

Lake Thonotosassa



Michael Brown at time of interview (USF)

The following narrative was derived from an interview with Lake Thonotosassa resident Michael Brown in his home on June 6, 2002. In it, Michael shares some of what he knows about the history of Lake Thonotosassa as well as what the lake means to him and what he has learned about it throughout the 25 years that he has lived there.

Personal History

A true Floridian born and raised in the Tampa Bay area, Michael Brown graduated from the University of South Florida and then went on to law school. He now works as an attorney representing his alma mater in malpractice defense cases. He was once Lake Thonotosassa's LAKEWATCH volunteer, but gave this up when his boat engine died. Michael and his family have lived on the lake since 1976 when they relocated there from nearby Temple Terrace. He told the following story about the move to Thonotosassa:

"We were looking for some waterfront property and there was an ad in the paper a lot in Thonotosassa on Lake Thonotosassa. We thought we'd come take a look at it. When we did, there was just a clay road out there instead of a paved road. We liked it, the price was right, and so we bought it. We've been here ever since."

About living on Lake Thonotosassa, Michael said: "It's a nice getaway from town and not so crowded." Although less so now than in the past, the Brown family has enjoyed birthday parties, swimming, fishing, boating, skiing, and jet skiing on the lake over the years. As Michael noted: "It's like everything else. When we first moved out here, we used it all the time. Everyday we'd do something and I guess as you get accustomed to it, you don't use it much anymore." Presently, Michael and his son who still lives at home simply enjoy the view.

History/Information

Lake Thonotosassa is an 839-acre lake and part of the Pemberton Creek/Baker Canal Watershed of Hillsborough County. Located roughly 14 miles northeast of Tampa, Lake Thonotosassa is Hillsborough County's largest lake. Although surrounded by residential development, the lake itself is owned and managed by the Tampa Port Authority.



Lake Thonotosassa in June 2002 (USF)



Lake Thonotosassa in June 2002 (USF)

According to Michael, the name Thonotosassa comes from the Seminole-Creek language meaning “flint is there.” As Michael explained: “The reason it is called that and the reason the Indians settled here is because it has a lot of flint rock. And they used the flint rock to make their arrow heads.” According to one source, in the early 1800s the lake was an abundant flint resource to a Seminole-Creek village on the southeast shore of Lake Thonotosassa.¹ In fact, Native American history of Lake Thonotosassa is prolific. Also of historical note, Michael shared the rumor that the famous fan dancer Sally Rand would stay in a house on Lake Thonotosassa when performing in Tampa.

Lake Thonotosassa supports a wealth of wildlife that includes alligators, otter, sand hill cranes, and “just about every kind of fresh water fish you can think of.” According to Michael, Lake Thonotosassa used to be stocked with fish to supplement recreational fishing on the lake, although this has recently ceased. Although less so now than in the past, Lake Thonotosassa is also home to alligators. In fact, according to Michael, the well-known alligator, Big Joe, that lives in Busch Gardens came from Lake Thonotosassa. He told the following story about this:

“They [Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission] put a giant trap made of iron bars, big as this room probably and put a big hook and a slice of beef on the hook. And they trapped it. Have you been to Busch Gardens? I think he’s called Big Joe. This is where he came from. He came out of here. They trapped him and took him away. It was a huge alligator and no body wanted him around the lake with people swimming and dogs. So they trapped it.”

In 1997, Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission received approval from lake residents to plant eelgrass in Lake Thonotosassa in an effort to rejuvenate the lake. Also of significance and as explained by Michael, in 1969, Lake Thonotosassa was home to one of the nation’s worst fish kills about which he shared the following:

“Dead fish were just piling up by the droves. They traced it to a sewer treatment plant in Plant City. They were dumping their sewage into the creek untreated. And by the time it got down to the lake, it was killing all the fish in the lake. So, finally they made plans to put in a treatment plant before it dumps into the lake. So, that’s cleaned up quite a bit.”

Although a relatively shallow lake, particularly where Michael lives, Lake Thonotosassa water levels are regulated by the Southwest Florida Water Management District (SWFMD) via a dam in nearby Flint Creek, which eventually empties into the Hillsborough River. Water level regulations of Lake Thonotosassa began in 1995. Michael explained how this has affected him:

“When the water does go down, we’re the first ones to feel it. SWFMD has put in a proposal to regulate the lake over a five-year basis to raise the levels, then lower down. During the times that they’ve lowered down, at times our whole dock was out of the water because of evaporation and they let the lake level go down quite a bit as well. That’s the only thing that hampers the lifestyle out here.”



View of lake from Michael's home (USF)

Development

Traditional land use around Lake Thonotosassa following Native American inhabitation was primarily orange groves planted by settlers. Local stories tell of the first citrus groves near Thonotosassa being inadvertently planted by troops from the Second Seminole War who once rested near the lake. Some of the soldiers had oranges from Cuba. After eating these oranges, they dropped the seeds on the ground accidentally starting the first citrus trees in the area¹. Horse ranching was also prevalent and Michael reported still spotting someone horseback riding occasionally.

According to the "Hillsborough Historic Resources Report," after the Second Seminole War in the mid 19th Century, white settlers began moving to the lake. One of these early settlers was a wealthy man from Ohio named W.P. Hazen, who purchased 2,000 acres along Lake Thonotosassa's lakeshore in 1881, on which he planted orange trees. Also due to his presence, a windmill and sawmill were erected. The Cooper family was also prominent in the early history of settlement on Lake Thonotosassa, between 1882 and 1900, having built 32 structures that included a hotel, citrus packing plants, a store, and over twenty houses¹. By the 1890s, there were 150 people in the Lake Thonotosassa community¹. Soon after there was a decline in the once bustling lake community, which can be attributed to the Tampa and Thonotosassa Railroad built in 1893. According to some, this caused many residents to relocate to the urban north of Tampa. Adding to the desire to move to more urban areas were the Great Freezes of 1894 and 1895, which destroyed citrus throughout the state. However, the community of Thonotosassa recovered as the citrus industry returned and the 1920s brought more people and more development. After yet another decline during WW II, the Lake Thonotosassa community slowly turned suburban as lake quality deteriorated and the population grew¹.

The majority of development on Lake Thonotosassa today is on the north, west, and south shores, mostly residential. Along the eastern shore is seawall built by the now defunct Hendry Corporation. Along this side of the lake, there are hardly any houses at all. Currently, there are roughly 40 homes on the shore of Lake Thonotosassa. The Brown family lived in the fourth house to go up on their street that borders the lake. Since he moved to the lake, Michael said the residential growth has been significant. Recently, a large housing development was built nearby where there was once open land. According to Michael, the trend in building seems to be homes getting larger and nicer. He believes such residential development will continue at Lake Thonotosassa. Although he worries about the impact to the lake, the positive side to this is that property values are rising.



Dock off of Michael's backyard (USF)

The Future

Michael's concerns for the future of Lake Thonotosassa include silt and road run-off entering the water from Thonotosassa Road as well as extreme low water levels in the area of the lake nearest his home. About this, Michael said:

"We can launch here [backyard], but you have to go way out. You'd have to go out a good 100 feet to deep water to launch a boat and not many vehicles can go out that far and then get back in. So, it's tough to try and launch a boat. I tried to go this past Memorial Day weekend and I just couldn't do it, it was too shallow."

Although there is no formal organization that focuses on the well being of Lake Thonotosassa, when the need arises, either SWFWMD or the Tampa Port Authority usually swing into action. Michael's only prediction about the future, "Property value is going up, more people coming in."

¹Hillsborough County Planning and Growth Management, *Hillsborough County Historic Resources Survey Report* (1998).

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