

Caddo Lake in a day

Staffers experience the eerie beauty of the historical lake

By **Wes Ferguson**

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It's high time to get reacquainted with East Texas. Over the next several weeks, the News-Journal is setting off to explore many of the attractions and oddities that keep people entertained in the area. Stories about our day trips will run over the next several Mondays, giving readers the rest of the work week to plot 'n' plan a trip of their own.



Scott Brunner/News-Journal Photo

Fishing guide Henry Lewis, 71, manages two oars, a cigarette and two cane poles as he takes people on fishing expeditions on Caddo Lake. Lewis said he wanted to become a guide to escape working in the cotton fields.

For the first installment, the News-Journal headed to one of East Texas' earliest and most enduring tourist destinations. News-Journal Web editor Scott Brunner and I were out of Longview and into the countryside in no time.

Meeting Bubba

Preferring the back roads, we kicked up dust as the old red Jeep rumbled past rolling hills and green pastures. From a distance, the freshly cut hay fields appeared as well-manicured as any lawn.

We turned onto Texas 154 southeast of Harleton and came upon a country store. The signs outside advertised feed, bait, hunting licenses - and "Bubba Burgers."

It was Fugler's Grocery and Market. Inside, John "Bubba" Fugler was grilling mounds of hamburger meat while his brother, Al, rang up the customers' orders.

"You got three sammiches," he said, laying on a thick country drawl. "Three traitor taters. Is this your bellywash? Unleaded Dr Pepper. Gotcha 20 dolla and 64 cents you have legally tendered - tax, title and license."

A bellywash is a cold drink in Fugler's lingo, and traitor taters are french fries at the store founded by the Fugler brothers' father and grandfather in 1940. The burgers are all Bubba Burgers, named for Bubba Fugler. "Well, people would come in here and want a burger," Al Fugler explained. "They'd say, 'I want Bubba to fix my burger.' That's Bubba down yonder."

Bubba Fugler looked up from the grill and nodded a hello. Within earshot, three regulars were ragging on the Fugler brothers and raving about their lunch. "Eat a Bubba Burger, and you'll go back to Longview and throw a rock through the window of (your local burger places)," said Richard McFarland, who was wolfing down his meal with Golden Flake Cheese Puffs. "They'll make you a double if you want it, but I tell you, it'll feel like you swallowed a brick right around 3 o'clock."

McFarland and a couple of his teaching colleagues said they drive over from Texas State Technical College in Marshall most days of the week. He's even got the Fugler's phone number on speed dial, he said.

"I walk in the door, and they know where to set it down for me," he added. "Nothing about it is quote-unquote 'fast food.' It's a hamburger that could have come out of your mom's kitchen. It's got that flavor. It's got that taste."

Waitress Lajuana Lewis plopped a couple of the famous burgers onto the table in front of us. The beef had been ground that morning, and the patty was so tender and juicy it took a delicate touch to keep it from falling apart.

"It's a regular, old, plain-Jane good hamburger," McFarland said. "It's just good." Stuffed, satisfied and fighting the urge to drop everything and take a nap, we stumbled out of Fugler's and were back on the open road. Our journey took us through Marshall alongside the red-brick campus of East Texas Baptist University, past Lady Bird Johnson's childhood home and beyond Caddo Lake State Park, to the fishing camp town of Uncertain. Our adventure was about to begin.

An Uncertain landmark

No one's sure how Uncertain got its name. On a western shore of Caddo Lake, the settlement has been home to scattered hunting and fishing camps for more than 100 years. One constant has been Johnson's Ranch Marina, a rustic place where boaters have stopped for decades to grab a drink or a snack and relax on the deck.

"Johnson's Ranch is 101 years old," said Billy Carter, the marina's operator and a longtime Caddo guide. "It's been a focal point for everything going on in Uncertain, and we don't have a problem with people pulling up here in the shade all day long."

Carter is restoring the building, and in a huge development, he's planning to install air-conditioning in the room where the cold drinks are kept iced down in coolers. "I'm trying to bring it back into shape like it was in the '50s — no frills, shade, a place for people to get together and talk about old times and new times," he said.

As a handful of locals lazed away the afternoon on the marina, an elderly man in a white T-shirt and overalls approached on a riding mower. He parked the mower beside the dock and eased out of the seat, steadying himself with a wooden cane. Carter introduced him as Henry Lewis. He would be our fishing guide for the afternoon.

On the bayou

Caddo Lake is a maze of bayous, sloughs, oxbows and islands. Lewis knows them all. He has spent more than 50 years leading people to his favorite fishing holes for crappie and bream, boating through places like Blind Slough, Whangdoodle Pass and Alligator Bayou and ducking the Spanish moss that dangles from the cypress trees.

It was a sunny afternoon in June, but a breeze cooled our faces as we cruised down Alligator Bayou in one of Johnson Ranch's aluminum boats. Suddenly Lewis let off the gas, made a U-turn and ducked into the cypress trees. To the unobservant passenger, there appeared to be no break in the trees along the bayou's edge, but Lewis promised it was a shortcut.

He deftly nosed the boat through the submerged forest, dodging the cypress trees, but the boat's propeller snagged a patch of hydrilla, a noxious underwater weed that is choking many of Texas' lakes.

Caddo is no exception.

Lewis popped the prop to shake loose from the tangles, flinging black bits of seaweed onto his back, but the boat slammed into a tree. His passenger grabbed a paddle and shoved off from the cypress trunk, pinballing the boat from tree to tree in the tight gap.

Finally, Lewis unclogged the propeller and eased through the forest. We saw daylight ahead. It was the "big lake," where the narrow bayous and sloughs give way to wide, open water.

Soon after, Lewis baited our bamboo cane poles with minnows and gave a simple instruction:

"Watch me, and do what I do," he said.

He tossed the minnow into the water, watched it for 30 seconds and tossed it somewhere else. A few minutes passed without a nibble. "Man, I was sure that we'd catch something by now," he said. "That's my favorite little hole. When it gets like that we move to another spot."

He revved the engine and took off. At the next hole, the fish were biting. "Watch out, man! Pull! Pull!"

A big haul

Crappie fishing, at least the way Lewis does it, is perfect for people with short attention spans. We spent the afternoon pulling foot-long fish from the water, and whenever a few minutes elapsed without a bite, we were off to the next hole.

As long as a parent is along for the ride, Lewis said he's kid-friendly, with 14 grandchildren that he knows of. Children used to exasperate him, but he's developed a few tricks over the years to keep them entertained when their interest wanes.

"I got used to it because I know what they're going to do. I'm well content now," he said. One of his passengers snagged a big one and yanked hard on the line. "Nope, you got a stump," Lewis said. "Work it back to you. Nope. Let me have that pole. You got to work it out."

If nothing else, the job beats picking cotton, he added.

Lewis said he worked in the cotton fields around Karnack from the age of 13 through 15, then moved to Dallas to make some fast money. He didn't like it, though, so he returned to his home and has been guiding since he was 17 years old. "I raised eight kids doing it," he said.

Hobbled by knee replacement surgery, however, Lewis said he doubts he will be guiding for much longer. He still managed to catch twice as many fish as his two passengers. Back at the marina, Leroy Jones scaled and gutted our 15 fish. He's held the job for nearly 40 years, he said.

"I was just watching folks and started doing it and got real good at it," said Jones, 57. He doesn't fish. When there are no fish to clean, Jones likes to sit on a bench in front of the box fan and watch the fishermen heading up and down the boat ramp. "I've been out here all my life, man," he said.