

Caddo Lake's history is the stuff of legend

Reservoir holds diverse native life, abundant lore

By SHANNON TOMPKINS Copyright 2009 Houston Chronicle

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Caddo Lake commands a deserved spot in Texas' rich mythology and pride-of-place.

Most Texans, even those who never have seen the shallow, sprawling, cypress-and-Spanish-moss-dressed water body on Big Cypress Bayou in northeast Texas (and inevitably anyone who has actually visited the lake), believe it to be a spectacular and special natural wonder in a state blessed with them.

No inland waterway in Texas holds a higher diversity of native aquatic life. More than 90 species of fish have been documented as native to the lake and associated waters; some of them, such as chain pickerel, are found almost nowhere else in the state.

More than 20 species of mussels live in the lake and adjacent wetlands, with some found nowhere else in Texas.

More than 40 species native to the lake and its

wetlands are threatened or endangered.

Along with noting Caddo's otherworldly beauty and amazing biodiversity, proud Texans will often recite some of the amazing history which has occurred on the lake's waters and banks. Some of it's even true.

Legends of the lake

The lake on the Texas/Louisiana border was the site of the nation's first "offshore" oil production when, in 1911, a well was punched through the bottom of Caddo Lake and produced more than 400 barrels a day.

Claudia Alta Taylor, known to the world as "Lady Bird" Johnson through her marriage to President Lyndon Johnson, was born in the town of Karnack on Caddo's shore. And, the story goes, her deep love of the natural world and her resulting efforts in its behalf were triggered by the impression Caddo Lake made on the young Claudia.

Too, there's the history of steamboat travel on the lake and Big Cypress Bayou, the steamship port of Jefferson, outlaws, the Regulator-Moderator War and plenty of ghosts.

But one of the most commonly-repeated “facts” about Caddo Lake — “It's the only natural lake in Texas.” — is misinformed myth.

Caddo Lake is *not* the only natural lake in Texas. The state holds dozens of natural lakes, some covering hundreds of acres, scattered from the playas of the Panhandle to the oxbows in East Texas river bottoms and the resacas of South Texas. Heck, Eagle Lake on the prairie west of Houston is a natural lake.

And, truth is, Caddo's not even a “natural” lake — at least not in it's current incarnation.

Caddo Lake *was* a natural lake, though.

Natural beginning

For at least a couple of thousand years, the area now covered by Caddo Lake was a low-lying reach of swamp and small natural lakes veined by Big Cypress Creek and other waterways.

Geologists and hydrologists are not certain about the exact timing, but sometime in the past thousand years — some say as long ago as 1100 AD, but most say 200-400 years ago — something happened to cause water to flood the low-lying basin and form Caddo Lake.

The generally accepted theory is that a massive log jam on the Red River (into which Big Cypress Creek flows) created a natural dam that caused water to back up behind it and flood the low-lying area on what's now the Texas/Louisiana border.

This “Great Red River Raft” — which obstructed more than 70 miles of the Mississippi River tributary — and Caddo Lake were noted by the first explorers of European heritage to visit the area.

The Caddo Lake that existed when pioneers moved into northeast Texas in the early 1800s was much larger and deeper than the than the one existing today.

In the 1830s, removal of part of the Red River Raft allowed steamboats access into Big Cypress Bayou near what's now Shreveport, Louisiana, a city named after Capt. Henry Shreve who headed much of the raft-removal effort. Those steamers regularly travelled into Texas as far as the town of Jefferson, several miles up the bayou from Caddo Lake.

In 1874, after more than 40 years of working in fits and starts, the entire Red River Raft was removed and backed-up waters, including much of what had been Caddo Lake, drained.

In the wake of the raft removal, Caddo Lake was too shallow for steamboats. What remained of the lake was mostly a series of shallow, swampy waters.

Oil boom forces change

In the early 1900s, the search for oil brought changes to the diminished lake. A well drilled over a patch of Caddo Lake — the first over-water oil well in the nation — hit pay dirt, triggering an oil-exploration boom in the area.

To make more of the swampy country accessible to oil drillers using barges, a dam was thrown across Big Cypress Bayou near Mooringsport, Louisiana in 1914. The resulting reservoir, which covers about 25,000 surface acres, is the latest manifestation of Caddo Lake.

Between 1968 and 1971, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers modified the 1914 dam. The dam uses an outlet weir system rather than the gate system seen on most modern dams, limiting reservoir managers ability to manipulate Caddo's water levels.

Water level of today's Caddo Lake is about 10 feet lower and the lake appreciably smaller in surface area than it was prior to removal of the Red River Raft.

But while the ancient lake can no longer claim to be wholly “natural,” and certainly faces serious threats to its future because of infestations of invasive plants, Caddo continues to function as the core of Texas' most ecologically diverse freshwater system and stands as a soul-stirring natural and cultural icon.

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