

Lake Howell



Shirley and Charlie Haynes (USF)



View of Lake Howell in February 2002 (USF)

The following narrative is based on an interview with Shirley and Charlie Haynes at their home on February 1, 2002. The couple has lived near Lake Howell for over thirty-five years, and Shirley's family has an even longer history on the lake.

Personal History

After they married, Shirley and Charlie Haynes lived in Orlando for a number of years. During this time, the couple enjoyed frequent trips to Lake Howell to visit Shirley's relatives who had lived on the lake since the 1940s. When the relatives needed someone to care for them, Shirley and her husband decided to move to the lake. They built their current home, half a block from Lake Howell, in 1966. Now most of their children and grandchildren live nearby. Shirley's daughter lives in the house where Shirley's relatives lived, what she calls "the old Anderson home place," a beautiful, spacious home on the lake.

Over the years, the lake has meant a great deal to Shirley's family. They still frequently picnic near the lake and participate in a number of water activities. Growing up on the lake, Shirley's children spent much of their time on the water:

"The boys would go on the lake and stay gone until it would worry me to death. We finally had to put that big bell in so we could call them in and make sure the alligator didn't eat them or they weren't drowned out there somewhere. They would go out there and lose track of time playing out there in the water and fishing and trying to catch alligators."

Shirley reports that her children and grandchildren have enjoyed jet skiing, water-skiing, wakeboarding, and fishing. Shirley's husband particularly took pleasure in fishing the lake "back when the fishing was good."

History/Information

Lake Howell is a 404-acre lake located in the Howell Creek watershed of Seminole County. Although Shirley has not kept up with LAKEWATCH data for the lake, which shows that the water quality was relatively good, she perceives Lake Howell's water quality as having decreased considerably in the thirty years she has lived on the lake. Some of the changes that she has seen include an overgrowth of vegetation and murkier water. According to Shirley, the water level of the lake is, however, considerably better than those of most lakes in Seminole County.



Baby bald eagles at Lake Howell (Haynes)



The hyacinth overgrowth on the lake (Haynes)

Lake Howell continues to support a variety of wildlife. The Haynes often see red fox, wild turkey, osprey, and eagles in the area. Years ago, Shirley monitored an eagle's nest for the Audubon Society:

"We've watched the eagles be born and raised and fly out of that nest for years. I've got pictures of them in my yard out here. That's a big plus for us living here."

Although the Haynes have not seen many deer, they have heard that there were a number of deer during a period before they moved to Lake Howell. In terms of wildlife in the lake itself, Shirley reports that a number of otters inhabit the lake. Charlie feels that the fish population has decreased considerably over the years that he has lived near Lake Howell. He remembers the lake when he and Shirley first moved there in the following way:

"This lake was just so clear you could have had the best speckled perch fishing on any lake in this county. You could go right out there and just drift right across this lake and catch speckled perch."

According to Shirley, Lake Howell has experienced a number of problems with overgrown vegetation over the years, and she feels that the lake's future is uncertain. Shirley reports that when she first moved to the lake, vegetation was not a problem; however, the lake has since experienced numerous periods of hydrilla and hyacinth overgrowth:

"When we first came out here this lake had a white, sandy bottom. It was so clear and so beautiful, it was like a spring. Certain times of the year we would get hyacinths. But there was never any hydrilla. All that hydrilla has come in since them."

For years, Shirley has been active in the Lake Howell Environmental Protection Association (LHEPA), a group concerned with issues affecting the Lake Howell Basin. The group managed to keep the vegetation relatively under control for a number of years, but the task has become increasingly more difficult. As Shirley remembers it, almost immediately after the organization had used a sonar treatment for the vegetation, paid for with funds collected from lake residents, Lake Howell experienced a sewer spill resulting from the widening of State Road 436:

"People had gone out on a limb to give nice amounts of money to do that and it was a very successful treatment of the lake. Then we got all of these nutrients and the lake was actually posted for a long time, 'No Swimming or Boating?...allowed.'"

As Shirley sees it, it has since become increasingly more difficult to solicit contributions from lake residents. When they have not been able to afford to treat the entire lake, a number of residents have cleaned up parts of the lake themselves. For instance, some residents have participated in "hydrilla-pulling parties":



Lake Howell in February 2002 (USF)

“We had a big harvesting machine. Our family would get together. We used to have lakefront parties years ago when everybody would go and share pulling out the hydrilla and hyacinths because the lake was socked in with hyacinths at one time.”

But unless all residents take responsibility for their lakefronts, the individual efforts do not make much of a difference to the overall health of the lake.

Fortunately, many residents have not given up on the lake. Recently a sister lake organization to LHEPA raised enough money to put grass carp in the lake to eat the hydrilla, and LHEPA continues to participate in maintaining the health of the lake as well, though with more of a focus on ecologically sound urban development than on the lake itself.

Development

As Shirley and Charlie understand it, land use in the area surrounding Lake Howell was historically agricultural. The area has been developed significantly since the Haynes first moved from Orlando in 1966, but they still feel as though they live in the “country”:

“At the time we bought...we thought it was really country, which it was. But it has slowly grown up around us. Now we still have the feel of country where we are, but half a mile down the road we’re right in the middle of the city. It’s very convenient, but here it’s so quiet and peaceful.”

When the Haynes first moved to the lake, there were a number of orange groves in the area. Shirley reports that State Road 436 was a dirt road and Red Bug Road and Howell Branch Road were dirt trails at the time. Instead of the residential and commercial development currently characterizing State Road 436, there were only a few scattered houses. The Haynes’s house was one of the first to be built in their immediate area but additional homes followed shortly:

“We weren’t here very long before neighbors started moving in around us. Almost everything you see around here is a new house.”

One reason that the Haynes feel like they still live in the country is that there are over 400 acres of land near their home that remain undeveloped. Owned by the Catholic Diocese, the land is used primarily as pasture for 35-40 heads of cattle. Despite the rural feel of the Haynes’s neighborhood, the surrounding area continues to grow.

For the most part, The Haynes do not see the residential and commercial development that has occurred as having a negative effect on their lives. However, Shirley does associate some of the lake’s water quality problems with the development in the surrounding area:

“The more developments you get, the more run-off you get with all the nutrients and fertilizers from all the new homes that fertilize their yards...it’s just further deteriorating.”

The Future



Lake Howell's shoreline (USF)

Although she will continue to work hard for the health of Lake Howell, Shirley remains uncertain about the lake's future:

"I wish I knew what the future of the lake was going to be. If we don't get some help from an outside agency, and from some chemical people [like Lake Doctors], who know what to do with this hydrilla and hyacinth problem...I predict that all the lakes will just be like Lake Apopka. Just be dead lakes. Think what we've spent just trying to keep this part [of Lake Howell] clean."

Citizen groups such as the Lake Howell Environmental Protection Association, headed up by Ken Anderson, and concerned citizens like Shirley remain key to the lake's future health. However, Shirley maintains that assistance is needed from outside agencies. She sees the battle for the health of Lake Howell as an ongoing one in which she will remain actively involved.

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