

Trying to Find My Way Back Home to East Lake, North Carolina

by Elena Tajima Creef

photographs courtesy of the author



Gilbert Creef, the author's father, circa 1939

writing to college students who were tortured by the blank page, I never dreamed that it would take me more than forty years and the death of my father to give voice finally to the silences surrounding one hundred years of family secrets that have followed me around for as long as I can remember.



Chiyohi Creef, the author's mother, circa 1950

There is a place along the "alligator's back" where the black water people have always lived. It is a place where my father's family was rooted for seven generations. All my life, my father told stories about the place he was born and raised down in the swampy inside of the Outer Banks of North

Carolina – a place called East Lake which is now little more than a dot on the map on the eastern side of the Alligator River. Those who are old enough can remember a time when the alligators multiplied and thrived in the fresh waters down there and swimmers at the creek near Hell's Hole had to watch out lest they lose an arm or a leg to these dangerous beasts. The alligators, like most of the

You know, they straightened out the Mississippi River in places, to make room for houses and livable acreage. Occasionally the river floods these places. "Floods" is the word they use, but in fact it is not a flooding; it is remembering. Remembering where it used to be. All water has a perfect memory and is forever trying to get back where it was. Writers are like that: remembering where we were, what valley we ran through, what the banks were like, the light that was there and the route back to original place. It is emotional memory – what the nerves and the skin remember as well as how it appeared. And a rush of imagination is our "flooding."

(Toni Morrison, "Site of Memory" in *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Culture*, ed. Russell Ferguson [Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990] 305).

families who used to be rooted there, are now mostly gone, but the river still takes its name from the peculiar shape of its reptilian banks. The large body of water that separates Tyrrell from Dare County forms an unmistakable monster whose mouth opens up into the Albemarle Sound while its tail curls itself around a sleepy little town called Gum Neck where my great-grandmother is buried – two miles down river from the Frying Pan.

They say the Outer Banks crawls with the restless spirits of the dead. If you walk in the woods along the water's edge on a dark moonless night in East Lake or in the abandoned timber town once known as Buffalo City, you can sometimes see the flicker of ghost lights that fade in and out along with the faint shadows of people who used to live here. The history of the people in these woods was never written down, but it has been kept alive in an oral tradition by those