

East Lake Narrative

The following narrative is based on an interview with Craig Williams at his home in the community of East Lake Park on October 15, 1999. Craig's story is interesting and unique; in the past twenty-five years he and his family have lived on the shores of East Lake in two different homes. Throughout this time the lake has remained a focal point of activity for the Williams family. Craig's perspective offers insight on the history of East Lake and on current issues that are of concern to the lake area's residents.

Family History



Craig Williams on his dock - USF

Craig, his first wife, and their two children originally moved to Tampa in 1972 from Grand Junction, Colorado. Initially the Williams' lived in an apartment complex in Temple Terrace. However, the Williams' desire to enjoy the advantages of lakeside living, such as easy access to water-skiing and swimming, drew them to their first residence on East Lake within five years of their move to Tampa.

Craig exposes the integral role the lake plays in his family's life in reminiscing about a conversation with his son. Craig states:

"I'll tell you how integral it was. When my son...was six years old and came home from first grade one day, and said, 'Dad you know what?'... 'I met a kid in school today that doesn't have a lake in their backyard.' It was the first person he'd even realized didn't actually have a lake in their backyard. It never occurred to him anybody could be so deprived."

Throughout the years, East Lake has worked as a recreation center for the Williams family. In the following quote Craig explains the family's extensive use of the lake. Craig states:

"Our kids have grown up skiing, swimming, chasing turtles. They had paddle-boats when they were just little kids. [When the oldest boy]...was eight years old, I came home from a sales meeting one time, and I was tired...it was about 4:00 pm and he said, 'Dad I gotta learn how to slalom tonight.' I said, 'Son let's do it another time! [His son said] 'No, my buddy Eddie did it yesterday, I have to learn.' So, here we were later that evening, 8:00 at night I couldn't even see him in the water. And he's saying, 'Go dad, go.' So, I pulled him up and he said 'I made it' ... He was the first one of the children to learn to slalom. So, yes they're very much into...[lake activities]."



The Williams use their dock to launch their powerboat and paddleboat - USF

Craig speaks positively about the joys of growing up in East Lake Park. He comments, "It's the greatest place to grow up in the world. There are teenagers out here that are members of our church and our community. And you see them out there in paddle-boats and canoes and everything else. It's like growing up as Tom Sawyer out here."

Craig has actually owned two homes on East Lake. Since 1994 he has lived with his second wife on the northwest shore of East Lake. Three of their combined eight children live in East Lake Park. Although Craig doesn't water ski anymore, he still enjoys boating. The Williams' enthusiasm for water activities has been passed on to the family's newest generation. Craig comments, "[My son] lives out here now and he has his own boat...he has teenage

daughters...[that] go tubing. The older one likes to drive the boat and the younger one likes to tube, so it works out real well."

East Lake

East Lake is a 100.5 acre lake, located in central Hillsborough County. It is just south of Hillsborough Avenue and can be viewed from I-4, which runs next to its southeastern shore. The lake is murky and shallow, averaging five feet in depth. When Craig was asked if he had seen any changes in the lake in the last twenty-five years, he had this to say:

"You know that's a funny question because a lot of people tell me, 'Well this lake was clean twenty-five years ago.' Hey, I was here twenty-five years ago. This lake has got the same thing every other Florida Lake has got. It's got the tannin muddy look to it. It's never gonna be otherwise. It's a run off lake with springs under it pushing the mud around some more. But, has it gotten worse? I don't know, does anything ever get better? I can't tell any difference [i.e., in the condition of the lake now from its condition twenty-five years ago].

According to Craig, in the early 1900's East Lake was referred to as Mud Lake on plats of the area. However, the lake was no longer recognized as Mud Lake on maps of the area by the 1920's. Craig asserts that the natural springs, which feed the lake, do not percolate with as much force as they used to due to being partially clogged by "pollution and mud". However, Craig comments, "...it's still fun to swim out there and feel it coming up between your legs and your feet. And it also changes temperature quite significantly where the springs are."



The island at the northern end of East Lake - USF

Craig reports that the wildlife and flora in the lake's environment seem to be healthy. He focuses our discussion on the lake's bird population and the excessive growth of weeds. In particular, he discusses the role excessive weed growth has played in expanding the land-mass of an island located in the northern portion of the lake. Craig states that, "Constantly the weeds are getting bigger and more prolific, and are covering larger areas. For instance, that island has doubled in the last twenty-five years, because the weeds come and catch the mud and debris and stuff. And that gets stuck in there. And, then it becomes solid land." This island has become a resting-place for an ever-growing bird population (e.g., Blue Jays, Black Birds, Pelicans, Sea Gulls).

Unfortunately, due to the high density of birds on the island, there has been a build-up of bird dung. Craig perceives this to be a major source of pollution entering the lake. Craig states:

"The biggest pollutant, believe it or not, is the birds. We have an island out here the community used to maintain as a park and we owned it. Well, they got lazy and they didn't care for it, long before I moved out, so it kind of just went to weeds and the birds started living there and so forth. Now there's thousands of birds that come in there and land every night. I mean they just fill the sky. The top of the island turns white up in the trees from the birds that are white. The brown colored ones stay lower down and the white ones go on top. And the pollution problem, the biggest one, is the birds, because they really, really, dump a lot of stuff on it."

Craig believes that excessive weed growth has contributed to the eutrophic quality of the lake. He states,

"And, we need to pull more weeds than we are. We're having trouble getting permits to pull all that we need to pull. To keep them from making more of an impact than they already are. What happens is if you kill em, but you don't pull 'em out, they die and then they become fertilizers for the next set of weeds, and so the nutrients in the lake are quite high."



East Lake Civic Center - USF

Craig asserts that East Lake has a unifying effect on the community of East Lake Park and that this unifying effect is manifested in the East Lake Civic Association. Craig comments:

"If that lake weren't there, to these people, it would just be houses, in an area of town. Instead there is the East Lake Civic Association, they are a tax district and they tax themselves. I think that's very critical, because they did not have to pay taxes for a community development... They own a huge property about four or five acres down there. A big Civic Center with a recreational center... A roped off area for safe swimming, restrooms, the whole thing... This whole community depends on that Lake. I mean that's the cohesiveness of the whole thing."



The East Lake Civic Association owns a recreational area and a boat launch for use by its members - USF

Craig speculates that there is a core citizen group that is composed of approximately ten to twenty percent of East Lake Park residents who are active participants in the community. He discussed the solidarity of this group and their strong desire to protect the lake from any threats to its environment. Craig comments, "We had a reporter out here, because we cause quite a fervor when people mess with our lake, and pollute it or whatever. And, he commented, 'You guys are pretty feisty, you seem like you'd fight over anything'. And I told him, 'You mess with our lake, we'll give you more trouble than you could ever imagine'."

The community's desire to protect the lake can be seen in its ongoing dispute with the Audubon Society over the ownership and management of the island located in the northern portion of the lake. Craig asserts that the island was historically managed and owned by the community. However, in the 1980's the island was left to fallow. As noted, this resulted in an abundant growth of foliage on the island and the establishment of a large and diverse bird population. Craig comments:

"And since the community let the island go, when we tried to claim it back again, we wanted to clear it, a lien was filed by the Audubon Society, and, they said they owned it. Well, what they turned up with was a quick claim that was unchallenged by the developer of the community. Originally, all that island was a spoil island. The original documents in the community say that island was suppose to be removed as part of the contract. The developers got lazy, and said 'We're not gonna move it, we'll leave it there for a park'. Then all of a sudden Audubon has this quick claim which basically says any rights ... [the original developer had were turned over to them]. They didn't have any rights. So now we're fighting with Audubon trying to get that taken care of. But it was partly our own fault, because the people who live out here didn't maintain the park on the island."

Development

Development in the East Lake area started in the 1940's; however much of the area remained undeveloped for decades. Craig reminisces,

"There's a lot of history out here, but only a relatively short history, it's only been going on for about fifty years... When I first moved out here, this was considered out in the sticks. There was nothing beyond 50th Street anywhere around here... about 1975. That Beltz Mall wasn't there. None of the fast food places were out here. The fairgrounds had just come out here, from downtown. They'd only moved out two years before. And, so this was just to heck and gone, you know. You could pull across 50th Street when you were going up the Interstate, and from there you'd see cows grazing and you'd never see a developed commercial building of any kind."

Craig explains that the earliest commercial development in the vicinity of East Lake Park was a drive-in theatre on

Hillsborough Avenue in the early 1940s. His words aid one in grasping a historical perspective of the area. Craig comments, "...Drive-ins of course always were built where there was no population and land was cheap. So, that one was way out in the sticks, compared to where the city was at that time."

Craig theorizes that the end of World War II and the advent of air-conditioning were 'catalysts' for the development of the East Lake Park subdivision in 1949. Craig comments:

"The first houses as far as I can tell were built in 1949. The war being over was no doubt the big catalyst. It was the new area, the new waterfront area in particular. Thonotosassa was not available, it was all groves around it. You could go in and fish it, but you couldn't buy on it. Besides that it was very swampy on the edges. The way they took care of the swampiness in here (East Lake) was building canals through. If you were to drive down here to Spencer Circle, you would find it's actually an island with canals passed from one side of the lake to the other. But, I would say the culmination of air-conditioning and the war being over, and so many people having lived in here with the bases. That was really the catalyst...the air-conditioning and the army releasing the people."



One of several entrances to the community of East Lake Park at the intersection of Walton Way and Hillsborough Avenue - USF

According to Craig, homes on the shore of East Lake are no less than 2000 sq. ft.. Historically, however, this was not the case. Craig recalls, "...Back then, really big was 1500 sq. ft.. So, all of those around the water have been enlarged since then. The average on the water is probably any where from 2000 to 2500, some of them a little larger, but, there are no houses on the lake that haven't been enlarged to at least 2000 sq. ft. since then."

Development has impacted East Lake in numerous ways. Craig recognizes some of these impacts in the following statement:

"There have been some good [consequences] and some have been bad. The access to the roads is one of the problems. Because with the wonderful access [to Interstate 4]. One of my neighbors says, 'You're one stoplight away from any place in the United States or Canada, and that's true. You just pull up on Hillsborough, stop at Orient Road, and you're gone forever on the Interstate system. The downside of that is it attracted a huge truck stop, that hasn't been a good neighbor, too much fuel and things like that that just naturally accumulate. And the sex shops that you see at Hillsborough [Avenue] and 50th Street."



Floating booms are met to prevent I-4 construction debris from passing into the rest of the lake. - USF

Interstate 4 has impacted the lake environment in several ways. Craig states:

"Well, we're having quite a problem with the mud that's a result of the runoff from all that construction [on Interstate 4]. They have built a berm, but the berm is kind of like putting a band-aid over an amputated arm...When construction is done, a lot of that will stop. The second thing we've gotten from that, it's like I said twenty-five years ago, it was isolated out here and you'd see cars go up and down but you wouldn't hear too much of that. Now it's getting louder and louder as it carries more cars, and of course, that creates its own pollution [i.e., noise pollution]."

Craig discusses one commercial development in particular which may damage the lake environment. Craig states,

"We've got the potential [for a serious environmental problem with] East Lake Auto Sales. We've had them cited by the county at least three times, we've had the EPA on them, and everything else, because they're using the area in back of their sales lot for junk. They put old battered cars in there. They will never be fixed. It's just a salvage yard."

Craig asserts that the community is concerned with the long-term negative effects from the seepage of automotive fluids (e.g., oil and transmission fluid), although they have found only traces of fluid so far. He implies that East Lake Auto Sales has used a loophole in the law to avoid legal penalties. This loophole consists of a ninety-day grace period, which allows for the offender to clean the spill. Craig claims that East Lake Auto Sales has cleaned their property within ninety days only to pollute it again shortly after, thus avoiding any legal penalty.

The Future

The future health of East Lake can not be predicted, however steps can be taken to promote a healthy lake through the pursuance of environmentally sustainable development in the lake area. In light of this, commercial and infrastructural development in the area must be in accordance with the long-term goal of ecological preservation. A sustainable management system should also facilitate the viability of the lake's ecosystem via maintaining appropriate populations of the lake's flora and fauna. East Lake residents can contribute to the maintenance of a healthy East Lake by supporting the sustainable management of the lake. Through organizations such as the East Lake Civic Association, community members can influence planning and policy relevant to the lake. As president of the East Lake Civic Association, Craig discusses the future agenda of the association, and implies that community involvement in neighborhood and lake issues is important. He states,

"My goal and objective as president, more than anything else, is to control the weed growth out here ...[especially on the island and in the canals]. And secondly, or maybe firstly, is to get the community to know each other better, and to have more involvement [in the civic association]...My wife is in the middle of helping to plan a Christmas Party and she's also planning a neighborhood garage sale. [She wants to have them]...because she thinks the people will come together, have a good time together and get to know each other better."

In closing, it is through the involvement of a diverse group of dedicated citizens, working in conjunction with local government agencies that developmental and ecological issues can be effectively addressed, so that a healthy East Lake may be preserved for use by future generations.