

# Commiston Lake Narrative

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The following narrative is based on an interview with Ray Cornett at the Cornett family home on February 26, 1999.

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## Family History

### The Cornett Family



Ray and Peggy Cornett, long-time Lake Commiston residents

Nestled on the southwest shores of Lake Commiston is the house that has served as home to the Cornett family since the early 1960's. Ray and Peggy Cornett moved to the shores with their three children, Mitch, Yvonne and Deb after relocating to Florida from Ohio. Ray comments, "...We came in 1964 and this was just a weekend cottage...It was not big enough for a family, so I improvised while I had a house built. Four years later I sold the house and bought this, moved in and added on to it. We've been here since; our three kids were reared here."



Ray Cornett on his dock in 1975  
photo by: Ray and Peggy Cornett

Ray truly appreciates nature and Lake Commiston is the ideal setting for his respect for the natural environment, which he has passed on to his children. (nar2: Ray Cornett on his dock in 1975) Throughout their tenure on Lake Commiston, the family has incorporated lake activities into their lives. Water-skiing, swimming, and boating were everyday activities for the Cornett family. Not to be omitted from the list is fishing. Ray tells stories of fishing with his children when they were younger. The fish in the lake were so plentiful that he did not have time to fish himself because he was so busy baiting hooks to replace the fish he took off their lines. He relates a story about his daughter Deb, when she was seven years old, and her battle with the 'big one':

"I had a huge fishing rod, too big for a kid...She said, 'No, it's not'. I said, 'Go ahead' ...She picked up a cane pole and caught a brim with it, and put it on that big rod. She said, 'See there, I can cast it,' and she hooked something. It looked like a mudfish... She said, 'No, it's a bass' and I said, 'Get it yourself, it's your fish, you

hooked it.'

So, I'm laughing and she had it for a long while ...that thing jumped and I saw its mouth and it looked like one of those photos they show in Field and Stream...it was a bass...it got off...I said, 'Sorry Deb, it was a bass. Go ahead and throw it back out and it will hit again.' She said, 'It won't and you know it, they never hit dead bait twice.'



Deb Cornett posing with her catch of the day, 1966  
photo by: Ray and Peggy Cornett

So she disgustedly threw it back out and and one hit like that and I got the net. She said, 'I told you it was a ten-pound bass.' I said, 'I told you it would hit again.' She said, 'It didn't...This is another one ...the other was a lot bigger.'

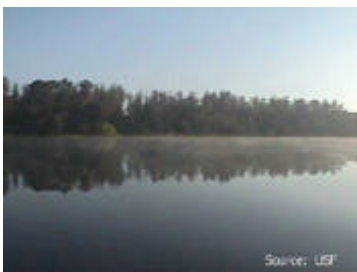
She was right. We took that one and Peggy had it mounted and hung it on the wall. It weighed eight-and-a-half pounds the next day [after it was dressed]."

Ray and his daughter Deb's relationship centering on the lake and the fish it supports did not end when her fish was mounted and hung on the wall. Ray relates another story about his 'big one' caught during a visit home by Deb when she was in college:

"She went to college in Lake Wales and she came home weekends a lot, whenever she could. She came home this one weekend and grabbed a canoe and a paddle and said, 'Come on Pop, I'll row you around the lake'... I grabbed a fishing pole...I was playing with it, and I threw it out on the edge [of the lake], there was a huge plastic worm, actually a 10 inch plastic worm, bigger than most people use and I threw it out there and I saw something hit it, so I just released it. She said, 'Did you get a bite?' and I said, 'It's just one of those little ones working around the edges.' ...I let it go and I was just playing with her. We were in the canoe and I had the one worm and no net no nothing and I saw the line going and the first thing you know, she says, 'Hey we don't need a motor! Is there a fish on there?' It was actually towing the canoe, and it towed and towed and the man over there came out and he was looking, and... I let it get in front and I really popped the hook and that thing came out and it was huge. 'You still got it!' I reeled and reeled and it came up beside the canoe and I reached down and just pinched it on the bottom of the lip and the hook came out of its mouth and I raised it up, she said, 'Did you lose that fish? You lost that beautiful fish? Dad, that was 10 pounds.' And I said, 'Well, I lost that one, but I caught this one' and I raised it up ...that fish weighed 11 and a half pounds, that was the biggest one I ever caught, it was towing the canoe, believe it or not..."

The Cornett family's memories, studded with scenes of and activities on the lake, have encouraged an on-going relationship between three generations of the family and Lake Commiston. Ray and Peggy's children still come back and visit, looking for the turtles whose shells they had painted in years past, with each child having their individual color scheme. They now bring their own children, numbering nine, to fish, watch the birds and paint turtle shells. Ray muses, "They still love the water. When they come down now, the first thing they do is get the canoe or the boat and just go around and look. This is home for them."

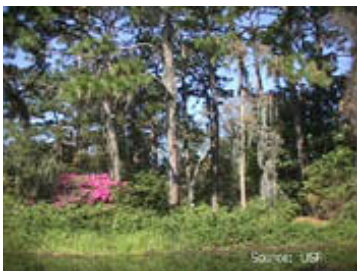
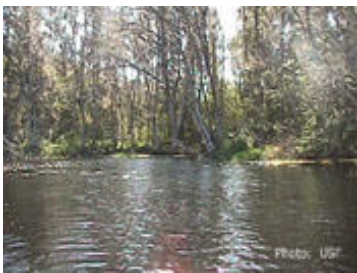
## Lake Commiston



North shore of Lake Commiston,  
1999

Lake Commiston is a 15-acre lake situated just behind the Lutz elementary school. The lake is located within the Hillsborough Basin in the Sweetwater Creek Watershed. Although small, the lake is an oasis located just a couple of blocks from the newly widened Highway 41, and is not as severely affected by light and noise pollution influencing other natural environments in the area. Attesting to the clarity of the skies around the lake is a story Ray relates about watching the Apollo liftoffs, "Remember when

they were doing all of the Apollo flights? I had a telescope... I knew where it [the rocket] would go and I would watch it on TV...until they had the blast off and then I would run out...Most of the times I couldn't see anything but vapor, but if weather conditions were right and clear enough, sometimes I could see the rocket taking off."



Shoreline vegetation on Lake  
Commiston, 1999

A look at the lake today would causes the observer to note the level to which lake is still rimmed by indigenous shoreline vegetation, but long-time residents such as the Cornetts recognize changes that have occurred over time. Ray comments, "We first came out here in 1964 you couldn't even see the water here...this was all grown up to the water's edge and you could barely see it. We lost a lot of trees since I've been here. Lightening and storms...there was a huge cypress tree with a dead top and we used to sit here and watch the osprey, that was their favorite place..."

The vegetation that has survived despite development and natural cycles is more than adequate to support a thriving wildlife population. Birds are appreciative of the habitat provided by the lake. Ospreys, egrets, herons,

woodstorks, songbirds and an occasional eagle are visitors to, or residents on the shores of the lake. Also present among the population are ducks, about

which Ray tells the following story:

"When we first moved out here, the lady from Parks [Department] gave us a pair of baby ducks. They grew up here and raised young, then they disappeared in a hurricane. We actually saw them being blown and then never saw them come back. Then the next year ducks came back and we know they are descendents from the same pair. Those are the wild mallards. I noticed they came here with a whole bunch of little ones, at one time I counted ... 14 little ducklings...the next day I counted and they looked like a little less, finally they were under 10...I watched and when they got over to a certain place, I saw a big splash. I don't know if it was a small gator or a bass..."



Just a taste of the wildlife on Lake Commiston

Where birds and fish remain stable in their representation on the lake, other species have been declining in number. Bobcat, fox and quail are under-represented relative to their historical populations. Ray relates a story exploring the interplay between wild and domesticated animals on the lake's shores:

"As a matter of fact...somebody had Siamese cats penned in over here...I have seen bobcats come out of the woods...going to that cat...he'd go over there and sniff around and then he'd go back. Then later I saw the cat got out and I saw the bobcat and it together going around the lake...a lot of times, I would say 'Now there's a funny looking cat', half domestic and half bobcat. They'd be bigger, with a bobcat face and ears, but no tail..."

The food chain is alive and well on Lake Commiston. The links in the chain are diverse and well represented, and alterations imposed by humans upon nature's balance can throw the system askew. Ray comments:

" Everything is part of the chain...They had a problem in the lake with these little green turtles, they just took over...They mess the place up...where they over multiply, it's really nasty. Well, they disappeared but the skunks [got] so bad. He [a neighbor] got rid of the skunks. As soon as he killed all the skunks, the turtles came back, they were all over the place...The skunks were digging all the turtle eggs at the edge of the lake, and when the skunks were killed, the turtles took over...When you mess with something, you're going to pay for it with something else."

## Development





Yvonne and Mitch Cornett  
photographed on the west shore of  
Lake Commiston  
photo by: Ray and Peggy Cornett

The history of the development around Lake Commiston is representative of Lutz in terms of its association with early pioneer families. Ray relates bits of history about neighboring lakes, such as the lake to the north known as Alligator Lake, "There was an old man who owned this property...but he raised alligators years ago, we're talking 50 years ago...for their hides. When I first came to Florida in the 50's on vacation, you could go anywhere and pick up an alligator handbag or a pair of shoes. People would actually raise the alligators in the lake."

The two lakes were at one time accessible to each other through a wetland sacrificed to recent development. In many places where natural connections between lakes have succumbed to development, man-made connections have been added. Lake Commiston is now connected to Lake Keene by a culvert through which the lakes exchange water when the levels of the lakes hit a threshold.



Culvert connecting lake Keene to  
Lake Commiston

The shore of Lake Commiston was the site of an early settlement of African American families who ran a sawmill to process the multitude of trees sacrificed to the settling of the surrounding area. To facilitate the existence of the sawmill, a road was built along the edge of the lake. The road was closed by referendum in the late 1950's. The Cornett's home was built along that road. Ray tells a story about the house's somewhat nefarious past: "...I worked with an older man and he said, 'Well, I know where you

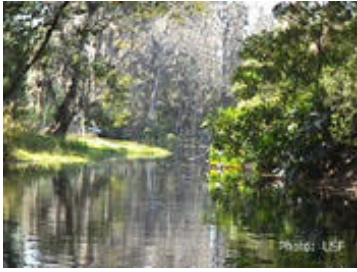
live, I helped build that house.' Whether he did or not...he said he used to come out on the weekends and have drinking parties. I can find evidence of their bottles now, and where they used to shoot [guns]. See that piece of tin on the tree? That's full of pistol holes."

Lake Commiston has escaped many of the effects of the rapidly developing northern sections of Hillsborough County. Ray comments that there are probably only five more houses on the lake than when the family settled there in the 1960's. The majority of these houses were built on land pumped up for that purpose. Ray comments:

"...[The developer] pumped sand into that swamp for days until finally they [the residents] actually stopped him. People got a petition that he was disrupting the lake and it became really milky and it lingered for years. It took forever to clear up. Once it settled we lost the shoreline, the swampline..."

The impacts upon the natural environment from pumping were not all negative, but include the creation of a great fishing hole, "I've caught some huge catfish out of there and some bass...", but such additions come at the expense of shoreline vegetation and alteration of the natural flow of water within the watershed.

The lake is the present setting for 14 homes and



Man-made canal on the northeast shore of Lake Commiston

a significant amount of undeveloped shoreline which backs up to Nye Park on the lake's south shore. The Cornetts extract much enjoyment from the space they have around their house and Ray comments, "As you can see, they can't crowd us here... I join the school ground...you would think you were 50 miles from town. No street lights...I like it wild. I like nature."

## The Future



Three generations of Cornetts enjoy Lake Commiston  
photo by: Ray and Peggy Cornett

Ray and Peggy Cornett have enjoyed a long relationship with the lake and their children have, too. The third generation of Cornett descendents is learning to love the lake on vacations and visits where they paint turtle shells, watch birds, and participate in lake activities much like those of their parents in their youth.

The lake has seen many people come and go. Neighbors are different, the wildlife changes and

alterations are imposed upon the natural environment, but some things stay the same. Ray comments, "People move in and use the lake and move on...It [Lake Commiston] is like Old Man River. The people change, the relationships change, but the lake is always there."