

St. Johns River



Archie Smith (USF)

This narrative is based on an interview with Archie Smith at the St. Johns River on the afternoon of August 23, 2001. Archie is the owner of Sanford Boatworks, a business that was started by his father in 1925. Having spent almost his entire life living near and working on the river, Archie has seen many of the changes that have taken place on the St. Johns River in the Sanford area. This narrative includes his stories about the history of the area, as well as his knowledge about the river environment.

Personal History



A houseboat belonging to the Smith family in the 1950s (Smith)

Archie Smith was born and raised in Sanford, near the St. Johns River. Water and boatmaking have been a part of his family's history for generations. His father, Archie, Sr., was born in New York Harbor and eventually moved to Savannah, GA where he became a master boat builder. In the early 1900s, Archie, Sr. moved to Palatka, FL where he built barges for the government. Archie, Sr. decided that it was time to move south and he took his three children from his first marriage on a houseboat up the St. Johns River looking for a place to settle. His father ended up in Sanford where Archie says he found "a natural harbor." In 1925, Archie, Sr. went into business with John Brumley, a local farmer, and opened up the marina. Around this same time, Archie's parents met in Sanford. Archie tells the story about how they met:

"My dad meets my mom in a drugstore. She makes nice apple pies. That's exactly why he married her, because of the apple pie."



An aerial view of the Sanford Boatworks (Smith)

Archie's parents then had three children, Archie and his two sisters. As a boy, Archie would occasionally go out to the marina. When he reached adulthood, he spent some time in the Army and then returned to Sanford. In 1966, Archie began working at the marina with his father and half-brother. He now runs the marina and continues to live near the river.

Even though most of his time is spent working on the St. Johns River, Archie and his wife still enjoy the recreational opportunities the river presents. Archie says about their activities on the river:

"I fish. I do a lot of my fishing south on the river. I go down to the places that they've now built, but they're still on the St. Johns. They've built very large reservoirs south on the St. Johns River...My wife and I love to bass fish. We release all fish. We don't kill them. We keep saltwater fish. We like grouper and snapper. We don't throw them out."

History/Information



The St. Johns River in 2001 (USF)



High water during the flooding of 1998 (Smith)

The St. Johns River is Florida's longest river, spanning 350 miles. The river begins in the marshlands of Indian River and Brevard counties and flows north to where it empties into the Atlantic Ocean in Duval County. The river has three drainage basins: upper, middle, and lower. Sanford is in the middle basin. The river actually widens near Sanford and forms Lakes Harney, Jessup, and Monroe (Source: "St. Johns River: A Vital Part of Florida's Environment, Economy, Culture and History" by the St. Johns River Water Management District. Available at: <http://sjr.state.fl.us>). The Sanford Boatworks is located closest to Lake Monroe.

Archie believes that the St. Johns River is "...one of the healthiest rivers and has been able to withstand the impact [of development]." He attributes this health to the fact that people have not been able to build close to the river because it is "relatively marshy." The quality of the river water near Sanford, according to Archie, is good. Although the water has a natural tannic acid color from the cypress trees, he says that you could drink it and it does not have a bad flavor.

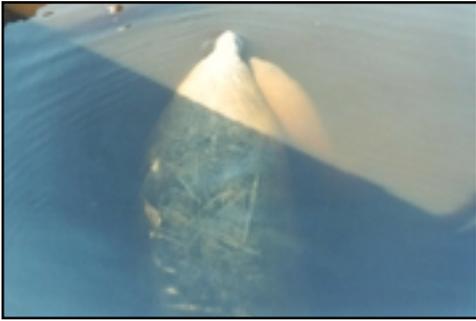
According to Archie, the water level in the St. Johns River has fluctuated over the years. He says, "We've had high water and we've had low water." Archie understands that the low water is not necessarily a bad thing. He says, "When the water is low, it allows a certain natural plant life to grow that then when the water comes back up and over that...and purify." Although he has seen the water level low in the river, he states that "...this is as long as I have seen it low." Archie explains that there are four artesian wells at the Sanford Boatworks, three of which were capped by the county a few years ago to decrease the amount of water flowing out of the aquifer.

One of Archie's concerns about the St. Johns River is that some of the areas are "choked with weeds." This vegetation growth, according to Archie, has impacted fishing and the number of ducks that visit. He attributes part of this growth of vegetation to the recent drought conditions. He says about the situation:

"So we've got fish. We're not fished out, but we don't have the areas [open] because they're choked with weeds because we probably didn't get the rainfall to start with. The rainfall then allowed the growth to come. Now we get a flood, but the flood doesn't kill the weed so you still don't have those open bodies that the sun shines down in and does the process that is necessary. You don't get the waterfowl because there's not the open miles and miles of that open area; it's choked."

Although the numbers of ducks visiting the river near Sanford have decreased recently, Archie says, "We've really got a lot of birds." Included among these birds are whooping cranes and ospreys. There are also, according to Archie, "a lot of fish." Some of these fish include bass, catfish, and brim.

Archie says that there used to be big game, such as bear, in the area, which started decreasing in the 1940s. When he was growing up, there were also deer, hogs, and otters. Archie believes that there are still deer in a nearby state-owned preserve. He says about the otters, "I see otters, but not often...Otters used to be hunted. You have more otters than you used to have. You don't see them unless you go tracking and hunt for them."



One of the manatees that visits the Sanford Boatworks yearly (Smith)

There are also manatees that visit the Boatworks yearly. Archie says that a “mama and her calf” visit the marina every year. According to Archie, the number of visiting manatees remains constant:

“We still have those manatees every year. They have never gone down. They have never gone up.”

Archie believes that the number and frequency of alligators are much higher now than when he was younger. He shares his opinion about the alligators:

“Major alligators. Alligators are everywhere. Well, alligators used to be poached...I used to do a lot of duck hunting. I would encounter big gators. I was never worried about a gator. I would yell at them and they would just be flying, probably because they were hunted and pursued. Today, they are not. Today, they are a different species. Today, I warn my customers, ‘Don’t you take a gator for granted.’”

Development



One of the older buildings near the Sanford Boatworks (USF)

The St. Johns River has been an important part of Florida’s history. The river went through many name changes before acquiring its current name. It has been called *Welaka* (river of lakes) by the Timucan Indians, *Rio de Corrientes* (river of currents) by Spanish seafarers, *Riviere de Mai* (river of May) by French settlers, and *San Mateo* (Saint Matthew) and *San Juan* (St. John) by Spanish soldiers. It is from the Spanish name of *San Juan* that the river received its current name of St. Johns (Source: “The St. Johns River: A River of Many Names” by the St. Johns Water Management District. Available at: <http://sjr.state.fl.us>).

Steamboats were once an important part of the St. Johns River. Between 1890 and 1930, steamboat transportation was at its peak (Source: “Early Days of Seminole County, Florida” by Arthur E. Francke, Jr.). According to Archie, one of the reasons that the steamboats came to Sanford was because of the local brick industry. He says about the brick industry:

“Now way back, there’s a slough down here called Brickyard Slough. They made bricks. That’s one reason the steamboats came down here. They got bricks.”

Historically, agriculture has been important in Sanford. Archie says about the agricultural production that has taken place near the St. Johns River:

“Now there were also a lot of fruit trees. I guess there was a freeze, I guess [in] 1896 and a back-to-back freeze. Kind of similar to what we had about ten years ago and it killed all the fruit trees. It put three banks in Sanford out of business and people moved back north... Those farms, they cut the trees down and went into farming. They started with celery and other types of things... This was celery capital until [Andrew] Duda went in and down into the Everglades and started and then moved the celery farming down there. [Andrew] Duda beat Sanford out on celery.”



The bridge for State Road 415 that crosses the St. Johns River (USF)

The residential development near the St. Johns River in Sanford has occurred over many years. Archie's father built the marina in 1925 and much of the housing in that area was not built until after that. According to Archie, some of the houses were built during the 1930s and 1940s and some during the 1970s. Archie says about the homes on the St. Johns River near the marina:

"These are the same houses that have been here. Now there's one new house built down the way, but there has not been [building]...the homes have been remodeled."

Archie believes that there has not been much residential development directly on the St. Johns River because of the marsh area. He says about the river:

"I think the fact that you have as much marsh area as you have, has kept the river from developing. Every place...if you go up the river and you get to the bluffs, you're going to have a house. Bottom line. The only thing that has kept the St. John's River from being developed from here to Jacksonville is that there's enough marsh."

Although there has not been much residential development on the river near the Boatworks, there has been considerable growth in the region. This has led to an increase in traffic in the area. However, as far back as Archie can remember, there has always been traffic in the area. He says that Celery Road, where the Boatworks is located, was once the main road to New Smyrna, and was heavily traveled. This road became privately owned by the Boatworks in the late 1970s when a bridge for State Road 415 was built nearby to cross the river and marsh area. This road helps to connect Deltona with Orlando. Once this bridge was built, the traffic increased dramatically. He says about the impact of the commuter traffic:

"The workforce by 4:30 this afternoon will be bumper-to-bumper for an hour and a half. The amount of noise that you get...If there is any pollution to worry about, the noise pollution would be the biggest thing that detracts from the serenity of the river."

The Future

In Archie's opinion, one of the greatest threats facing the St. Johns is the need for water. He says about future threats:

"The biggest threat that I could conceive for the St. John's River would be the pumping of water from the St. John's River. Now you got to go back, you've got a population that's got to have drinking water. So at what point do you sacrifice the river for the population and drinking water? ... Water is definitely a resource that is going to become more expensive. Absolutely, it is. How to give everybody drinking water in their houses and not reduce the water table, when you get that figured out, let me know. That's what I fear. I fear a drought like what we just came through. If there's another one, it's going to be much worse because we don't have the resources..."



View of Lake Monore, which is part of the St. Johns River, in August 2001 (USF)

He continues by sharing his concerns about who might have control over the available water resources:

“My greatest fear is who is going to have jurisdiction over this? Is it going to be used for drinking? ... Of course, everybody, whether you’re a boater or whether you’re not, wants a piece of the action. Everybody wants their usage of the water. Even if you’re going to go camp and you want to look over this tranquil lake, you still want your little campsite and you want your little tranquil lake and want to be able to go down and put your feet in the water. Everybody wants a piece of water, whether for boating, or not, or wherever they are.”

As far as development on the river, Archie does not believe that this will be a future threat because of the marshland that surrounds it. He does not believe that either industrial or residential development will occur right on the river. He shares his thoughts about future development on the river:

“I don’t think you’ll see any residential as far as any of the flats or marsh area. I think they’ll be set back. I think you’ll see it up to a certain point.”

Archie is also concerned about efforts to protect the natural habitats near the river. He believes that if natural areas are to be truly protected, then they should not always be open for human use. He shares his thoughts about what he believes can sometimes occur with land that is set aside for public protection:

“But we build these neat little wooden walkways that tie in with nature and everything looks fancy. It’s ten years later and there’s a hotel because there are so many people, you have to service the area. It’s not long before there’s a marina because those people need a place to put their boats... So I think in order to preserve, we’re going to have to set aside money, enough money, to buy up stuff and be careful about how we then use it. If we want to preserve an area, say, ‘We don’t want nothing else. We want the bears left alone. We want the deer left alone.’ That piece of property has to be totally left alone, or body of water.”

As the longest river in Florida, the St. Johns crosses many counties and plays an important role in many communities. There are a number of people and agencies that are involved in the future of the river. Efforts from all of these people will be needed to ensure the future health of the river.

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