

# Wins Battle ... with

# Catamount

## Turpentine Worker and Wildest of Cat-Family Species Fight It Out for Possession of Man's Cabin

By WILLIAM HORNE

THE Okefenokee swamp is a wild, awe-inspiring region. Like a world of its own, it stretches from far up in Georgia down and into the State of Florida, nearly a thousand square miles of wildness and tropical beauty.

Myriad canals and alligator trails and smaller runways cut like writhing tentacles of some giant octopus through the watery prairies and between small, undulating islands that nod eerily to your moving presence.

Going on and on these countless waterways finally end against larger, firmer islands deep in the gloom of semitropical jungle in the heart of the vast region far from the prying eyes of an outside world.

In her majestic solitude Okefenokee lies even like a hundred years ago when the lowly Seminole, driven back by the encroaching whites, sought deep in her bosom for safety in their last retreat.

Thousands of towering cypress lift their stately heads high above the jungle roof-like lonely sentinels, beards of gray Spanish moss trailing from lower branches, swinging ghost-like above the matted, impenetrable jungle walls beneath

Okefenokee. Serenely treacherous; wildly beautiful.

### Wild Life Abundant

GIANT saurian abound plentifully in the shallow waters and lie basking on banks of silt throughout the region, and the dim game trails are still the haunts of deer and bear and timber wolves, foxes and 'coons, 'possums, otter, beaver and many species of the cat family.

But the meanest of all members of the feline tribe that prowl the fastness of the swamp is the catamount.

He is not so voracious or pugnacious as his close brother, the panther, but he is, nevertheless, a killer, and scarcely a day that passes he fails to take his gruesome toll.

He grows to enormous lengths. Catamounts that measured eight feet from nose to tip of tail and that balanced the scales at 160 pounds have been killed in this swamp.

As a rule the catamount is vicious and quarrelsome, sometimes killing for the sheer love of killing, and although generally very much afraid of man, he has been known to attack without warning and kill a lone native with his savage, ripping claws and terrible teeth.

Like the scream of a panther, his cry is eerie and blood-curdling, and in the dead of night from far across the silent swamp may come his wild cry as he quarrels over the kill of a wild porker or mule deer.

The catamount's daily life is, indeed, a gruesome routine of serial murders, and he isn't a bit choosy as to his prey. He never hesitates to attack anything living in his domain, from a lowly rabbit to a full-grown buck deer, and he has been known to spring upon full 300-pound black bears when they ventured too near during his mating season.

Many natives of the swamp carry hideous scars in mute testimony of the blood-thirsty nature of this giant killer of the Southland's little-known jungle.



That backward step came near being fatal to Rufe Jackson, for as he moved, the giant cat launched itself with a scream straight into his face.

RUFE JACKSON, a turpentine worker who lives alone in a one-room cabin of cypress slabs well within the swamp limits, probably knows more about the nasty temper and fighting prowess of the Okefenokee catamount than any living native.

He carries deep scars on both upper arms and across his chest, and a livid mark down his cheek from his forehead to his chin from the raking talons of one of the murderous felines, and he recalls vividly the details of the hand-to-hand encounter that came near costing him his life.

Strange and eerie and breath-taking are some of the experiences related by many inhabitants of the swamp, but surely being locked inside a tiny cabin with a wounded catamount is one of the most hair-raising of all, and that is what recently happened to Rufe Jackson.

At different points in the swamp the turpentine crews have small, one-room cabins for the convenience of workers when they are caught away from their homes at nightfall.

These "line cabins," as they are called, are equipped merely with a crude bunk, a small wood stove and a few cooking utensils, and when a man knows he will be too far away from his home at dark to conveniently return for the night, he takes with him a small supply of uncooked food and prepares it at the line cabin at the end of the day.

Rufe Jackson was caught several miles from his home one evening at nightfall. He had with him a small supply of bacon, meal and coffee, and with first dark made his way alone to the nearest cabin, half a mile distant.

On his arrival there he found the cabin door open, but this did not surprise him, for men were careless, and he had found the same thing many nights before.

So he crossed the small clearing, taking with him a small tin trough filled with raw resin, applied a match and placed the improvised flambeau just outside the doorway so he would have sufficient light to prepare the evening meal.

Mosquitoes aroused with first dark, came down in swarms, and this smoking torch served to drive them off.

### Face to Face With "Cat"

BUT he never prepared the evening meal. For he had no more than swung the sack of uncooked food from his shoulder as he crossed the floor of the tiny cabin toward the stove than there came to his ears a low, ominous snarl from the doorway behind him.

He whirled about and peered into the deep shadows where the flickering light failed to touch, but saw nothing. He walked toward the door with the intention of bringing the dancing light inside, but as he neared the open door the growl came again. This time it was deadlier and nearer. He swung the door half shut and looked behind it in the corner of the room.

He froze at what he saw. Scarcely five feet away crouched a long, dark form. Green eyes glowed from the darkness upon his face.

He had no weapon except a keen-edged hunting knife he always carried in his sheath at his belt. His hand sought its hilt, and without taking his eyes from those gleaming orbs behind the door he slowly drew it and stepped backward.

But that backward step came near being fatal for Rufe Jackson, for as he moved the giant cat launched itself with a scream straight up into his face.

Rufe Jackson screamed, too, and as he did he fell backward hard against the open door. It slammed violently and the crude wooden latch clicked in place and held it shut.

THEN the catapulting body crashed full into his chest, and with a cry on his lips he was carried backward to the floor.

He threw up his arms toward off those clawing talons and raking fangs. The cat's claws sank deep into his forearms and ripped them to the bone.

Madly, savagely he thrashed out with feet and flailing arms, and with low, snarling gasps the big cat raked him mercilessly with terrible claws.

He felt hot blood run down his back from a long, deep gash across his face, and he felt the needle-sharp claws lay his chest wide open.

One of his arms encircled the tawny attacker's rippling shoulders, and now he thought for the first time of the keen knife in his clenched, bloody fist.

In desperation he struck out at the heaving side, he felt the point sink deep, he drew it out and with sobs on his lips drove it in again and again and again.

The big cat screamed in agony and raked its rear feet up and down in terrific jerks that would have disemboweled Rufe Jackson had he not swerved his lithe body aside and once again he drove home the long knife.

This time the great claw that had been clutching him like a giant hand on one ripped shoulder jerked away, and there came a shrill, trembling, agonizing cry from the open mouth there so close to his face in the dark.

It died away to a gurgling moan and he felt the heavy body go limp and slide to the floor beside him.

For a long time after the cat had died of the final thrust through its savage heart Rufe Jackson lay there gasping for breath and dizzy and sick from the pain and loss of blood.

Finally he managed to crawl to the door, open it and pull himself erect and stagger off through the trees to the house of a friend four miles distant.

Rufe can't remember how he managed those four miles through the thick swamp, but he did. And the surgical skill of his friend, learned during years of life in the great swamp, although crude, saved him from certain death.

He will always carry deep scars of that encounter with one of the swamp's worst denizens, grim reminders of his closest call to death during a lifetime in the jungle of Southeastern United States.