

# Lake Searcy



Charles B. Searcy, Jr. (USF)

*This narrative has been written based on an interview conducted with Charles B. Searcy, Jr. at his home on Lake Searcy on April 30, 2002. Charles's family has a long history in Longwood, with his grandfather first arriving in the area in 1873. Charles grew up on Lake Searcy and during the interview he shared stories about fishing on the lake and the changes that he has seen in the area.*

## Personal History

Lake Searcy has always been an important part of Charles B. Searcy, Jr.'s life. Although born in Sanford, he was raised in a house built by his grandfather, John Neill Searcy, between Lake Searcy and West Lake. John N. Searcy was one of the earliest settlers in Longwood, having arrived in the area in 1873. He started off in Tennessee, took a steamboat up the St. Johns River and eventually landed in Sanford. John N. Searcy then settled near Lake Searcy, built his home, and became involved in the cypress and citrus industries. He was also one of the founding members of Christ Episcopal Church in Longwood. John N. Searcy married Eva Lessie Muzzy in 1885 and one of their sons was Charles B. Searcy, Sr.<sup>1</sup>

Charles B. Searcy, Sr. and his wife, Berta, raised four children in the house near Lake Searcy. Charles B. Searcy, Jr., with whom the interview was conducted, was the youngest of these four children. As a boy in the 1930s and 1940s, Charles spent a lot of his time fishing in the lake. At the time, there was only one dock on Lake Searcy, which was owned by a man named Mr. Scofield, and Charles used to fish off of this dock. He related the following story about his early fishing days:

*"When I was a young man I didn't have any means of making money and I used to catch bass over there and I would sell them to the neighbors down there in the corner in the grove. My dad found out about it and he didn't like it because he wanted me to bring the fish home. My enterprise as a fish salesman ended there or I had to do it in secret."*

According to Charles, he used to refer to Lake Searcy as Scofield Lake because Mr. Scofield was the only other person living on the lake. However, according to Charles R. Searcy, son of Charles B. Searcy, Jr., the lake was also once called Rand's Lake after another family in the area. As the family tells it, Charles B. Searcy, Sr. officially changed the name to Lake Searcy sometime in the 1920s.

When Charles turned eighteen, he left Longwood and joined the Navy. After serving twenty years in the Navy, Charles retired and moved back to Lake Searcy with his wife and three sons. His mother had given him the land near the lake because he was such an avid fisherman. Charles said about living on the lake:



The house that John N. Searcy built (Charles Searcy, Jr.)



Lake Searcy in 1997 (Charles Searcy, Jr.)



*John N. Searcy with Jack, Charles's brother - nearby West Lake is in the background (Charles Searcy, Jr.)*



*The canal that Charles Searcy, Sr. built in the mid-1950s (Charles Searcy, Jr.)*



*Another view of the canal in 1997 (Charles Searcy, Jr.)*

*"I couldn't live anywhere else. I love the fish. That's why they gave me this piece of property."*

Charles continues to fish almost every day and the catch is often varied, with some days more productive than others. The biggest bass that he caught in Lake Searcy was 12 pounds.

## **History/Information**

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Lake Searcy is an 11-acre lake located in the Soldiers Creek Watershed in Longwood, FL. The lake is surrounded by a 130-foot swamp area, or greenbelt, that limits direct access to the water body. When Charles was growing up near the lake, there was only one canal that had been built through this swamp area, which led to Mr. Scofield's dock. However, in the mid-1950s, Charles Sr. constructed the second canal through the greenbelt.

According to Charles, the environmental condition of the lake has changed since he was younger. Although the lake has always had a "muck" bottom, Charles believes that the water clarity has decreased from the level that he had seen in the past. He attributes this change to the increase in housing in the area and the drainage coming from them into the lake.

Regarding water levels, Charles has seen fluctuations over the years. The highest he has seen Lake Searcy's level rise was in September 2000 during Hurricane Gordon. With this storm, the water flooded over his dock. However, the recent drought conditions have created the lowest water levels in Lake Searcy that Charles has witnessed. Charles said about the drought situation:

*"The whole canal was dried up all the way to where the water line is out there. Even my well here went dry... I've never seen it that dry before. It was horrible. Eventually, it started raining and the lake level came back up. Apparently there is a spring in there because it holds its level pretty well right now. It drains on the east side over there."*

Another change that Charles has observed in Lake Searcy is with the type and quantity of aquatic vegetation. Charles said that there were no water hyacinths present in the lake when he was a boy; however, when he returned to Lake Searcy after retiring from the Navy in 1967, the lake was full of water hyacinths. Charles received assistance from the University of Florida's Agricultural Department in addressing this problem with chemical sprays. Although the water hyacinths were removed, this also led to a decrease in water bonnets, which Charles would like to see more of in the lake.

The lake continues to support a diversity of fish. In addition to bass, Charles said that the other fish living in Lake Searcy include speckled perch, blue gill, mud fish, cat fish and gar. Surrounding the lake, Charles has seen the number and types of animals decrease as housing has increased in the area, leaving less land on which the animals can live. Some of the animals that no longer frequent the surrounding area include bobcats, skunks and snakes. Charles continues to see small mammals like opossums and raccoons. More recently, he has seen a pair of red foxes return to the area.

## Development

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*The Searcy house - one of the first on Lake Searcy (Charles Searcy, Jr.)*



*Lake Searcy in 2002 (USF)*

The development of the area around Lake Searcy can be traced back to the arrival of John N. Searcy in the late 1800s. When he arrived in the Longwood area, he built a home between Lake Searcy and West Lake. By the 1930s and 1940s, when Charles was growing up, much of the surrounding land had been developed into orange groves. The only two houses in the general vicinity of Lake Searcy belonged to the Searcy family and Mr. Scofield. Charles described what the area looked like when he was growing up:

*“Just orange groves mostly. No housing down there. There was an orange grove with housing in the back. One house on the corner. Then you go up Rangeline Road and there were a couple of houses there. It’s all housing now, but it was pretty rural back then.”*

According to Charles, the housing developments in the area began going up in the mid-1950s. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, Charles saw orange groves transformed into residential communities. However, directly on Lake Searcy, no homes have ever been built. The biggest changes that Charles has observed in the area as a result of these subdivisions are increased traffic and fewer animals. The greenbelt, with its marshy foundation, makes it difficult for any buildings to be constructed directly on the water.

The home that John N. Searcy built in 1888 still stands. The building stayed within the Searcy family until it was sold in 1997. The home is now used as a place to have weddings.<sup>1</sup>

## The Future

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The future of Lake Searcy appears fairly protected, especially with the swampy greenbelt surrounding the lake. Direct construction on the lake is unlikely. Furthermore, the lake is small, making it less desirable for many people to use for recreation. Currently, Charles is one of the only people who uses the lake on a regular basis. Charles said about the protection of Lake Searcy:

*“I’m very conscious of the fact that people throw trash in there. Whenever I see it, I pick it up. There’s not too many ways that you can get to this lake because it is isolated by that swamp... [However], there’s no way in the world you can keep people away from the lake. If they want to fish in it, they are going to get there one way or the other. I don’t see many bad problems. Unless they know how to fish, they’re not going to do very well in there.”*

Lake Searcy has played an important part in the history of the Searcy family. Hopefully, the lake will maintain its health for future generations to enjoy.

<sup>1</sup> “Searcy typical of many local settlers” by Jim Robison, *Orlando Sentinel*, September 25, 1998.

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