

# Lake Allen Narrative

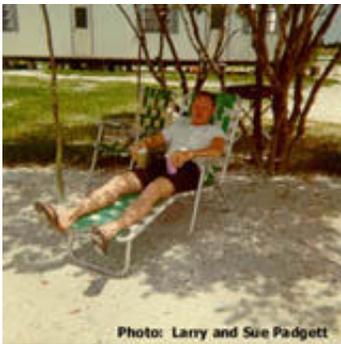
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The following narrative is based on an interview with Larry and Sue Padgett in their home on Lake Allen on June 2, 1999. The narrative provides a glimpse of life on Lake Allen from the perspective of these thirty-year residents and Lakewatch volunteers.

## The Padgetts



Sue Padgett, hard at work on Lake Allen's south shore, 1966  
photo by: Larry and Sue Padgett



Larry Padgett relaxing on the day he left for service in the Vietnam War, 1965  
photo by: Larry and Sue Padgett

Larry and Sue Padgett have been Lake Allen residents for more than thirty years. The lifelong sweethearts married in 1964 and looked for land to buy in Northwest Hillsborough County that would be closer to Sue's parents, who had moved to the area the same year. Sue recounts the tale of their relocation:

"Larry and I, within a year [of being married] ...started looking around out here because [my parents] were out here and we wanted to get on a lake. We used to go to Keystone and to a few places out there. A couple of our friends had friends on a lake out here in Lutz and we used to go with them out there. We thought, 'Hey, this would be neat to live on a lake.' I had never [lived] on a lake before. Then we came across this particular piece of property. We were just driving around one day and we saw a 'For Sale' sign. We made arrangements and we bought it."

Much work went into the land bought by the Padgetts. The previous owner of the land had left behind numerous surprises for them, about which Sue recounts:

"...When you pulled into the driveway, you could not see the lake because it was all overgrown. Mrs. Delucia, who owned the property... had all of the cypress trees cut down and she just let them fall into the lake and left them. Of course, when we bought the property we didn't know that, we found out later. There were probably fifty trees and Larry had an old white jeep and he just hooked a tree onto a chain and we drug them out, laid them across the road, cut them up and burned them...until we had cleared the property. We would come out with a tent on the weekends and we worked the property and tried to clear it."



The Padgett's first home on Lake Allen, 1967  
photo by: Larry and Sue Padgett

When Larry was drafted for the Vietnam War, Sue kept up the work on the new property. She reminisces, "Everybody had their beaches pumped, well, I had our property pumped also...my mother and I pulled up pieces of St. Augustine grass out of her yard and an abandoned house down the street and we planted it piece by piece..."

The Padgetts raised one son, Jay, and Lake Allen was his backyard. Despite the fact that Sue never learned to swim, the water was a large part of the family's life. She comments:

"He literally grew up on this lake, fishing and snorkeling and learning to ski. We bought him a little ski boat and then got him a bigger ski boat. The kids all came to my house... It was a fun thing to come to my house and be on the beach...I would be with them all day...this is his old playground."



Sue Padgett on her recently installed St. Augustine lawn, 1966  
photo by: Larry and Sue Padgett

Their son is now 27 and has moved to North Carolina, where he doesn't live on a lake, something that surprises his mother. Sue explains:

"...he comes back and he doesn't have much interest in the lake anymore. We would probably make arrangements for him to have this house if we were to move somewhere else, but he really wants to stay in North Carolina, he loves it up there, gets to see the four seasons. I really thought the lake

would lure him back..."

The lake hasn't cemented a relationship with the second Padgett generation, but it still has a firm hold on Larry and Sue. She declares, "We always thought we would like to move up there [North Carolina], but the lake kept luring us back here...we had other property too...we had fourteen acres in Sierra Pines and we thought we'd move there because we had all this land. The lake kept us here. We just, for some reason, have not been able to leave it."

## Lake Allen

Lake Allen is a 27-acre lake located in north Hillsborough County, just a short distance from the heavily traveled intersection of Dale Mabry and Lutz Lake Fern Road. The land around the lake has changed drastically, with additions to the built environment and expansion of roads. The lake itself, while affected by the changes around it, remains much like it was when the Padgetts moved onto its shores in the 1960's.



A sampling of the diverse vegetation on the shores of Lake Allen, 1999

Turnover among the residents living around the lake

has been slow and Sue comments:

"...There have been three of my immediate neighbors who have moved in the past two years. Up to that point, it was always the old neighbors, the same ones. We have been friends with most everybody on the lake for all these years."

Among the families living around the lake in the early days of development were the Wilsons, who were instrumental in the developing of the land around Lakes Wilson and Allen, the Delucias, Patskos, Butchers, Gibsons, Bogers, Hansleys, and the Francs.

Lake Allen has been the site for much activity over the thirty years the Padgetts have resided on its shores. One of the neighbor's grandsons staged an 18th birthday extravaganza by jumping out of a helicopter onto the lake where he commenced to barefoot ski. He took his skiing to a new level as explained by Sue:

"He ended up participating in a ski show along with Annie Franc ...and they'd come out here and practice. They actually did a pyramid. We loved it...they only practiced for six or eight months...there were younger kids, like nine years old, up to grown up people. They put on a show for people on the lake one time with music and costumes and everything. They went all around the country and competed..." In addition the lake has been the site of a water-skiing school started by Gene and Maurine Franc, yearly get-togethers for the residents and gatherings of the handful of families who initially made Lake Allen home.

Residences, beaches and some of the lake's original cypress surround the lake. Many of the residences have beaches fronting the homes, but Sue comments:

"A lot of people have left their natural grass. They always have, they've never cleaned their beaches. Mine, I have always had a beach and back then I don't think they were really strict with the EPC rules. I don't think they had any delineation of where the wetland line was...We just maintained our beach where a lot of people do not, for which we are so thankful because now we know how important it is to the lake...I think the plant life was probably all right. In fact, we've got new things...I've never seen before. We've got something I call spinach. It's really thin and it floats up. You pull it out of the water and its really flimsy...It's so fragile that the boats break it off and I rake it up on the beach all the time..."



Lake Allen tubing with the northeast shore in the background photo by: Larry and Sue Padgett

Wildlife still thrives in the environment the lake helps to provide. Sue comments:

"...There are some big healthy fish in there now...The birds have come back, the birds had disappeared...there are all kinds of cranes and even the big black birds...in fact, there was a big black snake in the yard that I walked up to about two weeks ago and it scared me to death because a snake is a snake is a snake as far as I am concerned...I thought there was a snake problem, but honestly, we don't have water moccasins. I have probably seen five water moccasins in 34

years, that's not bad. There have been rattlesnakes..."

In addition alligators have been an omnipresent feature on the lake:

"...we have had alligators out here through everything. We shine the light at night and we can see the red eyes. One time we did have one that got really aggressive and we had Game and Freshwater Fish come out and try to trap it and they couldn't get it."

Sue relates the following story of the alligator that wouldn't give up its harassment of a Lake Allen family:

"There was a lady across the lake and nobody knew that she had been feeding this 'gator. She would take all of her leftovers and feed it, she didn't know... the 'gator was coming up and starting to get aggressive. Nobody realized this because he was probably just coming up at night. Well at 2 o'clock on a bright afternoon, this 'gator gets up in between the floating dock, where Tommy Bryant and his kids Tracy and Lee were swimming, and the shore and he just sits there. Then he floats out a little bit and he's still even with the dock... The 'gator kind of turned a little and Tommy had the kids run. I mean, they were stuck. No one was home, just he and the kids. The kids got in the house and called for some help, but Tommy just had to wait it out, to wait until the gator finally left. That is the only time I can remember a gator being actually aggressive".

Sue regards alligators with respect. She comments:

"They say you can gage an alligator from the width of his eyes as to his age, and the guy from Freshwater and Game that tried to come out and trap that one, he said, 'You have to respect them in that daytime is our domain after dark is their domain and you respect those 'gators and they will never bother you.' But he said, '...if you see one coming up and sunning on the beach or going after animals or even showing themselves in the middle of the day, he said you watch out for that one, that's the one that is going to be aggressive'."

## Development

Lake Allen and the surrounding lakes contribute to a quality of life that is much in demand by residents of Hillsborough County. As a result the lakes and surrounding environments have been affected by increased development. Currently there are approximately fifty residences around the lake and the number is growing. Sue comments about the trend:

Residences, beaches and some of the lake's original cypress surround "There is going to be a new housing subdivision... It was approved probably six months ago and they are going to have some new houses [approximately eight] on this lake. There is Lake Nancy on our northwest end and on the south side of Lake Wilson there is Lake Pearl... the developer is buying both pieces from the property owners, so they are [building] on both ends of us. It is going to be a lot of change



Water-skiing on Lake Allen with the north shore in the background  
photo by: Larry and Sue Padgett

for us from what we've been used to."

The residents on the area's lakes have addressed issues resulting from changes to the natural lay of the land. Sue comments.

"...Lake Nancy [is] over here [to the northwest], the canal connecting to it is our only outlet. There are ten lakes around this area. All the ones on the east side flow into Lake Allen and then there is Lake Brooker that flows under Dale Mabry and goes to [lakes] Harvey and Virginia. Then we all three come together and we outflow across... this new project [location]. We went before the zoning master and the board of county commissioners and begged them to protect that outflow...[the owners of the property] own a lot of land out here. I will be honest, we have fought them in some of their rezonings because they want to put 1200 homes between here and about the area where Cheval is. We fought them about three years ago and they withdrew their application because they wanted to put 5000 square foot lots out here and... that's not reasonable. Let's go with third acre lots or half-acre lots, we'd really like acre lots because we're rural. But it didn't work out that way...[The approved development] was one section to the west because there was hardly anyone to object. Then once they got the approval for 5000 square foot lots, then they came back here and [platted] the rest of it which will go around [lakes] Harvey, Virginia and Allen..."

Footholds of development that will increase the density in the area have necessitated an increase in the capacity of infrastructure serving the area. In the past, smaller roads were adequate and Sue comments, "Mr. Patsko, I can remember him telling us stories that when he came out here, Dale Mabry was like a two lane dirt road ..." Road widening on Dale Mabry provided the forum for citizen action, spearheaded by concerned residents like Sue. The intent of the construction plans was to retain all of the stormwater from Dale Mabry in the median between the north and southbound lanes of the road. Heavy rains proved to be too much for the proposed stormwater retention. As turbid water flowed rapidly into Lake Allen, residents sprang into action. Sue relates:

"It was 1995 when I first started complaining...trying to draw attention, trying to do something. I did the best I could do...I was raising some Cain and other people were calling ...Everyday I was writing letters and I was faxing...I even wrote the governor...I figured, I am going to the top, I'm not going to go through these little agencies and have them tell me this isn't their problem..."



Stormwater inundated the area's roads in 1996 and 1997  
photo by: Larry and Sue Padgett

Through her and other's letters and objections, attention was brought to the expanding plume of turbid water entering the lake. Sue explains,

"You're allowed 29 NTU's by the state, which is a unit of measurement of turbidity, which is dirty water, muddy water, allowed off site during construction. They are allowed up to 29 and we had in excess of 140...This was just going on constantly during construction and I fought them and fought them and fought them."

Her actions eventually got results from the Department of Transportation and Sue outlines what they did:

"They put in a rock dam, about eight to ten feet wide to block all of this dirty water from coming in... Then they put up bales of hay which is a cleansing procedure... They had what they called turbidity barriers, which is the black fencing... They had ten barriers between Dale Mabry ... and where the water comes into Lake Allen. They had ten barriers and we still got [turbid] water."



Stormwater runoff brought turbid water into Lake Allen, 1996  
photo by: Larry and Sue Padgett

The water flowing into the lake from Dale Mabry was inundated with dirt from the construction and oil and gasoline from the road. Sue worried that the negative effects on water quality would be irreversible. She remembers:

"I told my neighbor... we were so concerned about the lake and I said, 'Mrs. Simpson, we will never see this lake clear again, ever.' I didn't think it would ever go down, it was up to my fence. I didn't think we would ever see the beach. The water was just so nasty... But I was proven wrong, it came back to life."

Development has contributed to changes in the flow of water within the watershed and lake levels have been affected as a result. Sue comments:

"... We have a canal that comes in, this is Lake Virginia [to the north]... this is the outfall... Lake Allen came up five feet and we stayed... and we couldn't figure out why we were staying up five feet, we've always flowed [out]. The property owners had come in and improved an existing jeep trail right across the wetland, right across the natural watershed. So at the same time we are trying to get this worked out with the Department of Transportation and trying to get them to admit that they're putting all this stormwater in from this end [south] and we find out we are blocked over on the northeast end. The lake literally was in some bad shape... The sewer was horrible... Our lake levels I think are almost identical to Virginia and Harvey, all three of us. I think it has always been the historic [level]... we started to try to figure what was going on here and EPC went out and they tried to work with the property owners ... They didn't get a permit to do this, they went right straight through a wetland which is against the law... So, SWFWMD drew up, and I even have a copy of the paperwork that they were going to file against them, but it is just one of those political things that has drug on for two, three, or four years. We think this problem is now solved. We are draining now and we have gone down and in fact we are getting back down to drought stage again."

## The Future

Lake Allen has survived the changes imposed

upon it by development and a growing human population. Concerned citizens like the Padgetts have had a positive affect on the health of the lake and help to ensure the perpetuation of their quality of life. Sue has mustered forces and her experiences serve as a case study of what citizens can accomplish with a bit of persistence. As problems and threats add up in their numbers, more citizens are getting involved. Sue comments:



Lake Allen's south shore, ca.1995  
photo by: Larry and Sue Padgett

"Mr. Bob Alexander from over at Lake Wilson, he was one of the ones that was fighting and we all got together and I met him, so we did an article together about the same problems, so that the County and the State realized we were one big flowing problem out here... Lake Wilson was getting it to the south. They were screaming and yelling down there and we were getting it up here. Well, nobody in the EPC told each neighborhood that they were getting the very same problem that we were."

By adopting the problem as their own and voicing their objection to changes imposed upon their environment, the citizens in the northern reaches of the Rocky-Brushy Creek Watershed have managed to affect change. They have met with success on many fronts and have presented themselves as advocates of the environment they appreciate and will fight to maintain.