

# Gornto Lake Narrative

The following narrative is based on an interview with Roy Schiro at his home on Gornto Lake on July 26, 2001. Roy has a very deep heritage with the lake and the surrounding area. The lake is actually named after his great-grandmother, Sarah Gornto. In 1910, his grandfather built the house where Roy now lives. This interview took place in Roy's study, which was once his grandfather's front porch. His lifelong friend, George Dill, joined us for the interview. Roy told stories about the history of the lake, as well as about the changes that he has seen during his lifetime.



The home built by Roy's grandfather, Roy Poore, in 1910. This picture was taken around 1945. (Source: Roy Schiro)

## Family History



Roy Schiro at Gornto Lake in July 2001. (Source: USF)

Gornto Lake has always been a part of Roy Schiro's life and has played an important role in his family's history. Roy's family first came to the lake in the early 1900s. Family members decided to name the lake after his great-grandmother, who had a house in the northwest corner of the lake. Roy's grandmother, May Gornto, was born on the lake. His mother, Nell, was born out of state, but moved to Gornto Lake during her childhood.

Roy was born and raised in Tampa but often visited the lake during his youth. When he was a boy, the people living around Gornto Lake were all members of his family. Roy says about the lakeside residents during the 1940s and 1950s:

*"I don't recall anyone not being family. We had the whole family around the lake at the time."*

During his childhood, Roy and his sister would go to the lake for birthday parties and to camp. As a child living in Tampa, Gornto Lake was "country." Roy recollects that during the 1946 polio epidemic, he was sent to the lake to avoid the crowds of people in Tampa. Roy says that, at that time, the lake and surrounding area was "just a fun place" with "so much to do." He and his friends would often play in the woods surrounding the lake and go swimming and fishing in the lake. There were diving boards in the lake and people used rowboats for fishing. It was on Gornto Lake that Roy began his lifelong hobby of bass fishing.



Roy's family at Gornto Lake circa 1907. In this picture are his grandfather (Roy Poore), grandmother (May Gornto), his aunts (Bess and Rena), and his mother (Nell). (Source: Roy Schiro)

As Roy grew older, Gornto Lake continued to play an important role in his life. He



Roy's mother, father, and sister at Gornto Lake in 1935. (Source: Roy Schiro)

and his wife, Patti, had their marriage ceremony in the family room of his grandfather's house. In 1963, Roy moved from Tampa closer to the lake when he built a house near Gornto Lake.

In 1981, Roy and Patti inherited the house they currently live in and they moved into the house that his grandfather had built in 1910. The original structure of the house remains, although Roy has built on two additions.

In more recent years, Roy's family has continued to make the lake an important part of their lives. Family events have continued to occur at the lake and both of his daughters were married on the lake's shores. Roy's grandchildren now come out to Gornto Lake and like to fish and play. Roy continues to pursue his passion for bass fishing in the lake. He typically releases the bass he catches unless they are worthy of being displayed on his wall. Roy's biggest catch was a 12.5 pound bass. However, his grandson has beaten his record by catching a 13 pound bass.



Roy's house with the additions that he built. The original structure is green and the additions are brick. (Source: USF)

## Lake History and Information



Gornto Lake is located in the northern part of Brandon, not too far from the heavily traveled Brandon Boulevard. The lake has a surface area of 12.6 acres and a mean depth of 4.3 feet, reaching 8.1 feet at its maximum depth. It is very close to Lake Chapman, which is to the east, with only a small stretch of land separating the two.

Roy says that when he was young the area around the lake was very rural and wooded. This is how Roy describes what the area used to look like:

*"This was all pasture with a little pond in the middle of that pasture down there. It was solid woods and you had to get a guide almost to get through...It was real rural. No houses hardly at all."*

Roy remembers from his childhood that there was some agricultural production in the area near the lake, but says that most of the land was still wooded. His grandfather did some farming, and Roy recalls a few small chicken and cattle farms. There was also a fern nursery in the neighborhood where an "asparagus like fern" was grown. However, according to Roy, none of these agricultural activities were large scale.

During his lifetime, Roy has seen the lake and area change considerably. Roy believes that the water quality in Gornto Lake has gotten worse over time. He says:

*"It used to be that you could see down to the bottom of that lake... It was a white sand bottom."*

Roy believes that the lake is not as clean as it used to be. He says that it currently has

a “mucky bottom” with algae in the water and an occasional “green slime that goes across the top of the lake.” He states that considering the lake's current condition, he would not go swimming in it like he would have years ago. Many years ago, two of Roy's relatives would swim in Gornto Lake on a daily basis.



Roy's dock almost completely under water during El Niño in December 1997. (Source: Roy Schiro)

Roy has also seen the water level of Gornto Lake rise and fall over the years. The highest that Roy has ever seen the lake was during El Niño in 1997, when the water reached higher than the dock. Roy says, “It was completely under, the dock was. It was like a flood.” More recently, the drought conditions have lowered the water level considerably. However, the rains this summer seem to have helped increase the water level yet again.



Roy's dock stands high above the water in July 2000. (Source: USF)

According to Roy, the vegetation in the lake has decreased in recent years. He says that there used to be a lot of vegetation in the lake, including lily pads and cattails. Roy says that now “You can't see them anymore around here.” However, he notes that nearby Lake Chapman still has many lily pads. Roy attributes the decrease in vegetation to a number of factors. He believes that during the recent drought, much of the vegetation has died. He also thinks that the influx of certain fish and wildlife, such as nile perch and nutria, has negatively impacted the vegetation since both feed on the plants in and near the lake.

Throughout his lifetime, Roy has seen the composition of the lake's wildlife change. Although he rarely sees animals like bobcats, red foxes or alligators anymore, he has seen the numbers of squirrels, rabbits, raccoons, and nutria increase. Roy has also seen the number of birds visiting the lake increase. He says:

*"The lake itself is just full of birds, of wildlife. It's just the prettiest...I sat there one day and I counted 126 different birds out there at one time...You can find birds. They're all over the place."*

Among the birds he sees are spoonbills, sand cranes, ducks, geese, pelicans, and ibis.

Roy believes that the number of fish in Gornto Lake has decreased. However, he does continue to see bass, blue gill, catfish, gar, and nile perch. Roy thinks that the decline in the fish population has been caused by the decrease of vegetation and recent drought conditions.

*"It's not like it used to be...It's never been stocked. It should have been stocked. The county should have fish put back in there. Then it went down so low sometimes that you would lose a lot of your fish. There's not enough vegetation or oxygen in the water to keep them all living...You could go out on that dock any day and throw a cast out and get a shiner this big. Now you wait forever for them. You don't catch fish like you used to out there."*



One of the sandhill cranes that Roy has seen at the lake. (Source: Roy Schiro)

# Development

Gornto Lake was originally in the town of Limona, not the town of Brandon. The lake once served as Limona's western border. Limona was settled in the late 1800s, at which time the lumber industry was booming. Many of the area's pine trees were cut down for lumber, leaving cleared land. This land was turned into farms that produced a wide variety of fruits and vegetables. By the 1960s, the town of Brandon continued to grow larger and incorporated parts of Limona. Gornto Lake was one of those areas ("Hillsborough County Historic Resources Survey Report" by the Florida Department of State Bureau of Historic Preservation, October 1998).

Roy remembers from his childhood that the area around Gornto Lake was still rural and heavily wooded. He describes the area as:

*"Very rural. Nothing but an old packing house up on 301, I remember. An orange fruit packing house on 301 and 60. That was there then. But there was no industry at all. No traffic lights but that one there. This was all dirt road off of 60 and back around."*

During his childhood, Roy's family members lived around the lake. In the 1950s, Roy's sister and his mother moved from Tampa and built houses near Gornto Lake. In 1963, Roy built his own house near the lake. It was during the 1960s that Roy saw the area near the lake start to be developed residentially. An uncle of Roy's developed one of the neighborhood's first subdivisions.

Sometime in the 1950s, Camp Florida was built between Gornto Lake and Lake Chapman. According to Roy, the Methodist Church built this camp. Roy's children went to camp there when they were young. In 1991, the Rotary Club purchased the camp and it now serves as a camp for children with cancer ("Camp Florida Mortgage Paid in Full" by Lenora Lake, *Tampa Tribune*, April 6, 2000). Roy says that the camp is active year round with children having a great time playing.

It was during the 1960s that Roy first saw commercial development begin in Brandon. About the changes brought about by the commercial development, Roy says:

*"You had to drive forever to find a place to eat. Now there must be 400 restaurants along Highway 60. Everywhere you look there are restaurants or gas stations or something. It changed the real ruralness of it."*



Brandon Boulevard near Gornto Lake Road in July 2001. (Source: USF)

In the general vicinity of the lake is the intersection of Brandon Boulevard and Gornto Lake Road, which is now quite busy with stores and restaurants. According to Roy, this area used to have apartment buildings, but they were replaced with strip malls in the 1980s. The stores and restaurants in the area have created a lot of traffic at this intersection. However, the commercial development has not reached as far back as Gornto Lake and Roy believes that the rural feeling is still maintained around the lake.

Recently, another subdivision has been built in the neighborhood with plans to build 41 new houses. Although this subdivision is not directly on the lake, it will increase the number of people using the roads. This makes Roy worry about how much worse the traffic might get. He also says that because of this high density of people, the subdivision has been connected to water and sewer lines. According to Roy, the older houses on and near the lake continue to have their own wells and septic tanks.

## Future Issues

Roy feels that in the future, Gornto Lake will remain peaceful and rural. He cites zoning restrictions as one reason the lakefront will not change much. He says that there's nothing really left to build on at the lake. However, the area not too far from the lake, such as Brandon Boulevard, has had what Roy sees as uncontrolled development. Although Gornto Lake itself might be able to avoid urbanization, the commercial and residential developments might move in closer than expected.



Roy hopes that, in the future, Gornto Lake can return to the way that it used to be with vegetation, abundant fish, and clear water. Roy would like to see some efforts put in place to help the health of the lake, such as the restocking of fish and the planting of vegetation. He also hopes that the drought comes to an end soon, allowing the water in the lake to reach a higher level. Gornto Lake has been an important part of Roy's life. Hopefully, it will also be able to play an important role for future generations.

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