

# Econlockhatchee River



View of the river in 2004 (USF)



A bend in the Econlockhatchee River (USF)

*The following narrative is based on an interview with Imogene, Bo, and J.W. Yarborough at their farm on November 11, 2003. Because the Yarborough family has farmed near the Econlockhatchee for generations, they provide a unique historical perspective on the river.*

## Personal History

Imogene Yarborough has always been involved in the cattle business. Her mother's family raised cattle in Sumter County, and when she was in the 6<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> grade Imogene moved with her family from Ocala to Geneva so that her stepfather could help his brother work in the cattle business. Since marrying Edward Yarborough, Imogene has been incredibly dedicated to the Yarborough Farm in Geneva, which she and her two sons, Bo and J.W., currently run. (Her two daughters have non-farm jobs.) Imogene credits the success of the Yarborough farm to:

*"Size of the area. Management. Hard work. Keeping it just at the very minimum of labor, mostly because it's a family operation."*

She related the following history:

*"My husband's grandfather, E.H. Kilbee, started the gathering of the land... And then his son was W.G. Kilbee. He was partners with his dad and they added more land as time went on. And then it went to my husband Edward Yarborough and his sisters. He had three sisters. And the land was divided at that time... After Edward passed away three years ago... comes our children. And then our children have children so we have grandchildren. It's always been a family operation."*

Out of three generations of Yarborough men, very few have held steady jobs off of the farm. The family rarely hires outside help, and it often seems to Imogene that her sons work day and night. Yarborough children begin working the land at a very young age. Everyone pitches in:

*"Both of their [Bo and J.W.'s] wives work right along with us out here. They can all ride; they can all give shots; they can all drive tractors. And of course you teach those little fellows to drive early because you never know when they might have to drive a tractor for help or something like that. So they learn to drive on the lawnmower at home."*



*Some of the vegetation near the river (USF)*



*The banks of the Econ in 2003 (USF)*

Imogene said that there are enough cows on the farm “to keep us busy”—around a thousand breeding cows. While cattle is the farm’s central focus, the Yarboroughs diversify with sod, hay, and occasionally lending their land to Hollywood movie crews—the first and last five minutes of the movie *Dinosaur* were filmed on the Yarborough’s property, for instance—among other small enterprises. The Yarboroughs formerly had citrus groves on property they own in Geneva. They had grapefruit and orange seedlings passed down from Mr. Kilbee that were over 100 years old. However, the Yarboroughs lost most of their orange trees in a freeze in the mid-1980s. That land has since been converted to hay fields.

The Econlockhatchee River—which the Yarboroughs often refer to as the “creek” because it feeds into the much larger St. Johns River—has been very important to the Yarborough farm and family. Cows drink the water and eat grass fertilized by the river water. In addition, the Econlockhatchee serves as a natural boundary fence, keeping cows from crossing onto neighbor’s property unless the water level is exceptionally low. The Yarboroughs have also enjoyed a considerable amount of family time on the river—swimming, fishing, and just hanging out. As J.W. remembers it,

*“We didn’t go to Disney. We weren’t that type of people. We didn’t go anywhere... That [spending time on the river] was our vacation, that was our recreation... I’m raising my kids to come up on that creek (the Econ). They haven’t as much as I have, but I do take them down there. I was raised on it. My dad was a little bit raised on it, I guess.”*

## History/Information

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The Econlockhatchee River, more frequently known as “the Econ,” spans 26 miles in Seminole County where it flows into its mouth - the St. John’s River ([www.seminole.wateratlas.org](http://www.seminole.wateratlas.org)). The Econ also flows through Orange and Osceola Counties.

When the water level is high, J.W. related that sometimes 3,000 acres of their land is covered by the river—and sometimes even more than that. The highest Bo recalled ever seeing the river is around ten to twelve feet straight up. And as J.W. sees it, the water gets low but never very low.

The Yarboroughs have noticed that the water has appeared less clean and clear over the years. The water quality on the Econ varies by segments – some exhibiting good water quality and others exhibiting poor ([www.seminolewateratlas.org](http://www.seminolewateratlas.org)). The Yarboroughs indicated that in the past, sewage treatment plants dumped into the Econ but were required to clean up the river in the early to mid 1980s. As the Yarboroughs see it, water pollution is often wrongly blamed on agriculturalists. Contrary to this perception, the Yarboroughs do everything they can to protect the river from pollution—for instance, by abstaining from chemical fertilizers.

The Yarboroughs reported that over the years there has been a significant decrease in fish in the Econ. As Imogene understands it, in the early 1900s some people even made a living from fishing the river. According to documentation that J.W. has seen, in the past:



*The river near the Yarborough property (USF)*

*“It was nothing to go down there and catch thirty bass. If you could do that in this day and time, you could probably charge a thousand dollars a day and people would pay it.”*

Bo and J.W. estimate that there was still decent fishing in the river in the early 1980s. Although the fish population has decreased, the river’s alligator population seems to have increased, which the Yarboroughs attribute to laws passed banning gator hunting.



*A view of the Econlockhatchee River (USF)*

The Yarboroughs know numerous stories about the river’s history. As Imogene explained, these are not things they have seen themselves, “But it’s things that have been handed down from one generation to the other. Grandfathers and stuff would tell.” For instance, there’s an area of the creek known by locals as “Culpepper Bend,” which is named after a man alive in the late 1800s, early 1900s. As told by Bo:

*“He (Mr. Culpepper) had a bunch of girls and every summer he didn’t want...boys messing with those girls, so he’d carry them down there. They’d paddle a boat up there. They camped right there for the whole summer.”*

Another area farther west on the river is called the “Nooning Grounds,” named so, as Imogene understands it,

*“Because different ones would meet there at noon whenever they were collecting their cattle off the river. And they would try to meet up there at noontime. Because different ones would go out to try to bring their cattle all together.”*

Even farther west along the river is a place called “Skinning Bench,” where a commercial fishing operation cleaned the catfish they caught each day.

Until the mid 1900s, 1949 to be exact, when a law was passed requiring cattle to be fenced in, there were no fences and people could more freely congregate at the river. As J.W. tells it,

*“Them folks back then didn’t have no money. They had nothing. But when they got together they had what they call gill nets and they’d gill net some mullet. Fry fish and cut swamp cabbage.”*

He added that all they had to buy was whiskey and corn meal, flour, and salt to make hush puppies. There was even entertainment in the form of makeshift rodeos.

Because most people had very little money at this time, the Yarboroughs have heard that many had to pay the town’s doctor in cows. According to J.W.:



*A bridge over the Econlockhatchee River (USF)*



*A view of the river and nearby woods (USF)*

*“There was a doctor in town...He worked everybody. They didn’t have no money, the only way you could pay them is to...mark a cow for him, a steer at that time... Maybe give him a hog. He had just as many cows down here as the cow people did. That’s all we had to pay him. We said, ‘Go mark you a steer.’ And he probably didn’t have as many but he had a lot down there.”*

## Development

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Over the years, the area’s historical land uses of cattle and citrus have begun to give way to residential and commercial development. These days there are few cattle farms in the area. According to Imogene, there are now only three families in Seminole County that actually make a living from cattle; the Yarborough Farm is of course one of them. When the Yarborough land was first acquired, in the early 1900’s, most of the property was bought at only \$35 an acre. However, as undeveloped land has become more and more scarce in Seminole county—especially over the past ten to twenty years—the property is now worth more than 300 times that in J.W.’s estimation. The immediate area of the Yarborough Farm remains very rural, and the Yarboroughs hope that it will stay that way.

With increased development in the area have come more people using the Econ for recreation. The Yarboroughs have seen a significant increase in traffic in the water nearly every day of the week, especially in the form of jet skiers, and the Yarboroughs have had a lot of problems keeping these boaters and others off of their property. Imogene conveyed the following in frustration:

*“Poachers are everywhere. They come up the creek (Econ River) in the airboats. They get out of the airboats, they run the deer down. We have even had cows shot in the stomach; they die later, you know. And campers. And there’s times that it’s just a pure headache to own the property next to the creek (Econ River).”*

## The Future

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The Yarboroughs look forward to many more years of farming near the Econ. However, in looking toward the future, the increased use of the Econ for recreation concerns the family. As Bo remarked, “People. Traffic and people is what tears up everything.” The ongoing erosion caused by powerful boats is a serious problem, for instance. However, the Yarboroughs hope for many more years of farming their land, using methods that respect the Econlockhatchee River as an important natural resource.

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