

# Hillsborough River



*The Hillsborough River in 2004 (USF)*



*Lafayette bridge over the Hillsborough River, 1948 (Florida State Archives)*



*Platt Street bridge crossing the Hillsborough River, 1948 (Florida State Archives)*

*The following narrative is based on an interview with Hillsborough River resident Thalia Potter and her husband, Sydney Potter, on June 7, 2004. The Potters have lived along the river for nearly 50 years and share with us their stories of how the river has enriched their lives.*

## Personal History

In the fifty years since Thalia and Sydney Potter first set eyes on their property along the Hillsborough River they have seen many changes, had numerous adventures, and fought tenaciously for the survival of the river. The Potters have seen hurricanes, development, and encountered many of the natural residents of the area. Most importantly, the Potters have given back as much as they have taken.

Thalia and Syd moved to the Hillsborough River in 1955 after Syd had spent many spare afternoons searching the area for the perfect place to move his family. He fell in love with an overgrown lot directly on the river, but convincing his wife that this was a good place to build a home would be his next challenge. Thalia remembers:

*“The property was jungle. Grape vines all along the river. People used to dig for worms here. They were not happy when we decided to build!”*

One of the first challenges the Potters would face after building their home would be Hurricane Donna. In 1960 Hurricane Donna devastated much of western Florida, including dumping an enormous amount of rain on an already saturated state. Thalia remembers:

*“In 1960 there had been a tremendous amount of rain up in the Green Swamp, and here too, and the ground was just saturated with water. Then Hurricane Donna came. We were sitting here watching when an island of hyacinths came [down the river]. Hyacinths used to be a big problem above the dam. A huge island of hyacinths came along. Just the weight and force of the water, and the weight of those hyacinths, we just watched our dock go down river.*

*Syd terraced [our property] after that flood. We had water under the house and on three sides. We didn't evacuate, but Syd kept his eye on the front door. Syd put a stake in the yard and marked every inch on it. The flood waters were coming up, and with that stake we could tell what level was actually being arrived at. After all that, I decided I would stay married to him forever!”*

The Potters raised three children, and as a family they fished, swam, and boated on the river. Thalia remembers:



*A man fishing on the Hillsborough River, 1958 (Florida State Archives)*



*The Potters dock at the river (USF)*



*A view of the river in 2004 (USF)*

*“We had an old German neighbor who had been an Olympic swimmer. He swam up and down the river, that’s how strong he was. He built a fabulous confidence in all the kids. When Mr. Weber was swimming the kids felt like they could just go and latch on to his shoulders. He was a barrel of a man and he worked in construction.*”

*The neighborhood children all learned to swim like fish. It was wonderful for them. I remember the year Skip, our oldest son, saw some cross-ties, railroad cross-ties, floating down the river. We always used to see debris. So, they started saving them. We had a little swimming area down there. They took all those cross-ties, and tied them together and made a raft. The moms in the neighborhood, we would all take turns playing lifeguard. One day when I was the lifeguard all the kids were on the raft and I saw some weather way off in the distance coming. I told the kids if they promised to come as soon as I said to I’d let them stay in the water a little longer. Well, I had hardly gotten that out of my mouth when lighting struck so close that every kid hit the water. They were soon in the house!”*

Thalia believes the river contributed to bringing their neighborhood closer together:

*“Our children, now, talk about it as if it were an ideal childhood. There was a neighborhood school, so they could walk back and forth from school. We had a very cohesive neighborhood. The kids gathered and played ball out here. A lot of us, in this little strip here, became very close friends because we all had kids that were growing up together. Mrs. Williams’s kids were a little older. But still there was an intermingling because of the river. The river contributed to that closeness because we all cooperated in supervising the children and gossiping while we were watching the kids. It was a very cohesive area.”*

However, this perfect existence was not without its kinks. As with every neighborhood and with every body of water, there are differences of opinion about how it should be safely utilized. Thalia explains:

*“The river did cause some controversy. We didn’t think skiing was the safest thing to do, and there was a lot of drinking- lots of boaters drinking. One time a fellow came raring up with a boat right between the children- he was so bleary eyed he had no idea what he had done. We had some neighbors who enjoyed skiing and so they thought we were intruding... Actually, the first year we were here, we saw three boats turn over.”*

There is also a park near to the Potters' house that the entire neighborhood can enjoy. Thalia comments:

*"The linear park here along the river, Epps Park, having that restored has done so much. The activity of families and people with dogs, and it gives everybody in the neighborhood a glimpse of the river."*

## **History/Information**

---

The Hillsborough River extends from the eastern side of Hillsborough County to its mouth in Hillsborough Bay. Within Hillsborough County, the river is 45 miles in length and is comprised of 16 segments.

The river has had two different dams. Thalia explains:

*"The original dam that was here a long time ago was for the purpose of generating electricity. The dam that we have now is to create a water reservoir."*

The effect of these dams on the river ranges from mild to dramatic. Thalia explains:

*"If we don't get much rain, the dam actually stops any water from coming down. So we get a lot of salt water in our part of the river... We are down river from Sulphur Springs, so we get some flow even if the dam is holding everything back in the reservoir. But, there's about a two and half or 2.2 mile stretch just down river from the dam which had suffered before the rains returned- you know we had about a three and half year drought and that was the period of time when they suffered a great deal. You could almost walk across the river, below the dam."*

The Potters' home is adjacent to a shipyard; known today as the Jean Street Shipyard. Thalia believes that many stories she's heard about military boats in the area are directly related to their location near the shipyard. Thalia explains:

*"Mrs. Williams tells me there was an army boat, or something, on the property back there. Mrs. Williams said that in order to get rid of it, because children were playing on it, the army blew it up. That was all before we came. When we bought the property there was the lower ribs of a boat, not much of anything, and in the water there were the ribs of another boat. There was a P.T. Boat that was anchored off shore, well onshore really, it had to do with the shipyard here I'm sure. John Brotherton from next door told me that during the Civil War there was very little action in Florida, but that two boats were burned right off shore here. So, I guess because of the shipyard, it was like a center for that type of activity."*

Syd has observed different stages the river has gone through due to changes in the area. Syd explains his observations:

*"You might say the river, in the years that we've lived here, has gone through three or four stages. When we first moved here it was fairly clear and all of our children learned to swim in it. Then development became pretty heavy. A lot of sewage went in. Of course that has all been stopped. We don't dump into the river or the bay anymore. The next stage with the river is that it became a source of tap water and drinking water. And that, as we have mentioned, has had a very bad effect on the river. When there is little rainfall all the water is dammed up behind the dam and we don't get any flow down here. There is some better awareness now. It's being realized that we've got to have some flow down here to keep the river healthy."*

For the Potters, one of the greatest joys of living along the river is the chance to see so many different types of birds. Thalia is keenly aware of which birds call her area of the river home:

*"There are egrets and the great blue herons. The white egrets, and white ibis, I've seen as many as 25, night herons, sometimes a green heron, but not very often. Sometimes pelicans, but the most steady*

*residents are your herons.”*

To a lesser extent, Thalia has also noted the fish:

*“There used to be a lot of mullet. It used to be that at 5 o’clock in the afternoon the mullet would jump. I’ve never been much a fisherman myself, so I don’t know much about them.”*

The Potter family has had many close encounters with the wildlife in their area. Thalia remembers:

*“One time when we were all swimming, and we didn’t even know what manatees were, one came up and visited us. Syd got the boat and we got over and looked down and we didn’t know what it was. We had the encyclopedia and the nature books out and we discovered what it was. It is unusual to have a personal contact with a manatee. Usually we see just the bubbles and circles and we know they’ve been there. One day there was a big, long manatee. He had barnacles all around his tail. I saw one cut on his back. This couch, the large part of his body seemed that large. One time my son called for me and there was a momma and a baby. So, we are aware of the manatees.”*

Thalia also recounts stories involving local reptiles:

*“We had the most delightful experience some years ago. There was an alligator. One morning when our youngest was about 7 he went down to the dock and the alligator and he saw each other at the same moment. That was when alligators used to be afraid of people.*

*We don’t see very many turtles, and we don’t hear very many frogs any more. And we were aware when we weren’t hearing them anymore because when we moved here the night was full of the sound of them. There was one particular day, and it was the same day as the alligator incident, it was a day that reptiles just wanted to be out in the sun. There was a log that was pointing out from the shore, and all these turtles were on this log. And what was happening was they were all getting their spot in the sun, and then another turtle would come up at the back and they would all move up and the one on the end would be dumped in. We just watched them do it over and over again. The wildlife is very much a part of our enjoyment of the water.”*

## **Development**

---

Both Thalia and Syd note the extreme changes that have taken place with the river and the surrounding areas over the last fifty years. Thalia and Syd’s love of the river led them to take active roles in advocating for the river, and being vocal participants in neighborhood associations and the Hillsborough River Technical Advisory Council. Thalia explains just a couple of the accomplishments of these organizations:

*“All of this had been developed. The Epps family left that [a strip of land along the river] to be a park. It couldn’t have been developed at that time anyway because water flooded it too often. It was eroding terribly and my husband and I got involved with the old Seminole Heights Neighborhood Association. We prevailed upon the city, and the newspapers were very kind, they gave us coverage. They did a planting and rock arrangement; it took lots of applications to the DEP. Actually, they had lost about 25 feet of land, and that has been restored.*

*This part of the river is a No Wake/Slow Speed zone. That was accomplished many, many years ago with the TAC [Hillsborough River Technical Advisory Council].”*

One of the biggest changes to the flow of the river was the creation of the Tampa By-Pass Canal. Thalia explains that the idea for the canal came about after the extreme flooding from Hurricane Donna:

*“They began to study the problems [flooding]. All of Sulphur Springs was under water and Forest Hills. From that came the plans for the by-pass canal. It was sold to the public on the basis that it would conserve water during wet times to be used in dry times. It was also for flood control.”*

Thalia has noticed clear changes in water quality that came on the heels of a development explosion:

*“One of the youngsters, I think it was our oldest, got an infection. So, the kids stopped swimming. I realize now that it was right about when so much development began to happen. The quality of the water was changing. I think this was probably in the early 1970’s.”*

Housing development in the areas adjacent to the Hillsborough River has steadily increased in the last fifty years. Thalia explains:

*“Mrs. Williams says that there was only her house and two across from her when she and Mr. Williams moved here. So, there were only about three houses in the area. But, in the year before we moved here the Harrisons developed three houses... We also bought this property from the Harrison family. Before us, this property had never been developed.”*

## **The Future**

---

As Thalia and Syd look toward the future they have great hopes for how the community will utilize the river:

*“I think development is a real threat... but I hope that the river will be seen as an asset. I think there is a greater awareness, that we will gradually give it greater care. It’s the little things that make the difference.*

*We love the river, we tried to plan our lives so we could stay here as long as possible, and that means giving up some things so we can stay here longer. There is something about water; it takes people into the depths of themselves. I think it is a wonderful thing. It has made such a difference in our lives.”*

Written By: Alexis Broadbent-Sykes