

# Lake Juanita Narrative

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The following narrative is based on an interview with Lake Juanita residents, Bob and Eileen Hart, in their home on June 16, 1999. The perspectives articulated by the Harts help to illuminate the realities of life on Lake Juanita in the past and present and to highlight some issues to be addressed by humans regarding their interaction with the natural environment in the future.

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## Family History

Bob and Eileen Hart have made Lake Juanita their home for 24 years and it has been the sight for raising their family of three. Bob is a long time Tampa resident. He moved to South Tampa when he was twelve and visited the Odessa area from his Palma Ceia home as an adolescent with the Boy Scouts and then later with friends to ski and camp. Eileen grew up on a farm in South Georgia and relished the return to a semi-rural setting. She comments on the reasoning for their move to Northwest Hillsborough County from Town and Country:

" I was raised on a farm and I didn't want my kids raised in [the city]. [Bob] was raised in town and he was perfectly happy in a subdivision...we lived there for seven years. The last straw was [when]...my mother and I went to Miami to get plants and when I came back some of the neighbors' kids had set a fire on our front porch. I went around and asked if anyone had seen what was going on. There was a mother that said, 'Oh, that was the boys. They were playing like they were camping out.' I said, 'That was a fire on my front porch. My house could have burned down!' She said, 'Boys will be boys.' I told Bob that night, 'I will not live here another day! We're moving, now!'"

The Harts had set criteria for the kind of home they wanted. Eileen comments, "I wanted two acres of land and a livable house on the water...[Bob] didn't want a big lake because he didn't want the noise". Ironically, noise ended up being a constant feature of the small lake they settled on and Eileen comments, " We ended up on a little lake [Juanita] and there were like six families and all of our kids were the same age and they all wanted to ski. ...There was loud raucous noise all of the time."

The Hart's children were five, six and seven years of age when the family relocated to the shores of Lake Juanita. The rural nature of the area added to their style of living, facilitating activities such as skiing, swimming, fishing and stargazing. When asked how the existence of families with children facilitated community in the area, Eileen comments, "We met all of [the families] when we moved in. ...The first thing you do in any community is you join the church, the civic association and any other groups. That was the first thing we did...Your kids make sure you meet people...If you want to be in a community, you have to join...Within the first five years we knew everybody."

Community involvement plays a large role in the lives of the Harts. Eileen comments on the origin of her

motivation, "My mother's thing was, 'If you want anything to happen, you had better stay involved. You had better do volunteer work for the city, county, state, everything, for the rest of your life, because if you don't, you won't be happy.'" Bob and Eileen have worked hard to stay involved, informed, and committed to the causes in their community to help ensure the perpetuation of their way of life and the health of the natural environment including Lake Juanita.

## Lake History

Lake Juanita is a shallow lake of 22.3 acres. It is located in Northwest Hillsborough County in the Brooker Creek Watershed. The lake is situated on land that was originally part of the five hundred acres granted to the Mobley family in the middle 1800's. The Hart's house is the oldest house left standing on the shores of the lake. It was built in 1946 when the lake was home to a cadre of older families including, the Norsworthy's whom the Harts bought their house from, the Cooks and the Fernandez's.



The families living on the shores of Lake Juanita use the lake for a variety of activities. The Harts are no exception, although the breadth of their activities declined as the children of the Hart family grew up and moved on. Where skiing used to be a perennial feature on the lake, Eileen comments, " We don't have any kind of motorized vehicle for boating any more because the kids are gone. The ski boat is gone ..."



The balance between a lake that supports wildlife and activity and the humans that benefit from that balance is tenuous. Eileen states, "...There was this big bass fisherman...[but] he cleaned his beach just as clear as can be. I asked him, 'Where do you think these bass are going to nest? I keep trying to keep places for the bass to nest over here, but you are the big bass fisherman.' He said that they would nest somewhere else. If everyone has that attitude, how are you going to catch a bass?" To help facilitate the creation and perpetuation of a healthy balance between the lake and humans, Bob and Eileen are the LAKEWATCH monitors for the lake and are staunch advocates for the health of the natural environment.

Lake Juanita is used by citizens for a variety of purposes (recreational, drinking/irrigation water, aesthetic). Should some uses be considered more important than others? source: USF

Lake Juanita is a relatively shallow lake that has been affected by dry spells and well field pumping. While well field pumping affects the lake's level, so do cyclic fluctuations over time. Eileen comments, "The old people that have lived out here

forever will tell you, ...they will say over and over again that you have ten to fifteen years of being really wet and it slowly goes into being really dry. You have a peak of really, really wet and then you have a peak of really, really dry and that is what we get...not only yearly ups and downs".

Despite normal fluctuations, pumping is a major cause of low water levels, especially when its impacts are compounded by a dry spell. Eileen comments, "Now, when [the lakes] are really down, they still pump at the same [rate]... We have advocated all along that pumping goes along with the rain cycles. You can only take so much. If you have a lot of rain, you can tap it and you can store it. When we start going into the dry cycle, when you have ten or twelve years of dry, you can not do anything, even wash your car. The pumping is at a steady rate, except it spikes up in the really dry periods because people need to water grass."

To address the affects of pumping upon the area's lakes, Eileen played an integral

role in founding the Coalition of Lakes (COLA). COLA served residents of Hillsborough County, Pasco, and Pinellas Counties. Eileen reminisces:

"[The Keystone Civic Association Water Committee] was doing all of this stuff...the ones of us that were in LAKEWATCH decided, well, why don't we rig up the Keystone Water Committee and educate ourselves on what is going on right now. I started going to West Coast Water meetings, Southwest Florida Water Management District meetings and working with the County Commissioners and zonings. . I got yelled at a lot. When people are angry about what is happening to them in their back yard, they don't care who the person is trying to give them the information. They are mad and they are yelling with you... We ended up being the political arm, trying to fight things... We had an attorney, [but] the attorney's fees were just astronomical. We couldn't afford it...[their attorney] took us before the Pinellas County Commission to sue the eight of us. We were all sued."



Lilly Pads are a common sight on Lake Juanita. source: USF

The story ends with the eight who were sued receiving financial retribution for their troubles, but the legal action effectively disabled COLA.

Citizen action groups such as COLA are important players in relations between local government and the needs and perspectives of citizens. The Harts provide an example of how citizens can contribute to ensuring a high quality of life for current and future community members.

## Development



A secluded residence on the shores of Lake Juanita. source: USF

Lake Juanita is the setting for twenty-eight homes; the majority built in the last twenty years. Eileen broaches the subject of early development, "This was the North Shore subdivision. There were twelve, ten-acre lots...[the west shore of Lake Juanita] was all swamp going over to Lake Rainbow and in the 1940's they dredged in sand and built [the land] up four feet...". The action altered the natural water flow between lakes in the area, but had a positive effect in that it provided Eileen, a master gardener, with a yard in which she can grow anything. She comments, "Consequently it is perfect for me as a gardener...four feet of sand drainage. I can mulch it really well and grow camellias or I can leave it just sand and grow some of the weirdest stuff. People can't believe they are growing side by

side, but if you begin with sand, you can build and change its texture. If you start with swamp, you have no drainage."

Eileen and Bob comment on the early development of the area, "A lot of people thought Odessa would be the big city and not Tampa. This was a big logging community". Eventually the trees were logged out and the port town of Tampa grew to be the area's metropolis. The Odessa-Keystone area though, continues to be a haven for residents seeking a bucolic setting. There is an on-going dispute about the identity of the area. Is it Keystone or Odessa? Bob comments, "Keystone is the lake. Odessa is the area."

Through living on Lake Juanita for the past twenty-four years the Harts have been able to witness the commercial and residential development of the Odessa area. They reminisce about the drive from Tampa to the Lake Juanita area when Dale Mabry was a two-lane road and Gunn Highway took them past Plantation Dairy, the last stop for groceries before they reached Lake Juanita.

Since that period of time, many changes have occurred. Grocery stores, gas stations, restaurants and the new Citrus Park Town Center are now familiar fixtures to the area that used to be characterized by agriculture and rural landscapes. Bob comments, "The biggest change for us is the traffic. It used to be that you hardly even looked when you pulled up to some of these intersections." Now, cars, noise, light and commercial development are commonplace in the area, with more changes on the way. Perhaps it was McDonalds that was the harbinger of change. Bob comments, "Those people do not put restaurants where there are not going to be people."

The demographic researchers at McDonalds were right on the money and new development is still expected in the near future. Proposals to develop Fox's Corner as a new commercial center of the area are in the works. In addition, large tracts of land that were previously occupied by orange groves or pasture are now being assessed by developers for residential and commercial use. The Harts recognize that development is a reality in this highly desirable portion of Hillsborough County. They have been active in discussing a compromise, such as having new residential building limited to one house per five acres to limit the impact of development on rural landscape, to protect the natural resources, and to continue the positive relationship the county has with agriculture.

## **The Future**

Will it be Keystone or Odessa? Will every corner along Gunn Highway be occupied with commercial development? Will the lakes remain the healthy and beautiful resources they are today, or will they succumb to the stresses of pumping, increased development and pollution? The passing of years will provide the answers to these types of questions. For the present, efforts such as those supported by the Keystone Civic Association, the LAKEWATCH program, and by individuals such as Bob and Eileen Hart will help to focus actions toward a future that will encompass a well paced and planned development and a healthy, natural environment.