

Lake Burrell Narrative



Barbara and Mike Fite
Source: USF

The following narrative was derived from an interview with Barbara and Mike Fite at their home on Lake Burrell, on June 23rd, 2000. The Fites have been active in protecting the lake from various threats over the years. This narrative offers a view of some of the threats to the health of Lake Burrell and the surrounding area through the eyes of the Fites.

Family History

Barbara and Mike Fite bought their home in 1972. They fell in love with the property the first time they saw it. They cite privacy and the lake's quiet setting as the two characteristics they like most about their lot.

Over the years the Fites have used the lake for various activities, including canoeing, swimming and bird watching, although their favorite activity is something they do almost everyday: enjoying the beautiful scenery the lake area provides. Another activity they enjoy is gardening. They have a wide variety of plants throughout their yard. Although the Fites love to cultivate, they have purposely chosen to leave portions of their yard untouched. In these areas they prefer to let nature direct its own course as much as possible.



Barbara and Mike's home
on Lake Burrell
Source: USF



One of the plants the
Fites planted in their yard
Source: USF

Barbara and Mike share a deep appreciation for the animals that inhabit the land and water around their home. They are aware of the comings and goings of various lake area critters. Mike has built nesting spots for birds on the edge of his shoreline. They have also kept a close eye on animals in their yard. In recent weeks, a woodpecker that inhabits a tree in their yard has kept their attention.

Since moving to Burrell, the Fites have sought to protect the lake from threats to its health numerous times. In the El Niño year of 1997, the Fites actually rolled up their sleeves and dug in. When the county didn't respond to several emergency calls about a backed up drainage pipe that carries overflow from Lake Burrell into a neighboring retention pond, the Fites took matters into their own hands. After a highly destructive storm, Mrs. Fite and a neighbor went into a drainage ditch and pulled out all kinds of discarded goods and trash. The Fites claim that the pipe is too small for the load that is placed on it during heavy storms. Barbara explains why and how they cleaned the conduit out in the following passage, "We couldn't get the county to help. We kept calling and calling and calling and they wouldn't do anything. So we went down there ourselves in this ditch, and we drug out doors and batteries and all kinds of stuff. That was keeping the water from draining out, and literally flooding peoples houses."

Lake History

Lake Burrell is located in northwestern Hillsborough County just north of Bearss Avenue and east of Nebraska Avenue (a.k.a. Route 41). It is a 25-acre lake in the Hillsborough River Basin.

According to Mike and Barbara, many of the homes on Lake Burrell were at one time weekend retreats for urbanites. Barbara states, "actually this house and pretty much all the houses along here were originally vacation homes for people from Tampa. They were weekend homes and they were like little cottages. Ours was like a Jim Walters shell house." The Fites assert that much of the land surrounding the lake was used for cultivating oranges prior to the onset of residential development. Around the turn of the century, orange groves could be found throughout northern Hillsborough County.

Lake Burrell is home to an abundance of wildlife including otters, alligators, and rabbits. The Fites have seen plenty of birds over the years. Barbara mentions that there are currently an over abundance of squirrels. It is thought that there were even goats in the lake area at one time. According to Barbara, a neighborhood friend told her that at one point in the sixties goats were being raised on the lake's shore. Mike mentions that the historically dominant flora in the lake area were longleaf pines and oaks.



Lake Burrell during a dry spell in 1973
Source: Barbara and Mike Fite

Like many lakes in the region, Burrell has endured great fluctuations in water levels over the years. The Fites are unhappy to say that lake levels in the past two years have been some of the lowest in their 28-year stint on the lake. Barbara states that "the only other time it was this low was in 1973." In 2001, the lake was totally dry for several months.

Unfortunately, not only are lake levels extremely low, but the water quality has declined over time as well. Barbara laments the change in quality in the following lines: "We've had the most marvelous well water for twenty-something years and all of a sudden it just got browner and browner and browner." Mike implies that low water levels have impacted the quality of the lake's water. Mike



In the past, the water in the lake came up to this cement wall

states,

"It's brown and sometimes the sulphur smells like rotten eggs. It's just the over-pumping from the well fields and so now we have a three thousand-dollar water conditioning system. And we don't drink the water it is just to keep the fixtures from getting brown, so we can use the washing machines. ...[W]e now buy the water from the store."

Mike believes that recent drops in the lake's water level have resulted not only from over-pumping but also from the severe drought central Florida is currently enduring.

During the time they have lived on Lake Burrell, Barbara and Mike have realized that lakeside residents harbor a diversity of views about nature and particularly what types of scenes are aesthetically pleasing when they view the lake. Mike explains that some residents like him prefer seeing the lake in what might be called a more natural state in which lillie pads and other vegetation are flourishing. He believes that some other residents prefer little or no vegetation on the lake. Mike thinks that these different perceptions of what is aesthetically pleasing cause people to act differently. Noting that those who prefer a lake with less vegetation are more apt to use herbicides, he gloomily asserts that by destroying vegetation with herbicide, precious wildlife habitat is also destroyed.

The Fites describe their neighborhood as stable, noting that children who were raised on the lake often buy homes on the lake when they reach adulthood. Barbara discusses the community's cohesiveness in the following quote: "It's like a family. You don't always love 'em, but you always stick together." Mike supports this by noting that if a threat is perceived [to the lake and/or neighborhood] somehow they get together.

Development

The community Mike and Barbara live in was initially developed in the 1950s and has continued to grow since then. There are currently 52 houses on the lake. These homes are not generic, but are unique, having been built by different builders at different times. Mike states, "They're all different, it's not a cookie cutter subdivision."

The Fites have witnessed the development of the area during the last three decades (i.e., 1970, 1980, 1990). They cite the widening of Route 41 as being one product of development that has threatened the balance of the lake area's ecosystem and the built structures on the lake's shore. The widening of 41 has lead to the creation of a retention pond to handle the increase in runoff created from the expansion of the road, which is an impervious surface and thus does not absorb storm-water. The Fites believe that the problem lies in the design of the storm water system. The system

transports water through a drainage pipe from the road into the lake; when lake-levels reach a certain point, water flows from the lake into the retention pond. However, the system is flawed in that the drainage pipe is too small to carry all the water that comes off the road. As a result, much of the runoff does not enter the pipe and drains onto the surrounding ground and then runs down slope to the lake. Mike states, "We never had a flooding problem until they put that retention pond in." The Fites believe that the lake is unable to handle Route 41's runoff during major storms without flooding some of the built structures along Burrell's shoreline. In the following quote Barbara discusses the impact of the faulty storm water system: "They flooded out the Church over there. They totally flooded out the church. It was just really sad."



Flooding on a road just south of Lake Burrell during El Niño
Source: Barbara and Mike Fite

According to the Fites, not only did the development of the retention pond cause damage through flooding, but the construction of the retention pond jeopardized the welfare of the area's gopher tortoise (an endangered species) population. Barbara explains the scenario in the following quote: "They (FDOT - Florida Department of Transportation) told us there weren't any gopher tortoises there and we showed them the ones that had been injured and killed. When they were plow'in it down and they....said 'we didn't see any signs.' Well you're either ignorant or lying. Because you know, there definitely were [signs]." The Fites also mention another bone of contention over the building of the retention pond. Mike and Barbara claim that none of the local residents were notified about the construction. The Fites do mention that F-DOT had said that they did alert homeowners in the area of the retention ponds construction. The Fites contend that the other residents they spoke to in the area also said they were not notified of the retention pond's construction. When Mrs. Fite

requested to see copies of the notification, DOT could not produce them.

Over the years, the community surrounding Lake Burrell has come together to cope with various threats to the lake. When developers attempted to build a high density residential area on one of the few remaining pieces of undeveloped land in the area, they met with stern opposition from the area's residents. Barbara offers details on her neighborhood's stand against a developer in court in the following lines: "(The developer) saw that more people showed up for the second meeting than the first ... and literally every man, woman and child in this neighborhood wrote a letter." In the end, the developer was allowed to develop the property, but the density (i.e., houses/acre) of the development was lowered substantially due to the community's efforts.

Future

The Fites believe that growth is an unfortunate reality and that its negative impacts, such as habitat destruction (e.g., gopher tortoises), must be mitigated. Their biggest concern is a lack of infrastructure in the area. Barbara states, "...there is no infrastructure, there are no roads, there's no drainage and there's no water to support it, yet they keep letting them build." In the end, the Fites stress the need for further planning, environmental protection and the addition of infrastructure if Hillsborough County is going to maintain a high quality of life for all its residents, human and non-human.