

# Egypt Lake Narrative

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The following narrative is based on an interview with Chris Thayer in his home on Egypt Lake in July, 1998. The interview provided information, which combined with survey, biological assessment, and other agency's data illustrates the past, present, and future trends of the lake.

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## Chris Thayer



Chris Thayer pictured on the right, Lakewatch volunteer and oral history informant

Chris Thayer moved to Egypt Lake in 1992 when he became semi-retired and was looking for lakefront property. He found a house for sale on the southeast corner of Lake Egypt, moved in and began a relationship with the lake that has benefited not just him, but all the residents living on the lake.

Chris is the president of the Egypt Lake Property Owners Association, a group instigated in the 1950's that swung back into action in the late 1980's to address a hydrilla problem threatening the very life of the lake. He has been an integral part in the creation of Egypt Lake's management program, and in the installation of aerators and artificial reefs to enhance the vegetation and fish population within the lake. In addition, Chris is the Lakewatch volunteer on Egypt Lake, compiling data on water quality and vegetation that can be used to identify trends in the health of the lake.



Chris Thayer's dock on Egypt Lake sports a visual reminder of the lake's historic association with the Shriners

Chris has spent his energy compiling a history of Egypt Lake spanning back to the late 1800's. He has accessed memories from old residents, records from organizations such as the Egypt Temple Shriners and has restored dozens of historic photographs. In addition, Chris is a member of the Egypt Temple Shriners.

His efforts have helped to link the past, present and future of Egypt Lake. They have served to provide a place for the memories of past residents as to the historic atmosphere and physical realities of the lake. They provide a framework within which to mount potential actions for the future

to enhance the health of the lake, the value of surrounding property, and the enjoyment of residents for years to come.

## Egypt Lake



Northeast shore of Egypt Lake

Egypt Lake is located in the Hillsborough River Basin just outside the city limits of Tampa. It is a 67 acre lake, which until the late 1970's, was fed by springs, an activity that has ceased due to silting and a lowering of the water table. The lake was known as Hagin Lake but its name was changed in the 1933 to Egypt Lake, paralleling the name utilized by the Egypt Temple Shriners since the early 1920's.

The lake is a very deep lake, in some parts supporting holes 50 plus feet in depth. The depth of the holes has been augmented by pumping sand to fill low-lying areas to facilitate lakefront building, but many of them occur naturally. The variation in lake depth has been cited partially as a reason for many drownings occurring on the lake over the past 70 years.

Historically, Egypt Lake was the home to a diverse and thriving wildlife population. Bass, shellcrackers, catfish, alligators and turtles were among the species represented within the lake environment. Heavy development and imbalances within the lake's ecosystem have led to a decline in the diversity supported by the lake.

Egypt Lake has periodically been plagued by vegetation problems, particularly hydrilla that in the late 1980's flourished to the point where it covered the surface of the lake. The Egypt Lake Property Owners Association swung into action and the lake was treated through the use of chemicals and grass eating carp. The treatments were extreme, resulting in the devegetation of the entire lake bottom. Lacking the vegetation needed to survive, the fish population dwindled and algae took over, supported by the influx of nutrients which vegetation no longer existed to absorb. The fish population was further decimated by fish kills brought on by lack of oxygen facilitated by the abundance of algae.

The Property Owners Association, rather than throw in the towel researched ways to facilitate the revegetation of the lake. They financed aerators to distribute oxygen throughout the lake, installed artificial reefs to facilitate the regrowth of the fish population, and removed a quarter of the grass eating carp, in hopes of allowing the regrowth of vegetation on the bottom of the lake.

The efforts of residents on Lake Egypt, spearheaded by Chris Thayer, have met with much success. The clarity of the water, historically in the 10-15 foot range is beginning to increase from as low of four foot at the height of their problems as

the aerators limit the algae growth. The fish population is experiencing a revival with catfish, bluegill, and a small but tenacious population of bass rebounding from the fish kill of the 1990's.

## The Development

The size and proximity of the lake to many parts of Tampa made it an ideal location for development, of which, Egypt Lake has a rife history. Old families in the area include Keggin and Morris' who owned property utilized by the Egypt Lake Shriners in the early part of the century. Mr. Greenman owned property on the northwest shores of the lake and cultivated much of it in citrus. He is purported to have been a nudist and suffered an untimely death in 1953, the cause of which may have been murder or suicide. The Ralston's owned property on the southeast shore and opened one of two public beaches for which Egypt Lake was known throughout Tampa until the 1970's.

Ralston Beach, on the southeast shore and another on the southwest shore called Morningside Beach and eventually Colonial Beach were the sites of much social activity in the early and middle parts of the century. The beach clubs were open to the public for a small entrance fee and featured amenities such as picnic sheds, bath houses and as is the case with Colonial Beach, an indoor dance pavilion where concerts and dances were held for the public. During the war years, Colonial Beach was utilized by the United States Army as a training facility and was closed to the public and guarded throughout the day.

Public access to the waters of Egypt Lake facilitated their use by the Tampa Skibeers as a practice and performance site. The Skibeers, active from the 1950's through the 1970's gave free performances on the weekends, broke a record for pulling the most skiers behind a boat (31) and even performed with the Cypress Gardens Skiers in St. Petersburg.



The Carleton Arms Apartment Complex is located on the southwest shore of Egypt Lake

With the decline in popularity of public freshwater beaches in the 1970's came increased development on Lake Egypt. Until the 1940's, the lake was only home to a scattering of residences and the two public beaches. Private residential development commenced on the north shores with the platting of Egypt Lake Estates on the property originally owned by Mr. Greenman. The land augmented by pumping from the lake bottom caused the lake to be murky for two years.

Multi-family development came to Egypt Lake with the building of the Carlton Arms on the site of the old Colonial Beach and was followed in the 1970's with the Landings Apartments where Ralston Beach was once situated.

The lake has had a long history of use and the



The Ralston Place Apartments situated on the previous site of Ralston Beach

intensive relationship it holds with humans has not been surprising to residents or necessarily negative. The problems usually instigated by development, invasive vegetation, pollution from storm drains, septic, and runoff, and the decimation of the wildlife have been mediated in the past by concerned individuals and in the present by efforts such as Chris Thayer's and the Egypt Lake Property Owners Association.

## The Future

Egypt Lake has certainly had its share of trials and tribulations. Set among the bustle of urban Tampa, its shores and waters have had a history irretrievably intertwined with human activity and occupation. Its health today is reliant upon the concern, planning and action of its residents and organizations. The Egypt Lake Property Owner's Association has achieved much success in mediating the interaction between humans and the lake environment. Their Lake Management plan benefits from the information, training and data collected through Lakewatch and their proactive behavior will ensure the life of the lake for future generations.



The new Ralston Beach Club as Chris Thayer has named his Egypt Lake home

Efforts such as those of Chris Thayer, not only enable proactive approaches for the future, but his history of the lake serves to link those actions with past experiences, conditions and memories. The residents have a model of the past against which to measure their actions in the present and in the future.

Chris has chosen a lifestyle that transcends restrictions set by time. He has named his house the Ralston Beach Club, and continues the tradition of entertaining Tampa residents on the shores of the lake that have for decades been known for their hospitality.