

Little Manatee River



Little Manatee River at sunset (Byers)

The following narrative was derived from an interview with Mary Byers, in her riverfront home on the morning of July 10, 2001. This narrative is an account of life on the Little Manatee River according to Mary, who has lived there for nearly 30 years. Her story provides a great deal of historical information on the area and tales of the wildlife supported by the river.

Personal History

Before living on Little Manatee River, Mary and Perry Byers (now deceased) owned and operated a delivery service business in Tampa for 20 years. For vacation, they would camp in the more rural surroundings of the city, especially along the Little Manatee River. Once, while they were in the process of going up and down the river in an old bait boat, Mary and Perry saw some land for sale and decided to buy it. For six years before moving onto the property, the Byers used the land to camp. Mary reflects upon those early days:

“From the time we camped, we put a little trailer here and we used to stay in that on the weekends up on this lot when we were clearing the lot and you would have to carry all of your equipment from Stephens Road, all the way back here because the road was ruts that deep with sand.”

The purchase occurred in 1966, but they didn’t move to the river until 1972. At that time, they were one of the very few people living in the area, except for an old hermit who would stay to himself and fish the river for blue crabs. Mary tells the story of how they happened to find their camping spot:

“We were campers all of our lives. And we were coming back up from Casey Key, where we had been camping one weekend and we saw this sign on 41 that said campground...So, since it was handy to Tampa, we decided we would just park our unit there and come down for the weekends, which we did”

For years afterward, the Byers enjoyed the benefits of living on the river. They all love to fish, swim, and water-ski. According to Mary, Little Manatee River possesses many fond memories for the couple and their family. Mary explains:

“We have a good many memories in this river because we always had a lot of family organization and we were a family that always celebrated everything. If it had any reason to be celebrated, they celebrated it and they came down here a lot.”



Dock on Little Manatee off Mary’s backyard (Byers)



Mary and Perry Byers on their dock (Byers)

History/Information



Perry sailing on the Little Manatee River (Byers)

Little Manatee River runs along southern Hillsborough County, slightly dipping for a brief time into Manatee County, ending at Bahia Beach where it flows into Tampa Bay. Mary says much of the area along the river is swamp and bayou. In 1982, with the help of an environmental group called Manasota 88, Little Manatee was designated an *Outstanding Florida Water*. According to Mary, Little Manatee is tidally controlled and although the river is fresh water, it becomes brackish as it nears Tampa Bay. Mary describes the river as follows:

“The river is ever-changing. It’s a wonderful thing to look at because you never see a river that is ever the same. There are some beautiful sunrises that you get over here. It’s a pleasant place to live. It really is.”

Mary believes that the river supports massive amounts of wildlife, both floral and faunal. However, she reported that both the amount and type of wildlife has decreased over the years. In terms of flora, Mary reports seeing hyacinths, hydrilla, and the imported Brazilian pepper tree. As for fauna, Mary reported foxes, raccoons, possums, and otters as abundant at the time of the interview. Mary shares her affection for the otter:

“The otters are still around...They’re putting in a golf course down there and right beyond where they’ve finished the golf course is an otter track. At times the otters will go tracking across there with their young and they’re just as cute as can be. They used to be over on the island...they would just be frolicking and playing. They were river otters and they were having a wonderful time.”

Over the years, Mary has also seen snook, catfish, redfish, manatees, alligators, and black snakes in the river. She discusses the manatee that seems to be harder and harder to spot these days:

“The manatee used to come up the river and on occasion we still see one. Once, one had a baby over there... a little baby manatee. And you’d hear them at night because they clean the shoreline, in other words, anything that is leafy and green, they would snort it up and you would hear them down there snuffing away.”

Animals prominent in the past, but rarely seen today are wild cats like panthers and bobcats, and two kinds of birds – the whippoorwill and the towhee bird. Also down in numbers are the blue crabs. Mary reports:

“We don’t get a lot of blue crabs anymore. They still put crab traps out, but they take everything. If they would just take the male crabs, it would be all right, but they take the females and everything else. We used to get some pretty good size blue crabs.”

Historical investigation of the Little Manatee River yields a deep past. Native Americans called the Uzita occupied the banks and were met by early Spanish explorers in the 15th Century¹. More recent and traditional land use along the river, at least the part where Mary Byers lives, was primarily agricultural, particularly citrus groves and cattle ranches. Amazingly, this use continues today.

Development



Mary Byers grandson sailing the Little Manatee River on his home made sail boat, the SS Minnow (Byers)

There is relatively little development – both residential and commercial along the Little Manatee River, at least where Mary Byers lives. Along the strip of land she lives on, there is a fairly even mix of trailers and houses totaling anywhere from 25 to 30 according to Mary. The original owner of the strip of land on which Mary lives is unknown, but by the 1960s, the land was owned by a man named Willy Wells. Mary reports:

“He and his wife Imogene were the first to build a house down here and then he put this land up for sale.”

According to county consultants from PBS&J, about half of the land along the river is used for agriculture, primarily pastureland, citrus groves, and tomato farms. Thirteen percent is considered urban development and the rest is natural wetlands and untouched land². The only major towns along its coast are Wimauma, Sun City, Sun City Center, and Ruskin. From such statistics and reports by Mary Byers, it seems the Little Manatee River one of the least developed rivers in Hillsborough County.

The Environmental Lands Acquisition Protection program or ELAP is a group that has bought land along the Little Manatee for preservation purposes. According to Mary, ELAP just recently purchased more acreage with intent to buy more. The goal of ELAP is to preserve the land and river running through Mary’s backyard. Certainly, the Byers did their share of preservation. Mary tells:

“Of course we’ve left the yard as wilderness. We’ve tried to not clear much because I like the idea of trees. Trees are the most important things in Florida.”

However, despite some residential development and a new golf course, Mary raised few concerns related to development issues. One developmental concern of Mary’s is the noise created by Interstate 75 that was put in a few years ago, but this minor inconvenience is far outweighed by the peacefulness, solitude, and inspiration the river continues to provide Mary.

The Future



Mary and Perry Byers on their sail boat (Byers)

Future concerns for Little Manatee River include increases in residential development, decline in natural wildlife, and phosphate mining. However, with efforts such as those of ELAP, careful development planning, and controls on pollution, it is likely that the Little Manatee will continue to flow healthily through Mary Byers' backyard. As Mary explains:

"We love living here and everybody loves to live on water, but if they do something about keeping it a bit more pristine than they do...it would certainly help matters. I hate to see government interference, but nonetheless, sometimes you have to have government interference because people can get greedy."

Such governmental interference will be necessary as plans for relocation of the State Fairgrounds to Ruskin and development of a major industrial/commercial park are underway (www.littlemanatee.pbsj.com/overview.htm). It is changing land use patterns such as these that must be planned and carried out with attentiveness to potential impacts on the river's future.

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*1 January 27, 2000 Tampa Tribune: People of the Past by Liz Bleau
2 October 7, 2000 Tampa Tribune: Water Ways by Susan M. Green*