

BY RANDY MALLORY

# UNCERTAIN

THE LATE SAMMY VAUGHN USED TO SAY OF HIS CURIOUSLY NAMED HOMETOWN, “UNCERTAIN IS not the end of the world, but you can see it right over there.” With those words, the wildcatter and antique-car collector expressed an impression that overcomes everyone who enters this watery world.

INDEED, this hamlet perched at backwaters’ edge on Caddo Lake provides a picture-window view of a wild, even eerie, wetland, seemingly lost in space and time.

Groves of bald cypress trees—often 50 feet tall and up to 200 years old—lord over the swampy scene. Long gray beards of Spanish moss drape the trees in a mysterious and otherworldly way. At their protruding knees in summer, lush carpets of green—pads of water lilies, spatterdock, and American lotus, dotted with flowers of yellow and white—comprise a floating forest floor. Autumn’s metamorphosis paints the picture a rich rusty brown. And in the stillness of dawn, great blue herons take flight, the air under their wings the only sound you hear. Clearly, Uncertain’s charm lies in its remoteness.

“One way in, one way out.” That’s how mayor Betty Holder puts it, as she serves up picnic supplies, barbecue, and tourist information at her Caddo Grocery. “But you’d be amazed how many people from all over the world find us.”

No surprise, really, considering that Caddo Lake—Uncertain’s veritable front yard—became a “Wetland of International Importance” in 1993, one of only a dozen or so U.S. sites so designated by the Ramsar Convention, an intergovernmental treaty. The lake draws hundreds of naturalists, anglers, artists, birdwatchers, and plain porch-sitters here each year.

Some old-timers say that a massive earthquake centered around New Madrid, Missouri, formed Caddo Lake (named for the Caddo Indian Confederation living in northeast Texas) in 1811. Not so, say Louisiana historian Jacques Bagur and longtime Uncertain resident and author Fred Dahmer.

The truth, according to Jacques and Fred, goes like this: Around 1800, a huge logjam called the Great Raft clogged the Red River at Shreveport, Louisiana. Heavy rains filled the Red and burst its soft banks a few miles east of present-day Caddo Lake, sending a torrent of water into the valley of Big Cypress Bayou, the lake’s main tributary. The resulting flood transformed lowland forests into a maze of swamps, ponds, and open water, according to recent research by Bagur. “A Caddo legend says that a chief had a vision of an impending flood and moved his tribe to higher ground,” says Fred, whose book, *Caddo Was...*, recalls the area’s colorful past.

“This [legend of a flood] accurately describes what would have occurred.”

Gradually, water-loving cypress trees took over and gave the wetland its primeval look. The spooky appearance has drawn moviemakers to Caddo at least 16 times to shoot films such as *The Long Hot Summer*, *The Legend of Boggy Creek*, and *Soggy Bottom USA*, as well as five Disney films.



[ABOVE] Like a ghost-bird materialized from lake-borne mists, a great egret waits patiently at Caddo Lake, surely one of the world’s most mysterious and beautiful bodies of water. Uncertain, the village that serves as portal to the lake, seems appropriately named in this strange water-world.

[FACING PAGE] In the fall, Caddo’s moss-draped cypresses seem to rust in the moisture, while its quiet waters take on a reflective mood.

## Mossy Gateway to Caddo Lake







The *Graceful Ghost*, a replicated 1890s steam paddlewheeler, plies Caddo's tunnel-like boat roads on 90-minute tours nine months out of the year. In the mood for shivers up your spine? Captains Lexie Palmore and Jim McMillen sometimes take groups out for tours 'neath the full moon.

AS THE largest naturally-formed lake in Texas, Caddo has nurtured abundant wildlife for almost two centuries, which, in turn, has attracted numerous hunters and anglers. Campers, too, have headed to Caddo Lake State Park, built on Big Cypress Bayou by the Civilian Conservation Corps in the early Thirties.

Increasingly, Caddo's mystique and Uncertain's loose and laid-back ways also attract eco-tourists and others ready for an escape from city life. They're discovering what locals and loyal repeat visitors have known for generations. Wind your way through pine uplands, past the state park, to the end of the road, and you, too, can enter the eerie and unforgettable water-world of Uncertain, the mossy gateway to Caddo Lake.

Here, private docks dot solitary sloughs and cypress brakes around town, where almost half the houses serve as getaways for out-of-town owners. Interspersed along several miles of shoreline, however, a growing number of bed and breakfasts, boat-tour operators, restaurants, and marinas eagerly show nature-lovers, anglers, and sightseers how to enjoy the Uncertain life.

Step one: Slow down and relax.

"Most people come here for peace and quiet," says Pete Grant, who opened Caddo Cottage, Uncertain's first bed and breakfast, in the mid-Eighties. In recent years, a dozen or so others have appeared, mostly on the waterfront.

"Many of our guests come from big cities, especially Dallas," says Lady Margaret Redd, who operates Cypress Moon Cottage with her husband, True, an internationally known photographer who hosts workshops here. "They come stressed out and leave relaxed."

"A lot of people have heard about Uncertain but are just now coming here," notes Dottie Russell, who owns Spatterdock Guest House and Duckweed Guest Cottage (and also fashions gourds into art). "Some are anglers who fished Caddo, then came back with their families to stay and

**Fred Dahmer "knows more than anybody else alive" about Caddo Lake, says popular Houston columnist Leon Hale. A longtime resident of Uncertain, Fred writes in his book, *Caddo Was...*, about the lake's intriguing history, including its one-time appeal to pearl-divers and oil-drillers.**

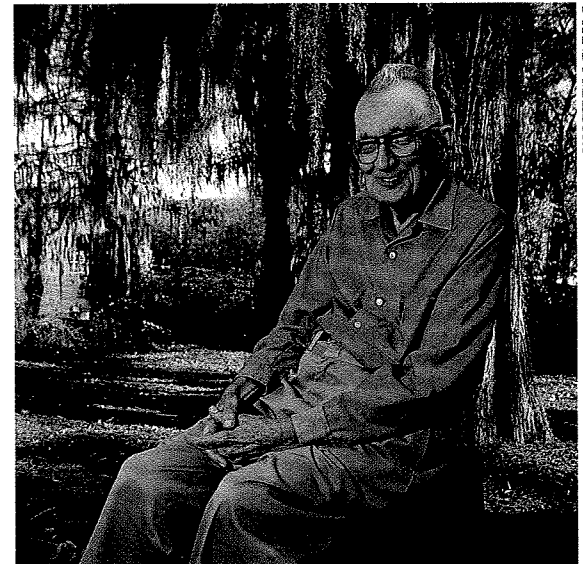
visit, now that we have so many B&Bs. Everyone gets intrigued by the place."

Walk or drive Uncertain's cypress-dotted lanes, and you'll see why.

Get an early start over at Crip's Camp, a fishing marina from the Forties, where anglers enjoy hearty breakfasts before hitting the water at daybreak. Wandering up Goose Prairie Drive from Crip's, you'll arrive at Joann Edmiston's Great Blue Heron Gift Shop, which offers pen-and-ink drawings, woodcarvings, and pressed-wildflower light-catchers... as well as "Magic Skin Oil," a combo bug repellent and skin soother.

Mosey across the street from the gift shop to Johnson's Ranch, a Thirties-era fishing camp. Pull up a chair on the covered pier, and ask proprietor Bob Curtis where the fish are biting—or how he's managed to reach age 88. "Being here on Caddo's the reason I've lived so long," Bob says plainly of his 47-year tenure on the lake. "I like the low stress level. Besides, you meet lots of different people, and they're always in a good mood. I'm the only grumpy fellow around," he says with a laugh. Don't forget to ask him about the water taxis that carried thirsty patrons just after Prohibition from Uncertain ("dry" at the time) to beer boats in "wet" Marion County just across the way.

Meander along Uncertain's shoreline, and cross (by the bridge on Bois d'Arc Lane) onto Taylor Island. There, Mossy



WIND YOUR WAY through pine uplands, past the state park, to the end of the road, and you, too, can enter the eerie and unforgettable water-world of Uncertain....

Brake Gallery showcases regional talent, including works by local artist Howard Howard and gallery owner JoAnne Imhof and her son Scott. Watercolors, oils, hand-pulled prints, and photographs—plus pottery, basketry, wood-carvings, and intricate gourd art—reflect moody images of Caddo. Chances are you'll find artists busy honing their skills at one of Mossy Brake's many workshops.

The Uncertain life suggests an afternoon nap back at the B&B or a contem-

plative stroll beside some cypress swamp. But if your citified pace still makes you a bit antsy, locals will forgive you for jaunting to nearby Jefferson or Marshall for sightseeing and shopping. Coming or going, drop by M&M Doll House, where Winifred "Pud" Harper shows off her collection of 500 porcelain and vinyl dolls (200 on display at a time). No charge, just friendly talk.

Cap your lazy day at a cozy waterfront eatery—such as Big Pines Lodge (a local tradition since 1952) or Waterfront

Restaurant, both on Big Cypress Bayou. Or try Bayou Landing Restaurant on the lake. All three offer Caddo's culinary coup—succulent fried catfish with all the trimmings—plus a grand view of boaters gliding by.

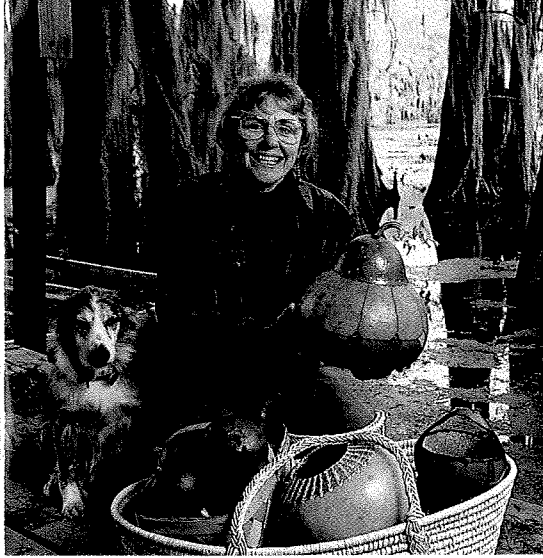
Though landlubbers can enjoy Uncertain from the shore, "You have to get on the water to really experience Caddo," says David Applebaum, operator of Mystique Tours.

Caddo Lake officially begins its 32,700 acres east of Texas 43 where it

**Members of an ancient family that dominated prehistoric landscapes, bald cypresses in Blind Slough bare their knobby knees. Some scientists believe the knees bring air to the roots and serve as anchors in the swampy soil.**

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**When she's not hosting guests at her two bed and breakfasts on the lake's Taylor Island, Dottie Russell creates artwork from gourds.**

crosses Big Cypress Bayou. Outfitters and tour operators make it easy to explore Caddo's three faces—river, delta swamp, and open lake. You can even rent a boat or canoe and go on your own. But heed this warning: Get a lake map, and closely follow the 42 miles of marked "boat roads." Otherwise, you might get lost in Red Belly, Government Ditch, Hog Wallow, or Whangdoodle Pass. Even if you do, no need to worry (unless you're lost at night), since some friendly local will come by sooner or later and direct you home.

Take it slow in a canoe from Caddo Canoe Rentals, located at the state park. Explore Big Cypress Bayou, as well as sloughs and swampy ponds that meander off its main channel.

Pick up steam with a nostalgic, narrated trek on the *Graceful Ghost*, a paddlewheeler that crosses part of the 7,500-acre Caddo Lake Wildlife Management Area, which surrounds much of Uncertain. The 50-foot vessel slips quietly through winding waterways to the whisper of steam from its wood-burning engine and the soft churning of the paddlewheel. Husband-and-wife team Lexie Palmore (the most extensively licensed woman pilot and master on America's inland waterways) and Jim McMillen (a licensed master and shipwright) take turns piloting the replica 1890s steam packet.

Slow-moving boats, like canoes or the *Graceful Ghost*, allow birders to view a

dizzying array of bird species. "Because Caddo is an old and large lake, historical patterns have been established for migrating waterfowl and nesting birds," says Dorothy Metzler, an avid birder from Longview who has identified more than 200 species here, including many endangered and threatened ones.

If you're eager to see all three of Caddo's teeming ecosystems, hop aboard one of several motorized boat tours. "When people get out on Caddo, they realize what a timeless feeling it has," says Rod Hines, owner of Shady Glade, a marina, café, and motel operated by Rod's family for 55 years. The creature most sightseers want to see, says Rod, is the stealthy king of Caddo's swamps—the alligator.

"You can see alligators if you know exactly where to go," cautions Caddo resident Harold Culver, "but they're shy and like to stay away from people."

On any given day, however, most boaters putter through the lake's shallow waters in pursuit of trophy-size bass, crappie, and sunfish. With a 16-pound Florida largemouth bass holding the lake record, Uncertain offers bass tournaments throughout the year.

"Because of the trees in the water, you can get into protected areas even on windy days," says Evans "Mann" Perry, who has worked as a guide here for 50 years. Adds fellow guide Billy Carter, "We're getting more families fishing together. Just about anybody can catch a fish here."

Fishing was good at Caddo around the turn of the century, too. In 1906, sportsmen from Dallas and Marshall started the Dallas Caddo Club at Uncertain, one of the state's oldest continuously operating hunting and fishing clubs. "Members would take the train to Marshall, then come to Caddo by wagon, and later by car," explains third-generation club caretaker Karl Campbell.

In 1908, 52 families from Rockwall County followed Dallas' lead and built the Rockwall Caddo Club on Taylor Island. Each family drew straws for its annual week at the lake house, which is essentially a large, screened porch with bedrooms and storage. "We've left it pretty much the same," says Sam Canup, a club member and resident of Uncertain whose family was among the original 52. "We added electricity and plumbing and tried air conditioning, but we took it out, because it just didn't feel right."

**The Rockwall Caddo Club, one of the last of many private hunting and fishing camps that once dotted Caddo Lake's shores, remains much as it did when it was built in 1908 by 52 families from Rockwall County.**



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That feel of heritage hangs over all of Uncertain as thickly as the moss on the cypress trees.

Once claimed by both Spain and France, the area became a lawless Neutral Ground, unsurveyed territory that lay between the Texas Republic and the United States. After statehood in 1845, officials restored order and set the boundary down the middle of the lake—half in Texas, half in Louisiana.

During the mid- to late 1800s, stern-wheeled steamboats plied Caddo's waters seasonally via the Mississippi and Red rivers. Trade turned Port Caddo (site of today's state park) into a cotton-shipping port and built its more famous neighbor, Jefferson, into a boomtown. In the 1870s, the invention of dynamite allowed the federal government to get rid of the Great Raft, an action that pulled the plug on Caddo Lake and its shipping business. By 1900, the lake had all but disappeared.

Pressure from Jefferson politicians, as well as the 1911 discovery of oil under Caddo Lake (site of some of the earliest offshore drilling in Texas), resulted in the construction of an earthen weir dam at Mooringsport, Louisiana, in 1914. That dam (rebuilt in 1970), along with the upstream dam at Lake O' The Pines, still moderates Caddo's fluctuating water level.

**W**HILE research has nailed down the lake's origins and history, the source of Uncertain's unusual name remains... well... uncertain.

One story tags the name to the unpredictable water levels and difficult currents that made steamboat travel uncertain. Another says that unclaimed steamer freight was returned to New Orleans marked "uncertain." Still another account claims that locals applying for a town charter wrote "uncertain" on the paperwork, because they hadn't settled on a name.

*The New Handbook of Texas* offers two more explanations: The place came to be known as Uncertain Landing because steamboat captains had trouble mooring their vessels. Or, try this one: Before the U.S. and Republic of Texas boundaries

were clearly established, local residents' nationality remained uncertain.

Uncertain historian Fred Dahmer offers yet another version: In the early 1900s, a party of fishermen met a woodsman on horseback at the edge of a Caddo swamp. "Can we get through here?" they asked. Eyeing their wagon, the stranger responded, "That'd be quite uncertain." Back home, the anglers joked about fishing at Camp Uncertain.

Whatever the explanation, folks in Uncertain don't fret over their tiny town's arguable appellation... they fig-

ure it just adds to the mystique. In fact, when you stand on the south shore of Caddo Lake at Uncertain and gaze across the teeming maze of waterways and mossy brakes, names hardly matter. Thoughts turn to timeless topics, such as the rare beauty of wild places. And you wonder if wildcatter Sammy Vaughn was right after all: Uncertain may not be the end of the world, but you can sure see it right over there. ★

RANDY MALLORY wrote about Pig Stands and Burma-Shave signs in last month's special issue on nostalgia.



Once Caddo's timeless feel has seeped into your bones, you might want to try some fly-fishing by the dawn's early light.