

# Robles Lake

*The following narrative is based on an interview with descendants of the Robles family: Mary Louise Smith, Ruth Meares, and her husband W. Murray Meares. They were kind enough to share their knowledge of their family history and their childhood memories of the area surrounding Robles Lake. The interview was conducted on April 12, 2004 in the Meares' home on Lake Noreast.*

## Personal History

The Robles are an old and important family to history of the Tampa area. The Robles connection began with Joseph Paul Robles, Sr., an immigrant from Madrid, Spain who came to the United States in the nineteenth century. After finding his bride in Georgia, he and his new family moved to Florida, homesteading in what is now Hernando and Pasco counties before moving to Hillsborough County in 1850. In 1857, Robles homesteaded 160 acres around what is now known as Robles Park. Murray notes:

*“He couldn't speak English and he eventually migrated up to Georgia and worked on a farm up there and one of the daughters befriended him and taught him English and eventually married him. They came back to Florida and over the years moved down the state and finally arrived here in Tampa and homesteaded that area.”*

The land was covered in orange and citrus groves. At that time, Robles Lake was only a large pond on a portion of the larger homestead. Mary Louise remembers, “It's a lake now; they used to call it a pond when I was growing up. I had always heard of Robles Pond. But, it wasn't even part of the city, of course. It was fifteen miles from the city, then.”

Mary Louise and her sister, Ruth, two of the three daughters of John Horace Robles and Mattie Platt-Robles, were raised along the shores of Platt Lake in the northern part of Hillsborough County. The sisters are not only a part of the Robles family, but of the equally long-standing Platt family. Ruth's husband, Murray, is a member of the Meares family, another Tampa family with deep roots. These three are not only descendants of three very important families to the history of Tampa, but their families are closely related by blood and friendship. Ruth and Murray's families knew each other before the two were born, making their marriage a natural result. (See the Platt Lake narrative at: [http://www.hillsborough.wateratlas.usf.edu/upload/documents/Lake\\_Platt.pdf](http://www.hillsborough.wateratlas.usf.edu/upload/documents/Lake_Platt.pdf) or the Lake Noreast narrative at [http://www.hillsborough.wateratlas.usf.edu/upload/documents/OH\\_Noreast.pdf](http://www.hillsborough.wateratlas.usf.edu/upload/documents/OH_Noreast.pdf) for more history and information on these families.)

The patriarch of the family, Joseph Paul Robles, Sr., made significant contributions to the area during his lifetime, which earned him the honor of having his name commemorated on the park and also a nearby elementary school. Robles, a diminutive man of 5-foot 1-inches, fought during the Seminole War (1835-1842) and helped to defend a Tampa salt works plant from Yankee soldiers during the Civil War. Robles took on the northern soldiers alone; convincing them they were outnumbered by shouting imaginary orders and firing with a double-barreled shotgun. Out of ammunition and his shotgun empty, he marched the soldiers to town. His Civil War stunt is his most spectacular contribution proving he was extremely brave and perhaps a bit zealous about his home. (Cabrera 1999)

Robles' productive and pioneering spirit drove him to organize volunteers for the building of roadways such as Florida Avenue, which made more land accessible for sale after the Civil War. Mary Louise remembers:

*“He opened the road which is now Florida Avenue; he opened it with some of the other men who lived down there, with the City of Tampa's permission, out to Columbus Drive where the lake is. He opened the first road that is now Florida Avenue. They got the horses and mules and hauled out all the trees and made a road. Always been Florida Avenue since then.”*

Robles spirit also drove him to experiment with growing different types of citrus and various other fruits and vegetables to diversify his crop selection. Robles is credited with growing the first avocados in Hillsborough County. (Cabrera 1999)

Robles son, Frances M. Robles became the first lawyer of Hispanic descent to practice in Hillsborough County and later went on to become a prominent circuit court judge. Judge Robles also lived in the neighborhood, Tampa Heights, adjacent to Robles Park. Murray remembers:

*“Probably the most illustrious member of the family was Judge Robles. I can remember him very well, both Ruth and I and of course Mary Louise born right here in the area. My family home was on what they called Michigan Ave., now they call in Columbus Drive. He would ride on a horse, all decked out with his boots on and everything. He would come by riding a horse. He wasn’t paying too much attention to us, I was just a child at the time, and I could see him as he’d go by, and that’s my memory of Judge Robles. He was quite a character in his own way.”*

Robles’ family has now branched in many different directions and his homestead has become an important park to the community that currently surrounds it.

## **History/Information**

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Robles Lake is part of a park located between Avon Avenue and Interstate 275. Originally known as Adams Park, it was renamed Joseph Robles Park in 1928. The lake has undergone as much of a transformation since that time as the area surrounding it has. Once a rural stand of orange groves located outside of the city, Robles Lake is now part of a park surrounded by buildings and a public housing complex. The pond was transformed into a lake in 1931 as part of a beautification project (Cabrera 1999). Murray remembers:

*“When the property was finally sold-out and the city took it over, they dredged it and made the lake. It was dredged out. The pond became a lake. And they had a large community building on the lake, and there the Robles reunion would take place occasionally... It was just marsh area, and when they dredged it the fill that was dredged out was spread around to help build up the surrounding property. I don’t recall that they hauled-in earth, but they got quite a bit of dirt out of that to spread around and make the surrounding land satisfactory.”*

Murray and Ruth lived along Robles Lake after they were first married. Murray explains:

*“Now Ruth and I, we lived there right beside the pond and park. I know that when we lived there we were on Jefferson Street, that’s one street over from the park. While there, Ruth had her first youngster and her second one. “*

Murray also grew up very near Robles Lake. Murray remembers adventures with his brother:

*“As a teenager, probably 12 years or so, my brother and I would go down to Robles Pond, at that time it wasn’t a lake. It was just a place where cattails grew and it was a shallow pond, and we would lie on our backs and look up at the stars at night and count the shooting stars, among other things... They wouldn’t ordinarily allow people to fish in there, it was private property, but we threw a line out and tied it to a root so we didn’t stand by it. If a fish got hooked, why he’d just wiggle that root and we’d know he was there and when nobody was around we’d collect our fish.”*

Mary Louise describes the environment around Robles Lake as a typical Florida wilderness:

*“[It had] everything that Florida has as far as wildlife. There were turtles. All freshwater animals. There would have been alligators. There would have been snakes, there would have been everything.”*

## Development

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The area's transformation first began toward the end of the nineteenth century as the city expanded with the influx of northerners and Tampa Heights became the first suburb of Tampa ([www.tampaheights.org](http://www.tampaheights.org)). Robles former homestead became known as Adams Park, but was renamed in 1928 to honor the original pioneer.

The Tampa Park Department launched an improvement project in 1931 that involved the park (Cabrera 1999). The pond was dredged and a beautification project enhanced the natural foliage.

## The Future

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Today the park is still in the Tampa Heights area and bordered by public housing. It serves as an oasis to the neighborhoods that surround it. Tampa Heights is currently undergoing a re-development project, including a Greenprinting project (sponsored by the Mayor's Beautification Program) taking place this June to revitalize Robles Park.

Mary Louise notes that the family has no affiliation with the lake today, but they keep up-to-date on the changes to the area. Mary Louise comments on the park, "It's nice. It's nice to have."

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