

HISTORY OF THE DEFENDERS OF CROOKED LAKE

1970 - 1985

Crooked Lake, one of Florida's purest and most beautiful lakes, has had defenders for many decades to protect it from environmental harm. Acting in groups or as individuals, these concerned citizens' efforts are noted as early as May 24, 1922. On this date the local newspaper carried an article about all the excitement caused in an effort to drain water from Crooked Lake into Lake Clinch: "A ditch has existed between the two lakes since 1891...a fall of about six or eight feet in the mile...Hearing of its being opened and noticing a change in the lake level a party of people went down Monday night, April 15 and closed the ditch, returning the next day and filling it in for a considerable distance. Steps were at once taken then to get a temporary injunction and a permanent one will be sought."

Thirty five years later, on July 9, 1957, minutes of the Trustees of the Internal Improvement Fund read: "Mr. W. A. McRae, Jr., attorney, Bartow, appeared in behalf of Mr. Roger W. Babson of Babson Park to protest proposed filling of Grassy Island in Crooked Lake, Polk County...On motion made by Mr. Green and seconded by Mr. Larson, it was unanimously agreed that, on the basis of the adverse effects brought out in the protest, there is to be no filling in Crooked Lake." Among the people who registered protests about this fill were Lee Draper, Owen B. Brice, Earl E. Baldauf, J. B. McClendon, Sam Donaldson, E. Pete Batten, A. W. Ward, Camilla Webber, Griffin Trask, Isabelle W. Boswell, A. R. Updike, Jr....

Then in 1969 Walter L. Brown (a resident on Seminole Road) filed a lawsuit (on behalf of himself as a lakefront property owner and all others similarly situated), against many of the citrus grove owners and caretakers to stop the irrigation of groves with water pumped from Crooked Lake. This action spurred residents to organize in order to gain better control of protection for the lake.

Residents met informally to discuss threats to water quality and the need to protect the environmental integrity of "Florida's finest lake". On a Tuesday evening in April, 1970, the "Defenders of Crooked Lake" (DCL) was formed. Temporary officers were Dale Fair, chairman; Charlene W. Johnston, secretary; and Malcolm McKinley, treasurer. Twenty three charter members voted unanimously to circulate a petition urging State Cabinet rejection of an application by W. A. Read, Jr., who was seeking state permission to dredge a boat basin in the lake. These charter members were:

Mr. & Mrs. David Braggins
Mr. Charles Coates
Mr. Donald Duckworth
Mr. & Mrs. Dale Fair
Mr. & Mrs. Charles Johnston
Ms. Charlene Johnston
Mr. Stanley Jordan
Mr. Bart Kimball
Mr. & Mrs. Jim McCallister

Mr. Malcolm McKinley
Mrs. Sally Mellor
Mr. & Mrs. Ken Morrison
Mr. & Mrs. D. Bruce Murray
Mr. Ed O'Brien, Jr.
Mr. Sheridan Redgate
Mr. A. R. Updike, Jr.
Mr. R. H. Wetzel

A membership pledge and by-laws were adopted by June 10, 1970. Dues started at \$5.00 and century membership was \$100.00. The group filed incorporation papers on June 3, 1970--the purpose: "to prevent pollution of Crooked Lake and throughout Polk County, Florida and the United States".

The first year was very busy. County zoning was a major concern. A canal was to be dug in "Caloosa Lake Village". An objectionable pipeline had to be removed from a dike at the mobile home park in Crooked Lake Park. Continued pumping of water from the lake for irrigation purposes and the proposed route for the four-laning of U. S. 27 south of S. R. 640 were also on the Defender's busy agenda.

According to figures taken on December 4, 1970, the lake stood at 117.72. Till that date the lowest was 114.3 in May of 1958 and the highest was 123.03 in September of 1960 when Hurricane Donna came through the area.

By 1971 the officers were: Charles Coates, president; Dale Fair, vice president; Charlene Johnston, secretary; and Malcolm McKinley, treasurer. Board members were: Ken Morrison, Willis Hall, Bart Kimball, Sheridan Redgate, Frank Purcell, James McCallister and Walt Calvin. Dale Fair urged residents to join DCL by sending out a letter entitled "How much is Crooked Lake worth to you?" The annual meeting was held on March 22, 1971. During the fall of that year there were several resignations not only from the board but also from the membership because of disagreement about speed boat races which were held by the Central Florida Power Boat Association on November 14, 1971 in Crooked Lake.

At the next annual meeting, March 24, 1972, Bart Kimball was elected president (taking over from Charles Coates). Action by this president included sending a letter to the Polk County Commission proposing a ban on airboats in Crooked Lake.

Water use was in the news again when the county commissioners were told by hydrologists from the Southwest Florida Water Management District (SWFWMD) that the county was using 400 million gallons of water per day in an area where there is only 443.5 million gallons available each day. So in June President Bart Kimball invited DCL members to

attend a special water resource meeting. On the panel were Dr. James Griffis, Florida Citrus Mutual; Bruce Congleton, Florida Phosphate Council; and Dale Twachtman, SWFWMD.

During 1972 the DCL opposed the marina to be put in Cody Cove by a margin of 5 to 1 and an emergency bulletin went out on December 16th requesting members to express their opinions to the Internal Improvement Trust Fund in Tallahassee.

DCL requested that the County Planning Department keep them informed on zoning changes, variances, special exceptions for property on and close to the lake.

A "vigilance committee" was formed which played an important part through the years in detection of activities which often proved to be illegal or harmful to the lake. Two very active participants in this group were Willis Hall and Russ Bowman as well as many people who were not members of DCL.

In 1972 James McCallister was vice president, Jan Wirt was secretary and Julian Chapman, treasurer. Board members were Dale Fair, Ken Morrison, Malcolm McKinley, Charles Coates, T. A. Hutchings and Robert Cloud. In May of 1972 DCL rented Post Office Box 191.

In July 1973 protests from DCL caused the state to order the owners of property to plug in a canal they had dug on the west side of Crooked Lake opposite Breezy Point. It was 3/5 of a mile long and 25 feet wide--the owners had no permit to dredge below the mean high water line.

At the annual meeting on March 12, 1974, Russ Bowman was elected president; Dale Fair, vice president; Robert Cloud, secretary; and Julian Chapman, treasurer. Board members were Ora Swank, T. A. Hutchings, Ken Morrison, Walt Calvin, Malcolm McKinley, Sheridan Redgate and Jesse Barber.

Even before the annual meeting DCL had been involved in countless meetings and hearings on Tudor Lodge, a development proposed for 23 acres on Seminole Road. The plans called for 75 individual units, a 4-story lodge, restaurant, etc. It was felt an undertaking of this size would definitely have an adverse affect on the lake and DCL was joined by many others in opposing this project which the county commissioners eventually denied.

A resolution was passed on June 19, 1974, by the DCL asking the State Cabinet to designate the Green Swamp in N. W. Polk County as an area of critical state concern.

DCL joined with area residents to oppose a truck stop application for the corner of U. S. 27 at 640 and there was a threat of another canal proposed for the lake. A letter went out urging residents to join DCL stressing "Crooked Lake needs friends and defenders".

Crooked Lake was #19 in cleanliness out of 104 lakes tested statewide according to the July 1974 issue of Florida Wildlife.

"Defenders Urge Supervised Park on Crooked Lake" was one of the headlines in October 1974. Russ Bowman released a statement..."It is easy to say that Polk County should have acquired extensive parklands many years ago when prices were reasonable; it is harder to declare that we had better buy them now, despite expense, than to wait a few years and find that suitable lands are not available at any price." Polk County had the opportunity to acquire close to 1,000 feet of lakefront right in the heart of Babson Park from Dr. C. R. Vogel for a fine park but it never came about. Evidently the County Commissioners felt the appraised value was "considerably less" than the owner's sale price. The DCL membership of about 300 had approved unanimously the acquisition of this prime land on Crooked Lake.

By the annual meeting of April 10th in 1975 there were 320 members and Russ Bowman was president. Phil Chapman, chief fisheries biologist from Florida Fish & Game Commission spoke on "How to be Kind to a Lake" using color slides to illustrate his talk. Julian Chapman was treasurer and board members were R. Harold Reese, Paul Cheeks, Robert Cloud, Dale Fair, Ken Morrison, Ora Swank, Jesse Barber, Malcolm McKinley and Sheridan Redgate.

In April DCL contacted the Internal Improvement Fund about a resident erecting a steel dock into the lake on the north shore. After an on-site investigation it was found no permit had been issued so he was made to obtain an after-the-fact permit.

A canal, located in Crooked Lake Park, 300 feet long and extending into the lake about 50 to 75 feet had to be filled in after the DCL spent months making phone calls, going on inspections and having conferences with representatives of the Department of Environmental Regulation (DER).

Robert Cloud was elected president at the annual meeting on April 12, 1976, Gerri Rayburn, vice president; Thelma Stevenson, secretary; and Paul Cheeks, treasurer.

Concerns were a sewage spill at the Crooked Lake Park Mobile Home Village which was repaired following DCL action. Dredging at the mouth of Warner Southern College canal was investigated and stopped; however, weed cleaning was allowed

by DER. Ken Morrison composed guidelines for protecting the lake and the result was a pamphlet published by DCL with the title "Prescription for Crooked Lake".

In May a public boat ramp was proposed by the county to be located off U. S. 27 which brought objections from DCL because of the danger of infectious weeds. In June they urged the county to adopt an ordinance to control infectious weeds brought in by boats.

Weeds were a possible problem but the major concern was lowered lake levels. An attorney was engaged to study the possibilities of preventing pumping from the lake.

"Lake Garfield Goes Under, Others to Follow" was the alarming headline on Sunday, May 2, 1976 and DCL members doubled their efforts to protect Crooked Lake from such a fate. In September Don Feaster, Executive Director of SWFWMD, recommended data be gathered as to the number of pipes at homes and citrus groves around the lake which were using lake water for irrigation. Charlene Johnston volunteered to compile this information and by the end of the year she gave her report on the data she had collected re pipes and pumping from the lake.

In July of 1976 there were 240 paid members of DCL. Board members were Ken Morrison, Dale Fair, Ora Swank, Russ Bowman, Jesse Barber, Malcolm McKinley and R. Harold Reese. Mr. Reese was membership chairman.

The county was still considering the boat ramp so in December Robert Cloud wrote a letter to the County Commissioners asking them not to erect the ramp on the west side of big Crooked Lake because of possible weed problems.

Besides the concern over low lake levels, DCL had other problems including a rezoning of 43 acres on little Crooked Lake for homes, a proposed subdivision in Hillcrest Heights, illegal fill on property near Ward Loop Road and a possible pollution problem from a house boat on the lake.

James A. Mann, Senior Hydrologist, Regulatory Division of SWFWMD, was the guest speaker at the annual meeting on May 10, 1977. Robert Cloud was still president and Russ Bowman, treasurer. Letters were sent to owners of pumps with large pipes regarding water conservation; response to these letters was nil. Robin Gibson, attorney, suggested a course of action to be taken if DCL wanted to go to court to prevent pumping from the lake.

Increasing seaplane traffic on the lake was investigated; it was found no law existed which would prevent the operation of aircraft on the lake.

There were 274 members and 12 anonymous contributors.

Gee and Jensen of West Palm Beach (Engineers-Architects-Planners) were hired to investigate and determine lake level to be maintained and to find out how much pumping would be permitted to maintain this level.

In February of 1978 John Mangham, developer of property on Mangham Road, dumped 13 loads of fill into Crooked Lake. After a long battle it was found the state couldn't prove he didn't own the filled area and the state couldn't prove the state owned it.

February - 87 irrigation pipelines ran into Crooked Lake - 12 are 6 inches or larger.

In January DCL opposed a request by Ellingson Groves to SWFWMD to pump 1,817,300 gallons of water per day out of Crooked Lake and a request by Darrel Doidge to pump 216,000 gallons per day, also out of the lake. But in April these groves got the okay on their request.

Directors were Paul Cheeks, R. Harold Reese, Russ Bowman, Jesse Barber, Malcolm McKinley, Gerri Rayburn, Ken Morrison and Walt Calvin. Robert Cloud was president. Thelma Stevenson and Jim Hustead resigned and Jan Pond and Walter Jackeway were nominated to fill their positions. Phillip Bryan and Lee G. Schmulde were suggested to fill two of the vacancies.

In October of 1979 there were lake level hearings at Webber College. Around 150 people were in attendance. The lake level was now 116.16.

For quite some time DCL and other organizations had been fighting a proposed boat ramp made of concrete on the north side of the lake. On December 14, 1979, the newspaper stated the applicant finally won approval for the boat ramp.

At the annual meeting on April 15, 1980, Robert Cloud was the outgoing president and Ken Morrison was elected new president.

Shortly before this, on April 1st, the concrete boat ramp question which was approved in December 1979 was contested and Governor Graham with the State Cabinet tied 3 to 3 on the appeal to "set aside and deny" this 186 foot long by 12 foot wide ramp. DCL board members Phillip Bryan and Gerri Rayburn went to Tallahassee to present the DCL's strong resolution in support of the appeal. Their petition was dismissed for a never-proven technicality. On May 6th the appeal again went to the Cabinet and a bus full of Defenders and others went to the meeting. The applicant was later given permission to construct this ramp.

On Ward's Loop Road a house was being constructed on lake bottom - the owner had been notified by DER he was proceeding "at his own risk". There was also a public health violation on Sunset Trail in Caloosa Colony. During that year DCL had to spend nearly \$2,000. defending the lake.

A review of matters before the DCL dated June 24, 1981, listed this area of concern: a 360 foot long, 21 foot top width canal was being dug for private use on sovereignty lands of little Crooked Lake. The applicants filed the application with DER who gave approval, but no consent from the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) had been requested by applicants. After a long battle, by DCL, letters to state agencies, to Dr. Elton Gisendanner, Executive Director of DNR, visits to the site by DCL members, it was finally resolved in 1981 that the DER had not followed correct procedures and the permit was withdrawn.

Bruce Parker, Assistant Director of the Regulatory Division of SWFWMD, was speaker at the annual meeting on Tuesday, May 26, 1981. Theme of the meeting was "What is the Future of Crooked Lake?"

On May 26th SWFWMD confirmed a DCL report of a large pump illegally pumping water out of the lake - no permit - DCL was assured swift action would be taken.

May 18, 1982 - Annual meeting. Directors were Dr. Robert H. Clark, Dr. Phillip Gordon, Virginia Johnston, Roger M. Rose, Robert Cloud, Donald G. McDonald, Phillip Bryan, Paul Egan, Dale Fair, Ken Morrison and Jan Wirt. The greatest concern was the continuing low level of Crooked Lake. DCL urged all of its members to practice water conservation in every possible way. In July of 1982 the level of Crooked Lake was 109.81 and in July of 1981 it had been 110.2, the lowest so far was reached in May when it was 108.2.

Ken Morrison was president and Linda Rogers was serving as membership secretary, Robert Cloud was vice president.

Speakers at the annual meeting were Bill Smith, Senior Hydrologist and Pat Dooris, Environmental Manager of SWFWMD. During 1982 a marvelous addition to DCL was created in the form of a newsletter co-edited by Randy Leinen and Myra Zilahy. Named WATERLINE, the first issue went out in September of 1982. In June the membership stood at 86 but by September 15th there were 139 members.

A fish kill east of Wirt's Point involved many hundreds of dead fish but the Florida Game & Fresh Water Fish Commission never provided a positive cause.

Paul Egan was able to get action on the Doidge property from the Polk County Health Department. A new septic tank permit was issued and a new system installed in compliance with all regulations.

A problem on the Tibado property, which had involved the nearby residents in a lawsuit in conjunction with DCL, was resolved by Judge Dewell who ruled the mobile structures must be removed from the property. The DER stopped the bulldozing of dirt into the lakefront on the Tibado property.

It was reported waterways of exceptionally high quality may be designated by the Florida Game & Fresh Water Fish Commission as Outstanding Florida Waterways. DCL started action which may bring this about for Crooked Lake.

Linda Rogers was appointed to fill the unexpired term of Phillip Bryan as a director. In 1983 Paul Egan was president; Donald G. McDonald, vice president; Linda Rogers, secretary; Dr. Robert H. Clark, treasurer. Linda Rogers served on the Membership Committee, Ken Morrison as Government Liaison, Roger Rose on the Finance Committee and Myra Zilahy as Public Relations.

Areas of concern in 1983 were: development of Leon Wells property in Hillcrest Heights for town houses, trot lines on Crooked lake, boat launchings and commercial fishing from Ward Loop-Mangham Road area, insecticide spraying for blind mosquitos, inspection of package plants at Webber College, Warner Southern College, Bob's Landing and others. Camp Inn RV Park on south U. S. 27 started modifications which DCL initially opposed because of possible runoff and the proximity of the high flood plain to the proposed expansion area. The use of Temik and EDB gave the DCL great concern; testing of wells and soil was done by various agencies because of this.

Sam Van Hook came before the Board proposing DCL consider the eradication of Melaleuca trees growing in the lake. Many safety measures were agreed upon and permits from various agencies obtained before the project was started.

A list of expert consultants to help with technical problems was proposed and then composed.

Much time and effort was spent during the latter part of the year trying to determine why water was flowing through the drainage ditch which runs from near little Crooked lake, under SR 630 and into Lake Clinch. Polk County, SWFWMD and other agencies cooperated with DCL and examined the entire area but never came up with a satisfactory answer.

what happened
A marvelous proposal by Linda Rogers resulted in the first "LIGHTS ON THE LAKE" on December 23, 1983. Lakeshore residents were asked to decorate their homes, turn on their lights and join other area residents in a boat-a-cade which started out from Bob's Landing in Cody Cove late in the afternoon. Many positive remarks and good will toward DCL was a result of this project.

The Board of County Commissioners was urged by DCL to adopt a lake protection ordinance.

Until 1984 the annual meetings had been held in the Community Church Fellowship Hall in Babson Park but on Tuesday, March 20th, the annual meeting was held in the Babson Center of Webber College. Tony Truechel of SWFWMD presented the "new" Crooked Lake report. No significant "new" information was forthcoming.

Paul Egan was president; Dr. Phillip Gordon, vice president; Roger Rose, treasurer; Linda Rogers, secretary; and Virginia Johnston, corresponding secretary. Directors were Dr. Robert H. Clark, Dale Fair, Ken Morrison, Myra Zilahy, Flo Curtis and Sam Van Hook. There were 155 members.

That year as ever before DCL was still concerned with the drop in lake level. Letters were sent to SWFWMD and the Peace River Basin Board requesting records be kept of the amount of water used by permit holders in the Crooked lake Basin. DCL asked Zeb Palmer of Polk County Water Resource Division to keep them apprised of any studies on Crooked Lake. DER was asked for the procedure to have a lake designated an Outstanding Florida Water.

A change in collecting dues to accept all dues money in March simplified record keeping.

Sam Van Hook reported the 3 month check of the lake in August, after the Melaleuca eradication, had resulted in a few more trees pulled or sprayed. The project was a real success.

The second "LIGHTS ON THE LAKE" was held on Saturday, December 22, 1984, with the boats gathering near Bob's Landing in late afternoon.

Coffee and dessert was served by Webber College at the annual meeting on Tuesday, March 19, 1985, which was held in the Babson Center. Speaker was a meteorologist from the U. S. Weather Service at Ruskin, Florida, who talked about Florida weather patterns and trends.

The main concern for DCL as it has been all through its' history was the continuing drop in water level. According to Roger Rose's records, lake levels on May 12, 1985 were 108.6. An article in the Tampa Tribune in August stated, "Crooked Lake, one of the largest and cleanest on the Ridge, is also among the hardest hit by declining water levels for the past couple of decades".

Grassy Island, once surrounded by water but now accessible to vehicle traffic from Thornburg Road, prompted the DCL to contact DNR and the owner of the property. Another matter which had been brought to the attention of DCL was that a fence was being constructed on lake bottom. No action was taken at the time since the water line was below the fence construction.

During 1985 Paul Egan was president; Dr. Phillip Gordon, vice president; Roger Rose, treasurer; Linda Rogers, recording secretary, Virginia Johnston, corresponding secretary; Directors were Dr. Robert H. Clark, Sam Van Hook, Myra Zilahy, Flo Curtis, Dale Fair and Ken Morrison.

The long-standing problem of storm drains in Hillcrest Heights emptying into the lake, was referred to DER which referred the DCL to Polk County and SWFWMD, which claimed all current regulations were being complied with. A center for the hearing-impaired, which had been proposed for 600 acres to the south of Warner Southern College, fizzled out. A permit applied for in Crooked Lake Park to excavate in the area of a canal prompted the DCL board to again go on record as opposing any dredging to extend or deepen existing canals as well as objecting to storm drains which discharge run-off into the lake.

Since the formation of the Defenders of Crooked Lake in 1970 its members have gone to countless meetings in their efforts to protect the lake. These included: County Commission meetings, zoning hearings, SWFWMD, Peace River Basin, DER meetings and State Cabinet meetings in Tallahassee. The year 1985 was no exception. Because of concerns over more population and development, and how this will affect the health of Crooked lake, the number of meetings attended increased, especially for the president. It was decided to start reimbursing for mileage.

The DCL's present project is the Outstanding Florida Waterway designation for Crooked Lake. Robin Gibson, attorney, has been retained to assist with this.

An ongoing area of concern is a solution to public access to Crooked Lake. DCL would like for this to be handled in a way which will afford the lake protection from exotic weeds and other problems, which, with the low water level, may prove to be the final blow for Crooked Lake.

Another concern is the proliferation of white sand beaches around the lake--a letter to lakefront property owners may be sent. The "LIGHTS ON THE LAKE" scheduled for December 1985 was not attended because of high winds and rain.

In December, 1985, the lake level was

The Defenders of Crooked Lake have been involved in many more problems and projects during the past fifteen years than are listed in this brief history. Many times they were joined by other organizations and many times by non-members of DCL. It is the hope of DCL members that people who come here years from now will find a good, clean, healthy lake thanks to all who care deeply about Crooked Lake and a healthy environment.

-end-

April 1986
Virginia Johnston