

South Crystal Lake



Lance in a rowboat on South Crystal Lake (Delaney, Circa 1950)

The following narrative was derived from an interview with South Crystal Lake resident Lance Delaney in his home on July 16, 2002. As a third generation resident on the lake and President of the South Crystal Lake Association, Lance was able to share a great deal of information about South Crystal Lake's history as well as its current state of affairs.

Personal History

Lance Delaney's maternal grandparents, Ann and Charles White, were the first in his family to build a home on the shores of South Crystal Lake. About his grandfather, Lance explained:

"He was involved with real estate in Florida. He was an independent real estate broker and he also worked for the County Tax Assessor's Office later in life. But he and a partner had holdings all over the Hillsborough Pasco County area and they decided or he decided that he liked the land around here. And in the late '20s, he built a small one-room log cabin on the lake to come to fish, hunt, and just get away."

At the time that Lance's grandfather built the cabin, he lived in Palma Ceia, which was much more developed than the wilderness of Lutz. The family ultimately added on to their weekend getaway cabin, making it their permanent home sometime during the 1930s.

During World War II, Lance's father was stationed in Europe and his mother (Ann Elizabeth Delaney) stayed behind in Florida to live with her parents on South Crystal Lake. When Lance's father returned from the war, he and Lance's mother started a family and Lance was born in 1946. The Delaneys settled on South Crystal Lake and built a home next door to his grandparents' original log cabin. Lance's grandparents also continued to live at the lake, staying in that original home until their deaths. Lance's mother ultimately inherited all of the property where her family continued the tradition of living on the lake. Lance and his wife continue to live in the home built by his parents. Although he has left and come back several times over the years, he is now permanently living there. He noted:

"The house we're in right now, where you see the wooden floor area is part of the original house that my mother and father built while they were living at my grandfather's to move into eventually. And this is basically where I grew up. My wife and I have added on since then, but it's been a holding in the family since the '30s and '40s."



Lance's grandfather and mother wading in South Crystal Lake (Delaney)



Lance's grandmother, Ann White. Original log cabin seen in background (Delaney)



The Delaneys' horse "Tommy Tomahawk" drinking out of the lake (Delaney, 1950s)

In present times, Lance is retired from the Hillsborough County Sheriff's Office and his wife Connie is the Assistant Principal at a local high school. Lance's brother, Brian, also continues to live on South Crystal Lake in the original log cabin built by his grandfather and next door to the home Lance and his wife currently occupy. Their sister, Eleanor lives just south of her brothers in Bradenton.

History/Information

South Crystal Lake, also known just as Crystal Lake is a 19-acre water body in the Rocky/Brushy Creek Watershed of Hillsborough County in Lutz, Florida just north of Tampa. According to Lance, the lake used to be called Strawberry Lake, although some argue that North Crystal Lake was the one that sometimes went by Strawberry on old county maps. Lance guessed the name South Crystal Lake has something to do with the quality of water it once had, while the name Strawberry is likely to have come from the shape of the lake as seen via an aerial view.

Wildlife on and near South Crystal Lake includes otter, gators, deer, various types of wading birds, and mallard ducks. However, all except the ducks have decreased in recent years, while the deer population has increased. There is also the occasional fox and bobcat. Lance further reported that, "There was always good fishing in the lake." About the alligator population, Lance shared:

"Gators don't bother you. When we were little, we'd go swimming out there and we'd see gators in the lake, but we'd keep an eye on them. If a gator disappeared for a while, we'd get out of the water. And even in the late evening, we'd go swimming out there at the old dock that used to be down at the log house. And my dad would sit up on the dock with a .22 rifle. If a gator got too close, the gator got eaten."

As a child, Lance and his friends enjoyed owning horses that they would ride around the lake and bathe in the water just because "it was easier." Lance said he enjoyed growing up on South Crystal Lake as it provided him and his siblings with many things to do. He noted: "For me, my brother, and my sister, it was a great thing because the nearest kids otherwise were over a mile away. You'd be able to run, hunt, fish... do what ever you want, whenever you wanted without a problem." In fact, wildlife in the area was a source of subsistence when Lance was a child. He shared:

"People don't have to sustenance hunt the way they did 75-80 years ago. But during times when people were laid off and stuff like that, my brother and I would hunt rabbits. We'd hunt squirrels. We'd fish. We ate fairly well most of the time. You can go down there and catch seven or eight catfish and have enough for two days."

Development



Lance's grandfather with friends building the original log cabin (Delaney, 1940s)



Lance's grandmother standing on dock over South Crystal Lake (Delaney, 1940s)



Lance's grandfather on "Tommy Tomahawk" (Delaney)

Traditional uses of land surrounding South Crystal Lake consisted mostly of orange groves and cow pastures. Lance remembers those days clearly:

"I remember when I was a little kid, the log house that is down there, they added a front bedroom area on for me when I was born. And I remember waking up numbers of mornings before we moved up here and there would be cows and cowboys in the yard because they were rounding up their cattle when the cow strayed, which they strayed all over. Florida didn't have a fence law until 1946. And most of the people, the Florida cracker cowboys, could care less whether you had a law about fences or not. The cows just kind of wandered."

When Lance's grandparents built the log cabin on South Crystal Lake's southern tip, it was the second building to go up on the lake. The only other structure at the time was another weekend hunting and fishing cabin built in 1909 by a county judge. Both cabins eventually became permanent dwellings. In 1956, Lance says a large piece of land on the northeastern shore of the lake was cleared for a housing development. Around the same time, Lance's mother bought a ten-acre track of land that was eventually broken up into four lakefront lots that were progressively sold off and built on in the late 1950s and early 1960s. There are currently eighteen homes surrounding South Crystal Lake.

As Lance sees it, continued development greatly changed the area from the way it was when he was a child. Many of the roads that were dirt, including Crystal Lake Road and Simmons Road, are now paved. According to Lance, most of the roads in the area were paved by the 1960s.

A further impact of development is related to water quality. As Lance sees it, dredging from the lake to create buildable land has changed the water quality of the lake from a white sand bottom to a darker bottom. Lance explained:

"What they did was put a sand pump into the lake and it would suck up mud just like a dredge does and pump it up on the shore. And all of the sand that was pumped out of this lake and most of the lakes around here was pure white sand and now through the ages, it's gotten a lot of sediment in it. It's got a lot of muck in it. And it's a dark bottom now. When they were developing that side of the lake, toward the end of development, they hit a... they referred to it as a bank of fuller's earth, which is a type of clay. It's very very fine. It's almost like what you would use in a pool filter, that type of clay. The problem with it is, it turned the lake the color of chocolate milk for about four years, probably causing all kinds of fish problems and everything else. Finally, it cleared up, but after that, the bottom was always a lot darker than it had been."



Lance's grandfather swimming in South Crystal Lake (Delaney)



Lance as a child with a captured gator (Delaney, 1950s)

The Future

Lance's primary concern for the future of South Crystal Lake is continued development without strategic planning and the availability of much needed infrastructure. However, the southern shore of the lake is currently a protected wetland area that cannot be built on. Lance's point of view is:

"I think this lake is fairly safe simply because its 100% surrounded by privately owned property with no more future of development. Yeah, there is not going to ever be any more development on this lake. Under current EPA (Environmental Protection Agency) rules and stuff, they can't, there is no way. As a matter of fact, there is a lot down here on the street that's for sale that goes down to the lake. But I'm not totally sure it's a buildable lot because of EPA requirements."

Also helping to ensure a positive future for South Crystal Lake is the lake association, founded by Lance's mother Ann Elizabeth and neighbor Ann Conrad. As the formal organization's President, Lance does his part in securing the future of the lake so much a part of his family history and the area that surrounds it.

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