If we had a window in the room, we could look out on the St Johns River and perhaps view the very spot on our river that MKR and her husband Charles saw from the deck of the Clyde Line Steam ship as they sailed into our world in March of 1928, and viewed for the first time, our Florida. They were met by Zelma Cason who took them to a hotel in Jacksonville before they journeyed the 80 miles to their final destination, Cross Creek. Remember that name, Zelma Cason.

Marjorie was 32 years old. Remember what it was like to be 32 years old, and her world awaited her, however it was as Aldous Huxley would say, “A Brave New World”. Yes, ahead of her lay literary acclaim, but also ahead lay loneliness, a divorce, endless labor, the torment of creativity, yet also a new life and fulfilling life.

In 1928, Marjorie and her husband Charles Rawlings were working as journalist in New York for the Rochester Journal American, yet both felt unfulfilled by their careers. She often stated a wish to be recognized as a writer, yet for all her submissions of short stories and poetry she had received only rejection notices.

The opportunity of a Florida vacation resulted from Charles’ brothers Jimmy and Wray working in Florida. A sea voyage on the Clyde Line from New York to Jacksonville was planned. My mother used to take that same Clyde Line from New York to Jacksonville, and I have often wondered if she and Marjorie’s lives had touched on that March trip. I’ll never know.

At first Marjorie and Charles were surprised to find that the brothers lived not on the fabulous beaches of the Florida Gold Coast but in the rural scrub area of north central Florida. An area of pine islands, of lake and sink holes. As described by Elizabeth Silverthorne (Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings Sojourner at Cross Creek):

“Here they saw sparkling fountains arising from underground limestone springs as described by early American Naturalist William Bartram.” Samuel Taylor Coleridge used Bartram’s description for the sacred River Alph in his poem Kubla Kahn. Another poet, Sidney Lanier had called it the “sweetest water-line in the world”.
Marjorie knew she had found her wellspring. She said to Charles, "Let’s sell everything and move South! How we could write.” Their plan of course was to buy a grove, sell the citrus, and find publishers.

On July 9, 1928, they found that grove: Seventy-four acres, an eight-room farmhouse, a four-room tenant house, a two-story barn, approximately thirty-three hundred orange trees, eight hundred pecan trees, some grapefruit and tangerine trees—all for $9,000. (Silverthorne—roughly)

Let’s hear as Marjorie describe it as she wrote it (Cross Creek):

“Cross Creek is a bend in a country road, by land and the flowing of Lochloosa Lake into Orange Lake, by water. We are four miles west of the small village of Island Grove, nine miles east of a turpentine still, and on the other side we do not count distance at all, for the two lakes and broad marshes create an infinite space between us and the horizon.”

Marjorie had come home. “For the creek satisfied a thing that had gone hungry and unfed since childhood.”

To know these people to learn of the Florida Scrub she went into the Big Scrub Country and lived for two and a half months with the Fiddia family a gray haired woman and her son. A woman who plowed her land behind a mule and so said also had a moonshine still.

When Marjorie returned to Cross Creek, she began to write:

1930, March  She sells her first story to Scribners’ Magazine for $150 “Cracker Chidlings”.
1930, December  She sells Jacobs Ladder for $700.

1933, Her first book, South Moon Under
More short stories... Another book, *Golden Apples*

Then in February, 1938 *The Yearling* is published, Film rights are sold to MGM for $30,000. MKR becomes a major best seller and MKR becomes a national celebrity.

1939, She is elected to National Academy of Arts and Letter and receives the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction.

I remember reading the Yearling. It was not in 1938 or 1939, but not too many years later. Perhaps 1944 when I was 8 or 9 years old. If we had a window in this room from which to look and we looked westward about a mile perhaps we could see the home I grew up in. Perhaps we could see the sunroom with the cool dark tile floor as I read about Jody and the deer named Flag. We don’t call it a sunroom now we call it a Florida room. I didn’t know as I read the Yearling the place it would have in my life. As I stated earlier, I have never known if my mother me Marjorie Rawlings on the Clyde Ship. Later in my life I would pass close to Marjorie and never know it.

But let’s get back to Marjorie.

Before the 1939 Pulitzer she had divorced Charles Rawlings. She continued to write and to live at Cross Creek:

*When the Whippoorwill* (1940)  
*Cross Creek* (1942)

In May of 1940 filming began on *The Yearling* with Spencer Tracy playing Penny Baxter; however, with the Second World War, and also the problem of the young boy who was to play Jody growing taller than Spencer Tracy, the film was postponed until 1945 now with Gregory Peck as Penny, Jane Wyman as Ma Baxter and Claude Jarman as Jody.

That November another new element to her world... She married Norton Sanford Baskin, manager of Castle Warden Hotel in Saint Augustine and moved from Cross Creek to the hotel in St. Augustine. (Do you know what is now located in the Castle Warden Hotel?)
She had begun work in 1942 on a book called The Sojourner. But that came to an abrupt end.

Remember Zelma Cason, the woman who met Marjorie and Charles here in Jacksonville as they disembarked the Clyde Line Ship in 1928? Well in January, 943,Zelma Cason brought a $100,000 suit against MKR for libel. The woman, Zelma Cason who had met Marjorie upon her arrival in Jacksonville in 1928 at the beginning of Marjorie’s inception into her creative realm, became the instrument to end Marjorie’s career.

Let me read for you what MKR had written about Zelma in her book, Cross Creek:

“Zelma is an ageless spinster resembling an angry and efficient canary...I cannot decide whether she should have been a man or a mother. She combines the more violent characteristics of both...(and) those who accept her...ministrations thinks nothing of being cursed loudly at the instant of being...nursed or guided through their troubles.”

Through all these legal troubles, she worked on the Sojourner, and also was a guest lecturer at the University of Florida in Gainesville—just 20 miles from Cross Creek.

By her side as she fought the lawsuit was her attorney the prominent Phillip May Senior of Jacksonville. The case ended five years later in the Florida Supreme Court with MKR paying damages of one dollar and court costs. Critics write that those five years put an end to her literary life and also perhaps ultimately to her physical life. In 1952 she suffered a heart attack at Cross Creek. To an extent she recovered; however, in December of 1953, she died of a cerebral hemorrhage at Crescent Beach, Florida. She is buried in Antioch Cemetery near Island Grove.

Again, almost, but not quite, does my life touch Marjorie’s, for in that fall of 1953 I was a freshman at the University of Florida. Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings was at Uf a visiting lecturer in the English Department, walking the campus. Did I pass her? Did I see her? How
could I have been so blind? I’ll never know. Yet it was not to end there for me.

Upon Marjorie’s death, the home at Cross Creek had been turned over to the University of Florida. It was used for a brief period of time by students who were English majors. Many of her private papers were lost. Many others were saved and placed in cardboard boxes to be housed almost untouched (except by one professor and one archivist) in the back of UF’s Rare Books Archives for over two decades.

Let us move two decades later. In the 1970’s I was to begin my dissertation in the Department of Speech in the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Florida. As a feminist and as the founder of the National Organization for Women on the University Campus I knew what I wanted to write on—“The Battle for the Ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment”. My committee would not accept either the ERA or any aspect of the current Women’s Movement as a topic. They rejected my ideas by stating such questions as: Where would such documents be housed? How could the committee have access? How would the committee be able to validate the totality of research? Thus I was strongly advised to find another subject.

My committee stated there being no acknowledged Woman rhetor or rhetorician other than Susan B. Anthony, I needed to research a man as the basis of my dissertation. In the Archives of the University of Florida among those dusty boxes filled with letters and papers and memorabilia I finally came face to face with Marjorie.

Today the UFArchives proudly display her manuscripts under climate controlled glass. Her papers are carefully cataloged. Access to her papers is severely limited. Users are monitored as are writing instruments. Yet I have touched those manuscripts. I have lifted from those cardboard boxes her writings. So perhaps after all I have met Marjorie. I know at times I feel I have.