

Wekiva River



Grace and Bob Chewning (USF)

This narrative is based on an interview conducted with Bob and Grace Chewning at their home on the Wekiva River on April 30, 2002. Grace and Bob have had a home on the river since 1971, but Bob has been visiting the river since the 1940s when his father owned a fish camp there. During this interview, Bob and Grace spoke about the river and its surrounding environment, as well as the changes that they have seen over the past thirty years.

Personal History



Wekiva River in April 2002 (USF)

Bob and Grace Chewning have owned property on the Wekiva River since 1971. At the time they bought their land, both were working for the City of Orlando and were looking for a “weekend retreat” from the hectic activities taking place in Orlando. Both are now retired, but Bob was the Chief of Police for Orlando from 1967 - 1976 and Grace worked as Orlando’s City Clerk for over forty years. The Wekiva River provided the quiet and isolation that the couple was looking for. However, they were also drawn to the Wekiva, in particular, because of Bob’s familiarity with the area. In 1946, Bob’s father bought a piece of land on the river and built a fishing camp. Bob would often come to the river to fish, and his sister would water-ski. His father sold the property in the late 1950s. However, in the early 1970s when the Chewnings found what they were looking for, the property that they bought was actually three lots over from where Bob’s father had his fishing camp.

Bob and Grace have enjoyed the rural atmosphere of the river, especially their ability to raise animals. They have raised goats, hens, geese and peacocks. Bob also used to tend a large garden in which he produced almost everything that he and Grace would eat. Fifteen years ago, the Chewnings began living at their property on the Wekiva River full-time. They continue to enjoy the beauty and peacefulness of the area.



Bob Chewning with a catch in 1971
(Chewning)

History/Information

The Wekiva River is a 14-mile river that begins at the meeting of Wekiva Springs Run and Rock Springs Run and flows into the St. Johns River. The Little Wekiva River is the main tributary into the Wekiva River.¹ The actual spelling of the river’s name has often been disputed – Wekiva or Wekiwa. According to an article in the Orlando Sentinel, Wekiwa was likely the original name used by the Seminoles, but Wekiva came into official use in the late 1800s because of its spelling on maps. Linguist Mary Hass stated in the article that “We” refers to water and “Kiwa” means spring.²



View of the peninsula on the Chewnings' property in 1971 (Chewning)



Area near the peninsula that is now filled in with weeds (USF)



View of the vegetation along the Wekiva's shores in April 2002 (USF)



Grace harvesting hydrilla in the Wekiva in 1971 (Chewning)

The Wekiva is a rather shallow river. Bob related the following about the river's depth:

"What we call 'The Flats' is about three miles of the river that's like this; it's spread out. In a lot of places it's not over 1.5 feet deep. You can walk from one shore to another without getting your knees wet."

According to Bob and Grace, the river has changed considerably over the years, specifically the amount and type of vegetation. When he first started coming to fish at the Wekiva River in the 1940s, Bob described the river as having a hard, sand bottom with very few hyacinths and cattails. He shared the following:

"That was a sandy beach over there. You could sit here and watch the deer come in in the evening and drink the water. Now it's 150 feet of cattails before you even get to the shore."

The vegetation on the shoreline increased so much during the 1980s and 1990s that the Chewnings' dock was surrounded by cattails and they had to move it to another area of their property. The place where their dock once stood is now covered with mud and trees. Bob believes that part of the problem with the growth of cattails is the method used to eliminate hyacinths in the river – spraying them with chemicals. He asserts that this method has led to the build-up of muck on the bottom of the river and the proliferation of cattails. Bob would prefer that an alternate method be pursued where the hyacinths and cattails are pulled up manually or with machines so that they do not sink to the bottom.

Another change that the couple has seen in the vegetation on the Wekiva over the past thirty years is the disappearance of hydrilla. In the past, there was often so much hydrilla that, according to Bob and Grace, people would come to the Wekiva to harvest it and sell to pet stores for aquariums. Grace would often clean it up manually to help open the river flow. She explained how she used to gather the hydrilla:

"I built up my muscles. I don't know how many boatloads of eladia [hydrilla]. It was right out there where I was picking it up. You couldn't even get your canoe out...If you took a pitchfork and put it in the water and left it up, you could barely bring it up it was so heavy. It was full of water to start with. It was quite a chore to try to clean out this stuff."

Both agree that the situation with hydrilla in the river has improved greatly, having almost completely disappeared in the past seven years.

According to Bob, the variety of fish in the Wekiva has made it an ideal place for fishing. Grace also agreed that fishing in the Wekiva has been abundant. Bob described the fishing situation back in the 1940s:

"It was great. You could catch almost anything in this river that you could catch even in saltwater. Saltwater fish would come in out of the St. Johns. You could get speckled perch. You could get bass. When you went fishing you just expected to come home with some fish."



View of the Wekiva in the 1980s (Chewning)



Some of the Chewnings' goats drinking from the river in the 1980s (Chewning)

The area near the Wekiva River continues to support wildlife. On a regular basis, Bob and Grace continue to see alligators, woodpeckers, snakes, deer, raccoons, opossums and foxes. Bob believes that the number of deer visiting the Wekiva has actually increased over the past few years.

There are some animals that the Chewnings used to see frequently in the area, but no longer do. These include bears, armadillos, turtles and frogs. The disappearance of the frogs is of great concern to the couple. They shared the following commentary about how loud the frogs used to be:

Grace: "One thing that we notice that we really miss are frogs..."

Bob: "It was deafening here at dark. Just as soon as it turned dark the frogs would start croaking. It would actually get annoying it would be so loud."

Grace: "We would actually have to close the door to hear the TV."

Bob: "You don't hear them anymore."

Development

Since the 1800s, the Wekiva River has been a part of the commercial and economic development of the area. According to an article in the Orlando Sentinel, the logging and turpentine industries were active along the river until the outbreak of World War II.³ Bob said during the interview that cypress logging was once an important industry on the river and that, "As you go down the river you still see some of the big old stumps from when they cut it [cypress] down."

Tourism is another industry important in the history of the Wekiva River. According to Bob, there was once a paddleboat that ran through the Wekiva Falls, carrying both tourists and supplies for settlers. Even today, tourism remains an active business on the Wekiva. However, instead of paddleboats, canoes and fishing boats run up and down the river.

When Bob's father built the fishing camp on the Wekiva in the 1940s, he described the area as "real forest and wooded." When Grace and Bob bought property on the river in 1971, there were few houses near them. At that time, there were two fish camps on the stretch of river between State Road 46 and the St. Johns River. One was owned by the Cheney family, and the other one was eventually bought by the Moncriefs. George Cheney's fish camp, Wekiva River Haven, still operates on the Wekiva River, but Katie Moncrief's fish camp and canoe rental business was bought in December 2001 by the State of Florida and Seminole County.

Since moving to the Wekiva, Grace estimates that there have been six more homes built on their road. Bob said about the residential development in their neighborhood:

"All of a sudden we have three beautiful homes being built right now. We haven't had a house built up here in 20 years and all of a sudden they started buying and building."



George Cheney's fish camp in April 2002 (USF)



The west side of the Wekiva in April 2002 (USF)



The river looking north in April 2002 (USF)

It is important to note that, according to Grace, the east side of their road is owned by the State of Florida, as well as the west side of the river. Because of this, it is unlikely that many more homes will be built in the area. Furthermore, the land that was bought by the state and county, as well as a piece of property on the northern side of State Road 46, will be turned into a public park.

The Chewnings have also seen many changes in the surrounding area, especially on State Road 46, since moving to the river. Bob said about State Road 46:

“This was a little red-brick road, a little two-lane road...It was so narrow that if a truck was coming in from Mt. Dora or something you’d have to pull off the road. There wasn’t enough room for two vehicles.”

Before development really started in the area, Bob said that it was possible to drive from their home to Orlando City Hall without any stop lights or stop signs. Now with the increase of traffic in the area this is not possible.

According to Grace, there used to be many truck farms along the state road, which mainly produced vegetables, as well as tree nurseries. Bob and Grace would often buy vegetables at a roadside stand that is now an RV park. The change in land use from farms to residential and commercial developments began about ten years ago, according to Grace. However, even with these changes in the general area, their property on the Wekiva maintains a sense of tranquility. Grace said about living near the Wekiva:

“Once you get here you don’t hear any traffic off of 46. You don’t have any of that. You’re in your own little world.”

The Future

There are many people in Florida who are actively involved in protecting the future of the Wekiva River, especially the Friends of the Wekiva River, Inc., who Grace refers to as the “guardians” of the river. In 1988 the Wekiva River Protection Act was passed; the goal of this act was to help maintain the rural character of the river. Because of these protections, the area surrounding the Chewning’s property, much of which is under state protection, will likely maintain a rural atmosphere. However, the future of the river is in the hands of many people.

¹ “Wekiva River Subbasin” by St. Johns River Water Management District. Available at: http://sjr.state.fl.us/programs/acq_restoration/s_water/msjr/wekiva_sb.html

² “Wekiva or Wekiwa? Only a linguist knows for sure” by Howard Means, Orlando Sentinel, June 1, 1983.

³ “Logging operation tamed wilderness of Wekiva forest” by Jim Robison, Orlando Sentinel, December 13, 1998.

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