

Lake Jesup



Vaughn Medcalf and Larry Scherer (USF)

The following narrative was developed from an interview with two friends, Larry Scherer and Vaughn Medcalf in Larry's home on Lake Jesup on the morning of August 24, 2001. It tells the story of Larry and Vaughn's 30-year experience of living and playing on Seminole County's largest lake – Lake Jesup.

Personal History

Larry Scherer has owned property on Lake Jesup for over 30 years. He moved to Florida in 1958 from New York and went to school in Pensacola at the University of West Florida. After which, he taught science to high school students for ten years, before going into the restaurant business for another ten years. Today, Larry is retired and enjoys staying home with his young daughter. He says that he chose Lake Jesup for its isolation and ocean access via the St. Johns River. It was the mother of one of Larry's student, a real estate agent, which found the lake front property on Lake Jesup for him. Since that first purchase, Larry subsequently purchased four other lots.

Vaughn Medcalf, Larry's good friend and neighbor, has been on Lake Jesup for roughly 28 years. At first, he lived in a 35-foot houseboat near Hylee's Fishcamp – a once successful fishing camp on Lake Jesup that no longer exists. After about a year of living on the water, he bought property next to Larry, where he has lived ever since. Like Larry, Vaughn shares his excitement of living on a body of water with ocean access:

“Not many people can go out their back door and go to the ocean. It's been a huge escape for me for 25 years.”

Both have raised children on the lake and share many memories together traversing its waters. They have hunted gator, gone fishing, and caught frogs. It seems both of them and their families have made a life out of living and playing on Lake Jesup.

History/Information



View of boathouse on Lake Jesup (USF)



Vaughn kissing a frog after a good catch (Medcal)

Lake Jesup is the largest lake in Seminole County reaching 13 miles in length and expanding 16,000 acres in open water and flood plains. The lake itself is roughly 10,000 acres. Located in the central part of north Florida, Lake Jesup is actually part of the St. Johns River waterway. It connects to the St. Johns River at the north end by a narrow strait. According to one source, Lake Jesup was named after General Jesup, the Commander of the Army of the South during the Second Seminole War from 1835-1842. Exploration of the St. Johns River for the transportation of troops and supplies led to the discovery of the lake and hence its naming (Source: Early Days of Seminole County, Florida by Arthur E. Francke, Jr.).

Larry describes Lake Jesup as a “nature lake”. Wildlife supported by Lake Jesup and the surrounding area is abundant. Vaughn says, “There are eagles, hawks, and big old barn owls out there.” There are also a lot of frogs, although they have decreased in number and size over the years. Larry and Vaughn share a passion for catching, cooking, and eating frogs. Vaughn drives the airboat and Larry grabs them out of the water. Once Vaughn mistook alligator eyes for frog eyes, but Larry fortunately dropped the wriggling alligator back into the water before getting bit.

In the middle of Lake Jesup is Bird Island, a 30-acre piece of land home to numerous wading birds including egrets and herons. Bird Island has also been known as a nesting site for bald eagles. Surrounding the lake are doe, wild turkeys, and numerous wild boars, all of which have been spotted by Larry and Vaughn over the years. About the boars, Vaughn shares:

“We found a stray dog that was running around here the other day and it had one of these beeper collars on it. So, we called. A youngster came over to pick up the dog and said he was hunting for one of the neighbors up here, taking hogs off his property and he had removed over 50 of them just this year. So, there are a lot of hogs.”

According to Larry, since he has lived on Lake Jesup, the number of alligators has increased and the number of fish has decreased. About the lake, he says:

“It’s got the most alligators of any central Florida lake and I believe the biologists’ last estimate is somewhere between 13 and 15 thousand alligators and it keeps increasing.” Vaughn adds: “I remember in ‘72-‘73, the fishing out there was so good!”

According to Larry and Vaughn, for years Lake Jesup was the recipient of waste runoff from Winter Springs, until the state intervened in the early 80s. Then in 1994, a legislative mandate to restore the lake was passed and work to improve it has been occurring ever since. Since the legislation, a group called the Friends of Lake Jesup has been meeting and doing various clean up activities and restoration planning. For more on the Friends of Lake Jesup, see <http://www.dep.state.fl.us/cd/programs/ecosystem/friendlj.htm>

Development



Aerial view of Larry and Vaughn's neighborhood circa 1980 (Scherer)



The dock in Larry's backyard on the canal connecting him to Lake Jesup (USF)

From roughly the 1860s until the great freeze of 1895, land around Lake Jesup was mostly used for growing oranges. However, after the freeze, the agriculture of the area turned primarily to celery. Development of the Lake Jesup area most likely began with the Osceola and Lake Jesup Railroad of the late 1800s also known as the “Dinky Line,” which connected Orlando and Winter Park. Today, Larry and Vaughn say much of the shores lining Lake Jesup have stayed residentially and commercially undeveloped. However, the surrounding area is growing rapidly. Larry explains:

“There are very few dwellings on the lake itself. The state [and county] has purchased most of the shoreline property preventing people from building and having access to the lake.”

For twenty years, Larry lived in a trailer before building a house roughly ten years ago. On his five lots, Larry has built four homes – one in which he lives, two that he rents, and one that is a guesthouse. According to Vaughn, there were 72 official residents in his neighborhood ten years ago. Around the entire lake, Larry and Vaughn estimate that there are hundreds of homes. Vaughn explains:

“This lake is 13 miles from one end to the other so you have potentially 30 miles of shoreline when you go all around it. Most of it is marsh and unbuildable, but that’s what the state [and Seminole County] has tried to pick up on.”

One effect of development on Lake Jesup, according to Larry, is the State Road 46 bridge causeway built over the St. Johns River by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in the 1950s, which partially cut off circulation of the lake. This combined with wastewater treatment discharge caused a build up of muck and a decrease in oxygen, which negatively affected the fish population. Larry says:

“Originally, St. Johns River flowed into the lake and it was like a big washing machine. It just came in and swept everything out and back up the river.”

Vaughn agrees that before the Army Corps came in:

“It [the river] used to flow into the lake and go back out of the lake at another point. You see, so it had a kind of clean out effect. Obviously, it lived for millions of years like that and the lake has gotten polluted real quick.”

The construction of berms that have blocked part of the lake from its floodplain combined with the State Road 46 bridge causeway that also lessened Lake Jesup’s link with the St. Johns River has reduced the lake’s natural cleansing ability. Since this realization, a cooperation of local and state officials has been working to restore the water exchange that once was. For more information on such efforts, see http://www.floridaecosystems.org/lake_jesup.htm.

The Future



Vaughn and Larry on day of interview (USF)

One future issue raised during the interview is continued residential development. This is both positive and negative according to Larry. In one sense, property value will increase, which would be beneficial to current property owners. However, the down side to such growth is its effect on the natural habitat for animals. Larry hopes that his property value will go up, but also has concerns for the wildlife in the area. In their neighborhood, Vaughn says a lot that once sold for \$1000 will now be worth \$40,000. The friends agree that this upward trend will continue. Larry says this is because “people are going to want to come out here.”

At the moment, most of the growth has been on the south side of State Road 434. Larry says his neighborhood has changed little, but he’s afraid continued development will cross over State Road 434 and replace the orange groves in the Lake Jesup area. Larry says, some say that ten years from now there will be no place left to build in Seminole County. Sustainable development and careful planning will be vital as development continues in the Lake Jesup area. –

A second hope for the future raised by the two friends that know the lake so well is restoration of water flow to the St. John’s River, but the details of how to do so have yet to be worked out. It is likely that water experts, scientists, and engineers from the St. Johns River Water Management District will tread carefully and the future of Lake Jesup will be secure.

Written By: Deanna Barcelona, M.A.