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Locals take in park's rich history

By Terri Hahn, News Messenger

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About 75 people congregated Saturday at Caddo Lake State Park to celebrate its 75th anniversary by remembering its construction and the enjoyment it has brought East Texans and tourists alike.

"Nature has provided a park in the rough, and it requires only the hand of man to make it one of the outstanding beauty spots in the Southwest," read Todd Dickinson, park director as he opened the presentation.

Speakers Saturday included Harrison County Judge Richard Anderson, Harrison County Sheriff Tom McCool, Marshall Mayor William "Buddy" Power, a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service representative and keynote speaker Mary Jane Sanders, who attended the park's grand opening 75 years ago.

"Today on its 75th anniversary, Caddo Lake State Park is one of Texas' best state parks," said Mary Jane Sanders who spoke during the commemoration having attended the park's opening.

Ms. Sanders shared the story of her family growing up with the red dirt roads on Sunday drives and taking time to watch the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) build Caddo Lake State Park during their outings. Much of her story was filled with lighthearted memories of bouncing in the car seat and discovering a "lucky" buckeye to carry around.

"During the time the park was being built, we watched the process," said Ms. Sanders. "Our family spent many afternoons here watching the wild get tamed."

"Franklin D. Roosevelt believed in conservation and said a nation that destroys its soil destroys itself," she added.

Ms. Sanders ended her speech with an "old Indian proverb."

"We do not inherit the earth from our ancestors," she read. "We borrow it from our children."

"I think it went pretty well and smoothly," said Todd Dickinson, park director. "The heat kept the crowd from being larger. The people here are all hardcore supporters of the park."

Even with a heat index in excess of 100 degrees Saturday, every chair was filled to hear the speakers share their love for the park. A handful of CCC veterans also attended with rich memories from the days they spent building the facilities and accesses.

"Things have changed in a very positive way," said McCool, who began his career as a game warden at the park in 1974. "People today have an understanding not to mess with Mother Nature."

McCool reminisced about people wanting to take bits of the park home with them. He also commended the Texas Parks & Wildlife Department "for many years and for the contribution they have made to Caddo Lake State Park."

Caddo Lake State Park has enjoyed continuous enjoyment and use, and will soon have a new neighbor when the Caddo Lake National Wildlife Refuge officially opens Saturday, Sept. 26.

The park is also undergoing a series of improvements with the hope of future additions.

"The Texas Department of Transportation project is for new sidewalks and parking," said Dickinson, who added that additional parking spaces will add accessibility to already prominent areas.

The upgrade of a screen structure into an all-weather "limited access" cabin is also planned, and long-range hopes include additional day-use areas, a pavilion and a playground, Dickinson said.

Inside the dining hall, displays included historical information about the region and the Civilian Conservation Corps 857, which built Caddo Lake State Park. Information about CCC building methods for retaining nature as the primary fixtures of the parks they built, landscaping methods and blueprints were included. Other CCC tidbits

included their recreational activities of sports and music. Full-color TPWD displays also depicted the culture and history of the Caddo Indian tribes.

"I think it went great," said Sherry Burke, who used to bring her fourth grade class to the park for nature walks.

"My dad used to have his company parties out here years ago. I have a house down here, and I just love the park," she said.

Strawberry cake was served and music was provided by the Piney River Band.
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