Lake County

COUNTY SEAT: Tavares

POPULATION: 47,800


LAKE COUNTY is situated near the center of the Florida peninsula, midway between the Atlantic Ocean and the Gulf of Mexico. The area of Lake County is 744,320 acres, and the county is bounded by Marion, Sumter, Polk, Orange, Seminole, Volusia, and Putnam counties. Tavares, the county seat, is 31 miles northwest of Orlando, 130 miles south of Jacksonville, and 90 miles east of Tampa. The center of population of Florida is at Fruitland Park in Lake County.

The weather is mild, with an annual average temperature of 71.8 degrees varying from an average of 59.7 degrees in January to an average of 82.4 degrees in August. Average annual rainfall is 47.57 inches, with the heaviest rainfall in June, July, August, and September. The elevation above sea level is 124 feet at Clermont.

The growing of citrus fruit, Florida’s outstanding agricultural industry, is of major importance in Lake County. Deep in the heart of the “Citrus Belt” the entire economy of the county is built around citrus, the growing, packing, canning, and shipping of oranges, grapefruit, and tangerines. Most of the cultivation is done by machinery, and the labor force is ample. The fruit is of high quality and brings top prices. Modern machinery, skilled labor, and efficient methods are employed in the grading, packing, and shipping of the fruit, and annual payrolls
run into large sums. The fruit grows well in every section. There are 77,700 acres of bearing citrus trees in this county. Lake County is second in citrus production and in citrus acreage in Florida, and is one of the leaders in the state in watermelon acreage, with 5,500 acres in 1954-55.

The leading truck crops are celery, beans, cucumbers, sweet corn, tomatoes, eggplants, cauliflower, peppers, and other vegetables. Corn, sweet potatoes, Irish potatoes, peas, peanuts, velvet beans, sugar cane, hays, and other field crops are produced to some extent in all parts of the county. Lake County is one of the leading areas in the State in the production of early watermelons, most of them being shipped to northern markets. In 1954 there were 2,920 farms in the county embracing some 319,428 acres. Poultry and cattle raising are also extensive farming enterprises here.

Fishing in the more than 1,400 lakes in the county is an important source of income, as are the many tourists and winter visitors who come to the county to take advantage of the moderate climate, excellent sport fishing, and other county recreational activities. Lake County is one of the favorite lake-fishing areas in the State. One of the largest trailer colonies and a factory which makes speed boat hulls, are located here. Candy plants, a manufacturer of moisture-proof salt and pepper shakers, and citrus juice concentrate plants also add to the economy of the county.

Assessed valuation of Lake County in 1956 was $81,447,188. Bank resources amounted to $46,737,000 in the same year, and retail sales totalled $52,937,000. Total annual wages paid in 1956 amounted to $15,601,837. Effective buying income was $1,247 per capita and $56,232,000 for the county in 1956.

Lake County's many lakes have made this section of Florida virtually a "fisherman's paradise." Fresh-water bass, bream, perch, catfish, shell-crackers, largemouth bass, pike, trout, crappies, and other varieties of fresh-water fish are caught here. Quail, dove, deer, bear, duck, squirrel, turkey, coot, march hen, rabbit, opossum, fox, and coon are found here.

An annual regatta is held in Mount Dora, and racing drivers of both inboard and outboard classes come from all over the nation to compete in the races. An annual Florida Fox Hunters' meet is held at Clermont, and the Florida Watermelon Festival is held in Leesburg each spring. The Lake County Fair and Florida Sportsman's Exposition are held annually in Eustis. A Class D baseball team has its home park in Leesburg. Alexander Springs, a scenic recreation area, is located near Astor Park.

U. S. highways 92 and 441 and Florida highways 19, 25, 33, 42, 44, 46, 48, 50, 435, 436, 448, 459, 455, 561, and 545 provide Lake County with excellent road facilities. The Atlantic Coast Line, Tavares and Gulf Railroad, and Seaboard Airline Railway provide rail transportation. Greyhound Lines and Orlando Transit provide bus service.

There are thirty-two elementary and secondary schools in the county, with a school enrollment in 1956-57 of 10,926 pupils. Two hundred and fifty hospital beds are available. There are seven newspapers published in the county, all weeklies. They are the Clermont Press, Eustis, Lake Region News, Groveland Press, Leesburg Daily, Commercial, Mount Dora Topic, and Tavares Citizen. There are three hundred churches, five libraries, and five public and private golf courses.

Lake County was first settled between 1840 and 1850 and was organized under its present name from Sumter and Orange counties, deriving its name from the many lakes within its borders. Monteverde, established in 1885, was named for the Spanish "green hill." Mount Dora, originally called Royalview, was renamed by a party of engineers who were so pleased with the hospitality of Dora Drawdy, a local resident at the time, that they named a nearby lake for her; the name of the city was soon changed to correspond. Tavares was named in honor of Lopez Para Y. Tavares, a grandee of Spain. It means "the middle" or "the center." Clermont received its name from Clermont, France; and Eustis was named in honor of General Abraham Eustis who was in command of troops in this area during the Seminole War.