

Little Manatee River



Lou Ellen Wilson and her grandson Wade
(Source:USF)

Lou Ellen Wilson related her experiences on the Little Manatee River in an interview at her home on July 24, 2001. She has lived on the Little Manatee for 33 years and provided information about the history of the river and the surrounding area. The following narrative is based on this interview.

Personal History

After visiting Little Manatee River for the first time, Lou Ellen Wilson and her former husband “fell in love with it” and decided to move to the river to raise their sons. When they originally moved to Florida from Virginia in 1966, the Wilsons did not live on the water, but in 1968 they found a house on the river only two miles from freshwater fishing and about three miles from the bay. The part of the river on which Lou Ellen Lives is about halfway between the State Road 41 bridge and the I-75 bridge on the North side of the river.

Lou Ellen’s husband was a professional bass fisherman during the first years of the Bass Masters, and both of her sons are “fishing nuts.” Lou Ellen fished too, sometimes more to spend time with her sons than anything else. These fishing trips often provided delicious meals for the Wilsons; they also ate crabs and clams from the river. In addition to fishing, the family enjoyed swimming, canoeing, and water skiing together. Lou Ellen comments further on the important role of the river in her family’s lives:

From swimming in the river to, of course, all types of boating. From canoeing to water skiing to fishing. And the boys...each one of them when they turned 8-years old got their own little boat, a little five-horse-power motor. So they were allowed to explore... We would let them go all the way down into the Mangrove Islands down in Cockroach Bay. So it’s pretty shallow water and they were good swimmers. And so we kind of just let them grow up on the water.”

Her youngest son was only eight months old when she and her husband taught him to swim. Living so close to the water, they knew he needed to learn “how to respect the water and to survive in the water” as soon as possible. So his father taught him to swim before he could walk.

Although she recently started her own business and now has less time to spend on the water, the river remains an important part of Lou Ellen’s life.



Boating is one of the many recreational activities enjoyed by riverside residents
(Source:USF)

History/Information

Little Manatee River runs through 40 miles of southern Hillsborough County's pastures, farms, swamps, and marshes. In 1982, the river was named an Outstanding Florida Water (OFW), a designation that requires the preservation of the river's water quality as it was at the time of its OFW designation (Susan M. Green. "Quiet Pollution Dirtying Little Manatee." Tampa Tribune. April 4, 1999).

Lou Ellen sees the water quality of Little Manatee as being very good; it has greatly improved since a sewage treatment plant was built nearby in the 1970s. At this time, the water up the river from Lou Ellen cleared up and sea grasses began coming back. She points out that Little Manatee River has escaped water quality problems such as phosphate spills since the closest mining is at what Lou Ellen calls "Fort Lonesome," about 15 miles away from where she lives. On the other hand, a recent article in the Tampa Tribune suggests that the quality of the water may be "quietly deteriorating in ways that show up on graphs and spread sheets understood by few people other than scientists" (Susan M. Green. "Water Designation Not Strong Enough to Safeguard River." December 24, 2000). Although she notes that all of the homes on the river probably still have septic tanks and this may cause some water pollution, Lou Ellen has not noticed a decrease in water quality in the area of the river near her home.

Before Lou Ellen started her own business, she spent a great deal of time on her dock and has seen an abundance of wildlife on Little Manatee. Among the fish in the river are snook, redfish, trout, mullet, and jacks. Lou Ellen has seen a dolphin, alligators, and manatees:



View of Little Manatee River from Lou Ellen's dock (Source:USF)

"My son was telling me there were four [manatees] in front of his house the other day. But I don't spend that much time on the dock anymore. You have to spend a lot of time on the dock to see the manatees. But when we first moved down here...we had grass beds right at the foot of the seawall and the manatees used to come up there everyday."

Although squirrels and rabbits are now rare, she still frequently sees black indigo snakes, fox, and opossums. To Lou Ellen, the bird population seems to have decreased, but this may be because she now spends less time at home and therefore sees fewer birds. For several years, more than 20 night herons nested in a tall pine tree on Lou Ellen's property; her family called it their "night heron condominium." Additionally, Lou Ellen once saw a beautiful flock of around 500 vibrantly colored wild canaries fly over the river.

Cattle ranches are both a traditional and contemporary use of land in the area. According to Lou Ellen, the Dickman Ranch continues to make up "most of the river going up on this side." As Lou Ellen understands it, over the years, a great deal of land in Ruskin has been shifted from tomato farming to residential development and other types of farms:

"Ruskin was the tomato capital of the world. Mr. Dickman, who was one of the founders [of the area], he came down in the '30s and purchased a lot of land. And one of the things that he was very successful in developing was a process that would keep the tomatoes from developing so fast so they could get them to the northern markets. And so with the advent of that...they

grew nothing but tomatoes here, acres. We used to have...seven or eight very large packing houses [between here and Apollo Beach].”

All of these packing houses are now much smaller because most of the larger farmers have either sold their land for future development or have turned the farms into sod farms, tree farms, ornamental flower farms, or citrus groves.

Another change in the economy of the area is that until about 15 years ago, when fishing with nets was banned, many people in the area made money from mullet fishing. As Lou Ellen remembers it:

“There was a commercial fishery on the lower part of the river. It’s not there anymore but...it was a fish house. And so...there was a whole fleet of boats that worked out of there, mostly mullet boats and they mullet fished in the bay and up the river. But when they passed the netting laws then they couldn’t catch enough.”

Development

From what Lou Ellen understands, the Outstanding Florida Water designation means that if a lot was platted before the OFW designation, building can still occur on the river. Otherwise, construction cannot occur closer than 600 feet from the river. She suggests that this designation has prevented several land developments from being built:

“The Dickman Ranch, which is right up here, tried to get zoning to put in a [golf course] community up there, and they couldn’t get it because...in order to make it feasible they were going to have to get too close to the river. And so they did not allow that zoning. In fact, it’s still a ranch now.”

She sees the OFW designation as having made the area in which she lives “sort of immune to development around us.”

The neighborhood in which Lou Ellen lives, “Little Manatee Heights,” is a subdivision of about 40 lots. According to Lou Ellen, it was developed by the Dickman family, one of the first families to live in the area. Her property was originally part of the Dickman ranch, and her house was the second house built in the area, in 1949. While there are still available lots in the subdivision, there are no longer any vacant waterfront lots.

Among the development in the surrounding areas is Sun City Center, originally started in 1962, located about six or seven miles from Lou Ellen. The population has grown to 15,000, and she predicts that they have only five to ten years of development left before there is no land left to develop.

The Future



Little Manatee at sunset (Source: Mary Byers)

Lou Ellen is extremely optimistic about the future of Little Manatee River, largely because of the OFW designation:

“The laws are so strict and they’re getting stricter so I do not think that...this river will be impacted any more than it’s already been impacted.”

Although she now has less time to spend on the water, the river remains an important part of Lou Ellen’s life. One of her sons now lives on the river with his family, and she looks forward to teaching his young son how to fish.

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