

# Bullfrog Creek



Jeanie and Pete Johnson (USF)

*The following narrative has been written based on an interview conducted with Jeanie and Pete Johnson at their home on Bullfrog Creek on June 11, 2002. Both Jeanie and Pete grew up on Bullfrog Creek and with their knowledge of the creek from childhood, they were able to describe the changes that have occurred over the past fifty years. This narrative also reflects the importance of the creek to them and others in the surrounding area.*

## Personal History



Bullfrog Creek in June 2002 (USF)

Bullfrog Creek has been a significant part of Jeanie and Pete Johnson's lives. Both grew up on the creek and continue to live there. For them, Bullfrog Creek has been a place for enjoyment, as well as necessity. Although they lived in Montana for thirteen years, the couple eventually returned to the creek in 1990. The land that was owned by Jeanie's family, the Ekkers, is now a Hillsborough County Environmental Lands Acquisition and Protection Program (ELAPP) and Southwest Florida Water Management District (SWFWMD) site on the creek. Jeanie and Pete continue to live on the same property and act as caretakers for this site.

Jeanie's family history in the area surrounding Bullfrog Creek goes back to the early 1900s. However, her maternal side of the family, the Tanners, can be documented as far back as 1854 in Hillsborough County. When the Tanners first arrived from Georgia, they settled near Fort Lonesome. However, the family moved to Gardenville in 1917. Gardenville is on Bullfrog Creek and is now incorporated into modern-day Gibsonton. Jeanie's paternal side of the family, the Ekkers, moved from Flint, Michigan to Bullfrog Creek in the late 1920s to raise oranges. Alfred Ekker, Jeanie's father, told her that the family moved to Florida to become farmers, inspired by the book *Five Acres and Independence*. Unfortunately, the 1930s Depression, as well as poor soil quality, forced the Ekkers to sell their grove near the creek and the family then moved to Ballast Point.

In December 1941, Jeanie's father, Alfred, traveled from Ballast Point to Gardenville to attend a Christmas program at the Gardenville School. While attending this program, a young woman wearing a red dress caught his eye. This woman was Marie Tanner and the two quickly fell in love and were married on Valentine's Day in 1942. Since Alfred already owned land on Bullfrog Creek, the couple settled near the creek, built a house and raised their children.

Pete's family moved to Bullfrog Creek in 1950 when he was a young boy. His family originally came from Georgia and moved to Ruskin around 1938, where Pete was later born. When the Johnsons moved to Gardenville, they purchased property near the Ekkers. Being neighbors, Pete and Jeanie knew each other from childhood when Pete often played with Jeanie's brothers, Hugo and Sammy.



Bullfrog Creek in 1943 (Jeanie Ekker Johnson)



Marie Ekker fishing in Bullfrog Creek in the 1940s (Jeanie Ekker Johnson)



Bullfrog Creek in the 1940s (Jeanie Ekker Johnson)

Bullfrog Creek was frequently a part of Pete and the Ekker boys' activities. Pete reminisced about some of their activities:

*"The creek was used for swimming. During the summer we lived in the creek - all up and down the creek. We used it for recreation. We would actually go up the creek and get a 2x6 or a 2x8 and throw it in the creek and like a surfboard we'd ride it all the way down...just lazily paddle our way along. We used it for food...a lot of fishing because the fishing was good in the creek. The water was clean so we wasn't afraid to eat the fish. It was nothing to see mullet way up the creek. We'd cast net for mullet and take cane poles with the worm and the hook and the cork. Most of the fishing was done that way. Fancy fly rods and all that; that was a joke. That's the way we fished."*

In the days before water parks, Pete and his friends would make use of Bullfrog Creek's natural water flow during flooding. He told another story about how the boys used the creek's current to their advantage:

*"There was a road - a dirt road now called East Bay Road - we'd follow it back so far or we'd go right along the creek as close as we could 'cause the creek would become just ½ a mile wide. We'd follow it way back there and we'd take a #3 washtub with us. We'd go climb up the oak trees and go from limb to limb hauling that #3 washtub until we'd get out almost to the middle of the creek. This creek, normally you would step over or jump over. Now it's ½ a mile wide. We'd jump in the creek and ride that #3 washtub because it had a pair of handles for lifting. We'd hang on to them and ride it all the way down back to the bridge. It's a wonder that we never got killed."*

As Pete mentioned, Bullfrog Creek was important to those who lived near it not just for recreation, but for subsistence and income. For many members of Jeanie's family, commercial fishing and crabbing was a significant economic activity. In addition to Bullfrog Creek, Jeanie's family members would go fishing, crabbing and oystering in Hillsborough Bay, Tampa Bay, Alafia River and a local bay head called "The Kitchen." This bay head was known as "The Kitchen" because it was an abundant food source for local residents.<sup>1</sup> Pete explained what a typical crabbing experience would be like in the area:

*"You'd go out to a fish market and they'd give you mullet heads; where they had taken the mullet and cut the head off. That was garbage to them. They'd take a piece of twine, like rope, tie the mullet onto it and throw it out into the edge of the saltwater. Then you'd take your fingers along the line like that and make an 'S' along the line. You'd just leave it because you had it tied on to something. When that line straightened out then you'd start pulling it in. You'd take the crab net and ease out there and pull it in and dip up the [blue] crab."*

## History/Information

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*Bullfrog Creek when it flooded in 1944  
(Jeanie Ekker Johnson)*



*Flooding on Bullfrog Creek in 2001 (Jeanie Ekker Johnson)*



*Bullfrog Creek flooded in 1997 (Jeanie Ekker Johnson)*

Bullfrog Creek is located in the Bullfrog Creek/Wolf Branch Watershed in the southern part of Hillsborough County.<sup>2</sup> The creek's headwaters are near Wimauma, where it flows north and then diverts westward to where it discharges into Hillsborough Bay.<sup>3</sup> The creek has a length of 138,524 feet.<sup>4</sup> The history of the naming of Bullfrog Creek is unknown, although the creek is full of bullfrogs, which would be an apparent reason for the name. Jeanie has done some investigation into the history of the name and discovered that the creek was called Bullfrog going back to 1916 and earlier. However, there was a short period of time when the creek was identified on maps as Roosevelt River. One local story that has been passed down through the years is that Teddy Roosevelt spent some time on the creek and that the re-naming had to do with his visit. However, Jeanie has not been able to verify whether or not this story is accurate.

The creek can be rather shallow in some places during low tide. According to Pete, during low tide people can walk across the creek. Jeanie added that "there are places you wouldn't even get your knees wet if you went across." However, this is not the case when there is flooding. The elevation of the land near the creek plays an important role in determining which homes get flooded and which remain dry. The Johnsons are lucky because their house sits on land that has a much greater elevation than the creek, leaving them out of harm's way when the creek is flooded. However, neighbors on the other side of the creek, where there is a lower elevation, are not always so lucky; their homes and yards have been inundated with flood water a number of times.

The Johnsons and their neighbors have documented flooding in Bullfrog Creek through photographs taken in 1944, 1974, 1988, 1997 and 2001. As Jeanie has looked back at the photographs of when the creek has flooded, there appears to be a trend of flooding occurring most often in September. Pete estimated that the frequency of flooding on the creek is "at least once every ten years."

In addition to flooding, Bullfrog Creek has also been affected by the recent drought conditions. Major effects of the lack of rainfall, according to Pete, include the creek being dirtier than usual with debris floating in the water.

Over the years, the Johnsons have seen the creek change in many different ways. Bullfrog Creek, which once fed many people, is now a place that Pete and Jeanie feel is too polluted from which to eat. The Johnsons believe that the pollution of Bullfrog Creek began at the same time that flooding became an issue. Pete said about the situation:

*"I would say that the flooding problems on the creek and the pollution started together. Roads got put in and were drained to the creek...People used it to wash everything down."*

The Johnsons think that development around the creek also has had an impact on the water's health. For those homes and trailers near the creek, septic tanks have often been installed that, according to the Johnsons, do not have enough set-back. Pete expressed the following about the septic tanks near the creek:



*The property after Alfred Ekker cleared it in 1944 (Jeanie Ekker Johnson)*



*The pine trees that Alfred Ekker planted in the 1990s (Jeanie Ekker Johnson)*



*Ducks on Bullfrog Creek in the 1940s (Jeanie Ekker Johnson)*

*“Actually, some people would put in a septic tank. Then they would put in a drain field and...put a pipe in from the end of the drain field into the creek. What now they call a skunk pipe. They would drain the waste into the creek when they had trouble with the drain field plugging up. And when high water came, it would cover the septic tanks.”*

Recently there have been regulations increasing the set-back distances from the creek. However, both Jeanie and Pete feel that these should be increased even more.

Although the Johnsons will no longer eat fish from Bullfrog Creek, they believe that the creek’s health has improved in recent years. Since the two returned from Montana in 1990, the creek has undergone some clean-up projects and Jeanie felt that the creek’s condition was better than it had been before they left. However, they believe that improvements still need to be made.

Jeanie and Pete describe the creek’s surrounding vegetation as having changed due to human influence. When the two were young, the area was covered with palmettos and pines. As Alfred Ekker cleared land for pasture, much of these were cut down. However, as Alfred grew older and moved away from raising cattle, he re-planted slash pines in the pastures. In between these pines, magnolia trees and hickory trees have grown. Jeanie told the story about why this was the case:

*“When the pine trees were planted, when the magnolia seeds came in, or if he picked up hickory nuts out in the field from the trees there or whatever, he would take the stick and walk. Where the pine trees didn’t grow he’d whomp it down and make a hole that deep and drop in the magnolia seed or the hickory nut... You find in these rows of pine trees...these other trees that are right in line. You wonder, ‘How did nature do that?’ Well, Dad did that.”*

According to Pete, the vegetation along Bullfrog Creek has also been altered by human interaction. He said that the creek’s current was slower than it currently is because of the undergrowth that used to exist along the creek. According to Pete, as development in the area has increased, the undergrowth has been removed. He said: “People have come through and they’ve knocked all that undergrowth out. Now the run-off can move even faster. It has nothing to slow it down. Back then it had the undergrowth and everything that slowed it down.”

The area surrounding Bullfrog Creek has been home to a variety of wildlife. Years ago, when the area was covered with palmettos and pines and few homes existed, it was not uncommon for bobcats and panthers to roam the area, for rattlesnakes and indigos to slither through the woods and for alligators and otters to swim in the creek. Jeanie remembered that as a child she looked out of her bedroom window and saw “a bobcat walk along the edge of the creek.” Pete told a story about when panthers and bobcats were a common sight in an area called “The Bottom,” which was a bay head. He said about that area: “It was nothing at night to be driving that way and see a bobcat jump the ditch. Bobcats and panthers were quite common back in the ‘40s and early ‘50s.”



*One of the gopher turtles that lives near the creek (Jeanie Ekker Johnson)*



*Bullfrog Creek in 2002 (USF)*

The Johnsons' most recent sighting of a panther near Bullfrog Creek was in the mid-1990s. The incident occurred when Pete went outside to investigate why his dog was barking. When he got near the dog, he realized that she had been barking at a metallic balloon. Pete shared: "The reason I know it was a panther is because its tail was about 3 feet long. It ran past me within about 20 feet of me." He was glad the dog missed seeing the cat.

More recently, Jeanie and Pete have spotted red foxes, gopher tortoises and black and coral snakes. Gopher tortoises are quite prevalent near the creek, with the Johnsons having counted about 10-12 tortoise holes on the Environmental Lands Acquisition and Protection Program (ELAPP) site. They are not quite sure about the number of tortoises making their home on the property because they have never been able to count them all. Jeanie shared a story about how they tried to count all of the gopher tortoises one summer:

*"Once upon a time when the grandkids were here for several months we got this big, red felt marker and said, 'Every time you see a gopher, put a number on it.' We got up several numbers and never saw a gopher [turtle] with those same numbers. Yet, they're here."*

There are also a number of birds that frequent the area around Bullfrog Creek. Although neither Jeanie nor Pete were avid birdwatchers when they were younger, they remember mocking birds, whippoorwills and owls in the area. In February 2001, a group of birdwatchers from the Audubon came to the ELAPP site to count the birds. The most frequently sighted birds on that day included: yellow-rumped warblers, American robins, blue-gray gnatcatchers, and palm warblers.

## Development

The area surrounding Bullfrog Creek has a long, rich history. The area was first developed in the late 1800s, when a number of small communities were founded. What is presently known as Gibsonton is made up of the communities of Gardenville, Adamsville and Gibsonton. Gardenville was one of the communities that was settled right near Bullfrog Creek. During the early 1900s, many of Gardenville's residents were involved in commercial fishing and truck farming.

As mentioned earlier in this narrative, when the Ekker family first moved to Bullfrog Creek in the 1920s, they were involved in citrus production. When Alfred Ekker moved back to the creek in 1942, he decided to pursue cattle ranching. This was not uncommon in the general vicinity; with nearby neighbors running cattle on what was known as Sumner's pasture.

After Alfred moved back to Bullfrog Creek and built his home, other family members also moved to the creek to settle. Jeanie related how family members kept moving to Bullfrog Creek:

*"The family that came from Flint [the Ekkers] settled on the creek, two of the sons came back. Dad [Alfred Ekker] came back and kept expanding. For a wedding gift, he gave his brother Bob acreage where what's now underneath the power lines. A sister bought the next 10*



View of Bullfrog Creek in 1974 (Alfred Ekker)

*acres that adjoins this. She and her husband later sold it. But they all came out here and lived for awhile. So there were two Ekkers on Ekker Road and the sister married a Lovegren and that's the name of a street."*

During the 1950s, Jeanie's grandparents on her father's side also moved to the creek onto nearby Symmes Road. When Jeanie's grandmother built her house, she began selling the lots directly on Symmes Road. By the early to mid-1960s, according to Jeanie and Pete, housing and commercial developments began increasing dramatically throughout the area. This included houses and trailer home parks directly on Bullfrog Creek. There has been constant building ever since. According to Hillsborough County records, the population of Gibsonton grew from 1,673 in 1960 to 14,000 people by the 1990s.<sup>iv</sup>

## The Future

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The future of Bullfrog Creek depends on many factors, including development, pollution as well as the plans to deal with these issues. Pete hopes that Bullfrog Creek will be preserved for the future "so that people can see what Florida was." It was always Alfred Ekker's dream to turn his property into a park. With that land now being in ELAPP protection, that dream will be somewhat fulfilled with some of the area being preserved for future generations. However, to protect Bullfrog Creek for the future, the cooperation of many agencies and citizens will be necessary.

<sup>1</sup> *Timeline Gibsonton. 2000. Hillsborough County Television.*

<sup>2</sup> *Bullfrog Creek/Wolf Branch Creek Watershed Management Plan Executive Summary. Hillsborough County.*

<sup>3</sup> *Bullfrog/Wolf Branch Creek Watershed. Hillsborough Lake Atlas: <http://www.lakeatlas.usf.edu/navigator/watersheds/bullfrog/intro.htm>*

<sup>4</sup> *Bullfrog Creek. Hillsborough County Watershed Atlas: <http://www.hillsborough.wateratlas.usf.edu/river/geninfo.asp?wbodyid=18&wbodyatlas=river>*

<sup>iv</sup> *Hillsborough County Historic Resources Survey Report. Hillsborough County Planning and Growth Management. October 1998.*

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