

Lil' Lake Jewel Narrative

The following narrative is based on an interview with Lil' Lake Jewel resident, Kathy Cropper, in her home on June 16, 1999. The perspectives articulated by Mrs. Cropper help illuminate the realities of life on Lil' Lake Jewel in the past and present and also highlight some issues to be addressed by humans regarding their interaction in the future with the natural environment.



The northeast shore of Lil' Lake Jewel is emblematic of the lake's beauty.

Family History

Kathy and Siegfried Cropper are life-long Odessa residents. Kathy comments:

"He lived down the road [North Mobley] just before Brooker Creek. We lived less than a mile apart for seven years and didn't meet until we went thirteen miles down the road to the University of South Florida. We met there in one of the classes that we took."

Kathy grew up on Horse Lake. Her family moved to the lake when she was less than a year old and it was her home until she was married, after which her new family traveled around the world with the military. They always returned to Odessa and she comments, "We'd always come home. We'd have a week or two of leave before going to our next duty station, and we'd always come home and visit."

One of the major land owning families in the area was the Mobley family, and Kathy and Jimmy Smith, a grandson, were fast childhood friends. She comments:



This image of Lil' Lake Jewel today evokes images of the lake enjoyed by Odessa residents of the past.

"We were best friends, and he was at my house as much as he was at his, and I was at his as much as I was at mine. . . I went fishing over here [on Lil' Lake Jewel] with him. We'd stand on the dock or on the shore and fish and I'd go home with a string of fifteen or more bluegill that Momma or Granny . . . would clean and fix them for supper."

Kathy has maintained a connection with her childhood memories in more ways than one. The kitchen in the Smith house was being remodeled and some of the heart of pine beams from the old house's kitchen now make up the kitchen floor in her house on Lil' Lake Jewel. She relates:

"It was heart of pine, and. . . it was. . . harvested from this property. . . . The house was built in 1865 and when they remodeled the house in the early 50s, they tore down the old kitchen. Jimmy stored the old timbers in the barn. When we were ready to build, Jimmy and Evelyn [his mother] offered us the timbers. . . . We figured the trees had to have been at least a hundred years old when they were cut because they have beams underneath the house that are

30-40 feet long, one piece of lumber. They were cut in 1865, so we figured they were 237 years old."

Kathy and Siegfried raised two children while traveling with the military, and when they retired in 1993, the couple sought out property to buy in Odessa. They bought two acres on the lake she remembers from her childhood and are now residents on the west shore of Lil' Lake Jewel.

History of Lil' Lake Jewel and Horse Lake

Lil'Lake Jewel

Lil' Lake Jewel is located in the Brooker Creek watershed, just west of Fox's Corner. It is a small lake tucked in among pastures and groves. The lake was named by a friend of Jimmy and Evelyn Smith who used to come out and fish. Kathy shares the story:

"He had asked her [Evelyn] what the name was and she said that they had never named it. He said, 'Well, it's a little jewel.' I didn't find that out until after we were living here and I asked Evelyn one day and she said, 'I guess if it has one it's Little Jewel.'"

Kathy speaks of the lake's water level:

"This lake has pretty much held its own. It has dropped because there is a well right across North Mobley which will affect this one, but it's not as close as the one is to Horse Lake, and I guess it doesn't hit as badly [as some other lakes in the area]. . . . It is down now, about to what it was when we moved in because we haven't had the rains this year. The two years when we had those good rains it came back up, almost to where it was originally."

When the rains are plentiful, the lake outflows into the Cropper's backyard, because the culvert connecting them to Lake Keystone is plugged.

The wildlife today in and around the lake is much like what could be found in Kathy's childhood. She comments:

"We have a pair of foxes. . . My husband sees them. . . little red foxes. We also have coyotes out here who have raided the chicken house. . . Done me out of about twenty chickens by now and two peacocks. . . . One of the neighbors said he had spotted what he thought was a bobcat. . . . We have a number of birds that we had when I was a child growing up. . . . We have what I think is a great blue. . . . We have a lesser blue, we have white ibis, we have little white egrets. . . . We have a pair of osprey that nest down at Keystone Park. . . possums, raccoons, armadillos. They have raided my chicken coop too, between the raccoons and the [others]. . . well; they didn't leave a single feather of my peacock. Not a beak, not a claw, nothing."

In addition, the fish are still plentiful. The Croppers and friends catch many bass, keeping just the trophy sized ones and throwing back the others. Kathy also is the benefactor to a bevy of ducks.

Invasive vegetation on Lil' Lake Jewel has not been a problem. Kathy comments:



Lil' Lake Jewell provides habitat for a diversity of vegetation.

"Here a couple of years ago, the lily pads were really beginning to take over, and then we had those heavy rains and it covered them up and I guess they died. Of course, now the water is not as nice because they are decaying. It used to be just as clear as can be. Now when my son-in-law uses the ski-do, when he sprays, there is an orange color to it. It is still clear, you can see down as far as the grass, but it is not as clear as it used to be. I don't know how long it will be before it clears back up."

Horse Lake

Horse Lake is a 28-acre lake located in the Brooker Creek watershed, just to the east of Fox's Corner. It was the sight of Kathy's childhood. Part of the land surrounding the lake was land deeded from Mr. Mobley to his former slaves. Horse Lake was at one time connected to Lake Pretty through a canal, as Kathy recalls:



1995 aerial of Horse Lake. source: SWFWMD

"Lake Pretty is higher than Horse Lake, so Horse Lake would always get the water and if we had rains, which of course we had back then, then the overflow would come into our lake. We always had water up until that time, I guess I was probably in college when the lake started dropping."

The level of Horse Lake has been an issue possibly associated with pumping. Kathy muses:



This 1997 aerial of Horse Lake (foreground) reveals development's encroachment on the lake when compared with the aerial photo from 1995 in the previous frame. source: SWFWMD

"They [the wellfields] were active when we moved out here. They were probably doing some of that, 'Oh sorry! We didn't know we were pumping too much water out.' God only knows how many years they got away with that. They are probably still getting away with it. Mother has to have a new well dug. SWFWMD paid for that one, but everybody out here has had problems. Especially when we had those ten years of drought. . . Horse Lake became two ponds because there is a pump right over there. For several years, Father had spoken to someone at St. Petersburg Waterworks and it was a gentlemen's agreement. They voluntarily augmented the lake by opening up the pump. Of course they were drawing from the lake, but it helped to keep it up. We had the drought years and there was like a sandbar across and you could walk across it. . . . Would have been in the early '60's."

Kathy reminisces about the animal life to be found around Horse Lake in her childhood:

"Oh goodness, we had three or four coveys of quail every year until the people who worked at GTE [located at the corner of N Mobley and Gunn Highway] started shooting them. . . . You'll see a couple of pair now but it's nothing like what it used to be. . . . If you would chirp like the babies, they would come up closer. Of course we had 'gators,-we had a whole family of 'gators over there. My dad could grunt like they do and bring them up. They never bothered us. They would sit off and watch while we were swimming and whatnot. Of course, they wouldn't be above getting one of the dogs, but we never lost a dog to the 'gators. All kinds of birds, meadowlarks, red wing blackbirds, they love to roost in the cattails, bunches of cardinals, blue jays, mockingbirds, thrushes. We had lots of wildlife."

Development

Like much of Odessa, the residents around Lil' Lake Jewel will soon experience an increase in development density. The small gem, once surrounded by grove and pasture, will instead be surrounded by a new housing project. In the past, the lake was part of a large tract of land owned by the Mobley family. Remnants from an early sawmill can still be found in the shallow waters of the east shore of the lake. Siegfried comments, "There is evidence that obviously there was a substation here and they did some milling here because the lake is filled with sawdust [and] old pieces of machinery left there." Kathy muses, "It was probably something that Mr. Mobley had to mill some of the lumber when they built the house in 1865."

Over the years more people came to Odessa to live. The increasing population brought new stresses to the lakes in the area. Horse Lake and Lil' Lake Jewel were not spared the effects. Kathy comments:

"Horse Lake was usually a quiet little lake until the State of Florida changed the law and said, 'Yeah, people can go into your lakes.' I still think that's wrong. They weren't the ones who paid to have it stocked. They always left trash behind. To me that is just not right. They're having to go over someone's property to get there. I have been known to let the dogs loose when people come trampling over our property. . ."

More recent proposals pertaining to development have the potential for increased impact on the Croppers' lives and environment. A 28-unit subdivision is planned for the northwest corner of Gunn Highway and North Mobley Road. Building will soon interrupt the isolation the Croppers enjoy. None of the houses are proposed to front the lake directly. Siegfried comments, "The original map showed that there was a retention pond, a series of retention ponds in a circle all the way around the wetlands and along the edge of the lake, which really means that no homes can be anywhere close to the lake."



1995 brought low water levels to Horse Lake. source: SWFWMD

The proposed development that would about Lil' Lake Jewel is on hold for the time being. The owners of the property currently have income from an orange grove on the land. They also own land across Gunn Highway that is not under cultivation, and they are proposing a mix of residential and commercial development that is meeting with opposition from residents in the surrounding area. Siegfried comments, "The citizens over there. . . I think it is going to go back and forth [with the residents on] Lake James and Little Lake] . . . The people over there, feel like they got sucked into something they really weren't made aware of."

The community responded through many avenues. Kathy explains:

"I think they [the developers] thought they had a done deal and then the neighborhood found out about it. They went to the Keystone Civic Association and the word was put out and [people came and] put flyers out and rang doorbells and they had a lot more negative input than they thought they would."

The Future

While development remains on hold for the undeveloped land surrounding Lil' Lake Jewell, the Croppers can still enjoy a lifestyle related to the Odessa they remember from their childhood. The view from the back of their house takes in the lake and an expanse of land uninterrupted by other structures.



Pastureland (background) is quickly becoming scarce in Odessa.

Kathy comments:

"It's peaceful and quiet and it's still a little bit of country here. You can hear the traffic down on Gunn Highway, and we've got a lot of traffic going down North Mobley now, but especially in the evenings it's nice and quiet. You can sit out in the middle of the night if you want to and listen to the frogs and the crickets. . . and the whipper whills calling. It's just like I remember the country being when I was growing up."

Development will come eventually and it is a reality recognized by the Croppers.

From the historic timbers on the floor of their kitchen to the location of their home on property that was a part of their childhood, the Croppers are saving a piece of the past for future generations to appreciate. Kathy comments, "I am just so glad that we have this because now my granddaughter can have a little bit of what I grew up with."