

Saddleback Lake Narrative

Jan Smith

The Smith family moved to Saddleback Lake in the late 1970's with the intent of providing their children an environment to grow up where entertainment was available for the asking. They bought a home on the site of land where the previous owner had envisioned building the "Taj Mahal". Before his dream could be realized he sold the land to Velma and Jimmy Moore who subdivided the six-acre lot, building a house on one half and Earl and Ann Henry built on the other half. It is the Henry home that became the setting for the Smith's on-going relationship with Saddleback Lake.

Jan could not have known the depth of involvement that would result by her relocation to Saddleback Lake. Early water issues, particularly groundwater pumping, dragged her into a life of public service that has lasted for more than two decades. She comments on her introduction to citizen activism:

"The first issue was...establishing lake levels, minimum flood, maximum drought, and all of these conditions which allowed them to draw the water. That was my first, and then when they proposed that well field out here, I just went ballistic. If you live on lakefront property, it is assessed at higher value than if you lived across the street. I could literally see them destroying my property value and everybody else's."

Jan attended County Commissioner, SWFWMD and West Coast Regional Water Department Authority [now Tampa Bay Water] meetings with a group of other concerned property owners. Her tenacity eventually led to an appointment as a lay member of the Planning Commission. Her service in local government is drawing to a close. She comments:

"I will miss it. I think there is a challenge there. I will miss the people. I will miss having the ability to participate at that level...I have enjoyed it immensely. I have learned just a tremendous amount and you feel that in some way you have contributed in bringing around change that is a positive change for the future of the community."

Jan remains dedicated to issues affecting life on a local scale. She serves as treasurer for the Saddleback Lake organization, is a member of the Hillsborough County ELAP team and is an active organizer of the County's Friends of the Parks.

Saddleback Lake

Saddleback Lake is a small lake, approximately 33 acres, shaped as implied by its name, like a saddle. A canal joins two nearly independent lakes creating a single body of water. The lake is shallow, on the average seven to eight feet deep. The minimal depths of the lake's water makes it particularly susceptible to drops in the water table, a result of, among other things, pumping from the near-by Section 21 Wellfields.



Southwest shore of Saddleback Lake, 1999

Residents banded together in 1968 and formed a lake organization to address threats to the health of the lake and property values. Jan fills us in with a little bit of the history:

"The wellfield originally did not pump too heavily and did not create much of a problem. Suddenly in the early and middle 60's they ...increased the pumping [from 13] up to 17-20 million gallons of water a day and it literally dried up all the lakes around here. This lake had over here in the southeast corner where there is apparently a sinkhole ...and then there was some water laying over there on the other side. Mostly it was a big mudhole...At that time there was a tremendous uprising out here. All of the lakes in a two or three mile radius were affected all the way down to Lake Magdalene. There was a horrendous cry from the community."

On Saddleback Lake, the "cry" was answered by the forming of a lake organization made up of property owners. The organization incorporated and invested in a pump to augment the lake level. Jan comments, "...our lake association abides by the pumping rules. We don't pump our well for the lake unless it is a day we would be allowed to water. We try very hard to follow the rules." Residents around the lake absorb the cost of running the pump. Initially TECO assessed each property owner participating in the augmentation and at the end of the year would add on the charges to the resident's bill. They no longer perform this service and the divvying up of the pumping cost has fallen to the treasurer of the lake organization.

The residents, aside from abiding by pumping rules are conscientious about the effects of augmenting their lake. Jan comments, "One of the problems you get when you bring up the crystal clear water is...water weed growth. If it is good weeds, then fine. If it is hydrilla or nitella, then that's not particularly advantageous." In addition to enhancing weed growth is the issue of utilizing water from the aquifer. Again, Jan comments, "There is some discussion that as...you bring water up that you increase the permicivity of the lake, the water dropping out of the bottom of the lake."



Despite the organization's conscientious use of the pump in the past, its potential benefits to the health of the lake and to property values has been effectively brought to a halt by the SWFWMD permitting process. Jan discusses the issue: "About 5 years ago, I got a letter from SWFWMD that we



Recent aquatic vegetation growth along the east shore of Saddleback Lake, 1999.

either had to cease and desist or apply for a permit. We have been going through the process for probably five years...we've had them out here...their argument for why we shouldn't be able to pump this lake is that it's no longer pristine, because of development. Wait a minute, you are giving Cheval [a recent golf course community in northwest Hillsborough County] a permit for a well to irrigate their golf course...we are still trying to get ours."

As feet are being dragged in the permitting process, and pumping in the wellfields continues with new wellfields being proposed, the land surrounding the wellfields and the lakes therein continue to take a pounding. Jan comments: "The lakes are no longer rimmed with cypress trees... We still have them and the only reason we have them, I truly believe, is that we were able to augment the lake to bring the water table up to protect the trees, but they are now breaking... The amazing thing is that we have a tree ordinance in the City of Tampa and in Hillsborough County. I can not go out and cut one down, yet they can suck water out from underneath and take out the trees. It is very frustrating."

The health of Saddleback Lake has benefited from the existence of the lake organization and the active involvement of its residents. Jan comments on the status of the lake in the early 1980's and the response of residents. "When we first moved out here, if you put a boat in the water you would have a hard time getting from one half to the other without having the prop just covered with weeds." After much research into the most effective means to address the vegetation problem, the property owners flew vegetation-eating fish in from out of state. Jan reminisces about stocking the lake:



Vegetation along the shore of Saddleback Lake, 1999

"We picked the fish up from the airport in pick-up trucks and brought them out here...all of the neighbors were over here. The way we were instructed to put the fish in and the way the kids were dancing around, it was a lot of fun. It had a tremendous impact on the lake. We did do something that hindsight tells us we probably didn't need to do...a chemical knockdown of the weeds before we put the fish in. It probably would have taken a little bit longer to see the improvement from the fish...for about two years after we did that...the frogs and crickets...humming...was gone for a long time... You didn't see the eggs on the grass or anything. That was all gone, but it has all come back.

Despite very real and serious challenges to its health, Saddleback Lake has survived and today hosts a wide assortment of wildlife including otters, quail, sherman fox squirrels, armadillos, snakes, owls and eagles. Jan enthuses, "The nature around here is so much fun."



Cypress trees in an undeveloped area on the shores of Saddleback Lake are being affected by fluctuations in the water table, 1999

Development

Saddleback Lake is a well-developed resource in terms of density. The small lake serves as the location for more than forty homes, the majority of which have been developed since the late 1970's. Jan comments, "A lot of these houses out here were small homes. People in the city owned them and this was their summer cottage. We had a tremendous tree cover and a lot of shade, and a lot of orange groves all around here...the lakes were much deeper than they are now."



Wildwood, a business set on 17 acres to the east of Saddleback was the setting for weddings and other special events until the 1980's when it closed

An increase in the built environment has instigated changes that combined with the problems stemming from pumping, provide threats to property values in the area. Jan comments about the construction of berms along Berger Road: "When they first started building those [mounds], I went down to the County's code enforcement and I said, 'You're going to have a flooding problem'. I have been here since 1976 and until those mounds were built, we never had standing water on Berger Road...now it doesn't take much rain at all and it will go almost...all the way across the road."

In addition to land being built up, an almost opposite problem is being experienced with the settling of the land and the enlargement of sinkholes resulting partially from a lowering of the watertable. Jan comments:

"All of these problems brought on by pumping have left a lot of property owners with damaged houses. You can see the stairstepping of the concrete blocks...the windows wouldn't open and close, the doors wouldn't shut...The problem is that no-one is going to buy your house sitting on a sinkhole...That is happening all over Northwest Hillsborough County and South Pasco, but in many instances, all over the state. When you think about the destruction of property value...It has not only a blighting effect on the neighborhood, but it has the ability to reduce the property tax income in Hillsborough. The County certainly can't afford to have their prime residential neighborhood in Northwest Hillsborough become inundated with fallen-down houses."



1995 aerial of Saddleback Lake shows residential and agricultural development photo by: SWFWMD

New threats are on the horizon for the residents in the area. Commercial development is eating its way north up Dale Mabry and bringing many threats to the area's semi-rural environment. Jan comments:

"I think one of the biggest concerns I have now about the lake, other than how low the level is, is what is going to happen when...the northwest, northeast, and southeast corners of Dale Mabry and Van Dyke become asphalt parking lots.

What is the effect going to be on this lake? Initially the simple response is that asphalt is made by oil by-

products. Everything that goes into cars and is used is considered a carcinogen and we know that when asphalt heats up and water rushes over it, that washes those carcinogens into wherever it's directed, be it a storm water drain or a lake...My fear is that these three lakes, Crenshaw Lake, Saddleback, and Round Lake are all going to suffer severe degradation because of that, no matter what the county tells me. If they tell me that the developer has to retain the first inch of runoff on sight, then all I have to say to you is 'thirty days of rain' and in the summer, if we are lucky, we get thirty days of rain. It's like having a bathtub, you put the plug in and it rains, pretty soon it will overflow. It won't take long for those 'one inches' of rainfall to be in these lakes."



Undeveloped land on the corner Crenshaw Lake Road and Dale Mabry is the proposed site for commercial development, 1999

Future Trends

The threats to Saddleback Lake loom large for the present and future. Residents of the lake have taken major steps to address issues that have emerged in the past. They have been successful on many fronts including the abatement of invasive vegetation and mitigating the effects of pumping, and have gained access to many decision-making arenas on their way to success. Involvement and persistence have paid off for the residents. If they will be adequate to stem the flow and mitigate the effects of commercial development still remains to be seen. In the mean time, the residents cling to what they can of the rural, pristine nature of their environment for as long as they can.



North shore of Saddleback Lake depicts the rural nature residents would like to maintain, 1999