

Swan Lake



Swans on the lake in 1963 (Carpenter)

The following narrative is based on an interview with Swan Lake residents Janet Carpenter, Sylvester Shetter, and Anne Shetter. The interview was held on June 10, 2002 at the Shettters' home on Sun City Center's Swan Lake and provided information about the history of Swan Lake and the issues affecting the lake's health.

Personal History



Janet Carpenter's parents canoeing on Swan Lake in the 1960s (Carpenter)

Janet Carpenter has been visiting Swan Lake since 1963, after her retired parents moved to Sun City Center from central New York in 1962. Located on Swan Lake, their house was among the first built in Sun City Center, as Janet understands it. In 1992, after her father's death, Janet moved into the house. Although she appreciates Sun City Center's incredible amenities (i.e., golf courses, outdoor swimming pool, town hall complex), Swan Lake is what actually motivated her to move:

"I don't know whether I would be here [in Sun City Center] if it weren't the fact for my home on Swan Lake, across from the island. Because that's the attraction. The lake, island, the aquatic and bird life that comes from that. And the privacy I feel all the time. That combination."

Sylvester and Anne Shetter moved to Swan Lake from Dayton, Ohio in 1989. Part of Sun City Center's appeal for the Shettters was the opportunity to pursue their hobbies. Living in Sun City Center, Sylvester, a "basement woodworker," and Anne, a weaver, have access to extensive craft facilities located in the town hall complex and belong to special interest clubs in the community that support their hobbies. However, like Janet, much of the appeal of moving to Sun City Center for the Shettters was living on Swan Lake with a first-rate view of the lake's island. Sylvester related:

"The island and the clubs, the two clubs [woodworking and weaving] is what got us. But if the island hadn't have been here, we wouldn't be [here]."

The Shettters enjoy watching the wildlife on the island and in the lake from the expansive windows in their sunroom, where they spend much of their time.

History/Information



Swan Lake in 2002 (USF)



The island in Swan Lake in 1963 (Carpenter)

Swan Lake is a 13-acre lake located in Sun City Center, in the Little Manatee River Watershed. The land on which Sun City Center was built was previously used for cattle ranching,¹ and Janet has heard that Swan Lake was then a watering hole for cattle. As she understands it, during the development of Sun City Center, the watering hole was expanded into a lake, with an area of land left behind as an island. One resident quoted in a newspaper article remembered that in the early 1960s, what is now called Swan Lake was just a golf course reservoir. Water was pumped into the reservoir from wells and would later be pumped onto the golf course to water the grass.²

According to Sun City Center historian John Bowker,³ the lake was first known as Bass Lake because Del Webb put 10-15,000 large mouth bass in the lake as a sales strategy. In 1964, the water body became known as Swan Lake, when a man named John Cook brought the lake's first pair of swans from Chicago. At that time, swans were difficult to acquire.⁴ As Janet understands it, this pair of swans lived around twenty years. There is currently a pair of white swans and a pair of black swans on the lake. Two or three years ago, lake residents purchased the white pair of swans. In order to acclimate these swans to their new environment, they were kept in a large cage in the Shettters' backyard for a few weeks. During this period, the Shettters enjoyed feeding and caring for the swans.

For years, a man named Glen Sweeney fed the swans with his homemade swan feed made from grain and bread he dried and ground himself.⁵ Janet remembers that he had a swan feeder attached to the end of his boat. Since Glen's death in 1995, residents buy swan feed and fill automatic feeders located on the lake's sea wall.

Residents are also active in the maintenance of the lake's island, mowing the grass and planting flowers. Sylvester once built a picnic table for the island and canoed it over with Anne's help. The couple had a picnic on the island that day and report that few people have been on the island since. However, residents certainly enjoy the view of the island and its wildlife inhabitants.

In addition to swans, lake residents frequently see ospreys, eagles, herons, anhingas, ibis, egrets, woodstorks, morehens, coots, various types of ducks, and a pair of white geese. Recently a pair of brown Chinese geese were donated to the lake. Because not many people fish in Swan Lake, residents are not sure what types of fish inhabit the lake. However, Janet knows that there are bass because her husband once caught one.

Over the years, residents have enjoyed a number of lake related activities. Early in Swan Lake's history, a Gasparilla celebration was held on the lake each year. According to Janet,

"Every year at Gasparilla time, some one or two crews would come down to Swan Lake...and come over and capture the island."

For many years, lake residents set out paper luminaries on their sea walls at dusk every Christmas Eve, but the practice ended after it rained on the luminaries one year. Currently, a few residents participate in weekly remote controlled miniature sailboat races on Swan Lake.



The low levels of Swan Lake during the drought in 2002 (Shetter)



Higher levels of the lake in 1999 (Shetter)



View of the island in Swan Lake in 2002 (USF)

While current LAKEWATCH data indicate that the lake's water quality is "good," residents are concerned about recent low water levels. According to Janet, Sylvester, and Anne, water is regularly pumped out of the lake to water a nine-hole golf course. As they understand it, the golf course agreed to regularly pump water back into the lake from a well, which it did for many years. But residents have noticed that over the last few years, very little water has been pumped back into the lake. Recently the lake's water level has decreased considerably, to the point that sandbars have emerged in a number of areas. Residents recently signed a petition to ask the golf course to continue to pump water into the lake, and for about a month-and-a-half afterwards, it seemed that the golf course had complied. However, according to lake residents, the pumping stopped again last month.

Since around 1998, there have been a few problems with overgrown vegetation, which the Swan Lake Association originally addressed by buying grass-eating carp. Now the Association pays to have the lake sprayed with chemicals every other month, which seems to be effective in preventing vegetation overgrowth.

Development

In the early 1900s, the area now known as Sun City Center experienced its first development. After nearby Ruskin was founded, some of the community's agricultural development, primarily cattle ranching, came to extend into the Sun City Center area. Then in 1956, C. Palmore sold his 12,025-acre cattle ranch to Max Cohn, who sold the land to Universal Marion Corporation. In 1961, Del Webb bought the land to develop Sun City Center.⁶ As Janet understands it:

"Well this whole area, when Del Webb conceived of having this community, he actually bought the property that at one time went from 19th street all the way down to the Manatee River, 301 West to what is now I-75. And it was all cattle ranching area."

According to Janet, by 1962 Sun City Center's amenities were in place and a few model homes were built on the northwest side of Swan Lake. Part of what is now State Road 674 was then an airstrip used by Del Webb to fly in potential homeowners to show them around the community.

Since its beginning, the community has changed dramatically. Over the 1960s and 1970s, Swan Lake became entirely surrounded by about 46 houses. According to an on-line community profile of Sun City Center, the early 1970s "marked the true building boom" for Sun City Center and its surrounding communities, including a boom in commercial development.⁷ Residential and commercial development continue to grow. Around 300 houses are constructed every year, with a build-out expected in 2010.⁸ In just the last several years, there has been a considerable amount of commercial development along State Road 674, most recently a Pizza Hut and a Wendy's. Swan Lake residents look forward to the construction of a new craft building nearby.



Sunset at Swan Lake in 1965 (Carpenter)

For additional information about Sun City Center's history, see John Bowker's account (<http://web.tampabay.rr.com/sccinfo/scchistx.htm>), an on-line community profile of Sun City Center (<http://villageprofile.com/florida/suncity/suncity.html>), or the Middle Lake Narrative on this website (http://www.hillsborough.wateratlas.usf.edu/upload/documents/OH_Middle.pdf).

The Future

Residents remain unsure about the future of Swan Lake. Janet's perspective, shared by Sylvester and Anne, is as follows:

"If there were to be an improvement, it would be to get the developer to pump into the lake on a regular basis... We hope that will be something that will transpire."

They are prepared to take further measures to restore the lake's water level, but in the meantime they hope for a storm like last year's Hurricane Gabriel, which brought heavy rains without destructive winds, raising the lake level considerably. Residents will also continue to work to maintain the health of the lake by spraying it monthly with chemicals and taking samples for LAKEWATCH.

¹ John Bowker. "A History of Sun City Center." <http://web.tampabay.rr.com/sccinfo/scchistx.htm>.

² Newspaper article, "Caretaker Remembers When Swans Came."

³ Personal communication.

⁴ Newspaper article, "Swans In Sync."

⁵ Newspaper article, "Caretaker Remembers When the Swans Came."

⁶ "Village Profile: Sun City Center Florida." <http://villageprofile.com/florida/suncity/suncity.html>.

⁷ "Village Profile: Sun City Center Florida." <http://villageprofile.com/florida/suncity/suncity.html>.

⁸ "Village Profile: Sun City Center Florida." <http://villageprofile.com/florida/suncity/suncity.html>.

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