

REFUGE OF HISTORY

Historians hope not to lose the history of Longhorn plant

By GAIL K BEIL
News Messenger

What remains of the old armament plant on the 8,500 acres owned by the federal government and managed by the Army for the past 50 years will be a problem.

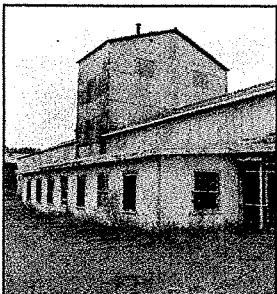
Not just because it is growing more dilapidated as each week goes by, but because parts of it may be polluted by 50 years of manufacturing ammunition and cleaning rocket motors with solvents that were often poured on the ground.

More important to local and state historians, the Army may be tearing it down too fast, leaving so little that the history of the plant will be lost.

Its role in war and peace during three wars — four if the Cold War is added — is important. At one time it produced more solid fuel for rocket motors than any place in the United States. It manufactured the motors for Sargent and Pershing rockets, then saw their destruction as the Cold War with the Soviet Union ended.

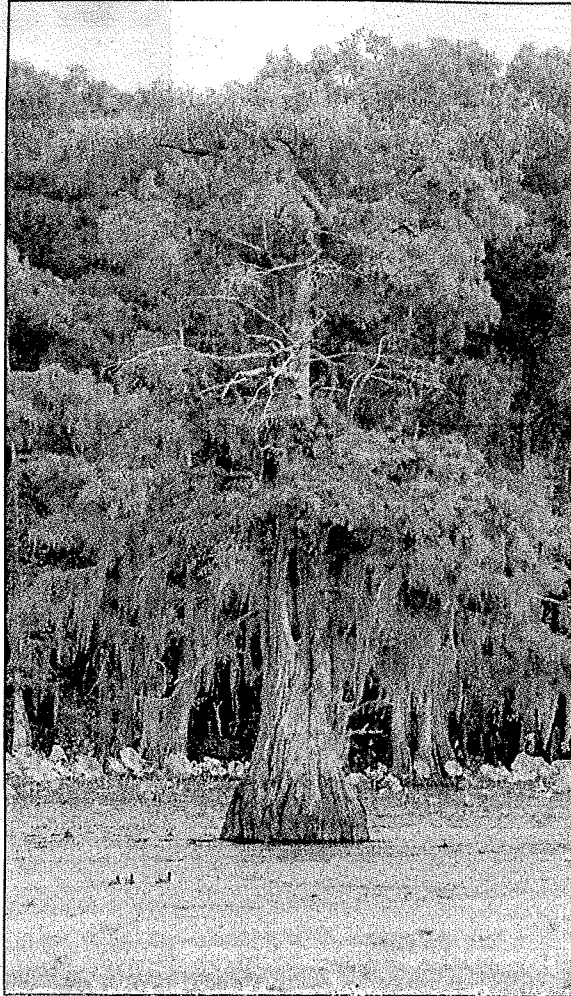
Now it is to become a wildlife refuge operated by the U.S. Department of Fish and Wildlife, and a research facility with the private-funded Caddo Lake Institute securing a 15-acre campus with an option to lease 15 more for as many public and private universities and research entities as the CLI can round up.

Tom Cloud, supervisor for the Fort Worth office of U.S.



Brent Mitchell/News Messenger

THE ARMY IS rapidly tearing down many of the manufacturing and storage facilities such as this. Some may be too contaminated to save, but local historians are concerned that some are being razed needlessly.



Brent Mitchell/News Messenger

A SCENE OF the changing leaves at the new wildlife refuge.

Fish and Wildlife, calls the area an "overlay refuge," meaning that the Army retains primary jurisdiction over the property while U.S. Fish and Wildlife manages the natural resources and conservation activities. He said that the public will have only limited access until U.S. Fish and Wildlife takes over the entire site, save for the CLI campus.

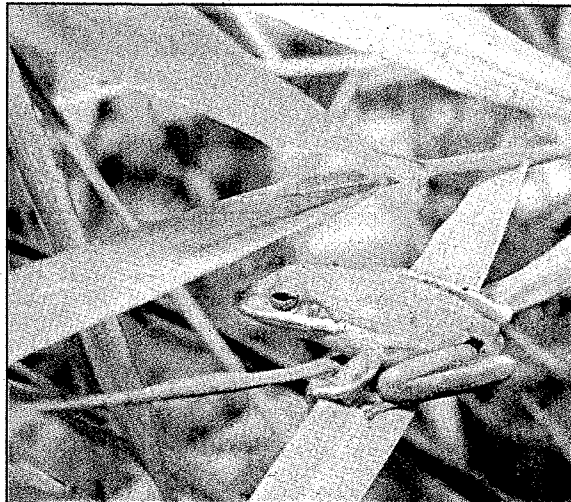
"Right now, it's so fragmented" Cloud said as he and Craig Giggelman drove their four-wheel drive vehicle over the roads that snake through the property.

Along with the deer, turkeys, ducks and geese on the reservation and in Caddo Lake on its edge, are many migrating birds. That alone makes the refuge important, but it also has several national and state champion trees.

A water hickory was the largest in the nation, and a blueberry hawthorne is still the largest one registered in the state, according to records kept by the foresters employed by the Army.

It's easy to get lost on the place, particularly since the

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Brent Mitchell/News Messenger

A TREE FROG clings to grass blades at the lake's edge, waiting for a snack.

History also a factor at LAAP

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Army removed the old water tower that was once a landmark.

On our tour, a small herd of deer dashed down the road in front of Cloud's vehicle then watched warily from the woods as it drove slowly by.

Some day the general public will be able to hunt them, but this year, as it has been for so long no one is sure when the custom started, retired Longhorn employees, whether they worked for the U.S. Army or the manufacturing contractor, will be the only ones allowed to hunt this season.

"All they have to do is contact the guards at the gate," said David Tolbert, the U.S. Army commander's representative.

Tolbert, now based in Shreveport, was one of the last Army employees at Longhorn. He toured the plant last week with Max Lale, who began working as public information officer there in the 1950s.

Lale described a structure on the edge of the forest.

He said it was a conference room, constantly checked for listening devices. "When there

were talks that weren't to leave the building, that's where we had them."

Caddo Lake Institute President Dwight Shellman hopes to restore it as living quarters for visiting scientists or students.

If walls could talk!

Lale pointed to the changing building where workers shed their own clothes for coveralls that were washed in the laundry next door.

"That way their washing machines at home weren't contaminated," he said.

"This was a self-contained community. We had our own water treatment plant, power plant, water plant, railroad, cafeteria. Elevated steam pipes provided heat for every building on the plant."

Much of it is gone, and much more going, including one building, 45-E, recently torched, and now the source of an arson investigation. Lale called it, "The most important building on the preserve."

"That's where they loaded the motors for the Sargent and Pershing Motors. It was a masterpiece of a building."

Because of the fire, cleanup

will be much more expensive than originally anticipated said Tolbert.

"It will cost \$365,000, because when it burned, a lot of asbestos was freed up."

A stumpy silo of a building surrounded by sandbags caught Lale's eye.

"That was the smoking area. You had to go in there to smoke and there were electric lighters in the walls."

Nearby were some 50 or more powder magazines. One of them has mock-ups of both the Pershing and the Sargent rockets stored inside.

"I put them there so they wouldn't disappear," said Tolbert.

His hope is that they will again be put on display somewhere in the public part of the plant.

"Some of this stuff is going to be like Stonehenge," said Lale.

The analogy is well taken. This historic site/nature preserve will require careful effort by several agencies to interpret. But in a few years it should draw serious scientists, historians and many tourists through its gates.