

Tuskawilla Lake



Steve and Shyla Reich in May 2002 (USF)

The following narrative was derived from an interview with Tuskawilla Lake residents Steve and Shyla Reich in their beautiful home on May 2, 2002. In it, they tell of their years of living on Tuskawilla Lake and being involved in its well-being through political advocacy and participation with one of the homeowner's association that centers itself on the lake.

Personal History

Steve and Shyla Reich have been living on the shores of Tuskawilla Lake for over 30 years. Before moving to the lake, they lived in nearby Maitland, Florida. One Sunday while living in Maitland, they decided to drive around and look for property to buy. Shyla recalled first seeing the land they would eventually settle on:

"All that was back here was dirt paths where hunters had been and we saw this beautiful piece of land. We didn't know who owned it. We didn't know anything about it. We found out it was owned by Gardena Farms and that they were unwilling to break it up."

Several years later they tried again and found out that a man by the name of John Cather had purchased the land. Although not at first, he eventually was willing to break up the 35-acres he owned and sell part of it to the Steve and Shyla. Steve explained:

"\$100,000 for the whole lakefront; that's all it was. 'No,' I said, 'I can't handle that.' He [John Cather] said, 'I'll tell you what. Step off as much as you want.' So, we came over here to the eastern property line and stepped off what I thought I could afford. It turned out to be almost 400 feet of lakefront."

In 1971, the Reichs built a home there. In the years since, the couple has bought additional land extending their ownership of adjacent property, now totaling close to 15 acres. Their reasoning for acquiring the extra land was to provide space for the horses they have owned over the years and buffer their homesite from development.

While living on the lake, the Steve and Shyla raised two sons and now two grandchildren. Currently, Steve is retired from the insurance business and Shyla is semi-retired from real estate. Shyla is a native Floridian and Steve originates from New York, but has lived in Florida for over 40 years.



The Reich family in the 1970s with Lake Tuskawilla in background (Reich)



Steve and Shyla's two sons on the lake's shore as young boys (Reich)

History/Information



Lake Tuskawilla in May 2002 (USF)



View of Lake Tuskawilla from Steve and Shyla's backyard (USF)



One of Steve and Shyla's sons as a young child playing on the lake's shoreline (Reich)

Tuskawilla Lake is a 100-acre lake located in the Little Lake Howell Watershed of Seminole County in Winter Springs, Florida. As Steve sees it, Tuskawilla Lake is unique and said, "If you could hold up a lake, a Florida lake as an example of close to perfect, this is it." Steve's reasons for claiming this perfection are numerous. They include his belief that the size of the lake is ideal, it is not connected to other lakes that might bring outside traffic, the roads around the lake are connector roads, not major highways that might cause road run off, and those who live at the lake are highly concerned citizens who continually monitor the health of the lake.

Tuskawilla Lake houses an ecologically sensitive area that restricts the amount of development. In combination, these factors make Tuskawilla Lake an ideal and unique place to live. Shyla is in agreement and described the lake as "very peaceful."

At the time of the interview, Steve and Shyla said the lake water level was at an all time low, maybe just a bit up from the previous year 2001. Steve approximated a 6-foot drop below average. He explained the condition of water levels in 2001: "I had 150 feet of exposed lakefront beyond that cypress tree that we've never seen before. One time there was a drought that exposed a lot of land, but nothing like this." Steve attributed the extreme levels to larger Florida drought and says, Tuskawilla Lake is just showing signs of what is occurring all over the state.

In terms of wildlife supported by Tuskawilla Lake, the Reichs have spotted many animals. In the lake itself are otters, water moccasins, and alligator that have decreased in number over the years. Land animals near the lake consist of fox, opossums, racoons, and snakes such as the black racer and indigo. Since childhood, Steve has enjoyed bird watching. Over the years at Tuskawilla Lake, he has observed sandhill cranes, blue jays, cardinals, doves, red-belly woodpeckers, brown thrashers, wood thrushes, bald eagles, robins, hawks, owls, osprey, and several types of ducks.

Regarding vegetation, the Reich's property is home to many large cypress trees that they have watched grow over the years. Plant life in Tuskawilla Lake includes sawgrass, cattails, milfoil, and hydrilla, of which the latter three have been problematic. On two occasions, hydrilla became a problem. About the hydrilla problem, Steve said:

"The first time we had the problem; we fought it through the use of carp and it worked. They ate it slam up and that was the end of that. Then several years later, all of a sudden, we got it again. At that point the lake was only four to five feet higher than it is now. They told us the only way we were going to solve the problem that time was with sonar, which is a chemical. So, we got a price on the sonar and it was \$20,000 to cure this lake. Well, we were hemming and hawing about how we were going to raise this money and how long it's going to take to get it when the drought hit us. The lake started dropping and dropping.

Finally, two years ago, the lake was down more than it is right now and the price for the sonar dropped in half because we had less water to treat. That was the good news. Well, we snapped that up like hotcakes. We got ourselves a fundraiser drive. Got the money together. Put the sonar in and that lake has now been cleared. Now, we have the carp back in there and they have less territory to cover. There is no chance that the carp will get away because the outflow is so far above the lake level. For now, we're in real good shape."



Steve and Shyla's horses in May 2002 (USF)



The family with one of their horses in the 1970s; lake in background (Reich)

Development

Traditional land use around Tuskawilla Lake, about which the Reichs shared some interesting stories, is varied. The history includes citrus groves and pig farming. According to Steve and Shyla, John Cather was the first to develop the north end of the lake, at least residentially. However before that, on the land on which Steve and Shyla currently live was reportedly a place called Gardena Farms.

The eastern shoreline of Tuskawilla Lake used to be orange groves. Steve and Shyla reported horseback riding through them before they were cut down. Just north of the Reichs' home used to be a pig farm. In fact, it has not been uncommon for their dogs to dig up pig bones that must have been left behind in the butchering process. Shyla shared the following story about this historical land use:

"Remember Morison's Cafeterias? They [the pig farmers] had a contract with them to pick up the garbage and feed the pigs. So, they would get the garbage and they would bring it out here and dump it out. Every time it rains out in our pasture, things come up out of the ground. Dishes come out of the ground. Ketchup bottles, forks and knives. We got a set of butter dishes, these little white round butter dishes. A set, like 30 of them. People don't really use them anymore, but they come right up out of the ground. Although, it's pretty much over now because we've picked most of it up."

Over the years, the Reichs have truly done their part in keeping the development around Tuskawilla Lake low density. Steve has been President of the Lake Tuskawilla Home Owner's Association for twenty years. On numerous occasions, the couple has fought off high-density development. On one occasion, they prevented a two-story apartment complex from being built on land directly east of them by negotiating with the landowner. The Reichs successfully got the landowner to sell to another buyer that was not planning on building apartments. Another time, an agreement was made with the developer of Tusca Bay, a housing development on the east side of the lake. Shyla explained:

"Steve and I have always sort of been the frontline of the battlers. The next project was over here, Tusca Bay, a housing development. And we were successful in getting the developer...to not give access to the lake, except to people who lived on the lake, those lakefront homes, and keep the width of the lakefront lots at least a 150 feet. That was really important."



View of Lake Tuskawilla from Steve and Shyla's backyard (USF)



Some of Steve and Shyla's property (USF)

Steve and Shyla along with the lake association did the same with the next development to come in, Tuskawilla Pines. Again, they met with the developer and county to ensure lake access to only lakefront homeowners. The last of the land around Tuskawilla Lake that is undeveloped is currently under construction. This time, the Home Owner's Association was able to guarantee a conservation easement for an area they call Gator Cove, a piece of shoreline that they see as environmentally sensitive. The Reichs believe that currently, development is “maxed out” and that once the homes in Tuskawilla Pines are built, there will be no more residential construction.

The Future

According to Steve and Shyla, the future of Tuskawilla Lake is a positive one. Both have been very involved in making sure of it. As seen on numerous occasions, the Reichs have acted as guardians of the best interest of the lake. Exemplary of the fact that the Reichs helped found the Tuskawilla Lake Association of which Steve is President. However, Steve was clear in pointing out, he does not work alone. A large part of the success the Reichs have had is due to the shared values and concerted action of their neighbors. Shyla pointed out: “We’ve watched it [the lake] very carefully and we’re very happy. We’ve got good neighbors...I think it is just about perfect.” Steve added: “Well, we worked hard at that though. That just doesn’t happen.”

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