

Lake Armistead Narrative

The following narrative is based on an interview with Sammie and Greg Williams in their home on Lake Armistead on January 16, 1999. The interview provided information, which combined with survey, biological assessment, and other agency's data illustrates the past, present, and future trends of the lake.

The Williams Family



Greg and Sammie Williams

Greg Williams is a Tampa native who grew up in the Odessa- Citrus Park area. Since the 1950's he has been visiting the area's lakes mostly to see an aunt who lived on Lake Ellen. Throughout his adolescence he remembers fishing, swimming and skiing in the area lakes, including the lake on Boy Scout Road that now belongs to the St. Petersburg water department and an old borrow pit located by White Trout Lake. He comments, "We used to

walk down the railroad tracks south of Busch ...there used to be a sinkhole right where the overpass comes in ...we used to walk down and camp, fish and swim right there in the borrow pit, didn't even go to White Trout. We walked right by it and couldn't even see it..."

Greg and Sammie married in 1975 and moved to Lake Armistead in 1981. Greg had tried the construction trade early in his working career and had built what is now their home as a spec house for his father in 1971. Sammie and Greg reminisced about how the lake was while his parents lived on it. His mother once caught a 9 pound bass, quite a size for the lake. They also recount a story about the Abracinas, an older couple living in the first house built on the lake. The couple had no children, and were patrons of the wildlife in the area. As the story goes, they kept the alligators well fed with loaves of bread and chicken parts. Eventually, the gators got accustomed to the regularity of the feeding periods and would rush across the lake upon sighting a human, often seeming to throw up a wake in their hurry. Eventually one alligator grew to such a size that it needed to be removed. Residents called the DNR, but their cages were not big enough. Busch Gardens was called and their cage was not big enough either. Eventually they removed the reptile and took it away. The head of the reptile collection at Busch Gardens was unable to clarify whether the alligator had been installed in the park, but the possibility provides a happy ending to the story.

A few years after the young couple married, his father decided he wanted to get

rid of the house and asked Greg if he wanted to buy it. Sammie and Greg jumped at the opportunity and settled on Lake Armistead to raise their family.

The Williams family is rounded out by a trio of sons who have all grown up on Lake Armistead. Sammie comments on the benefits of living on a lake when bringing up a family, "...I love that my kids can walk to school...I like the idea they go to school in the community and they don't have to be bussed out...I like the idea they have friends and acquaintances that I know..."

The Williams' have maximized on their use of the lake. Their home is the center of action for kids in the area, many coming in for a snack or a drink and calling Sammie and Greg, 'Mom and Pop'. The kids use the lake for swimming, fishing, skiing and boating and its shores are often the site for parties like the New Year's Eve gathering about which Sammie enthusiastically recounts, "New Year's Eve Night, the kids had a party here, about 40 kids in the back yard. It must have been that over half of the houses on the lake had a bonfire, or a party, or were shooting off fireworks...they were calling back and forth to one another...everybody was having a good time."

Lake Armistead



Lake Armistead looking south toward undeveloped area
photo by: Greg Williams

Lake Armistead is a 40 acre lake located in the Rocky-Brushy Creek watershed. It is the last lake in a chain of four commencing with Rock Lake which flows into Josephine, on into Pretty and then into Armistead which outflows eventually into the Channel A Canal and then into Tampa Bay. The lake has a brownish tint to its water stemming from the tannins released from the bay heads. According to Greg, the lake is a spring fed and was dredged out maybe 75 years ago.

As the final lake in the chain, level fluctuation is often a contentious issue for Lake Armistead's residents. The Williams' comment, "I would think that managing the levels of the lakes has more to do with [the level]...because people up on Pretty like their lake levels higher...they hold the water so that it does not come to our lake. SWFWMD is supposed to monitor that ...all the sudden it will rain and ...they open [the dam] up...and our lake goes 'bloop'. You go to bed at night and it will be sort of like it is now and you get up in the morning and it will be up over the dock...and stay there." Sammie continues, " When we had Hurricane Elena...the water was 6 feet over my dock and it sat there for almost 4 weeks before it went down because it was so restricted going out...I had no water around the house, yet the lake was up...Lake Pretty wasn't up, Lake Josephine wasn't up, because once they got the water down here, they shut the dam off so the water wouldn't back up into Lake Pretty."



Lake Armistead in 1989 experienced many problems with flooding
photos by: Greg Williams

In addition, development in the past 15 years has put further strain on the land's historic ability to control storm water. The Belle Meade subdivision developed to the east of Lake Armistead was the cause for a good deal of flooding in the late 1980's. Eventually, after well-organized effort by Lake Armistead residents, the county responded by fining the developers \$50,000 and requiring them to correct deficiencies in their retention system. The corrections have solved portions of the flooding problem, but other issues threatening the lake's health have developed.

Lake Armistead is currently experiencing problems with algae, which some residents feel is the result of increased levels of nutrients draining directly into the lake from the retention ponds in the neighboring developments. "[Storm water] still goes into the

lake, but they made it so that it stays in the retention ponds longer. They dug them out and raised the outflow higher up. There is now algae from their fertilizers, some from ours too, but we've never really had a problem with algae growing on the lake until that subdivision." The Williams' do not attribute the entirety of nutrient presence in the lake to new development. Sammie comments about the existence of citrus on the lake shore, "In the orange grove, you had fertilizer and stuff, but the water sat around. You didn't have the run off that you have when the water went into a ditch, the water stayed in the orange grove...they [the orange groves] only fertilize every so often, there [developments] they fertilize every month and every one of these houses are being fertilized..."

The rapidity of development in the area has affected not only the lake's water level and quality, but also the amount and diversity of wildlife the lake supports. One of the types that has been affected is the fish population. Although the lake has a significant population of small fish, a gap exists between the big ones and the little ones. Greg comments, "when I first moved here, the fishing was great...There's little fish in there, but I don't know what's happening to the big fish..."

Other species that were previously active parts of the natural environment and have now disappeared or experienced a reduction in number are quail, owls, woodpeckers, and snakes.

Development



1978 Aerial photograph of Lake Armistead , Pretty and Josephene. Note the Orange groves before development
photo by: Greg Williams

Like many residents in the Odessa/ Citrus Park area, the Williams' are ambivalent about the development rush that has hit the area. Sammie comments, 'The way it's developing is ...crazy... The first time I came down here there was nothing but orange groves and cow pastures and dairy farms. We came down through Pasco County, the back way, down Gunn Highway. There was nothing. There were no houses. I could not believe this was Tampa...I thought Tampa was this huge city. There was this house and another house on the lake when we got married..."

The atmosphere of the area has changed drastically since the mid-1980's. Belle Meade has perhaps had the most impact directly on the lake, but other developments have brought significant changes as well. The rural feeling of the area is quickly becoming lost in high-density building. The Williams comment on this trend, 'It's not that it's just one house per acre. If you have 200 acres and you put 200 houses on it, by the time you put all the roads in and all the retention ponds ...you may have a house on an eighth acre lot. That is ...not the rural nature of the area. I wish the county would hold to ...one house per acre...I wish people would just say no."

Another objectionable example of development is located off Hutchinson Road. The land was initially excavated as borrow pits and the dirt sold off as fill. The houses, selling for \$350,000 are on small lots perched on fingers of land and backed up to borrow pits, filled with water which will eventually drain into the natural water supply. Sammie comments, "That to me is the biggest atrocity the county has ever done. He should have never been allowed to have the borrow pits...because that is right behind the lake...he should have never been allowed to build there. For a long time there was not a single house there. In the last year or so they have started building the houses. They are on tiny little lots; they should not have been allowed to be done this way. They come in and say we can't restrict the owner's use of their property, yet they let them destroy the land, the flavor. It's sickening."

Around Lake Armistead itself, a recent development, Hammock Woods has also had effect on the lake environment. The natural out flow of the lake is on the south side. Building for the subdivision required the land to be built up in the location of the out flow. Sammie comments, "They didn't do anything to widen it or to clean it up at all so that it could flow the rest of the way down to Channel A". As a result, increased flooding and prolonged periods of high lake levels are endured by the residents.

The area has much to consider concerning the significant population growth. Infrastructure and public services are falling behind the levels needed by the population and high-density development is changing forever the rural nature and the quality of life achievable by the residents. "It's not right of them to develop property that has never been developed and it impacts us who have been here all these years."

The Future



Lake Armistead, a center for activity for the youth and a haven for wildlife

For long term residents such as the Williams', Odessa and Citrus Park has an identity that they do not want to give up. When asked about what she would change concerning the area, Sammie commented, "What I don't like is the over-extension, the filling of lands that should be left alone to preserve the animal and water resources and the air. You go in and cut down all the trees, you fill in the swamps and all the land, you put in retention ponds, these open holes that let the water evaporate and are most of the time so polluted with chemical and runoff . . .that nothing grows in them. . .I don't like the idea that it ruins the flavor of the whole community. . ."

The Williams endeavor to set an example for other residents, who they believe settle into the lake lifestyle after a while, "Once you get out here, you see kind of how nice it is. . .that you don't own just your part, you're responsible for the health of the whole lake. . ." Although an altruistic love of nature and appreciation for the environment is a portion of the Williams' motivation, a personal sense of sustainability contributes to their outlook and motivation. "We have kids who are going to inherit it some day and let's try to keep the property and the lake and the environment the same way or as close to it as we can for our children and our grandchildren. If we don't this won't be here. The lake will be a stagnant retention pond. . .it will be dead."