

Canals, lakes provide different way of looking at Winter Park

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Editor's note: This is the first installment of a two-part historical look at Winter Park lakes as seen by traveling through their canals.

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When Winter Park was founded, its beautiful lakes dictated where the streets were built.

The focal point then was definitely the lakes. Evidence of that fact remains today in the form of scores of meandering streets which gently curve and twist between and among them. Many persons in Winter Park are aware and proud of their lakes and canals but, as the decades slip away and the suburbs spread farther out, longtime residents are constantly amazed that so few people in today's thriving Central Florida metropolis are familiar with the priceless beauty of the lakes.

The splendor of the old and new mansions—which ring the shoreline of virtually all of Lake Osceola, most of Lake Maitland, much of Lake Virginia and a sprinkling too of little Lake Mizell—is hardly known to motorists who whisk to work from Winter Springs, Oviedo, Casselberry and other environs.

Riding recently as a guest of the city in a police boat captained by Officer Randall Durkee, together with my son Scott, I happily viewed once again the story of the lakes of Winter Park.

It was a nostalgic voyage indeed for me that 45-minute excursion, a trip not taken for at least 30 years, perhaps longer.

Growing up in Winter Park in the 1950s, I knew the lakes well. I didn't live anywhere near the lakes, rather on "the other side of the tracks" so to speak, but my buddies—now successful architect Jack Rogers, attorney Bob Green, well-known oral surgeon Wilbur Davis, businessman Alan Cone, and barefoot ski demon Mitch Taft—took me out in their boats from time to time.

I was a lousy skier, nothing like trick and slalom specialists Wilbur Davis and Mitch Taft, but enough

Remember When:

A view of Winter Park's past courtesy of the Winter Park Historical Association and the Winter Park Library

of a "good time Charley" I suppose to get to go along in the days when playful lake orange fights reigned, Fleet Peeples was teaching swimming at Rollins College, and the students there were having those legendary night parties on Dog Island in the middle of Lake Maitland which were probably more tame than their advance billing.

We left the old, slanted police boathouse on Lake Osceola, familiar with its funny pointed roof and headed for the Venetian Canal connecting Lake Maitland. I looked for the ornate Seminole Hotel to my left, searching for the distinct yellow

and red design on the grand lady but of course she wasn't there, retired to yellowing photographs years ago.

I made do with viewing the elegant homes built where she had stood so long, and reminisced about the old "Naptha" tour boat the hotel had at the turn of the century, undoubtedly a forerunner idea for the splendid Boat Tours available now, which leave daily with guide and microphone from the foot of Morse Blvd.

Officer Durkee puttered through the Venetian Canal, dodging a

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revolving lawn sprinkler. The Venetian Canal was built in 1889. The waterway was natural back then but had to be improved. It was known as "Palmer Brook" and the bridge built there cost \$335 in those days.

The wooden bulkheads along the canal are channel markers, not true seawalls. The city, I was told, is constantly trying to get people not to shore up earth behind them. They did look fragile for earth embankments.

Cruising around Lake Maitland, we made out the former Alabama Hotel, hidden by sentinel trees, and saw the swim side of the Winter Park Racquet Club. We sped around the Isle of Sicily, finding the little bridge all shored up with crossbeams. Smart move. There's plenty of Lake Maitland to enjoy, no need to constantly motor under the novelty of that quaint bridge. I saw the home of my old friend Mitch

Taft, which faces Pinetree Rd. (the other Winter Park, remember?) and laughed aloud at his water antics. My son and the policeman looked strangely at me.

Our police boat, earning nods and propitious bows from other boats, moved slowly back through Venetian Canal. I pointed out the now fancy U.T. Bradley crew boathouse to Scott and told him the crew team from Rollins in the old days had to run down from campus even before Coach Bradley's arduous practices. Maybe that's part of the reason they did so well in crew, often rowing in Philadelphia at the prestigious Dad Vail Regatta on the same river where Princess Grace's brother rowed.

After passing the "No Wake" sign, Officer Durkee gunned our sleek torpedo for Fern Canal and Lake Virginia beyond. We passed the elegant Brewer Estate on Lake Osceola and sent disturbed waterfowl flapping off into the cobalt blue sky.

Continued next week.