

Valrico Lake



Dick feeding fish at time of interview (USF)



Dick & Betsy when they first moved in (Mahoney)



Fish eating bread fed to them by Dick (USF)

The following narrative was written based on an interview with Valrico Lake resident and LAKEWATCH volunteer Dick Mahoney in his home on September 9, 2002. In it, Dick discusses his 23 years living on a lake named Valrico, which as Dick explained, means “Valley of Gold”. He jokingly shared: “I haven’t found any gold yet, but I’ve been in the valley.”

Personal History

Dick Mahoney and his wife, Betsy, were living in St. Petersburg, Florida when they decided to move further into the country, as the city was becoming too crowded for their tastes. Betsy had been in St. Petersburg since birth and Dick grew up there since the age of six years. Over the years, the city became more and more crowded, and nearing retirement the couple decided to move. Dick told the story of how they came to live on the shores of Valrico Lake after many years of living in St. Petersburg:

“I was a general contractor and I built Buck Horn Elementary, [which is near Valrico Lake] and it was a nice neighborhood. You know normally we [builders] are vandalized. It’s a constant problem on a construction site unless you have what you can’t afford, which is around the clock watches on weekends and nights. And I never had a bit of vandalism over there, nor anything stolen the only contract I ever had that something wasn’t stolen or vandalized.... So I said, you know, this would be a good area to move into. And I hung around and I found this house and bought it. I’ve added three rooms onto it since.”

Part of the attraction to their new home, besides the tranquility of the neighborhood, was Valrico Lake. Dick expressed how living on a lake prevents any development from occurring directly behind lakefront homes like his, which is an attractive feature to the couple. In 1979, when Dick and Betsy moved to the lake, they had only one of their six children still living with them. As Dick explained:

“I had one son left when we moved here and he stayed about a year. Then he moved on. Had six kids. They’re mostly in Pinellas County. I have one daughter who lives over here. They all took off all over the world and all eventually came running back.”

Over the years, the couple of 50 years and their extended family have enjoyed many activities on the lake, particularly fishing, water-skiing, and air boating. They do all three much less now than in the past, but continue to enjoy what the lake has to offer. Dick is retired and enjoys serving as the LAKEWATCH volunteer and feeding bread to the fish that “boil up like piranhas” when he sits down at the dock feeding them. Betsy stays involved with her local church and library, as well as volunteers for local political elections and voter registration drives.

History/Information

Valrico Lake is a 124-acre lake and part of the Pemberton Creek/Baker Canal Watershed of Hillsborough County in Valrico, Florida. On the north end of the lake, a marshy area connects it to nearby Long Pond, which is also known as Lake Hunter (see narrative for Long Pond on this website). Dick described the water paths of Valrico Lake this way:



Valrico Lake in September 2002 (USF)

"It [drainage from Valrico Lake] goes into what's called Long Pond, which is marsh area. It's full of that Georgia willow and just brush...old Florida. Then it goes from Hunter [Long Pond] by pipe into Lake Weeks and then under 574...goes into another lake somewhere back in there and eventually ends up in Baker Creek, which dumps it into Thonotosassa. Then it goes into the Gulf eventually. So, this is a natural drainage area."

Wildlife supported by Valrico Lake includes raccoons, fox (both red and gray), geese, ducks, alligators, and a family of otters that Dick spots occasionally. The most prevalent birds are anhinga, coots, moorhens, and small blue herons. While geese and otter sightings have declined, alligator sightings have increased. About the alligators, Dick reported:



Valrico Lake congested with hydrilla in June 2000 (USF)

"It's getting to be a little too many now. It's a bit of a nuisance. You only see gators mostly at night. You can go out there with a spotlight. I went out there one night and stood by that little canoe we got as a planter now between the end of my dock and that little green patch of grass, there were five of them. You can tell from their red eyes."

As Dick sees it, Valrico Lake is in relatively good shape, particularly as compared to other lakes in the area. Although water quality has decreased during the time the Mahoneys have lived there, Dick still considers the lake to be in a current healthy state of affairs. As he described: "You won't find a lake any clearer than this one, except for the vegetation. It's like drinking water...crystal clear."



View of Valrico Lake from Dick's house (USF)

Over the years, Dick said Valrico Lake seems to experience constant change. He described the water body as hypereutrophic, which means high in nutrients. Dick sees this as the reason for the overgrowth of hydrilla that has occasionally plagued the lake, a condition attributable to septic tank runoff and the agricultural past of the surrounding land. Along with water quality, water levels have also fluctuated, which is why Dick promotes the use of a floating dock that rises and falls with the water levels. As he shared:

"The only thing to put on a lake that I've learned is a floating dock, not a stationary one. It's either under water or there is no water. And it's been both. One time I had water all the way up to this Oak tree. That was in... 97-98, El Nino years. And it was up about four posts up on this fence over here. A lot of people were flooded, particularly down the other way on what they call Long Pond."

Another dynamic aspect of Lake Valrico is its floating islands. The islands are made up of grass and other vegetation and have been seen migrating across the lake by Dick and others. At times, these landmasses hit up against the shore and make themselves a part of it, changing the shape of the lake. Dick shared:



Valrico Lake at time of interview (USF)



Fat Willie's Fish Camp on Lake Valrico (USF)



Valrico Civic Club-Historic Landmark (USF)

"We have these islands...They are as much as say 400 foot long and probably 200 foot wide, just blowing around with the wind out there. There is one right there to the right anchored to the shore. It knocked my dock out and my son and I had to put a boat in there, two boats. I've got a 70 horse and he had a 120-horse outboard and it took that to move them. It pushed my dock, bent all the spuds. They must weigh tons and they're amazing."

The floating islands reminded Dick of his time in the U.S. Marine Corps when he would watch the ships off the coast of California. Dick explained:

"That's what these [the floating islands] reminded me of. The northwest wind would start. I'd be sitting down there and here they'd come. No sound. They're moving at a pretty good clip. They're moving maybe two miles an hour. I mean it was amazing really. And they just push everything ahead of them. There are three of them trapped up in this corner over here. That's what all that growth is. They get in there and if it's a dry season and the lake's gone down, they start rooting. Now, when the lake comes back up, they start getting higher and floating. Those roots are in muck and so they pull right out. And take off. They float around. There is a name for them. I don't remember what it is...floating grass islands they call them. But they'll have water willows with stumps that big around. I mean big trees. And it's just quiet, kind of eerie really."

Development

Traditional uses of land surrounding Valrico Lake were primarily agricultural, which included the growth of citrus and strawberries, and cattle ranching. Cotton plantations are said to have been present in Valrico the town prior to the Civil War and lumbering for sawmills and turpentine stills was also a part of the larger Valrico area¹. Remnants of the citrus groves continue to exist. As Dick pointed out:

"There is still citrus right behind us. That's probably the best pink grapefruit you'll eat in your life. I have people waiting in line for them. I tell them, come pick them. I'm getting too old to pick them."

Dick was unable to pinpoint the start of residential development on Lake Valrico, but mentioned that when he moved to the lake in 1979, there were only four or five houses on his street and roughly ten houses on the lake's shoreline. Today, there are at least 20 houses on the lake with two new ones currently being built.

The earliest landowner on the lake as far back as Dick remembers is a man named Mr. Kiser. In fact, Valrico Lake is sometimes called Kiser Lake, presumably after Mr. Kiser. According to Dick, Mr. Kiser and his wife Mabel Claire Hackney owned most of the land around Valrico Lake during the 1960s. Mr. Kiser was a rancher that tended cattle and farmed. The wealthy couple produced no offspring and Dick said nieces and nephews are currently subdividing the land with plans to build at least one home directly on the lake. There is a housing development attached to the lake, although not all residents live on the lake's shores. The residents of this development maintain a small pavilion and boat ramp on a lakefront piece of land owned by their Homeowners Association. Historically, the group



Lake Valrico in September 2002 (USF)



Water level marker off Dick's dock
- September 2002 (USF)

has been active in maintaining the health of Valrico Lake. According to Dick, the Homeowner's Association is responsible for having stocked the lake with grass carp in previous years in response to the vegetation problems. Although, not living directly on the lake, the group has vested interest in the ability to continue using the lake. In Dick's opinion, this is a positive arrangement. Also worth noting with regards to development is the school that once sat on the shores of Valrico Lake. Maddux School was once a private school that closed down recently. As Dick described:

"It's a private school. It was a real good school, but it fell apart for some reason. It went to bankruptcy and they sold part of it. In fact, this part of it here you see on the left where that little framing is, from there on back to Pine Street, which is the next street up."

Currently, there are plans to develop the school property into a housing development that will include 20-30 homes worth \$180,000 and higher. Dick expects construction to begin soon.

The Future

One concern of Dick's regarding the future of Valrico Lake and the surrounding area is the overgrowth of hydrilla the lake is currently experiencing. However, he sees such intrusion as part of the always-changing nature of the lake. In his 23 years living there, he has seen the lake in many of its phases.

In considering the future of Lake Valrico, Dick is aware of the fact that it is completely private and possesses no public points of access. He believes this could be both good and bad. It is positive because those living around the lake have vested interest in its health. However, on the flip side, no public access can lead to drawbacks in attempts to get county officials to make something private a priority. About the residents' attempt to receive intervention concerning the hydrilla, Dick expressed: "We're supposedly on the list, but I think we've been bypassed...it's so solid, you can barely boat out there." Another forecast made by Dick concerning the future of Valrico Lake is the alarming rate at which it is "filling itself in":

"When I first moved here, I had a sounding device and it was eighteen feet deep on that end and about 10 feet deep on this end. Now it's...I just monitored it yesterday...6 foot deep down there and four up here because of muck. It's a self-filling lake right now because it's blocked off on the north end. And there is no flow of water on the south end. I've seen it come up at least 10 feet from the bottom. That's too much and in 20 years. In another 20 years, there won't be any lake...at least at the rate it's going."

However, Dick is hopeful:

"It's got to get better and I think eventually, of course SWFWMD controls the water, the water itself. The lake is going to have to eventually get cleaned out or it's going to fill itself in. And eventually, somebody is going to clean the lake up. I'd just like to be here when it's done. It'd be real nice."

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¹ History of Valrico, Florida, Greater Seffner Area Chamber of Commerce, from <http://seffnerchamber.com/history/valrico.htm>