

'A community effort' Hundreds attend refuge opening



Caddo Culture Club members bless the opening of the Caddo Lake National Wildlife Refuge Saturday in Karnack.

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By Terri Hahn, News Messenger Sunday, September 27, 2009

KARNACK — The sun shone Saturday on the crowd celebrating the grand opening of the Caddo Lake National Wildlife Refuge. "I just thought it went great. I didn't know how many people to expect or what kind of weather to expect," Judge Ben Z. Grant saw as the event was drawing to a close.

With an estimated 1,000 in attendance, merry music, some dancing and lots of mingling, guests were only left to expect that the fervor of the refuge's beginning would carry for their "children, grandchildren and beyond."

The opening ceremony began as Boy Scout Troop 239 from First United Methodist church of Marshall conducted the presentation of colors and led the crowd in the Pledge of Allegiance.

"God smiles on our undertaking," said Grant, master of ceremonies. "This land — if you go back in history — was part of the Caddo Nation. In my mind's eye, I can see a time when this land was home of the Indians."

Members of the Caddo Nation of Oklahoma and the Caddo Culture Club were called upon early in the program to make a ceremonial blessing of the refuge. Four men carried a drum, beating it and singing the blessings.

The ladies dressed in floor-length, 19th Century-style dresses with ribbon stripping and C-shaped combs adorning their hair. Many also wore head-dresses that flowed in one piece down their backs and they waved feather fans. They seemed to gently float as they made their shuffling dance steps in a circle, following the men.

"I hope this place turns out to be an attraction. Everybody sounds like they have worked so hard to have this happen," Doyle Edge of Fort Cobb, Okla., said. "We didn't hesitate when we got the call to come here."

Edge described the ceremonial blessings as deeply spiritual, adding that all of the dancers, singers and drummers did so wholeheartedly.

"Some of these songs we sing from our heart, and the ladies have learned to dance from the elders, and they have handed them down from generation to generation," said Edge. "Our young boys learned the songs real well. These are spiritual songs. This drum that we use, we have blessed it with a lot of spirit."

The spirit and enthusiasm that a distinguished lineup of speakers dedicated to the refuge was also heartfelt. Many of them praised others, the names of hard-working people were listed with genuine thanks or awe in the accomplishment.

"It took a lot of people to put this together, both inside the government and out," said Mark Williams, refuge project manager.

Speakers for the event included Rep. Louie Gohmert; Chris Pease, National Wildlife Refuge Service region chief; Addison "Tad" Davis, IV, U.S. Army deputy assistant secretary; William K. Honker, deputy director of the Environmental Protection Agency's Water Division; and Don Henley, Eagles frontman and Caddo Lake Institute founder and board chairman.

"I caught my first fish here at Caddo Lake in 1955," said Henley, who recalled early morning fishing trips with his dad. "The older I got, the more I realized the importance of the ecosystem here."

Henley described the process of creating the park and how the efforts of so many people kept it from becoming another "empty industrial park."

"This has truly been a community effort, and this couldn't have been done without the National Fish and Wildlife Service and the Army," Henley said.

Many organizations gathered for the grand opening to share their missions and efforts. Texas Parks and Wildlife, Texas Conservation Alliance, Texas Forest Service and the Texas Master Naturalists' Cypress Basin Chapter all talked with visitors.

One of the most instrumental groups for the refuge is Friends of Caddo Lake National Wildlife Refuge.

"Every refuge has a friends group," said member Henry Bradbury. "It is the friends group that conducts the cultural side with special programming, environmental education and tours."

While the park opened Saturday, the friends group will celebrate its third anniversary during a meeting next month. Individual memberships are \$15 a year, and meetings are held monthly. For more information on the organization, visit www.caddofriends.org or call 903-679-9144.

A silent auction was also held to benefit the refuge, as visitors bid on a wide variety of items donated by businesses in Marshall and the surrounding areas.

Saturday was also National Public Lands Day, a fitting holiday for the celebration. Harrison County Judge Richard Anderson also brought a proclamation declaring Saturday "Caddo Lake National Wildlife Refuge Day," giving the park yet another page in history.