

# Alafia River



Arthur Cuscaden near the Alafia River (USF)

*This narrative is based on an interview conducted with Arthur Cuscaden in his home on the Alafia River on July 7, 2001. Arthur has spent most of his life on a river, growing up next to Palm River and living on the Alafia River for over 30 years. This interview provided insight into what the area used to look like and the changes that Arthur has seen occur.*

## Personal History

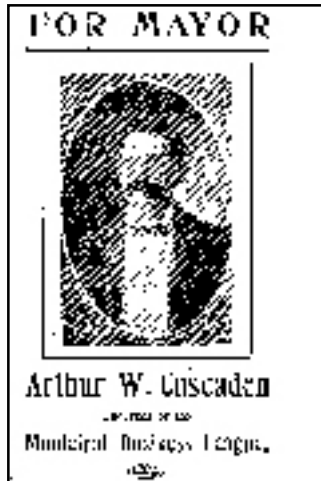
Arthur Cuscaden has a rich knowledge of many of the natural environments in Hillsborough County. His family has been in the Tampa Bay area since the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century. He has been told that they were the tenth family to settle in the area. Arthur's grandfather, after whom he is named, owned a fishing business and marina near the Gandy Bridge. As a young man, his grandfather was also politically active, once running for mayor.

Arthur was raised on Palm River in Hillsborough County. In the mid-1960s, the county decided to dredge the river to create a canal. Unfortunately, the property that Arthur owned was condemned as a result of the dredging. However, the county compensated him for his loss of property. With this compensation money, Arthur purchased his current property on the Alafia River, which at the time of purchase was in Riverview. However, the area has since been incorporated into Brandon. He says about his decision to live near a river:

*"...I just always lived on the water... I like to fish. I like to swim. I just can't imagine not living on it."*

At the time that Arthur bought his lot on the Alafia, he was serving in the Marine Corps. In 1966, he was sent to Vietnam. After finishing his tour of duty, Arthur returned to Florida and built his home on the river with the help of his father-in-law. In this home, he and his wife, Shirley, raised four children. When his children were younger the family would often go swimming, boating, and fishing. He says that he used to go swimming all the time and that his children "used to live in" the river.

Arthur continues to fish and swim in the river, although not as frequently as he would like. He currently works as a long distance truck driver, a job that only allows him to be at home on the weekends. When Arthur does find time to go fishing, he spends it "strictly saltwater fishing," especially snook. He typically takes his boat down the Alafia until he reaches Ruskin, where he will anchor his boat and fish. Occasionally if any of his nine grandchildren are visiting, they will ride the boat from the Alafia into Hillsborough Bay to eat at the Seabreeze Restaurant.



Campaign poster for Arthur's grandfather (Cuscaden)

## History/Information

---



*Arthur's children swimming in the Alafia during the 1970s (Cuscaden)*

The Alafia River begins north of Mulberry, flowing south towards Lithia. The river splits at Lithia, with one spike flowing east towards Riverview and into the Hillsborough Bay, and the other flowing south.

Arthur describes the Alafia as "...a dark river, but it's normally real clear." However, he says that if there are heavy rains, there will be run-off that goes into the river making it muddy. Furthermore, when phosphate spills from nearby companies occur in the river, Arthur describes the water as becoming "milky looking." Recently, Arthur has seen salt intrusion into the river's fresh water. He believes that this is due, in part, to the recent drought conditions.

Arthur is very familiar with the Alafia and surrounding areas, having spent much time fishing and hunting. Since moving to the river, he has seen many changes in the surrounding environment. The area where Arthur used to hunt stretched from his home in Riverview south to Lithia Springs, and between Bloomingdale and the Alafia River. Arthur says that this area used to have many more trees, including cypress, cedar, and oak. He also used to go hunting in the area that is now the intersection of King's Avenue and Lumsden Road. It was all pasture back in the 1960s. Now, he says, "...it's all subdivisions and shopping centers." Arthur believes that this clearing of the trees for commercial and residential development has negatively impacted the environment, including increased run-off into the river and decreased numbers of animals.

When Arthur would go hunting in the area in the 1960s and early 1970s, he would see many squirrels, quails, doves, and sometimes even turkeys and hogs. Around the river, he used to see redheaded woodpeckers and mockingbirds. Arthur believes that the number of birds has decreased greatly in the area. He says about the birds:

*"When I was a kid, there used to be redheaded woodpeckers all over the place. Now I've got two that live around here. It's the only ones that you ever hardly see... Not like when I was a teenager. There used to be birds everywhere. Not anymore."*

Some of the birds that Arthur continues to see are redbirds, hawks, owls, pelicans, and seagulls. He also continues to see animals such as raccoons and opossums.

Bobcats are among the larger animals that Arthur saw when he first moved to the Alafia. He once even saw a Florida panther.

*"I have seen one Florida panther out in road a little ways. When my daughters were little, I was taking them down to a friend's house. I presume that he lived in that patch of woods the phosphate company owned. I couldn't really believe it. It surprised me. He came jumping out across the road right in front of me...first I thought it was a big dog and saw that long tail on him and how high and far he could jump. That's a darn panther."*

In the Alafia River, Arthur still sees snook, bass, sheephead, red fish, and tarpon. Recently, he has even seen porpoise, black tipped sharks, and

# Development

---



*The vegetation surrounding the Alafia River near Arthur's house (USF)*

Arthur has seen the many changes that have occurred in Brandon since the 1960s. When he first moved to the Alafia, his home was in the town of Riverview. However, in the 1970s, his neighborhood was incorporated into Brandon. The town of Riverview was settled in 1891 and at the time was populated mainly by phosphate workers. In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, citrus and lumber were major industries for the area (Hillsborough County Historic Survey Report, Florida Department of State Bureau of Historic Preservation, October 1998).

When Arthur first moved to the Alafia in the 1960s, he describes the area then as “country.” The landscape included many heavily wooded areas and pastureland. He explains that the area had been previously used for farming, primarily dairy, citrus, strawberries, and beef. The most important product was citrus. According to Arthur:

*“Citrus was the big thing in Brandon. Either that or you worked for the railroad.”*

Many of these farms still existed when Arthur moved to the Alafia. Numerous dairies at the time were family operations. Since then, he has seen many of them replaced with commercial and residential development. He says that he has seen “massive growth” in the area. The woods and pasture where he used to hunt are now shopping centers.

In his own neighborhood, Arthur says that one of the first planned residential developments was constructed in the 1960s for trailer homes. By the 1970s, developers were building subdivisions in his neighborhood. Since then, the growth of these subdivisions has been a constant.

Beyond his immediate neighborhood, Arthur has seen nearby King’s Avenue grow from “...a little ol’ gravel road, two lane...” into a major roadway. The building of subdivisions also extends beyond his neighborhood and he says, “...they keep moving on out further towards Lithia.” Arthur believes that the area is now “overgrown” and that there are “too many people and too small of an area.” One of the effects that he has seen as a result of the growth in the population is an increase in traffic problems.

## The Future

---



*The trees near the Alafia River (USF)*

There are many serious concerns for the future of the Alafia River. One of Arthur's major concerns is the possibility that, in the future, pumping stations might be put into the Alafia. If this occurs, he is afraid that it might not take long for the river to dry up. Were this to happen, it might lead to a major decrease in the river's fish and vegetation. Another serious concern discussed by Arthur is the amount of toxic waste spilled into the river from the phosphate plants. Again, when these spills occur, they negatively impact the river's fish and vegetation. It is unknown from how many more spills the river can recover.

The Alafia River has been an important part of Hillsborough County's history. Hopefully, it will continue to be an active and viable river in the future. However, it appears that the concerns raised by Arthur are serious and pose current and future problems for the river. His hope for the future is that the problems do not get any worse.

**Written By: Christiana Schumann**