

Lake Jesup

The following narrative has been written based on an interview with Friends of Lake Jesup members Robert King, Tom McCord, and Darrell Leidigh at a group meeting on November 15, 2001. Robert and Tom grew up in the area, and Darrell has lived in Seminole County for over forty years; all three know Lake Jesup well. Together, they provided historical information on both the Friends of Lake Jesup organization and the lake that it serves. The resulting narrative presents an overview of the issues affecting Seminole County's largest lake, Lake Jesup.

Personal History

What is now called the Friends of Lake Jesup is a group that has undergone numerous transformations over the years. Robert King, current chairman of the Friends of Lake Jesup, explained that the organization can trace its roots back to the formation of a citizen's group in the mid-1980s when plans were made to construct a bridge that would run directly over Lake Jesup. In response to citizen protests against the construction, a Citizens Advisory Committee was formed to help inform the decision-making process. Those citizens were the seed for what would eventually become the Friends of Lake Jesup. The group laid out a list of 25 stipulations to be met in order for the bridge to cross over Lake Jesup. Major concerns were car run-off such as break fluid and antifreeze, and car exhaust being released into the lake. According to Robert, when the bridge was finally built, the Florida Expressway Authority failed to consider the conditions set by the citizens. Robert explained what happened next:

"The members of the Citizens' Advisory Committee got pretty upset because their name was on a document saying that they endorsed something that they, indeed, would never have endorsed. Well, several of those members from the original Citizens Advisory Committee for the Expressway Authority finally became so fed up with what they saw going on around them that they said, 'We can't stand by and let this happen, especially with my name attached to it.' And they formed a group. They went to their local government and legislators and said, 'We have to do something. Something is very wrong here and we need to do something.'"

The group they formed was the Lake Jesup Restoration Task Force, officially founded in 1988 by the Florida State Legislature. The mission of the Task Force was to discuss ways to build the expressway that considered the best interests of Lake Jesup. However, according to Robert, many members of the Task Force became frustrated because of lack of cooperation among citizens and agencies and felt as if they were not able to accomplish their goals. The Lake Jesup Restoration Task Force then disbanded in 1989.

Many citizens remained concerned about the potential effects the bridge would have on Lake Jesup, and in 1990 another group was formed, the Lake Jesup Restoration and Management Team. At this point, construction of the bridge had begun. Again, these citizens felt as if they could not get agencies to cooperate with them, so they went to the state legislature with their concerns.

In response to these complaints, one state representative, Marvin Couch, became involved and through the Florida State Legislature created a group called Friends of Lake Jesup. Representative Couch mandated that certain groups be involved in the Friends of Lake Jesup, such as the St. Johns Water Management District and Florida Fish and Wildlife Commission, as well as citizens' groups, such as homeowner associations – all of which were given voting power on decisions made about the bridge. Robert said about this group:

"There was a list of 13 people that had to attend these monthly meetings and they had to report back to the legislature... The legislation said that when this group, the Friends of Lake Jesup, made a recommendation to an agency that the agency had to either implement that recommendation or give in writing to the legislature why they didn't implement the recommendation of the group. So, it gave the group some clout. It forced every one to meet and that was in 1994 when the legislation finally passed. So that's when the Friends of Lake Jesup was technically born. The authority and the funding, and basically the direction of this thing, went to the [St. Johns River] Water Management District as the lead agency."

This legislation lasted for only four years and in 1998 the group was freed from the legal mandates of the Florida Legislature, which meant that many of the agencies were no longer required to attend Friends of Lake Jesup meetings. However, even without the mandate, many agencies continue to be involved with the organization. Robert shared:

“The irony of it is...that the agencies never went away. The agencies stayed. There are a couple of local governments [that] bailed... [If] they weren’t mandated by the legislature; they weren’t going to be here. But other local governments are here and all the state agencies are here and the [Army] Corps comes now...There is nothing that forces anyone to come to these meetings. What you saw here was people taking time out of their personal lives to come here. I don’t think anyone got paid to come here tonight...and there are 20 of them in the room. And that just amazes me. So, the whole thing of creating it with the Legislature was a good idea. It just ran into a little snag. We eventually got a lot accomplished.”

History/Information

Lake Jesup is the largest lake in Seminole County reaching 13 miles in length and expanding 16,000 acres in open water and flood plains.¹ The lake itself is roughly 8,000 acres. Located in the central part of Florida, Lake Jesup is actually part of the St. Johns River waterway. It connects to the St. Johns River at the north end by a narrow strait, and the lake is rather shallow. According to one source, Lake Jesup was named after General Jesup, the Commander of the Army of the South during the Second Seminole War from 1835-1842. Exploration of the St. Johns River for the transportation of troops and supplies led to the discovery of the lake and hence the naming.²

Tom McCord, native to the area, explained some of the Native American history surrounding Lake Jesup. According to Tom, the southern shore of Lake Jesup is called Kitchen Middens. A kitchen midden is a place where early Native American inhabitants processed food and disposed of the waste. Tom explained:

“You can finger through the little stream that runs from a flowing well and you’ll find pottery shards and pieces. They’re called blackened sized pottery. It’s a tannish colored pottery. And I’ve found a few pieces like that myself. The whole history around Lake Jesup is one of a fresh water lake system for a couple of the different native tribes to Florida. You’ll find pottery shards and pieces of bones where animals were processed and washed and cleaned. Many of the places along the lake...north shore and south shore have evidence of Native American habitation.”

In the middle of Lake Jesup is an island called Bird Island, which is sometimes referred to as Jane’s Island. Tom McCord remembers former Bird Island owner Forest Michaels, who farmed part of the island in the 1960s. Tom recalled, “He would bring his tractor on a barge over to Black Hammock Fish Camp and from that landing, he would tow his tractor out to the island, plow it, and grow tomatoes and things like that.” Today, the 30-acre piece of land is a nesting site for many birds. A survey of the island’s birds, conducted in May 2001 by the Seminole Audubon Society, documented a large colony of wading birds. Some of the birds that were observed include cattle egrets, white ibises, great egrets, glossy ibises, snowy egrets and blue herons.³ Bird Island has also been the site of eagles’ nests.

Vegetation in and surrounding Lake Jesup has changed over the years. During the interview, Robert talked about how water hyacinths were once quite prevalent on the lake. He said that during the 1950s and 1960s the lake was often “completely covered with water hyacinths.” Robert shared how the hyacinths had an impact on the local fish camps:

“...Boats would line up for a mile from the fish camps. Some fish camps when the wind would blow and they were packing up hyacinths, the boats couldn’t get out...They’d go to another fish camp. It could literally put them out of business. This was in the ‘60s. As a matter of fact, the fish camps would have a pusher boat. They would have one boat dedicated with like a cow catcher on the front, and he would clear a hole out so that people could get out of the fish camp. Otherwise, they lost all of their business. So, the poor guy would drive around all day pushing hyacinths out of the lake. Of course, the wind would blow them right back in again, but you know as long as he kept a canal open for them, they could get out. I remember times, when as far as you can see the lake was covered with water hyacinths.”

Water hyacinths are no longer present in Lake Jesup. This is because, according to Robert, the Army Corps of Engineers is responsible for the control of aquatic vegetation and they regularly spray the hyacinths. Although the spraying removes the hyacinths and opens up the waterway, it also leads to the build-up of rotting vegetation on the bottom of Lake Jesup.

The fishing in Lake Jesup has deteriorated over the years. King shared that 50 years ago, Lake Jesup was a world-class fishing destination. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, Lake Jesup was often described in the fishing magazine *Fish and Stream* as a beautiful and bountiful place to fish for bass. Fish camps abounded around the lake.

Robert pointed out that in just 40 years the lake has gone from being one of the most popular lakes in Florida for bass fishing to the second most polluted lake in the state with very minimal sport fishing. This situation, Robert believes, is partially due to development in the area and the pollution it has caused. He said: “The fact is that all of the muck that is in the lake now came from somewhere. It came from people; people that weren’t here prior to the 1950s.”

Development

According Robert, current Chairman of the Friends of Lake Jesup, the lake has been central to the development of the land that surrounds. He explained:

“The city of Orlando grew from a steamboat wharf on Lake Jesup. This was in the days when there was nothing in Florida. If anything came down the river, Lake Jesup was the head of navigation. Orlando was carried in on a wagon off of Lake Jesup. So, commerce was a big part of the lake all the way until the turn of the century. This was from the 1840s on through to the turn of the century...until the railroads took over and then they started building roads.”

Over the years, more housing has been built around the lake. This influx of people to the immediate area near the lake has had its effects on Lake Jesup. Many of the people living on the lake fertilize their lawns, leading to fertilizer run-off entering the lake. These nutrients encourage the overgrowth of vegetation. Robert summed up the situation in the following way:

“What they found was that the nutrient loads are higher coming into the lake now than they ever have before and that’s because when they built all of these new houses, paved over all the land and allowed these people to fertilize their land and drive all of their cars, pave over what was the permeative filter portion of the land. Now the nutrients go straight in.”

The Future

As some members of the Friends of Lake Jesup see it, Lake Jesup faces numerous problems that include the impact of development, wastewater management, and pollution, namely fertilizer. Key agencies and groups involved in the restoration of Lake Jesup are Seminole County, St. Johns River Water Management District, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, and of course, the Friends of Lake Jesup.

The members of the Friends of Lake Jesup who were interviewed for this narrative provided many suggestions to begin dealing with the problems they see facing Lake Jesup. As long-time resident Darrell Leidigh pointed out, “The fact of the matter is growth does not pay for itself.” He said, “An inexpensive way to get rid of hazardous waste is to not create it.” According to Darrell, fertilizer should be regulated so as to ensure proper use. One suggestion made by the group was to clean the muck from the bottom of Lake Jesup and use that as fertilizer instead of chemicals.

Recently, St. Johns Water Management District voted to buy a 10-acre plot of land that was once a wastewater treatment facility. Located in southern Seminole County, the intent is to convert the land into a working stormwater project that will reduce pollutants going into Lakes Howell and Jesup. Such initiatives are attempts to continue to turn back the effects of years of stormwater and agricultural runoff, and wastewater discharges. The District, in cooperation with other state and local agencies, has also been working to restore vegetation around the lake and find ways to improve water circulation with nearby St. Johns River.

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(Endnotes)

¹ St. Johns River Water Management District. *Lake Jesup*. (http://sjr.state.fl.us/programs/outreach/pubs/order/pdfs/fs_ljesup.pdf)

² Arthur E. Francke, Jr. 1995. *Early Days of Seminole County, Florida*. Seminole County Historical Commission.

³ Audubon Society. (<http://www.audubonweb.net/seminole/birdisland.htm>)