

West Cedar Lake



West Cedar Lake, looking southeast in 2001 (Teske)



The Teskes' West Cedar Lake "jacuzzi" in the 1980s (Teske)



View of West Cedar Lake in the 1960s (Teske)

The following narrative is based on an interview with West Cedar Lake residents James and Bernice Teske at their home on September 30, 2004. In this story they share with us how living on the lake has enhanced their lives and how the lake has provided them with a very private oasis.

Personal History

Jim and Bernice, in 1961, just married and both employed at USF, rented their home on West Cedar Lake for six months to decide whether or not to buy it. After a couple of months, they decided in the affirmative and to this day do not regret that they did. Indeed, they can't imagine living anywhere else. This home has served them well for nearly 44 years.

Over the years the Teskes have made many changes to their home and to the lakefront to enhance their enjoyment. From scrub oaks, sandspurs and lots of sand, a private, lushly landscaped yard now encircles the house with its dock, potting areas, screened porch, decks and a brick patio complete with a raised goldfish pond and the sound of water coming from the trickling of a spout into the pond. Jim adds:

"Many years ago, we built a bubbler—as found in spas—and installed it under the water level, on the several steps going down into the lake. It was a great toy for a summer but all was not lost, we moved the equipment to a deck beside the house and had a real spa installed."

The Teskes, who enjoy their yard from behind the privacy of 12' high, very thick hedges surrounding their property except for the lake, explains the extent he and his wife went to enhance their view of the other side of their lake. They comment that it seems some people who live on lakes tend to think of their back yard as just that, a place to store yard equipment and build aluminum sheds. He adds:

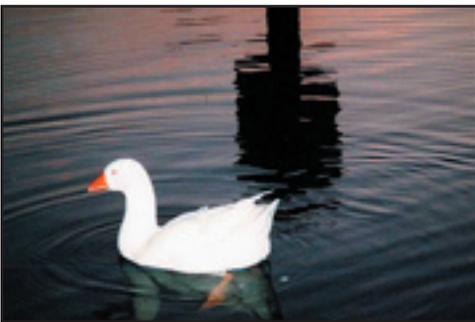
"Twenty-or-so years ago, Bernice bought 18 cypress trees, six-feet high, at a nursery sale, brought them home in her car and placed them beside the house. When I got home from the office and saw my next project, I asked her what she planned to do with those trees. She said, 'Maybe you could plant them around the lake to add more greenery to our scene.' I said, 'So, how do we do that, locked gates and all?' I borrowed a neighbor's rowboat and very, very, early several weekend mornings I loaded a few into the boat along with my posthole digger, paddled to my chosen site and planted them, much like Johnny Appleseed. When we walk down to the lake you'll see the rewards of that effort."



Anhinga on post near a duck nesting box (Teske)



Ducks near West Cedar Lake in the 1960s (Teske)



A duck swimming in West Cedar Lake (Teske)



A flock of transient ducks visiting Cedar Lake in the late 1990s (Teske)

Bernice adds:

“I would also buy some trees, other than cypress, and place them anonymously, in various neighbors' driveways with a note tied to the limb: ‘For your lakefront. Enjoy’.”

Jim has also made helpful additions for their lake area animal friends, he explains as we look around the lake from their dock, pointing at posts with large boxes atop he says:

“These are wood duck nesting boxes that we installed about 15 feet from the shore for added security from land-based predators. We convinced a neighbor to add one too, so there are 3, two-sided boxes providing 6 places for wood ducks to hatch their eggs. When it’s time to leave the nest—the day the chicks hatch—mother duck sits in the water at the base of the box and whistles. The little ones climb out the hole, one at a time and leap into the water. They float down like feathers. Once they’re all in the water they follow their mother to safety under the hedges. Those other posts sticking above the water are what I call, ‘Posing Posts.’ Some of these posts are topped with verdigris bronze mallards spouting water into the lake to impart the restful sound of falling water; The rest are for the other ducks of the lake on which to sit and preen, providing us an incomparable view of waterfowl activity.”

The Teskes, with the purchase of 6 young ducklings, formed the beginning of the wood duck population on West Cedar Lake about 20 years ago. They built a small holding pen for the tiny family and patiently fed them until they were old enough to be on their own. The ducks were released and they promptly took off, only to return the next spring and set up housekeeping in the new nesting boxes. They’ve returned annually ever since.

History/Information

Cedar Lake, on maps in the late 1950s was shown as an inverted “U” shaped lake of approximately 10 acres. Today it is shown as two curved ovals of about 4 ½ to 5 acres each, joined at the top of the “U” by a spillway and a large underground pipe. The lakes are now known as East and West Cedar Lake and are located in the Curiosity Creek watershed. According to Jim, West Cedar Lake is primarily fed by two springs and in the last few years it additionally receives water from a storm drainage system carrying water from the Oregon Ave collection boxes entering West Cedar Lake near the southwestern quadrant. Jim recounts the time his friend explored the bottom of the lake:

“In the early 1970s a friend was visiting with his scuba gear and volunteered to look at our lake bottom. He swam around the whole lake and reported 2 springs (as well as a door from an old car) feeding colder water into the lake from about 30 feet into the lake off our north property line. The other spring outlet was



Sunset on West Cedar Lake in 1961 (Teske)



West Cedar Lake, looking southwest (Teske)



View West Cedar Lake from the Teskes' backyard (Teske)

located in the center of the lake at the deepest part, about 100 feet from the lake's south shore."

West Cedar Lake has a maximum depth of 10 feet and is about a foot higher than East Cedar Lake at the spillway. Mr. Teske recalls his early memories of how the lakes connected:

"When we moved in to our home in 1961, a very wet year with flooding over much of Forest Hills, the two lakes appeared to be connected at the top of the "U" by a small amount of water. The low place adjoining the two was a shallow channel about 6 to 10 feet wide and perhaps 30 to 40 from west to east. If one were paddling a canoe, portaging between the lakes would be necessary. The person who owned the large parcel comprised of the land joining the two halves and the north half of East Cedar Lake as far as Fletcher Avenue and North Boulevard, had business-oriented shops and buildings on their property toward Fletcher and built their home on the west bank of East Cedar Lake. In succeeding years when the water was lower, he would use the narrow piece of land dividing the lakes as a driveway to get from his home to his work. As time moved on—into the 1970s—the county formally connected the lakes with a concrete pipe and the small spillway. The connecting pipe also had a tee from the north that brought the overflow from Lake Butler, also known as Turtle Lake, north of Fletcher, through two retention ponds southeast of Jean Park and into East Cedar Lake along with whatever might be flowing from West Cedar Lake."

As with most lakes in Hillsborough County, West Cedar Lake suffers from regular vegetation blooms. Jim and Bernice recount the changes they've seen over the years:

"I the beginning, there were lily pads covering a great deal of what is today, both the Cedar Lakes. It got worse on West Cedar Lake until in the late 1960s the entire surface appeared to be solid lily pads with, on the bright side, waxy-white, semi-fragrant, water lily blooms. Every year Bernice and I would get into the lake on inflatable rubber rafts and remove the pads and connecting stems in a 100 foot semi-circle from our shore to about 50 feet towards the middle of the lake, load them on another raft, float them to the shore and pull them up onto the bank to dry. When dry and significantly lighter in weight we carried them to the roadway for collection by the yard trash trucks at that time. In the mid-1970s, another wet year, the water level rose about 6 feet higher than it had been for a decade. Since this was before the overflow system was installed, it stayed high for several months. The water lilies must have required a certain depth of water to properly thrive and big clumps of lily roots popped to the surface periodically for the next few months, and eventually all of



The Teskes' backyard looking at West Cedar Lake in 1962 (Teske)



A view of the Teskes' backyard and West Cedar Lake in 2000 (Teske)

the lilies died and were no longer a problem. There were two large—35 feet in diameter—islands composed of reed-like weeds that also lost their footing and began floating with the wind from one end to the other. It was a race to see how fast we could push the clumps away from our shore and get them into the wind again, so they could go to some other shore. I don't know if others joined in this game, but one day all of those mini-islands had disappeared too. Today we have duckweed and southern naiad in the water, along with a hot dry summer causing a green algae-like scum to form on the surface. In previous years we applied for a permit for sterile grass carp to eat the weeds and it worked. The fish have a life span of about 10 years and we recently added the remaining fish on our permit with the hope of regaining a clear, weed-free lake once again.”

The Teskes have also noticed the water clarity changing from year to year:

“Right now, below the algae, the water is very clear. The algae, however, is a current negative. I've seen the lake so clear, in years past, that you could see your feet quite clearly in four to five feet of water. It seems that every year or so there is a new weed of some type and it then leaves and the following year another shows up. It all seems to work out on its own, with the help of the grass carp.”

Aside from the non-edible, grass-eating carp, there has been some light fishing enjoyed by Jim's dad on the lake:

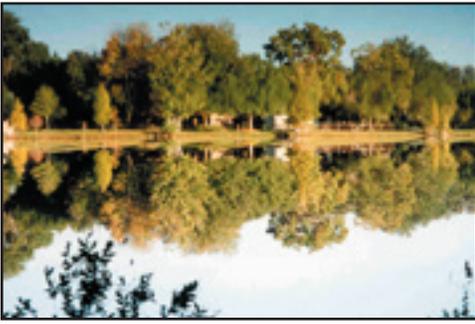
“My dad, on his visits from Ohio in the 1960s, would cast a line into the lake, hoping for 'some action'. There were several very large bass spotted over the years, 16 to 20 inches long and probably in the 10-pound range; I haven't seen any lately. There's lots of little sunfish, I've seen a snake from time to time, and some mud turtles and we suspect a gator a few years ago. We're pretty sure he has moved on; there's been no recent evidence of his presence.”

A variety of wildlife inhabits West Cedar Lake and in the neighboring environment including the usual squirrels, raccoons and opossums. Jim remembers when they first moved in:

“When it was much more wild and natural with fewer homes, we would pick wild blackberries from the empty lots next to us. Quail ran freely through our yard. We had, and still have, rabbits visiting us along with myriad butterflies, cardinals, Carolina wrens, red-bellied and downy woodpeckers, black-capped chickadees, tit-mice, robins—in season and hummingbirds.”

Bernice adds:

“We have, in addition to the wood ducks, assorted warblers,



View of Cedar Lake in 1980s (Teske)



Irises that the Teskes planted along the shores of Cedar Lake (Teske)



The shoreline of Cedar Lake. The rocks were added by the Teskes. (Teske)

mallards, anhinga—also known as snakebirds, a variety of herons—great and small and sandhill cranes—the sandhill cranes have a breeding location on a spit-like island at the north end of East Cedar Lake and loudly parade their babies through the yards in the spring. There are also ibis, grebes, egrets, cormorants and purple gallinules. Roseate spoonbills come by when the water is low enough to search for fish along the gently sloping parts of the shoreline. We’ve even seen bitterns, pairs of kingfishers and pileated woodpeckers. The latter, favoring us with babies at least once.”

The naming of Cedar Lake eludes both Jim and Bernice for an easily apparent reason: “I have never seen any cedar trees around this lake but across Forest Hills Drive toward Lake Dorset, there is a row of white cedar trees. Maybe there were more at one time,” says Jim.

Development

In the first few years the Teskes lived at Cedar Lake some of the lots were very bare and some heavily wooded. Bernice notes:

“That was how they did it back then, bring in a bulldozer and clear far more than necessary to build a house, today it is frowned upon and cost is more of a factor too. But that was the thinking in the 1950s. The road in front of our house was hard sand covered with crushed oyster shell. Jim badgered Roy Haynes, our County Commissioner at the time, to do something about making us a real road. Eventually the road was paved with a mixture of tar and slag-like stones. It was dug up in 1985 for the installation of City of Tampa sanitary-sewers, and then repaved with real blacktop. An interesting aside, the sewers were placed at a depth of 8-feet below the street. The sand that was displaced in the process was whiter and finer than any we have ever seen anywhere.”

West Cedar Lake has many more homes on it than East Cedar Lake, due in part to a 40- acre parcel held by one owner. Jim notes the changes:

“When we moved in there were 2 empty lots next door to us and 2 empty lots across the street, we could see both the lakes from, and through, our house at that time. Additionally there were about 5 empty lots around the lake; today it’s full, with 26 homes. East Cedar Lake had, in 1960, seven residences; during the last 44 years only 5 have been added. There is land remaining on the northern half of East Cedar Lake for a number of additional homes that would have access through a right-of-way to 131st Avenue.”

Despite the surges in development in other regions of Hillsborough County, Jim says that people found and moved to Cedar Lake at their own pace; a few at a time.



Autumn in Tampa is subtle; however, the cypress across the lake turn the rich shades of russet found here. (Teske)



View of the Teskes' home coming up from Cedar Lake (Teske)

Development is threatening the area, this time on the shores of East Cedar Lake. The large landowner of the upper half of the property surrounding the lake is considering selling off the remaining 8 acres. The land is currently zoned for single-family residences but recently there has been interest in rezoning the land for town homes. This proposal for rezoning would require public hearings, which, given the existing climate, may preclude acceptance at this time. The fall-out from this potential change has temporarily divided this once friendly neighborhood.

The Future

Jim believes that the future of Cedar Lake is secure:

"I think it's pretty much going to continue, much as it is. Older houses will be razed and rebuilt, or added-to, similar to what is happening to Old Carrollwood. The general level of quality of life will improve as people work to improve their homes and yards, to take advantage of the serenity and beauty of the area. We are only a short distance from a wide and very busy major thoroughfare and when sitting on my dock I hear almost nothing but the sounds of nature—and a lawnmower or barking dog occasionally."

When asked if there was anything he could change about the lake, Jim had this comment:

"I'd like to be able to properly landscape all of the other properties within my view, to give us all a much more beautiful place in which to live. But I won't hold my breath."

Bernice adds:

"There's a lot of big oaks but I wish there were more; it's good for the wildlife and they absorb noise and what better to see than giant trees being moved by gentle breezes. With the four hurricanes to hit Florida this year, two passed through our neighborhood and I was pleased to see that the big oaks calmed the winds and survived, generally intact."

With their personal future in mind, Jim concludes that there is no better place to be than exactly where he is, in the house he and Bernice have been in since they came to Cedar Lake in 1961, when they were in their mid-20s—he is now 70 and states that he, if he had to do it again, would make no changes:

"It's a modest place, but it's been rewarding and fun living here, building to what it has come to be, a pleasantly quiet, safe haven for us from the rest of the world. We just can't imagine being anywhere else. When I retired, other people asked, 'When are you going to start traveling?' To which I reply that we are childless and have traveled and this, our little retreat to enjoy nature, is the best place of all."

Written By: Alexis Broadbent-Sykes and James Teske