

Jerry McKelvy's
WAY BACK WHEN
October, 2024

BRAGG LAKE



Each week, I travel past Bragg Lake on Highway 24 between Camden and Chidester. If the weather is good, there will usually be a few fishermen along the shore or one or two boats out on the lake. I have also seen some beautiful sunsets there when I happened to pass by at just the right time. Bragg Lake is owned by Ouachita County and is open to the public for fishing. I decided to do a little research on this lake.

The lake and park were constructed as a Works Progress Administration (WPA) project in 1936. An article in the Arkansas Gazette in August, 1936 stated that 60 men were working on a recreational park west of Camden on Hwy. 24. The lake was expected to be over 100 acres with a concrete dam and spillway. Robert Burns was the supervisor for the project. The article stated that cabins were to be built along the edge of the lake and a summer playground with recreational equipment installed. Mr. T. J. Gaughan and others donated much of the land for the lake and park.

In November, 1937, another article in the Arkansas Gazette stated that this was a \$40,000 project. The dam and spillway had been completed and the lake was said to be

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filling up with water after some recent heavy rains. The article told of plans for a large clubhouse, bath house facilities for both men and women, and restrooms. The water was said to be ten feet deep at the spillway and the average depth of the lake was five feet.



The Island

Before the lake was filled with water, it was known that a small island about two acres in size would be left in the middle of the lake after it filled with water. Mr. T. J. Gaughan stipulated in the deed when he donated the land that this island was to be left as a game refuge. The deed stipulated that no one could enter this island with a gun or other device to harvest game, fish, or birds nor could any timber be cut on the island. No homes or other structures could be built on the island nor could any bird or animal be killed on this island for the next fifty years. Only predatory animals or birds could be killed and that by a special permit from the county. Another article stated that the Bragg Lake hunting grounds would be closed to hunting immediately and converted into a game preserve. A deputy sheriff would be on duty at the park.

Under Federal Protection

An article in November, 1939, stated that Bragg Lake would be a wild duck and migratory bird sanctuary and the entire area would be under federal protection. Ducks and geese were already on the lake and being fed. Hunters were warned not to stop at the lake.

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A Flash Flood Causes Damage

Summer months in Arkansas are usually dry, but in early July of 1941, the area was hit by a flash flood with 6.5 inches of rain falling in a short time. The Bragg Lake dam gave way resulting in a 25-foot section of Hwy. 24 being washed out. The lake project had just been completed earlier that year. The lake had been stocked with fish and had just opened to the public a month before the flood after being closed for three years to allow time for the fish to grow. It was a popular place in June of 1940 when the lake first opened for fishing. One report said hundreds of anglers lined the banks and every available boat was being used. Large catches were reported.

Thousands of fish escaped during the flood and the lake was emptied of water. It was reported that the dam would be rebuilt but it would take years to restock the lake with fish. The main problem in rebuilding the dam and restoring the lake was money. Over \$6,000 was received from the federal government to be used for repairs. Volunteers provided some of the labor in repairing the dam. Several cottages had been built along the edge of the lake at that time.

A Name Change

Work continued repairing the flood damage and making more improvements to the park. The pavilion was enlarged, a concrete pump house was built along with a dock, benches, a toilet, tables, and fences. Some landscaping was also done and grass sod added in some places. A contract was let to rebuild the dam with automatic flood gates to prevent future washouts.

It was decided to re-name the park as the Gaughan Memorial Park in honor of the late T. J. Gaughan, the originator of the idea to construct a park and lake there. He also had donated much of the land for the project.

The next thing I found about Bragg Lake was an article in the Arkansas Gazette in May of 1955 which promoted the lake. It included a picture taken of the lake from the pavilion which was said to adjoin the superintendent's house. The superintendent of the park at that time was Robert Nash. I don't remember a house being next to the pavilion.

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Another flood on Labor Day weekend in 1974 caused the Bragg Lake dam to break in two places as water flowed over the dam. Hwy. 24 was closed while repairs were being made. Traffic had to detour around by Poison Springs.

A state-wide study was released in 1977 which listed all dams in the state that were considered “highly hazardous”. Bragg Lake dam is on the list as well as the dam at Lower White Oak Lake. The term “highly hazardous” does not mean they are likely to break, but in the event of a break, much property damage would result.

I recorded in my journal in May of 2002 that the pavilion at Bragg Lake was being torn down since it was in bad shape. A new pavilion was constructed in the same place which still stands today.



I don't know if some of the improvements mentioned in the old newspaper articles were ever made. The new pavilion is nice, but there are no restrooms there today. A portable toilet stands near the pavilion. There are several nice picnic tables scattered under the huge pine trees that appear to have been recently refurbished. It would be a nice place for a picnic.

As with any body of water, there is a possibility of someone drowning. I came across an incident from July 6, 1941, in which three men from Chidester were out on the lake in a boat when it capsized. Two of the men, Robert Hindman, age 20 and Billy Stinnett, age 22 were drowned. The other man, Joe Brazzell, age 47 escaped. There could have been other drownings on this lake.

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I have never fished at Bragg Lake, so I can't report on how good the fishing is. There are some alligators in the lake now and warning signs are posted. The lake has been a popular place over the years for fishing, picnics, and family reunions. I even know of one wedding that took place at Bragg Lake.

Some people who fish from the bank prefer to fish just below the dam between the dam and the highway. This is evident from the large number of tangled fishing lines hanging from the power lines overhead in that area.



AN UNUSUAL HONEYMOON TRIP

I came across an article in the Arkansas Gazette newspaper dated July 26, 1928 which tells of a couple who decided to travel on their honeymoon to the wilds of South America to investigate a strange custom of a primitive tribe called the Piarrone tribe.

These people were said to be one of the most primitive tribes living in that region. It was said that when a member of the tribe became sick, they were placed in a cave with a pot of water and a basket of food. If they got well, they came out of the cave. If they died, the cave became their burial place.

The couple was Dr. Herbert Spencer Dickey and his wife, Elizabeth Staley Parker. Dr. Dickey spent 25 years exploring parts of South America. He had many near-death experiences during his travels and even witnessed a head shrinking ceremony and brought back a shrunken head from his honeymoon trip. He tells of one time when he was captured by savages and tied to a tree and then they removed the bark just above his head so that the sap would run. The sap attracted thousands of ants which he had to deal with during the 22 hours he was left tied to the tree. He was exposed to jungle diseases and contracted yellow fever on one of his trips.

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Dr. Herbert Spencer Dickey died in 1948. His two most famous books are “My Jungle Book” and “The Misadventures of a Tropical Medico”, both of which may be ordered online.

[Fire Prevention Week](#) is October 6-12, 2024.

Hey, Chief! – by Don Mathis

“Hey, Chief! Your replacement’s here,”
the fireman shouts with a smile
as a young child,
complete with suit and boots,
enters the station.

Wide-eyed wonder
is shared with all
waiting for a call.
“What’s that? What’s that?”

Tailored explanations,
politely proffered
by hard flame-fighters,
saturate and satisfy
a five-year-old mind.

“Show me the tool that you can
open up a car like a can-opener.”
This request stumps the guide
and brings a smile
when he realizes
the answer is
“The Jaws of Life.”

“Why? Why? Why?”
is the answer to each answer.

“Two steering wheels?”

“A pick-ax?”

“A mask?”

But no one can come close
to, “Who enjoyed it the most;
the firemen or the five-year-old?”

