

Lake Lotus



Reta Jackson in a rowboat with her pet duck in the 1950s (Jackson)



Reta's mother and father when they first moved to Lake Lotus in the 1950s (Jackson)

The following narrative has been written from information gathered in an interview with Reta Jackson in her home on Lake Lotus on February 22, 2002. Over the years, Reta has accumulated endless memories, having grown up, exchanged wedding vows, and raised two children on the lake. The following story reflects her extended knowledge of Lake Lotus.

Personal History

In 1956, Reta Jackson's father decided to buy 2.5 acres of land on Lake Lotus, which was then in the rural outskirts of Orlando, so that his daughter, Reta, could own a horse. He bought the property from the then Director of Orlando City Parks. At that time, a local obstetrician named Dr. Bob Hoover owned a great majority of the land on the southside of the lake. This land had been in the Hoover family for many decades. A small cabin built by the Hoovers in the 1800s still stands on the property adjacent to Reta's house, reminiscent of the Hoovers' occupation. Reta reflected on the reason for her family's move to Lake Lotus:

"I was the reason they came out here. I was in the seventh grade and I wanted more than anything else in the world to own a horse and to go horseback riding. I was into horses. Dad said, 'Alright.'"

When Reta's family moved to Lake Lotus, there was a small wooden framed house on their property, which was torn down and replaced by a larger house and then occupied by Reta's family. Today, Reta alone occupies this house. Much later, a second, smaller house was built on the front end of the property in which Reta's mother currently lives. As children, Reta and her brother, who she affectionately calls "Bubba," loved living on the lake. Reta had her horse and Bubba had his small boat with an outboard motor. Both siblings greatly enjoyed fishing and water-skiing and Reta's late father was a fly-fisherman. She shared:

"When my Dad would come home from work, we would take the rowboat and I would row him around the south cove of the lake as he would flyfish. But you see Dad was the kind of guy that when you caught a fish, you brought it home. You catch it; you eat it. We had bass and speckled perch and what Dad pulled out of the lake, you'd have fresh for supper and I can remember being raised that way."

At the time, Reta's father owned and ran the Hal Rivers Service Station in downtown Orlando and according to Reta, he did very well for himself and was in business for 47 years. She said he was a master mechanic and the epitome of the hard working, ethical businessman, living the American dream. Today, Reta works as a teacher at Lake Mary High School in Seminole County and remains active in the preservation of the lake she has lived on for so long.

History/Information



Brother and sister, Bubba and Reta Jackson rowing with family dog on Lake Lotus in the 1950s (Jackson)



Bubba Jackson in front of Lake Lotus (Jackson)

Lake Lotus is a 77-acre lake located in the Little Wekiva Watershed of Seminole County in Altamonte Springs, Florida. A smaller lake connects to Lake Lotus near Lake Lotus Park. Reta shared that Dr. Hoover believed this round smaller lake was once a sinkhole. According to Reta, Lake Lotus was named for the Lotus Lilies that once dominated the water.

Reta says the water quality of Lake Lotus has decreased over the years. However, as a young girl, Reta remembers the lake as “pristine.” She says some of the change is due to the influx of silt, sand, and run-off. She also believes some of the changes have been caused by the chain effect of development cascading from Hurricane Donna. Reta explained:

“In the ‘50s and early ‘60s, this was so beautiful. Let me tell you what happened. It is all because of Hurricane Donna. Everyone was under water. So Orange County, bless their hearts, got together with the Army Corps of Engineers for a flood control project that channelized the Little Wekiva River. The Little Wekiva in my memory was a little meandering creek. It was very small and it wound through the woods. You can still see in the park the old creek bed. It went into a swampy area and it filtered, by shedding into the lake through grasses and swamp. When they channelized the river, it ruined the lake. They cut way down deep so there were all these high banks. Well, it eroded and all that sand went into the stream and started building a delta into Lake Lotus. It got so bad that the lake would turn white after a storm from sedimentation and silt coming in.”

According to Reta, ever since the officials channelized the Little Wekiva River, silt has flowed into Lake Lotus, filling in the south and west end of it. Then sand coming into the lake from Oranole Road exacerbated the problem.

In terms of wildlife supported by Lake Lotus, Reta said the number and types of animals have decreased over the years, but have not completely disappeared. She remembers clearing land for building when the family first moved to the lake and coming across a six foot, one-inch rattlesnake. Reta even spotted a Florida panther soon after. She shared:

“We were really living in the woods back then and there was a Florida panther that had been in the newspaper, the Orlando Sentinel, with a big explanation of how this Florida panther had been sighted and had been killing chickens. Well, we didn’t realize that it was right up the road here. And the next day, it crossed our property and we saw it.”

Reta said, Lake Lotus was “really wild” back then (mid 1950s) with huge alligators and seemingly infinite snakes. However, although the frequency of such animals has decreased, Reta exclaimed, “We have still have a lot; it’s amazing.” Present day wildlife includes the two wild turkeys that Reta feeds, otter, osprey, opossums, and rabbits.

Development



Oranole Road before it was paved (Jackson)



Sand pile up on Oranole Road (Jackson)



Lake Lotus at time of interview in 2002 (FCCDR)

Development has placed a significant role in the history of Lake Lotus. Reta said, “all the growth in the area has just destroyed everything that was once here.” Certainly, things have changed since Reta was a young girl. She remembers riding a horse down 436, then an old country road and now a major thoroughfare. In those days, land around Lake Lotus was used for citrus growing. Reta said she grew up trail riding the groves when the whole east and north side of the lake consisted of orange groves. During the interview, Reta shared:

“You can see that there was a tower on the north side of the lake. That was a water tower that was attached to High Acres Orange Juice Plant. We would get up in the morning and smell the orange juice cooking. All of this was citrus. But see that predates ‘89 when the big freeze came and destroyed everything.”

Today, two private homes, apartments, condominiums, and a city park border the lake, to which only the two private homes and one of the condominiums have access. The condominiums stand on the northwest side of the lake and Lotus Lake Park now runs along the west side. According to Reta, Lake Lotus Park is currently Altamonte Springs’ largest city park. This is a conservation park that opened in late 1995 and offers a nature/jogging trail, a fishing pier, pavilions, and playgrounds (<http://www.altamonte.org/departments/leisure/parks.html>).

The Future

Despite the seemingly daunting future of Lake Lotus, Reta believes there are rays of hope. The Friends of Wekiva River are active in preserving Lake Lotus as it is part of the Wekiva River Basin, which is a good sign. There is also Lake Lotus Park that Reta believes helps keep some of Lake Lotus preserved and in good condition for the public to enjoy.

However, plans for continued development are pressing. There are currently plans to build a four story apartment building directly east of Reta’s property, but construction has been delayed, at least temporarily, due to nesting ospreys. The desire of developers to build on Reta’s land is also a real concern. Reta often gets offered deals to sell the land she owns. In the interview, she talked about how the Hoovers left due to the encroachment of development. She said:

“Dr. Hoover just threw up his hands. And his wife, I felt so sorry for her. She really cried. She raised four boys on that lake and she did not want to give up her home. That’s the same struggle I’m going through. I have realtors calling me every month wanting to know, when are you going to sell?”

One of the concerns Reta has is that with the increase in corporate ownership versus private homesteads, the vested interest in the well-being of the lake might be at stake. However, as mentioned, Reta thinks that there are still many positive forces working to protect the lake including the park and her personal strong vigilance.

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