

Prairie Lake



Ron Browning (USF)

The following narrative presents the story of Prairie Lake as seen through the eyes of Ron Browning, who grew up on the lake where his grandparents lived. The narrative was developed from an interview with Ron on Friday June 27, 2003. In it he shares what the lake means to him personally and how it has changed in the time that he has known it.

Personal History

Ron's grandparents, Harold and Mary Fansler Browning, first came to Prairie Lake in the 1930s when they invested in several lots along the southern shore of the lake. On one of the lots, they built a home and raised Ron's father and uncle. Throughout the years, the Brownings sold off the other lots, keeping only their .87-acre lot where they dwelled. Ron related stories his grandfather told of those early days:

"When he [grandfather] purchased land, he was a lineman for Florida Power, which had just really started at the time. And he bought the land because it was cheap. Nobody wanted to live on the lake at the time. If you wanted to live at a ritzy address, you lived downtown off of Orange Avenue or somewhere down there. This was in the sticks. As a matter of fact, my grandfather told me how 17/92 was a dirt road... 436 was two lanes. There was literally nothing."



Prairie Lake in 2001 (Seminole County)

As a child, Ron made frequent visits to the lake. Then in 1989 he moved in with his grandparents to assist in caring for his grandfather who had just suffered a stroke. Ron lived lakeside with his grandparents for five years. Although he now lives only 10 minutes away from Prairie Lake with his wife and 4-month-old daughter, Ron continues to visit the lake, which is not far from where he works as a middle school teacher. Ron elaborated on his personal connection and affinity to the lake:

"As a kid, we didn't live all that far away and we were constantly there. Summer time, I was there ALL the time. It's my whole childhood. This was the only thing I was allowed to do in Orlando. I was too young to go out and do anything by myself. So this was our whole world... We crawled all over this lake for two and a half decades."



View of lake in 2001 (Seminole County)

Ron and his brother spent hours on Prairie Lake as children and young adults. Ron said they did it all – fishing, water skiing, wake boarding, boating, and swimming. He reflected: "It is a really great lake and I really remember it fondly."

When Ron's grandfather passed away, the house and last of the Browning family land were sold to the Street family. Today, the house built by Ron's grandparents has been removed and in its place is a much larger home was built in 1996. Ron explained:



View of the lake's shoreline in 2001 (Seminole County)



Prairie Lake in 2001 (Seminole County)

"The Streets were friends of my grandparents forever and ever. He bought on the lake after my grandfather did and always coveted that property because it was the largest one on the lake..."

History/Information

Prairie Lake is a 122-acre lake in the Gee Creek Watershed of Seminole County near Orlando, Florida. Two smaller water bodies flank Prairie Lake. Pot Lake sits on the southwest corner of Prairie Lake and Pearl Lake is connected to Prairie Lake on the northeastern corner. Pearl Lake is also known to Ron as Gem Lake. Pot Lake used to be connected to Prairie Lake via a slight channel that has since been filled in for development purposes. Pearl Lake, however, continues to easily share water with Prairie Lake by way of a small canal that can be driven over on Gladwin Avenue.

Ron reported that traditional land use around Prairie Lake consisted mostly of orange groves, but other than that little is known. There still is a railroad that runs along the west side of the lake that Ron says is more difficult to hear today due to the increase in development. When considering other changes he has noticed over the years, Ron recalls water levels of Prairie Lake showing continued decreases. As Ron explained:

"Water levels have gone down significantly overall. There was a dock... my grandfather's original dock on the lake. It was a stationary dock. And in 1982, I remember for my grandparents, my father and uncle tore out the old dock and put in a new one. And they actually had to drop it eight feet because the water level had receded that much. Now that dock is all but out of the water. So, overall it's gone down. And I remember as a kid being able to dive off the end of the dock, not any more."

One partial theory of the lowered water levels Ron proposes is that over the years, the natural springs that run along the northern part of the lake have been stopped up by an unknown vegetation, lessening water refill flows from underground. Ron shared:

"When they [grandparents] moved onto the lake, it was still an active spring down at this end and of course, it ended up caving in. Now, they're all over-grown green little furry, moss...it's not muck. It's...if you were walking on it, you'd think someone has put sod out there. It feels like golf course grass, it's firm and springy."

Water quality, however, as Ron sees it, has stayed of relatively good quality. He expressed: "It was never this yucky gross lake. I mean when you go out in fresh water in Florida a lot, it's like black...Prairie Lake was never like that. Unless it was raining really hard, it was always a very clear lake."

With increased development, vegetation has lessened, yet remains relatively the same in type, except for the melaleuca tree. Ron reported:

"The vegetation on the lake hasn't really changed...lots of lily pads, reeds, and marsh. The vegetation on the floor of the lake is exactly the same as it's always been. Scattered around the lake I remember and they're not there anymore. I think everyone cut them down, but there



Prairie Lake in 2001 (Seminole County)

were melaleuca trees. They're non-indigenous and they came from Australia. They have this paper like bark and its almost cork like, but you can peel it off. And I remember peeling it off as a kid, making little boats and watching them float around."

In terms of wildlife, Ron says there have been changes in both population and type. Two interesting examples of this are ducks and lizards. As a child, Ron said muscovy ducks were far outnumbered by the more ascetically pleasing mallard ducks. Today all that seems to remain are the "ugly" muscovies. He hypothesized that:

"Muscovy ducks are like pigeons. I think they co-habitat with people nicely. But the mallard ducks really don't. And I noticed that as there was development around the lake, I think it eliminated a lot of their nesting sites and I've noticed fewer and fewer of them. As a child, I remember the big ugly ducks and as I recall, there weren't as many of them. Then the really pretty green headed brown little ducks, there were lots of them. You know we would feed bread to them and they would just flock around the dock. And that trend is completely opposite now."

Like the ducks of Prairie Lake, lizard types have also reversed. When Ron was young, nearly all lizards he and his brother caught for fun were green. Very rarely, Ron reported, did he and his brother catch a brown lizard. Today, that trend has completely reversed so that finding a green lizard among the many brown ones would be unusual.

In terms of fish, Ron reported sightings of perch, brim, shiners, and bass, yet never a catfish. Surprisingly, Ron knows of no gators that occupy Prairie Lake. As he related:

"The one gator that we were told about never existed. My father in all his years on the lake began to think, 'You know, I'm beginning to think the alligator was a myth.' He never saw it. He fished for it. He did everything he could to find it. My grandfather swears he saw it, but who knows. We were constantly out there, in the evening, in the early morning. If there was an alligator on that lake, I'm sure I would have seen it. And it just never materialized."

Development

Based on knowledge passed down from his father and grandfather, Ron pinpoints the start of development around Prairie Lake during the 1930s. Indeed as far as Ron knows, his grandfather was one of the first people to build on the lake. Knowing what his grandfather and father experienced, combined with what he knows now, has brought Ron to be able to identify three phases of development along the shores of Prairie Lake.

The southeastern shoreline was the first to be developed mostly during the 1940s and 50s and was completely residential. Ron describes the houses of this phase as: "Old 50s style architecture, which was forward looking then...just a cinder block box with a flat roof." During this time, there was some commercial growth that ran along State Road 436 on the northern end of Prairie Lake. When Ron was a child, what is now a Circuit City flanked

by a strip mall was once a drive-in movie theater with the screen facing the water and boating marine store next door. About the old drive-in movie theater, Ron reminisced:

“We had this rowboat that we’d row it over and watch the movies. It was good...it was a lot of fun... Rite of passage as a kid was to swim from my grandfather’s dock across to the movie theater and back. So that you were a big kid when you could do that. And one fond memory I have is my brother and I rowed the boat across the lake and watched an R rated movie...and I remember rowing back and my grandfather was on the dock and oh...we got yelled at that day.”

The second phase of development as identified by Ron occurred along the northeastern shore of Prairie Lake during the 1970s and early 80s. This was also residential. Then in the mid 1980s and through the early 1990s, the western edge was developed – the third phase. As a child, Ron remembers this western undeveloped area of the lake as:

“...All swamp, completely undeveloped...nothing until the mid 80s. As a kid, it was all weeds and marsh. It was just swamp. We used to row over here and actually explore through there and find snakes and frogs and all that.”

Currently, Prairie Lake is essentially built out with little room to grow much more. Ron remembers a park that gave public access to the lake, which no longer exists as even more houses replaced it. Prairie Lake is now surrounded by houses except for a small area along its north shore where a green area buffers the lake from commercial development and potential road run-off. Summing it up in just a few words, Ron expressed how Prairie Lake has changed over the past 50 years: “There is development that is just insane.”

The Future

In terms of the future of Prairie Lake, Ron raised one major issue. That is development. With increased development, there is obvious concern for the natural environment that includes Prairie Lake and its ecology. More houses has brought more people and thus increased traffic both on the lake and around the lake. About boat traffic on Prairie Lake, Ron explained:

“I noticed significant boat traffic, which changed a lot. I mean growing up from the 70s to the 80s, there were maybe four powerboats using the lake. When I was there in the mid-90s, I remember counting eight different master craft type ski boats on the lake, just right on the lake.”

The other increase in traffic is that of increasingly busy State Road 436 mentioned above as the northern commercial border of Prairie Lake. Fortunately, there is a buffer of green space between the water and the street, which carries a great deal of traffic due to its commercialism. Ron shared:

“As long as they manage the storm water, it should be fine. And as long as they don’t decide that Prairie Lake should be the dumping ground for all that water. It seems to be a pretty healthy lake as far as water clarity and depth...just keep it that way.”

When it comes to matters of the lake, Ron says there really is no formal organization. He remembers only one time residents from all phases of development banded together in concerted action for the lake. He shared:

“The only time I ever saw any organized action was when there was a boat company on the north end of the lake that wanted to use it for boat test drives. I saw all of the homeowners incensed and basically everybody showed up to that City Hall meeting for the council meeting.”

Their efforts paid off. Thinking positively, Ron feels confident Prairie Lake will continue to exist in its beauty and uniqueness. Ron expressed feelings of perhaps one day owning property on the lake and continuing the family tradition. However, he was also shared that the opportunity to have known the lake at all has been great enough.

Written By: Deanna Barcelona