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Marshallite recalls park's debut

By Cox East Texas

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On Sunday afternoon drives down a narrow dirt road, Mary Jane Sanders would stare out of her daddy's car window at the hundreds of towering pine trees.

"We came here every Sunday to see what had changed, what progress had been made," Ms. Sanders said of her family's weekly routine some 75 years ago. "We were so excited to have a state park open on Caddo Lake in 1934."

Caddo Lake State Park opened July 4, 1934. On Saturday, park officials plan to celebrate the 75th anniversary with several activities, including a speech by Ms. Sanders, who attended the park opening.

"We were all so excited on opening day," Ms. Sanders said. "I was only 8 years old, but it seemed to me that the crowd was enormous. People spoke. I don't remember what they spoke about though because I was just so excited to go into the park. We were so anxious to get in and see what the park was like."

Ms. Sanders, 82, said her dad grew up on the shores of Caddo Lake and took his family to watch workers clear land and construct buildings for the state park.

"As they cleared the land and began to work, you really saw the area take on a new beauty," said Ms. Sanders, of Marshall. "The park really melded into the background of the land. It just seemed like it was meant to be here."

Caddo Lake State Park was established in 1934 under the Civilian Conservation Corps, a public work relief program developed by President Franklin Roosevelt to put

unemployed men to work during the Great Depression era. Caddo was the corps' first planned Texas park, according to the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department.

T.J. Taylor, Lady Bird Johnson's father, made the first land donation in the early 1930s and convinced a few friends to give land, Park Manager Todd Dickinson said.

"He saw the economic benefit of tourism," Dickinson said. "Karnack was a depressed area, as was much of the nation at that time. He helped grease the original wheels. The CCC had to have property that they could work on."

Fifteen U.S. Army barracks and a mess hall were converted into nine log cabins and a group recreation hall that are still in use.

The park — named after Caddo Lake — opened on Independence Day in 1934.

"I feel like this is my park," Ms. Sanders said. "I watched it grow. I watched it being built. Somewhere along the way someone said, 'This is for the people of Texas.' It was for all of us. It was for me."

After the opening ceremony, Ms. Sanders and her family loaded up in the car to take a drive through the park.

"Boy, we thought that was fun," she said. "Back then they had dirt roads. We always hoped it would rain and we'd get stuck so we could stay here the whole day. This was our special park. I've watched it ever since."

Though there have been some renovations during the past 75 years, Ms. Sanders said the park maintains its original feel.

"The changes have been subtle," she said.

From 1968 to 1972, the park went through a redevelopment phase and added campgrounds, Dickinson said. During another redevelopment in 2000, the cabins were remodeled, including redoing interior walls, bathrooms, kitchens and floors, he said.

The Texas Department of Transportation is adding more parking areas and sidewalks to improve the park's accessibility, Dickinson said.

The Caddo community also is preparing for the Sept. 26 opening of the Caddo Lake National Wildlife Refuge, a conservation area. Ms. Sanders and her husband, Jack, serve on the board overseeing the project.

"I hope people understand the work that's been put into this area, and I hope they

understand what it will mean to their generation and to future generations," she said. "You see, I saw Caddo Lake for the first time when I was 2 weeks old. I've grown up with it in my heart. I've done my best, and I'll continue to do my best to help with issues here. It was in my daddy's blood. Now, it's in my blood."

IF YOU GO

What: Caddo Lake State Park 75th Anniversary

When: 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. Saturday

Where: Caddo Lake State Park, 245 Park Road 2, Karnack

Activities: Viewing traveling historical exhibits with information on the Caddo Indians and the Civilian Conservation Corps throughout the day, unearthing a time capsule buried 15 years ago at 1 p.m., burying another time capsule to be opened at the 150th anniversary and touring the Group Recreation Hall and cabin area from 10 a.m. to noon. Harrison County Judge Richard Anderson and Harrison County Commissioner Jeffrey Thompson will speak at noon.

Cost: Free from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m.; Otherwise, admission is \$2 for people age 13 and older, \$1 for adults age 65 and older and free for children under 13.

Contact: Park office, 903-679-3351

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