

# Little Bear Lake



Tom Easton at time of interview (USF)

*The following narrative was derived from an interview with Little Bear Lake residents Tom and Shirley Easton in their home on June 5, 2002. In it, they tell of what Little Bear Lake means to them and what they have learned about the lake in the 30 years that they have lived there.*

## Personal History

During the earlier years of their marriage, Tom and Shirley Easton would vacation in the central Florida area for two weeks every winter. Shirley's grandparents, John and Anna Rufener lived in nearby Mount Dora, where the Eastons began visiting in the early 1950s. Coming from Chagrin Falls, Ohio, the couple enjoyed the warm weather Florida provides and felt they would eventually relocate there. The couple always had an affinity for water. In fact, their home in Chagrin Falls had a natural eight-foot waterfall in the front yard. Tom explained how they came to live on Little Bear Lake:



Tom and Shirley Easton near Little Bear Lake (Easton)

*"Every year we were down here, we would look a little. In '72, we were a little more earnest about moving to Florida, so we decided that we would really look good this time. On the last day of our vacation, we looked and looked and looked and we didn't find anything. We thought, 'We haven't been in that Bear Lake area. Let's go over there.' So, we drove down Bear Lake Road and then onto Little Bear Lake and down onto Bear Lake Circle, passed the house and as we're passing the house, we saw a guy come out the front door with a for sale sign. He poked it out on the lawn and we backed up and made sure it was for sale. He said, 'I just started to sell this.' And I said, 'Well OK, let's take a look.' We backed in and bought it...ha ha ha. He said, 'I love a sale like this.'"*



Tom and Shirley's daughters on the lake (Easton)

The couple officially moved to Little Bear Lake during 1974. At the time, their two daughters were grown and living elsewhere; one in Florida and the other back in Ohio. Not long after, the daughter living in Ohio moved with her family to Florida as well. As a result, all four of Tom and Shirley's grandchildren were partly raised on Little Bear Lake where they learned to swim, fish, and water ski. As Shirley pointed out:

*"A lake can be such a marvelous place to live. It is something we always wanted to do and that's why we bought this when we had the opportunity. Coming from Ohio, never having been on a lake, we were just looking for something like this."*

## History/Information

---



*View of Little Bear Lake in June 2002 (USF)*



*Lily pads on Little Bear Lake (USF)*



*Tom feeding ducks at Little Bear Lake (Easton)*

Little Bear Lake is a 28-acre lake and part of the Little Wekiva Watershed of Seminole County. The name Little Bear Lake is such because of its proximity to Bear Lake, which looks like a bear from the sky. A quarter of a mile away is a third lake appropriately called, Cub. According to Tom, Little Bear Lake was once connected to Bear Lake, which is also known as Big Bear. As Tom understands it, the connection was removed to cease the flow of water between the lakes and prevent flooding during times of heavy rains. Tom explained:

*“The county took the canal out in about 1955. There is a county easement right down the edge of our property and there was a canal that joined the two lakes. They took that out because when the hurricanes came through, Big Bear would fill up faster than Little Bear and it would overflow and flood everyone out on Little Bear. So, they put a weir on the end of Big Bear and another weir on the end of Little Bear. So now, no matter what it is, we usually don’t get an overflow either way from Little or Big Bear.”*

Twice in the history of Little Bear Lake, overgrown vegetation necessitated the introduction of grass eating carp, once in 1985 and again one year later in 1986. Tom said it had gotten so bad, “you could walk across the lake on vegetation.” There are few carp left today, but those that are, said Tom, are close to three feet long. The Eastons suspect another batch will be introduced again soon.

Little Bear Lake supports a wealth of wildlife that has diminished during the time Tom and Shirley have lived there. The couple particularly enjoys watching the freshwater otters that still call Little Bear their home. Tom describes the water body as a “good fishing lake” and has enjoyed a great many hours fishing there himself, although less so now than in the past. Fish types include bass, crappies, bluegills, catfish, and a few gar. Also abundant in the past, but not so much now are alligators. Tom shared a story about one encounter he had with an alligator:

*“We had a real downpour here once and I looked out this window over the garage and I saw this gator come across the street. He was on all fours. He got up into the bushes over here and he stood up. He actually ran on his hind feet. And you know, they say an alligator can go as fast as a quarter horse in a straight line. Well, let me tell you. Believe it! Don’t try to outrun one. This guy got up on his back legs and he ran through that lawn over there until he hit the water and launched himself. I’ll tell you what, that was a scary sight. You realize how fast these silly things can go. Of course, when they’re on all fours, I guess you can get away from them, but not when they get up and are running right at you.”*



*Tom with a bass caught from the lake (Easton)*



*The Eastons' dock on Little Bear Lake (USF)*

Turtles have also decreased in number over the years. The Eastons attribute the decline to the high volume of jet skis used on the lake, claiming the turtles get hit as they come up for air. Shirley shared:

*“We used to have a lot of turtles, snappers, sun turtles. I mean big turtles that you could hardly pick up. And we very seldom see any turtles anymore. They used to come out on the grass. People would have to stop and you’d have to go move the turtles off the roads so that they could go...as they were traveling from one lake to the other, but we very seldom see anything like that any more.”*

## **Development**

---

When the Eastons first moved to the lake, the area was mostly farmland, particularly orange and grapefruit groves. According to Tom, early history of the land surrounding Little Bear Lake also included a sawmill that ran until the early 1960s. Reminiscent of that time, a portion of the bottom of Little Bear Lake is filled with sawdust. “They blew all the sawdust right out into the lake and it’ll take 100 years to rot it all back down.” It is of some consolation to the Eastons that they believe today’s environmentally conscious planners would not use the lake for such depository purposes.

Tom and Shirley pinpoint the start of residential development around Little Bear Lake in the early 1950s. The home they live in was built in 1957. According to Tom, the first development on the lake was called Parkinson’s. At that time, Tom says the area was “plain forest and they cut all the pine trees down in the area, except for certain ones on the lots they allotted around the lake.” He estimates that there are currently about 25-30 homes on Little Bear Lake’s shoreline. With very few exceptions they were all built in the 1950s. Although the number of homes around the lake has remained consistent, the surrounding area has grown a great deal. Despite this growth, along the south side of the lake is a strip of undeveloped land about 14 acres in size owned by a private citizen who plans to keep it that way as a sort of natural habitat for wildlife, something for which the Eastons are grateful.



Tom with a big catch from Little Bear Lake (Easton)

## The Future

---

The Eastons care a great deal about Little Bear Lake and would like to see it preserved for future generations, like their grandchildren who live nearby. Their aspiration is partly assisted by the Bear Lake Preservation Association, a group that monitors both Little Bear and “Big Bear” Lakes. One of the Eastons’ main concerns about the lake is the high volume of jet skis on it. Shirley claims, “There are more jet skis now than anything else on this lake.” Tom explained why this is not good for the health of the lake:

*“There are probably 10 or 12 [jet skis] at least on this little small lake. In itself, that is a bad thing for the lake because three quarters of fuel that you put in a jet ski with these two cylinder engines goes into the lake. It comes out in exhaust and  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the fuel is back into the lake. The four-cycle engine that they are now making are much more lake friendly. They are a real hazard as far as I’m concerned on any lake. The end of our dock was knocked off by one of them a few years back. Thank God the person was not killed.”*

If he could, Tom would outlaw jet skis. Nevertheless, the Eastons understand that there is little they can do. Tom can only hope that the new residents of the lake, who are the primary users of jet skis, learn to appreciate what Little Bear Lake has to offer. Tom remarked:

*“I just hope that some of these young people wake up to the fact that if they want a lake house, it [the lake] has got to stay pristine. It can’t be just a mud hole. The people who have the jet skis have little or no respect for the lake and you need to have that. The sooner these people that are out here find out ‘Geez wiz our lake is going to heck here... maybe we have to do something about it,’ the better.”*

**Written By: Deanna Barcelona, M.A.**