Caddo Lake
The old Caddo Indian came down from the Oklahoma reservation for a last look at Caddo Lake. As he pointed across the broad waters and began to speak, he reported, perhaps without realizing it, the greatest story that has rocked the North American Continent since the white man came. He was giving an eyewitness account of what happened on Dec. 16, 1811, as follows:

"Here (near the Texas-Louisiana line) was once a prairie where we hunted buffalo. But that was before the earth had chills and fever and shook in the night, and our village clank, Then the water of Cypress Bayou rolled over our home ground, and we fled to the hills."

The old Indian was describing the natural phenomenon of our time one of the largest earthquakes on record. The quake's epicenter was near New Madrid, Missouri. It is known as the New Madrid Earthquake, which is slightly inadequate in view of the fact that it affected 2,000,000 square miles. It produced striking topographical changes over a vast area. The current of the Mississippi River was reversed for a matter of minutes. Its banks heaved and caved. Landslides roared down cliffs. The sky was darkened by dust or by sulphurous clouds flung skyward from the rotting subterranean vegetation.

In Boston, Massachusetts, buildings shook. In Charleston, South Carolina, walls cracked and bells tolled eerily with no one near the bell ropes. Actually little damage was done in comparison to much smaller quakes as this area was sparsely settled. But the New Madrid Quake, which recorded no less than 1374 shocks between December 1811 and March 1812, created a major topographical change. Where once the old Caddo Indian hunted his buffalo is Caddo Lake, the largest, natural, fresh water lake in the south. Its 150,000 acres sprawl for 65 miles through northeast Texas into the northwest tip of Louisiana. Caddo Lake has mystery, history, and fascination you can't copyright. Reelfoot Lake in the northwest corner of Tennessee was formed during the New Madrid quake.

The remains of the Caddo Indian village were found in 1938 under two or three feet of water at the southern point of Little Green Break, near the Texas-Louisiana line by Don Brown. There were flint chips, many finished and partly finished arrowheads, stone hammers, charred rocks of heavy iron cement which the Indians heated in coals and drooped into clay pots to heat water. Scientists from the University of Texas looked at these artifacts and said they proved the story of the old Caddo Indian who told of his village and its inundation many years ago.

In 1931 on a still summer afternoon Don George's father was fishing in Pine Island Pond, an arm of Caddo Lake. He looked up and saw a wall of water rolling toward him over the previously dead calm lake.
The wall, or wave, was about two feet high. Mr. George said the unearthly stillness and the lack of apparent cause for the wave were terrifying. He turned his small boat into the wave, rode through, and afterwards the pond settled down again.

Let us look at the history of events which have affected Caddo Lake. In 1833, the "Great Raft" - a jam of logs, snags and driftwood - blocked the Red River from bank to bank for nearly 200 miles. A colorful character, indeed, was the man chosen to open up the river to navigation. He was Henry Miller Shreve, river captain, inventor of the picturesque double decked steamboat, son of a Revolutionary War Colonel, and savior of Fort Philip in the Battle of New Orleans. Shreve, not to be discouraged by the dim view taken by most engineers, undertook the river clearing project, and with 4 steamboats and 150 men, began grappling the half rotted stumps and slippery logs. It was in the Spring of 1833 that he first sighted the land which was to become the city bearing his name - Shreveport founded in 1826.

A navigable route for light draft boats, from 6 to 9 months in the year, from Red River near Shreveport, La. to Jefferson, Texas, a distance of 68 miles, was made possible by the accretion of drift in the Red River which formed another "raft" near Shreveport, converting the bottom lands into lakes. The River and Harbor Act of June 10, 1872 provided for dredging and straightening the channel, removing obstructions and clearing the banks. This 68 mile stretch was known as the "Waterway between Jefferson, Texas and Shreveport, Louisiana." The removal of this raft brought about quicker drainage of the lake lessening the depth of the water, so by 1879, boats from Red River ceased going to Jefferson.

It was during this era of water travel that Caddo Lake suffered its greatest single tragedy. On February 11, 1872, the steamboat "Mittie Stevens" caught fire and burned to the water line. More than 60 passengers perished in the blaze. This tragedy occurred near Swanson's Landing in Texas. The steamboat was carrying a cargo of hay and a consignment of gold to pay off a Yankee Regiment stationed at Jefferson, Texas. The Caddo Gazette, at Shreveport, editorialized on the tragedy in this way: "It is a known fact that the Mittie Stevens was making 15 miles an hour at the time of the wreck. When will this American mania for speed come to an end?" For many years the ribs and boilers of the Mittie Stevens were visible in low water.

The River and Harbor Act of June 28, 1880 provided for the construction of a Dam without a navigation lock at the foot of Caddo Lake. The Dam was finished in 1914 at a cost of $100,353. Navigation on the lake was possible from the Dam to Jefferson, Texas, a distance of 43 miles. Navigation below the Dam is largely dependent on back-water from Red River through Twelve Mile Bayou for light-draft boats. A new Dam has been approved by the U.S. Government. The money has been appropriated as stated in the Shreveport Times, January 19, 1959. The proposed site is to be between the present Dam and Highway 1.

What opportunities does Caddo Lake offer the people? Let me name a few. A water supply for cities, irrigation for agriculture, sites for new industries, an aid to flood control, recreation, a livelihood for many people as commercial fishermen, guides, camps, and eating places.
Provision has already been made for Shreveport to pump water from Twelve mile Bayou into Cross Lake, if and when the water level in Cross Lake gets too low. The water in Twelve Mile Bayou as you know comes from or out of Caddo Lake at the Dam. Mr. Henry Grell, a citizen of Mooringsport worked on the installation of the pumps to do this job.

The fascination of Caddo Lake can be summed up in these words, "Beautiful Scenery -- A Sportman's Paradise". Caddo Lake has everything. Her alligators, garfish, and 200 pound logger-head turtles are links with prehistoric times; but the giant catfish, the pearls, and the caviar, the deer, duck and geese, the bass and the barn-door sized perch - all these belong to our time. In Caddo Lake, black bass are plentiful. They have been taken up to 8 pounds. A new bass, the Kentucky or spotted bass has been introduced and is thriving. They run up to 8 or 8 pounds and are fine sport.

Fly fishermen specialize on the wall-eyed pike, bream, sunfish, calico and striped bass, and barracuda. Bait fishermen, using minnows, catch gasper gil, sturgeon, spoonbill catfish, and the occasional alligator gar, which will tear your tackle to pieces. These gar growing up to seven feet in length are predators. Sportsmen are trying to build up an interest in taking them on light tackle as you would tarpon. Caddo Lake is also famous for her giant catfish. The average big one is a 50 pounder, but in 1946 a blue channel catfish weighing 170 lbs was taken.

Deer have always roamed the forests, but several years ago the Federal Government restocked the area. Today most hunters quickly get their limit when the season opens.

Caddo Lake's mussels have provided many beautiful pearls and a few small fortunes for pearl fishers. One of the most famous fishers was George Murata (known in Mooringsport as the Jap) who made $3,000 his first year. The next year George's luck ran out. "So", said he, "I took to fishing for spoonbill catfish, and shipped their eggs iced in barrels to St. Louis for "Russian Caviar." This Caddo Lake furnished some of the best (imported) Russian Caviar in the country -- in cans with labels all in Russian.

Mr. James J. Davis, a citizen of Mooringsport can tell of many interesting experiences pearl fishing around the Little Green Break. He says pearls are found in the shallow sandy areas of the lake, and are harvested during July, August and September. He saw a glass jar of pearls which a pearl fisherman sold for $3,000. Jimmy Collier of Mooringsport recently found a beautiful pearl which he plans to have set in a ring for his little daughter Sharon.

Caddo Folk Music is described by Don Brown as colored largely by Africa, the lyrics reflecting the life of the people of the region, but the music itself is primitive. Rhythm dominates it. Around Caddo Lake you hear the echo of jungle drums mingled with mournfulness of hymns. These people are of Negro-Indian blood. A group of them organized in the summer of 1932 as the "Caddo Folkways Society", and they meet once a week to play and record their original music. In almost every home in this region of Caddo Lake (Texas side) one or more members of the family play an instrument -- the guitar, a banjo, or at least a harmonica.
The players come on foot or horseback along the deep rutted backwoods roads to the highway where they are picked up and taken by car to the home of Franklin Jones. Most of them are older men. They settle on a broad screened porch facing the Lake and tune their instruments. Then begins the rough and ready music.

One of the players, Albert Vaughn has a concertina, which, when he plays it, runs a close second to an orchestra. Lacking a drum, Albert leads the rest of the musicians in a furious and complicated rhythm with his feet. Sometimes a fiddler shows up at these "concerts". They play and sing Sunday morning music like "Just a Closer Walk With Thee" as well as Saturday night pieces like "Old Man Cackle", "Brown Ferry Blues", "Big Fat Goose and the Gizzard", Rattlesnake Daddy" and a host of other Caddo originals. It is a good thing these old songs are being recorded for Caddo music is already feeling the blighting contact of the outside machine minded world.

Frank Gill, another of the musicians who lives on a small farm, said to Don Brown, "Learn? I never learned nothin', never went to school. Playing the guitar -- that's just a birthmark". He told Don Brown about Huddie (pronounced Howdie) Ledbetter. Huddie was born near Mooringsport on Caddo Lake of mixed Indian and Negro parentage. As a youth he traveled the country side from Mooringsport to Greenwood with his 13 string guitar to play for dances and parties. Huddie could really play but he saw the inside of a lot of jails. One time he sang his way out of jail in La.

At this time O.K. Allen was Governor and Huddie composed a song for him.

One verse went like this:

Governor O.K. Allen, if I had you where you got me,
I'd wake up in the morning and set you free.

So the Governor let him go. Huddie was brought to national attention by John A. Lomax, American ballad collector and Congressional Librarian who hired him as chauffeur. Huddie played in the night clubs of New York and finally gave concerts in Carnegie Hall. "Good Night Irene" was a song he made famous. He died in 1949. His body was brought back to Caddo Lake and buried at Shiloh Baptist Church on the Blanchard-Latex road, "in the biggest coffin ever seen around here -- all gold and silver" as told by Frank Gill.

Other musicians interviewed by Don Brown were Jim Higgins of Leigh, Tex. who also made some solo recordings, and Johnnie, another guitar player who entertains the guides and sportsmen as they wait around the wharf. Johnnie's favorite rendition is the Caddo Lake Blues, which ends like this:

Got those Caddo Lake Blues and don't know what to do,
But if I ever leave ole Caddo, you'll know I'm through.

Many wells have been drilled in Caddo Lake by the Gulf Oil Co. producing oil by millions of barrels. What is left of many of these wells are the rows of snags which you see sticking out of the water. You seldom see a "horse head pump" on the wells in the lake as a new method. The Kobe method is used to bring oil out of the wells.
Besides the operation of the oil companies on the lake, another industry located on the lake is the Lieberman Power Plant of the Southwestern Electric Company.

Some other interesting facts about Caddo Lake and its environs which I learned from the following people:

Mr. John M. Miller Sr. and his wife, Mrs. Lillie Harris Miller* told me about the ferry boat that crossed the lake from the south shore about where the Gulf loads their barges, to the north shore near Charlie Johnson's home. When the railroad built the dump for their tracks, the ferry boat crossed the lake just under where the traffic bridge is now. An old Indian Chief is buried between the railroad and the Clem Grocery about where an oil well was drilled recently.

Mrs. A. G. Colgin and Joe Sharp told of their good times hunting turtle eggs on the little islands in the lake when they were in their teens. So you may know how to find them, you dig for them in the sand.

The draw bridge section in the middle of the traffic bridge was raised and the turn-table bridge of the railroad turned when the pile-driver used by the Gulf went up and down the lake. The Police Jury had charge of the draw-bridge, hiring manual labor to raise it when requested by the oil company, and the railroad had charge of operating their turn-table bridge.

In 1935 during the Shreveport Centennial the Caddo Indians came from their reservation in Oklahoma to take part in this celebration. They came out to the lake and just in front of the present Methodist Church they waded out into the lake and carried out their Indian ceremony.

Mrs. C. R. Jarrett, wife of the mayor of Mooringsport at this time viewed this spectacle and late that afternoon wrote a poem and sent it to me.

**SUNSET ON CADDOD LAKE**

"God paints the sky with brilliant hues, ere night's dark curtain falls; Deep flaming rose and clearest blues, such art my soul enthralis. The fleeting day hastes to it's rest, as swift the Painter yields His brush, Rich colors glow at His bequest, while over all; a heavenly hush. Could mortal hand such pigments blend, 'twould win the world's acclaim, And life for me could swiftly end, were I to reach such fame."
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*Deceased

Acknowledgement:

I am indebted to Mrs. C. B. Moore* and W. E. Stewart of Mooringsport for their help and interest in getting this account of Caddo Lake.

*Deceased

I do hope you enjoy reading about our Caddo Lake.

Mrs. J. M. Sharp
January, 1959