

Rock Lake Narrative

The following narrative is based on information provided by a group interview attended by citizens from Lake Josephine and Rock Lake and Jim Griffin, head of the Hillsborough Lakes Management Program in August 1998. The meeting served multiple purposes including the compilation of historical information, education of citizens concerning beneficial lake behavior, and the raising of issues of concern to lake residents directed toward the ends of exploring of the possibilities of creating a lake organization to represent the two inter-connected lakes.

Josephine and Rock Lakes: The People the Places and the Stories

Odessa is an area rife with history. Once a haven for weekenders seeking to get out of the heat and bustle of the city, it has, in the past 20 years become a more accessible and desirable place to relocate permanently. Behind the new houses, the multi-lane expressways and the malls exists a rich history, a portion of which is kept alive by the residents of Rock Lake and Lake Josephine.

The interconnected lakes are still home to residents that have lived there since the 1950's. Dr. Meyers relates stories of giving parties on his dock by the canal connecting the two lakes. At that time, his was one of three permanent residents on the lake.

Dr. Meyer's ownership of an old house facilitates the relating of an interesting bit of history associated with previous owners. He bought the house in 1956 from Russell Bogue who had purchased the property in 1941 from a Mrs. Holder. One day, while relaxing on his porch, a car drove up and the story emerges in this way, told in the words of Dr. Meyers:

"I asked when she had built the cabin and she said, 'Me and my husband built it in 1923.' I said, 'It must have been really wild back then, and she said that it was. They had bobcats and panthers and talked about hearing the panthers scream back in the early days. I asked her how she got here and she said that her husband and she lived in Oregon for a number of years and they decided to come to Florida because they were getting old. I asked how she got to Oregon and she said they went by covered wagon and said, 'We were going across the country and we stopped in North Dakota. That night we set up a camp. The next day we heard all this gunfire and she said we got really nervous...saw a bunch of bands of

Indians leaving that area. They thought they would get massacred, but they kept going and kept going and they wondered what had been going on with all the gun fire, and they came upon Custer's Last Stand."

Some of the older family names in the area include the Fitzgeralds, the Burroughs, the Archibuchevs, and the Oppenhauers. The Archibuchevs have owned property on Lake Josephine since the 1930's. Nadine, a second generation Lake Josephine-Archibuchev moved to the lake year-round with her brother in 1975 and their parents located year-round in 1977. In the 1930's Nadine's father held hunting parties in, mostly in pursuit of deer, quail and wild boar. Eventually the 1920's log cabin on the property was demolished, but Mr. Archibuchev had an eye for preservation and used part of the cabin to build his bar in the new house.

Dr. Pat Waterman is another long time resident on Rock Lake, moving out in the 1960's and teaching Anthropology at the University of South Florida. She relates memories about the "old-timer culture" in the Odessa area,

"... Foxe's Corner was the place to sit. Old Mr. Foxe was alive back in 1968 and if you wanted to meet the old-timers, you had to sit in Foxe's Corner on Sunday afternoon and drink a beer or whatever... There was an old broken rocking chair, with the cane seat and you sat around and talked to the guys who had been around for a long time..."

The stories told by the residents just scratch the surface of a diverse social history centering on the area's lakes. Other comments and stories related by residents were focused on the historic natural environment. Odessa, until fairly recently, was a destination for weekend residences because of the natural environment and the benefits it provided. Lizzie Locke, a Rock Lake resident relates the observations of a long-time resident unable to attend the interview:

"Ginger Derrenthal... said when they used to be coming home, you would drive Erlich and turn on Hutchinson, and the air would cool... it was really 10-15 degrees cooler out here. Then as the building started, you would have to get up by Northwest Elementary before it got cool, now she says she doesn't feel the temperature change at all. She also said when she slept at night she could hear the bass jump in the water and now you can hear 'vroom, vroom' on the Veteran's Expressway all night. When you turned out the lights it was pitch black and you didn't know if there were any houses across the lake, now there's always an aura."

The Lakes

Rock Lake and Lake Josephine belong to a chain of four lakes that also includes Lake Pretty and Lake Armistead. The chain begins with Rock Lake flows into Josephine, then to Pretty and on into Armistead. The flow among the four is mediated by structures managed by SWFWMD.

As inter-connected lakes, Rock Lake and Lake Josephine share a similar identity. Jim Griffin sums up the characteristics of the lakes,

" These lakes are healthy lakes... You know you have a lot of tannins from where water is coming from or from the bay heads which have a lot of tannic acids...the lakes are more acidic than many, possibly because of the tannins. They tend to grow fewer submerged aquatic species. You may think of this stuff out in the lake as weeds and detrimental, but it really is the health of the lake. The submerged aquatics are what keeps the nutrients under control and what limits the photo-plankton, or small algae, and give the additional color to the lake. This lake and Josephine and to some extent Pretty have very little submerged vegetation... You have good diversity of shoreline species and this is an advantage..."



The chain of lakes supports a diverse wildlife, although there has been a decline in, or a disappearance of, many of the species that once populated the lake and the surrounding land. Presently, a visitor to the lakes can find alligators, wood ducks, eagles, sand hill cranes and many other species. Species experiencing a decline include bass, owls, fox squirrel and otter. Disappearing and impacted habitat caused by increasing development and its accompanying changes are possible causes for the decline.

The lakes were once known as among the best fishing lakes in the area, a designation now debatable. One resident comments, "I get frustrated when I go out. I am out for two hours and I maybe get two hits..." Jim Griffin comments on the decline in the fish population, "When we destroy or change the habitat, then the fishery goes away. This lake is a pass through lake and if they [the fish] don't like it, they can go somewhere else."

Development in the surrounding areas has led to the removal of wetlands that act as a natural flood control, retaining the water and releasing it slowly. Lake level fluctuation is a point of concern mentioned by residents on the lakes. One resident comments, "I know that I've noticed a difference in how quickly the lake is rising now. It never went up that quickly before."

The heavy rains and the exchange of water between lakes are a potential cause of an increase in invasive vegetation and wildlife in the lakes. A resident muses about the vegetation increases, "I never saw so much algae...first we had all the water hyacinth coming down after all this runoff...then we had algae...every weekend for five weekends we were raking piles this high..."

Development

The two lakes serve as the setting for approximately 40 single-family residences and one Bed and Breakfast. The area was platted in 1941 when land use around the lake was predominately agricultural and pasture, and the houses were for the most part weekend places. The early planning of the lot size in the area resulted in well-spaced and good-sized building lots.

The rapidity of development in the Odessa area is an issue of concern for older and newer residents alike. Increased development has been cited as a reason for alterations in the types of vegetation and wildlife that can exist in the area's environment. Single family residential development along the lakeshore has had its effect on the natural environment through dredging for beaches and land on which to build and removal of shoreline vegetation. Many of these occurrences are violations of EPC codes, but weekends and evenings seem to be a productive time to complete such work.



Rocky Creek flows into Rock Lake
photo by: SWFWMD

Van Dyke Farms, located off Hutchinson Road and abutting Rocky Creek is a large development of single-family houses that has had appreciable impact upon the character of the lakes. The residents, the EPC and the developers worked to mitigate the negative impacts of the development upon the lake. One resident comments, "...a lot of property owners fought that battle. The EPA (sic) did as much as they could do. ..Tommy Shannon ...did a lot...That massive of a project you are just going to end up having water running into the bayheads and then into the creek and other kinds of vegetation going into the lake..." Despite their efforts at mitigation, the residents have attributed some negative effects upon the lake to the

existence of the development, including increase in invasive vegetation, an increase in Asian Clams, and an increase in water level from runoff.

The Future

The Rock Lake group meeting was an opportunity to ask questions, receive information and to raise issues that have been plaguing the minds of the lakes' residents. Issues brought up in the course of the meeting included the effects of runoff upon the lake, how to maintain both invasive and desirable vegetation, working with various government agencies in a productive manner and how to address the lack of a unified base of information concerning lake management and government codes.

One of the purposes in holding the group interview was to explore the potential of forming a lake organization that would represent the residents of both of the lakes. Such an organization could benefit the property owners through sharing knowledge, through the existence of a critical mass to represent the residents and would help to ensure the future health of the lake. Their interest in protecting their lake is proactively based. Jim Griffin comments, "...what we want is swimmable,

fishable lakes and that's the class of water you have, swimmable, fishable and boatable." It is through efforts of citizens that a healthy relationship between the natural and social environment can be maintained.