

# Tampa Review 26



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著者:

出版者:

出版时间:

装帧:

isbn:9781879852983

hristmas Eve. The nativities I visited contrast of darkness punctured by light¼ and in<br> with my wife and her family were trian- the shadows we saw human figures in clusters<br> gular log constructions perched along with appendages of children¼ extended family<br>the levee s edge. One hundred and sixty in all. members¼ and close friends.<br>We had hoods and stocking caps pulled over The bonfire construction begins late in Octo-<br>our ears¼ disguising us as much as the light mist ber when families and friends cut trees from<br>and darkness. The incline to reach the levee s their woods¼ strip off the branches on tailgates<br>peak was steep¼ as these man-made mounds of trucks¼ measure and saw the logs into sec-<br>had been constructed to keep floodwaters at tions¼ haul them by flatbed¼ load after load¼ to<br>bay¼ the neighborhoods safe a hundred

yards the edge of the levee where larger logs are used for  
from their base and  
not as walkways for folks the base are pulled up the slope by four-  
on holiday.  
Two days of wispy rain and tem- wheeler and tractor while those for the frame  
peratures in the forties (enough in the South to be hand-carried by two or more  
women and  
call a white Christmas) made the ascent pre- men. The top pieces that  
will be placed later by  
carious--that and a few cups of hurricane  
ladder are brought in by children who treat  
punch them like stars. The  
logs are then placed  
Barges hidden by darkness ran the Missis-  
sippi over end to create box upon box of diminish-  
sippi and sounded their fog  
horns at seven to eight o'clock spiraling upwards until pyramids  
signal the bonfire  
builders who distinguished twenty-five feet tall begin to take shape  
each  
themselves by emerging with lighters and one composed of hundreds of parts--not  
an  
matches to strike the first tiny flares into the afternoon's work but two  
months of week-  
night and ignite torches they would use to set ends and the  
builders claim that their struc-  
the levee ablaze. The diesel-soaked logs  
flashed  
tures are sturdy as houses and that on Christ-  
and for a  
second seemed to lift off the ground  
mas morning one can look out the window  
and  
as if they were fiery chariots heaven-bound still see them smoldering all  
along the high  
but it's nothing that sacred: it's a celebration for ridge.  
children  
who know nothing of death who be- A century-old tradition passed down  
through  
lieve they're lighting the way through the fog generations naturally  
inspires attempts to make  
and mist for Saint Nicklus. This is Lutchery one's  
bonfire unique and while most take the  
Louisiana. Christmas Eve in the  
South. typical shape there are variations--Cajun cab-  
We wandered to the  
canal that separates levee ins and deer stands  
staircases  
log houses  
oil  
from water to escape the great heat and stray rig towers manned by plastic  
Santa Clauses.  
bottle rockets the crackling of cane that adorns Some are  
covered in cane that pops when ig-  
many structures and this is what we saw:  
the nited  
others strung with firecrackers whose  
obvious line of bonfires that  
began with the gunpowder explosions send a succession of  
closest--flames  
stretched to the black sky thirty echoes across the water and back. Banners hang  
feet or more--and moved to seemingly smaller from a few with football team  
logos  
proclama-  
structures until the burning logs diminished tions for  
Jesus or someone not as well known  
into campfire sizes and then  
luminaries and but when the fires are lit they're caught in the  
then  
candlelight until the capacity to see even updrafts  
flapping and curled  
sending bits of  
night fires failed. Yet we lingered longer and burning cloth into the  
air like fiery moths. And  
endured the cold  
resisted the temptation to no  
matter the cold shape of individual struc-  
return to the heat until our eyes  
adjusted to the tures all these yuletide offerings are reduced to

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