

# Marsh Branch Creek



Bobbie and Philip May (USF)

*The following narrative comes from an interview with Marsh Branch resident Philip May in his home on September 17, 2003. In it he shares with us his long history with Marsh Branch from his boyhood days in the 1920s to how it has evolved into the Marsh Branch of today.*

## Personal History

Philip May first saw the waters of Marsh Branch in 1924 when his family made their first trip from Michigan to Florida for the winter. Philip explains:

*“We moved here in 1924. My daddy had apple orchards in Michigan, that’s where I was born. He spent his summers there taking care of his apple trees, and then he would spend his winters down here. I’ve spent most all my winters, all my life, except a few years, down here...we moved down here for good in ’76. I was a bean farmer in Michigan. I spent six months up there and then I was done, and I would spend my winter down here.”*



View of the creek and the May's dock (May)

Phillip raised two girls on Marsh Branch. When asked if they enjoyed living on the creek Philip responds, “Oh yes! Oh yes! They would take off in the boat and we wouldn’t see them until 6 o’clock at night...they loved it, they really loved it. And we never worried about them, they’re both good swimmers.”

Philip and his family were among the first to inhabit this area, and one of the lucky few to enjoy Marsh Branch before it was affected by development. Philip has seen the transformation of Marsh Branch from a secluded haven for both humans and animals to a neighborhood looking-point where most residents use the creek for its view and access to the bay. Philip recalls how the local birds used to fill the air:

*“There were bluebill or butterball ducks. I’ve seen them so that when they got into the air they’d block the sun. There were that many, thousands of them. You never see one anymore. There’s pelicans. They had a roost out here. But they ruined it when they built the park. Now they roost wherever they can find a place to roost. When the pelican roost was up here at the park it would open up into about a solid acre; and the mangroves was 30 to 40 feet high! Way, way up. And there was an assortment. And that’s where the pelicans would roost. And I’d go down to the bay and the pelicans would come, maybe a string of 150 of ‘em. They was just like a big wave going down.”*



Philip and his catch from the creek in the 1960s (May)



*Philip and friends after fishing in Marsh Branch Creek (May)*



*Another photo of Philip with his catch from the creek (May)*



*View of Marsh Branch Creek in 2004 (USF)*

The May family enjoyed fishing, swimming, and water-skiing on the creek in the fifties. Philip says about what the family used to do, “I bought a 20-foot boat in Kissimmee and it had a 50-Johnson on it, the girls loved to ski. We’d ski down to Shell Point and back many, many times.” Philip and his family enjoyed the many advantages to living on the water, but Philip’s transition into the fishing lifestyle that would become part of his livelihood began with a rocky start:

*“When I was a boy I was afraid of the fish, there were so many big ones in here, and all we had was old castin’ reels, you know bob and wind casting reels, no drag on them, thumbed ‘em. And if a big one hit, man he’d come out of the water and tear things up, and pull the line away from ya, and tear you up, so it wasn’t until years later I started fishing... for 12 or 13 winters I fished commercially for hook and line trout.”*

## **History/Information**

---

Marsh Branch is located in Ruskin and eventually spills out into Tampa Bay. The creek has a length of 22,475 feet and is part of the Little Manatee River watershed. The creek supports a wide variety of animal and plant life. However, the numbers and types have changed dramatically over the years. Philip explains fishing on Marsh Branch:

*“You can catch just about anything there is. Redfish, trout, snook, sheepsheads, snapper, and a lot of catfish, but nobody eats them. I can’t even explain what the fish used to be like here. The mullet used to come by the thousands and thousands. Silver mullet, that’s your small mullet, weighs about a pound. You could go out here on the riverbank and throw a spear in any direction you wanted and you’d have a couple of mullet, ‘cause there were just thousands and thousands. And the bait in this river used to be unbelievable. And crabs, oh my goodness, if you loved crabs you could go out, just across the river here, and you could catch big ol’ hard shell crabs. We used to catch shrimp out here, too. In the spring months here in the bay you’d go out with a headlight and a dip net. And I’d catch 250-300 shrimp a night and a lot of them were big ol’ frying shrimp. And the oysters, oh my land, were probably some of the best oysters there ever was, oysters the size of your hand right off the bank out here.”*

According to Philip, fish aren’t the only group to have changed over the years at Marsh Branch. The number and variety of animals has dwindled:

*“This island over here is called Snake Island. All this country was wild here west of us, palmettos and pinewoods and plenty of rattlesnakes. And in the fall of every year the rattlesnakes, a lot of them, would swim the river and get on this island because it’s surrounded by water and it’s warmer over*

*there. And it has wildlife on it 'coons, rats. Oh, my Daddy always got big rattlesnakes, always in November. The only wildlife we see now is 'coons and occasionally a possum, and squirrels. And back in them days we didn't have any squirrels."*



*The May's current dock on the creek (USF)*



*Marsh Branch Creek and nearby vegetation(USF)*



*The creek at sunset (May)*

A variety of birds also frequent Marsh Branch including curlews, squawks, herons, pelicans, seagulls, ducks, and osprey. Philip developed a close relationship with many of the local birds including a heron he affectionately called Big Sam. Philip remembers afternoons with Sam and another little blue heron:

*"Every time I'd come in from fishing he'd fly in and stand on the banks and I'd fillet my trout out and then throw the body out there, and then he'd take it to the river and rinse it off and eat it. He could eat three of them. And then I had a little blue heron who lived in the cove over there. And he knew my boat and when I came in to clean fish I'd throw him pieces of fish, you know. But sometimes the seagulls would run him off; there was thousands of them."*

Vegetation in the area is made up mostly of mangroves and Brazilian peppers, which according to Philip, "thrive on all this water." Life on Marsh Branch is peaceful and the beauty of the natural surroundings continues to be a haven for both the residents and their natural counterparts. However, in its more secluded days, Marsh Branch also served as a respite from the bustle of Tampa. Philip tells the story of a couple who used to frequent Snake Island:

*"There was a man and his wife from Tampa, and they loved to fish. So they'd come down here and they'd keep their boat... here, and pull her out, just a little wooden boat with a motor. They were good friends of Mr. and Mrs. Red Laughton and his wife Sharla, they were right next door to us. They were there from the '30s on. And they was just like family to us. And they asked them [Laughton's] if they could build a little outfit out there [Snake Island]. And they said yes. They had the big ol' posts put down and they built a little one-room place that had a bed in it, and a place they could cook. And they'd come down on the weekends. On Friday night, they'd get in their boat and spend a weekend there. They'd fish Saturday and Sunday and go back Sunday night. And many, many times they'd catch 75 to 100 redfish. Now you can't even see where it was. I'm sure the posts are still there."*

## Development

---



*View of Marsh Branch from the May's yard (USF)*



*The US 41 bridge that spans over Marsh Branch Creek (USF)*

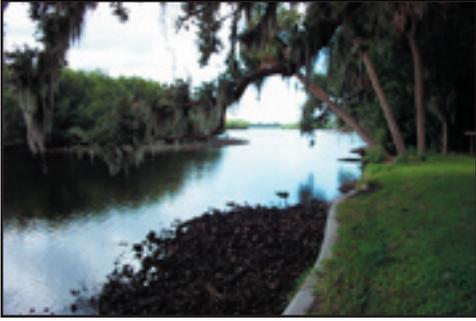
When Philip first visited Marsh Branch the area was sparsely populated and predominantly open wilderness, “There was a little house next to us and one down on Cedar Grove, that’s on the main river, but ... there was nothing until you got two blocks from [US] 41 and then there were several houses on the branch. But there was nothing; palmettos, rattlesnakes, whatever!”

But the May family’s paradise would soon be discovered by others. Philip recalls, “[The first development] got started in the thirties, a few people from the north bought property along the creek, but most people didn’t have any money... Major development got started in the fifties. There might’ve been a little development in the forties. Before that was Sun City. They were going to build a movie studio down there, and they had the school built and everything, and they just dropped it. They had curbing in, miles and miles of curbing, they wanted to make it another Hollywood, but it didn’t pan out.” Sun City (not to be confused with the current Sun City Center) got its illustrious start in 1925 when the Sun City Holding Company filed Sun City’s plat for a school, hotel, theater, church, city hall, and studio park. In 1926 the Ross post office officially changed its name to Sun City. Sun City was even promoted as “Florida’s Moving Picture City.” However, the Great Depression brought all of these plans to a halt and in 1932 Sun City was sold on the steps of the Hillsborough County courthouse for \$100.<sup>1</sup>

Today, Philip can’t count the number of houses located on and around Marsh Branch, but they have all had their impact on the environment. Philip remembers the times when developers would bulldoze the area’s predominant vegetation: mangroves. Today, the mangroves are protected. Philip is also worried about the pollution in the creek. Philip believes that the canals that were dug off the branch are letting drainage from farmlands into the creek. Philip recalls an incident from much earlier in the branch’s history:

*“Sometimes in the morning you can see pollution floating on the top of the water. One time my brother-in-law, he always got up real early in the mornin’, and he says, ‘Phil, you got to come on down here, I want to show you something.’ So I got up, before daylight, and got down to the river here, and there was a scum of water, I bet 15 feet wide. Just terrible! And I know where it came from. They had, just up here past 41 on the left, they had a laundry, and they’d wait until midnight and they’d dump that in the creek, and the next morning here it was. Later they put in the sewer lines, and I guess they just quit. But, I know that’s what it was.”*

The entire area has undergone a dramatic change since the beginning of the 1900s. Philip recalls that the road from Ruskin to Tampa was a 9-foot brick pavement that, “if you met a car you had to get off the road because it wasn’t wide enough. But, it sure beat the sand and mud and everything else!” Philip also remembers his Uncle John making a trip to Palmetto, a 20-mile journey that took half a day. Philip says, “If it hadn’t been for the palmetto limbs to put under your tires, you’d never make it.” Philip remembers when Ruskin was made up of, “a dry-goods store, a couple of grocery stores, and four fish markets.” The citizens of Ruskin were mostly netters who caught,



*The creek and oyster bar (USF)*

“mullet and redfish, trout, snook- nobody thought the snook was good to eat, but they found out later on that if you filleted ...the hide off of ‘em they was one of the best eatin’ fish there is. They called them soap fish. With the hide on I guess they tasted like soap.”

## **The Future**

---

In Philip’s eyes, the future of Marsh Branch is pretty secure for the time being. He believes that anything that could threaten the branch is already here. He says, “All the property, from here to Ruskin, has been taken. It’s pretty well solid on both sides. There’s property to the north here, but they sold that awhile back...you see a lotta changes in 80-some years, I tell ya.”

Marsh Branch is no longer hidden in the wilderness, but it maintains its natural beauty despite the encroachment of civilization and environmental threats. Philip explains his relationship with Marsh Branch,

*“I always knew this was where I wanted to live... my daddy always said that the river owed us one meal a day: shrimp, trout, oysters, or whatever... I tell you, it’s been a good go around.”*

### **(Endnotes)**

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

**Written By: Alexis Broadbent-Sykes**