

Lake Island Ford Narrative

Ensley Williams



Ensley Williams as a young man. Many of his years were spent on Lake Island Ford

Ensley is a second generation resident on Lake Island Ford. His father George Williams moved his wife, Azalia and their eight children to Odessa from Pensacola. When the Williams family first came to Odessa, George worked for the Gulf Pine Lumber Company owned by Mr. Charles Lutz and Mr. Muller.

Upon arrival in Odessa, the family lived in a house on the millpond. George Williams was the superintendent of the mill that employed more than 100 workers. His duties included the supervision of the timber from the time it arrived from the woods until it was ready to be shipped out. In addition he was responsible for hiring and firing employees and had an interesting way of interviewing potential workers. Ensley comments, "He would ask, 'Are you a mill man?' and he would hold up his hands and there would be a finger or two missing and he would say, 'No, you're not a mill man!'"

George purchased twenty acres on the southern shore of Lake Island Ford. The family's house on Tarpon Springs Road was completed in 1913 and the family, with the exception of George who stayed at the mill, moved to the narrow saddle of land between Lake Island Ford and Lake Keystone.

To augment the income for the family, George Williams planted a grove of grapefruit trees. Ensley explains:

"...His younger brother [Wilbur] was conductor on the Atlanta Coast Rail Road that ran through Odessa...the reason [his father] started doing the grapefruit trees is ...the hotel in St. Petersburg, owned by Wilbur, was serving grapefruit...At one time we had about fifty trees, mostly grapefruit trees but the freeze got them all... They were budded on lemon stock and a lemon tree can't stand the cold. If they had been budded on sour orange stock, the grove would still be here, the freeze wouldn't have killed it."



Source: Ensley Williams

The original deed to the twenty acres purchased by George Williams on the south shore of Lake Island Ford



The Original Williams' home, built in 1913, still stands on the north side of Tarpon Springs Road

The family grew to number thirteen and the eleven children grew up on the shores of Lake Island Ford in a two-bedroom house with long sleeping porches. Ensley talks of his childhood, "Back in those days we had the general run of the lakes in the area. We had boats on several of them...we'd go and fish whenever we wanted to...we gave the lakes names, names of our own"

The childhood lives of the Williams kids were filled with activities on the area's lakes. Ensley remembers setting sail on the weekends on a houseboat built by his father:

"We'd go out, leave Saturday afternoon after my dad got off work and my mother would have everything already loaded on the houseboat...it had a wood cook stove...we moved it with oars and it had a front porch on it...Once we got the thing moving, it was as easy as anything to move [the boat] without trouble...Boy, it was surely wonderful with all the picnics. We'd invite our friends to have a picnic on the houseboat...when night came, we would bed down and let the boat drift and the next morning we'd be up against the cypress trees. Spend all day Sunday getting back. Surely it was a wonderful thing."

Many of the Williams children attended the Lake Fern School and Church located near the intersection of Gunn Highway and Lutz Lake Fern Road. The family did not have a car until Ensley was fourteen, when in 1919 he spent \$350 for a second hand Model T. Exploring the land around the lake bred a love of the land in the Williams children. Ensley's brother John bought forty acres on Lake Alice, a locale he had admired since his teenage years when he and a friend camped for several days on the north end of the lake. Later in his life, John bought the land for \$1800 from Tom Henderson and began growing citrus.



Ensley Williams and two of his sisters in the 1920's

The western half of the family's original twenty acres on the land between lakes Island Ford and Keystone was sold because of financial necessity. Ensley shares the story:

"We were swindled out of the west end of the property after my dad died... My dad had left the lumber company late in 1925 and that was during the Great Florida Land Boom; 1925 was the end of it. So, my dad sold the land to for \$1000 an acre, ten acres, and

got \$1000 down for it. My dad died shortly after that and the boom busted and [the buyer] didn't make any more payments...After a while, this woman came along and offered my mother \$2600 for \$10000 worth of property. That \$2600 looked like a lot to her after that boom busted, a lot of people were out of work...She had those kids to raise and put through school. She accepted the \$2600. It was that stinker who had bought it in the first place and had this woman buy it for him! Wasn't that something? After a while she fell off the payments...We thought it would come back to my mother again [but] my mother didn't have any legal rights to sell it in the first place..."

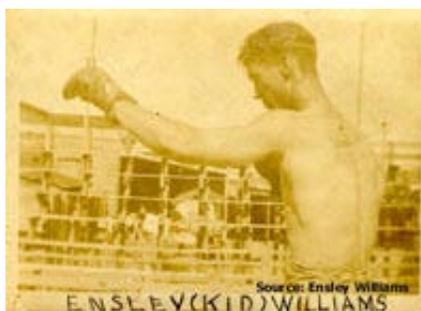


The Williams children in a 1920's photo

Eventually Azalia Williams moved into town to put the remaining children through school. Ensley comments:

"My youngest brother [Quentin Williams], he was only about ten years old. He went to Seminole Heights Elementary School...When he was a kid, he used to have to compete with older children...and he was as rough as could be...Everything he participated in, he excelled in it. He had all kinds of athletic contests and he won them all. They started calling him 'champ' and from then on, he was 'Champ Williams'. He didn't play high school football. After he graduated from high school, he played for the University of Tampa. They called him the 'Cinderella Man of Football'. The first time he carried a ball in a football game, he said, 'The first time they give me the ball, I'm going for a touchdown.' And sure enough he did."

Ensley was also quite an athlete. He was an avid professional boxer and he went by the tag name 'Kid Williams'. By the time Ensley reached his adult life, he had already left home for Tampa where he worked a wide variety of jobs including cabinet making, furniture sales, refrigeration, trucking and electrical work. He comments, "It's like that song... 'I cropp'd the fruit and worked it loose and taken the time to plow. I've searched for gold in rain and cold and worked a river scow...'. That was me...I worked as a millwright, a blacksmith, I was an engineer's helper..." Ensley found his employment niche with the Tampa Electric Company for which he worked for 34 years, retiring in 1970 at the age of 65.



Ensley 'Kid' Williams, ca.1925



Faye Williams

Ensley met his wife, Faye, while he lived in Tampa and shares the story:

"I used to see her when she was a small girl...I saw her as I was passing the house one day [along North Street]...just momentarily as she was at the back steps and right away I had it in my mind what it would be like to have her as my wife. Isn't that something? She used to drive a big old Hudson...I worked at a garage at that time on Florida and North streets and she used to trade at the filling station next door. She'd come up there in the car and I would stand at the door the whole time and just gawk at her the whole time she was at the filling station...I didn't even know what her name was. You have heard that song, 'Some Enchanted Evening'? I was in the Civic Club where they had dances once a week. I was standing on the front porch looking in on the dancers and she was in there dancing. She seemed so graceful and everything when she was in there dancing. For me, that was 'Some Enchanted Evening'. I was closer to her than I had ever been. After a while she walked out on the porch and leaned up against the rail...I was on the other side of the porch. I stood there and looked at her and neither one of us spoke. Later on, I went to this little neighborhood store and she was there. They had a juke going in there. She twisted around and I remember 'St. Louis Blues' was on...we got to talking and I walked home with her and that was all she wrote. It was a very short time before we were married. She just was everything that suited me every way in the world. I just couldn't stand the idea of anyone having her but me."

They were married and lived in Seminole Heights until Faye passed on, and then Ensley moved back to the shores of the lake that has been a part of his life since his childhood. He and Faye raised two children, Marilyn and Roger. Marilyn lives with her husband Harold Finke in a house they renovated on the acreage retained by the Williams family on the south shore of Lake Island Ford.

Lake Island Ford and Other Lakes in the Odessa Area



Island Ford Lake is a 95-acre lake located in the Brooker Creek watershed in Northwest Hillsborough County. This area of the county is home to roughly two thirds of the County's lakes and Ensley's childhood was shaped by his interaction with them.

Ensley comments:

"We were the only family living on either one of these lakes, Island Ford or Keystone for years... At one time [lake Keystone] was called Lake Distress. People were driving up in front of the house and my mother would be out there. They would say, 'This is Lake Distress isn't it?' She didn't like that name and she would say, 'This is Keystone Lake.' [It was] already named that in 1909"

The Williams children had the run of the lakes in the area and Ensley has witnessed them change over the years. He comments:

"When we first moved here in 1913, that creek [Brooker Creek] was a beautiful stream. We used to enjoy going through that with a boat. You could paddle from Keystone to Island Ford. At that time there was a creek that ran from Island Ford Lake to Crescent Lake [to the northeast]...we could go through that with a boat, but it's all stopped up now and can't be done anymore. Cypress Gardens has a manmade [stream] where you take a ride on it... this creek was a lot prettier than this manmade thing, [it was] crooked as anything."



Lake Keystone's north shore depicted
from the Williams home, 1917

Ensley played a minor part in the altering of the water flow among the lakes of the area. He comments:

"The same way with this lake [an unnamed lake 100 yards south of the east end of Lake Island Ford]. It was as clear as a crystal...I thought it would be wonderful to have a stream from that little lake over to Island Ford that I could fish in. I had everything to fish in around here. I dug a little ditch and I ruined that thing after a while. Somebody else took over and dug the ditch wider. I think they have a big pipe under the road now or something. That lake dropped way down. I used to think that lake was a bottomless pit

it was so deep. Now you can see the bottom all over, it dropped so low."

Ensley reminisces about other lakes in the area:

"That large lake, about the size of Island Ford, we used to call it Ward Lake because a family named Ward lived on it. They called it Lake Ann for several years and now there is another name to that Lake Ann...Lake Ann was called Big Lake by us and the Millpond was called Little Lake. There was a lake south of where we lived...called Clear Lake, the water was just as clear as could be. When they built the new mill just south of Dowling's Mill they used that for the log pond, cut all the cypress trees from around it. There used to be cypress trees all around it, just as thick as everything. When I was only about five years old, my mother's youngest brother came to visit us. It was the first time I had ever seen him...he and I went down to the lake and we were walking around through a lot of huckleberry bushes that grew way up high...After awhile we decided to go swimming. There was nobody around so we stripped off and went swimming. I remember that he took me around that lake on his back and I thought, 'This is surely something!', that he was able to do that. I went to that lake a year or so ago and went to the spot that he and I were swimming. There was a lake, or a pond I guess you would call it, no trees growing around it...There was a pond and we used to call it Hall Lake because the Hall family lived on it. That was where the residents in town used to swim. It went shallow gradually and got deep enough so you could dive off a springboard...That was where my brother Razzie and I learned to swim."



Map of the Keystone Park Colony, 1909

When asked about the wildlife that populated his childhood environment, Ensley had many tales to tell including the following:

"When we first got down here we didn't realize there were foxes and bobcats until we got this one certain dog, a hunting dog, that when he got on the trail of something he was so fast that this animal he was trailing had to get somewhere quick, up a tree or down a hole or something. We discovered then that there were a lot of foxes in the area and also, we didn't dream of anything like a bobcat. One night, my uncle...and one or two of my brothers went what they thought would be opossum hunting. I stayed home. The next morning my mother said, 'Get up on that platform on the back porch and look up on the roof and see what they got last night possum hunting.' I stood up on that platform and my eyes got just above the roof line and I looked right into the face of this bobcat."

Alligators were a common feature of the lakes and he relates:

"Alligators by the hundreds... Two men, alligator hunters came out here, I guess it was before it was against the law to kill alligators, and killed them by the hundreds. My brother went with them on their hunting expeditions... My brother was about fourteen years old I guess... after that he started handling alligators, started doing all sorts of things with them... He handled them like anything, he even wrestled them... just for fun. During the Depression he was sixteen years old, and he read an ad in the Tribune for somebody who could wrestle alligators. There was this show that traveled with alligators and... he traveled out West wrestling those alligators, billed as 'Alligator John'. Times were so hard that they couldn't make a go of it and my brother was left stranded somewhere out West and he hitch-hiked home."

Changes in the natural environment have had impacts upon the wildlife to be found today:

"That is one reason the fishing isn't as good as it used to be, because that was a natural fish hatchery, that creek [Brooker Creek] was. When we first moved out here, people from all walks of life used to come out here and rent boats from my dad and fish every weekend. Politicians, bank presidents and doctors, every weekend they would come out here fishing. They caught bass and everything. Plenty a time, I climbed up in a tree that hung out over the creek like that, about eight feet above the water. I would get up in that tree and look down into the clear water and see dozens of bass there ranging from two to ten pounds and didn't think anything about it. It was just commonplace. It could be like that again."



The Williams family depicted on the millpond dock of the Dowling Mill, ca. 1913

Development

Ensley's perspective, ranging over nearly 100 years, gives us a look at development in his corner of Northwest Hillsborough County. When his family relocated from Pensacola to Odessa, only a handful of families occupied the physical landscape. Lake Fern was the location of the schoolhouse and the church and at the time was the focus of the social community. In the area, the Pea Vine Railroad, also known as the Tampa Gulf Coast Railroad, meandered through, named because it was as crooked as a pea vine. The schoolhouse was located approximately three-fourths of a mile north of the intersection of Tarpon Springs Road on Gunn Highway and the teacher Ensley remembers from his childhood was Miss Forbes. The Lake Fern Church, located in the little

community, was under the guidance of Pastor Shepherd, a blind man who also lived on Tarpon Springs Road.



Some of the Williams children and the Dowling Mill depicted in the background, ca. 1911

In Ensley's childhood, lumber was the ruling industry in Odessa. He comments:

"Back in those days they didn't have any chain saws, just cross-cut saws with two men to operate them... They had mules

to pull these big old things with wheels on them, oh, I guess six feet in diameter. Just two wheels and they would hook a chain around the log and they would pull it up on to this thing and the mules would pull it to the log trucks. I guess they had about twenty, pulled twenty trucks by steam locomotive. The Company owned about five locomotives. It was a big operation."

Two large mills operated in the area, the Dowling Mill and the Lutz Mill. George Williams worked for both of them, his transition between the two explained by the following story:

"In 1913, he was still with Dowling. Mr. Tom Dowling had two sons, Willie and James. The planing mill had two slow-feed planers... well that wasn't fast enough for them. They got another planer that dressed the wood at the speed of 350 feet a minute... they [Willie and James] always were hurry, hurry, hurry. My dad wanted to slow the machine down because it would do a better job of dressing the lumber. They didn't go along with the scheme of his and they had a row. Mr. Dowling told my dad to take a thirty-day vacation with pay... My dad took his thirty-day vacation and while he was off... my dad was visiting Mr. Lutz [Charlie]. He had worked for Mr. Lutz before when Mr. Lutz ran the original mill that Dowling owned later. He liked Mr. Lutz, so while he was on vacation he went to Mr. Lutz [who] hired my father as a superintendent for his planing mill. He worked there until the mill burned down in 1925. Mr. Lutz had my father build a small planing mill to replace the mill that that burned. A small sawmill was also built. "

The mills brought people, commerce and development to the area. The mills had a commissary, housing for workers, and were responsible for the first roads in the area that were built to transport planed lumber to the waiting trains.

By the middle of the 1920's, the timber in the area had been "mined" out and the

decline of the lumber industry in the area was quickened by fires that ripped through the area's two mills. Since then, a more residential-based development has taken hold in this Northwest corner of Hillsborough County as people relocate, looking for a piece of rural living and Odessa, with its plethora of lakes, has become the destination for many.

Presently, Lake Island Ford is the home of forty-four single-family residential homes. Like the rest of the area, the residents of Lake Island Ford will experience many changes in their lifestyle as the area continues to feel the effects of population growth.



Lake Island Ford still maintains some vistas reminiscent of times past, 1999

The Future

The lakes in the Odessa area serve as reminders of times gone by. They no longer are rimmed by as many cypress, the sand pine and palmetto choked shores are now the home to many families commuting elsewhere for work, rather than the sawmills and scattered homesteads of the past. The lakes, though, help to perpetuate memories of times gone by for those still with us and help to remind us of those who have passed on.