

**ROWENA**  
NEIGHBORHOOD



**PARK**  
ASSOCIATION

## HISTORY OF ROWENA PARK

### ***Our thanks and appreciation to Pen Gaines for this first ever history of Rowena Park.***

For anyone visiting the northeast section of Orlando in the late 1940s, the feeling was "in the country," with groves and lakes. Unless they had a bird's eye view of the four "chain of lakes" where Mills Avenue ended at Virginia and Nebraska, they would not know why it took so long for residents of Orlando to drive to Winter Park or vice versa.

Prior to just after World II, one had to use either Orange Avenue - the route of 17-92 to Winter Park - or use several roads (Nebraska or two-lane Virginia Drive) to reach Winter Park Road (now Old Winter Park Road).

North of Virginia Drive and Nebraska were four lakes. Lake Formosa and Lake Rowena, both spring-fed lakes, were connected by a canal, with other canals connecting Lakes Rowena, Estelle and Virginia. The Walter Rose home located in the country between Lake Virginia, Lake Estelle and Lake Rowena, appeared to be on a peninsula.

The small Florida Hospital and Sanitarium, with cottages rented out primarily to winter visitors, was located on Lake Estelle, with Princeton Street ending at an Agricultural Center station.

On the southeast side of Lake Rowena, Harry P. Leu was living in a house built in 1896 on 50 acres, which he had purchased from the Mizell family in the 1930s. Further to the west on Lake Rowena, Charles Reppard had two homes, both built around 1900, with property consisting of 20 acres of citrus extending to Nebraska. To the west, with an address of 1405 Nebraska, Louis Dolive had become the second resident of a home built early in 1900 by J. P. Williams (a lumber yard owner who hand-picked all the lumber for his home and who constructed a french drain, with any rising ground water under a basement flowing by pipe to the lake). The Dolive property also included 40 acres of citrus.

The Leu property was a showplace with many stately oaks and other trees and with azaleas, camellias and many plants and flowers he had obtained from many trips throughout the world. West from the Leu property, the only oaks and other trees were along the lake with only citrus groves southward to Nebraska. In 1944, Clarence and Aline Gay purchased an 8 plus-acre lakefront property from the estate of Mary Lucy Payne, located north and west of Louis Dolive's property on Lake Rowena, which included a three-story colonial home. (See Rowena Park, Phase II)

All five lakefront homes were built facing Lake Rowena. A one-lane driveway between two rows of citrus at 1405 Nebraska Avenue was the road the Gays and the Dolives both used to reach their homes, dividing at a point (now in the center of what is now Dolive Drive, about 25 feet west of what is now Gay Drive) with one fork curving westward to the Gay's three story colonial home and the other curving eastward to the Dolive home.

After World II, construction was begun on a causeway through Lake Estelle, to be linked to an extension of Mills Avenue northward from Nebraska over a new bridge between Lake Formosa and Lake Rowena. On March 8, 1949, the Andrews Causeway was dedicated by President Harry Truman in honor of the late Senator Charles O. Andrews.

A year later, a two-lane brick Princeton Street was extended from an Agricultural Center station to Mills Avenue. Soon, Edith Bush provided funds to build a Civic Theater south of the intersection of Princeton with Mills, and the first small Art Museum was constructed north of Princeton/Mills. (It wasn't until the late 1980's before the route of a multilane Princeton was moved south of the Civic Theater and north of the bridge.) The route of U.S. 17-92 was changed from Orange Avenue to move down the extension of Orlando Avenue and Mills from the North and Southward to Colonial Drive - a two-lane brick street - which was widened after 1950 to accommodate 17-92 through to Highway 441. It was constructed by L.B. Mcleod Construction - who had purchased a large acreage ranch on the west side.

The opening of this major highway brought commercial construction to the area, and at that time the White Turkey restaurant was being built on Lake Rowena and the Flamingo Court began construction in 1950. Clarence and Jerry Gay were negotiating with Louis Dolive to purchase his 40-acre grove and to have a plat approved for the first phase of one of the first private residential areas. They were also negotiating with Aaron Reppard for an eastward extension.

The plat of Rowena Park, Phase I was approved in 1951 and included four roads off Nebraska - Reppard, Wycliff Drive, Gay Drive and Flamingo Drive - in offset with the city grid of streets/avenues (Fern Creek and Belgrade avenues). The first phase included 32 lots from Nebraska to McCamy, but none of the roads were extended northward until 1955. The plat provided for having lot owners provide 11 two-foot easements on the rear of their property so utility lines would run behind the homes and not on what might become city property in front.

While Developer Jerry Gay was constructing the drives and roads within the private development, he realized that selling lots off Nebraska would not be as successful without an entrance opening off the new 17-92 highway route (Mills Avenue).

The City and Jerry Gay agreed to have the city extend McCamy Drive from the private line to Mills. That portion became McCamy Street, but it remained McCamy Drive for years within Rowena Park until the city erected street signs. The first commercial ventures at the corner of McCamy and Mills were a Dairy Queen on the north side and a restaurant on the south side, which later became a pizza parlor.

The first new house in Rowena Park was built by Jerry Gay as his own home at the southeast corner of Flamingo and McCamy. Realtor, and later developer of residential areas, Jack Gale, built the second home at the southeast corner of Wycliff and McCamy.

The Gaines bought the lot at the southwest corner of Wycliff and McCamy (back of the Gale home), and Charles Clayton built his home in 1952. In 1964, they bought the Dolive property on the lake and, after renovation and adding a street-front and circle driveway, they moved in May, 1965.

Rowena Park, Phase II, extended all four drives or roads in much longer blocks to reach the new east-west Dolive Drive. There were six lots each side, or 48 home-sites - with wider lots on the east side of Reppard and west side of Flamingo so that the last house would be on the curves at the three-block east-west Dolive Drive.

Wycliff Drive was then extended from Dolive Drive northward to a circle, and six lots (two lakefronts) were added, bringing the total to 86 new homes. The three-story Gay colonial home was demolished, with some of its foundation still noticeable. Jerry Gay built a new red brick home for his parents at 1403 Dolive Drive. At one time, Jerry Gay planned an extension of Flamingo Drive northward to a circle for six more potential lots. Instead, Jerry built and lived in one lakefront property before selling it and building a second lake-front home at the extension driveway off Flamingo. These now have Dolive Drive addresses, with four possible home sites. Jerry Gay planned to acquire the Dolive property for five more home sites at the end of Gay drive, but Louis Dolive preferred not to have his homestead property divided or his homestead demolished. (See tidbit below about his purchase of the home across the street). When the Reppard home was acquired by Dr. Richard and Frankee Hellinger and Barbara Reppard Slettedahl and her husband Dale moved into Reppards' aunt's home, the plan to extend Reppard Road with additional lots was prevented. Two home sites are possible.

At present, with nine new homes on the lake, the demolishing of one, and with three original existing homes, the total homes in Rowena Park has reached 92, with a possible eight or nine more sites.

Harry P. Leu lived on his "plant-flowers-estate" for a number of years after Rowena Park Phase II was completed in 1955, and after Walter and Stella Rose deeded a large portion of their land within the County to the Rose Isle Development Company in 1955, Lake Shore Drive, Shrewsbury and Shoreham roads began construction in 1956-57. Rowena Park became part of the City of Orlando, excluding the nearly two acres of the Dolive homestead, which remained in the county and on septic tanks, as did all homes later at the extension of Wycliff with six more lots toward the lake from Dolive Drive. Mr. Leu had agreed to have McCamy extended to his property and also to have the utility lines run down his property line with Rowena Park, with the thought in mind that they could be used if his property were to become a separate residential development or be an addition to a larger Rowena Park.

The current Leu Gardens web site provides the story of how angry Mr. Leu became a year-and-a-half after deeding it to the City because of what the City was doing to the property and to the Lake, actions that were not made clear at the time of the gift. The City had added a larger underground storm system under Leu Gardens and into Lake Rowena and connected it to the system as far southwest as Colonial Plaza. For a number of years, without having a catch basin in Lake Rowena, the trash and debris from several miles caused serious pollution to the Lake, making it non-swimable, non-skiable and useless to the property owners on the lake even though taxes increased each year for lakefront property.

Rowena Park, in 1951-55, and Rose Isle, in 1958-64, were two of the first private residential developments in Orlando - over two decades before the concepts of having common fences or walls with landscaped entranceways or with the name of the development prominently identified. The first such residential development with landscaped entrance ways on Conroy Windermere Road from Kirkman to Windermere began in the late 1970s, with more than 25 being developed from 1980 to 2000. It wasn't until later that the trend included "gated communities."

Before there was a Rowena Park Neighborhood Association, the idea of closing some of the roads, and building two landscaped entranceways with identification signs to update the private development, was discussed a number of times. The first suggestion was to provide landscaped, identifiable entranceways on Wycliff, Gay and McCamy, and to close Reppard Road and Flamingo Drive. Later, another suggestion was to make Reppard Road and Flamingo the two landscaped entranceways with signs and close Gay, Wycliff and McCamy. The parents of City Commissioner Crenshaw lived in Rowena Park, and Commissioner Crenshaw, being fully aware of the background of Rowena Park, agreed with either plan and encouraged the residents to update the residential development at their expense. He also agreed with the idea of a special designed marker at each intersection for drive and road identification.

***An interesting true tidbit:***

When Louis Dolive decided not to sell his remaining acreage to Jerry Gay for five more home sites, he contacted Jim Stokes, who was an associate of Jerry Gay and who lived across the street, to make an offer to buy his house. He told Jim that, 'if his big Cadillac would fit in their garage, I will buy your home'. He drove the car over to check it out. He then called the Gaines who had offered to buy the property and invited them to his home. He advised them that he had just bought the house across the street and asked what their plans were for his property. He said that, 'if you shake my hand and promise not to demolish my home or proceed with subdividing my property as planned until after I die', he would sell.