

Wekiva River



Katie in her convenient store with assistant in background (USF)

This narrative is derived from an interview with Little Wekiva River resident, Katie Moncreif. It took place in a cabin at her canoe outfitting service and campground called Katie's Landing on the morning of October 23, 2001. Katie is a long time resident of the area, canoeist, and environmentalist. Her story of living on the Little Wekiva River and working on the Wekiva River is rich and informative and well worth reading.

Personal History



Katie's Landing (USF)

Katie Moncreif, 76, is originally from the Seattle area of Washington State, but moved around a bit before settling in central Florida. Her husband Russ originates from Virginia. For the past 27 years, Katie has run a small business appropriately called “Katie’s Landing” on the Wekiva River, although the couple lives upstream on the Little Wekiva River. Katie runs the business and her husband Russ is retired from a position as Dean at the local community college.

Katie was canoeing on the river one day nearly 30 years ago when she saw a small fish camp for sale. She quickly decided to purchase the property that eventually became “Katie’s Landing”, now a successful small business. When “Katie’s Landing” first opened there were no canoes or metal rowboats, just wooden rowboats of which Katie wishes she still had today. She reminisces of those early days:

“I had already been canoeing this river and that’s how we discovered it [the property] was for sale. Since I’m a canoeist, I thought it would be nice to have a place on the river never knowing what it involved to have a little business. It is very difficult if you’re in business to just sit there and not watch it grow. You have a very strong desire to watch it blossom and do what you can do. Our main desire, both my husband’s and mine, in buying this was that so other people could enjoy the river and this is why we’ve extended it to having canoe runs that would cover every inch of it.”



Cabins available for rent at Katie's Landing (USF)

Today, “Katie’s Landing” is a recreational site that provides RV park and tent rental sites, wilderness canoe trips, and log cabin rentals. The canoe adventures offer excitement, tranquility, beauty, and a sense of a disappearing natural Florida of the past. For more information on “Katie’s Landing”, see www.ktland.com .

History/Information



Bear Crossing sign near Katie's Landing (USF)



Sign leading to Katie's Landing (USF)

Located in north central Florida, the Wekiva River is 25 miles of clear spring water in a pristine and subtropical environment of north central Florida. The Wekiva River begins in Orange County and runs to its confluence with the St. Johns River. Essentially, Katie points out, one could paddle from the landing to India via the St. Johns River, which will take you to the Atlantic Ocean. “Sort of exciting, isn’t it?” Katie asks. According to Katie, the Wekiva River has many wildlife designations including Outstanding Florida Waterway, Official Florida Canoeing Trail, and the National and State Scenic and Wild Designation at both the state and national levels.

Wildlife on the Wekiva River is abundant. Over the years, Katie has spotted alligators, deer, otters, turtles, large mouth bass, and sunfish. The area around the Wekiva River is also known for its Florida Black Bear population. Just down the road from Katie’s Landing is the world’s only black bear underpass sign on State Road 46, which runs alongside the river. The underpass is a fenced in area that tunnels bears and other animals below the traffic so they are not hit by cars.

Also unique to the Wekiva River, according to Katie is a bird called the limpkin. Katie says it is a small water bird with a long beak, with which it eats snails. According to Katie, biologist Fred G. Thompson of the Florida Museum of Natural History in Gainesville recently discovered five aquatic snails previously unknown to science during an investigation of the Wekiva River Basin. About the limpkin, Katie explains:

“It is brown and white and it doesn’t spook. It’s very peculiar to this river. You can’t find it.... Well, occasionally in some other river or body of water, but very very rarely. It is a very unique, one of a kind sort of thing.”

In terms of vegetation there are cypress trees, oak trees and Spanish moss. Traditional land use along the river has consisted of growing citrus and lumbering. However, for thousands of years before the influx of Europeans, Native Americans including Timucuan and Seminole tribes inhabited the area. At “Katie’s Landing” there is at least one midden. A midden is essentially a prehistoric refuse heap consisting mostly of the discarded shells of edible mollusks. Katie says the Timucuan and Seminole Indians created the one on her property. Archaeologist Gary Ellis did a survey of the area and found evidence of major trade. Katie says what is “Katie’s Landing today might have been a major interchange for Indians trading with people as far as Georgia.” Katie says she has collected boxes of shards of the years.

However, after the Indians and before the fishing camp that became “Katie’s Landing”, the property owned by Katie Moncrief was reportedly used as a rest stop for navy soldiers during WWII. At that point, it was called Camp Seminole. Katie shares:

“They would sit around a great big long wooden primitive table with one light bulb shining down and they’d drink their beers and this was the place they came. Sanford had a Naval Air Base during WWII”.

Development



Convenience Store located at Katie's Landing (USF)

According to Katie, the growth impact on the area surrounding the Wekiva River has been phenomenal. With a less than an hour's drive between "Katie's Landing" and the Orlando/Disney area, this is not a surprise. Upon reflection of the growth she has witnessed over the years, Katie shares:

"I lived in Orlando in 1974 when we acquired this property and there were three houses all on Markham Woods Road, this 13 miles. Now, there is probably 3000 easily. So, the growth has just been tremendous and of course, 46 was not a problem to drive. Now, you have to wait ten minutes to just get out into it."

Much of the development in the immediate area of "Katie's Landing" is residential, although there has been some commercial growth along nearby State Road 46. Katie says the influx of residents is probably because of people's love for the country environment. Katie believes all the building has potential consequences to the river, mostly in terms of water quality due to road run off. Also of concern are the nitrates and phosphates that come from fertilizer and fuel the growth of invasive aquatic vegetation. As Katie reports, "Everybody wants a pretty lawn!" In attempting to do her part in slowing the development of the area, Katie is considering selling the property to Seminole County, who will protect it from builders. An update from Seminole County officials revealed that Katie decided to go ahead and do so, but at the time of the interview and still undecided, Katie shared:

"I think if we sold to a builder or a developer, it is possible that it could be developed to a higher degree. With 55 campsites, that seems hard to believe, but it could be. I think the government has some good ideas and I'm sure that they will really treat it well while still letting the public enjoy the river."

The Future



Wekiva River off of Katie's Landing (USF)

It is Katie's greatest hope that the future of the Wekiva River is environmentally positive. One of the reasons Katie thinks the river will have a healthy future is that the State of Florida has purchased a significant amount of land that borders the river with plans for protection and they hope to acquire more. As of 1998, the State of Florida owned over 50,000 acres of land surrounding the Wekiva River and its tributaries. This land includes forest, watershed lands, and parks such as the Wekiva River Basin GEOPark. St. Johns River Water Management District also owns land in the watershed with the sole purpose of protection (The Orange County Register Page 3, February 15, 1998). At the time of the interview, Katie discussed the possibility that Seminole County might be buying her property. As mentioned, an update in late 2001 revealed that Katie went ahead and sold the land jointly to the State of Florida and Seminole County.

Other factors ensuring the future of the Wekiva River is its numerous state and national designations as well as The Friends of Wekiva River (FOWR). The FOWR is a nonprofit organization working to preserve the beauty and natural functions of the Wekiva River system by promoting and protecting the aesthetic and recreational values of the river system, working toward restoration and continuation of the river and its tributaries, and presenting educational programs to achieve these goals. (For more on the FOWR, see <http://members.aol.com/fowr>). Also, Katie explains that Seminole County has a unique protection mandate called the Wekiva River Protection Act put in place a little over ten years ago. Part of this legislation mandates a 550 foot set-back for any building along the shores of the river. It is only hoped that all this land owned by the government is used in ways that only benefit the river. Katie explains:

"Hopefully, the governmental body is aware that they should limit the use of the river and bring awareness to the people using the river that they are there to enjoy and help protect it. I think one of the best things is to get people out there canoeing and kayaking to enjoy it. Then they'll understand the wonderfulness of it and therefore want to protect it."

With such continued efforts, it is expected that the Wekiva River will continue to provide people with a piece of Florida's wondrous past. Katie reports that she "would just like to see what we have in place stay there and have it be impenetrable, the protection that is."

Written By: Deanna Barcelona, M.A.