

Horse Lake



Horse Lake in 2002 (USF)

The following narrative was written based on an interview with Emogene Riek, a life-long resident of Horse Lake, on August 20, 2002. During the interview, Emogene told stories about growing up in the Citrus Park/Keystone area, the turpentine industry in which her father worked, and the changes she has seen occur in the area throughout her lifetime.

Personal History

Emogene Riek was born in Hillsborough County, in the Citrus Park/Keystone area. A few years before Emogene's birth, her parents, Carl and Cora Brown, had moved from Alabama to Florida so that Carl could pursue work in Florida's booming turpentine industry. Back in Alabama, the Brown family had been in the business of running turpentine stills, so when Carl moved to Florida, he was able to start his own turpentine still near Linebaugh Avenue and Sheldon Road. Carl and Cora bought land on Horse Lake, which was about four miles north of the turpentine still. Emogene related the following about how her father decided to buy property on Horse Lake: "He was down on Linebaugh and saw the property was for sale. He liked it so he bought it." The house on the property is still standing today.



Girls swimming in Horse Lake in 1940 (Riek)

Emogene was Carl and Cora's only child. Growing up on Horse Lake and in the Citrus Park/Keystone area, Emogene recalled many fond memories of swimming in Horse Lake and playing in the surrounding forest; however, she also remembered the occasional loneliness of growing up in an area with few children with whom she could play. Emogene's first school was a one-room schoolhouse on Boy Scout Road, which had students up to the eighth grade. After a year at the one-room school house, the local children attended school in nearby Lake Fern, where they had two rooms in the Masonic Lodge. After a year in the two-room schoolhouse, all of the local children were then sent to Citrus Park Elementary School. Emogene eventually attended Hillsborough High School, and went on to graduate from Florida State University. Even though the local children were bussed out of the area for school, when they returned home, they made sure to enjoy the nearby lakes and forest. Emogene said about the local children's activities after school:

"We fished and we swam everyday after school. At that time there were a few more [children]. We were in high school and we had to go to school in town at Hillsborough [High School]. There was only grammar school out here. We'd come home and get off the bus and...we all would meet down here and go swimming every afternoon. We'd have the best time."



The Browns' dock extending into the lake in 1924 (Riek)



Boating on Horse Lake in 1924 (Riek)

Emogene also spent much of her childhood at the turpentine still that her father ran. She told stories about some of her experiences playing at the turpentine still:

"I used to go and play in the rosin when I was growing up. I've had quite an unusual life as far as that's concerned. They [the turpentine workers] would let out a charge, which is what they would call it, and they would cook all this gum. They'd chip the trees, cut them so the gum would come out... They'd have to come chip some more to make it keep pouring 'cause a tree would heal itself. That would go in the cup. In the bottom you would have pine, straw, leaves and everything else in there. They would come and dip it in the big barrels and take it back to the turpentine still. Then they would put all this in a big vat and put hot fire underneath it and cook it. Then when it was up the turpentine, the liquid, would rise to the top and get so hot and go down this way. You could go out there and take a little glass and stick it under there and tell when it was done. I used to play with it. I'd go down and get in their way. Then they would take all this and take the charge out and it would go in this big vat with a cotton batting in the top. It would seep through the cotton, which would strain all the stuff out. The rosin was going to be in the bottom. The rest of this stuff was junk and they would throw it away. Then they would take the rosin and dip it into barrels, big barrels, and the rest would be turpentine, liquid turpentine that they would put in paint. That would be in another section. Then when the rosin would get in these big barrels I'd take flowers and twigs and leaves and everything and I would dip them down in the hot rosin. It was so pretty; it would glaze over. My fingers were burned all the time because it was so hot. It was like wax. Rosin is worse because it sticks and it's hotter. I would go down there and I'd have everything around there dipped in rosin. I had the best time in the world. Then they would have to weigh it. They'd get paid by the weight. And then they would get paid by gallons of turpentine. Then the big trucks would come by and load it. I'd be playing out there and having the best time in the world and my Daddy would call me. I knew what it was. I'd have to get up on top of each barrel and I'd hop from barrel to barrel reading the labels of the rosin."

As the trees in the Citrus Park/Keystone area became depleted, the Brown family had to move with the turpentine industry. Carl started another turpentine still in the Bartow – Auburndale area in Polk County. Even though the Brown family started a turpentine still elsewhere, they still considered Horse Lake their home and made trips back to the lake as frequently as possible.

Emogene married Dewey Riek, Jr. in 1946 and the two built a house on Horse Lake in 1957. There, they raised a son and a daughter. When her children became adults they moved away from Horse Lake; however, both have returned to the area with their own families. In fact, her daughter's family also lives on the lake. Horse Lake continues to be very important to Emogene and her family. The lake has been a place for holiday gatherings – Christmas, Thanksgiving and Easter - over the years.

History/Information



The Browns' dock during a period of low water (Riek)



Low water in 2002. Picture taken from point of previous shoreline.. (USF)

Horse Lake is a 24-acre lake located in the Brooker Creek Watershed of northwestern Hillsborough County. According to Emogene's knowledge of the local history, the lake received its name from the early Mobley settlers. She shared:

"They had been here since the Civil War, the Mobleys. They told my mother, as I recall...that right after the Civil War a horse got loose and they ran him down. He [the horse] came to the lake, which was bigger than it is now, and he started swimming across and he got in the middle and drowned. So they called it Horse Lake."

Horse Lake is in an area populated with many lakes, such as Pretty Lake, Lake Raleigh and Rogers Lake. According to Emogene, these lakes were at one point all connected by man-made canals. She shared the local story that these canals were dug for drainage by freed slaves shortly after the Civil War.

The water level in Horse Lake has fluctuated over the years. The highest levels that Emogene has seen were in the 1940s and the early 1960s. She shared an experience from when the lake was extremely high:

"One time when I must have been about 14 or so, the water from this lake was all the way up to the edge of that house [her parent's two-story house]. I can remember going out there barefoot and catching little minnows. It was solid water all the way down here."

Horse Lake reached high levels again in the early 1960s. The Rieks had been living in their newly built home for a number of years when a season of rain and floods became a problem. She shared:

"One year...we had a flood. It rained and rained...I can remember sitting in that room watching it rain constantly, constantly, constantly. The water came up from this lake all the way, this far from my house. We moved out. We had to move out because we didn't know when it was going to stop. We moved over there [to her mother's two-story house] because it was empty at that time...until they could get the water down."

In more recent times, the lake has been encountering problems with low water levels. The drought conditions of 1999 and 2000 have likely influenced this situation, as well as the nearby well fields servicing Pinellas County. A few years ago, the Southwest Florida Water Management District (SWFWMD) installed a pipe from Lake Pretty to Horse Lake. The purpose of this pipe was to allow Lake Pretty's overflow to drain into Horse Lake, rather than have it flow out of its other opening. According to Emogene, this pipe succeeded in filling up Horse Lake. Available data on Horse Lake's water level reveals that 2001 did see a more than 20-foot increase for a brief period of time.¹ This pipe was removed because it ran through land that was going to be developed. On the day of the interview (August 20, 2002), representatives from SWFWMD came to ask Emogene if they could again run the pipe through her property, allowing Lake



Water gauge on the lake; an indication of how high the water once reached (USF)

Pretty's overflow to run into Horse Lake. Emogene agreed to the pipe and is hopeful that this will again mean that Horse Lake is full of water.

Around the lake, there has always been a diversity of trees, including pine, cypress and oak. When she was growing up, the area around the lake was thickly forested, and was home to a variety of animals. One of her memories from childhood was about the panthers in the area:

"When I was in the 1st or 2nd grade, they killed a panther down here in the swamp. He [the panther] was a big thing. They killed him down there and they put him on the hood of the car and were taking him around showing him to everybody. I wouldn't go from that house down here by myself even in the daytime; I just figured there was going to be a panther because all this was trees at that time. I was scared to death for years. My daddy had some horses, and panthers would come through about once every six months and the horses would run and you could hear them running. The next day, my daddy would go out there and you'd see the big panther tracks. But the horses were scared to death."

Living on Horse Lake with her husband and children, Emogene also encountered bobcats:

"We had a bobcat up in a tree when I lived up there. He was after the housecat. We had a cat and that cat was screaming and carrying on. Boy, he was scared to death. My husband heard it, got his pistol and went out there. When he turned on the light, the wildcat hit the ground running. He was after that cat."

Recently, Emogene has seen a bobcat, a red fox and a possum near the lake.



The house in which Emogene grew up (USF)

Development

The area around Horse Lake has historically been rural; however, as development has increased for all of Hillsborough County, the Citrus Park/Keystone area has also experienced change. Historical use of the land in the Citrus Park/Keystone area, including the communities of Cosme, Spivey, and Fox's Corner, has been turpentine, logging and citrus.

The development of the area in the late 19th and early 20th Century was triggered by the abundant tree resources that supported turpentine stills and sawmills. In the early 1900s, railroad tracks were built in the Citrus Park/Keystone area to transport the turpentine and lumber to other parts of the country. There were train tracks connecting Lutz to Tarpon Springs, with stops in Cosme, Lake Fern, Gulf Pine and Keystone.²

As the timber industry cleared the land of trees, citrus groves often went up in their places.³ Emogene's father, Carl Brown, planted citrus groves near Horse Lake in the 1920s. These groves are still in production and Emogene said that some of the trees her father planted are still there. There were other commercial citrus groves in the Horse Lake area. According to Emogene, Cosme, the community where Horse Lake is



View of the lake in 2002. The shoreline used to reach the oak tree (USF)

located, was named after the local fruit-packing house:

“There was a packing house down there and it was Cosme Fruit Company or something like that. They had a little siding, the railroad did, and it came through here at that time. We called it the P-line. The boxcar would pull up there and they would load all this fruit, but it was Cosme Packing House, so it was Cosme Road and this was Cosme.”

Growing up in the Citrus Park/Keystone area, Emogene said that the area was sparsely populated. During her childhood, the limited number of people made the area inopportune for Tampa Electric to run lines. Emogene told the following story about the lack of electricity in the area:

“When I was growing up out here there was no electricity, no telephone, nothing. We tried to find out how it was and the Tampa Electric Company said that there weren’t enough people out here for them to pay to string a line. It was just too far from Tampa. We had a generator. At night and late in the afternoon we’d turn the generator on and pump the water from the well up to the tank at the top so we’d have water in the house the next day. Then it was late in the afternoon and we could have a little light to see by while it was pumping. The generator would light the house lights up.”

When Emogene was growing up, Gunn Highway, a now-heavily traveled road in Hillsborough County, was a narrow road without much traffic. Emogene shared a story about what Gunn Highway used to be like and how it has evolved over the years:

“It was Gunn Highway. Still very narrow. I could go all the way down Gunn Highway, clear down to Dale Mabry and I would never meet a car. They could never believe it. They widened Gunn Highway a little bit more and the traffic got worse. Then they widened it a little bit more and now they need to widen it some more.”

As mentioned previously in this narrative, when Emogene was growing up, there were few children and other people in the area. When she was raising her two children on Horse Lake, the area was still sparsely populated. Emogene said that she and her husband would spend hours driving the children back and forth to different places.

Although in the past there were few people living in the Citrus Park/Keystone area, the area has changed considerably over the past 20-30 years. As a child on Horse Lake, Emogene’s family’s house was the only one on the lake. Now there are eight houses. Also built on Horse Lake a few years ago was Walker Middle School. This school was named after Charlie Walker, a prominent local African-American man who in the 1920s and 1930s worked to start a school for African-American children in the area.

The 1970s marked the beginning of subdivisions and gated communities in the Citrus Park/Keystone area.⁴ Emogene expressed concern about the impact of these housing developments on the environment and sense of community. She shared:

“Everybody out here has only just begun putting water lines in; they are mostly reclaimed water to irrigate groves and stuff like that. Everybody has a well and everybody has a septic tank. The more people, the more water they use. Hundreds and hundreds of people have had new wells dug because the water table has gone down and down and down. Every time there’s a new subdivision, we say, ‘Where are they going to get their water?’ That’s the first thing we think about. There’s not enough water for everybody now.”

With the influx of new people have also come changes in the sense of community. Years ago, Emogene said that all of the neighbors knew one another. She shared: “At that time, when we were married and first moved out here you knew everybody in the neighborhood. When you had some kind of get-together, everybody in the neighborhood was invited.” Now, she is not as well-acquainted with her neighbors because of the frequent turn-around of people moving in and out.



View of lake in 2002 (USF)

The Future

Horse Lake has always been an integral part of Emogene’s life. Having spent her entire life on the lake, its health and its future are important to her. Emogene said about Horse Lake: “I like the peace and quiet. I can do what I want to. It’s home.”

Emogene has hope that the upcoming plans for a pipe from Lake Pretty to Horse Lake will fill the lake with water again. She expressed the following about the pipe plans: “I think that this is a start, the new pipeline they are going to put in. I think it will be back up to normal, if they can just stop pumping so much.”

Emogene’s ultimate hope for the lake is that it remains a quiet and peaceful place. She expressed her hopes for Horse Lake:

“I would like to keep it a family-type like it always has been. It’s not big enough for skiing or anything. Once in awhile they would when it was up high, but it’s not big enough really for that. I would like to keep it as a family treasure, you might say.”

With concerned lakeside residents and students at nearby Charlie Walker Middle School, as well as continued involvement from agencies, it is hoped the Horse Lake will once again be a healthy and viable lake; and continue as such into the future.

ENDNOTES

¹ Hillsborough County Watershed Atlas. Horse Lake Hydrology. <www.hillsborough.wateratlas.org.

² Hillsborough County Historic Resources Survey Report. Hillsborough County Planning & Growth Management. October 1998.

³ Hillsborough County Historic Resources Survey Report. Hillsborough County Planning & Growth Management. October 1998. Page 68.

⁴ Hillsborough County Historic Resources Survey Report. Hillsborough County Planning & Growth Management. October 1998. Page 62.

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