

Plans in works to renovate Caddo Refuge's Starr Ranch

By Glenn Evans gevans@news-journal.com | Posted: Sunday, February 17, 2013 4:00 am



KARNACK — The Friends of the Caddo Lake National Wildlife Refuge are working on a star attraction for the 8,400-acre nature preserve.

The Starr Ranch dates to the 1830s when its namesake family wrested a plantation from the lush land bordering Texas' largest natural lake. The settler family's enterprise was ideally located close to what was then a major doorway to Texas: Port Caddo.

"But there's always been a habitation there since forever," architect Duane Meyers said this past week, as he and fellow Friends of the Refuge members Gary Endsley and Mark Williams pored over plans for the site that kisses the inlet to Goose Prairie.

Caddo Indians aside, the site was leased in 1905 by the Dallas Caddo Club to give wealthy Big D denizens a break from city life. The club is still alive and well in nearby Uncertain, but surrendered its hold on Starr Ranch by 1941 when the U.S. Army built its Longhorn Army Ammunition Plant there.

"The chronology here goes from Indians to early settlers to the Army and their contractors to now," Meyers said. "So, the site has been used for eons."

Officials from the ammunition plant were the most recent regular visitors to the old, wood-frame house on the northern tip of the old ammo plant property.

That could change, dramatically, under long-range plans for which the friends group is raising funds.

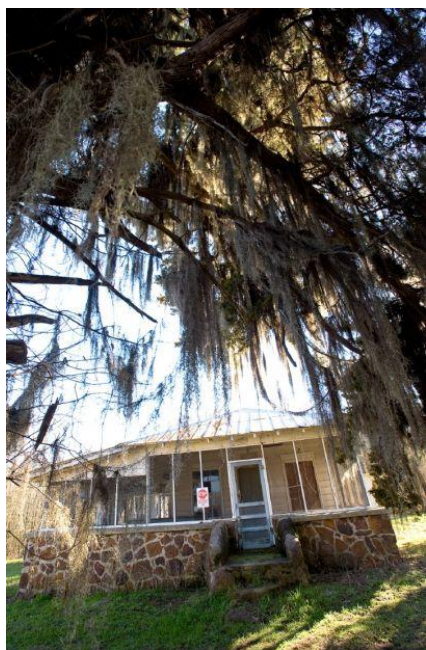
Phase I is renovation of the house itself, along with the separate kitchen connected by a covered porch.

"It's the old way," Endsley explained. "You put your kitchen outside and connect it by a back porch."

A fishing jetty will extend into Goose Prairie from the shore, where a tower resembling an oil derrick will lift wind turbines converting ancient breezes into modern power.



The facility is envisioned as off-the-grid, energy self-sufficient. “We’re trying to make this self-sustainable,” Meyers said.



Six cairns, basically large steel bowls outfitted for night-blazing fires, will hold icons depicting six eras at the site — Caddo natives, riverboats, fishing/agriculture, the oil industry, the ammo plant and today’s national wildlife refuge — in a line parallel to the jetty.

Nine boat slips will be built beneath angled solar collector rooftops also holding more wind turbines. A few feet along the dock, an enclosed fish feeding area is planned adjacent to an overlook fashioned after the familiar “beehive” Caddo dwelling top.

Finally, a stage and amphitheater will welcome musical, theatrical and other events. Administrative and scientific field survey offices will be joined to the amphitheater.

Given its location at the north tip of the refuge, Starr Ranch will provide an ideal trailhead for four connected walking loops already cleared in the refuge. Resembling two No. 8s stacked on top of each other, the trail network plunges into the serene refuge setting and offers scattered glimpses of Caddo artifacts.

Meyers described “ethereal screens” along the trails, a concept he is exploring that projects images onto anything relatively flat such as the cascades of Spanish moss common at Caddo Lake.

“We want this to be as much of a teaching environment as we can make it,” Meyers said.

“Because the history aspect just makes your mind explode.”



All photos by Les Hassell.