

Little Lake Wilson



View of Little Lake Wilson in April 2003
(McKenna)



Fishing on the lake in 1977 or 1978
(McKenna)



On the banks of Little Lake Wilson in 1977
or 1978 (McKenna)

The following narrative is written based on an interview with community activist Sharon McKenna in her home on Little Lake Wilson on November 9, 2003. Sharon has been visiting the lake for over 30 years and has lived on the lake for 27 years. She has also recently been part of the neighborhood effort to clean and restore the lake.

Personal History

Sharon McKenna's association with Little Lake Wilson began because of her parents desire to live closer to her. Sharon explains:

"I was already living down here [in Florida] and my father and mother wanted to retire here. My dad wanted to live on a lake, but near the gulf. He was shown the lot and fell in love with it, plus it was only eighteen miles to the gulf. At that time Dale Mabry was still only two lanes and there were no streetlights, it was very rural. My parents loved the quietness and peacefulness of the area and the wildlife."

Sharon's parents bought the property in the early 1970's, but they didn't build their house until 1977, after Sharon's father passed away. Sharon remembers her father's motivation for buying the property, "I don't know what it was; I think my father just liked the property with the dock."

Sharon and her family enjoyed the benefits of having lakefront property including the different activities it affords. Sharon notes, "We used to swim a lot and fish. It's a pleasure to come home from work and relax on the porch and simply enjoy nature."

Today Little Lake Wilson has undergone many changes as the area surrounding it continues to develop. Sharon is member of the Wilson Lakes Neighborhood Association and their involvement with LAKEWATCH. Sharon comments on swimming in the lake today:

"I go in there and clean it, but I don't know right now if I'd swim in it, to be honest with you. There are all kinds of little critters that have developed, and I have seen snakes in there. I like to be able to see the bottom so I know if I'm going to jump in there and step on something. I can't see that now."

History/Information



Little Lake Wilson in 1977 or 1978
(McKenna)



View of the lake in 1997 (McKenna)



Little Lake Wilson in 1997 (McKenna)

Little Lake Wilson is located in Lutz off of Dale Mabry Highway. Today, it is a seven-acre lake that was born out of a swampy series of ponds in the 1940's when T.E. Wilson developed the area. Little Lake Wilson is part of the Rocky/Brushy Creek watershed. It forms the headwaters of a chain of lakes that drain through the watershed, through Cheval, into Rocky Creek and eventually into Tampa Bay. This makes the health of Little Lake Wilson very important to a large part of the Tampa area.¹

Sharon remembers meeting Mr. Wilson around 1978:

"I met Mr. Wilson, who was the original owner, I guess around 1978. He was about 90 years old. He liked to talk and visit the people who lived on the lake. He was also a poet, who was willing to share his work with people who were interested, which I was. He was kind enough to bring his poetry booklets to me; I still have them and occasionally read them. It was very cool because he was very modernized for a man his age, very liberal thinking. He was just a really neat man. He said he had the property around Big Lake Wilson and our lake and wanted to make it into a subdivision type thing. He wanted it to be a nice little community."

Little Lake Wilson supports a wide variety of animal life. Sharon explains:

"We have alligators, I saw one not too long ago. Otters, but I haven't seen any lately. We were seeing them for a while, but not since this salvinia minima (a water fern blanketing the lake) came in. Even the ducks, we haven't seen ducks lately. We have fish, we have lots of turtles. I've seen hawks, egrets, and ibis- the ibis go in flocks of ten around here. Snakes and possums. We had a possum sitting in the tree one night. Armadillos and rabbits. I haven't seen any deer over here. Owls. We have a big owl that hangs out here. It's really cool. It's amazing because they're right on the dock in the daytime. He turns around and looks at you. I sit here with my binoculars and it's like he's watching me!"

The lake has undergone many changes since its creation. Sharon was told that a bridge used to exist between the two lakes that allowed residents of Little Lake Wilson to paddle over to the big lake. There was also a pipe under Geraci Road that connected the lakes that had been crushed. Recently the pipe was replaced and a plastic screen placed at the pipe's entrance to prevent the flow of the water fern from Little Lake Wilson to the larger Lake.²

Sharon remembers the water level changes that took place after the pipe was opened:

"Our lake was very high during the rainy season. Then, when they opened the canal to the big lake it kind of evened out, but now it's staying pretty high."

The biggest change the lake has undergone has been its invasion of

salvinia minima, a water fern that can quadruple in mass every week. This has led to a drastic reduction in wildlife. Sharon comments on what she has seen:



The beginning of cleaning the salvinia from the lake in 2003 (McKenna)



Another view of the beginning of the clean-up in 2003 (McKenna)



Progress of the clean-up in 2003 (McKenna)

"[I have seen] a reduction in all the wildlife. Especially the ducks, we've always had ducks. I haven't seen any in about a year and I haven't seen any otters."

Changes to the area have also resulted in the invasion of Brazilian Peppers, well known as one of the most aggressive of the invasive exotic plants in Florida. Residents of Little Lake Wilson have been attempting to combat the plant. Sharon explains their approach:

"The County came in and cleaned out all the exotics. We're supposed to plant native plants to help the drainage and keep the fertilizers draining into the lake at a minimum. The planting should take place in the spring."

Sharon has been told that the water quality of the lake is pretty good despite how it can look at times and that "there are a lot of nutrients in it, but its not supposed to be bad to swim in."

Development

As Tampa and Hillsborough County continue to grow, more developments are built and roads are widened. These are just some of the issues impacting Little Lake Wilson. When Sharon first visited the lake there were already many homes, but today Sharon believes there is only one available lot, "There were already quite a few homes, but there have been a lot more built since then. There were a few available lots on this street when we first moved in... and I don't think there's any available property except for one lot, now."

According to a St. Petersburg Times article, residents feel the recent explosion of water fern apparently began following the widening of Dale Mabry Highway in the late 1990's:

"When Dale Mabry had two lanes, water drained through a pipe under the road from a dense cypress swamp on the west to Little Lake Wilson on the east. Cypress swamps cleanse many pollutants out of water as it meanders through them. The widened Dale Mabry paved over much of that swamp. The pipe was lengthened, connecting to a network of culverts that drain more directly from an office center, two convenience stores and two horse farms."³

The threat of further development directly on the lakes is unlikely. However, there is a very real and continuous threat from development in the surrounding area, especially if the runoff problems from Dale Mabry are not resolved. Sharon notes:



View of Little Lake Wilson in November 2003 (USF)

“We are concerned, in a sense, about development across Dale Mabry which would also add more unwanted and environmentally damaging nutrients coming into our lake from the runoff. So, yes we are concerned with gas stations and businesses.”

Since the water fern has been such a significant problem for Little Lake Wilson, it became an important concern for residents of Lake Wilson when the pipe connecting the two was replaced. The plastic screen placed at the entrance of the pipe was for the purpose of keeping the water fern out of the larger lake. The water fern problem has mobilized the community. Sharon explains:

“We have a lot of support from Big Lake Wilson. If I lived on the big lake I’d support it too, because our lake drains into their lake. Without them, I don’t think we’d be too far... and the people that are the governing board [of the Wilson Lakes Neighborhood Association], the board of directors, have done a remarkable job getting government officials together. We are making progress.”

The Future

The future of Little Lake Wilson depends on the continued involvement of its residents who encourage the involvement of government agencies in order to solve their over-growth problems.

The future of Little Lake Wilson is filled with many possible threats according to Sharon:

“From what we’ve seen, and we’ve had lots of LAKEWATCH meetings, is that we will end up having a major fish kill. Our lake will be completely depleted of oxygen if we don’t do something about this [water fern]. And that’s from the drainage coming in off Dale Mabry with the pipe and the in-flow of water. We don’t have boats come down here very often, but you go down there and see oil and the gasoline edges along the water. You have to ask, ‘Where did that come from?’ It has to be coming from there [Dale Mabry]. So, that’s what we’re working on. Hopefully we’ll get something done with that because the lake is really nice.”

Dale Mabry Highway continues to be the biggest target for blame with the continuing problems at Little Lake Wilson. Sharon shares her dream change for the lake:

“I would stop the runoff coming in from Dale Mabry. Some of us believe, and I feel this way, that we’re like the retention pond for Dale Mabry. They didn’t put a retention pond in because, I was told, it wasn’t necessary, that there wouldn’t

be that runoff into it. But there is a pipe coming in, and they need to add a filter. But, I believe if that [the pipe] wasn't there, we wouldn't have this problem- at least not to this degree."



Little Lake Wilson in November 2003 (USF)

Recently, the residents have turned to a much more controversial means of controlling the water fern: herbicide spraying. Hopefully, the problem will ultimately be solved so the residents can once again enjoy the lake on a regular basis. Sharon has this final comment that seems to be a common feeling amongst residents:

"I love living here. I want it cleaned so we can sit out on the porch and enjoy it."

(Endnotes)

¹ St Petersburg Times (09 January 2004) Lutz: Fight goes on against invasive Lake Fern

² St Petersburg Times (09 January 2004) Lutz: Fight goes on against invasive Lake Fern

³ St Petersburg Times (09 January 2004) Lutz: Fight goes on against invasive Lake Fern

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