

Quite the wonder — natural or not

Rich history, diversity and lore reflected in northeast Texas waters

Caddo Lake commands a deserved spot in Texas' rich mythology and pride of place.

No inland waterway in Texas holds a higher diversity of native aquatic life. More than 90 species of fish have been documented as native to the lake and associated waters; some of them, such as chain pickerel, are found almost nowhere else in the state.

More than 20 species of mussels live in the lake and adjacent wetlands, with some found nowhere else in Texas.

More than 40 species native to the lake and its wetlands are threatened or endangered.

Along with noting Caddo's otherworldly beauty and amazing biodiversity, proud Texans will often recite some of the amazing history that has occurred on the lake's waters and banks. Some of it's even true.

Legends of the lake

The lake on the Texas-Louisiana border was the site of the nation's first "offshore" oil production. In 1911, a well was punched through the bottom of Caddo Lake and produced more than 400 barrels a day.

Claudia Alta Taylor, known to the world as "Lady Bird" Johnson through her marriage to President Lyndon Johnson, was born in the town of Karnack on Caddo's shore. And, the story goes, her deep love of the natural world and her resulting efforts in its behalf were triggered by the impression Caddo Lake made on the young Claudia.

Too, there's the history of



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Most geologists and hydrologists say that 200 to 400 years ago, something happened to cause water to flood a low-lying basin and form Caddo Lake. In the early 1800s, it was much larger and deeper than the lake that exists today.

steamboat travel on the lake and Big Cypress Bayou, the steamship port of Jefferson, outlaws, the Regulator-Moderator War and plenty of ghosts.

But one of the most commonly repeated "facts" about Caddo Lake — "It's the only natural lake in Texas" — is myth.

The state holds dozens of natural lakes, some covering hundreds of acres, scattered from the playas of the Panhandle to the oxbows in East Texas river bottoms and the resacas of South Texas.

And, truth is, Caddo's not even a "natural" lake — at least not in its current incarnation. But it was until this century.

For at least a couple of thou-

sand years, the area now covered by Caddo Lake was a low-lying reach of swamp and small natural lakes veined by Big Cypress Creek and other waterways.

Natural flood

Geologists and hydrologists are not certain about the exact timing, but sometime in the past thousand years — some say as long ago as 1100 A.D., but most say 200 to 400 years ago — something happened to cause water to flood the low-lying basin and form Caddo Lake.

The generally accepted theory is that a massive logjam on the Red River (into which Big Cypress Creek flows) created a

natural dam that caused water to back up behind it and flood the low-lying area.

This "Great Red River Raft" — which obstructed more than 70 miles of the Mississippi River tributary — and Caddo Lake were noted by the first explorers of European heritage to visit the area.

The Caddo Lake that existed when pioneers moved into northeast Texas in the early 1800s was much larger and deeper than the one existing today.

In 1874, after more than 40 years of working in fits and starts, the entire Red River Raft was removed and backed-up waters, including much of what had been Caddo Lake, drained.



TOM SETZER/Staff Artist

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In the wake of the raft removal, Caddo Lake was too shallow for steamboats. What remained of the lake was mostly a series of shallow, swampy waters.

A time for change

In the early 1900s, the search for oil brought changes to the diminished lake. A well drilled over a patch of Caddo Lake — the first over-water oil well in the nation — hit pay dirt, triggering an oil-exploration boom in the area.

To make more of the swampy country accessible to oil drillers using barges, a dam was thrown across Big Cypress Bayou near Mooringsport, La., in 1914. The resulting reservoir, which covers about 25,000 surface acres, is the latest manifestation of Caddo Lake.

Between 1968 and 1971, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers modified the 1914 dam. The dam uses an outlet weir system rather than the gate system seen on most modern dams, limiting reservoir managers' ability to manipulate Caddo's water levels.

The water level of today's Caddo Lake is about 10 feet lower than it was before removal of the Red River Raft, and the lake is appreciably smaller in

surface area.

But while the ancient lake can no longer claim to be wholly "natural," and certainly faces serious threats from invasive plants, Caddo continues to function as the core of Texas' most ecologically diverse freshwater system. It stands as a soul-stirring natural and cultural icon.

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