

Lake Wilson Narrative

Bob Austin and Ben Sager

The following narrative is based on an interview with Bob Austin and Ben Sager, two Lake Wilson residents.



Bob Austin and Ben Sager, Lake Wilson Residents

Bob Austin

The Austin family has lived on Lake Wilson since the 1985, but the move was preceded by a long-term relationship with the area's lakes that reached far into Bob's childhood. He remembers swimming, fishing and water-skiing with friends on the area's lakes, often riding their bikes to near-by lakes that were more accessible to the public, especially a gang of fun-seeking youngsters.

Bob reminisces about attending dances at the Keystone Civic Association, swimming at the public beaches located on lakes Egypt and Ellen, swapping comic books with other kids using the garbage man as a messenger, and, in his more mischievous hours, rolling watermelons down the then-rural Dale Mabry Highway with the hope that they would explode on an unsuspecting car.

The Austins bought property on a canal dredged on the south end of the lake by Mr. Griffin, a lawyer and land speculator from Tennessee. The canal accesses springs located along its length and benefits from their coolness and water flow.

The Austin family has an active relationship with the lake. Bob is an avid scuba diver and has explored the bottom of the lake using a planing board. He and his wife will often take their Jonboat out to benefit from the exercise and the accompanying view. He and his son have many memories of spending the weekend on the lake, returning to land only to sleep and eat.

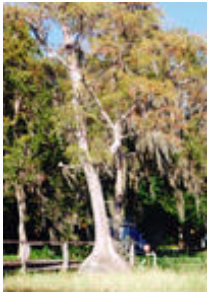
Bob is the Lakewatch monitor for Lake Wilson, a position he has filled for nearly two years. He cites as his motivation the commitment Lakewatch has to protecting the lakes and natural environment of Florida and has benefited from the education and awareness that results from volunteering for his lake.

Ben Sager

Ben's relationship with Lake Wilson began in the fourth grade when his parents bought property on the lake as a weekend get-away. He remembers white sand beaches that had been dredged up. Ben comments, "One of the reasons I like this lake is that I know this lake, it's my back yard. I used to put a 55-gallon drum on my head with glass on it, and a concrete block and I walked the bottom of the lake as a kid. I'd go 5 minutes without coming up for air. Then we got to where we would pump air down and would go fifty minutes..."

Ben did move away from Lake Wilson, but came back later in life. His sister and his mother, both of whom live on Little Lake Wilson now, accompanied him in the move.

Lake Wilson



This old cypress on the northwest shore of the lake is a well known fishing spot

Lake Wilson is named after Mr. Wilson who owned much property and farmed gladiolas around the lake. Mr. Wilson lived on the northeast corner of the lake in a house whose shoreline sported a well-used cypress tree. Ben comments, "That big old tree ... was my father's favorite place to get bass. We used to put the tout line out at night ..." Bob agrees with the beneficial use of the tree, "When I first came out here, one of my best spots for shiners was right out around that tree."

Somewhat of a dispute is currently being waged concerning the name of the lake. Hillsborough County and SWFWMD have the lake identified on their maps as Lake Thomas, an erroneous designation considering the history of the lake and the name of the connecting lake and streets. Bob comments on the dilemma, "[the lake] has two names which is confusing. It's Lake Thomas...and it's Lake Wilson...I don't know where the name came from. I think it must have been named improperly on the map."

The lake is 61 acres and is spring fed. There are some parts of the lake that are 35 feet deep as a result of dredging. Ben comments on the perceptions of dredging by residents, "I think they didn't like the murky water from the dredging, so they passed a moratorium that every five years you could dredge for just a short time...then all the sudden people would dredge really fast." The dredging created a lake bottom with much contour variation. In their excursions wandering the bottom of the lake, Bob and Ben can tell you about mountains and valleys existing on the west side of the lake.



Protected wetlands border the lake's southeast corner

The lake is bordered by wetlands, swamp and residential development. The southeast corner of the lake is the site of a protected wetland that is home to a variety of wildlife including deer, alligator, heron and osprey. Bob often takes his cue from the osprey, "...you can hear them, especially in the spring when they start pulling their chicks out of the nest... Whenever I go fishing on the lake, I know it will be best when the ospreys are flying because they

know when to fish. I have to follow their lead."

The lake has experienced threats to its health in the recent past. Eight years ago, the residents funded the treatment of the lake for hydrilla with chemicals and grass-eating carp. Bob remarks, "...they treated the whole lake and the bottom lifted up. There was a massive amount of stuff floating everywhere and of course it decayed and then sunk. The by-product of that is that they killed the habitat for the small fish to grow...it was decimated...It even killed the cattails. It killed every green vegetation, all the lily pads, everything. It was almost a year and then they put the carp in".

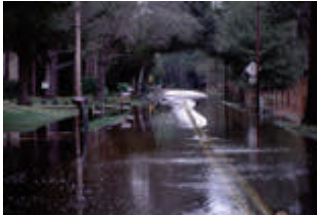
The negative effects of the treatment have begun to be reversed. The vegetation has resurfaced, but in a modified way, "There's some different kinds of grass growing now, eel weed and things that weren't here before...the fish have started to come back in the last two and a half years..." What continues to thrive in their new environment is the grass carp, or torpedoes as Ben refers to them, "There's a moon shaped cut in the grass and you know it's their mouth, they just cut right through it. I come out and see islands of this stuff floating down the canal and you know they've been working..."

Almost on the tail end of the last problem, new issues have emerged threatening the health of Lake Wilson. The record rainfall brought on by 1997's El Nino resulted in unprecedented flooding in the area. Residents of the area lived with standing water for two months and Ben comments, "...it looked like a canal was the road, like you were driving down the middle of a canal. They sandbagged it, but I think it was to keep the wake down..."

Bob monitored the water quality of the lake during the months of flooding and recorded increases in nitrogen and phosphorus levels by 700% and 400% respectively. The impacts have been severe. Bob comments, "There is all this algae, my Secci depth is only four feet, from almost ten feet before. The lake is now a tannic acid color where it never has been as long as I have lived here...there is a heavy growth of weeds in the water that weren't there before. I used to stand on the dock and see the bottom, I can't see the bottom now..."

Development

Lake Wilson is the setting for approximately 40 homes, 19 of which are situated along the canal. The land remaining undeveloped is either protected under a wetland status, or is the swamp located on the north end of the lake. People wanting to live on the lake have resorted to purchasing properties sporting weekend type cottages, demolishing them and then building new structures.



El Nino rains brought two months of standing water to some roads and raised residents' awareness about the threat of runoff to water resources
photo by: SWFWMD

A new addition to the area has been proposed in the guise of a 448-unit subdivision to be built by US Homes. Although the subdivision will not abut the lake, the resident's experience with the detriments of run-off has raised their awareness concerning potential negative impacts. Bob comments, "...When you take away the ability of water to seep into the ground and replace it with rooflines and asphalt, there's going to be run-off."

Bob has a proactive outlook concerning development. "You can't stop it, there's no reason to stop it. If it had been stopped before my parents got here, I wouldn't be living here. Bob has endeavored to be an active participant in the planning process. Using information and knowledge gathered through his Lakewatch monitoring, Bob has addressed zoning hearings to share what he has learned concerning the negative impacts of high density development upon the water resources in the area. "You can't stop progress...There is no sense in fighting it, but you have to limit the impacts in the surrounding areas when you do it. That is the intent when doing controlled growth."

The Future

The residents of Lake Wilson are well aware of the threats to their environment, perhaps more so than most because of the trials their lake has already survived. As Lutz continues to develop, the pressures upon lakes in the area will continue to mount. Efforts such as those of Bob Austin and longtime residents like Ben Sager will be important parts of ensuring that the lake can meet the challenges of the future.