Baton Rouge's manmade lake system has grown in quality and popularity over its 80 years of existence.

By GEORGE MORRIS

To thousands who daily pass by on Interstate 10, they are visual relief on a route otherwise distinguished by billboards, concrete sound barriers and other cars. For walkers, joggers and cyclists, they are a mecca in a city that provides few other places that attract such activities. Ask any Baton Rougeans their favorite places in the city, and City Park Lake and University Lake are almost certain to be on the list. But it hasn’t always been so.

Eighty years ago, these lakes and four smaller ones that are connected to them formed a dense, uninviting swamp. But, when Baton Rouge decided to build City Park in the 1920s, it began a process that changed this area for good.

This process hasn’t ended, either.

Starting in 1923, 60 acres of the much larger Perkins Swamp were cut down and filled with water when a dike was built on what is now May Street, which separates the two main lakes.

The first section of what is now East Lakeshore Drive was built along the east and north sides of the lake. The road separated the main lake from a small body called Lake Erie. It also created a loop around the lake that included a thinly-tarred road that is now Dalrymple Drive.

Dr. George Jones, a retired ophthalmologist, said the lake, though attractive, was a place people rarely swam.

"The lake was a nice place for water meccas. They were up in the bunk," Jones said. "There were a lot of them, and muskrats. That was the hangover from the swamp."

One annual event that drew people to the lake in the 1930s was the Fireman's Festival, which raised money for the local fire department. Colorful lighted floats on the water attracted people, who were charged $10 per carload to park along the edge of the lake and watch the show.

"It was like a Mardi Gras float," Jones said. "It had a light inside of it, and paper, and the light shone through it. It made it look like a Christmas tree light.

"You've got to remember, this town was smaller. If you've got cars parked hub to hub around the lake, you've got a lot of cars, $10 a car loaded with people. It was during the economic times when $10 prevented me from seeing it."

These very economic times led to the creation of University Lake.

The work began in July 1933 under the direction of the Emergency Relief Administration, one of several federal agencies created to provide work for millions who lost their jobs in the Great Depression. Those hired for this job would earn their pay.

The remaining cypress swamp occupied 285 acres between City Park and LSU, populated only by crawfishermen, and frogs and snake hunters. A canal 4 miles long, 40 feet wide and 4 feet deep was cut through the middle and along the sides of the area to drain the swamp. Logs and stumps were so thick that 2 1/2 tons of dynamite were used to finish the work. A Sept. 22, 1934, Sunday Advocate headline declared the work "Removes Last Mosquito Breeding Place in Vicinity of City," an inaccuracy current residents can all too easily identify.

The project lasted five years, involved roughly 1,000 workers armed with saws and axes and cost $35,000 to create University Lake and its smaller sisters — Lake Crest, Campus Lake and College Lake, which are connected to the larger body by underground concrete channels. The six-lake system drains into Bayou Dularge.

An artisan well near LSU's campus and rain runoff filled the lakes, which residents celebrated as a big visual improvement, although reminders of the swamp remained.

"As you drove by you saw alligators," said Jones, who hitched rides to LSU. "They were hub to hub, lying out there in the sun by Dalrymple Drive and the edge of the lakes. There would be any number from three to 40, all sizes. Everybody thought they were wonderful; that was where they lived."

But not for much longer. The habitat that supported their appraisal was gone, and the lakes soon attracted not only recreational users but houses. Alligators still migrated up from Bayou Dularge, but their appearances became novelties and nuisances. Jones remembers using a broom to chase a 5-foot gator from his front yard.

Some residents were more foolhardy. Retired LSU professor Leon Standifer, who has lived here since 1961, learned of residents who lived along College Lake and decided to catch an alligator whose mating calls they heard.

"They got a big iron hook they made and chains and put some meat on it and floated it out in the lake and anchored the chain to a tree, and they caught a big, big, 13-foot alligator, and they didn't know what to do," Standifer said. "They had to call the wildlife people, who really rushed at them."

The city's encroachment had predictable results. In 1967, just 19 years after University Lake's completion, the City Health Unit's chief sanitarian, H.W. Allen, urged people not to swim or water ski in lakes that were "grossly contaminated" with sewage.

The public didn't seem alarmed. Rather, there were proposals to make the lakes more accessible. In 1969, the Baton Rouge Sportsman League proposed that the lakes should be dredged to improve fishing.

Dredging in the early 1960s was designed to deepen large parts of the lake, but massive cypress stumps slowed the project.
The most visible change to the lakes from the view of a fisherman was creating land that is now known as Baton Rouge Beach at University Lake off Stanford Avenue.

Advocate photo

CORPS OF ENGINEERS

Lakes

fishing, with the dredged material moved to create points of land for recreation. One reason the lake level was also lower than it was a decade ago is due to the cost and opposition from lake shore residents.

The lakes may have never been more popular than they were in January 1962. A severe cold snap forced many to walk or ice skate across the lakes.

"I walked from my house across the lake over to the LSU campus where the waterways houses are now," said Tom Kirkpatrick, who lives on Lakeshore Drive. "They were just starting to build dams on the edges of the lake. We just went the whole way around.

In later years, however, it was not ice covering the lakes. More often, it was algae or dead fish. In fact, there were actually fish in, runoff from the LSU agricultural area, that washed into the pond. Course and adjacent lawns were damaged for algal nutrients that contributed to these problems. The plankton blooms became almost annual occurrences, and the lakes' poor health became a constant issue/year. Nobody could argue against the problem.

There was no lack of suggestions: Oxygenating the waters, the introduction of water and fish from the lake bottom. Stocking the lakes with alewives and fish from Israel. Space-age biological filters. Draining the lakes, bulldozing the bottoms for depth and allowing sunlight to bake the soil before allowing water to return.

Draining to increase the lakes' water capacity was the most obvious solution, but it was not considered feasible. The Environmental Protection Agency provided a grant in 1978, but it did not make it popular. The Corps of Engineers was what to do with the dredged material.

Original plans called for the creation of four islands. That brought out opponents who thought these would be unsightly mud flats. Later plans avoided the shorter, shorter plans to extend the shoreline with dredged dirt. The spoil had to go somewhere, and nobody wanted to look at it.

It took three years of debate before at the eventual solution. For the lake to be pumped across Stanford Avenue near Bayou De La Chene and a pedestrian bridge would be created on the west side of Stanford cutting into the lake. The plan is known as Baton Rouge Beach. The work last year.

Kirkpatrick, whose home faces Baton Rouge Beach, said all the opposition came from those who opposed the plans. He termed the results "about 80 percent OK.

"We had visions of people having picnics there and leaving it," he said. "But the city has been pretty good about keeping it clean. We still have instances on Saturday or Sunday night when they have people out there with loud radios. All we do is call the police, just saying please keep it clean. I can't say all of our friends have been realized by a long shot.

But some local residents also weren't fully realized, either. One idea was to make the lake more shallow and costly for Baton Rouge Beach was untouched. Only the southern end of the city, and Lake and Louisiana Avenue of University Lake were dredged. Campus and College Pond were drained and deepened. The work cost about $2.5 million.

If there is any doubt about the impact of the Corps of Engineers' work, it was answered on June 6, 1962, when Thomas Roberts caught a 13.5-pound largemouth bass at University Lake. It was a state record and remains the fifth largest bass ever caught in Louisiana waters.

The lakes quickly became even more popular for recreation. With fewer water problems and the addition of banks, children and adults alike flocked to the shore path along parts of the shoreline, and a forlorn population of yuppies, particularly since Baton Rouge Beach was opened in 1978.

Without a doubt, a said avid
driver runner Jenifer Peters, who lives in the area. "It was a real wake-up call for us all.

Though an improvement, the dredging of the early 1960s has not been a permanent fix. Summer droughts occasionally drop the water levels, exposing the lake bottom in spots. Last year, such an event triggered a fish kill in City Park Lake.

As a result, LSU, BREC, and the city-parish government have agreed to do further studies and take the lake bottom. Tenders for the study are due by Jan. 15, with the studies will begin after that.

"That's a matter of time," said Ward Q. Toms, a former state senator who lived on the lake.

"We're just trying to make it a better place for everybody here. It's something we truly look forward to seeing enhanced."
Inn one day, out the next

This sequence of pictures, taken from the observation deck of the State Capitol, shows the demolition of the old inn on the Lake hotel Sunday morning. The demolition process took about 10 seconds. Capitol Lake Properties Inc. bought the inn late last year with the intent to clear the site and sell it to the state. The property is being considered for a new six- to eight-story Division of Administration building.