

Rainbow Lake



J. Danforth Browne and his grandson Phillip Browne (USF)

This narrative is based on an interview with J. Danforth Browne on June 22, 2001 at his home on Rainbow Lake. A 31-year resident, Mr. Browne has a great deal to say about issues affecting the lake on which he lives.

Personal History

As a fighter pilot in World War II, Mr. Browne commanded the first fighter squadron into Normandy. At age 80, he continues to practice law five days a week. Perhaps because his life has been so eventful, he appreciates the peace of living “way off from everybody.”

Mr. Browne moved to Rainbow Lake on April 1, 1970. It is hard to believe his attractive, spacious home was used as a “fishing hut” by previous owners. When Mr. Browne moved to the lake, he began renovations:

“When I first moved here, this wasn’t anything. I put the front door there and then I built another bedroom here and another bedroom back over there. And changed the kitchen all around. So, it was just a fishing hut when they first built it.

Mr. Brown related the following about what the lake has meant to him over the years:

“This is really a magnificent place to live, for me, because I’ve got 17 acres, and I can walk all around it, ride my golf cart around it, and fish, swim....All my children grew up and learned how to water ski here.”

Mr. Browne continues to spend most of his spare time outside, often with his grandson, Phillip, who lives with him. Phillip, who was present at the interview, enjoys boating on the lake; he has a sailboat, a rowboat, a canoe, and a jet ski.



Mr. Browne and Phillip years ago (J. Danforth Browne)

History/Information



View of the lake from Mr. Browne's back yard (USF)



A pump from the Cosme-Odesa Well Field (USF)

Rainbow Lake is a 27-acre lake located in Odessa between Crawley and Boy Scout Roads. The maximum depth of the lake is approximately 26 feet, but at the time of the interview the water level was low due to drought and pumping from nearby well fields.

Among the lake's wildlife are turtles, alligators, possums, raccoons, and armadillos. When Mr. Browne gets up in the morning to read the paper, he hears a "cacophony of sounds of different birds." There are whippoorwills, osprey, blue heron, and sand hill cranes, among others. He has even seen a bald eagle once or twice. Among the fish in the lake are gar, catfish, sunfish, perch, and bluegills. Cypress, virgin pines, and palmetto are some of the trees growing on Mr. Browne's property.

When he first moved to Rainbow Lake, Mr. Browne remembers the lake being so clear that he could see the bottom. Years ago, the clarity of the water was threatened by a neighbor who began racing a 280 horsepower motor boat across the lake at around 60 miles per hour:

"He was a professional water skier and he built a race run all the way from this lake through the narrows up there... When the boat was pulling the skier up on the water it would tilt the boat at an angle. And then that would throw the propeller with that tremendous power that it would just dig up the bottom of the lake and you couldn't go in the lake without coming up with green algae all over you...you'd be awful looking."

Mr. Browne sued the man and won. He called in an expert to testify to the danger of certain organisms that live in the muck on the bottom of lakes; when stirred up, they are more likely to go through a person's skin to get into the bloodstream and can cause a number of serious physical problems. After the lawsuit, the water ski racing ended, and the water quality has remained relatively high ever since. But the lake is now facing a more serious issue: pumping from the St. Petersburg-owned Cosme-Odesa Well Field.

Years ago, after exhausting the supply of potable water under its own land, Pinellas County bought large tracts of land in Pasco and Hillsborough Counties and began pumping water from under its neighbors.¹ In 1930, Pinellas County began pumping from the Cosme Well Field in the Keystone area of northwest Hillsborough County. In 1952, they added the Odessa portion, creating the "Cosme-Odesa Well Field."² According to Mr. Browne, "something like twenty-million gallons a day comes out of these little pumps." Many lake residents believe that, over the years, the pumping has resulted in the levels of numerous lakes dropping considerably. Rainbow Lake is at an extremely low level, and the canal feeding into the lake dried up around two years ago. Mr. Browne has contributed to several funds to sue St. Petersburg, but he feels it is unlikely a suit will occur. (See Lake Juanita Narrative for more information about how area residents have addressed the issue of pumping www.lakeatlas.usf.edu/lakedata/data/history/juanita-narrative/narrative.htm.)

Coinciding with concerns about the water level are the issues of property values and property taxes. Due to the decreased level of the lake, the value of his property has deteriorated considerably but his taxes remain high:

"I'm paying extra money because I have a waterfront. A lot of people are still getting taxed and their waterfront is nothing but a lake with nothing in it."

Lake residents in the area have to pay a considerable amount of taxes for living near water even though there is very little water in many of these lakes.

Development

As Mr. Browne understands it, the area near his home experienced industrial development years ago as the site of numerous lumber mills:



Oral history researcher, Deanna Barcelona, demonstrating the low level of the lake (USF)

"There was a huge mill right down here...right off Gunn Highway...Timber was one of Florida's biggest products for a long period of time."

Residential development has occurred since Mr. Browne moved to the lake. In 1970, there was only one other house on the lake. There are now around 15 houses and several nearby subdivisions. As he remembers it, a number of citrus groves in the area were torn down for residential development in the mid to late 1980s. Lakeside Grove subdivision, immediately bordering Mr. Browne's property, was one of these subdivisions.

Commercial development began around five years ago and has continued steadily as new schools, grocery stores, and banks have been built nearby. According to Mr. Browne, the area is one of the few places in Hillsborough County where there is still room for additional development.

The Future

Mr. Browne reports that commercial development is a concern for many area residents, but he sees pumping as the most significant issue for the future of Rainbow Lake. The continued pumping of the well fields in combination with the drought has left many area lakes at severely low levels. Residents have pushed to decrease the amount of water that is being pumped but have not seen much success. In fact, one activist group was actually sued for statements they made against Pinellas County for pumping from the area's lakes (see Lake Juanita Narrative for more information www.lakeatlas.usf.edu/lakedata/data/history/juanita-narrative/narrative.htm). Mr. Browne perceives that if the pumping continues—and it looks like it will—the future of Rainbow Lake is bleak.

Written By: Ashley Spalding

1 Jean Heller. St. Petersburg Times. On-line article. <http://www.ittind.com/waterbook/page14.pdf>

2 "History of Hillsborough County Water Issues." http://www.hillsboroughcounty.org/bocc/water_resrouce/history.html