

Remember When:

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

Boat ride on lakes recalls another era

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

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Fern Canal, between Lakes Osceola and Virginia, is the only one of the three main canals which was not natural or partially natural. The owner of a sawmill on Lake Virginia had the waterway dug near the turn of the century so he could float logs through to Lake Osceola.

I haven't the foggiest idea why Fern Canal is so named. Bamboo

Canal would be more appropriate. There are stands of bamboo along the canal that must have been planted during the reign of China's Ming Dynasty.

I remembered them distinctly from my youth in addition to the elegant bald cypress and the giant pine tree growing right on the canal, one so large it is mistaken for a western Ponderosa pine. I believe a glimpse of that lofty pine can be seen from Osceola Ave.

I was riding in a police launch gathering old memories for this story. And there it was, another gem from my youth—the quaint boat-

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NO. 26. OUTLET TO LAKE VA. LOOKING S. WINTER PARK, FLA.

Virginia Canal as it appeared circa 1882-87. (Courtesy of Winter Park Public Library)

house-apartment jutting out to the canal just as you break free from

Fern Canal and Lake Virginia opens up before you.

Forty years flew back in an instant. I gasped! Then I told Scott and Officer Durkee about the time my dad and I were fishing in a rowboat and 5-horsepower Elgin motor in Lake Virginia about 1948 and spotted a rattler swimming down by the Lake Berry cove. Dad chased it with an oar, practically swamping us. It curled off into the weeds, escaping his splat! splat! with head and rattles lifted free of the water.

We headed west, churning past Dinky Dock, much improved in recent years—water and site—thanks to local folks like Dr. Jim Madison, who have great concern for the lakes of Winter Park. I learned to swim there at Dinky Dock in 1947 at YM-CA Day Camp.

The skyline of Rollins College, dominated by the spire of Knowles Chapel coming into view, focused our attention. Yes, skyline. Rollins has quite an impressive skyline from the water, one quite different from the one viewed motoring along Holt Ave. Officer Durkee showed me where the new Rollins boathouse would be built.

The shoreline there reminded me of the high wooden dive tower which was a fixture on Lake Virginia for decades. Jumping off that dive tower at age 8 or 9 was practically tantamount to initiation into ritual manhood in some faroff place like New Guinea. It took you a year—at least it did me—to coax yourself up to a closed-eye leap from that three-story white dive apparatus.

We stole a decorous gaze at the bleacher of sunbathing beauties at the Rollins pool, turning every bronze face in our direction. Riding in a police boat certainly is great for the ego!

We circled past College Point, a jut of fashionable land which was largely underwater for a time during Hurricane Donna in 1960. In passing, we almost overlooked the canoe canal to Lake Sue. That canal is the only natural-bank canal on the lakes and it is passable only by canoe with need for several portages.

Along this hyacinth and lily pad-choked stream once lived the legen-

dary alligator named Levi. Levi weighed a thousand pounds and was over 12 feet long, the story went, and once terrorized pets in the area before a taste for dogs and cats spelled his doom at the hands of a citizen vigilante committee.

On to Lake Mizell we charged, leaving dobermans and rottweilers splashing along the shore, barking courageously at our wake. Genius Canal, connecting Lake Virginia and Lake Mizell, is only about a hundred feet long. The three of us needed to crouch in order to pass under the Genius Dr. bridge. The shore of Lake Mizell is the least developed along the Chain-of-Lakes, largely because the Genius property stretching all along the curving southern end is still natural and protected. Another memory jolted happily my recollection, the little white wooden boathouse in a thicket of trees along the southwest shore, untouched by time. The year could just as easily have been 1946 for me.

Genius Dr. is closed now, a victim of too much local growth and too much rampant curiosity. What a wonderful experience it was to drive slowly along Genius Dr. in years past, feeding the peacocks, taking family outing pictures, enjoying the flamevine, bougainvillea, and azaleas with their riotous profusion of color. Our family still has home movies of browsing along Genius Dr. in the 1950s, taking in the sights with other folks after church on a Sunday.

It was time to return to our departure point on Lake Osceola. Leaving secluded Lake Mizell, we beckoned a tour boat with a dozen patrons to enter into Fern Canal in front of us. My son Scott spied a brown barn owl perched in a leafy tree overlooking Genius Canal. The owl gave us that patented, unruffled professorial stare which owls bestow to humans in the daytime, as if to say, "Well, what did you expect? Everything is fine with these lovely lakes, that's why I stay here."

We laughed aloud despite the fact we desperately didn't want our 45 minute voyage to end that glorious April afternoon. Take a boat tour on the lakes of Winter Park. It might do wonders for your blood pressure.