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Voices of Lake Okeechobee

Meet a farmer, an activist, an environmentalist, the fish finders, the immigrants and the berm buster, the people who are at odds.

by Mike Vogel

The muck raker

Farming the Land

Third-generation farmer Rick Roth farms 5,000 acres of sugar cane, vegetables, rice and sod in the Everglades Agricultural Area, the half-million acres of rich, organic muck deposited over thousands of years as Lake Okeechobee overflowed its southern bed, layering ton after ton of decayed plant matter. "I'm sitting on some of the best land in the world. It's nitrogen rich. It's like farming a sponge. The land holds water so well," Roth says.



"I'm sitting on some of the best land in the world. It's nitrogen rich. It's like farming a sponge. The land holds water so well."
— Rick Roth, farmer [Photo: Jeffrey Camp]

Roth knows his Belle Glade land, his crop markets and how to argue the farmers' case — their need for water from Okeechobee for their crops. In the current drought, the South Florida Water Management District put farmers under severe water rationing in November but didn't restrict homeowners until March. The district, says Roth, "just had it backwards. It's so politically driven, it's scary."

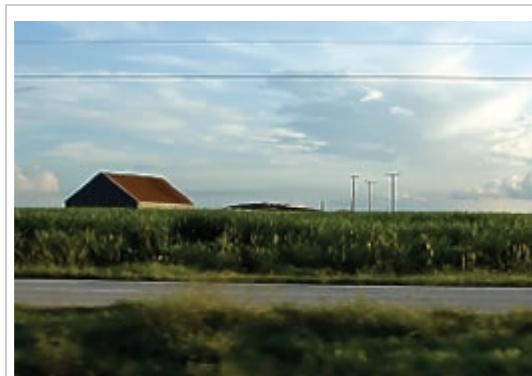
The area has more than 100 farmers, but much of the land is controlled by two large entities, U.S. Sugar Corp., founded by industrialist and later philanthropist Charles Stewart Mott, whose foundations remain a major shareholder, and companies tied to Palm Beach's wealthy, politically connected Fanjul family.

In terms of risk and return, Roth likens vegetable growing to the stock market and growing sugar to the bond market. Bonds, then, are down. Sugar, the predominant area crop, fetches growers roughly 18 cents per pound, compared to 20 to 21 cents 22 years ago. This year's sugar harvest is projected to be down 15% because of the drought. U.S. Sugar closed Bryant Mill in April after 45 years in an efficiency drive as it fully automates its Clewiston mill. Companywide, it has laid off about half of its 500 mill workers.

Roth, in contrast, just opened a vegetable packinghouse and employs 175 seasonally.

The depletion of the muck by erosion and cultivation leaves the future of farming mixed. Some areas have a decade of farmable muck remaining; others have 50 years. Environmentalists shiver at the prospect of subdivisions sprouting where sugar cane now grows.

Roth has eight feet of muck in places and expects it to last 50 years. Sugar uses up soil slower than other crops. "Growing sugar cane by far is the best environmental practice we can have," he says. "It may not happen in your lifetime or mine, (but) some day it will be in the history books that sugar cane saved the Everglades."



EVERGLADES

COMMODITY:

"Growing sugar cane by far is the best environmental practice we can have," says Rick Roth, who farms 5,000 acres of sugar cane, vegetables, rice and sod in the Everglades Agricultural Area.

Mind of the Community

Helping Belle Glade Rebound



Pep talk: "Some of us have to try to bring the community back," says Linda Johnson.
[Photo: Jeffrey Camp]

"It's a major sacrifice to stay, but some of us have to try to bring the community back," says Linda Johnson. Born in Belle Glade, now living in South Bay, Johnson is president of the Everglades area NAACP and directs the NAACP area from Key West to Palm Beach. She's also trying to build a marketing business. It's tough. The 5th Street of the Belle Glade of her youth, lined with black dentist and doctor offices and grocers, is gone.

"It was a special kind of community," she remembers. Community life, not just worship, ran through eight or so churches. But as jobs were lost, so were community-minded people who kept on top of government officials to maintain infrastructure, she says. The community began to decline. Bright young people left for college and didn't return. The area became more diverse by country of origin. Churches have proliferated, but many are small, and unity isn't as strong, she says.

» **"If you look at the individuals who were born there, reside there, you would be shocked. A lot of them have degrees."**
— Linda Johnson
President, Everglades area NAACP

Pride remains. Everglades area residents are proud of the wealth of NFL players it has produced and the sense that the community is more than the migrant farmworkers for which it's known.

"If you look at the individuals who were born there, reside there, you would be shocked. A lot of them have degrees," Johnson says.

She says the area is rebounding. Leaders are enhancing infrastructure. Her daughter plans to return after completing her education.

The Environmentalist

Seeking a Solution



"We've done a good job of tying the environment to our economy."

— Paul Gray

Lake Okeechobee science coordinator, Audubon of Florida [Photo: Jeffrey Camp]

Paul Gray gives a pathologist's report on a very sick patient. Gray — the Lake Okeechobee science coordinator for Audubon of Florida — is at Lightsey's, a legendary lake restaurant near the city of Okeechobee, near where the Kissimmee River flows into the lake.

Over a fried oyster sandwich, Gray consults his patient's chart. One problem troubles him particularly — phosphorus counts. Despite years of taxpayer money to buy out dairies and retrofit others to control nutrient runoff from cow manure, seven of the worst 11 years for phosphorus entering the lake have occurred since 1995.

Why? Too much water. Florida entered a warmer-wetter period in 1995 — the same phenomenon that increases hurricane frequency — and more water means more phosphorus.

The new weather pattern does three things:

- Stirs up, through hurricanes, the nutrient-laden muck, damaging the habitat and everywhere else the water dumps nitrogen and phosphorus as it flows.
- Brings droughts in a rough five- to 10-year cycle that, exacerbated by man-made flood control, cripple the lake for years. It recovers just in time to be crushed by the next drought. “If it takes five or 10 years to recover, you’re talking about a system that’s never going to get better,” Gray says.
- Calls into question the plan to clean up the Everglades, because that plan was modeled on cooler, drier periods that produce half as much water, Gray says. The existing lake system, and the replumbed one, simply can’t handle the extra water.

His argument: To clean water before it reaches the Everglades, Florida has spent \$700 million constructing 47,000-acre water-holding filter marshes south of the lake. The marshes allow phosphorus to settle out and be absorbed by plants. They work but can handle only six inches of water a year in a good year — and only two inches of hurricane-churned, nutrient-rich water. The rub: The 2004 hurricanes put six feet of water into the lake in just a year.

The solution, Gray and water managers agree, is to store more water north of the lake — no small task. Gray estimates water storage capacity needs to be twice what plans call for. The amount that has to be stored would cover everything in the lake’s watershed — from Orlando International Airport down through Osceola, Highlands and Okeechobee counties — under an average of six inches of water.



POLLUTED:

Seven of the worst 11 years for phosphorus flows into Lake Okeechobee have occurred since 1995.

Holding areas south of the lake may need to be tripled, he says. That’s a daunting task considering that two of the largest treatment areas there, combined, already will create a reservoir equal in size to Florida’s fifth-largest lake. Just one of them is 22 miles in circumference and will be the largest earthen-constructed reservoir in the world.

Gray is optimistic that demand from estuary communities, lake residents, south Florida homeowners, agricultural interests and environmentalists will see a lake solution through. He heads for Stuart to see Gov. Charlie Crist sign a law putting \$94 million a year into cleaning the Northern Everglades. “A tremendous gift from the Legislature,” Gray says. “We’ve done a good job of tying the environment to our economy.”

the fish finders

Living off the Lake



"Let's face it. Fishing is what brings people here. It's not water-skiing. It's not parasailing. This is not a water recreation lake. It's too shallow. There's too many predators."

— Mary Ann Martin
Owner, Roland and Mary Ann Martin's Marina & Resort
[Photo: Jeffrey Camp]

During the drought, Mary Ann Martin had to stop renting out boats from her Clewiston marina. As lake levels fell, borrowers were losing propellers on rocks. Sales at her gift shop fell. Food and beverage sales were off. High fuel prices should have been good for her — boat owners need gas as they take the cross-Florida Okeechobee Waterway past her door. But low water closed the route in March. On a May day, a rabbit darts dry-footed from one high-and-dry floating dock to another in a basin that should be 10 feet deep.

Some of her business lines are down 80%, Martin says. Then she adds, "Trust me, this is the best thing to happen to the lake."

Martin owns Roland and Mary Ann Martin's Marina & Resort just outside the dike. Walls hold pictures of VIPs like basketball legend Larry Bird and U.S. Rep. Dennis Hastert, R-Illinois, the former House Speaker. Not many people, famous or otherwise, visit this day. She claps for the lone customer in sight. A few days before, the lake had broken the record low level set during the 2001 drought. Martin still pays on a loan she took to help her through that dry spell. Hurricane Wilma in 2005 did \$2 million in damage.

An Oklahoma native and accomplished angler — the first woman on the cover of Field and Stream, she says proudly — Martin first saw the lake in 1971, just after marrying champion fisherman Roland Martin. It was love at first sight. With smiling eyes, she recalls the clarity of the water and the startling sight of men fishing for redear sunfish, their poles bent as they fought to land the feisty shellcrackers. It's her favorite fishing now, "bar none."



HIGH AND DRY

The lake sank to record low levels this year, cutting deeply into Mary Ann Martin's revenue. But she says the drought "is the best thing to happen to the lake."

[Photo: Mike Theiss]

She has seen the lake that pretty again — after the 2001 drought. Then, as now, the water district took advantage of low water to clear the lake bottom of stifling muck. When the drought subsided, the native lake bed grasses returned. The water cleared up and the fish came back in numbers.

That's why the drought will prove to be a blessing, she says. "As the water comes up, so does my business."

Immigrants

American Dreamers

Maria and José Prieto, a welder, own five rental properties. Maria also owns a small restaurant with her sister. “I think Pahokee found out Hispanics are very hard-working,” says Father John Mericantante.

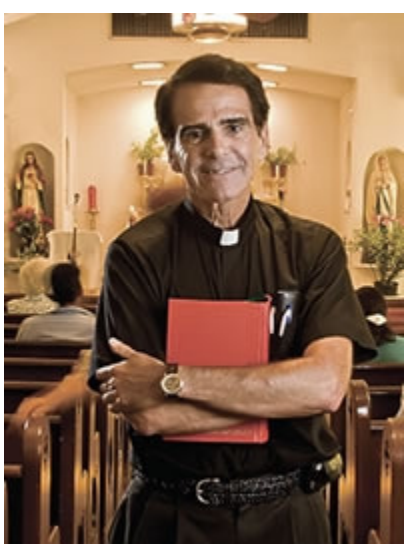


José and Maria Prieto (back) with daughter Sara and Maria's sister Carmen Hernandez (right)
[Photo: Jeffrey Camp]

Not too many years ago, as Mexican immigrant Maria Angelina Prieto and her husband, José, earned extra money cleaning and painting five Pahokee rentals while their first-born watched from a playpen, Maria joked to her husband that some day they would own the units.

It was a far-fetched notion for recent arrivals, themselves renters, who supported themselves with José's income. But they added two more kids, moved up to a mobile home, then bought a three-bedroom house with a terrazzo floor nine years ago. José is now a welder, and they own those five rentals. What's more, Maria and her sister Carmen Hernandez opened a small eatery five years ago that employs three part time, serving migrant laborers from the nearby fields.

“We have people now who own their own businesses. It's beautiful,” says their pastor, Father John Mericantante. “I think Pahokee found out Hispanics are very hard-working.”



Father Mericantante
[Photo: Jeffrey Camp]

Mericantante is the energetic head of thriving St. Mary's Catholic Church in Pahokee, a 75-seat community hub with a 16th-century Russian icon, a one-room folklore museum, youth and after-school programs, a medical and dental clinic and food distribution for 1,000 people a month. A church building houses a public charter school. He serves as translator for his flock and go-between on everything from real estate closings to trying to get compensation for the family of a worker who died on the job. Himself of Italian, Irish and German descent, he was Pahokee's Citizen of the Year once and knows everyone. He hopes to break ground soon for a larger, Spanish Mission-style church.

Fourteen years ago when Mericantante arrived, half the parish was Spanish-speaking. Today only nine English-speaking families remain. The other 391 families — about 60% have legal status, he estimates — are Spanish-speaking, many with six to 10 children.

Driving around town, he introduces them. Vicente Torres, 28, came from Mexico 14 years ago to work as a laborer in a nursery. Now he's a DJ at a local radio station and operates a small used-car sales center. Irma Paniagua, 19, came from Mexico at 7 and grew up in a hurry after her mother died three years later. With a friend, the single mom recently purchased a business that imprints T-shirts, magnets, business cards and the like.



Humble beginnings:
Many immigrant farm workers start life in America in houses like these, in an agricultural area near Pahokee. "It's the country of hopes and dreams," says Maurilia Martinez.
[Photo: Jeffrey Camp]

Alva Aguirre, 37, and her husband, José, who drives a tractor for the sugar industry, raise their four children in a three-bedroom house on the dike. She sells fruit from a truck. The integrity of the dike doesn't worry her, she says, standing in her yard. She's more concerned about her upcoming citizenship test, property taxes and insurance.

Her fellow immigrants have a similar list of concerns: Insurance, taxes, their children's education and whether the kids will find work and be able to afford to live locally. Still, "It's the country of hopes and dreams," says Maurilia Martinez, a mother of four, in Spanish. Opportunity is their reason for coming; work and Pahokee's small-town feel keep them, many finding it reminiscent of home, to which none desire to return. "Me gusta todo," (I like everything), Aguirre says.

The Foot of the Dike

"I jokingly tell people the city of Pahokee is five miles long and 550 feet wide," says Mayor J.P. Sasser. "And you see I'm not too far wrong."



"We are a fully integrated community on all levels. The poverty is just as equally spread as the wealth. I think that throws a lot of people off. They think it's rich white people and poor blacks."

— J.P. Sasser, Mayor, Pahokee
[Photo: Jeffrey Camp]

Indeed, he's not. Unfortunately for 6,500-population Pahokee, that narrow strip comprising Pahokee's homes and businesses sits literally at the foot of the Herbert Hoover Dike. A 2006 state study showed the dike's precarious condition — a "piece of Swiss cheese," says South Florida Water Management District Executive Director Carol Ann Wehle.

And after what Hurricane Katrina did to New Orleans, you might guess that Sasser and his citizenry would be anxious to see the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers fix the dike. They are anxious all right, but not the way you expect.

The faded charms of the city's buildings speak of a better past. "We had everything. We had movie theaters. We had restaurants. We had stores," says Sasser, who runs an auto body shop in nearby Belle Glade.



business: Mayor J.P. Sasser fought a plan to build a berm around the dike, arguing that it would kill the city's tax base.
[Photo:U.S. Army Corp of Engineers]]

Pahokee's survival plan hinges on a public-private venture formed to do a \$22-million rebuilding and expansion of the city's lakeside campground, marina and amenities. But the Corps' initial plan conceived building a berm around the dike at Pahokee, and much of Pahokee's tax base was in the way. Sasser complained. Corps Jacksonville district chief of construction and operations Alan Bugg says a berm will be part of dike rehabilitation elsewhere but innovative designs will spare Pahokee homes and businesses.

Says Sasser, "I try to be eloquent, but the only way to say this is, we're trying to get the city of Pahokee off the government tit, and they keep trying to put the tit back in our mouth. We don't want to be a welfare city any more than you want us to be a welfare city."