Lakeshore Drive

The history, the architecture, the people

By TED McGEHEE
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Creating University Lake and City Park Lake out of Perkins Swamp was like spinning gold out of hay. During the past 60 years, East Lakeshore Drive has become a South Baton Rouge address that many coveted — and with good reason.

As Tony a neighborhood as one can find in Red Stick, the East Lakeshore Drive area encompasses so much; one finger of the drive stretches north from city lake along the golf course all the way to Perkins Road. The home on the corner is on the third hole tee box, two full par four holes or one mile from the lake, but still has a Lakeshore address.

Of the 107 homes on Lakeshore Drive, only two are for sale publicly, although some may be for sale privately. You almost have to be family and inherit a home to live on this street. One of them is worth a few million dollars, more than a few are valued at half a million, and most go for about $300,000. One advertised for $250,000 was featured in the Sunday Advocate real estate section recently.

The lake area has undergone development in the late 1920s because City Park had gained a lot of attention with its elegant landscaping. The progression was a natural one, and four years after City Park Lake was developed, LSU decided to beautify its swamp along and created blueprints for University Lake.

In 1927, Harding King Knox built a home on a peninsula on City Park Lake. The construction was carried on from Morning Glory since the far side was not accessible from Dalrymple. The lake itself did not take as much digging as University Lake and was put into pretty good shape within a couple of years after completion of the Knox home, marked by a large gazebo easily visible from Dalrymple Drive.

The fact that the lake is so close to town is what excites Arlin Dease, current owner of the Knox house. "This is a 4½-acre secluded retreat in the middle of town. It's a unique opportunity to have this much land and the maximum amount of privacy."

Dease added a gazebo and formal gardens to the eight-bedroom, 7½-bath Greek Revival home. His interior renovations were extensive, lending splendor to the large columns added to the home.

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by A. Hays Town in the 1950s, Dease feels the area around City Park Lake is as prestigious and desirable as it ever has been. "I would never sell this home to move to another more desirable area of Baton Rouge."

He said he thinks of the property as an 1850s home rather than 1920s. The palatial estate is easily the most expensive on Lakeshore Drive. Longtime residents question why Knox built the house — he had no children and rarely entertained. Succeeding families which occupied the home were the Markleys, the Browns and the Cangelosis.

Dease insists he has never had better neighbors, that he had hundreds of cars parked along Lakeshore for a symphony function he hosted and did not receive one complaint.

The neighborhood is a protective one, especially if someone tries to get an area rezoned commercial, said Hannah Nolan, treasurer of the Lakeshore Drive Civic Association. "We don't meet often, but when there's a problem we meet right away. We used to have 125 members," said Nolan, who has lived in the English Tudor on the point on City Park Lake for the past 30 years. Her home is known as the first C.I. Fiero home, built in 1936. It drapes itself nicely across a point a half-mile northward along East Lakeshore Drive from the Knox home. The pointing of the stones and the glasswork are superb. Fiero was general manager of Standard Oil.

A similarly elegant home built a year later by Fiero, in 1937, Stone Tudor No. 2 sits on Nolan's south side; it is occupied by Dr. Alan Fairies. One way to tell them apart is the magic of Nolan's live oaks, which sweep along the ground magnificently. "We are very particular about who takes care of them, she said.

Nolan is happy with the way the lakes have been trimmed and kept up since they were deepened a few years ago. Residents will long remember the fish kills when the vegetation in the lakes grew out of hand and ate up too much oxygen. A "horrible smell," lake dwellers complained.

It was just the lake returning to its natural state — Perkins Swamp, part of a sough that ran from the City Park swimming pool, down the fifth fairway of the golf course along Dalrymple Drive,

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through Southdowns, LSU and all the way out to Bluebonnet Road, bounded by Highland and Perkins roads. Oldtimers say the Mississippi River flooded and created Perkins Swamp. Groomed in 1929, City Park Lake was the scene of the annual Firemen’s Festival through the 1930s; they had a parade and 10 to 15 elaborate barges in the lake, according to Katy Johnson. She, her husband Stuart and family were residents for almost 20 years.

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Then there is the Dalrymple Drive side of the lakes, typified by residents Chet and Joan Coles. Their home was built by Col. E.P. Roy, former head of the state police. The architectural firm was Weiss, Dreyfus and Sieferth. It’s well known for its work, which includes the State Capitol, the French House and New Orleans’ Pontchartrain Hotel.

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Coles, a dentist, said he and his wife, who recently published a book on etiquette, enjoy their neighbors. "They’re just friendly with one another. We pass gifts back and forth at Christmas.

The Cazandessus family owned the land around City Park Lake from the golf course (formerly the LSU Dairy) to the corner of Dalrymple Drive and East Street. Cecil Cazandessus’ father asked his mother if she wanted to build a house on City Park Lake (on the plot where the Knox house was later built) and move out there.

"It was too far from town," said Camille Cazandessus, whose father eventually sold the land to the city. Now retired and living in Baton Rouge, Cazandessus was a young man of 24 in 1933. He was fresh out of Springhill College with a civil engineering degree when he was hired to help LSU with its Emergency Relief Administration (ERA) undertaking: to dig out University Lake.

"I worked for John Mundinger, civil engineer for LSU. He was the best. I learned more about civil engineering from him than I did from LSU and Springhill," he said.

"We would get out there every morning with hundreds of workers and Mr. Mundinger would say here’s what I want, and they would start shoveling, and gradually things would get done. That man could do more with a pencil and a piece of paper than anyone I’ve ever seen."

According to Cazandessus, ERA projects had a rebate plan whereby a head of construction material could be earned for every $1,000 in labor contracted by LSU. They received concrete, framing lumber and other material, he said.

Digging began at what is now the corner of Dalrymple Drive and May Street, and took about five years to complete. During that time, thousands of workers wielded shovels, as there was no shortage of labor.

The first step, according to Dr. Henry Jolly Jr., whose father’s 365-acre farm included part of Perkins Swamp, was to build Stanford Avenue across the swamp and connect B.E. Perkins’ development, College Town, with Southdowns. Jolly, a Tulane medical professor, still lives on the family homestead at the gates of Stanford Place, where his son lives in an adjacent house. Jolly’s father tried to develop the Stanford side of the lake out to the point where Huey Long’s widow’s house sits.

Huey Long never saw the stately white home that bears his name out on the South Lakeshore point, where its broad three-story countenance looks out across Sorrow Road. He was shot before they finished it. For 17 years, it has been home to Dr. Charles and Celine Ateman.

"When we first moved here we could look out and see the State Capitol. Huey would have liked that," said Celine Ateman, who describes South Lakeshore as country right in the city. "The lakes are so soothing to look at. The water ripples and you can hear the chimes. I like to see the students jog by."

Just across Lakeshore Drive was originally a driveway for the Knox house, the framework of South Lakeshore is built around the Huey Long house, rumored to have been built with materials paid for by LSU. Russell Long lived out there. He was still so secluded in 1945 that Camille Cazandessus say he and some buddies just out of the service went out there to shoot pistols. Yet through the years, the homes that have sprung up in this finger of land are gracious and their grounds well-tended.

Besides offering an excellent view of University Lake, Sorrow Road features many outstanding lakefront houses, including the Alumni House and, further up, ATO fraternity. Up until the 1960s, it was all rose gardens, and a few people were angered when the gardens were bulldozed to lay the foundations for the sorority house, residents said.

Steele Burden landscaped all of City Park, including the lake, the golf course and many of the homes. His association with LSU dates back to his work on the Memorial Oak Grove, a tribute to LSU’s World War I dead. Burden has been shaping the look of Baton Rouge for many years.

"I dig City Park after the lake was completed in the late 1920s and ’30s. It was always considered an asset to the town. That and the Knox house were my bigger projects," he said.

Burden now spends his time managing the Rural Life Museum off Essen Lane or working on his bird sanctuary project. The sanctuary is being developed on President’s Point, a 5-acre jut of land that extends into University Lake at the intersection of Lakeshore Drive and Bengal Lane. The lot was home to a couple of horses before Burden cleared the land, put in a gravel drive and planted live oaks.

On the B.E. Perkins, or College Town, side of the lake sits the big pink Victorian that is many a college student’s dream house. David and Eloise Wall moved the three-story home from downtown to the lakefront 10 years ago, although they lived around the corner at Cornell for many years. Eloise Wall said she loves living here, but outsiders have tried a lot of things in an effort to commercialize the Stanford Road area near One Lakeshore Place, formerly Studio Arts. "With the college nearby, naturally they would like to have bars on Stanford Avenue, and that has been a big fight. There is not a thing that goes on around here that everyone doesn’t know about," said Eloise Wall, who recalls that the lakes always gave her children something to do. "I like looking out and seeing people out there fishing or in sailboats. It’s a nice place to walk your dog."

Nothing exciting ever happens around the lakes, and that’s why most residents love it. The best part is that there is rarely traffic on Lakeshore Drive, unless someone is having a party.

A real estate representative of C.J. Brown, Dorsey Peck, said that in better times it was hard to find a home for sale in the Lakeshore Drive area. She said it is still a wonderful resale area even though there is growing competition from other lakefront properties.

"When New Orleans folks ask for uptown, an older area, I show them the lakes since we really don’t have an uptown," Peck said.