

Lake Magdalene Narrative

The following narrative is based on an interview with Paul and Mary Bearss in their home on Lake Magdalene in August 1998. The interview provided information, which combined with survey, biological assessment, and other agency's data illustrates the past, present, and future trends of the lake.

Paul and Mary Bearss



Paul and Mary Bearss in their home on Lake Magdalene

The Bearss family has long been a part of Tampa's social and cultural history. Paul's grandfather moved the family to Florida from St. Joe, Missouri in 1894 when he traded 80 acres of Missouri farmland for 600 acres of Florida "pine, scrub and palmetto". Today, the Bearss' retain 100 acres of the original 600; much of the land is still invested in citrus production.



My grandfather traded a farm in MO for a section of land and came down here and it was nothing but pine trees and palmettos and alligators and what have you...
photo by: Paul & Mary Bearss

For decades, the Bearss' homestead was the only residence on Lake Magdalene. It was a two story wood structure, built from the pine and cypress on the proper. The area was perceived by Paul's grandmother to be a "God-forsaken wilderness" but the family stuck it out and turned the land into productive groves through, "strong backs, quick minds, hoe, axe and shovel."

Through the early years of periodic freezes and slow grove growth, Paul's family supported itself by producing pine charcoal to be sold in Tampa. A trip into Tampa those days was a daylong excursion, making use of the only bridge crossing the Hillsborough River, located at Sulphur Springs.

Much of the Bearss family have moved to other

parts of Florida and the United States, although Paul retains a "family compound" on the northwest shores of Lake Magdalene. The land they retain along the Lake Magdalene shore supports three generations of the Bearss family. It is also the site for family reunions, the last of which in 1995 was attended by 258 members of the Bearss clan.



We had our reunion 2 years ago, the original family came down here, we call them tribes you know what I mean... My granddaddy and grandmother had 8 kids...out of the ones that came down here, at the reunion, we had 258.

photo by: Paul & Mary Bearss

Lake Magdalene



When he first learned to swim ...he was less than a year old, you could see the color of his eyes under the water. You couldn't see anything like that now.

photo by: Paul & Mary Bearss

Lake Magdalene is a privately owned and non-navigable lake. The lake is named, curiously enough, after a relative of Mary Louise Hebble, the woman who became Paul Bearss' wife. The Parrish's who settled in Manatee County, lived briefly in the area in the late 1800's and the lake was named for Mary Magdalene Parrish, Mary's great aunt.



The trees we have now were planted after we had 4 freezes in 5 years in 80 and 85, it wiped us out then so we replanted although we have a few trees here in fact there is one by the garage that is right at 100 years old

Lake Magdalene, located between Bearss and Fletcher Avenues in the Hillsborough Basin, contains water that does not flow six months out of the year. In the 1920's before the Southwest Florida Water Management District implemented flood control measures, the lake flowed east into Haypond slough, now known as Curiosity Creek. The lake historically had a high level of clarity. The Bearss' comment that you could see the blue of their son Marty's eyes when he swam as a child.

The lake has, in more recent times, been the

recipient of an increase in the amount of tannic acids from other lakes through the canals dug for flood control.



They keep the grove for one of two reasons. Either they want to keep them in the family or because the grove is greenbelt and you get less taxes on them then you would if it was developed.

Much of the land surrounding the lake was under cultivation for citrus production until the middle half of this century. The groves were owned for the most part by the Bearss, Greco, and Butler families. Many of the groves have been replaced with residential development, a shift in land use partially due to the freezes the area experienced in the 1980's.



Between here and the lake we used to go and catch them was about a mile and a quarter we would row down, didn't have no "kickers" had to use a row, a paddle ...we'd take a slingshot and kill a blue jay or some other kind of bird. We had an alligator hook, about 3 inches and you'd take a piece of telephone wire and tie it to the chain on the hook and hang the bait above the water about that high so that the turtles wouldn't get it, and then we'd row back down in the morning and if we'd caught one, we'd bring him home.. One day we put one about 6-7 feet underneath the seat of the boat, still had the hook in his mouth and had the wire...he came to in the middle of the lake, so Clayton had to shoot him again and that shot a hole in the bottom of the boat. We're rowing awful hard at that time. ...we got close to shore and got out, shoved the boat up on shore, still had the wire tied to the hook. When we hit the shore, the gator got out and we had to catch him again



photo by: Paul & Mary Bearss

During those winters, the temperature dropped to 18 degrees Fahrenheit, splitting the trunks of foot wide trees nearly 100 years old, and causing many farmers to abandon their groves rather than replant. Some of the original trees from the Bearss' groves still exist on their property.

The lake in, historical times, was home to a greater variety of wildlife than is presently evident.

Alligators were a part of life on Lake Magdalene. Mary recounts a story of Marty swimming as a child and repeating a phrase, to which she only lent half an ear. When she realized exactly what he was saying, she yanked him out of the water, as the phrase was actually, " Eyes looking at me, Momma!" Marty was not the only family member with a history involving alligators. As a youngster, Paul used to hunt alligators for spending money, and retains somewhat of a preoccupation with the reptiles to this day.

The bird population was also more numerous and exhibited



Fishing is nothing compared to what it used to be. When I was a kid, Momma'd say come 5 o'clock, how's about we have fish for supper? We'd go out and catch a mess of fish and eat them before 6 o'clock
photo by: Paul & Mary Bearss

greater variety. Eagles, Herons, Osprey and Whooping Cranes were all frequent visitors to residents around Lake Magdalene. One of the relatives of the Bearss' used to enjoy feeding the cranes, until mobbed by a hungry hoard of them on the way to the mail box, with a young relative yelling "Big Bird, Big Bird!" from the safety of the porch. The population of fish in the lake was also plentiful. Paul, as a child, would be requested by his mother an hour before dinner, to catch the entrée and would return with enough bream and bass to feed the family. Although the Bearss' have not seen them recently, Paul remembers stories of his father hunting deer in the area.

The lake, always shallow, has experienced periods of severe fluctuation, which is one of the main reasons for the founding of the Lake Magdalene Restoration Association. One summer, the level dropped so sharply that the Bearss' tell a story of a VW Bug, driven out to the middle of the lake to be washed. That was the time that we could look out there and somebody had driven a red Volkswagen, remember, parked it in the middle of the lake and washed it and we decided the lake was too low!"



These pictures will show that there have always been low points in the lake. Now it will go down and stay down for a long time. Gives a chance for the lily pads and stuff like that to grow up... Lake Magdalene is essentially a shallow lake...
photo by: Paul & Mary Bearss

Development



When I was a child, between here Waters and Armenia Avenue, there were 5 houses we had the only house on Lake Magdalene. There were some back off the lake ...I knew everybody in the neighborhood, knew all the way to town, now you don't know anybody

In 1916, when Paul was born, the Bearss home was the only residence on the lake. As a youngster, he remembers five houses between Lake Magdalene, Armenia and Waters Avenue and he knew everyone in them. Now, Lake Magdalene is the setting for 157 households and an apartment complex. The land around the lake, previously used for agriculture, was developed as residential largely in the 1980's after freezes decimated many of the groves.

Concomitant with the rise in residential development was a decline in the interaction between the property owners around the lake. Facilitating communication among property owners is one of the

goals of the Lake Magdalene Restoration Association, established in 1974. The

Restoration Association is represented by a core group of individuals who have repeatedly given their time to the health of the lake over the years. The association has been successful in addressing some issues, vegetation control, lake level augmentation, and they put out a bulletin to establish guidelines for beneficial lake behavior, safe boating guidelines and to relate the history of the lake to new residents. Development has instigated change in other areas. Paul's father used to take rowboat excursions from Lake Magdalene to Sulphur Springs. Such a trip is now impossible because of development, pumping and water redirection for flood control.

The Future of Lake Magdalene



Oaks planted in the early 1900's along Lake Magdalene's Shoreline illustrate the fluctuation of the lake's level

For the Bearss family, the largest concern for the future of Lake Magdalene is the lake level. The pump, financed by the Restoration Association, is under the charge of the county and they decide when its use is needed, often dropping the lake to a level which the property owners believe is threatening to their property values and the health of the lake. Property owners on Lake Magdalene have a means to address such concerns. The Restoration Association has proven to be an effective vehicle for the residents on Lake Magdalene. They have been

able to address many issues by acting as a critical mass, and there is no reason to think this efficacy will decline.

Lake Magdalene is presently developed to its maximum potential, as the only undeveloped lakefront property is owned by the Bearss'. Their family has a stake in retaining pieces of their lifestyle from the past, a preservation ethic from which the whole community can benefit. Paul contends, "If you study history, you profit by other people's mistakes and without history, how you going to do it?"

