

# Lake Ellen Narrative

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## Barbara Stover



Barbara Stover is a long time resident of the Lake Ellen area

Barbara Stover, nee Stall, has a life long history with Lake Ellen and the surrounding area. The Stalls were among the first to cultivate the land of West-central Hillsborough County. The memories she shares about growing up in Tampa offer a glimpse of what life was like when Carrollwood was still a wilderness, when Dale Mabry did not extend past Gunn Highway and when urban development had not yet inundated Central Hillsborough County.

Barbara shares her memories with us. She reminisces:

"Lake Ellen has been an important part of my life since the late 1930's. I grew up on the west side of Orange Grove Drive and Stall Road. My brother, Tom Stall and I went swimming in this beautiful lake each day. My grandparents, Berton and Clara Stall, bought the property in the early 1900's; there were 80 acres. They came to Lake Magdalene to start the church that is now known as Lake Magdalene United Methodist Church. Their orange grove later was bought by my parents, Hanley and Connie Stall. In 1977 the grove became what is now Lake Ellen Woods [subdivision]. My dad irrigated the grove out of the lake, which is now right in front of my home.

During the War Years, 1941-1945, Lake Ellen Beach, owned by Mr. and Mrs. Gene Beam, was fun for everyone. Busses brought loads of soldiers from MacDill Air Force Base to enjoy swimming, picnicking, and dancing. You had to walk across a little wooden bridge to get to the area where the dancing [was], with a jukebox. As a child, that was so much fun to watch the soldiers and their girlfriends dancing... they were jitterbugging, and that was new to me. As a nine-year-old, I was just excited to be there.

In the 40's, only about 12 homes



The Stover's children water-skiing on Lake Ellen in 1968. The northwest shore is depicted in the background  
photo by: Barbara Stover

were on the lake, including the Salvation Army Home for Unwed Mothers at the southeast end of the lake. Over the weekend, the lake is popular with boats of all sizes as well as fishing boats. We have many ducks, ducklings, birds and cranes, plus one alligator, and the sunsets over Lake Ellen are beautiful. In the winter months, I feel like we have our own "Golden

Pond". Our children Mike Stover and Debbie Smith and grandchildren, Aaron, Emily and Christy Stover and Luke and Lane Smith have had many ski parties on the northeast end of the lake. The only wooded reserve area left joins our property and goes north to Fletcher Avenue. We feel as if we're still in a little bit of country. I can't express how happy I am to be living here. We are truly blessed to live on a beautiful spot on Lake Ellen.

The picturesque shores of Lake Ellen have provided a backdrop for the lives of three generations of the Stall family. Barbara's grandparents, Berton and Clara Stall, had eight children. Barbara comments, "Back then he actually supported his eight children and he was also on the board of the Florida Citrus Exchange...one of the directors...They [her grandparents] started out in the wagon train [from Missouri] in October of '94 and got to Florida in December of '94. There was a horrible freeze in 1895. They had already set out trees and had to start all over again. He also gave the property which is now Lake Magdalene United Methodist Church...[He was] a very generous, wonderful man."

Barbara's parents set aside a plot of land for her on the shores of Lake Ellen when they sold the family groves in the late 1970's. Since 1988 she and her husband Earl have lived on the northeast shores of the same lake she often admired as a child. She recounts, "I can remember climbing a tree with a friend, Judy Morris, at the south end of the lake where the Country Wood Apartments are now. There was a jacaranda tree, [its] branches going out in all directions, and I can remember sitting up there thinking, 'Why isn't our house on this beautiful lake?' I have always loved this lake and it was a dream come true when my parents gave me this piece of property." Barbara Stover's life has been shaped by her association with Lake Ellen. In her home on its shore, she is truly living her dream.

## Lake Ellen

Lake Ellen is a 51-acre lake located within the



East shore of Lake Ellen, 1999

Sweetwater Creek watershed and just a stone's throw away from Fletcher Avenue. The lake historically was clear with a sandy bottom. Barbara remembers, "As a child swimming on the south end of this lake, it was so clear. You could open your eyes and paddle around under water. Now it is so murky, because of the runoff I think... Numerous things that can cause a lake to be very clogged and unhealthy looking. It's doing better, but there is still a ways to go."

Previous use of the land around the lake was mainly devoted to agriculture, but many long time residents of Hillsborough County will remember the public beach located on the southwest shore of the lake. The groves and the public beach have been surrendered to development, but one undeveloped area still remains as a wooded lot adjacent to the Stover's property.



The Northwest shore of Lake Ellen Remains Undeveloped

Despite a highly developed shoreline, the lake still helps to support wildlife, especially water fowl, about which Barbara comments, "There are some ducks out there now... I wish the crane would come because he, or she, stands so tall and proud and those little skinny legs come up so graceful. Then they have a baby. It is so funny because the mother is white and the father is gray and this little baby is such a mixture, you are not sure if it is gray or white. That little one is only so high... They come flying in and I am not really sure where they nest... See we have a very wooded area here and they could easily come out of there... He is very proud of his little family."

In addition to waterfowl, like many Florida lakes, Lake Ellen is home to transient alligators. Barbara comments, "... it scares me, I really believe the alligator must have gotten to some of these ducks because we used to have so many ducks. One day when my dad was still living we looked out and we saw this nose and the eyes coming real slow across [the lake] and he stopped in the grass over there and just sat there. It was April and my dad said it was mating season and that's why he was so brave. He sat there for a long time... You never really know if you have one or more. I feel like they, the alligators probably took care of some of our ducks. I know it's part of Florida and it's part of being so close to this wooded reserve here because right now it's pretty dry. In wet times, we have a lot of water, it's very dry now. Those 'gators come and go."

## Development

From a history centered on agriculture and recreation, Lake Ellen has grown into a high-density residential development. The number of single family homes has increased from twelve houses in the 1940's to more than 40 today. In the late 1960's, Lake Ellen Beach closed and was replaced by condominiums selling in

excess of \$200,000. The Stall's groves were sold in the 1970's to accommodate the Lake Ellen Woods subdivision.



Condominiums have been built on the site of what was once Lake Ellen Beach

Barbara regrets to some extent the loss of the groves that were such a large part of her family's history and her childhood. She comments, "Back then, everything was geared so differently than now. You could make a go with agriculture. You would have a tough time now. I have watched it here in...the late 60's, 70's and the 80's.

Everything grew like a mushroom. All of the orange groves turned into subdivisions. It is sad to see. It really is, for a country girl like me. I hated to see it. I can understand the economics of it...[the land is] much more valuable as a subdivision..."

She continues, "I remember when the Old Carrollwood was built in the early 1960's. There have been a lot of changes. Everybody got so excited when the Village was built, Carrollwood Village. When I was a child, that was 'Never-never Land' and nothing but trees and palmettos. Who would go over there? It turned out to be a very valuable spot."

Homes, apartment complexes and streets circle Lake Ellen today. The only reminders of the once rural atmosphere exist in the landscaping of the yards surrounding the lake and in the protected wetlands on the northeast shore. Despite the increases to the built environment around the lake, Lake Ellen remains a beautiful reminder of days gone by.

## The Future

Barbara and other families who have long been residents of West-central Hillsborough County share a set of memories about an environment that has largely disappeared. The land surrounding the lake has been built up, forever altering the look of the land they knew in their childhood. Remaining for them are the lakes themselves holding their own and providing a link to times gone by.