

Lake Harney



JP Ritchie (USF)

The following narrative presents the story of Lake Harney as seen through the eyes of second generation resident JP Ritchie. This account came together from an interview with JP on June 9, 2003. In it he shares his many years of experience living, working, fishing, and having fun on Lake Harney and the St. Johns River, of which the lake is a part.

Personal History

In 1913, JP's father, Samuel Columbus Ritchie, also known as SC, bought a 70-acre track of land that partly bordered the St. Johns River only a quarter of a mile from where it opens up into what is called Lake Harney. JP's parents moved to Florida from Pittsburgh with the hopes of making a living off the southern land by cattle ranching, farming, and fishing. As such, Bridge End Farm was established in 1913. JP tells the story:

"He [SC] came from Pittsburgh. He was like me a construction man. Mama came from Scotland. He met her up in Pittsburgh. That's a story in itself. When she came over here, she was going to take the Titanic, but something happened and she didn't.... Papa came down here and bought a piece of land, this piece of land we have here and then Mama came down later."

The Ritchie family and their farm were integral to the beginnings of the area called Geneva in Seminole County, Florida. SC Ritchie ran for County Commission twice, although he lost both times. JP's mother and aunt started the town's first post office. Overall, JP's father did relatively well for himself, notwithstanding the Great Depression. JP boasted:

"Papa would hook and line fish with two poles and a line you know... and catch bass and sell them. He'd go two days up the river, two days back down here to the house and have anywhere from 800 to a 1000 pounds of bass. Drive out with them on flat cars and that's the way he made his living."

JP Ritchie was born and raised on the land that his Papa tended. Over the years, work and some time in the military brought JP to places far from home. Doing various jobs such as construction, steel millwork, and phosphate mining led him to various places in the southeastern United States such as Jacksonville and Tampa. But even after serving in the Korean War during the early 1950s, JP returned home to his beloved house near Lake Harney. In his own words, "I had a house here the whole time and I ain't never pulled roots up. I just left the house here."



Lake Harney in 2002 (USF)



Lake Harney's shoreline in 2002 (USF)



The dock on Lake Harney where fruit was loaded to go to Sanford circa 1900s (Geneva Historical & Genealogical Society)



Fishing on Lake Harney in 1910 (Geneva Historical & Genealogical Society)

Eventually moving back, JP raised all five of his children on the family farm, two of which continue to live there – one with a young daughter, who counts as the fourth generation living on the same land originally bought by her great grandfather Samuel Columbus. Today, JP at the age of 72 years continues to enjoy the farm along with his second wife, two daughters, and granddaughter. The family tradition of cattle ranching and small farm activities continues in much the same way as it did during SC's time on the farm in the early 20th Century.

JP possesses many memories of times on Lake Harney in his youth, as a man, and now in his seventies. When asked to describe the body of water, JP replied: "It's a big lake and I've fished every damn inch of it." The lake and river have been so much a part of JP's existence and have taught him so much about life, he said he is not sure where he would be without them. He jokingly shared: "Well, I used to think I owned the lake. But I found out it owned me...My Papa always said, 'You can make a living on the river or you can have fun on the river.' Don't mean a difference and that's the way I lived all my life, right here!"

History/Information

Lake Harney is a 6268-acre lake that straddles two Florida counties – Volusia and Seminole. Essentially, Lake Harney is a wide expanse of water along the St. Johns River and if one follows it north back into the St. Johns, it will eventually lead you to Jacksonville and out into the Atlantic Ocean.

Lake Harney was named after William Selby Harney, a Colonel of the Seminole Wars in Florida during the early and mid 19th Century. There is a story that during the Second Seminole War (1837-1842), Harney and his men were camped near the lake awaiting Cook's Ferry to cross the river. While sleeping, Harney's tent was attacked by an Indian. He escaped, but a group of Indians chased him into the water, where he evaded them even as they took after the soldier by canoe. Eventually, Harney made it back to camp where he sounded off and the Indians were chased away on foot (http://www.usgennet.org/usa/fl/county/seminole/Geneva/naming_of_lake_harney.htm, Mal Martin, 2001).

Fort Lane, a military fort established in 1837, is also part of the Seminole Wars history of the area. Located on the southwest shore of the Lake Harney, Fort Lane is named after Colonel John F. Lane, known inventor of the pontoon boat. The fort was established as a supply depot under the campaign of General Thomas S. Jesup. Fort Lane was abandoned in March of 1838 and today exists as Fort Lane Park (http://www.usgennet.org/usa/fl/county/seminole/Geneva/fort_lane_park.htm, Geneva Historical & Genealogical Society). JP shared how signs of the wars still exist:

"I'd walk down along the bank when I was young and pick up arrowheads and stuff like that. Oh yeah...all kinds of signs you can see. If you look at one of these old cabbage trees, now we call them sabal palms...all the fans fall off of it and whatnot and get slick. Once in a while you see a black hole in there, you dig in there you'll find a rifle ball and that's from the war [Seminole Wars]. Now, see they've got a



Lake Harney in 1930s (Geneva Historical Society)



Lake Harney's shoreline in 2002 (USF)

mound over here, Indian burial mound pretty close to the river. But the Indians they didn't stay there, they stayed up here on the hill cause if they stayed up on the hill, they [Whites] couldn't see them from the boat. If they went down the river on the boat... they [Indians] could see them and move back up here on the hill in the scrub so they could hide."

Although JP says the topic of the Native American history of his home is fascinating to him, he sadly reports that history is all that it remains to be today. For more on Geneva history and the Seminole Wars, see <http://www.usgennet.org/usa/fl/county/seminole/Geneva/>.

Today, Lake Harney is a place of mostly recreation, although commercial fishing continues as does the traditional land uses of cattle ranching and citrus groves. What JP loves most about the area today is the wildlife it sustains. Wildlife known by JP to exist within the lake include bass, speckled perch, catfish, shad, mullet, and even stingrays, about which JP shared:

"Of course, the stingrays are the worst thing in the world in this lake. They come up from the ocean and they stay here. Yeah, that's the most potent thing in the world to get stung by. It's not brackish. They stay here year round."

JP said he has even heard reports of manatees that come up the St. Johns River, although he himself has never seen one. He does, however, see the occasional panther today as well as in the past, about which he shared:

"I remember this one time, I walked right up on top of a panther...me and my buddy did. The panther was more scared than I was and I was scared! I just didn't know what he'd do."

Other critters that call Lake Harney home include alligators, soft-shell turtles (which when eaten are known as "cooters"), wild boars, rattlesnakes, turkeys, bald eagles and other various birds. In fact, roughly seven deer feed near JP's daughter's home on the family property, where she regularly feeds them corn in the evenings. Overall, JP says wildlife is not like it used to be, although he does not know why. He reflected on how life used to be when animal and human interacted in a mutually symbiotic way:

"I'm just a good ol' cracker. You had to be tough back in them days. I'm telling you that now. If you take care of it [wildlife], it'll take care of you. But you got to know what the hell you're doing. A lot of times, people do more harm than good."

Fishing has been the primary love of JP's life as it relates to his relationship with the wildlife of Lake Harney. He both fishes for recreation and for food. In his youth, he would fish every day, sometimes twice a day. Now with age and a bad back, he is lucky to get out there two to three times a year. He talked of how fishing on both the lake and river has changed during the course of his life:

"[Early on] in the lake, the only way you could get out there was to row. We had no motors then. And no one was in a hurry cause you couldn't

get in a hurry with a damn pair of sticks you know. But now there are motors on the lake over 200-horse power. I have just a regular fishing boat with a motor now. Now? I don't get out there but two or three times a year. It used to be every day. Every day, twice a day."

Despite the decline in his fishing activities, JP still claims to know better than most what fishing these two major Florida water bodies is about. As he related:

"I fished a lot of my life here and it's a hard lake to fish. Of course, sometimes the fish are there, sometimes they ain't. They move about. Fish move about. Just cause they don't bite, don't mean they're gone. They either went up the river or down the river and you got to get them while they're here."

Over the years, JP has noticed water quality changes in both the river and the lake. He contributes much of it to a water sewage plant on the Econ River, which reuses treated water that JP just does not trust. He explained:

"That's [treated water plant] done a lot of damage to the river. They say it's treated water. What is treated water? They put chlorine in and that's it and that ain't no good for the fish. Then they spray the land with it. I don't know what damage that does, you know. They spray it on the ground, on the orange trees, and whatnot. Then it probably goes to the river or lake you know."

Development

Although Native Americans have been said to first occupy the area surrounding the point at which the St. Johns River turns into Lake Harney, early white settlement is very much a part of JP's own family history. As mentioned, JP's aunt started the first post office in Geneva, called the Bridge End Post Office after the family ranch of the same name. According to JP, fishermen and those working for the sawmill industry mostly occupied the area. There was also the Florida East Coast Railroad that stopped in Geneva and JP said there were a cluster of houses and small businesses where it stopped. About the community and the post office his aunt ran, JP shared: "There were enough people over there for her to open a store. Whatever she made was profit. Back then, you had to look at everything to make a living." He continued: "Papa knew everybody in Sanford just about and Geneva. And everybody was friends."

A major part of this initial settlement was the Osceola Cypress Company, established according to JP in either 1916 or 1917, just a few years after his father made the move there from Pittsburgh. JP told the following story of the sawmill industry in his hometown area:

"They used to drive a train up and down the railroad and haul out logs – cypress. And these were cypress logs that were three foot at the top. Not the bottom, but the top...big trees down here in the swamp. And they ran out of timber in 1939 I think it was, but still had 50 acres of lumber stacked up out here drying. So they stayed here until about '43 or '44. Then it moved to Fort Lauderdale."

As JP sees it, the area has changed a great deal during his lifetime and mostly for the worst. He describes the early days as: "It was good times and people got along good. It used to be I never locked my door. Now, you better lock it. You got to lock it."

When JP was a young man, there was not a single house on Osceola Road heading from his house near the lake all the way until you hit downtown Geneva. Today JP says, "There are homes all along it."

The Future

When asked about the future of Lake Harney, JP raised two primary concerns – the infringement of state regulation on his traditional way of life and the continued increase in development. About the many regulations and laws that attempt to protect Lake Harney and its ecology, JP says:

“They got all these laws...can’t fish with a net...They have a turtle season now. We used to eat turtles anytime we’d catch them. They got all kinds of regulations and they don’t need that. There are just too many laws now. They have infringed on my rights, are still infringing on them, messing up my lake and river.”

In terms of development, JP sees the “build it and they will come” attitude alarming as well as intrusive to the traditional way of life in the area, as with increased state regulation. In both concerns, JP sees the government as the culprit. About local government’s continued approval of building, JP attested:

“They want to build and get taxes. And it might be the trend, but it ain’t the right thing. They want to get like LA and LA ain’t never solve a problem. They got 12 lane roads, but it’s still crowded. They build more lanes, they build more houses.”

JP says the implications of such development threaten the natural ecology of the area. Particularly as it relates to wildlife, JP noted: “Like bears.... People move into the bear’s house and when they see the bear in the yard, they want to kick them out. Take care of this bear. You moved into his backyard. He didn’t move into yours.”

However, despite what JP sees as the infringement of increased state hunting and fishing regulations and local governments patterns of increased development, much of what JP values and loves about Lake Harney and the St. Johns River continues uninterrupted on his 70-acres of land. When asked if he believes the Ritchie family tradition of living and working on Bridge End Farm (est. 1913) will continue, he responded: “I imagine so.”

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