

# Bear Lake



Nancy Dunn and Bob Heideman (USF)

*The following narrative was derived from an interview with Bear Lake residents Nancy Dunn and Bob Heideman while riding on Nancy's pontoon boat one sunny Florida day in October 2001. This narrative provides a great amount of historical information, as well as current data, which reflect the roles of Nancy and Bob on Bear Lake.*

## Personal History

Nancy Dunn and her husband James have lived on the northeast side of Bear Lake for the past 26 years. The couple used to visit the lake back in the 50s and 1960s before actually buying property on its shores. In 1976 the Dunns purchased the home they now live in, which was at that time only a small cabin built out of cypress that had been used by a couple from Boston as a winter home. Ten years ago, they expanded and remodeled it. Today, Nancy is the president of the Bear Lake Preservation Association and her husband is a land surveyor who restores antique boats as a hobby. Nancy shares:

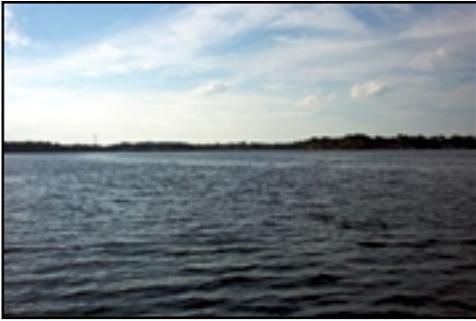
*"We had lots of friends that used to live here when we were growing up in the 50s. The lake has always been really clean and nice to swim in. We did a lot of sailing here in the 70s."*

Bob Heideman is a limnologist who has lived on Bear Lake for 11 years and currently works as President of Aquatic Eco-Systems, a company that sells aquaculture and lake/pond equipment. His expertise with lakes and water resource management was highly beneficial to the interview and resulting narrative. Bob moved to Bear Lake because he needed a landing strip for his amphibious airplane and says he uses the water in the lake for take offs and landings. Bob says he has stayed on Bear Lake for his mental well-being, which is what living on the water provides him. With all of his experience, Bob rightfully claims Bear Lake one of the best bodies of water around. He says:

*"Having been in the lake business for 30 years, I've visited most of the major lakes around the world from the Artic Circle to Lake Geneva in Switzerland, Lake Tahoe, New Zealand, and everywhere except for Lake Titicaca. Of course there are more beautiful lakes, you know with mountains around them and stuff like that, but in terms of living on a nice clean lake, Bear Lake has been right up there with the best of them."*

Nancy and Bob are both active advocates for Bear Lake and together they possess a wealth of information on the lake and its surrounding area. Bob shares:

*"As you look around central Florida and what lakes are the best to live on, this is one of the best. You can count the best lakes on one hand and of those, Bear Lake is right up there. If not the best in this area, it's very very close to it. As Nancy said the size is right, the water quality is right. The fish are good to eat. The neighborhood is fine. You couldn't find a better place to live in central Florida in my opinion."*



*View of Bear Lake at time of interview (USF)*

## History/Information

---

Bear Lake is a 310-acre lake located in the Little Wekiva Watershed of Seminole County in the town of Apopka, Florida. Bob says Bear Lake is the cleanest lake in the area and that the water quality is good enough to swim in. Nancy says Bear Lake is a peaceful place, great for boating, fishing, and skiing.

In terms of wildlife supported by Bear Lake, Bob reports seeing a pair of bald eagles that frequent his house. He says there used to be otters, but they have not been spotted lately. In the past though, Nancy has seen three of the playful creatures frolicking on her boat early in the morning. Nancy says they used to have great horned owls that have not been seen in a while, but Bob hears them at night sometimes. Other fowl seen in and around Bear Lake are various wading birds like the great blue heron and an occasional egret. Bob's theory for the increase in wading birds is that the recent drought lowered the water levels of the wetlands forcing the wading birds to nearby lakes such as Bear. Bear Lake is also home to pelicans and a few mallard ducks. Bob says there is also a group of seagulls that winter on the lake. There are also various fish in the lake that, according to Nancy, are clean enough to eat. She reports:

*"The lake is very healthy as far as bass, there are schools of them out there all the time and you got your nice speckled perch, brim, and catfish."*

In terms of the vegetation in and around Bear Lake, there are some long leaf pines, pond pine, a few cypress, water primroses, maiden cane, alligator weed, torpedo grass, cattails, sweetgum, and some loblolly bay plants among others. About the pond pine, Bob explains:

*"The pond pines are those where the feet can stay wet. Normally people say oh, that's a pine tree, but how is it living that close to the water? Well it is a pine, but its called a pond pine, a little variation on the same thing and they can tolerate wet roots for extended periods of time."*

Historically, Bear Lake was known for its fishing, and legend has it that a recently torn down cabin was a hangout place for soldiers during the Civil War. Nancy says they would play cards and drink there. During World War I, according to some anecdotal stories, the Army had a rest area on the west side of the lake where soldiers were held. It was a place they could rest, sleep, and do vehicle repair. Bob shared:

*"One fellow said that they buried a bunch of junk out there such as engines. They just dug a hole and buried it. I haven't heard if they've dug it up or anything yet, but that's where they're building the new church, so maybe they'll run into something."*



*Example of large-scale homes being built (USF)*

## Development

---

According to Bob, one of the first industries set up around Bear Lake was a sawmill run by the Anderson family in the southeast corner of the lake. Cypress trees from around the lake and the surrounding area were cut down and floated to the sawmill where they were processed. This went on from 1896 until the early 1900s. Prior to that, Bear Lake was primarily a fishing lake with homes scattered around its shores.

Today, Bear Lake is mostly residential. Nancy and Bob's estimate on the number of houses on Bear Lake is between 160 and 180. Nancy's house was built in 1939 and was most likely one of the first to be built. From around the mid 1940s up until the 1960s, there was a little "mom and pop" kind of general store on the east side of the lake. The Beggs, who sold kerosene, cigarettes, milk, and other such items out of their house, ran it. Bob said he has heard some of the elders around the lake say that in the early days, they would row a boat to the Beggs' store to get whatever they needed, then row back home.

In the 1950s, a subdivision called Paradise Point was built on a strip of land that comes out onto the lake by the same name. Developers dredged sand out of the lake to strengthen the land on which they built leaving holes around the lake bottom in that area. Nancy says that the number of homes has not changed much over the years, but the size of them has. Nancy reports:

*"Actually, what has happened is that they've been tearing down the old cracker box homes that were on the east side of the lake and the north side of the lake. These are the older areas that developed along Bear Lake Road and Holliday Avenue. Now, they're rebuilding large estates and that's been the trend, but most of the lots were built out when I moved here in 76."*

Bob adds:

*"The watershed was pretty much developed by the early 60s and it hasn't changed much other than the size of the homes. Like Nancy said, they're tearing down the small ones and putting up the mansions."*



*Water Quality Monitoring System (USF)*



*Water Quality Monitoring System (USF)*

## The Future

---

One future trend of Bear Lake, as seen through the eyes of Nancy Dunn and Bob Heideman, is the continued development of newer and larger homes in the place of smaller and older ones. Overall, the future of Bear Lake seems relatively sound. Any issues that might be detrimental to its health appear to be monitored closely. Nancy has monitored the water levels of Bear Lake with University of Florida Lakewatch for the past ten years, which provides her with some valuable data and statistics to monitor the trends of the lake and its pollution sources. One environmental concern for the future raised by Bob is the likelihood that with the big new homes, will come big fertilized lawns, which Bob says, not only makes the grass green, but the lake as well.

Recently, a water quality monitoring station was deployed by Seminole County, the first of its kind in the area. Currently it is experimental, says one Seminole County official, but the goal is for the station to read water quality information hourly and send it to a base station twice daily. This data will then be uploaded to the Seminole County online Watershed Atlas ([www.seminole.wateratlas.org](http://www.seminole.wateratlas.org)).

There is also the Bear Lake Preservation Association, a group of concerned citizens living on and near Bear Lake. This group meets regularly to discuss water quality issues, property value concerns, and social affairs. The group also publishes a quarterly newsletter that provides relevant information to the 800 homes that occupy the Bear Lake Watershed. With such continued efforts, Bear Lake is sure to continue providing its residents with a peaceful view as well as a place to fish and swim.

**Written By: Deanna Barcelona, M.A.**