

Where the Heart Is

Toledo Bend residents reflect on four decades of lake life.

BY KATHRYN HUNTER / PHOTOS BY EARL NOTTINGHAM

“Home” isn’t always where you were born and raised, but often it is. As a child, perhaps a person is more susceptible to the combination of raw materials that make up the idea of a place. Memories of orange-red clay that turned to soup after a heavy rain, the sound of pines knocking together, coffee milk in a delicate tea cup, a grandfather’s tattered baseball cap, the feel of the air on the first true day of autumn — such impressions brew a potent sense of belonging, making East Texas where the heart is for some folks, even if the body and the mind choose to reside elsewhere.

After 48 years, my grandmother returned

to the same woods and hills where she spent her childhood. In Toledo Bend Village, an out-of-the-way lakeside community of retirees, snowbirds and weekenders near the Texas-Louisiana border, my grandmother and her friend Rhona are known as “the nurses.” The nearest hospital or doctor’s office is 40 miles away, so if someone’s grandson gets a fishhook in his thumb or an accident happens on the county road, Grandma and Rhona are liable to get a knock on their door. Though long retired from nursing and no stranger to health problems themselves, they always answer.

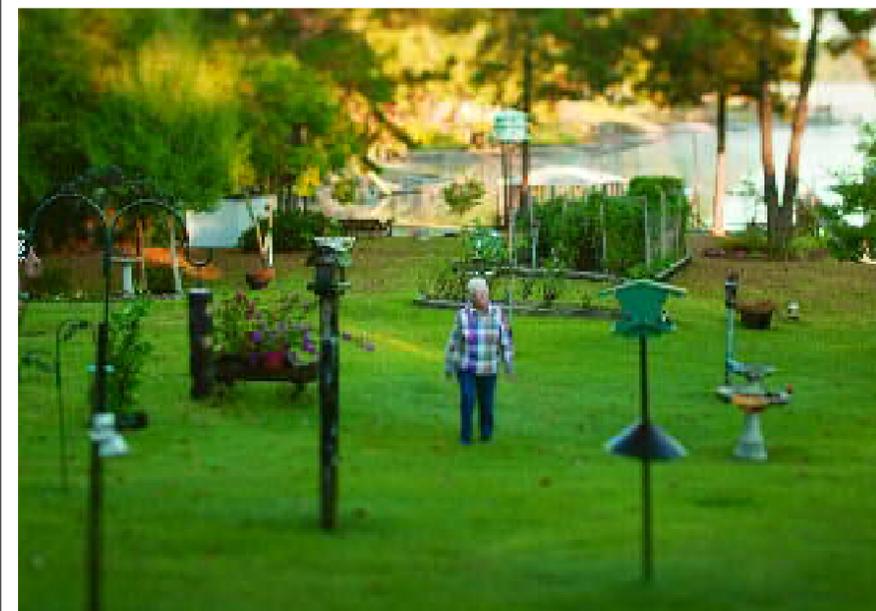
Grandma’s backyard rolls right into

Toledo Bend Reservoir. On the porch, she looks out past the rose bushes and fig trees and bird feeders to the muddy-watered inlet under which may be, she says, the very spot she visited every summer as a girl.

Long before the dam project broke ground in the early 1960s, her family would come together to camp at the mouth of what was called Indian Creek, a clear stream that trickled out of the pines to meet with the mighty Sabine River. Grandma rattles off a list of names, people who are and always will be strangers to me except in these stories.

“When we started to come down here, this was a long way,” she says. Family members lived far apart, and most didn’t have a means of transportation. “My Uncle Bob was the only one in the family who always managed to have a truck. He would make trips and get everybody and bring them down here, with their

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Imogene Weber, left, otherwise known as Grandma, and Benton and Charlotte Brockette enjoy lake life in Toledo Bend Village.



PHOTOS BY EARL NOTTINGHAM/TPWD



Above: Low-flying Canada geese patrol the shoreline of Toledo Bend Village. Left: Locals gather for lunch at Indian Creek Lodge café.

Toledo Bend Village is small, and to see it from the highway, there's not much there. No fast food restaurants, no businesses beyond the single gas station, the oil and lube shop and a handful of mom-and-pop bait stores and diners. It's not a town in its own right — the mailing address here lists Burkeville, though it's roughly 19 miles away. Full-time residents take ice chests to Jasper to do their grocery shopping and usually go to Beaumont or Lufkin for regular medical care.

Yet the people who live here seem to stay busy. Benton Brockette devotes himself to politics and the local water board; his wife, Charlotte, collects and catalogs rocks and petrified wood. Nell Loftin paints, and her husband, "Runt," fishes every day the weather's good, though he's now 84 years old. Everyone I speak to proudly mentions the community club, which is a catch-all for the locals, hosting potlucks, card games, fundraisers, craft clubs, exercise groups and parties. The church and volunteer fire department are also hubs of activity.

I like the kindness of these people and their tall tales of alligators and catfish as "big as a number-three washtub," but what I enjoy most is their enthusiasm for life — rare even in much younger people. If there is a secret to longevity and good health, perhaps it is this brand of good humor combined with (I'll say it even if I do get myself in trouble) a substantial dose of bullheadedness.

"We don't plan on leaving until we go in a pine box," Nell Loftin says lightly, adding that Toledo Bend Village also has its own community cemetery.

There is a beautiful nostalgia present here, a small-town feel reminiscent of Garrison Keillor, of lemonade stands and bake sales and friends who know one another so well they can finish the other's sentences. No doubt there is a fair amount of squabbling, too, but as a person just passing through, it's easy to romanticize a place like this.

Of course, none of it would be here, including many similar developments on other parts of Toledo Bend, without the dam that flooded roughly 180,000 acres of forested land and a handful of small towns. Completed in 1969, Toledo Bend Reservoir is the largest human-created lake in the South and the fifth largest in the nation, producing an estimated 205 million kilowatt-hours of power annually. It's popular as a retirement and vacation spot, and draws fishermen from far and wide.

On both its Texas and Louisiana shores where the land is not publicly owned, docks and boathouses jut out into the water in every cove, adding to the crowded feeling that the dead, but still standing, trees give the lake, as if the water had come in overnight and surprised them all.

The reservoir covers more than 100 archaeological sites. Much of East Texas was inhabited by the Caddoan Indians before Europeans arrived. A peaceful agricultural society, the Caddos traded with Spanish arrivals as early as the 17th century, and later with the French and Americans. The Spanish, establishing several missions in the area, named the Sabine River (*Rio Sabinas*) for its cypress trees. Some theorize that "Toledo Bend," the name for the wide arc in this river, was inspired by a similar bend in the Rio Tagus of Toledo, Spain.

The Toledo Bend area was sparsely populated and largely ignored in those early days. That is, until distant powers renewed their periodic quarreling over territorial boundaries. A given settler, more often than not, liked his French- or Spanish-speaking neighbor just fine, trading with him, some-

times going to the same church or marrying the man's daughter or son into his own family. After all, there were very few resources or other people nearby. Still, one had to play along with political rivalries.

After the U.S. purchased the Louisiana territory in 1803 from the French, the political ridiculousness reached a tipping point. Spain and the U.S. threatened to go to war over the western boundary of the tract — Spain said the line should be the Arroyo Hondo, the U.S. said the Brazos River. Their agreement, in the end, was that a long strip of land between the Sabine River and the Arroyo Hondo should be a "neutral zone" — which, since ungoverned by any law and off-limits to soldiers from either army, quickly became infamous as a haven for outlaws and revolutionaries, and thus a problem in its own right.

It's peaceable enough now, this place. All that's left of the Caddos and the Spanish are a few old mounds and missions and the relics of their language in today's common tongue. For instance, Nacogdoches (pronounced *nack-uh-dough-ches*) and Natchitoches (*nack-ah-tish*) were Caddoan tribe names; *Tejas* was probably the Spanish

interpretation of *Tayshas*, the Caddoan word for friend. Gone, too, are the steamboats that chugged their slow course up the Sabine all the way from Orange to Burkeville.

History is sometimes faint, leaving a great deal to the imagination. In the course of my research I read a story about a man named Ira Holbrook — the book gave him only a brief mention, a single paragraph. He lived in a house near where the dam was being built, the book said, and despite a court order, he refused to leave it. Authorities would persuade him to go, and he would leave, only to return soon after. The last time, after again persuading Holbrook to vacate the premises, workers used a tree-crusher to destroy his home.

It's foolish, perhaps even dangerous, to think of "home" as a constant, to imagine that a place you love will not change. But what would Holbrook, or those long-ago Indians or padres or steamboat captains, think if they were to return now? Maybe they would look out at the lake like my grandmother does, marveling at its utility and its beauty, while at the same time missing terribly what had once been in its place. ★

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Early settlers named the site "West Caves" because of its location west of the Peder-nales. Until the late 1970s, trespassers heavily damaged fragile vegetation and cave formations at the collapsed limestone grotto. Since 1976, careful management and limited visitation have allowed the habitat to heal.

No one else arrives by 2 p.m., so we get a private tour with David Bennett, who's worked at Westcave for 18 years. Along our half-mile trek into the canyon, he shares the cave's history and points out plant species — dwarf palmetto, velvet-leaf mal-low, chinkapin oak and Mexican plum, to name a few.

A leggy shrub with glossy red fruit catches my eye. "That's spicewood bush, a host plant for the spicewood swallow-tail," Bennett says. Cool — I want one for our wildscape!

The dirt path ends at a tropical paradise, where shield ferns, beautyberries, sycamores and dark green moss nearly conceal a limestone cavern. Above, a spring-fed waterfall trickles 40 feet into a jade green pool.

"That's travertine," Bennett says, pointing to the grotto's odd-shaped columns

formed by mineral deposits. "We're trying to keep this area as natural as possible so it can recondition itself. And it is." Then Bennett leads us into the dimly lit cavern, where we stand in the middle of a long, narrow room. With his flashlight, he points to ceiling formations that resemble dripping soda straws and one stalagmite that we're allowed to touch. We also see old graffiti carved into the stone floor in 1883.

On our last morning, we explore Little Bee Creek at Los Madrones. Along the path, we pass a stone dam, covered with ferns and grass. Farther downstream, we admire a small waterfall that tumbles into a pool so clear that we can see aquatic plants waving around underwater. In the spring, golden-cheeked warblers — an endangered species targeted by many nature photographers — nest near the creek.

Our last outing is the Austin Zoo, a rescue sanctuary located west of Austin. Many of the zoo's 300 domestic and exotic animals were once circus performers, research experiments or someone's pets. What started as a goat ranch in 1990 now includes prairie dogs, black bears, tarantulas, marmosets, lions, macaws and potbellied pigs.

We meet Bulldog, a western leopard

tortoise once used by a university in nutritional studies, and Cody, a white-nosed coatimundi that bit his owner. We visit Gonzo and Magnolia, a pair of shy colobus monkeys soaking up some sunshine, watch a Bengal tiger splash in his swimming pool and feed pellets to some eager pygmy goats.

On our way home, we visit Solstice, a plant nursery in Dripping Springs. We pick out a coralberry, a fall fruit producer. Bummer. What I'd really wanted was a spice-wood bush ... you know, that cool native plant I saw in the cool place that I'm glad we finally made time to see. ★

DETAILS

- Los Madrones Ranch, 512-264-1741, www.losmadrones.com
- Hamilton Pool Nature Preserve, 512-264-2740, www.co.travis.tx.us/tnr/parks/hamilton_pool.asp
- Milton Reimers Ranch Park, 512-854-7275, www.co.travis.tx.us/tnr/parks/reimers_ranch.asp
- Westcave Preserve, 830-825-3442, www.westcave.org
- Austin Zoo, 512-288-1490, www.austinzoo.org

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