

# Platt Lake Narrative

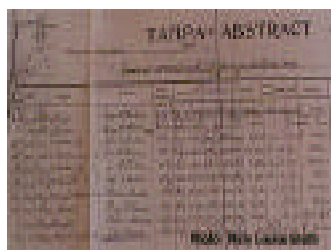
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The following narrative is based on an interview with Platt Lake residents, Mary Louise Smith and Maurine McTyre, in the home of Mary Louise Smith on June 16, 1999. The perspectives articulated by Mrs. Smith and Mrs. McTyre help to illuminate the realities of life on Platt Lake in the past and present and to highlight some issues to be addressed by humans regarding their interaction with the natural environment in the future.

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## Family History

Mary Louise Smith and Maurine McTyre are sisters, separated by nine years. They live on the shores of Platt Lake, on property that has been in their family for more than one hundred years. Their parents, Mattie Platt-Robles and John Horace Robles were joined in marriage, and through their association with the land.



The original abstract for the property traces its ownership between the Platt and Robles families.

The Robles family homesteaded 40 acres on the north side of Platt Lake in 1878. Mary Louise and Maureen explain, "We have the original abstract . . . [from] the State of Florida. This shows when [the land] was given to Uncle Green W. Robles. . . . He was Dad's uncle. . . . You see [on the abstract], it changed hands between their family." The sisters' maternal grandfather, John Wesley Platt, bought the land in 1900.

Maurine comments about how the north shore of the lake became the setting for nearly one hundred years of Platt-Robles family life.



Mary Louise Smith and Maureen McTyre as children on the shores of Lake Platt

"Grandfather, who was from out by Dade City, had cattle. He was also a surveyor on the west coast of Florida, in the Port Charlotte area. That was Mother's father. In fact, all of the Platts are scattered all throughout Florida and were cattlemen. That is how they found this lake. He went out rounding up his cattle and of all of the little lakes he went by, he went back and told my Grandmother, 'I like that [one best].' She came down and spent a week [with him] in a little cattlemen's cabin and that was it. She'd come down with him when he was rounding up cattle."

So began a multi-generation life experience on Platt Lake for the Platt and the Robles families.

Maureen and her husband live in the sisters' childhood home built by her father. The original house was constructed by combining two schoolhouses that he moved by wagon from their original locations to the north shore of the lake. Mary Louise and her husband live a stone's throw away in the house they have lived in since they were married.

John Horace Robles was a bi-vocational minister who supplemented his income in various ways. He had a twenty-acre orange grove, including a six-acre seedling orange grove, to the west of their lakeshore house. The grove was planted when the land was homesteaded in the late 1800's. Maurine explains about the grove, some members of which still bear fruit today, a century after they were planted:

" [The trees] were all big enough, that in the big freeze of 1895, they froze down. They cut them off and the trees came back up . . . one trunk, and then it sprouted like an oak tree. They grew so tall that one hundred-foot ladders were required to harvest the fruit. Not many orange trees do that. Today's trees are budded and they branch way down."



Citrus trees planted at the turn of the century still produce fruit today.

In addition, their father produced coal to sell in Tampa. Mary Louise explains the process:

"In part of the acreage they had all pine trees, and Dad cut those trees ten or twelve feet long. He would stack those logs six or seven feet [high] . . . into the cracks, right close together so it would build up like a pyramid. He covered it with dirt and built a fire under it and it cooked, burned under the sand; eventually, smoke would ease out here and there out through the cracks. . . . It made coal. It took three to six months to make coal . . . Then he'd haul it, he had a little truck . . . and he'd haul the coal in bags to where the Convention Center stands today on the bay. . . . That part of Franklin Street was all commercial, nothing like it is today. . . . Fort Brook was in there, you see, so this was down by the water where the boats come in. . . . Everybody would go to those docks because everybody that lived in the city of Tampa had to live on charcoal. They heated with charcoal, they cooked with charcoal, in Ybor City and everywhere. He sold it out there. That is one of the ways the people out here made a living."



John Horace and Mattie Robles had three daughters, Mary Louise, Ruth, and Maurine, who enjoyed a privileged upbringing relative to the time and place of their childhood. Maurine remembers, "We had lights and running water, and we had an inside toilet before anyone else did." To facilitate the family's access to running water, their father built a pump and a large water tank, which stands out in the sisters' childhood memories. Maurine continues, "He built a tower, a huge water tower. . . . It was a big thing, not like the little ones you see now . . . and pumped water up from the lake and we had running water. It was clear and pure enough for drinking water."

Eventually, the majority of the original 40 acres was subdivided and sold to support the family and to send the daughters to college. Mary Louise comments,

"When Dad was ill, he became diabetic and didn't carry insurance. . . They said, 'We have the property. That is our insurance.' They sold two pieces and that took care of it. Then when he passed away, Mother had to sell the one on the corner [of Lake Magdalene Boulevard].

The sisters grew up and went separate ways. Ruth, who was born in the family house on the lake, married into another old Tampa family, the Meares, and still resides in Tampa on Noreast Lake. Maurine, with her husband and three children, moved to Chile as missionaries for 28 years. Mary Louise married and built a house next door to her parents who were both in their 70's at the time. In 1983, Maurine and her husband retired and moved into their parent's original lake house. Their mother had died just a month short of her one-hundredth birthday. The two sisters each retain approximately 3 acres and plan to stay on the shores of the lake they have known their entire lives.

## Lake History

Lake Platt is located in the Sweetwater Creek watershed, just to the north of Lake

Magdalene. It is a 63-acre lake rimmed by cypress and oak, with a small island in the middle. The sisters reminisce about the island, "There was a shallow spot out there. Now it is an island with all the grasses on it...It was always under water, before the water table dropped." The 'shallow spot' was a destination for children growing up on the lake. Maurine explains, "We swam there all the time. . . . We didn't go around the road to meet each other, we went across the lake. We'd stand here on the edge of the lake and say 'Whoo, whoo, whoo!' They'd hear it because the water is just like a telephone. We'd say, 'Let's go swimming in the shallow spot!'" At times, the water was deep enough to dive from a tower they built there. Mary Louise picks up the memory's thread, "They'd swim across and we'd take a boat...an old wooden boat, good and flat so it wouldn't turn over...and we'd meet them over there." Maureen adds, "Recently, with developments west of here, it has become a bird rookery. In the evening it looks like the bushes have white blossoms."



The north shore of Platt Lake looking east has a different aesthetic than at the turn of the century.



Maureen and her husband pose on the diving platform in the "shallow spot" of Lake Platt, ca. 1940.

The bottom of Lake Platt is sandy and peppered with deep holes. Maurine comments,

"It's a sand bottomed lake. Some of the lakes around here are mud-bottomed...but Platt Lake is nice and sandy. Once the winter sediment is washed off...there is beautiful white sand underneath. The lake was a good fishing lake. Many evenings, Dad would catch bream, speckled perch, or a bass for our supper. He fed the small fish daily from our dock and when we walked on the dock, they would swim up. They nibbled at us when we went swimming there."

Maurine speaks of the shores of Lake Platt when she was growing up:

"Beyond the cypress and the shoreline there wasn't anything other than pines and palmettos. We used to...pick blueberries and huckleberries and blackberries. We always carried a stick with us because of all of those palmettos- that's where the rattlesnakes always were. You would put your stick in there and shake it around in the palmettos because if there was a snake in there, he would come out and run the other way. That was the way you protected yourself."

Some of the snakes were bigger than those that could be frightened away with a bit of noise. Maurine and Mary Louise remember a harrowing sight from their childhood:

"We had a dog and it got to barking furiously and we knew it was barking at something. Dad went out to see [what it was]. . . . Rattlesnakes lived back toward the swamp in that lower area. One had come up here, a huge six-foot rattlesnake. . . . He was headed for under the house and the dog stopped him. Dad came around and saw him and I remember standing on the porch, scared to death because it was the longest thing. Dad didn't have any shells for the shotgun and the longest thing he had was a hoe, and here was this six foot rattler. . . ."

Mr. Robles killed the rattler with the hoe, effectively putting an end to that problem. Mary Louise comments that, "We don't have anything like that now [there are] too many machines and subdivisions."

Other frequent visitors to the lake of their childhood were otters and alligators.

Mary Louise reminisces:

"I was my daddy's 'boy.' I would ride behind the mule, cut



Alligators were a more common feature of Lake Platt in the



An alligator-skin chair is a family heirloom and aided many Platt and Robles children in taking their first steps.

the grass, [and go] alligator hunting in the boat. It was not the rowboat, we didn't use oars then. It was just one paddle, but he taught me to paddle. If you lift the oar, it drips water and the alligator would swim under the water. He could hear it... You could shine a light on the lake and see alligator eyes everywhere because they always kept their heads up at night... I would paddle and we'd get within about twenty feet... and they'd come up and he'd shoot them between the eyes. The only way you can kill them is between the eyes... So, he'd drag the alligator in, hang it up there where the water pump was, he'd string it up there and skin it."

1930's.

Photo Source:Maureen McTyre

Mary Louise has a family heirloom. It is a chair made by her grandfather, with a seat made of alligator skin that he shot and cured. She explains, "This chair was hand made and was used this way [tipped over], only by the children. Mother said that they learned to walk by pushing on the chair because they needed to stand."

## Development

The Robles sisters' long history with the area provides valuable insight to changes in social and physical environments throughout the 20th century. They remember a small community of families in the area made up of names like Bearss, McKay, Macklin, Denham, Griffin, Stall, Lowe, Benzinger, Gass, Lough, Lipkey, Stover, Kee [Ki], Bond, Fletcher, Ehrlich, Zambito and Vandervort. Much of the interaction among families centered around the United Brethren Church. Maurine comments, "There were five [churches] started in the area. There was one downtown and there was one here and one in Lutz. He [her father] was pastor there and built the building by hand with the help of men in the congregation. The building still stands today."



The Robles home after renovations in the 1930's looks much as it does today.

Mary Louise relates an interesting story about the present location of the Lake Magdalene United Methodist Church. She explains:

Photo Source: Mary Louise Smith

"Lake Magdalene United Brethren Church was interesting because it was built over there off Casey Road, in the woods between Casey Road and what is now Dale Mabry. . . That little, frame church, they moved it to where the United Methodist Church is now [because] there were a lot more families over here and the school was up this way. The people walked or went by horse and buggy or whatever up to the school. They moved the church. How they did it was right through the woods, because there were no roads. They cut limbs, logs, and put them under the church and rolled it on logs and when it came off a log, they pulled it out from under and put it in the front and it was moved by logs all the way over to its present location."



The original Robles home was built by joining two school-houses that were moved to the property by John Horace Robles in the 1920's.

Photo Source: Mary Louise

School was another forum for the area's families to come together. Maurine reminisces:

"We were all in school together; my generation was in the new school. . . they built one from the frame building here . . . It must have been about '26 or '27. . . . It burned the next year. I remember. . . it may have been early evening, . . . but Dad saw the flame in the sky from our porch here. I had already gone to bed for the night because I was standing on the porch in my nightgown and just crying my eyes out because my school was burning down."

Maureen remembers the special activities at the school. There was always a Christmas and an Easter play, a Maypole dance in the spring, and a Halloween carnival to raise funds for school needs such as the library, lab, and sports equipment. The school also



Smith supported group activities for youth, and the Girl Scouts, Boy Scouts, Future Farmers of America, and 4-H Clubs were vital school activities.

Mary Louise explains about the social role the school and church played in their lives:

"The school or the church. . . those were the social activities of the whole community. . . . All kinds of activities for young people and children. Vacation bible schools. . . and the [secular] schools would have competitions. The families met quite often in the schools. On the night for the parents to come, everybody had to have a part, and the children were all in it. You had to memorize. You had a little four-line verse if you were in first grade and then, when older, you had to memorize a little poem. We had spelling bees and geography bees. All of the families attended. They were knit together and they looked after each other, just like you do in this little community right here [on the north end of the lake]. We have five or six families and everybody looks after each other."

Maurine remembers the taffy pulls and other activities:

"Oh my, we had taffy pulls. . . pulling it and pulling it. I remember standing on the porch with the young people and pulling. We had a big porch, a wrap around porch, and everywhere people were pulling that taffy until you got it just right to break off. . . . [I remember] oyster roasts, [travelling by] wagons and later with the Model T's down to Rocky Point to get oysters. We'd carry the big sheet of tin and they'd bring it out and spread the oysters on that piece of tin and roast those oysters."

As more people moved to the area, the roads were expanded. Maurine comments:

"The first road was nine feet wide, following the path of the old wagon road. Later, the main road was just a narrow road, just wide enough for two to pass on, like 25 feet [wide] . . . Dad gave all of that and then the other people [the Macklins and the Stalls] gave. . . . They called it Lake Magdalene Boulevard because Lake Magdalene was the biggest lake. It followed the county section lines."

The Robles sisters remember times when shopping was not nearly as convenient as it is today. Mary Louise comments:

"Until 1950. . . we had to go clear downtown to buy our groceries. We had gardens and all of that. We could buy a little meat in Sulphur Springs, they had a little market there. . . . They didn't have much. . . . We could buy a little bit of canned goods [and] sugar."

Maurine expands:

"We also bought one hundred pound ice blocks for the ice box, as well as grain for the chickens and cows at the feed store. Later we could get grain at Sinclair Hills on Nebraska Avenue. It was before the time of supermarkets, of course. There was one large market store downtown, actually very close to where the old courthouse is now. . . ."



The undeveloped shoreline of Lake Platt in the 1920's bears little resemblance to the shores of the lake today.

Photo Source: Mary Louise Smith

The days of daylong trips to the market, oyster roasts, acetylene lights and iceboxes have passed. Today, Lake Magdalene Boulevard has much of its traffic relieved by Bearss Avenue, and the area around Lake Platt is becoming increasingly developed. The shores of the lake are lined with 15 homes and a conference center owned by the Baptist Churches. Gone are the days of orange groves and coal making. Remaining are a few scattered citrus trees serving as reminders to the area's agricultural past, and of course, the lake.

# The Future



Mr. Platt and his nephew on the shore of Lake Platt (ca. 1930)

Photo Source: Mary Louise Smith

So many changes have occurred in the lives of the Robles sisters. The community consisting of old North Tampa families has dispersed, but reminders are everywhere, in the lakes, in the homes, in the cemetery at the north side of Lake Carroll, and in the stories and memories they share.

Maurine and Mary Louise have aged gracefully. Often one can find them outside in their yards, pulling moss out of the trees, raising orchids, or watching water skiers. They appreciate the turtles and an occasional alligator or otter, and enjoy a wide variety of birds, especially an occasional osprey, hawk or owl. They still experience daily visits from the sandhill cranes that eat from their hands and the night calls of the whip-poor-wills and screech owls, which nest on their property. There are still, although less frequent sightings of wild turkey or grey fox on the conference center grounds, in spite of

nearly total development around the lake. Increased development has brought many new families to the shores of the lake, and they are a welcome addition to the Lake Platt community that changes with time, but with the lake at its center, remains strong.

## **The following addendum was prepared by Maurine McTyre to highlight the diversity of families living in Central Hillsborough County during her childhood.**

The early North Lake Magdalene community around Lake Platt was a microcosm of the diversity of the pioneers of Early Florida. They were first and second generation pioneers from Spain, England, Scotland, Ireland, Holland, Germany, Poland, Slovakia, Italy and China. This diversity is reflected in names like Robles, Platt, Macklin, McKay, Bearss, Griffin, Lowe, Stall, Vandervort, Lipkey, Stover (Krystoviak), Zambito, Kee (Ki), and Ehrlich. Several of these families have third and fourth generations on the same land homesteaded by their ancestors - notably the Robles and Platts, the Stalls, Stovers, Kees, Bearss, and Lowe/ Griffin families.