

# Carlton Branch Creek



Robert Tatom (USF)



Carlton Branch Creek in 2003 (USF)



Vegetation near the creek (USF)

*The following narrative comes from an interview with Carlton Branch Creek resident Robert Tatom in his home on October 1, 2003. Robert has lived near Carlton Branch Creek his entire life and has seen how the changing area has affected the relationship between people and the creek.*

## Personal History

Robert Tatom's relationship with Carlton Branch Creek began the day he was born. His family had been living near the creek for years, and in 1946 he joined the family tradition. Robert's grandparents moved to their home near Carlton Branch Creek in 1923 with the intention of farming. Years later, the property was divided between Robert and his siblings. Robert explains:

*"When my mother died, there was thirty acres that were divided up between the four of us. My brother's kids got the lot next to mine, and the creek actually comes into the property on their part."*

The creek played a much more active role in his life when he was growing up than it does today. Robert and his family used the creek for fishing and keeping cool on hot Florida days. Robert remembers:

*"When we were kids we called it going swimming, but it was hardly deep enough to swim in. It was really wading. That was back on the other side of Sweat Loop Road. There was what I guess you would call fords, where they crossed with a tractor; they had orange groves on this side and that's where they'd cross. That's where we'd cool off."*

Robert feels that the water level must have changed since he was a child. Robert remembers his father's favorite fishing holes in the creek:

*"Well, I know that when I was just a boy, my dad would go down there fishing, but there's no holes down there deep enough to fish in now. I remember because that tree had fallen out across the creek and he had sat down along the tree fishing and he caught himself an eating-size fish. It's not very big now [Carlton Branch]. I could probably drive across it with the tractor."*

Robert doesn't believe his grandparents chose the property because of the creek, but he does believe it was probably an asset they didn't mind having on their property. Robert explains:

*"I really don't think the creek really had any influence on why they came here; they were going to farm. Sure, with the creek back there it probably helped some, but it gets so wet back there, you can't farm that far back. I really think it was just there. They had cows, too. So, they had a place to water."*



Carlton Branch Creek and nearby vegetation (USF)



Marker on Carlton Branch Creek on the Sweat Loop Road Bridge (USF)

## History/Information

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Carlton Branch is a sandy-bottom creek. Tannic acid from the surrounding trees gives the water a rusty-brown color. It is part of the Little Manatee River watershed and is 33,834 feet in length. Its headwaters are south of Highway 672 and Dupree Road. It eventually spills into the Little Manatee River ([www.hillsborough.wateratlas.usf.edu](http://www.hillsborough.wateratlas.usf.edu)).

Robert doesn't know why the creek is named Carlton Branch, but he notes that the nearby lake is also named Carlton Lake. Robert suspects that both were probably named after one of the original families living in the area surrounding the city of Balm. Robert explains:

*"It might just be named after some of the people out here. Most of the people over here were Sweats. Maybe it's named after one of them, I don't know. They go back to when they first started dividing the property."*

The Sweat family has a long history with Balm that goes back to 1905 when H.D. Sweat established a general store near the new Balm train station. In 1916, two of the four principal landowners in and around Balm were Sweats: H.D. Sweat and J.D. Sweat. This area was home primarily to small farmers owning between five and fifteen acres.<sup>1</sup>

Robert has seen the creek go through many stages of drought and rain. He notes that in the recent drought the creek was significantly smaller:

*"There was hardly anything that you could see that was running. I looked down and there was just one little place where you could see a trickle. But, it never did dry up."*

By contrast, a much more frequent occurrence for the creek is flooding. Today, the creek still rises during heavy rains, but it doesn't reach the same scale it has in the past. Robert explains:

*"When we get some real heavy rains, it gets up out of its banks... It used to come up over the bridge here, but I haven't seen it do that in many, many years. The bridges aren't any higher now than they were then, so you know something has changed."*



*View of Carlton Branch Creek (USF)*



*Some of the vegetation in the creek (USF)*

The area surrounding Carlton Branch has had an influx of residents in the last few decades, but for the most part, has had little impact to the creek and its immediate surroundings. Robert notes that the creek is mostly surrounded by Elephant Ears and other green vegetation. He also notes that he has seen very few animals near the creek besides the occasional raccoon. Robert explains:

*"I've never seen any deer, any hogs, I guess it's too close-in with houses and trailers."*

## **Development**

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People first began settling in the Balm area at the beginning of the twentieth century when a train station opened<sup>2</sup>. The area has had a slow but steady influx of people ever since. Robert believes the biggest changes to the area were brought about in the 1950's when new roads were put into the area creating new access to land. Robert explains:

*"One thing that had a lot to do with it was that they opened up the road. This road [Sweat Loop Road] stopped right there at my mother and father's house. And then Carlton Lake Road, it stopped just the other side of the bridge. So, there wasn't anyplace for anybody to live. When they opened Carlton Lake Road up they just came in. And as people sell off their farms and divide it up..."*

Robert remembers a much smaller community when he was growing up:

*"When I was younger there were very few people out here. Probably in the whole community, which goes back to the other side of Balm, a four-mile range, there are about a hundred people. It used to be you knew everybody and everybody knew you. And now, you don't want to know them! I probably wouldn't know either one of my neighbors if I wasn't kin to them."*

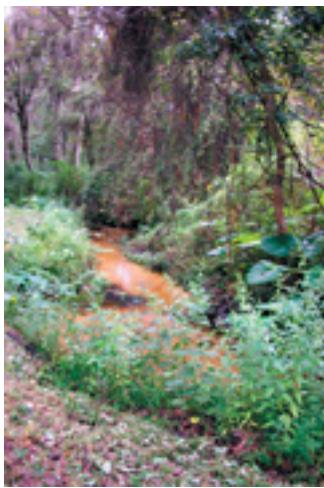
Even today, the general area surrounding Carlton Branch is predominantly agricultural. A Department of Environmental Protection Eco-Summary report performed in 1997 noted the high potential for agricultural runoff that could also impact the Little Manatee River and Tampa Bay.<sup>3</sup>

## The Future

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A close-up on the water in the creek (USF)



Carlton Branch Creek in 2003 (USF)

Robert has mixed feelings about Carlton Branch. When asked about the changes to the area, Robert has this response:

*"You hate to say things have changed for the worse, but when you've been here since when no one was here, you have to think it used to be better."*

The Department of Environment Protection recommended continued monitoring of the creek for the protection of the watershed from "land use activities in the area" and rated it as only marginally healthy due to the "potential impacts during fertilizer and pesticide applications."<sup>4</sup>

The future of Carlton Branch seems to be dependant on how the area surrounding it develops in the future. If the area remains predominantly agricultural, the health of the creek from runoff will need to be addressed. However, if the area changes in other ways, the future is unpredictable. Robert only knows this is certain:

*"With something like that, you just take it for granted. You don't know what value it has until there's not enough water there for it to serve its purpose."*

### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Hillsborough County Historic Resources Survey Report. 1998. Prepared by Hillsborough County Planning & Growth Management.

<sup>2</sup> Hillsborough County Historic Resources Survey Report. 1998. Prepared by Hillsborough County Planning & Growth Management

<sup>3</sup> Carlton Branch, Hillsborough County: A BioRecon Assessment. April 1997. A Report by the Surface Water Assessment and Monitoring Program (SWAMP) #96-004 – Florida Department of Environmental Protection.

<sup>4</sup> Carlton Branch, Hillsborough County: A BioRecon Assessment. April 1997. A Report by the Surface Water Assessment and Monitoring Program (SWAMP) #96-004 – Florida Department of Environmental Protection.

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