

Alafia River



Driveway leading to Dr. Reed's home (USF)

The following narrative is derived from an interview with Dr. Richard R. Reed in his riverfront home on the morning of July 27, 2001. The narrative is an account of living on the Alafia River according to Dr. Reed, who has lived there for roughly 14 years. It includes a great deal of historical information on the area and stories of some of the major issues currently facing the river.

Personal History



River running through Dr. Reed's property (USF)

Born in Zephyrhills, Florida in 1933, Richard R. Reed grew up on the lakes, creeks, and rivers of south central Florida, living with his father for a time near Turkey Creek, which is connected to the Alafia. Although, Dr. Reed has lived on the Alafia's shores for only 14 years, he has never strayed far from it for too long. In 1951, Richard graduated from Plant City High School and went on to get his Associate of Arts degree from Emory-Valdosta College. Later, he went to Emory University, where he graduated with a Doctorate of Dentistry Science in 1957, making him a 24 year-old dentist.

After a stint in the army, he spent seven years in private practice in Leesburg before moving to Brandon, FL in 1967. Then in June of 1998, Dr. Reed retired from 41 years in dentistry. In 1969, he bought an 8-acre piece of land on the Alafia River. He bought it from a man named E.E. McLean. Dr. Reed reflects on the property:

"This is a little piece that juts across the river, the square end of it and there was no access to it, except by the river when I bought it. But I bought it cheap, and then I gained a fifteen-foot access, and that's all I've got right now."

Dr. Reed purchased the land because "it was quiet and right on the water" and he loves to hunt and fish. He says, "it was just sort of a natural thing."

History/Information



Dr. Reed at time of interview (USF)

The Alafia River is a fairly swift moving river in eastern Hillsborough County that runs for roughly 45 miles from the towns of Mulberry to Riverview. As can be seen from an aerial view, there is both a north and south prong of the waterway. From their convergence, the river runs roughly 25 miles westward, eventually emptying out into the Hillsborough Bay. According to Dr. Reed, the land around the river is not very fertile at present but may have been used for agricultural purposes in the past. He reports:

“Most of the areas that you see that are open were either for pasture or at some point they could have been used for agriculture. But a lot of this soil is poor and not particularly good to grow anything on. In fact, it’s not even good enough to grow decent grass...that out in front looks like beach sand, at least eight feet deep.”

However, vegetation is not what attracts Dr. Reed to the river. Rather, it is the animals that the river supports. Dr. Reed is both a hunter and a fisherman and he loves to eat the snook, trout, speckled perch, redfish, and grouper he fishes for as well as the quail he used to hunt for. He warns, “you don’t shoot or kill nothing that you’re not going to eat!” On his property, Dr. Reed has seen many birds and animals including hawks, buzzards, cardinals, blue jays, shrikes, owls, bob cats, fox, snakes, turtles, and every once in a while, hummingbirds.

One major issue facing the river and the life supported by it is the phosphate mining that occurs along its shores. When asked about the phosphate mining, Dr. Reed explained:

“Well, it’s probably one of the biggest employers in central Florida and has been for a long long time. They build these big reservoirs with earthen berms and sometimes they break...for one reason or another and then wash into the river. Then as it comes down, just like a tide of bad water, it kills everything as it moves down, everything from little tiny crabs to tiny minnows. So, that’s not good. It takes a long time for it to replenish itself.”

In 1997, there was a massive spill of nearly 2,000 tons of phosphorous and nitrogen when a gypsum stack dam broke, sending roughly 50 million gallons of acidic water into the river. The accident killed fish, shellfish, oyster, and much of the river’s plant life. Both federal and state officials sued Mulberry Phosphate, the company that is responsible for the spill, but retribution has not yet been paid. This summer, there are plans to build a three-mile long pipeline that will remove acidic water from the plant. In an ironic twist of fate, the Florida Department of Environmental Protection has now taken over Mulberry Phosphate because its owner went bankrupt. What this means is that the cost of the restoration projects will become the burden of Florida’s taxpayers.

Development



Dr. Reed's house hidden among the vegetation on his riverfront property (USF)

Although Dr. Reed has lived on the Alafia River for only 14 years, he knows the surrounding area and its development history well. As a child, he would fish and swim with his father in Lithia Springs. He explains the Brandon area in those early days:

"My dad and I would fish right there in the edge of the springs and down on the river, but that was a long time ago. There weren't many houses on the river at that time. Brandon probably consisted of maybe 40 people and 400 cows. Real small."

It was some time before Dr. Reed decided to build on the land that he had purchased. He wanted to build a home when he first bought the property, but waited until his wife was ready. He jokingly shares:

"I wanted to go ahead and build a house a long time ago, but my wife didn't want to live down this far in the woods by herself if I was working. When we got some neighbors, you know relatively close...then she decided, well, it won't be so bad."

Before the Reeds lived in the area, one subdivision called Indian Hills was built, and it is likely that residential development will continue. During the interview, Dr. Reed talked about water issues and the need for careful water management as the population increases. He explains:

"I've had a good life in Florida and the more congested it gets, the worse it seems to be. We have a finite supply of water and that's one thing, since our bodies are 99 percent water, that we can't do without. We need to control growth like Colorado. Come visit, but if you buy land, it must have water."

As Florida's high rate of development continues and the state experiences robust growing pains, water quality and availability will be at the forefront of sustainability issues.

The Future



River running through Dr. Reed's property (USF)

Some of the major issues facing the future of this river are the prevention of future phosphate spills, careful water management, and planned development. An additional concern raised during the interview with Dr. Reed is that of people dumping garbage such as tires and old refrigerators into the river. Dr. Reed says he feels that “the river would be fine if we’d just quit spoiling it, quit dumping in it.” However, he is optimistic for the future. He shares:

“Actually, people are finally waking up a bit. Now, they have these clean ups. They have the scouts and other people that go down with canoes and you know they make a party out of it and they collect as much junk as they can. They find and collect old tires, refrigerators, washing machines, cans and other garbage that’s in the water.”

With continued such efforts and the prevention of future phosphate spills, it is likely the Alafia River will heal itself of past wounds. It will just take some time.

Written By: Deanna Barcelona, M.A.