

The Lake No One Knows

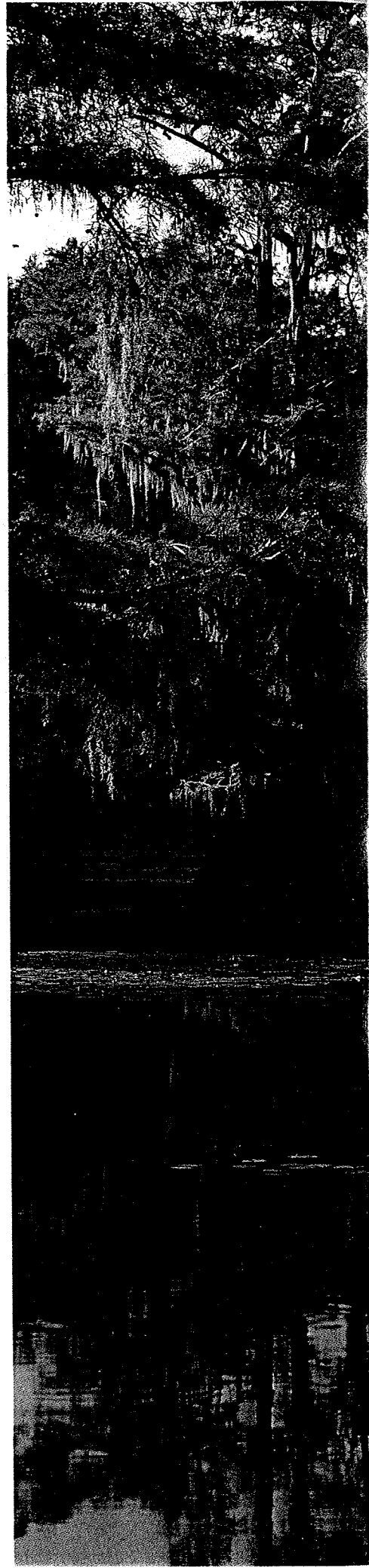
KNOW

*The largest natural lake in Texas
isn't really natural. That's just one of the murky
misconceptions about Caddo Lake.*

BY DANA RUBIN

FRED DAHMER KNOWS CADDO LAKE BETTER THAN ANYONE, BUT even he doesn't know it all. He has spent most of his 79 years photographing, exploring, fishing, ferrying visitors, and daydreaming on the lake, which is practically in his back yard. But you can't really understand the lake, or Fred Dahmer, by standing on the shore. Not until you get out on a boat do you begin to grasp that this is a distinct and separate world—a labyrinth of sloughs and shallow submerged islands dense with tupelo and bald cypress, their branches shrouded in long, dangling strands of moss, their wide, fluted trunks mirrored in the surface of the water. There is something wild and primordial about the place, as if a creature from the Pleistocene Epoch were about to lurch forth from the muck.

Fred has worked as a photographer, a radio repairman, a shipyard electrician, and a postman, but he has spent the past twenty years exploring and defending Caddo Lake, a 23-mile-long waterway that straddles the Texas-Louisiana border, midway between Marshall and Shreveport. When he is not attending meetings and writing letters to politicians, hydrologists, engineers,



and other would-be despoilers, he can be found in his battered V-bottom boat, poking his way through the lily pads. I met him four years ago, when he was living alone on Taylor Island in the town of Uncertain, on the Texas side of the lake, in a cabin he had built himself: a small wood-frame bunkhouse covered in tar-paper shingles. To get there, you follow Uncertain's aging commercial strip, a two-lane road with a couple of seafood restaurants, a convenience store, and some ragtag motels, and cross the bridge to the island. So dense with moisture is the atmosphere at the water's edge that everything is damp and mossy; anything left untended slips into deliquescence—shacks with lapsed roofs, rusted pickups parked under the pines. Occasionally you come across an abandoned house that is entirely overrun by weeds and vines, its rooftop barely visible behind a frenzy of foliage.

Fred is a narrow and unprepossessing man, slightly hunched, with a left leg that was crippled in an auto accident. He has a kindly crinkled face, with large ears, green eyes, and tannish-colored skin. His voice is peculiarly high-pitched, almost a falsetto—the result of an unexplained hardening of his vocal chords twenty years ago when he stopped smoking. This, together with his lopsided gait, creates a peculiar first impression of Fred. To get to know him, you must disregard the physical strangeness; or perhaps it is the other way around: Once you know him, the oddity disappears.

I first saw Fred Dahmer on the evening news. He was being interviewed for a program on Texas travel and looked squirmy and self-conscious in front of the television camera. Several weeks later I called him up and asked if he would give me some pointers on exploring the lake. He did much more than that: When I got there, he gave me my first tour. I have no idea where he took me that day; the lake was big and bewildering. I remember only an impression of Spanish moss and shimmery waters and a feeling of enchantment. After that trip, I returned to Caddo Lake again and again with Fred as my guide.

Had he not been so willing to share the lake with me, I might not have gone back. Nothing about the lake encourages visitors. Instead, there seems to be an antipathy toward outsiders, a xenophobia almost, as if the lake and all its smothering vegetation were turning inward on itself. It is impossible to find a decent map of the lake. There is no place, at least on the Texas side, where you can get an overview of the lake, no scenic turnout or lookout point. Only two public boat ramps exist—one at the state park and another by the Mooringsport dam. None of the usual tourist courtesies are extended. The restaurants are uneven, the motels perpetually dilapidated. But none of this matters very much. No one goes to Caddo Lake for the food or the accommodations. You go because, quite simply, it is the most beautiful lake in Texas.

You go because you can wander alone in a reverie for hours, never encountering another human being, believing you are in the remotest place in the universe.

This can be a dangerous illusion. Caddo Lake is not remote at all. It is threatened by the same factors that endanger inland waters throughout the country: pollution, commerce, and the presence of human beings whose escape into nature depends upon their ability to

mold and shape the environment until it is no longer wild and natural but man-made, with all the problems people bring.

To know Caddo Lake you need patience and a good eye. Fred has both. Over the years, he has attempted to teach me the mysterious system of markers posted on the barks of the cypress trees—signs like "2E" or "5F"—designed to guide boaters through the complicated sloughs and boat lanes. He also attempted, without success, to teach me to distinguish between the various lily pads on the lake: duckweed, spatterdock, water lily, golden club, and

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red

*Dahmer has spent
the last twenty years
exploring Caddo,
but his ties to it date
at least as far back
as 1928 (below).*



yongupin. And one time, spurred by a rumor, we searched in vain for the oldest cypress on the lake, a tree reputed to be more than three hundred years old. Fred pointed out where the floating beer boats were moored during Prohibition. And he took me to the spot where Robert Potter was killed during a feud between rival vigilante groups known as the Regulators and the Moderators in the days of the Texas Republic. Pursued by his enemies, Potter propped his rifle against a tree and leapt into the lake, whereupon William "Pinkey" Rose grabbed the gun and shot Potter as he tried to swim away.

One day last spring Fred and I drove to Mooringsport, just over the Louisiana border, to see the dam that holds back Caddo Lake. It is nothing special to look at: a low concrete wall extending uninterrupted across the waterway. The spillway is 168.5 feet above sea level. No gates or openings pierce the wall, meaning that there is no way to adjust the water level on Caddo Lake—it is always more or less the same. In times of heavy rainfall, the lake rises slightly and the excess water spills over the weir.

Long before the dam existed, a fluke of nature created Caddo Lake. Over thousands of years, a logjam formed on the Red River—a blockage somewhat like a beaver dam, made up of cottonwood trees that toppled from the banks of the river. By the late 1700's this so-called raft had grown to be more than a hundred miles long and filled the riverbed from bank to bank. Bounded by roots, moss, and silt, it seemed almost like solid ground. People walked and rode their horses across. As logs piled up at the head and decayed at the tail, the raft crept upstream, plugging the river. Pent-up water spilled out on either side, creating new lakes that drained and disappeared as the raft moved along. One large break in a bend of the river flooded the Cypress Bayou valley and gave birth to Caddo Lake. Many attempts were made to clear away the raft. In the 1830's Captain Henry Shreve got rid of it with a snag boat that sawed through the logs as it moved upstream. But when he ran out of money, the raft came right back. Not until 1873 did the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers blast it away for good with dynamite. With the raft gone, the water slowly began to drain away, leaving a swamp. When oil was discovered on the Louisiana side, the drillers realized that they couldn't haul their heavy machinery through the sludge. They pressed for a dam that would raise the water level enough to float in their equipment by barge, and in 1914 the dam was built.

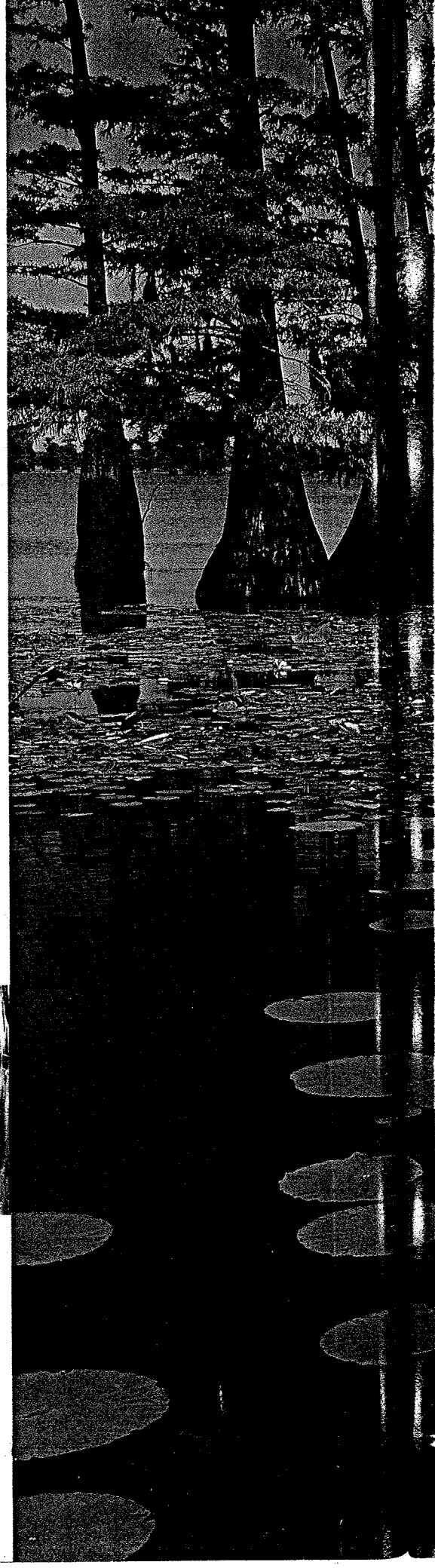
The more I learned about the lake, the more it drew me back. With each trip, the three-hour drive from Dallas to Uncertain seemed to pass more quickly because I knew Caddo Lake was at the end. About three years ago, I noticed a For Sale sign on an old racing-green Karmann Ghia coupe parked under a shed by Fred's house. Fred had bought it in 1971 for his wife, Loucille, but now he had to sell it because of his handicap—it sat so low to the ground that he could no longer climb in and out. The car still had its original paint, its original upholstery, its original engine, even the old AM radio. I still don't know why I bought that car from Fred. Perhaps it was because of the bumper sticker that said "Greater Caddo Lake Association." I rattled around Dallas in it for two years, a reminder of the green lake in the fummy concrete city.

One morning Fred decided to show me the Monster of Caddo Lake. It had been misting for hours, and a vaporous haze was clinging to the water surface. Vegetation closed in behind us as we motored through a slough thick with lilies. Deeper and deeper into the maze we progressed. More than once the motor snagged on the undergrowth, and Fred had to heave the outboard from the water and scrape off the viny loops. At last he gave up on the motor and began to paddle silently through a grove [CONTINUED ON PAGE 188]

*If you
motor through the
slough dense with
lily pads, you'll see
the Monster (below)—
a cypress root shaped
like a ghoulish face.*



FRED BANNER



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The Lake

[CONTINUED FROM PAGE 134] of fluted trunks resembling a floating Temple of Karnak.

Had Fred not pointed it out, I would not have noticed the gnarlish mass—a burl or perhaps an errant root protruding from a cypress tree just above the waterline. From the right angle, you could see the unmistakable contours of a face: two dark and liquid eyes, a bulbous nose, and a sinewy smile. Fred said he had shown the monster only to Loucille, and she had been horrified. “She thinks it’s pornographic,” he said. At first Fred had also thought of it as evil, but gradually he had come to see it as a benevolent creature, to think of it as a friend. We sat for a while, contemplating the face upon the tree. I wasn’t so sure I agreed with Fred, but I didn’t say so. By then, I had already begun to sense that on Caddo Lake, all was not as it seemed.

THE PEOPLE WHO LIVE ON CADDO Lake like to brag that it is the only natural lake in Texas. While it is true that the lake was created by a natural phenomenon, the giant raft, to believe that Caddo Lake is natural today you would have to ignore a lot of evidence to the contrary—the boat lanes that would be impassable were they not regularly dredged, the striped bass that were introduced in the fifties, the oil wells on the Louisiana side. Most of all, you would have to overlook the concrete dam at the foot of the lake, without which Caddo Lake would drain away and revert to a hardwood forest.

Even so, “Keep Caddo Natural” has become the watchword on the lake. You see it on letterheads, on bumper stickers, and on the banner that is tacked to the wall at the monthly meetings of the Greater Caddo Lake Association, an organization dedicated to protecting the lake. The association’s current enemy is the Army Corps of Engineers, which has proposed an eighty-mile barge canal that would link northeast Texas to the Red River at Shreveport. The canal would cut right through the heart of Caddo Lake on the Texas side. All over this down-and-out part of the state, the project (called the Daingerfield Reach, after the town of Daingerfield at the western end of the canal) is heralded as economic salvation. The exception is on Caddo Lake, where the members of the Greater Caddo Lake Association are convinced that barge traffic would ruin the lake. They call the canal “the ditch.”

During the Civil War, Daingerfield was a boomtown, with sawmills, gristmills, foundries, and tanyards that turned out leather for Confederate boots, shoes, and saddles. Today many of its genteel

nineteenth-century brick buildings are empty. Unemployment in Morris County is 15.4 percent—the eighth highest of the state’s 254 counties. In this part of Texas, the agrarian economy died thirty years ago, a victim of foreign competition, rising labor costs, cheaper land in West Texas, and synthetic fibers.

The Daingerfield Reach is one segment of the mammoth Red River Waterway Project approved in 1968 by Congress. Originally the idea was to dig a navigable canal from the Red River north to Shreveport, then along the Twelvemile Bayou through Caddo Lake and up to Lake O’ the Pines. With the lower section of the waterway due to be completed in two years, the Corps is now reexamining the wisdom of constructing the upper stretch.

Economics is the question: Would the project benefit enough people to justify the \$650 million it is expected to cost? In 1989 the Corps queried fifty companies within a fifty-mile radius of the canal route. Twenty-eight said they would be interested in using the canal, with savings of as much as \$28 million a year. The single biggest beneficiary most likely would be Lone Star Steel, a company that makes oil-field casings and tubings. In the early eighties, Lone Star employed six thousand workers. When the price of oil collapsed, the work force shrank to about one thousand. The canal would give the company a tremendous boost. Lone Star could ship about two million tons on the canal each year at an estimated savings of \$2 to \$7 a ton compared with train or truck transport. Canal backers across East Texas are also counting on economic spin-offs: construction jobs, business relocations, tourist dollars. One study optimistically predicted 40,000 new jobs. The city of Jefferson sees the canal as a potential bonanza, with tourist barges, riverboat gambling, and a revival of the glorious steamboat days.

But would the canal harm Caddo Lake? Nearly everyone around the lake insists it will. The sight of barges plowing through the water will be just plain ugly, they say. The wake from the barges will rock smaller boats and destroy the serenity that Caddo Lake is known for. Beyond aesthetics, there is fear of an environmental disaster. A trough through the middle of the lake, even one that is only nine feet deep, could divert flowing water from other areas of the lake, leaving the rest of the lake a swamp. Residents also fear that an accidental barge spill could dump more toxins in the lake. For all these fears, the Corps is trying to come up with answers. Studies won’t be done for another two years. In the meantime, a serious rift has arisen between the boosters and the lake dwellers. “The people on the lake aren’t environmentalists. They don’t want

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the canal interfering with their retirement plans," says Duke DeWare, a Jefferson attorney. "They're crazy," one Caddo Lake resident says of the canal supporters. "They want to build a superhighway to nowhere."

ONCE YOU HAVE BEEN SEDUCED by Caddo Lake, it becomes a picture postcard of the mind, fixed with bewitching images of cypress and coon-tail moss and water hyacinth. For me, there was no single flash of realization that Fred Dahmer's vision of Caddo Lake did not tell the whole story. The awareness came about in a gradual way, through a series of ordinary telephone calls last spring to the district office of the Corps of Engineers in Vicksburg, Mississippi.

I had called to find out the results of the latest testing of the water and sediments in the lake. A Corps hydrologist named Dave Johnson had been taking samples from the lake for about a year. Johnson told me that he had thought the tests would show the presence of PCBs, or traces of oil compounds from the drills on the Louisiana side, or evidence of pesticides used by farmers upstream. The lab analyses revealed none of these. Instead, they indicated extremely high amounts of organic carbons. While there is no way to say with scientific certainty where the carbons come from, Johnson has a strong suspicion that some is from human waste.

If Johnson is right, then the very people who are most intent upon saving the lake may be doing the most damage. There is no sewage treatment plant at Caddo Lake. Practically all of the cabins, restaurants, and businesses use septic tanks to dispose of their wastes. Septic tanks should be emptied every few years, but lots of people don't want to spend the money. "You could smell it—the smell of sewage," said a hydrologist about a lake sample he collected near some homes. "You can look at the color, texture, and odor of the sediments and make assumptions about what it is."

Too many organic carbons are bad for the lake: They act as nutrients for the duckweed and lilies, which choke the lake even as they enhance its beauty. Phosphates, most likely from washing machines and dishwashers, spur the growth of vegetation. It does not help that the western end of the lake is extremely shallow—in some places only a couple of feet deep. Sunlight encourages photosynthesis, so the entire lake has become densely clogged with luxuriant underwater plants. They trap sediments, making the lake even shallower. As the plants decompose, they create more sediment and they use up the oxygen that fish need to survive. Low levels of oxygen have probably been the cause of mass fish kills on Caddo Lake for the past four years. The last one occurred in August. "The water was cov-

ered with fish," said Walter Martin, the owner of Paradise Marine in Uncertain. "You could see them by the thousands. The stench was unbelievable."

POLLUTION IS NOT THE ONLY problem at Caddo Lake. The dam that forms the lake threatens the cypress trees. I learned this one spring afternoon on a boat with Jacques Bagur, a consultant to the Corps. We were in an open clearing, admiring a cluster of cypresses growing out of the water. The trees were maybe forty feet high, with enormously wide buttresses that flared like a dancer's swirling skirt. Jacques guessed they might be 150 or 200 years old. Then he mentioned, almost offhandedly, that he thought the trees were not healthy. They were surrounded by water and looked as though they thrived in that setting, but Jacques knew otherwise. Cypress trees need standing water to germinate but grow best on dry land. Their seed covering is so tough and leathery that it has to be submerged to soften up and release its contents. But seedlings can't withstand prolonged submergence. Cypress trees flourish at the water's edge because of the normal riverine cycles of ebb and flow. Inundate them with water, and they will die.

There is no secret about all this. In 1984 the Corps studied the bald cypresses on Caddo Lake and concluded that the trees were sick. The stands that Jacques and I were admiring probably took root and began to grow when they were actually at the edge of the bayou channel, before the lake existed. They do not grow well in standing water. This is why their buttresses are so wide—to give them stability. This is also why they are relatively short and why their branches are gray and spindly. If you would cut open their trunks, you would probably find that they were hollow. In another fifty years, most of these trees will have toppled over and there will probably not be any cypresses standing in the lake at all—only along the shoreline.

The irony of the dam is that it preserves Caddo Lake, but it also might kill it. Before Caddo Lake existed, floods used to sweep through what was then the Big Cypress Bayou and raise the water level by fifteen feet or more, scouring the channel and washing away the vegetation. Now, because of the dam, the water level is static. None of the sediments get flushed out. Already the channels are so shallow and smothered with vegetation that the boat lanes have to be continually dredged, and boaters can barely stray off the traveled paths without getting tangled in undergrowth. "If you don't do some type of control, the aquatic plants will take over," says Maryetta Smith, a biologist at the Vicksburg Corps office.

But what kind of control? The best solution would be to mimic the cycles of na-

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ture by alternately flooding and emptying the lake. The floods would flush out the sediments; lowering the water level would kill off the vegetation. But if you lower the lake, suddenly the people with lake-side cabins can't get their boats out of their docks. And if you flood it, the same people will have water lapping at their doorsteps. This is the last thing people at Caddo Lake want.

ALTHOUGH HE HAS LIVED NEAR the lake almost all his life, it wasn't until 1970 that Fred Dahmer realized what it meant to him. That summer he and Loucille bought a new Volkswagen van. On June 13 they set out from their home in Marshall on a trip to Missouri with two of their daughters. From Uncertain they drove north into Arkansas and had lunch at a cafe. In the afternoon they came to a roadside park with picnic tables ringing a circular driveway. Restless, Fred hopped out of the van and jumped up and down a few times, then prodded his daughters into jogging around the driveway. The daughters dropped out after a couple of laps, but Fred sprinted around twice more before getting back in the van. He recalls heading uphill on a two-lane road. He did not even see the car coming from the other direction, trying to make a blind pass. At the crest the two cars collided head-on.

Fred never ran again. An infection in his smashed left hip led to an artificial hip joint, which also became infected. Finally, the doctors removed the artificial socket altogether—he keeps it in a brown paper sack beside the phone. The result is that Fred can't put weight on his left leg. He walks only with the help of two crutches with scalloped braces that fit around his forearms. But in an unexpected way, the accident changed his life. "I was self-centered and stingy," he says. "I cared more about money."

He took early retirement and went to live full-time at the lake. For years Loucille insisted on staying at their home in Marshall. ("I hate the lake," she once told me.) Fred got by on TV dinners and canned soup, was elected mayor of Uncertain in 1978, and became a defender of the lake, opposing any project he thought would endanger it. He was against the Ferrell's Bridge Dam (which created Lake O' the Pines), a dam on the Little Cypress Bayou that was never built, Shreveport's failed attempt to operate a drinking-water pumping plant on the eastern shore, and an aborted plan for a hydroelectric plant at the dam. "You have to keep fighting," he says, "or they'll destroy the lake."

Although getting into the boat is a torturous ordeal, Fred still goes out on the lake. He hobbles down to the water with a clumsy, laborious gait, then leans on a

crutch while lowering himself to the edge of the boat. He swings his right leg inside and then reaches down with both hands to lift his left leg over. But when he lays the crutches down, starts the engine, and glides away from shore, his handicap disappears.

Fred has trouble articulating what it is that gives him a special feeling about Caddo Lake. He knows that others more pressed for time do not perceive the lake the way he does. He says of the Corps of Engineers, "They fly overhead in their helicopters and see a complex maze of waterways. They zip along, and the water sprays off the sides of their boat. But they don't really see the lake. They're going too fast."

But does Fred Dahmer really see the lake? He is like a Zen master; what he sees is an idealized internal vision of Caddo Lake. Fred understands something fundamental about nature, about how a human being inhabits and finds meaning in a beautiful place. He does not see that the immediate threat to Caddo Lake may not be the Daingerfield Reach but the shortsightedness of those who live at the water's edge. Without a plan of rescue, the lake will eventually become a bed of muck. What Fred is trying to preserve is less a lake than a museum.

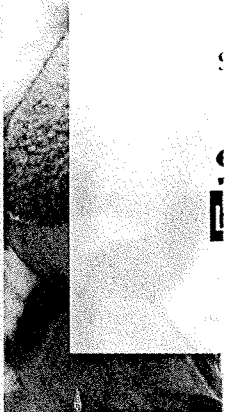
On one of my last trips to Caddo Lake, Fred took me to a place not five minutes from his house, a spot I'd never seen before. Off a main channel, we passed through a line of trees and entered a long, oval-shaped clearing flanked on all sides by cypress. This, Fred said, was his cathedral. What he meant was suddenly apparent: We were within a space shaped like the nave of a Gothic church. An arc of cypress at the far end composed a sort of apse, the rows of trees on either side were the columns of the nave, and the afternoon sun filtering through chinks in the moss was the clerestory light. When we reached the center, Fred cut the engine.

About a decade ago, he said, he had helped found a Lutheran church in Marshall. The church had hired a young minister, then fired him when he began showing up at services with cowboy boots under his robe. Fred quit the church and had not been back since. On the lake, he found a deeper everlastingness. "I believe that anybody who looks at the lake as I do—at the trees up close, the birds and the animals—will see the lake as I do," he said. "You can commune with any god or deity or entity that rules this universe." But how many more generations will be able to worship at Caddo Lake? I wondered, but I didn't ask. Inside the cypress chamber, now deep in evening shadow, Fred's voice echoed as though we were surrounded by stone. ♣

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