

# Dead Lady Lake



Dan Duerr at his home on Dead Lady Lake  
(USF)

## Personal History

Dan and his wife Kathy moved to Dead Lady Lake in August of 1987 seeking rural surroundings. The couple had lived on Halfmoon Lake for six years prior to their move and feel in many ways as though they were “driven out” of the Halfmoon Lake area by development. The plans for Veteran’s Expressway called for a section to be built approximately 500 feet from the lake, much too close in the opinions of the Duerrs. When the plans for the expressway were approved, the couple moved to Dead Lady Lake. Unlike Halfmoon Lake, which Dan describes as a large ski-sized lake with plenty of ski boats, Dead Lady Lake is “perfect because it’s too small, so far, for anybody to try to ski.”

Dead Lady Lake has played an important role in the lives of the Duerrs, as Dan expressed in the following quote from the interview:

*“Looking at the lake and interacting in some way with the wildlife. Sitting down there and watching the wildlife that...live by the lake. That’s an important part of it. I get out once a month in the canoe to sample the lake for the Lakewatch program. So I am on the lake a minimum of once a month. And also in the evenings I like to go down to the lake. We have a little portable base of a free-standing stove and we actually build small, contained fires on the dock in the winter time and cook hotdogs and invite friends over. We can be out on the end of the dock with just the starlight and a little fire going.”*

For Dan, the lake serves as a connection with nature, as well as with family and friends.



A view of Dead Lady Lake from Dan's back yard (USF)

## History/Information

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An alligator spotted in Spring 2000 (Dan Duerr)

Dead Lady Lake is located in northern Hillsborough County. The lake has a surface area of about 8 acres and reaches a maximum depth of 10 feet during the wet season.

In addition to the residents of three lakeside homes and several nearby subdivisions, Dead Lady Lake is populated by alligators, turtles, possums, raccoons, fox, several different types of fish, and at least one otter. Dan remembers regularly seeing an otter on the lake for the first five years he and his wife were living there. He tells the following story about an incident that happened eight years prior to the interview: Dan and his neighbor were both standing on their docks one day when one said to the other:

*"Have you seen that otter in a while? Then the other one said, 'No, I haven't. I bet it's been six months since I've seen the otter. I wonder if he's gone. I wonder if he's still in this lake.' And just then, right between the two docks, up comes the otter, looks at him, looks at me, and goes back down under the water... That was the last time I saw the otter."*

There are also many different types of birds on the lake, including blue herons, anhingas, osprey, hawks, and owls. Among the plant life present at Dead Lady Lake are cypress, pine, bay, wax myrtle, dahoon holly trees, and grape vines.

The lake is known by some as "Dead Lady Lake" and others as "Lady Lake," and Dan suggests that many people do not know the lake's name at all. Dan has heard that the name "Dead Lady Lake" was adopted after a dead woman was found in the lake in the 1950s or 60s. He further relates his understanding of the lake's name as follows:

*"When I was at my first LAKEWATCH meeting, Sandy Fisher asked me what the name of the lake was that I was now sampling, or going to be sampling. I said, 'It doesn't have a name.' Someone in that meeting spoke and said, 'That's not true. The name of your lake is Dead Lady Lake because I used to live on that street and that's what we all called it thirty years ago.' So I said, 'Great. Let's go with that name.' Here's the local people telling me what they think the name was because they lived out here. So I used their name, Dead Lady Lake, as the name for the LAKEWATCH program... Not one person has come up and said, 'No. That was Lake Estrada because I saw it on a real estate map.' But again, I don't know how many people even know what the name of this lake is. Now the developer knows what the name of the lake is. But guess what's on his sales plat? ... Lady Lake."*

Dan's statements reveal local understandings and uses of the lake's name.

Years ago, much of the land around the Dead Lady Lake area was occupied by citrus groves and ranches. Drawing from his personal

experiences and general knowledge of the area, Dan describes some of the historical uses of land:

*"Well, I know that there was a citrus grove in the large field to the south that's now a subdivision. It was about 100 acres. It's now...called 'Stillwater,' with about 50 planned houses. Also, there was a citrus grove where 'Montreux' is now a subdivision. I know that there were ranches east, near Lutz Lake Fern Road...I work for the Geological Survey and we had monitor wells that are...gone now. I know that there was, way before my time, a sawmill off Gunn Highway. But that was way back. Just in the last 20 years there have been significant changes...When we moved in the citrus grove was gone. I imagine...the trees probably died in one of the freezes in the early '80s. That would be my guess. After the trees died, the land was cut for hay."*



Cypress on the shore of Dead Lady Lake (USF)

## Development

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Dan takes Veteran's Expressway to work every morning. He admits how ironic it is that the very expressway that made he and Kathy choose to move away from Halfmoon Lake now makes going to work very convenient for him. Instead of taking 30 minutes, it now takes only 20. Although Veteran's Expressway has made life more convenient, for the most part Dan is critical of development in the area. He maintains:

*"I have benefited from it in the purely selfish point of view of being able to get to point A from point B. But as far as the overall picture, saving ten minutes on the trip is nothing to what we've lost...from what those expressways are bringing."*

At the time of this interview, the Suncoast Parkway was being built nearby, and Dan expressed his relief that it will not be any closer than two miles east of Dead Lady Lake.

Dan perceives that in the general area, as development has increased, wildlife has been disappearing. For instance, while he used to see a number of deer out on Lutz Lake Fern Road, he hasn't seen any in years. But in his immediate backyard area, Dan is glad to still have plenty of raccoons, alligators, turtles and fish.

Dan identifies increased runoff into Dead Lady Lake as another outcome of development, which he fears may be the downfall of the lake on which he lives:

*"My hope is that the Stillwater<sup>1</sup> people who move in will have a feeling for leaving vegetation in its native state and not try to pull out all the ferns and plant St. Augustine [grass] that takes lots of water, chemicals, and fertilizer. Because it's all going to run right into this lake and then into Lake Elizabeth, and then into Lake Wood, and then across Gunn Highway, and then all the way down the chain of lakes to Tampa Bay. So even right now we have algae blooms with only three houses and septic tanks on the lake. So, yes, we are contributing because we have a septic tank. Thankfully, as part of the settlement of the rezoning, Stillwater will have water and sewer controlled by the county, so there won't be more septic tanks. So that's a real positive. But the downside is that there's*



A view of the lake at sunset (Dan Duerr)

*numerous lots with future houses that border lakes and ditches leading into lakes...Fertilizer from the lots will run off into the lakes, increasing the algae bloom. That is what I see is the greatest threat to this little piece of environment that I'm involved in, runoff."*

Dead Lady Lake has experienced numerous algae outbreaks since the Duerrs moved to the lake, many of which can be attributed to development in the area. Dan tells the story of what happened in 1990 when about 100 trucks of chicken manure were spread as fertilizer in the former hayfield to the south. For years afterward, the lake experienced severe algae outbreaks, which Dan believes were related to the manure washing into the lake.

Lake residents have been active in opposing development projects that they see as threatening to their local environment. Among other causes, residents have organized to protest a borrow pit that was going to be permitted east of the lake and to express concerns about the subdivisions being built nearby. In response to the algae outbreak following the introduction of chicken manure in the area, neighbors went out on the lake in boats and manually raked the algae and salvinia into the boats, pulled the boats out with a Jeep, and dumped the algae on the shore. All together, they disposed of seven boats full of algae.

## The Future

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Dan emphasizes the education of residents as a key factor in determining the future of the lake. He has suggested to a developer that each person who buys a lakefront lot should be given the book *Living at the Lake*<sup>2</sup> as part of the closing, as a gift:

*"It's a \$10 book. [Give it to them] and say, 'Here's the lake.' It's in laymen's terms about how to appreciate the lake. How not to mess it up. What to do. What not to do. So if this new owner does not get the book from the developer, I'm giving him a copy."*

Dan believes that while new residents mean well, they often cause irreparable harm to the lake, something that could be changed if residents were better educated about lake environmental issues. It is interesting to note that John Snyder, the LAKEWATCH monitor for Crescent Lake had the same idea about educating residents: that developers should give the book *Living at the Lake* to all new residents (see Crescent Lake narrative at <http://www.lakeatlas.usf.edu/lakedata/lakes/crescent/default.htm>). This might very well be an effective way to educate citizens and protect the future of the lake.

**Written By: Ashley Spalding**

1 A new subdivision.

2 Marilyn D. Bachmann, Mark V. Hoyer and Daniel E. Canfield, Jr. 1999