

Lake Stemper Narrative

The following narrative is based on an interview with John Crilly at his home on Lake Stemper in May 1998. The interview provided information, which combined with survey, biological assessment, and other agency's data illustrates the past, present, and future trends of the lake.

John Crilly



John Crilly, longtime Lake Stemper resident and Oral History informant

The Crilly family has owned property, originally 30 acres of which John retains 13, much of it swampland, on the North Side of Lake Stemper since the 1920's when the residence was a summer cottage. During the depression of 1930, the family lost their home in town and moved from Lutz to Lake Stemper to take up permanent residence.

Lake Stemper was fairly undeveloped in those days. John speaks of moving wheelbarrow loads full of dirt to create a path through the swamp to get to the lake.



This was my path when I came home from school; I had to wheelbarrow 10 loads of dirt down this path to help build it up. Originally we just had wooden planks down the middle of the swamp
photo by: John Crilly

Their outhouse was on the edge of the swamp before they had running water.

John has memories of swimming in the lake as a child accompanied by many friends, making use of a diving board and swing his father built. They fished and occasionally caught baby alligators, resorting to more extreme measures when the reptiles got bigger.

John moved back to Tampa in 1933 to live with his mother so he did not have to ride the school bus, a Model A Ford truck with benches in the back. He attended the old Lutz school, a two room wooden building, beginning in 1925, before it was replaced with the brick school. Although he visited two or three times a year, he did not live on Lake Stemper again until 1981 when he retired. John lives in his childhood home with his wife and 93 year-old stepmother.

Lake Stemper



photo by: John Crilly

Lake Stemper, in the Hillsborough Basin Board, is a natural lake that is not spring-fed, but rather relies on rainfall and the runoff from other lakes to maintain its level. Because the lake is fed from other lakes and because of the swamp, Crilly maintains the lake has always had, "kind of a rusty color, it never was crystal clear".

If it does not rain for an extended period of time, the lake may experience an increase in clarity.

The lake has dried up three times since 1981, the last time being 5 years ago. Some attribute the difficulty in maintaining lake level to the installation of pumping wells for St. Petersburg. Regardless, Crilly does not remember the lake ever drying up as a child.



...since I retired in January of 1981, it's probably dried up three times...
photo by: John Crilly



Land-based vegetation surrounding Lake Stemper is varied. Crilly has multiple varieties of citrus trees, some of them 60 years old, on his property. In addition, he also grows magnolia, azalea, avocado, pear, cypress and camellia. The lake experienced a bout of hydrilla occupation in the 1980's, but the problem was addressed through the stocking of grass carp that eat the exotic plant.

The composition of the wildlife population around Lake Stemper has changed over the years.

Fish were plentiful enough to be assured of a substantial enough catch for dinner. John reminisces about the rare mornings he would go down to the lake and catch enough fish for the family's breakfast. Alligators, when they were bothersome, were caught. Otters, snakes and wading birds, plentiful in the recent past, have all decreased in number. What unfortunately remains to be plentiful is the armadillo.



The gator would come out and just sit there with his beady eyes watching us swim...my dad finally got nervous about it...we bought a shark hook...put three pork chops on it...dangling about this far above the water...We came out the next morning, we could hear it thrashing and carrying

on...I had my picture taken on him after he was dead. The St. Pete Times got a hold of the picture...and they ran a story about my alligator.
photo by: John Crilly

Development



They can't really develop. Most of it is pretty well developed
photo by: John Crilly

The land surrounding Lake Stemper is developed nearly to capacity. Land use is limited mainly to single family housing, including a fifteen-acre subdivision with 17 homes. What remains undeveloped is a 200acre site, previously owned by Roscoe Nettles, the owner of the Tampa Gas Company, that used to be an orange grove until the freezes in the 60's and 70's instigated its abandonment. This site was under consideration for the new Lutz High school. In addition to this

undeveloped site, the swampy land on the southeast point remains undeveloped.

The Future



I took these pictures ...down to the meeting to show that this lake does this periodically...you just had to wait until the next rainy season to get it back up...

Perhaps the biggest concern to the residents on Lake Stemper is the level of the lake. Relying on the flow from other lakes to maintain a level, Stemper often drops low. The system of dams implemented by the Water Management District would allow water to flow from Lake Hanna into Lake Stemper, but the decision to instigate augmentation is often put off and the lake drops to a level alarming to newer property owners. The residents financed an 800-foot well and are attempting to finance a pump to bring water up from the aquifer to maintain a more acceptable lake level. Crilly, relying on a lifelong relationship with the

lake and its cycles, believes they should simply wait for the rain.