

# Lake Mary



*Claire Evans O'Connor in the 1950s with three of her children and Lake Mary in the background (Evans O'Connor)*



*Dr. William Evans (Evans O'Connor)*



*Claire and her friends on Lake Mary (Evans O'Connor)*

*The following narrative presents the story of Lake Mary as seen through the eyes of third generation resident, Claire Evans O'Connor. The account was developed from an interview with Claire on September 26<sup>th</sup>, 2003. In it, she tells about her deep family roots in the area and how Lake Mary has played a role in her own life.*

## Personal History

In 1883, Claire’s grandfather, Dr. William Evans, left Indiana due to failing health and moved to Sanford, Florida with the hopes of setting up a medical practice and investing in the then lucrative orange grove business. He operated a medical clinic in an old house in Sanford, but the land for orange groves was located all along the western edge of Lake Mary. According to Claire, Dr. Evans was one of the very first to cultivate this land for such a purpose. Indeed, his orange groves were successful and the medical practice he established prospered.

Dr. Evans also served as elected trustee of public schools for two years and in 1889 became the mayor of Sanford. He was reelected two times. He has been attributed with keeping Sanford safe during a yellow fever outbreak (Rajtar, 1999). The doctor and his wife had three sons, the middle of which was Claire’s father Frank Evans – a noteworthy man himself.

Frank did not immediately follow in his father’s footsteps, but instead traveled around doing different jobs including tightrope walking in the circus, serving in the Spanish-American War, working for the Texas railroad industry and once also working for the Sanford Ice Company (Rajtar, 1999). He also ran a dye and chemical business in Massachusetts. When he returned home to Sanford in the 1920s, he invested in land that he developed and advertised in promotion booklets. Like his father, Frank became involved in politics, founding the Lake Mary Chamber of Commerce and serving as County Commissioner in 1926. As founder of the Chamber, he constructed a building to house meetings. This building eventually became City Hall, which now houses a museum. Frank Evans was also involved with building Lake Mary First Presbyterian Church, helping to establish credit and acquire building materials (Rajtar, 1999).

When Frank married Claire’s mother, Stella, he built a house for his family on his father’s property near Lake Mary and it is there that Claire grew up along with her two brothers. Claire shared some of her family history:



Lake Mary in 2002 (Seminole County)



View of Lake Mary in 2003 (USF)



Nearby Little Lake Mary (USF)

*“My grandfather came here and my father came as a baby. My father, this was his boyhood place. When he married my mother, we lived here [in the house Claire currently resides]. There was nobody else living here, but we loved it. We lived in the lake. Oh we loved it. It was everything.”*

When Claire married, she moved away to follow her husband who was a flight surgeon for the Air Force. However, Claire and her nine children would regularly return to Lake Mary at least twice a year, usually for Easter to worship and Labor Day as a kick off to the children’s school year.

Today, Claire lives in the wood frame house her father built on Lake Mary. She keeps busy with friends and family and enjoys painting. Two of Claire’s daughters also continue to live on the lake. Mary Jane lives on an island in Little Lake Mary and her sister Claire lives on Big Lake Mary. Claire’s six sons have dispersed, but the third daughter lives in nearby Kissimmee.

## History/Information

---

Big Lake Mary is a 106-acre lake, while nearby Little Lake Mary is a 44-acre lake, both in the Lake Jesup watershed of Seminole County in a town of the same name – Lake Mary, Florida. Lake Mary was reportedly named for the wife of Reverend J.F. Sundell, Mary Sundell. This legacy is seen also in the name of the town (Rajtar, 1999). Although once a single water body, Lake Mary is now divided into two water bodies, known as Big Lake Mary and Little Lake Mary. Water continues to flow between the two via an underground water pipe. About this issue, Claire shared:

*“I would say that it’s only since the war [WWII] that they call them Big Lake Mary and Little Lake Mary. I always called it Lake Mary. The whole thing was once Lake Mary and that’s the way it still is to me, but I will say that’s the smaller lake or that’s the bigger side of the lake.”*

On the west end of the lake used to be Evansdale Park, a piece of waterfront property owned by Claire’s father. Frank cleared the land along the shoreline and put in a bathhouse, swimming dock, and pavilion (Rajtar, 1999). Claire described the park that is no longer there:

*“My father took this whole end of Lake Mary and made a park. It was called Evansdale Park. The reason he had the park was nobody could go in the lake if they didn’t have a boat, so he made a park. It’s not there anymore. After the war, he closed it because he thought too many people were parking in there at night and stuff like that. But he gave it for many years... and everybody would go there swimming. He had some benches and a dock. It was sandy bottom. Many people have told me how they enjoyed going to that park because many of them couldn’t get to the beach. And he did out of the goodness of his heart because he thought he should share something. That was his property. It’s all gone now.”*



Lake Mary's shoreline in 2002 (Seminole County)



View of Lake Mary and dock in 2003 (USF)

Undoubtedly, much has changed at Lake Mary since that time. Claire said about the past: “This lake had no weeds. It was so clear that you could see the sand underneath and all the fish swimming.” Since that pristine era, Claire said both water quality and quantity has diminished. According to Claire, hyacinths and water lilies now invade the lake water and water levels have slowly, but consistently gone down.

In terms of wildlife, there was more then than there is now, at least as far as Claire can tell. Along with the changing ecology of the lake have come changing patterns in wildlife. Certainly, there are no more rattlesnakes around, a reptile she told the following story about:

*“I was bitten by a rattlesnake. I was about six years old. My father took my brother and I over there. He had to carry a machete because this was all woods. Anyway, he drove us over there and he said don't get out of the car. It was a little two-rut road to go on and he had a Model T or A. I can't remember. Well, my brother and I got out of the car and the rattlesnake bit me. I was screaming and my brother was yelling to my father, 'Daddy come! Claire has been bitten by a rattlesnake.' So my father pulled me away from the snake. It had cut down into my leg. And one of the fangs made it bleed a lot and the other left a small hole. So it must have been that I too, moved. I've only met a few people who have been bitten by rattlesnakes. I was very lucky because I had my father who took care of me right away because my grandfather was a doctor and he knew what to do.”*

## Development

---

As Claire remembers Lake Mary as a child, there were only three homes bordering the lake. In fact, her family was of the first settlers on the water body. Claire's grandfather had an unknown, but large amount of land that was sold off in pieces over the years. During the 1920s, Claire's father constructed a housing subdivision called Evansdale Park, like the park he owned.

Evansdale Road, which runs between Little Lake Mary and Big Lake Mary was originally a wooden bridge built by Claire's father to make commuting between their house and that of his parents easier. Claire explained:

*“During WWII they [the two water bodies] were still connected by way of a canal. What happened was he [Frank Evans] put a bridge there that so that he could ride to his parents' house and my grandparents' house. But there is land all in between now and people have built houses there. In other words, where the bridge was, you could drive along and see the lake on both sides.”*

It was this path that Claire used to walk to see her grandmother nearly every day. Although only three homes were on the lake when Claire was a child, she estimates there are now over 80. She noticed a significant development boom right after WWII and attributes it to servicemen stationed in Florida and eventually moving there with their families. She explained the development trends she has noticed:



Lake Mary's shoreline (USF)

*"I think it started to grow after the war and then it grew quickly. Now the land is all gone. It is all built out now, but that happened just a few years ago. The most recent are very large homes."*

Today, two major roadways - 17/92 and Lake Mary Boulevard - flank Lake Mary. On Little Lake Mary is Seminole Community College, which teaches water skiing on the lake. Undeniably, the area has come a long way from the horse and buggy transportation once used by Claire's grandfather and father.

## The Future

---

When Claire looks to the future of Lake Mary, she sees continued trends of growth and development. She believes the lake itself will never return to the pristine state she remembers it as a child. When asked about Lake Mary and Little Lake Mary, she said:

*"They're both now so different [than in the past]. They seem to get lower and lower [in water levels]. And I think maybe they'll stay this way."*

As for predicting the future, Claire commented: "The growth will keep going until they can't grow anymore because when there is land, somebody will always offer a lot of money for it." She sees the growth as part of the larger trend in Florida. As she commented about Lake Mary: "I think it has changed a lot. I think all the lakes have in Florida."

### REFERENCES:

Rajtar, Steve (1999)

[www.geocities.com/yosemite/rapids/8428/hikeplans/lake\\_mary/planlakemary.html](http://www.geocities.com/yosemite/rapids/8428/hikeplans/lake_mary/planlakemary.html).

**Written By: Deanna Barcelona**