

# Caddo Lake Is: (pick one)

**1. Natural                      2. Unnatural                      3. Supernatural**

by Jacques Bagur

Is Caddo Lake natural? The short answer is no. The long answer is more interesting.

The short answer is based on the fact that the lake would not exist without the dam at its foot. Technically, it is a reservoir. The dam was built in 1971 by the Corps of Engineers to replace the original 1914 dam built by the Corps. If the 1914 dam had not been built, Caddo Lake would have disappeared by World War II. Ironically, the 1914 dam was built at the instigation of navigation interests in Jefferson who wished to maintain the prospect of commercial boat traffic during a period when there was strong public support for draining the lake and converting its bed into a cotton field. Thus, Caddo Lake is a reservoir that was created for commercial navigation using public funds. That would seem to make it the antithesis of the natural.

Nevertheless, Caddo Lake was created naturally. It was one of the many lakes that was created along the Red River by the actions of the Great Raft, a log jam that moved upstream, forcing the waters of the Red to divert to the east and west into depressions that became lakes. These lakes eventually disappeared as the raft left them behind or as a result of its removal in 1873. Many were

recreated by dams. When the dam was built in 1914, Caddo Lake was quite low and on the verge of disappearance because of the removal of the raft and the closure by levees of the channels that fed the lake with Red River water. Nevertheless, it was still in existence. It may have been the only raft-formed lake that maintained a continuous existence; and in this might lie its uniqueness.

Caddo Lake is a natural lake that was saved from extinction by transforming it into a reservoir. An attempt has been made to encompass this duality by designating Caddo Lake a "naturally formed reservoir." I prefer the oxymoron "natural reservoir," since it sharpens the duality contained in the equally nonsensical phrase "naturally formed reservoir." The lake is best described as "naturally formed, artificially maintained;" but this should not be taken to mean that the natural lake has been artificially preserved. What was saved by the 1914 dam was the lake, which required the sacrifice of its naturalness. To speak of it as a natural lake is incorrect. To speak of it as a reservoir is correct, for it owes its existence to the dam at its foot. This is easily demonstrated by conceptualizing the removal of the dam, which would cause the lake to disappear. A natural lake does not

disappear with the removal of an artificial structure.

Whether Caddo Lake was ever a natural lake is questionable because it is questionable that it was ever a lake. Although we use the term loosely to refer to whatever looks to us like a lake, there are serious scientific and legal problems connected with such designations. On the scientific side, there are controversies about whether various coastal waterbodies are lakes or estuaries. On the legal side, Caddo Lake was an issue when oil began to be discovered beneath its waters. Various parties to the disputes over ownership argued that Caddo Lake was not a lake in the legal sense of the term, but rather a "mere temporary body of water" that owed its contingent existence to the Great Raft.

This issue was never resolved and is now moot. However, it points to a quality of the lake that was understood by everyone in the 1800s; that the lake would not last forever because the raft would eventually move to a point upstream on the Red River where it would no longer exercise an influence on the area west of Shreveport. When this would have happened cannot be determined with any precision because of the complexity of the hydrologic situation; but the dynamics of the raft suggest the present as a distinct possibility for when Caddo Lake might have disappeared naturally. It has been argued that the 1914 dam would not have been necessary if nature had been left alone and the raft had not been removed in 1873. This is certainly true; but what would be the position of the defenders of nature if the lake was threatened in the present with extinction by natural processes?

The lake that exists today is quite different than the natural lake that existed in the 1800s. The primary difference is in the hydrologic regime. During the 1800s, water levels on the lake were determined primarily by water levels on the Red, which changed dramatically on a seasonal basis. Spring highs and summer lows were much more pronounced, and the lake often became a mudhole in the summer. Drying during the summer prohibited the capture of the lake by aquatic vegetation; but the violent water-level fluctuations undermined the root sys-

tems of the cypress trees that came into existence with the lake, causing many of them to topple over.

The dam at the foot of the lake has provided a much more stable water regime, which is conducive to recreational usage and of much greater appeal to residents. This regime also created most of the cypress trees on the lake, which for many constitute its distinctive beauty. However, a stable water regime prohibits cypress regeneration and has led to the proliferation of aquatic vegetation, which threatens to choke the lake. The natural conditions of the 1800s were more healthy from a biological perspective and could be recreated to some extent by establishing a draw-down structure in the dam. Because the lake is becoming increasingly eutrophic, this issue will eventually be addressed and will produce conflicts among those who

care for the lake. This will not be a conflict between naturalists and those who desire to control the lake. The lake is already controlled, and the decision will relate to the form in which this control will be exercised.

Caddo Lake is cherished not because it is natural, but because it is unnatural. For most people, the lake generates feelings of elation, of peace and tranquility, and of fear and trembling. These are not experiences that take place in the natural world of space and time that is studied by science. They are occasions when time stops, the world falls away, and we are reminded that although we are creatures of the world, we are also participants in another. This is a gift given to us from elsewhere through the mysterious complex of water, trees, and vegetation that we call Caddo Lake, which should be designated the most unnatural lake in Texas.

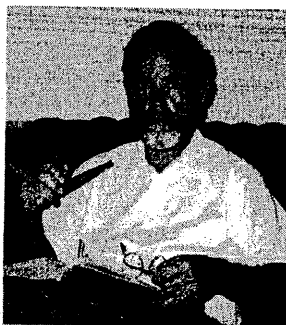
## About the author . . . . .

Jacques Bagur is a professional researcher living in Baton Rouge. He first came to Jefferson in 1990 to conduct a public involvement program for the Corps of Engineers in connection with the Shreveport to Daingerfield Study and began writing articles on the history of the area for the study newsletter.

He has been a regular contributor to "The Jeffersonian" since 1993 and has participated in archeological investigations at Potter's Point, Jim's Bayou, and Stormy Point on Caddo Lake. He was also responsible for locating the remnants of the wreck, the "Mittie Stephens."

From 1993 through 1996, he prepared a comprehensive history of navigation from Shreveport through Caddo Lake to Jefferson for the Cypress Valley Navigation District. This history deals with navigation-

related events from 1800 through the present and provides detailed coverage of steamboat activities at all the ports and landings, including Caddo Lake. The manuscript is presently being considered for publication by university presses in Texas and Louisiana.



Research historian Jacques Bagur.



Natural, unnatural or supernatural, real or surreal, more truth than legend? The final answer may lie in the eyes of the beholder as Caddo Lake casts its spell on each individual.

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