

Lake Geneva



Tommy Summersill in July 2002 (USF)

The following narrative is drawn from an interview with longtime Lake Geneva resident Tommy Summersill in his home on July 30, 2002. As a second-generation resident on the lake, Tommy was able to share a great deal of information not only about the lake's current state, but also its history.

Personal History

Tommy Summersill's parents E.T. and Effie Summersill moved to the town of Geneva in 1917. His father was a railroad engineer for the Osceola Cypress Company and moved around a lot following the lumber industry. Tommy was born in Osceola in 1927 not far from Lake Geneva, although his family spent some time in Fort Lauderdale before moving permanently back in Geneva. Tommy grew up with three brothers and two sisters. While the family was in Fort Lauderdale, Tommy finished high school. Upon graduation, he went directly into the military to serve in World War II. His three brothers also joined the military. However, the siblings all wound up back in Geneva, the family home base. To help get his children started, E.T. gave each of his children, including his daughters, a piece of his land in Geneva so that they could build individual homesteads on them.

Using the skills he learned in the Army and other flight training, Tommy began an aviation business in Geneva flying in multiple capacities, but primarily crop dusting. Tommy shared the following about his business venture:

"Got out [of the Army] and I've been in aviation ever since. Very good living. And my son and my grandson now run our business. I'm not the President anymore. I turned it over to my son. Basically, we're crop dusters. But I've done a little bit of everything. You name it, I've done it. Whatever pays you to fly, I flew. Now, I'm basically retired. I still have one airplane that I fly occasionally."

For a while, Tommy and his wife and two children traveled the United States crop dusting, but eventually settled back on the family land in Geneva. Tommy and his wife raised two children in their house on Lake Geneva. Their daughter is now a local schoolteacher and their son and grandson run the family aviation business. Tommy and his wife continue to live in the original homestead they built in 1952. He is now the only sibling remaining on family property.

Lake Geneva means a great deal to Tommy and his family. As he shared: "It's always been a big part of our life. For recreation, for sunrise service." The yearly sunrise worship service organized by residents of the lake and held on its shores is known simply as Summersill Hill because worshippers congregate on Tommy's property, which is a small hill. As Tommy described it: "Everybody, nondenominational. Everybody. And it is just very nice. Everybody from town."



E.T. and Effie Summersill (Summersill)



The home Tommy lived in as a young boy (Summersill)



Lake Geneva during high water levels (Summersill, 1930s)



Lake Geneva during medium water levels (Summersill, 1960s)



Lake Geneva during low water levels (USF, July 2002)



Lake Geneva during "Summersill Hill" Worship Service (Summersill)

Currently, Tommy and his wife enjoy visits from their extended family including their great-grandchildren. Tommy's wife continues to work as secretary and treasurer of their aviation business and Tommy is a self-described semi-retiree. He recently received a national award from the National Agricultural Aviation Association for his innovation in early crop dusting.

History/Information

Lake Geneva is a 29-acre lake in the Big Econlockhatchee Watershed of Seminole County in Geneva, Florida relatively close to the St. Johns River and Lake Harney. According to research done by the Geneva Historical and Genealogical Society, the town of Geneva was named by Emma Van Brunt Wilcox in the latter half of the 1800s. She thought the area looked like her birthplace of Geneva, New York. Subsequently, the town and lake received the name Geneva.¹

Lake Geneva is an oddly shaped lake fluctuating in size and shape depending on its water level. At low levels, as it was during the interview, Lake Geneva is actually two bodies of water. Tommy lives on the smaller of the two, which is considered a sinkhole, and the deeper of the two water bodies. About this part of Lake Geneva, Tommy said: "Back when I was a kid, none of us could ever find the bottom." According to Tommy, "Geneva is just full of sink holes."

Wildlife on and near Lake Geneva has changed greatly since Tommy was young. He remembers tending the cows and horses on his father's pastures and hunting for turkey and quail in their orange groves. Tommy related that Lake Geneva had some "truly wild animals" in the past, but that development has driven many of them away. As he shared: "Now, where they go to I don't know. You know as people build, they just disappear." He told the following story about a bear he once encountered:

"You're not going to believe this, but I would buy sweet feed for our horses. I had two horses here. And these bags kept being torn open and ate. So, I went back there and set them back behind a bunch of drums. I got up the next morning and the bags were out in that field. And I said, 'Now why would a horse do that?' I got my flashlight and walked out into that orange grove. And I seen the horse's eyes, which are blue. Horses eyes are blue, but so are bears'. I seen him. And then I moved the light and it was gone. And my old dog, he was just barking you know... no teeth. He couldn't bite. And I followed him all the way out there and I came back and said, 'Well darn where could he have went?' So, the next morning, I got up and told my Dad. And I said, 'Dad, I don't know where that horse went to.' And Dad said, 'Well son that wasn't a horse, it probably was a little bear.' And sure enough, it was."

Tommy also had stories about the panthers in the area that, according to him used to follow a path along Lake Harney and past Lake Geneva through his backyard. He reminisced about the wildcats that once roamed the area:



Tommy's brother with 13 pound bass caught from Lake Geneva (Summersill)

“Every once in a while they would holler along the way and scare the cows off to death. Then they’d jump the fence or tear it down. I had 35 acres down on Jungle Road, which I sold about five years ago and I had, I think 12-15 cows on it and horses. And a panther came through there one night hollering. This big cross between a Big Brahma bull and Black Angus just walked right through the fence taking the cows with him.”

About that same bull, Tommy shared the following funny story about his neighbor’s encounter with the large animal that he was taking care of for Tommy, while Tommy was away:

“He [Tommy’s neighbor] went out and got him a bucket of feed one night and was going to lead this bull back to the pasture. He said he looked up and here comes this bull through the woods with all these vines hanging off him and these two big old red eyes. And he had this mean Doberman dog. He said, ‘I dropped the bucket of feed and I made it back to the truck... and when I got to the truck that damn Doberman was in there trying to roll the windows up’. So, he called my wife and said, ‘You tell Tom, he needs to either be a pilot or a cowboy.’”



The home Tommy lived in as a young boy (Summersill)

Development

A significant part of the history of Geneva is the sawmill industry in operation during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The Osceola Cypress Company, for which E.T. Summersill worked, was one of these mills. According to the Geneva Historical and Genealogical Society, this mill was in operation until 1942 when it was moved to Port Everglades². Other traditional uses of land surrounding Lake Geneva include orange groves, cow pastures, and the turpentine industry. Tommy remembered those days clearly:

“When I remember Geneva, say in the early ‘30s, we all worked. I mean when you came from school, you milked your cow. Everybody had a cow. You always had a little vegetable garden. You worked to eat. That was hard times. Rough times, but fun times.”

One of the first homes to be built on the shores of Lake Geneva, according to Tommy, was the one his parents used to live in a house, which was built by a man named Charlie Stewart. Tommy estimated that house to have been erected in the 1870s. In fact, the Stewart family still owns land in Geneva. The Summersills also built some of the original homes on Lake Geneva. Tommy explained:

“My Dad gave us all one little piece of land. We built our little house here. And my brother built a little house down there on this corner, which I bought from him. Four boys and two girls. And this piece of land over here belonged to my oldest sister. And my youngest sister, she married and lived right across the street over there.”



The home Tommy's brother built, which is now owned by Tommy and inhabited by extended family (USF, 2002)

Tommy described the area around the lake as having once been surrounded by orange groves. As the orange groves became less profitable, the land was sold and houses were built. Tommy said that development around the lake has since remained consistent.



Tommy pointing to present day conditions of Lake Geneva (USF, 2002)

In the larger town of Geneva, many changes have taken place during Tommy's lifetime. He described what Geneva used to be like:

"We used to have a depot. And of course when you have a depot, you have people that work there. And we had a sawmill. And we had a one, two, three, about four stores. I mean country stores. And my Dad's old shop still stands up there. The railroad is gone. It's been taken up, but the rest of it is there."

Today, Tommy is the only sibling still living on "his little piece of land." His family sold off the remainder to individual homeowners.



View of Lake Geneva from Tommy's house (USF, 2002)

The Future

Tommy's primary concern for the future of Lake Geneva is continued development without county or city regulation. He also feels that the infrastructure necessary to support growth and development must be in place before more building occurs. As he explained:

"I don't think we need to build a new stadium to try and draw another 150,000 people when our roads cannot take care of what we have. And when you have a family come down from up north and they buy five acres and then they go out and they breathe the air and they have them a horse. And then first thing they know, they have to feed the horse. Then the horse gets sick because there's not enough grass. Then he says, well I just love this place, but I'm going to have to subdivide it. He wants to chop it up into quarter acres and there you have it."

Although there is no formal organization that focuses on issues facing Lake Geneva, Tommy says Seminole County takes care of things when problems arise.

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¹ Geneva Historical and Genealogical Society. Mal Martin, "How Geneva Got Its Name," 2002, <http://www.usgennet.org/usa/fl/county/seminole/Geneva>

² Geneva Historical and Genealogy Society, "Osceola Cypress Company."