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Caddo State Park Has Its Own Unique History

Editor's Note: This is the first in a series on Texas State Parks in East Texas.

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KARNACK — The Caddo Lake area is steep in history, and although it doesn't go as far back as that of the lake itself, Caddo Lake State Park's past is just as rich as the land and water around it.

It begins at the front gate, one of about 125 projects remaining from the second Civilian Conservation Corps project started in the state in the 1930s.

"We were the first state park authorized for a CCC project, but we were not the first one started. That is why we have the road designated as State Park Road No. 2," said Park Manager Todd Dickinson.

The park can trace its roots back to a group of local businessmen and landowners, including Karnack mercantile owner T.J. Taylor, father of former First Lady Lady Bird Johnson. Taylor and the others put up the original 163 acres just in time for it to qualify as a Depression Era public service project.

Even though fishing camps like the Dallas Caddo Club had been established at the lake 20 years earlier when Caddo Lake State Park opened, access was down a dirt road from Marshall to Karnack.

While the CCC primarily created access to the site, a series of barracks and a mess hall were redeveloped into cabins and a group recreation facility still in use today.

Through the years the park was expanded to 484 acres, but about 100 of that was cut from the main park site by the development of Texas Highway 43 and is currently undeveloped. "I think I figured it up and about 125 is actually developed," Dickinson, noting the park has eight screened shelters, 36 trailer sites and 20 tent sites to go with the nine original cabins.

While Caddo Lake is best known for its cypress trees growing in the shallow water of what is a tupelo-cypress swamp, the park was carved out of cotton fields that helped supply the bustling river port at nearby Jefferson. Although stately today, the pines, oaks and sweetgum trees that form a canopy over the park are for the most part only as old as the park itself. Visitors only need to make a short walk down to Black Cypress Bayou to find the famed cypress trees.

A gateway to the park through the bayou, the park attracts about 50,000 visitors a year. While they come year-round, the bulk of the seven-day-a-week traffic occurs in March with spring break, June and again in October. Stifling heat and humidity can make visiting the park difficult in the summer, and without a designated swim area potential park visitors tend to look elsewhere.

The majority of the visitors coming to the lake are from the Dallas-Fort Worth area, but because of Caddo Lake's designation in 1993 as a Wetlands of International Importance the park has received visitors from around the world.

To really see the cypress trees on the lake a boat is needed, but for those without boats there are several private tour operators on the lake.

“If you have the time I recommend you take a tour. If you can you should take different tours because they are going to show you different things. Go on one in the morning and one in the evening,” Dickinson said.

For those interested more in photography, he recommends coming in the winter when the cypress trees are dormant and Spanish moss has turned gray.

“During the winter you can really get nice black and white photos,” Dickinson added.

Any visit to the park should begin with a quick tour of its museum in the headquarters building. It provides an ecological and cultural history of the region and the park.

Although the park’s main attraction since the beginning has been its access to the lake, the development of the adjacent Caddo Lake National Wildlife Refuge should bring more visitors over time. The refuge is being carved from 8,500 acres of what had been the Longhorn Army Ammunition Plant.

Portions of the refuge were opened to the public in 2009, but work continues. The area has recently undergone a timber thinning, opening the forest to improve habitat for red-cockaded woodpeckers and other bird species.

There are no camping facilities onsite at the refuge, but there are off-road bicycling and equestrian trails available to the public.

A fee increase is under way at the park. The entrance fee is going to \$3. Camping sites are also going up, the first increase in 10 years at the park.

For more information on Caddo State Park or other state parks, go to www.tpwd.state.tx.us. Campsite reservations can be made online or by calling the statewide reservation system at 512-389-8900.



It is the cypress trees and fishing that bring most visitors to Caddo Lake and Caddo Lake State Park. Still dormant, the trees and Spanish moss should turn green soon. Visitors (below) find getting around the 484-acre park easy on bikes.
(Staff Photo by Steve Knight)