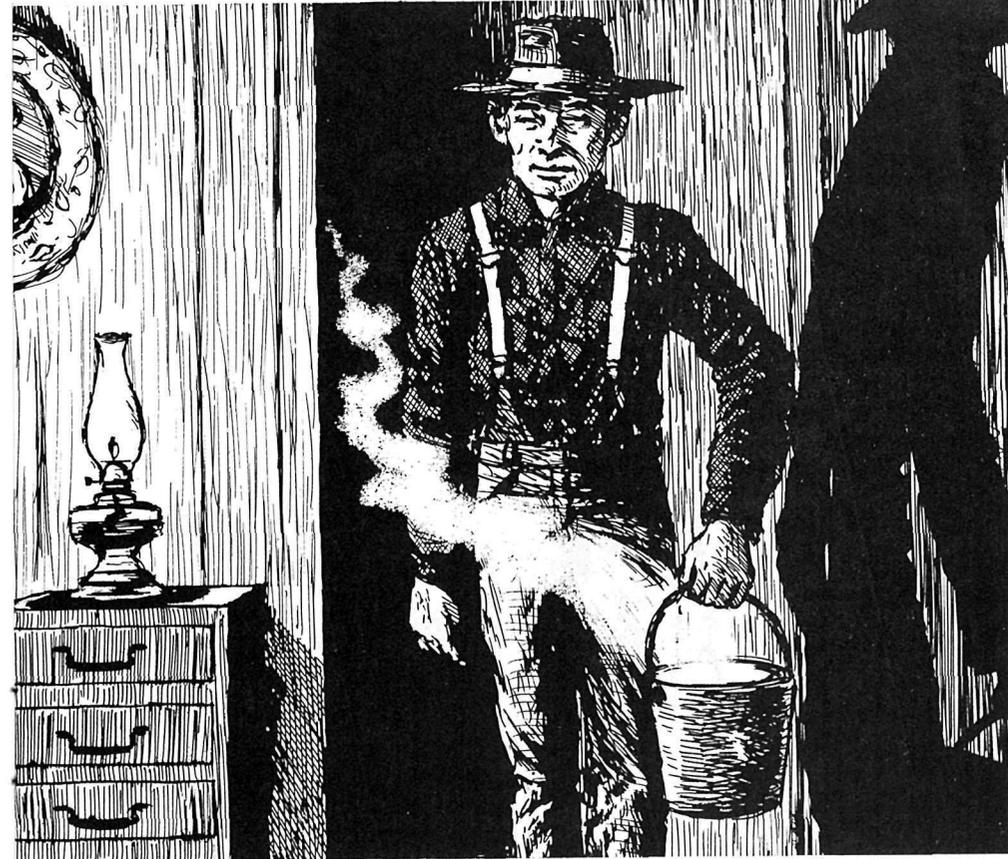
## 1 PURPLE MARTIN NESTING GOURDS



Few people who visited this homestead have escaped without being bitten by a mosquito. These numerous insects were a continual discomfort to the early swamp settlers. In an effort to reduce the population of this pest, the pioneer "swampers" erected bird nesting structures to attract the mosquito devouring purple martin, the largest member of the swallow family. These nesting structures were made from dried gourds, a cucumber type plant and were hung in clusters from a tall pole. Not only do the adult purple martins consume large numbers of mosquitoes, they also feed them to their young, making the purple martin an excellent natural control for mosquitoes.

## 2 MAIN HOUSE

During the years that have passed since the Chesser family first settled the island in 1858, several houses were built at various locations. The existing main house was built by the family in the late 1920's. Heart pine and cypress lumber were the basic building materials. Additions to the house were made at various times as the family grew in size. Five bedrooms are included in the house attesting to the large size of many families that were raised around the edge of the Okefenokee.



Before the days of window screens, mosquitoes often were controlled in some swamp homes by smoking the rooms with a small fire using oak bark ignited in a bucket. The bucket was carried from room to room, and the smoke would drive the mosquitoes away. Sometimes the process had to be repeated several times during the night.

### 3 CLEAN YARD

You will note as you tour the homestead that there is no grass or lawn around the house. There was a time when a well kept yard was one that was completely bare of vegetation and swept clean. The yard was often "scraped" with a hoe to remove any grass or weeds which might sprout. With several children playing in the yard and chickens pecking at the blades, grass would have had very little chance of growing anyway.



### 4 HOLLOW LOG WELL



Cypress, because of its durability, was used liberally by swampers in construction projects. Its use in a well was imperative since the wood is continuously wet. Without the hollowed log, freshly dug wells were apt to immediately cave in and refill with the sandy soil that is so common in uplands adjacent the swamp.

A rope and pulley, as you see here, was one common way of drawing water from the well. Sometimes a long weighted lever or sweep was used to lift the heavy bucket of water.

## 5 SMOKEHOUSE AND STORAGE SHED

The wonderfully odorous smokehouse was usually located close to the main house since the family's meat supply was stored there. Fresh meat, usually pork hams, bacon, sausage and venison, was first cured with salt. Next it was hung from wooden ceiling beams or poles. Fires made of green oak smoldered and smoked to further preserve and flavor the meat.

Once cured and smoked, the meat was usually cut into portion-sized chunks and packed in cans of lard. The lard sealed the meat from moisture which could have caused it to mold in the very humid climate.

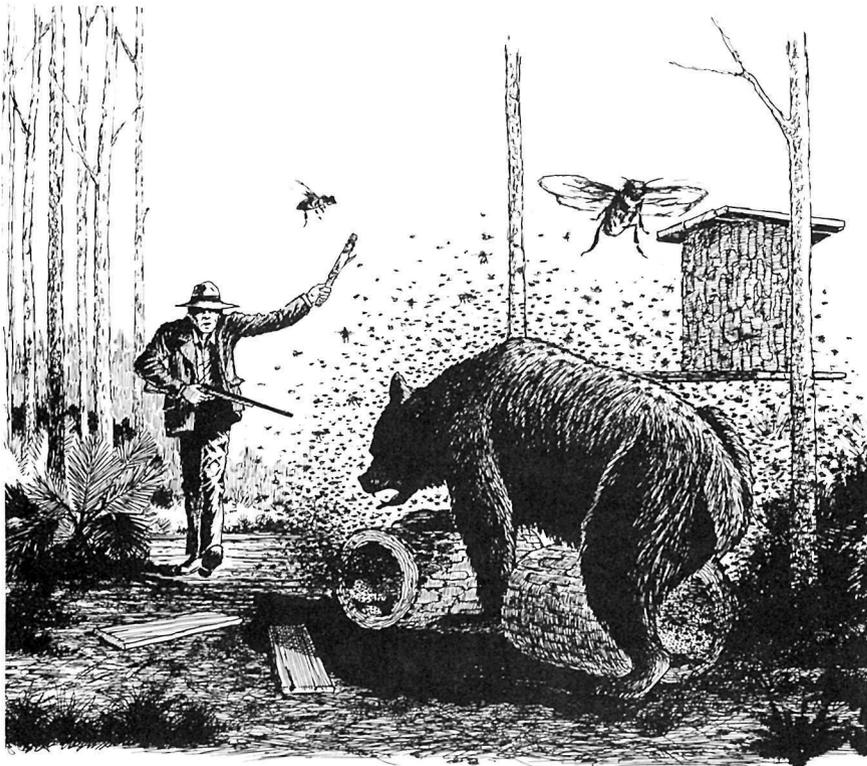


This shed could have contained dried beans, peas, apples, figs, peaches, or huckleberries. The floor may have been covered with red potatoes. Onions and dried peppers may have hung from the ceiling. By the end of the growing season, this shed would have contained enough food to last until the next spring.

## 6 GRINDSTONE

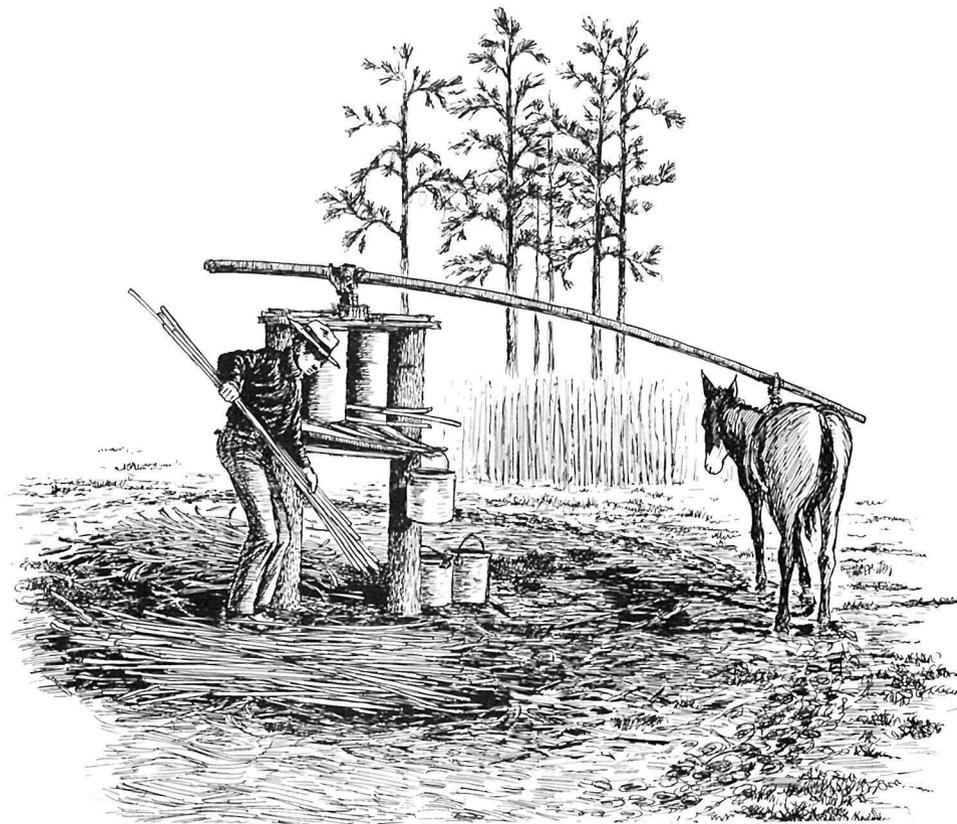


Two people are required to operate this implement and often it was the children who turned the stone while their father sharpened his axe, knife, hoe, or other tool. Dripping water kept the pores of the sandstone open for faster sharpening.



The Okefenokee area is well-known for its fine quality gall-berry honey. Swamp families, dependent upon honey as a sweetener, frequently established homemade beehives in hollow cypress logs. A hole was notched near the base for access by the bees. Nectar gathered from swamp flowers made honey production excellent and the supply quite plentiful. One drawback to beekeeping in this region was the occasional robbing of the hives by a hungry black bear. Bears, of course, are more than fond of honey.

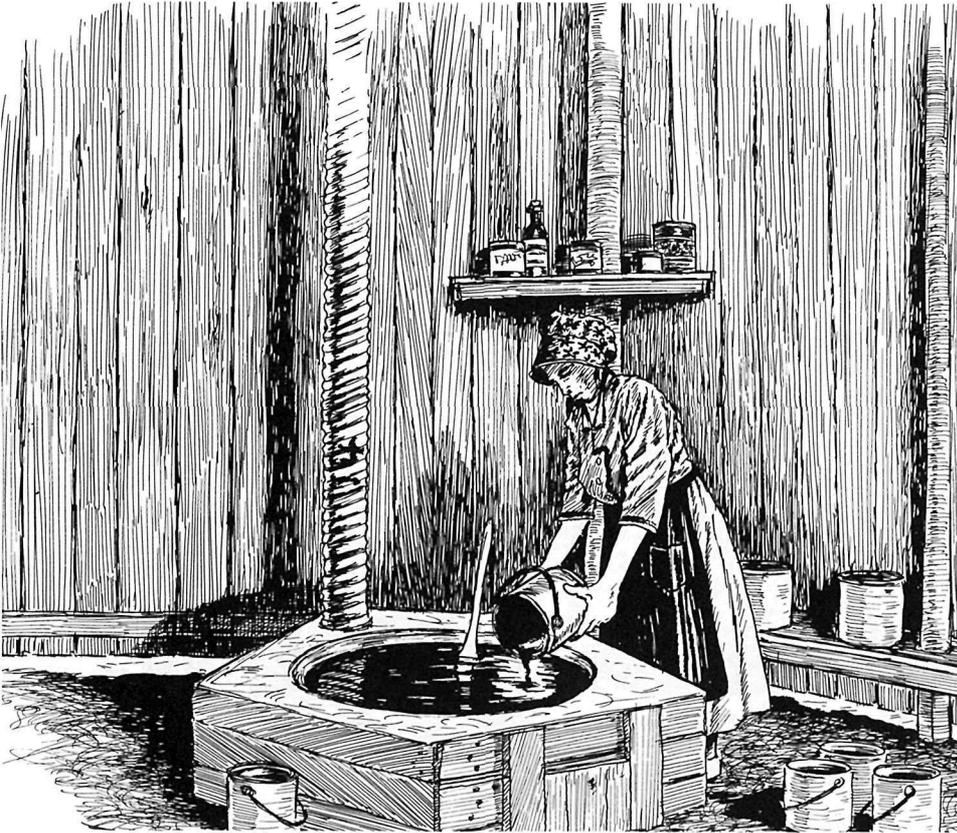
As the mule pulled the sweep around the grinding mill, an operator would feed two stalks of sugar cane through the rollers in order to squeeze the juice from the cane. The juice was strained through clean burlap or other similar coarse material as it was being collected in a tub or wooden barrel. The juice was then carried in buckets to the syrup-making shed for boiling. Sometimes the children would push the sweep by hand just to squeeze some juice to drink.



## 9 SYRUP SHED

Evaporating the water and concentrating the sugar content of the cane juice was and still is the principal involved in making sugar cane syrup. The 60-gallon boiler in this shed was filled with raw sugar cane juice, and a roaring fire of fat lighter pine was built beneath the boiler. The juice was boiled and continually strained, skimmed and clarified for 3 or 4 hours, and finally yielded only 7 or 8 gallons of finished syrup.

In addition to providing food for the home, some of the syrup was sold to provide an income. Cane syrup from Chesser Island was prized highly in South Georgia for its fine flavor.



In some cases, the early settlers made their own sugar from the cane juice. To do this, the juice had to be boiled longer to further concentrate the sugar. A big wooden barrel was filled with the very thick syrup and was inverted on a table which was grooved to fit the barrel rim tightly. One small notch was provided to drain off the molasses leaving the raw sugar crystals in the drain.

## 10 HOG PEN

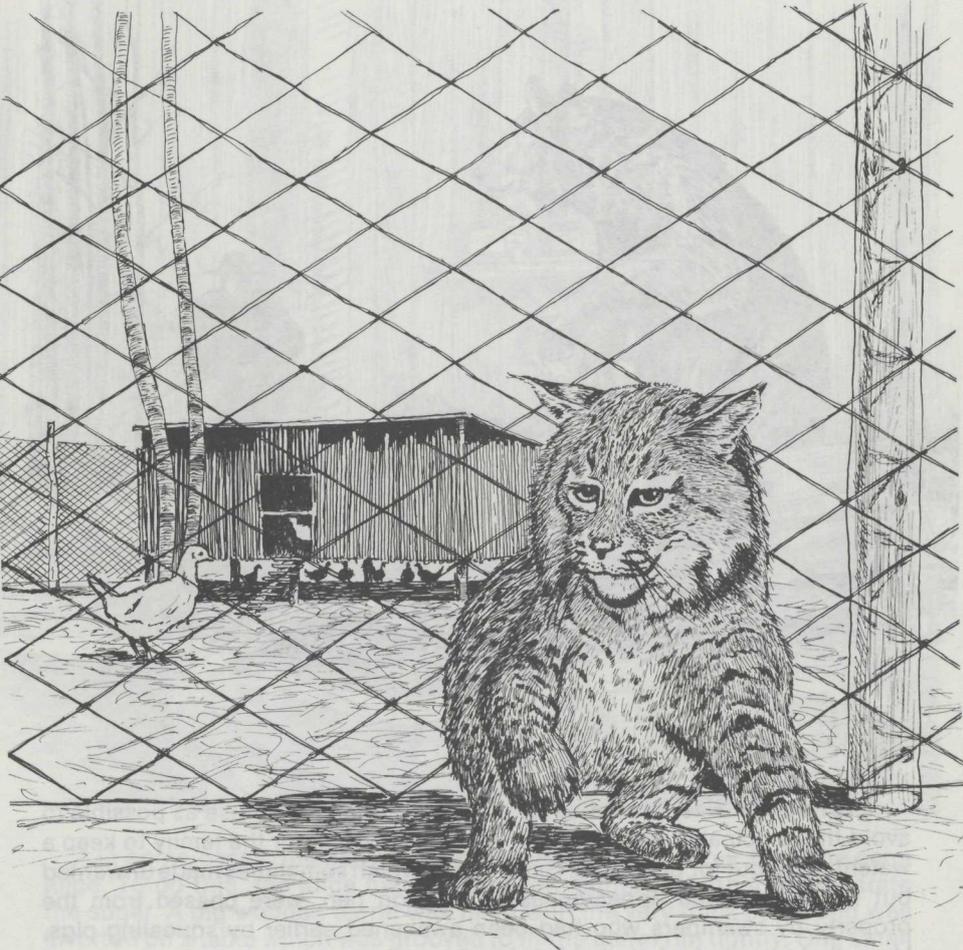


The hog pen was located as far away from the main house as possible to avoid the anticipated odor and was yet close enough for the family to keep a watchful eye out for predators. Black bears, which sometimes made unwanted but not unexpected appearances at the hog pen, were chased from the property by swampers who had been awakened earlier by squealing pigs. Hogs that were to be fattened for slaughter were put into a separate pen and generously fed selected grain.

## 11 CHICKEN YARD AND COOP

... "When the Chickens Come Home to Roost"

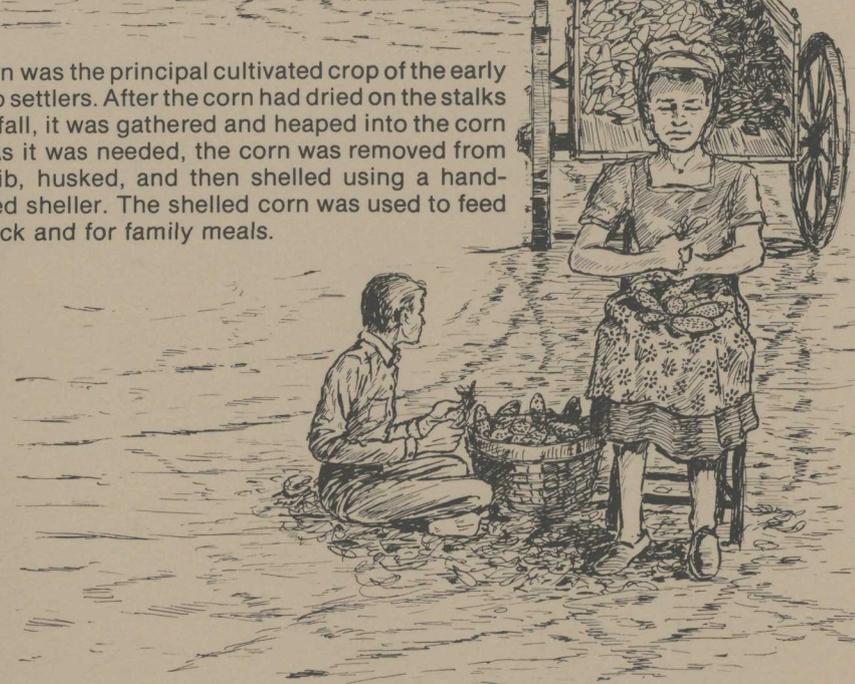
Despite their wandering nature, chickens and other fowl almost always returned at night to the same area to roost. The spread of corn and an echoing man-created chicken call summoned browsing chickens to the yard and to the coop where they spent the night relatively safe from predators such as foxes and bobcats. The small coop was for the old hen and her biddies.



## 12 CORN CRIB AND STALL



Corn was the principal cultivated crop of the early swamp settlers. After the corn had dried on the stalks in the fall, it was gathered and heaped into the corn crib. As it was needed, the corn was removed from the crib, husked, and then shelled using a hand-cranked sheller. The shelled corn was used to feed livestock and for family meals.



White corn was grown abundantly in the Okefenokee Swamp and was utilized in making grits and corn meal. More often than not, the corn was ground at home with a hand-cranked mill.

The remainder of this building served as stalls in which to store the wagon and the buggy. The homestead mule also enjoyed the comfort of the stalls. The loft was used as a storehouse for fodder and hay which was needed to feed the mule and other livestock that may have been present.