

Drift off to



Shane Bevel/News Messenger

CADDO LAKE can be explored solo in pirogues (left) or by canoe in pairs (right). These boats were rented from Pine Needle Lodge on the north side of the lake.

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By KARLA DeLUCA
Marshall News Messenger

High gasoline prices needn't put the damper on vacation plans this summer.

With one of the state's most unique lakes within less than a half-hour's drive from Marshall, this summer is the perfect time to explore Caddo.

With its maze of Spanish moss-draped cypress trees, quiet lagoons, water lilies and exotic water birds, it is a strange and beguiling world, one markedly different from the world that exists just past its shores.

It is a world best explored by boat.

No boat? No problem. There are several locations on the lake that offer a variety of canoes, kayaks, boats and boat tours for non boat-owners.

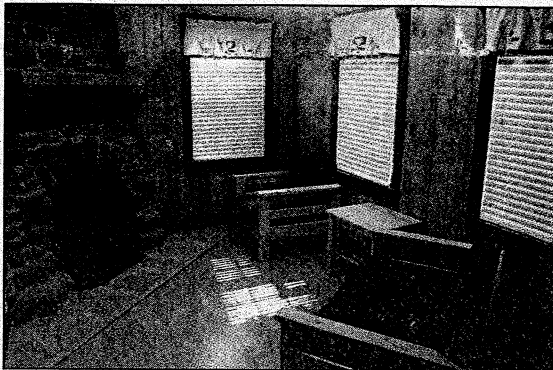
Canoe rentals are available at three locations, Caddo Canoe Rental in the Caddo Lake State Park, Pine Needle Lodge off FM 805 and Johnson's Ranch in Uncertain.

Avid canoeers Barry and Ann Bennick, owners of Pine Needle Lodge, gave up high-pressure jobs as real estate brokers to open the Lodge after having been charmed by the lake on a trip with the Houston Canoe Club.

There were not many canoeists in the area at the time, Bennick recalled, but Caddo Lake is now a frequent destination for canoe clubs from San Antonio, Austin and Beaumont.

"I'd like to think we had a part in developing that," he said.

Canoes offer a unique way to experience the beauty and mystique of Caddo Lake



Shane Bevel/News Messenger

THE CABINS at the Caddo Lake State Park were originally built by the Civilian Conservation Corp. The cabins have been totally remodeled and the only interior part that remains original are the fireplaces and mantles.

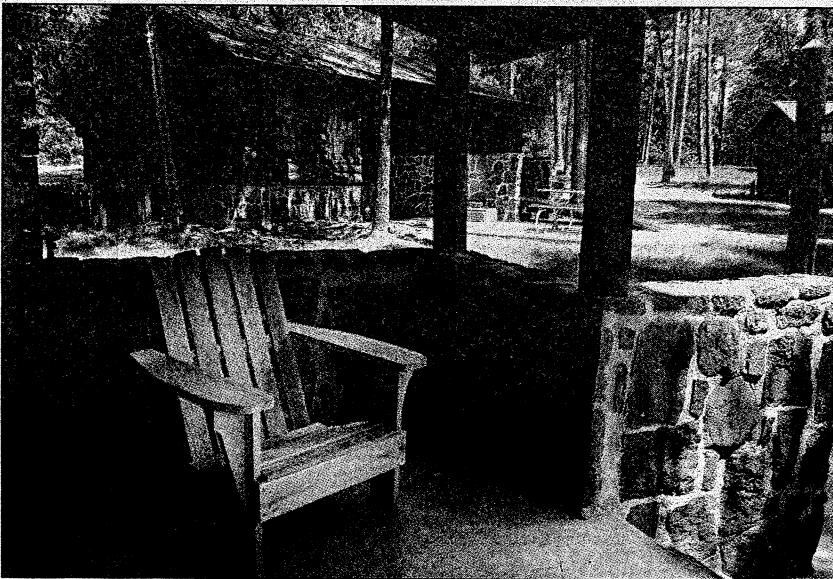
Canoeing is not only a business, but a passion for the Bennicks, and they share that enthusiasm with every rental.

Paddles are not just handed out. Canoeists are measured and issued paddles suited to their height. The Bennicks also provide bent-shaft paddles when possible, which makes paddling easier.

The rental fleet includes kayaks

and several wooden solo pirogues for skilled paddlers. The Bennicks also rent camping equipment for those who don't mind roughing it on some of Caddo Lake's islands, a popular destination. Those who like amenities such as running water and air-conditioning can find accommodations at the lodge.

Canoe rentals also come with a detailed trail map, and maps are



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THE CABINS at Caddo Lake State Park are now available to the public on the weekend, and by the first part of June they will be available on weekdays.

also provided to those who wish to launch their own canoes from the lodge. Available for purchase are the "latest and best" Caddo Lake map available, Bennick says, a multi-color, water-resistant map with Global Positioning System Grid.

Good maps are a must for those negotiating Caddo Lake's maze of lagoons and boat roads.

Goat Island, a popular destination for picnicking and camping, is a 2 1/2 mile long island of varying widths, and "quite a tangled maze," Bennick said.

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Boat and Canoe Rentals

■ **Caddo Canoe Rental:** Caddo Lake State Park 545 FM 2198, Karmack (903) 679-3743. Canoes, \$10 per hour, \$20 for 4 hours, \$25 per day. Boat tours, \$10 adult, \$8 students and senior citizens, \$7 children, free under age 5. Open every day except Wednesday. Lifevests and paddles provided. Accommodations available at state park. Ice, drinks, snacks, etc. available.

■ **Pine Needle Lodge:** Rt. 3 Box 447, Jefferson (903) 665-2911. Open every day. Canoes, paddles, lifevests. No hourly rate. \$25 per day or \$35 for two days. Includes paddles, lifevest, map and instruction on canoeing. Accommodations at lodge available, and camping equipment for primitive camping on Caddo's islands available for rental. Pine Needle Lodge: Take Texas 43 toward Atlanta. Three miles past the Big Cypress Bayou bridge, turn right on FM 805 (Carter's Lake Road) the road dead ends, then follow signs to the lodge. www.pineneedlelodge.com

■ **Johnson's Ranch:** 5131 E. Cypress Dr., Uncertain; (903) 789-3213. Open every day. Rents canoes and paddleboats, no motors. Rates are \$15 for canoes, \$10 for paddleboats. Fishing guides (with motorboats) are available. Sells bait, drinks, groceries.

■ **Crip's Camp:** Goose Prairie Drive, Uncertain. (903) 789-3233. Open every day. Rents 16-foot flat-bottom aluminum boats with 8 horsepower motors. \$65 per day plus tax. No reservations, with exception of guests at the camp. First come, first serve. Accommodations available.

■ **Caddo Grocery and Boat Tours:** 312 Cypress Dr., Uncertain; (903) 789-3495. Open every day. Narrated lake tours lasting 1 1/2 to two hours. Three boats which accommodate 13 people. \$15 per adult, \$10 for children 12 and under. Call ahead or walk in.

■ **Caddo Lake State Park:** 545 FM 2198, Karmack (903) 679-3351. Camping fees vary, and there is an entrance fee. For reservations call 512/389-8900. For more details, call the park or Park Information at 1-800-792-1112. Rental rates, reservation information and map is available from the park's website at www.tpwd.state.tx.us.

Caddo Lake offers a unique getaway

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Reservations aren't necessary, but it's a good idea to call ahead, Bennick said.

"We live here, so we're open almost all the time, but occasionally we go buy groceries."

David Lomax, owner of Caddo Canoe Rental in Caddo Lake State Park, agrees with the need for a good map, which he also sells and has displayed at the rental site.

"I came here 23 years ago, and in all that time, I've never had to go out and look for anybody," he said.

Lomax provides instruction, paddles and lifevests to those renting canoes, available every day except Wednesday.

"We get a lot of people coming in the morning, renting a canoe and taking an ice chest with them," Lomax said. "They can drift around all day."

Canoes can accommodate as many as two adults and two small children or three adults, he said.

Lomax also offers boat tours on a fully-covered 24-foot pontoon boat, for those who would prefer to let someone else do the navigating. The 10-mile round trip tour takes about an hour and 15 minutes, and it is best to call for a schedule.

Located in the state park, hiking and camping are also available, as are accommodations in the park's newly-renovated cabins.

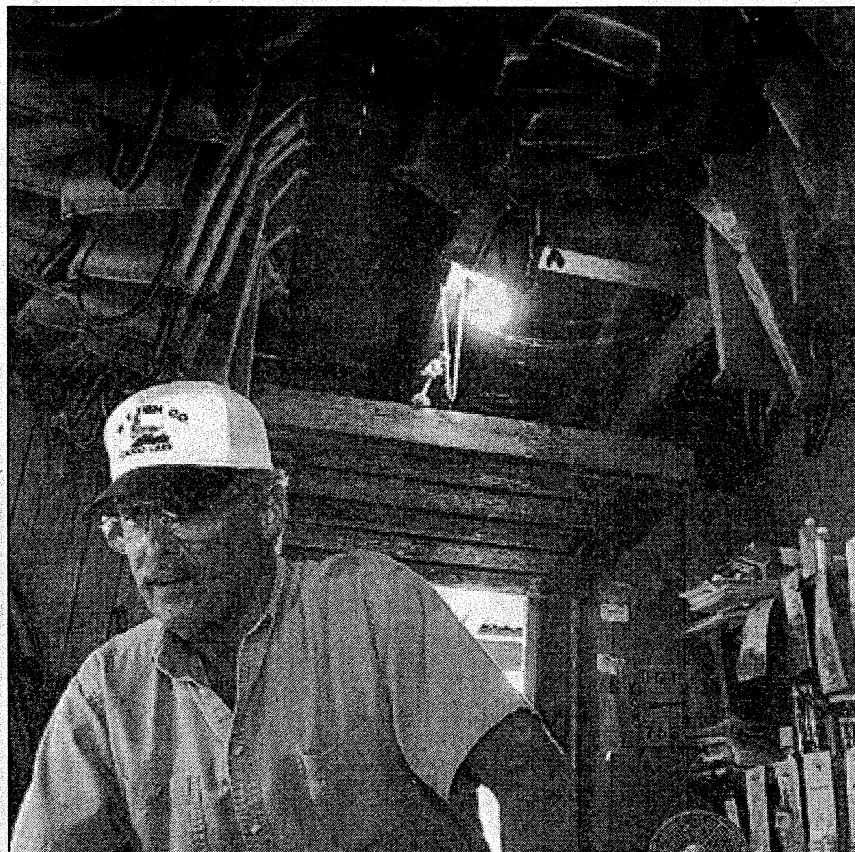
Built in the 1930's by the Civilian Conservation Corps, the cabins are now available only on weekends, but will be available during the week as well after Memorial Day, according to Todd Dickinson, park manager.

The interiors of the nine cabins have been totally replaced, and offer central heat and air, kitchens and gas-log fireplaces in all but the two-person cabins.

"The only thing remaining inside are the stone fireplace and mantels," Dickinson said. "For the most part, the outside has remained the original timber and rock skirting."

The entire park has undergone renovation during the past few years, Dickinson said, and is ongoing.

The park offers 20 sites for tents only, 20 multi-use areas, 8 screened shelter sites with water and electric and 8 full hookup sites for RVs. There is a public restroom facility near the canoe rental site and another restroom facility with showers.



Shane Bevel/News Messenger

DAVID LOMAX rents canoes and leads guided boat trips on Caddo Lake. Six days a week (closed Wednesday) David can be found in his canoe shack in the state park.

Canoes are also available for rental at Johnson's Ranch, located a little farther down FM 2198 in the city of Uncertain.

The marina is open from "daylight to dark" seven days a week, said owner Bob Curtis, and rents canoes and boats that can be paddled, but without motors. Fishing guides, who do have boats and motors, are also available.

Nearby Crip's Camp rents 16-foot aluminum flat-bottom boats with eight horsepower motors for \$65 per day, plus tax, and the hours are convenient.

"We don't ever close," says owner Gary Kempf, who runs the fishing camp with his wife Kelly.

"We don't take reservations," Kempf says. "It's first come, first serve, unless you're staying here at the camp."

Caddo Grocery, also located in Uncertain, doesn't rent boats, but does offer boat tours.

Uncertain Mayor Betty Holder and her husband Robin

have three boats that accommodate 13 persons available for tours every day of the week.

The tours, lasting 1 1/2 to 2 hours each, are narrated, providing the lake's history, and photo opportunities, Ms. Holder said.

The Holders take "walk-in" passengers, but "it's nice to call ahead," she said. "If we know they're coming, we can have a boat available when they get here."

Out on the water, boaters maybe able to catch a rare glimpse of an alligator basking on shore in a quiet, isolated lagoon. More likely they will see the numerous other wildlife, beaver, nutria, mink, white-tailed deer.

Egrets and herons are a common sight on the lake, as well as many variety of ducks. In spring and summer birding enthusiasts may hear a chorus of prothonotary and yellow-throated warblers along the maze of tree-lined canals.

An angler's delight, the lake contains 71 species of fish. It is especially good for crappie and

large-mouth and white bass.