

In and Around Naples
A Series of Presentations
for the Collier County Library
by Paul Pacter

Chokoloskee
The Story of Edgar Watson

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Chokoloskee

The Story of Edgar J Watson

**Was he Florida's most prolific serial killer?
America's #1 mass murderer?
A diabolical madman who left a trail of
murder wherever he went?
A farmer who killed his workers rather
than pay them?**

**Why did 33 of his neighbors riddle Watson
with bullets on October 24, 1910?**

Edgar J. Watson

Born: 11 Nov 1855, South Carolina

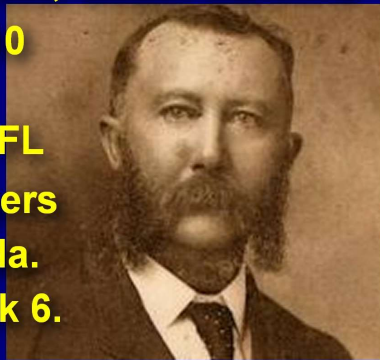
Died: 24 Oct 1910

– Aged 54

– Chokoloskee, FL

**Buried: Fort Myers
Cemetery, Florida.**

Plot: Lot 8, Block 6.



11 Nov 1855: Born in rural South Carolina. Father was a violent redneck drunk. Member of a Klan-like group. Got into many knife fights. Fathered an illegitimate mixed-race son (Edgar's half-brother).

1858: Sister Mary born. Died 1912.

1860s: Mother, Edgar, and Mary left the father and migrated to Fort White, Columbia County, northern Florida, to live with relatives.

Early 1870s: Edgar got into drunken fight in Fort White. Killed the man.

1870s: Fled to "Indian Territory" (first Arkansas, then Oklahoma) to farm.

1878: Married first wife Ann Mary "Charlie" Watson, age 16. She died 1879.

1882: Married second wife Jane S. "Mandy" Dyall Watson. She died 1901.

1882: Son Robert born.

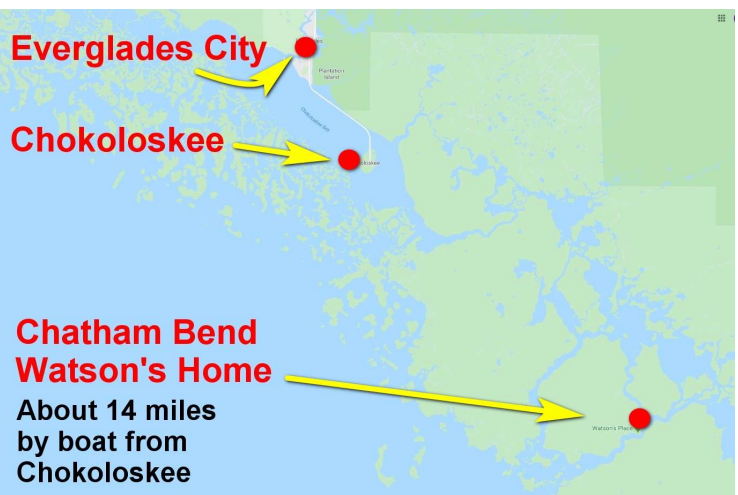
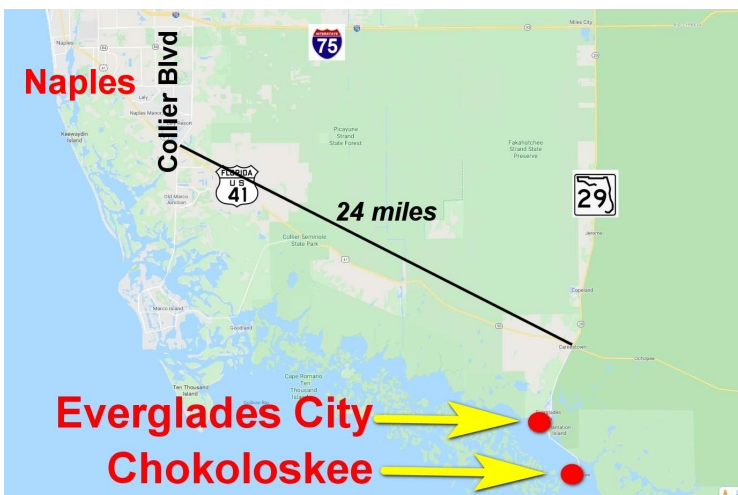
1885: Daughter Carrie born.

1887: Son Edgar born.

1889: Son Lucius born.

1889: Arrest warrant in Arkansas for murder of Belle Starr, notorious female outlaw. Tried and acquitted.

1891: Returned to Florida. Bought 40 acres of land on Chatham Bend Key, one of the 10,000 Islands, Everglades. Near Chokoloskee. *Map next slide.*



1891: Killed a man (Quinn Bass) in Arcadia over a land dispute. Claimed self-defense.

1890s: In Key West, Watson got into an argument with Adolphus Santini and slit his throat. Paid \$900 to drop charges.

1893: Settled on Chatham Bend. Built a house. Became a vegetable farmer (bananas, papayas, beans) and sugar cane grower. Sold in Ft Myers and Key West.

Edgar Watson's Home on Chatham Bend Island

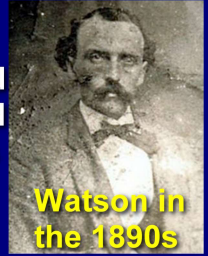
Has since been destroyed by a hurricane



1890s: Watson's workers were poor whites, blacks, and Seminoles. Harsh redneck white supervisors (fugitives) mistreated workers and strong-armed others into selling their property.

One account: He would occasionally travel to Marco Island, Fort Myers and even Tampa searching for vagabonds, migrants and wayfarer types that he would bring back to his plantation near the Chatham River in order to give them work. Locals believed his success was due to his 'cheap' labor as he never intended on paying them their wages in the first place. One thing is clear: none of these people ever seemed to leave Chatham Bend alive.

1890s: Watson bought land in Lost Man's River. A man named Tucker squatted on the land and would not leave. Tucker and his nephew were found murdered. Watson suspected.



1890s: Suspected of involvement in the deaths of two men in Fort White, FL.

1901: Second wife Mandy died age 38.

1905: Married third wife Edna Katie Bethea Burkett. Edgar was 50. Edna was 17.

1907: Daughter Ruby born.

1909: Son Hampton born.

1910: Daughter Anna born.

1890s-1910: Either he or people living on his property were rumored to have killed 57 people at Chatham. Many were African-American or Native-American field workers killed when they came to collect their pay. Some were white settlers with whom he had disputes. Chokoloskee townspeople feared and hated Watson.

Ted Smallwood's Store - Built 1906
Chokoloskee, Florida. Then part of Monroe County. County seat was Key West.



EDGAR J WATSON WAS MURDERED HERE ON OCTOBER 24, 1910. SHOT 33 TIMES BY - SUPPOSEDLY - 33 MEN.

What Happened on October 24, 1910?

Most common theory:

Oct 24, 1910: A group of armed Chokoloskee men met Watson at the store dock and killed him. They believed he was shooting his farm workers on payday and feeding them to the gators. He blamed the shootings on his foreman, Leslie Cox. (a convicted murderer and fugitive). But the townspeople did not buy that story.

Or even if Cox did the killings, it was at Watson's direction. 33 bullets were eventually removed from Watson's body, not counting buckshot.

Theory #2:

Oct 24, 1910: Watson was a serial womanizer. He had affairs with several women who were relatives of the 33 shooters. Had illegitimate children all over the islands. People hated Watson.

Theory #3:

Oct 24, 1910: Supervisor Leslie Cox had killed 3 black workers at Chatham Bend. A black man went to Chokoloskee and reported those murders.

Watson promised the townspeople he would deal with Cox, but he did not. Townspeople wanted law and order and peaceful lives. They hated Watson and killed him together.

Side story: Shortly before Oct 24, 1910 there was a bad hurricane in Chokoloskee. Smallwood's store was soaked, including the shotgun ammunition he sold. Smallwood sold Watson waterlogged ammunition. On Oct 24, when he tried to fire back at the townspeople who were shooting at him, Watson's ammo would not fire.

Oct 24, 1910: Some of the 33 people dragged Watson's body by boat to Rabbit Key (island) and buried him there.

Theory #4:

Oct 24, 1910: The supervisor Leslie Cox had gotten a black woman pregnant. The townspeople were mad. Watson promised to "deal with Cox" but did not. Henry Short, a half-black friend or relative of the woman, killed Watson. Henry was well-liked in Chokoloskee. Townspeople knew he would be lynched for killing Watson. So all 33 shot Watson to shift the blame away from Henry Short.

Oct 25, 1910: Sheriff finally came from Ft Myers, dug up body. 33 bullet holes.

Oct 27, 1910: Brief inquest. Nothing came of it. Townspeople alleged self-defense. Body reburied in Ft Myers.

Shortly thereafter: Third wife Edna went back to Fort White with their 3 children.

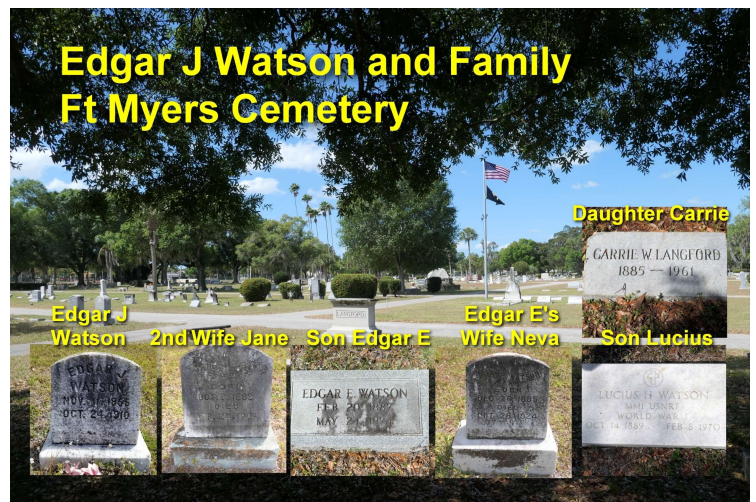
1940s: Watson's house burned. Cement cistern, sugarcane syrup cauldron, and some farm machinery remain. Part of Everglades National Park.

Grave of Edgar J Watson - Ft Myers



Photo
March 22,
2020.
Someone
Had Left
Flowers

Edgar J Watson and Family Ft Myers Cemetery



Many books have been written about the killing of Edgar Watson in Chokoloskee.

Many newspaper stories.

University papers and dissertations.

Until a few years ago Chokoloskee re-enacted the killing each year.

The 1958 Burl Ives movie *Wind Across the Everglades* is based on the story.

Most famous books are a trilogy by Peter Matthiessen:

Killing Mister Watson – 1990 First book in Peter Matthiessen's trilogy about Edgar J Watson

This novel is based around the circumstances of the death of a man in Florida 1910, who had terrorized his community in the Florida Everglades. It explores whether it was murder, exorcism, or sacrifice. GOOGLE BOOKS

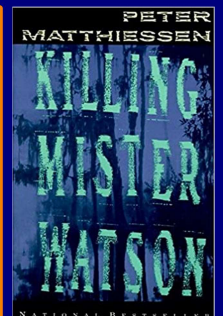
Drawn from fragments of historical fact, Matthiessen's masterpiece brilliantly depicts the fortunes and misfortunes of Edgar J. Watson, a real-life entrepreneur and outlaw who appeared in the lawless Florida Everglades around the turn of the century. AMAZON BOOKS

What a marvel of invention this novel is. A virtuoso performance. NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW

Intricately structured, richly documented, utterly convincing. Sure to linger in the memory like an experience we have lived through. WASHINGTON POST BOOK REVIEW

Powerful and unforgettable. CHICAGO TRIBUNE.

As a political allegory, it is stunning. LA TIMES BOOK REVIEW



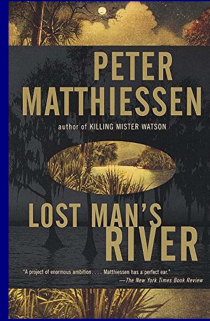
Lost Man's River – 1997

Second book in Peter Matthiessen's trilogy about Edgar J Watson

A man still known in his community as E. J. Watson has been reimagined from the few hard "facts" – census and marriage records, dates on gravestones, and the like. All the rest of the popular record is a mix of rumor, gossip, tale and legend that has evolved over eight decades into myth. It is fiction, and the great majority of episodes and accounts are my own creation.... It is my hope and believe that this reimagined life contains much more of the *truth* of Mr Watson than the lurid and popularly accepted "facts" of the Watson legend. PETER MATTHIESSEN. AUTHOR'S NOTES FOR LOST MAN'S RIVER.

As with *Killing Mr. Watson*, Matthiessen's loving descriptions of wildlife, human swamp dwellers, and the interwoven land and coastal islands is first rate. TIME.

A large, vivid, ambitious novel... a powerful meditation on the sources of American violence. Matthiessen has produced one of the best novels of recent years. KIRKUS REVIEWS.



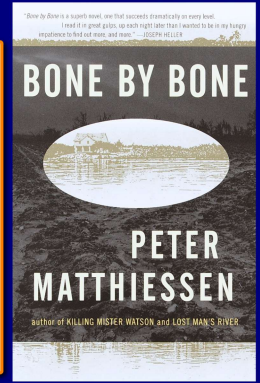
Bone by Bone – 1999

Third Book in Peter Matthiessen's Trilogy About Edgar J Watson

In the critically acclaimed *Killing Mister Watson*, Peter Matthiessen brilliantly re-created the life of the legendary E. J. Watson, who was gunned down by a posse of fearful neighbors before World War I. In his masterful sequel, *Lost Man's River*, Matthiessen returned us to the lawless frontier of the Florida Everglades, where Watson's son Lucius sought to untangle the knot of truth and lies surrounding his notorious father and his strange death. And now, in *Bone by Bone*, the story unfolds in its final form, in the voice of the enigmatic Mister Watson himself. AMAZON BOOKS

In the final novel of Peter Matthiessen's Florida trilogy, E. J. Watson explains how he grew up to be a killer. THE NEW YORK TIMES

Matthiessen has given us Watson's own story in Watson's own words, and it is a book of heroic, even tragic, proportions. PUBLISHER'S WEEKLY



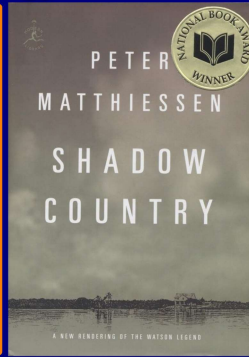
Shadow Country – 2004

A compilation, substantial revision, and updating of Matthiessen's trilogy

Shadow Country's 3 "books" correspond to the earlier ones: Book One is based on *Killing Mr. Watson*. It is a collection of first-person narrative accounts of Edgar "Bloody" Watson's rise to power in the 10,000 Islands starting in the 1890s until his demise in 1910. Many of the "characters" who tell the story are based on real people who lived in the area at the time.

Book Two is set several years after Book One. It tells the story of Lucius, one of Watson's sons and an alcoholic historian, who tries to reconstruct his father's life in an attempt to determine whether he was really a murderer and an outlaw.

Book Three is based on *Bone By Bone*. In this first-person section, Edgar Watson tells his own life story, from his childhood in South Carolina to his fatal encounter with his neighbors on the edge of the Florida Everglades. By using this chronology, Matthiessen ends the book with the same scene in which it began told from opposite points of view.



Tampa Bay Times book editor Colette Bancroft:

"Matthiessen is writing about one man's life in Shadow Country, but he is also writing about the life of the nation over the course of half a century. Watson's story is essentially the story of the American frontier, of the conquering of wild lands and people, and of what such empires cost. Most of the book is set in frontier Florida, a Florida virtually unimaginable in our air-conditioned, subdivided century. It is a brutally beautiful wilderness where, just 100 years ago, panthers and red wolves stalked the woods, plume hunters made fortunes wiping out whole species of birds and men like Watson made their own law. Shadow Country takes us there in unforgettable fashion. Even among a body of work as magnificent as Matthiessen's, this is his great book."

We will never know for sure what happened at Ted Smallwood's store on Oct 24, 1910. Or why.

The participants have been dead for years. None left first-hand accounts.

The many who have studied and written about Watson don't agree on who he was or whether he got what he deserved.

Why did so many men jointly shoot him in such a public fashion?

The mystery is very much alive.



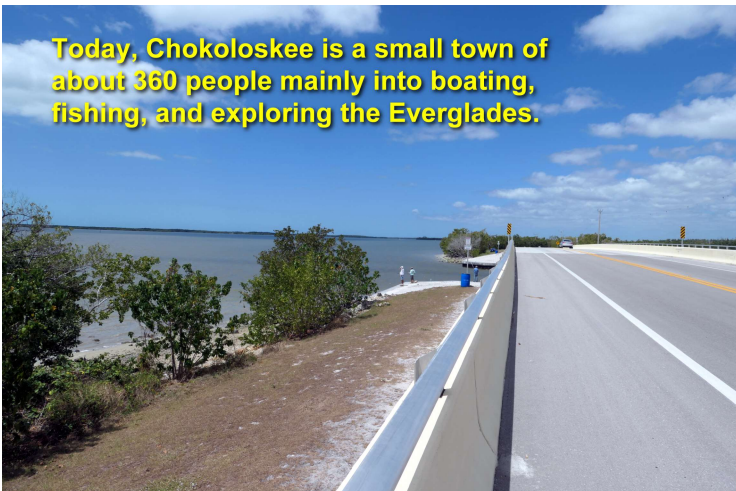
Ted Smallwood continued to run his store until he died in 1951.

His daughters kept the store open until 1982.

Smallwood's Store was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1974.

His granddaughter now operates the store as a museum. There is some Edgar Watson memorabilia in the museum.

Today, Chokoloskee is a small town of about 360 people mainly into boating, fishing, and exploring the Everglades.



Lots of boating.



Lots of fishing.



A cafe or two, and that's about it.
But people still talk about Edgar J Watson

