

Little Lake Wilson



Little Lake Wilson in June 2002 (USF)



The Polks A-frame house on Little Lake Wilson (Polk)

The following narrative comes from an interview with Little Lake Wilson resident Kelly Polk in her home on June 20, 2002. In it, Kelly shares some of what she knows about the current state of the lake as well as its history.

Personal History

A true Floridian born and raised in South Tampa, Kelly Polk now lives on the northern end of Little Lake Wilson with her husband, Milton, and stepdaughter. Kelly left the urban lifestyle of Tampa in 1996 to live on the lake in Lutz for the rural atmosphere. She explained why:

"I like the area. I want to try to keep it as rustic and rural as I can. Because you know if I wanted to live in a development, I'd live in Tampa Palms. Some people want the sidewalks and curbs. I just can't imagine living somewhere else."

Kelly told the following story about how she and her husband came to live in their A-frame house on Little Lake Wilson:

"We came and looked at the house. They were having an open house. We knew as soon as we walked in the door that we were going to buy it. But we really wanted the house for the yard."

Over the years, the Polk family has enjoyed fishing, picnicking, and canoeing on Little Lake Wilson. Kelly currently serves as an advocate of the lake, working with the county and other officials to ensure it a healthy future. According to Kelly, Little Lake Wilson is currently "in a poor state of affairs." As such, she has been working closely with Hillsborough County on a clean up program designed to remove some of the muck and other build-up from the bottom and replace it with plants that will help maintain water quality. The project is part of the county's improvement of storm water flow that plans to reconnect Little Lake Wilson to Lake Wilson (also known as Lake Thomas) towards the east as well as replant native vegetation.¹

Kelly and Milton were part of the original Wilson Lakes Neighborhood Association, an organization that encompassed both Little Lake Wilson and the larger Big Lake Wilson. However, Kelly said the organization is no longer as active as it once was. At present, Kelly is Little Lake Wilson's LAKEWATCH volunteer. LAKEWATCH is a program through the University of Florida that monitors lakes throughout the state.**

History/Information



Kelly's neighbor dredging vegetation overgrowth (Polk)



Little Lake Wilson during the 1980s (Polk)

Little Lake Wilson is a 7-acre lake located directly off Dale Mabry Highway in Lutz, Florida just north of Tampa. Oddly shaped as more of a series of canals than one large water body, Little Lake Wilson is part of the Rocky/Brushy Creek Watershed in Hillsborough County. The reason for Little Lake Wilson's odd shape is its origins. As Kelly described, Little Lake Wilson is a man made lake. T.E. Wilson and his wife, Goldie, once owned the land surrounding what is today Little Lake Wilson. Kelly explained how the Wilsons created the lake:

"What he [T.E. Wilson] did was the reason this lake looks so funny. ...There were three little different, basically ponds in this cypress swamp. So, owning all of this property, he dredged out canals and connected them. He dredged out the canal that's behind me on the south side and even the little finger that goes up to that part. All this was dredged. These were existing water bodies and he connected them so that he could maximize his water front development."

Today, Little Lake Wilson is a quiet private lake that Kelly described as "just a little fishing lake." It's quiet because as Kelly explained:

"No true motor craft are allowed on it. You can have a trolling motor kind of thing, but you couldn't have jet skis or any kind of big outboard. And because of that there is no outside people trying to access the lake to launch their boat. It's private and there is no real public access to it."

Little Lake Wilson supports a wealth of wildlife that includes numerous rabbits and squirrels, raccoons, frogs, and turtles. Landscaping around the Polks' house was highly manicured when they first moved in. However, they have since allowed the yard to revert back to its natural state with woodpiles and brush, providing a place for wildlife to live and flourish. About turtles, Kelly conveyed the following story:

"The turtles are always coming up in the yard in the spring laying eggs. It's cool because when I see that they lay the nest, I'll put something over it to protect it. And then if you go out a month later on a full moon, you see all the little turtles hatch. I don't know why. Maybe because they can see where to go."

Prevalent in the past, but less so now are otters, what Kelly calls "coots" or "morning hens", and ducks. Kelly attributes the decrease in ducks to the one alligator that is occasionally spotted. Vegetation includes a great deal of nonnative and invasive species like Brazilian pepper trees and plum spice trees. According to Kelly, at one point in Little Lake Wilson's history, overgrowth of hydrilla became a problem. The issue was resolved through the inclusion of state permitted carp. Kelly told how her neighbor took initiative that eased the hydrilla growth:



Canal area of Little Lake Wilson at the time of the interview (USF)



Kelly's lakefront backyard (USF)

"Back in 1990, Ms. Molly had to get signatures from all the homeowners because there was a huge hydrilla problem and they had to get permission to put in carp. In fact, I saw the last of the carp just a couple years ago. It was five feet long. It was a big fish. He had actually beached himself up on the point. He was enormous. I didn't know they got that big."

Development

Land surrounding Little Lake Wilson before residential development began was purely swamps and orange groves. As mentioned in the lake history section, the start of residential development of the Little Lake Wilson area may be attributed to the lake's namesake T.E. Wilson. As Kelly explained, after connecting the existing ponds and swamps via canals to create Little Lake Wilson, T.E. Wilson began dividing the land into plots that he sold to individuals who built homes independently along the shores of Little Lake Wilson. One of those first families was the Johnsons who bought from T.E. Wilson in 1970. In 1996, Kelly and her husband bought the house and land from them. Therefore, the Polks are the second family to own the A-frame house, the only of its kind on the shores of Little Lake Wilson. Kelly shared:

"The Johnsons bought this property in 1970 for a whopping \$7000. It's unbelievable. It's truly unbelievable. The Johnsons bought it from Wilson and his wife. The first document I came across was a little memo pad like a little scratch pad that you'd have next to your telephone. Where I guess they had met at a restaurant and said, hey I've got this great property. They went out to see the property, purchased it and they just wrote up a little agreement between the four of them."

Today, Kelly said there are 128 houses that border Little Lake Wilson and that there are only two lots left that are not yet developed. According to Kelly, the larger area surrounding Little Lake Wilson has been highly impacted by development. Both a positive and negative aspect of her neighborhood, Kelly says the effect on the lake has not been good. She explained:

"You know when you turn on from Dale Mabry, the lake starts right there. And people don't realize that. You see all those Brazilian pepper trees and what they don't realize is that the lake actually starts right there. So, everything that comes in off Dale Mabry goes immediately into the lake. There is no filtering or retaining or anything. It's just a straight dump. It's been a real struggle because development is imminent and roads must be wider. I understand all that, but a balance has to be sought. You know this quaint little neighborhood is kind of tucked back in here right off of Dale Mabry Highway and if you didn't know it was here, you would never even suspect that there are 128 houses on a little fishing lake. People live here and it's a quiet little place to live."



Part of Little Lake Wilson that Hillsborough County will focus on (USF)

According to Kelly, the Geraci family, long-time landowners in the area are currently planning to sell off large sections of their undeveloped land. However, as some consolation to Kelly, Hillsborough County has kept the selling under regulation according to a growth and development plan for Lutz as a part of unincorporated land within the county. The goal is to minimize dense housing developments through size requirements on lots that may be developed. But as Kelly sees it:

"[Building] is inevitable. And I'm sure that if we stay here long enough, we will see the entire area grow up around us. If useful and beneficial things are put out here, I don't think anyone would object."

The Future

Kelly's concerns for Little Lake Wilson include drought, continued road run off from nearby Dale Mabry Highway, and water quality. However, she is hopeful for a positive future of Little Lake Wilson. She certainly does her part to make sure that such a positive future will exist. Beyond forming the Wilson Lakes Neighborhood Association and working with Hillsborough County to dredge and replant the lake, Kelly has further plans and hopes. As she discussed:

"One of the things that I'm trying to do with the help of Carlos Fernandes [Hillsborough County] is to develop a lake management plan because the lake is in trouble from an environmental stand point. I think a lake management plan would help strengthen the lake. If not strengthen, than at least prevent it from degrading. Because ultimately, it's a cypress swamp and left to its own devices, it would revert back to a cypress swamp because that would be its natural state."

It is a difficult balance to achieve as Kelly further commented:

"I see the struggle of this little lake and to me it kind of represents... it's symbolic of the struggle of the individual versus the machine of the county and battling the development and trying to stay true. It's a difficult balance and I don't think either side has got it right. They have no limitations or moratoriums on excessive and exaggerated development and then on the other hand, the area would benefit from schools, shopping, medical. It is kind of a give and take of the lake and I think it's very symbolic of what's going on in the larger area. It's well loved and well used, but on the other hand its abused and taken for granted. That's my thoughts on it."

Written By: Deanna Barcelona, M.A.

¹St. Petersburg Times (28 July 2002) Clearing the way for better flow

***In September 2003, Kelly gave an update about the Wilson Lakes Neighborhood Association and LAKEWATCH. The Neighborhood Association is now much more active than in years past. Furthermore, Kelly is no longer the LAKEWATCH volunteer on Little Lake Wilson and has passed along her duties to another resident.*