

Simmons Lake



Simmons Lake in June 2002 (USF)



The shore of Simmons Lake in 2002 (USF)

This narrative has been written based on an interview with four Simmons Lake residents – Bob Hall, Tony Isenberg, Larry Jefferis and Emil Marotta – on June 21, 2002. All four men have been actively involved in enjoying the lake's features and protecting its health. The following narrative combines their personal experiences with the recorded history of the Simmons Lake Association.

Lake Residents

Simmons Lake is a 21-acre lake located in Sun City Center. The lake has been and continues to be a positive feature of this Florida retirement community. Since 1974, when the first houses were built on the lake, Simmons Lake residents have been enjoying the benefits of life on a water body and the strong-knit community that has developed over the years. One thing that ties this community together is their shared concern for the health of Simmons Lake. Tony said about lake residents:

“That is one important feature, the fact that the 81 houses are all concerned with the lake. It ties them all together. We have golfers, we have bridge players, we have tennis players, but everybody on the lake is concerned about the lake.”

Emil agreed that the residents are actively concerned about the health of the lake. He related that at an emergency Lake Association meeting in the summer of 2001, of the people living at the lake during the summer months, there was 100% attendance and 100% agreement to pay the extra costs for treatment of the lake's aquatic vegetation.

The lake's beauty is a draw for many people moving to the lake. Tony expressed the following about Simmons Lake:

“It's interesting to see the changes in the water; it's just unbelievable the way it changes within a few minutes depending upon the wind. There's no question about it, that it adds to the property values; a tremendous draw. We're getting people all the time moving into empty houses here from other parts of Sun City just because they want to be on this lake.”

Residents of Simmons Lake enjoy the lovely view that it provides and often go boating and fishing. A few people will even dive in for a swim. The residents living around the lake also plan many social events involving the lake. One of these events is a “rack-up,” which Bob described as 12-13 boats tying up together for a party.

History/Information



A view of the lake in 2002 (USF)



Some of the silt that runs into the lake from stormwater pipes (USF)



The concrete wall around the lake - low levels in June 2002 (USF)

Simmons Lake is a man-made lake in Sun City Center in the Little Manatee Watershed, which flows into Cypress Creek. Construction of the lake began in 1971 and was completed in 1973. Residents started moving into homes around the lake in 1974. Prior to construction, the land was used primarily for cattle ranching.¹ The lake had originally been planned as five small lakes, but as management of Sun City Center changed hands from Del Webb to W-G Corporation in the early 1970s, the layout of Simmons Lake was altered to make it one 21-acre lake.² The lake was named after former Hillsborough County Commissioner Ellsworth Simmons, who had been very involved in the original development of Sun City Center.³

After the lake was completed, it was stocked with fish, specifically largemouth bass. Some of the fish currently in the lake are bass, blue gill, tilapia and triploid carp, which were introduced to assist with the vegetation problems.

Simmons Lake has had problems with unwanted aquatic vegetation since its construction. In 1975, which was only two years after the lake was completely dug, it was reported in the Simmons Lake Association Notes that there was “alarming proportions” of hydrilla. To address this problem, the Association arranged for the hydrilla to be chemically treated.⁴ Even with chemical treatments, hydrilla remained a problem for Simmons Lake. In 1989, the Homeowner’s Association introduced triploid carp.⁵ According to Simmons Lake residents, the carp were successful in reducing the amount of hydrilla in the lake. Tony said about the success of the carp:

“Actually, from my standpoint, the lake was as clear as drinking water. You could see the bottom of the lake 10 feet down and we didn’t have any weeds. The carp had taken care of it. The lake was the cleanest lake in Sun City. The rest of them were green and brown and ours was gin clear.”

The triploid carp are sterile and only have a lifespan of about 10 years. Therefore, more carp were put in the lake in 1999. Currently, according to Bob, other types of aquatic vegetation affecting Simmons Lake include cattails, southern naiad and duck potatoes.

Even though the carp were successful in depleting the hydrilla, the drought of the late 1990s caused other problems for the lake. According to Tony, Simmons Lake was down 43 inches from the top of the concrete seawall in 2000. With the low water level, other problems, such as algae blooms, emerged. In addition to the low water level, there has been an increasing silt problem in the lake. Bob said about the silt:

“Another one of the problems that we have is that the storm drains bring in a lot of silt from the street. We now have an island over here. Particularly when the lake is low, it’s getting worse.”

According to Larry, when Simmons Lake was first dug, the depth was 16 feet. However, over time, as silt has come into the lake through storm drains, the depth has decreased to a maximum of 9 feet.⁶



The dam between Simmons Lake and Cypress Creek (USF)

Although Simmons Lake is in the developed area of Sun City Center, the lake still attracts wildlife from the surrounding areas of forest and swamp. Among the small animals that visit the lake are foxes, raccoons, armadillos and turtles. The lake's bird population includes blue herons, ducks, seagulls and crows. Occasionally, larger animals are seen in the area. Emil reported seeing a bobcat at the lake on two different occasions in early 2002. He related the following story:

"They [the bobcats] were like hugging the house. You can hear something walking in the stones. It sounded almost like a person. They came around the bend and my wife and I just sat there and froze because here they came."

Development

Simmons Lake was created as part of the development of Sun City Center. Prior to the growth of this community, the land was used for agricultural production and cattle ranching.⁷ In 1961, the Del Webb Corporation began developing the area to build a community specifically for retirees. The initial construction of the community was north of State Road 674. As part of these first communities, North Lake, Middle Lake and South Lake were dug to allow for water drainage. In the late 1960s plans were made to expand the community southward, and Simmons Lake was a part of this plan.⁸

By the early 1970s, management of Sun City Center changed hands from Del Webb to the W-G Corporation.⁹ Construction of the houses on Simmons Lake took place between 1974 and 1979, resulting in a total of 81 houses around the lake. Since 1979 no additional homes have been built on the lake; however, in recent years some of the newer residents at Simmons Lake have re-built their homes.

According to Sun City Center historian, John Bowker, the original vision for Sun City Center was to be a community of 5,000 retirees.¹⁰ Through the changes in management, the growth of the population has exceeded this number. It is expected that Sun City Center will be built out by 2010 with an expected population of 20,000 people.¹¹



A view of the lake in 2002 (USF)

The Future

With a concerned group of residents living around its shore, Simmons Lake has people in place who will help to ensure a positive future for the lake. Although the lake is currently facing ecological challenges, such as unwanted aquatic vegetation and algae, there is hope that the lake will return to a normal balance. Tony said about his hopes for the future of Simmons Lake: “What we hope to do is to return to it to the way it was before the drought with no weeds and clear water.” Bob stated similar hopes for the future of the lake: “I’d say what we’re looking for here is the status quo...that the lake keeps its beauty and usefulness to us. I so enjoy just looking out the window here. It’s just a great location.” After the interview took place, Bob gave an update of the lake’s condition in October 2002. He said: “With plentiful rainfall, our lake has returned to its pristine beauty.”

As seen with previous problems that the lake has encountered, the community around Simmons Lake has come together to work for the improvement of its condition. Residents hope that this will also be the case in the future.

NOTES:

¹ Jim Steele, *Simmons Lake Notes*. (Simmons Lake Association, 1996).

² *Sun City Center and Simmons Lake History* (Simmons Lake Association).

³ Lindsay Peterson, “Developer described as visionary,” *Tampa Tribune* (November 13, 1991).

⁴ *Simmons Lake Association Memo* - Simmons Lake Association Memo (Simmons Lake Association, 1975. (In Jim Steele, *Simmons Lake Notes* (Simmons Lake Association, 1996).)

⁵ Jim Steele, *Simmons Lake Notes*. (Simmons Lake Association, 1996).

⁶ Hillsborough County, *Hillsborough County Watershed Atlas* <www.hillsborough.wa.teratlas.org>

⁷ Village Profile, *Village Profile Presents Sun City Center, FL*, <<http://www.villageprofile.com/florida/suncity/suncity.html#history>>

⁸ *Sun City Center and Simmons Lake History* (Simmons Lake Association).

⁹ John Bowker, *A History of Sun City Center* <<http://web.tampabay.rr.com/sccinfo/schistx.htm>>

¹⁰ John Bowker, *A History of Sun City Center* <<http://web.tampabay.rr.com/sccinfo/schistx.htm>>

¹¹ Village Profile, *Village Profile Presents Sun City Center, FL*, <<http://www.villageprofile.com/florida/suncity/suncity.html#history>>

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