

Middle Lake



Middle Lake in 2002 (USF)



View of Middle Lake shoreline in 2002 (USF)

The following narrative is based on an interview with Dave Brown at his home on Middle Lake on January 25, 2002. As the lake historian and a six-year resident, Dave provides a perspective on both past and present issues affecting Middle Lake.

Personal History

Dave Brown and his wife, Jean, moved to Middle Lake from Maryland in 1996. For the past three years, Dave has served as the lake historian. In this position, he collects historic photographs of the lake and lake-related events, minutes from past and present Middle Lake Association meetings, historic maps, and other types of documentation.

History/Information

One of five man-made lakes in Sun City Center, Middle Lake was built in 1966. According to Dave, the lake is 35-acres and approximately seven feet deep. The water from Sun City Center's North Lake and South Lake flow into Middle Lake, as planned by Sun City Center's developer and Hillsborough County.

While the lake has a natural population of panfish and catfish, redears, bluegills and bass are regularly stocked. Some carp were put into the lake a number of years ago to keep plant life and algae under control. Middle Lake also has at least one alligator that is around twelve to fourteen feet long. Among the other types of wildlife supported by the lake are a number of land and water birds, including cormorants, anhinga, herons, osprey, the occasional pelican, and sometimes a significant population of vultures.

In terms of both water depth and quality, Middle Lake has remained very healthy over the years. The lake's water level was down three feet at one point last summer but was back up at the time of the interview. According to Dave,

"The lake pretty much takes care of itself. Except for maybe hydrilla, you could leave it alone for years and it would be the same. Which is something ... people who worry about the lake realize, that God will do a good job with it if you don't muck around with it. Some people complain about the green [color of the water] but really that just means it's healthy."



Hydrilla problem in 1970 (Brown)



Island with vulture problem (Brown)

In spite of Dave's confidence in the lake's natural processes, he supports the numerous actions the Middle Lake Association takes to prevent hydrilla, fight the growth of a pesky vulture population, and stock the lake with additional types of fish.

The Middle Lake Association was formed in 1970 to organize residents around the issue of hydrilla in the lake:

"The hydrilla, when it came up, was the basis for forming an association just for the purpose of hiring a company to come in and spray to eradicate it. Since then, the organization has become more social, although there is still the lake [maintenance] part of it."

There is no longer a hydrilla problem, since the last spraying about six years ago. The Association's budget currently goes toward paying a lake ecology company that monitors the lake, stocking the lake with fish, and controlling the lake's vulture population. In terms of social activities, the Association organizes one social event per month and two or three "raft-ups" per year where residents tie nine to twelve boats together, bring food, and walk from boat to boat eating and socializing. According to Dave, occasionally one or two people accidentally fall into the lake at a raft-up. Although only about half of the Association's members attend meetings, all lake residents pay dues and seem to be committed to the lake's well being.

Last summer lake residents were plagued by a sizable population of Turkey and Black vultures that took up residence on one of the lake's two islands:

"They would tear the stuffing out of cushions because they thought it was a dead animal and they're used to pulling stuff out of a carcass, so they pulled stuffing out of the cushions. They also pull at caulking. Plus they throw foul as a defense mechanism, which is quite foul."

The Association partnered with the University of Florida and the Department of Agriculture to address the vulture problem, which consisted of around 150 birds on the lake at one point. As part of the vulture riddance project, five residents were in charge of counting the vultures daily, and Dave kept a bird diary to document actions and progress. The first strategy was to shoot the birds. When this plan failed, residents tried shooting firecrackers into the trees every night to frighten the vultures away. The firecracker approach did not work either, so residents tried another, rigging up dead vultures to hang from the island's trees. Although no one is sure whether the "effigies" are responsible for the vultures leaving, the vultures roosted elsewhere for about six months. However, they have recently returned, so the battle continues. The real vulture carcasses have been replaced with three plastic vulture decoys in the island's trees to deter the vultures from returning.

In addition to organizing around social and environmental issues, the Middle Lake Association addresses lake regulations by electing a lake commodore whose role is primarily to enforce boat speeds and make sure boats have the proper navigation lights.

Development



Middle Lake being built in the mid-1960s (Brown)



The early stages of Middle Lake (Brown)

Like much of Southern Hillsborough County, before Sun City Center was developed the land was used primarily for cattle. The area's only "major" road was a narrow gravel two-lane road called the Ruskin-Wimauma Road that ran east to west through the area. The road has since become a four-lane highway called State Road 674. According to John Bowker's account of the history of Sun City Center, Ruskin-Wimauma Road was so narrow that two passing vehicles would both have to pull off toward the road's shoulders in order to pass each other safely (< <http://web.tampabay.rr.com/sccinfo/scchistx.htm> >).

In 1961, developer Del Webb bought the land to develop Sun City Center, a community designed to provide retirement living at an affordable price. Webb's plan included stores, recreation facilities, office and factory buildings, and all other key amenities normally found in a small town. However, the community has since grown larger than this plan and has diverged from Webb's vision in a number of ways. According to Dave's understanding, Sun City Center was developed one area at a time over a period of years. The first homes were groups of around eight duplexes; later only two duplexes were grouped together; then individual homes were built. Dave related the following about the history of Sun City Center:

"The very early houses that they built in Sun City Center were much smaller and they all had carports. His [Del Webb's] idea was that you would be able to live here on Social Security, period. So they were very inexpensive houses. Now the houses are much more expensive. You couldn't live here on just Social Security."

Most individuals who bought homes when the community opened in 1962 were moving from the Northeastern US. Dave explained that as the houses were built, Del Webb would send weekly photographs of each home's progress to the homeowners. Dave also described how Del Webb provided new homeowners with some landscaping options:

"When you bought a house in Sun City Center, Hubbell's Nursery would give you six coupons for anything. All these Queen Palms you see around the lake are from there. They would give you a little plant or a big plant."

According to Dave, Middle Lake's homes were not built until fairly late in the development of Sun City Center. The first homes on Middle Lake were built in 1969, and it took only a year or two before all of the 103 houses were in.

Dave suggested that Sun City Center will be completely "built out" in ten years:

"The north side is all built out and there is land to the south that the current developer is building homes on."



View of Middle Lake shoreline (USF)

Since he moved to Middle Lake, Dave has seen the most significant development in the southwestern part of Sun City Center; among the new businesses that have sprung up are nursing homes, a fitness center, a physical rehabilitation center, and a proposed office building.

The Future

Dave seems very optimistic about the future of Middle Lake. The lake is currently healthy, and Dave hopes that the vultures remain at bay. There are no other specific issues currently threatening the lake or lake residents' well-being. A major reason for Dave's confidence about the future of Middle Lake is its strong lake association. The Middle Lake Association provides residents with a way to address any pressing issues affecting the lake as well as with an outlet for socializing with other residents.

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