

a few hours or days they come. Several have bought cabins.

I have heard parents say, "I wish we had never sold our cabin." "Hap" has always told me, "Whatever you do, Mom, don't sell the cabin." I guess I never will!

by L. D. "Bill" Melton

## Yost Lake Personal Recollections

In Oklahoma's early days, few towns enjoyed the pleasures of a nearby water-hole or recreational spa at which to wash off and cool down in those hot, dusty, pre-electric, pre-air conditioned days and nights. When they did have such proximity to water, they certainly tried to make the most of it.

This was the case with folks in Stillwater, when at the beginning of the 20th century, the Santa Fe Railroad completed its branch line loop out of Guthrie serving Ripley, Cushing, Stillwater, Glencoe, Pawnee, and intermediate points. The all-important feature of this branch line was a lake of some 25 acres, more or less. Located seven miles northeast of Stillwater, the lake was built to supply boiler water for trains operating on the line. I understand the lake got its name from the landowner, Mr. Yost, but this did not concern us kids. The important thing was the water, muddy or not.

Organization of Yost Lake Country Club quickly followed the construction of the lake, and my father, C. A. Melton, who had arrived in Stillwater in 1900, quickly joined. He served as secretary-treasurer of the club for many of those early years.

I can recall buggy rides to Yost and back well before the general use of automobiles which became common with advent of the Model T about 1908 or 1909. It was a private club, organized primarily for members and their families, but public pressure quickly caused it to be opened to the public at a small charge (not over a quarter). Most people in town were able to enjoy the facility if they had some way to get out there and back.

Yost Lake quickly became a Mecca for youngsters from Glencoe, Pawnee, and other places within driving radius, and its significance in the lives of children in Stillwater and Payne County in those days can hardly be overestimated. This also included many generation of college students from about 1904 on, as well as groups of trainees during World War II, who enjoyed picnics there during short "crash" training programs at the college.

Getting there and back was often a problem. One way was to ride the train, which left Stillwater around noon and returned later that night. I don't remember the fare, but it was a factor for us kids. Bicycles were the usual mode of conveyance for many and even walking the railroad tracks out and back was not uncommon. Later, the Model T served one of its felicitous functions in hauling high school and college boys and girls to Yost and back.

I recall one time, when about seven or eight years old, I was awakened during the night by my Dad asking if I needed to go to the bathroom. I sleepily responded, "Wait till we come to a bridge," which he found

wagon pulled by a tractor went to the dump every morning. Not only were there trash barrels but all the Yost Lake Kids were on it. It went fairly early and "Hap" and other children too, said "Wake me up when you hear the wagon coming!" Many times there were more kids than trash going to the dump. It was a fun ride and, too, there were "goodies" to be found at the dump.

Other managers were John McCrosky, Ernest Westmoreland, Al Hiatt, Gene Jardot, Bud Winsor, a Mr. Johnson, Jim Wells, and now Dick Anderson. Most all the wives of these managers cooked the hamburgers in "The Little Store" and they were always good.

Dick Anderson and Mary are two of us. May I say I have never seen the grounds kept in better shape all year around than Dick has kept them. I am very proud to bring friends to Yost Lake.

The Westmorelands got a high rating, and besides, they had Gary who was certainly one of the gang of Yost Lake kids. There has always been such a deep comradeship among all the children who spent their summers playing and swimming at Yost Lake.

As they become teenagers they generally give up staying at Yost because they are afraid they will miss something in town; but when they are grown and with children of their own, back they come to dear ole' Yost. Look at Bill Jenkins, Lonnie Bair, Bobby Bair, Bob Hert, Judy Baker, the McColloms, Janet Plaxico, Bob, Lynn and Tom Sherwood, John Holt, Mike McWherter, the Jones boys--Bill, Bob and Dick,--and many, many others. Even though they can stay only

public about 1965 but the club still allows large paying groups. The membership has always been kept around one hundred.

The store and manager's house, which was combined into one building, I believe was built in 1918. I do not have the names of all the lake managers, nor are they in the right order, but G. W. Patton was there from 1918 to 1920. "Curly" Donovan was next and he was from Canada. He and his wife had several children and then one Saturday night the twins arrived. It was almost more than "Curly" could take. The Yost Lake Board had to add to the house and store because of the growing family, and the only way to do this was to build north. There was a large tree growing in the way which they did not want to cut down so the kitchen was built with the tree left in the middle. For a number of years kitchen activities went on around that tree.

A Mr. Miltmore was about next in the managers' list. He had coal shipped in by freight and farmers from all around came over to buy coal that had been piled by the tracks.

Mr. Mullins was probably next in line. He was on the plump side and every night just after "lights out" he would walk down to the south end of the road singing at the top of his voice while checking cars and cabins. If some car was there that he didn't recognize he would investigate. We went to sleep with his singing.

Then came Alvie Tate, a friend of the children, particularly as far as the trash wagon was concerned. An old four-wheeled

very amusing. I had been dreaming I was walking the railroad tracks to Yost Lake.

There was a period during my high school days when I took up fishing and would ride the train out at mid-day and fish most the afternoon and evening. Then, when the family drove out to the cabin, we'd enjoy supper in the cool of the evening. I supplied some of the food from time to time, for I became a pretty good fly fisherman and caught some nice crappie and bass.

No reference of the railroad connection to Yost Lake would be complete without mention of the popular, well-known conductor, Tom Fogarty, who, with his family, lived in Guthrie. Fogarty was probably the most accommodating train conductor in the nation, as he would stop the train to let off or take on farmers and others wanting transportation wherever encountered. He would also bring his family to Yost on vacation each summer. I became acquainted with his boys during those vacations and later renewed acquaintance with Dick Fogarty when he came to the legislature representing Logan County in the 1950s or 1960s.

The pumping station at the southwest corner of the dam, close to the gate, was manned at the time my memory began by Pat Albert, an Irishman not long out of the olde country. His job was to keep the water tank filled from the lake to serve trains as needed. Pat later became custodian for the Club during the teens and early 1920s. He ran a "taut ship" as it were and would brook little nonsense from toughs or college boys who got out of line. I remember a fight he and Commodore Wheeler had one day

along about 1916, but I can't recall the cause of the fracas. Commy was quarterback on the college football team, a Delta Sig (later Beta) from Blackwell and a BMOC. Pat reported to C. A. in my presence that Commy could hit a pretty good lick. But my impression was that Mr. Albert prevailed.

Arrival of the train at Yost was a major experience in the lives of us youngsters. This was where we learned most about trains. We could hear the whistle and with ear to the rail could detect the distant rumble long before the train appeared around the curve from the north. As that iron monster bore down upon us, panting, wheezing and breathing up to the water tank, mashing the pennies we had laid on the rails, we were tremendously impressed, indeed, by what man had wrought. It left a memory on our impressionable minds that is still there.

In the early days, cottages were relatively few and clustered mainly between the gate and the pavilion along the west bank. C. A. once told me that his cottage which he had bought from someone else was the first one on the lake. Another early cabin was Bob Lowry's houseboat, the "Hunky Dory," which after being overturned in a violent storm was hauled ashore and converted into a cottage, the better to play poker without disturbance from windstorms. Most cottages were small originally, but enlarged from time to time to suit family needs, and were lighted with coal oil lamps (kerosene supplied by the "Oil Boys," the Lovell brothers). My father's cabin was second from the pavilion, with a point of land out in front. C. A. subsequently had filled in the point and rocked up around the waterfront.

Kid was building a raft of some sort. One just can't imagine the stuff that came back from the dump to help build the rafts!

There have been summers when the children, after lights were out, stayed in the pavilion to tell ghost stories. It was really a race home and a duck into bed when the stories got too scary.

Liberty Preston and I organized a teen night to meet once a week. It finally got bigger than both of us but it did last for several summers--so many, many teenagers came out from other towns as well as Stillwater.

My son, "Hap" Escue, was lifeguard at Yost Lake for about three summers and that was during the time the lake was open to the public. On Saturdays and Sundays there would be as many as three hundred people in and out of the water during the hours from 10:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m. That was a long day but he did have some help on weekends. During his tenure he did pull out quite a number of floundering persons. Also during this time the Waves and the Air Force were stationed in Stillwater and they were taken out in buses for a day at Yost.

The admission to Yost Lake by that time was 35 cents for children and 50 cents for adults. At one time it was 15 cents. There were quite a few teenagers who would ride in the trunk of a car and try to get by without paying, but the culprits were generally caught by some member down at the south end of the road.

Yost Lake was closed to the general

board by the side of the phone to see if there was a number for you to call. Some child would run to tell you that you were wanted on the phone. Of course, the child who did the errand made a dime.

One year the State Forestry Department gave my husband about 200 cypress seedlings, so all club members were invited to the lake to help plant them. It was a cold, wet and very nasty day but many men did show up with their shovels. Our cabin was headquarters and Bernice Jones and I served coffee and cooked doughnuts all afternoon. Cypress trees were planted by the shores all around the lake. When the weather cleared in a few weeks I washed mud and seedlings out of the cabin with the hose. I do not know how many of those cypress trees are left growing, but not many I think, for weather, boats, kids, and other things have taken their toll. Earl Fisher, Lester Sherwood, Bob Hert, Bus Jones and Francis Escue all bought larger trees and planted them also.

There used to be bathhouses very close to the pavilion and close to the shoreline. The women had one east and the men had one west of it. Then the bathhouses were moved to the west of the lake for the population was growing and improvements were needed.

It seems every summer there is something different going on. One summer it was dog fights. One in particular was terrible so rules had to be made about keeping dogs on leashes or leave them in town.

One summer it was rafts. Every Yost

Steps led down to the water. A screened porch extended some 18 or 20 feet across the lakeside, where picnic suppers were enjoyed by generations of family, college students, Pi Eta Alpha girls, South Methodist choir members, and friends galore.

The storm that overturned Lowry's "Hunky Dory" happened one night about 1905. C. A. and my older brother Armon (Dr. Frank A. Melton), then age nine, were spending the night at the lake and were awakened by cries of "Help, Help" from across the lake. They put out in a rowboat in the direction of the shouts, and picked up the "survivors."

I don't believe anyone drowned on that occasion, as did happen in July of 1910 when my four year old sister, Armorell, fell off the diving board (then attached to the pavilion) about noon one hot Sunday. No one was around to see her fall in. My brother finally found her lying on the bottom, but efforts to resuscitate were unavailing as she had been under water for thirty minutes or more. In those days the only technique for resuscitation was to roll the victim over a barrel, which was tried. And Doc Janeway, who made a record drive from Stillwater in about ten minutes, was also unable to revive her. A tragedy for our family, indeed. But at age six, I was too young to realize it then.

This was probably the first of very few drownings that have occurred at Yost Lake. I am sure many were prevented by quick action on the part of better swimmers. Now and then someone would find himself in trouble, gulping too much water, panicking, and needing assistance. I remember pulling

more than one to safety in such situations, using the techniques learned in the life saving course at college. One night, my wife, Nellie, and I were having a picnic supper at the cottage--the phonograph was playing "Stormy Weather"--when we heard cries for help over in the swimming area. I ran over and revived a young Stillwater businessman who had lost consciousness.

The major buildings at the lake in those days consisted of the pavilion, the custodian's house and store, the bathhouses, male and female, and the privies. Later, an electric plant was installed, protected by a small shed, which provided intermittent electricity until cut off at midnight. This operated until a tie-in was made with the Rural Electric Co-op in the late 1930s. There were also some good, high swings for girls and boys, and horseshoe grounds, all of which were in large demand.

The Club supplied a number of flat bottomed rowboats, possibly fifteen or twenty of them, painted mostly green as I remember. These had several uses, including fishing, teaching kids the art of boat-handling, and for romancing by "spooners," among other uses. They were great as a point from which to watch a beautiful moon rise and shed its brilliance across the waters. But there were restrictions on boat usage. At 11:00 p.m. the inexorable sound of "ALL BOATS IN" came floating across the lake or penetrating the willow trees along the bank, intruding upon and terminating prematurely many an idyllic situation. Helping girls to a seat in a wave-tossed boat, or transferring them from one boat to another was always fun, probably for both boys and girls. And the higher the

well! No more drinking from the dipper. There were three pumps that I remember. One was back of Paul Santelman's cottage, one was on the grounds just south of the store, and one was on the picnic grounds.

And the electricity! At first it was lamps. Then we graduated to Delco system, each one being a little better than the one before. The caretaker turned on the big switch when he thought it dark enough; then at 10:45 there were three blinks which meant everyone head for the outhouse and get home in fifteen minutes when all lights would go off. Of course, if necessary there were still lanterns or candles and a little bit of juice left in the wires.

I came home late one night from a date and slipped on to the back porch. It was very dark and I reached up to turn on the hanging bulb. And guess what! My hand enclosed flypaper! My Mother--who was always playing some trick on me--had tied flypaper around that cord and bulb. She and I giggled together for the next thirty minutes while I washed my hands in the wash bowl!

We all had Kerosene cooking stoves. I believe we could buy Kerosene at the store if we forgot to bring it from town. We generally could buy bread and milk at "The Little Store" besides hamburgers, pop and candy. For several summers dressed chickens could be bought from Mrs. Newman over on the hill, and also, for several summers some lady took orders for very delicious cakes. She lived on a farm north of Yost Lake.

There was one telephone in "The Little Store." One could check the bulletin

east side. Mr. Ernest Westmoreland drilled one of them, the one to the south, and he said there was a much larger underground lake there with pure water. Our water is tested each year by the City Health Department.

Hal Hackleman was the contractor who put in the sewer which runs to the south side of the tracks to a disposal system. I do know that in front of our cabin the sewer line is eleven feet deep.

Lester Sherwood did a lot for the lake just on his own. The new foot-bridge close to Larry Plank's cabin, the railings over the culvert on our own road, and many other things are the results of Lester's handiwork.

One year Sudan grass was planted on the land west of the golf course. Francis Escue said it wasn't worth very much, but a farmer from out west was desperate for hay and bought the hay anyway.

Another time sorghum cane was planted and it was cut and put into the lake to settle the silt. The sorghum cleared the lake all right but it stopped up our noses for a few days. This was Dr. Will Irwin's idea and it worked.

It was a great day when we got the sewer in (\$14,000) and a great time for the plumbers who were putting in bathrooms. That meant the dishwater wasn't thrown out the door and we could do away with the out-houses across the street. Of course, it was a few years before everyone could get these conveniences, but they were wonderful--to go to a faucet instead of taking a bucket to the

waves, the better.

Club policies were usually controlled by members interested in fishing. For this reason motor boats were ruled out on the lake from the beginning. Their noise would also have been objectionable to the increasing number of residents around the lake.

For youngsters in Stillwater the lake's primary function was to serve as a swimming hole. I learned to swim there along about 1909 at age five as did many others including Frank--"Little Doc" Whittenberg. The diving platform was a "show-off" place for expert divers and swimmers of whom I was considered one. My specialty was hand-stands and dives off the high tower. The older folks sat on the pavilion watching the sport and enjoying the breeze. Races and diving contests were occasionally organized. A swimmers' raft was anchored some 20 to 30 yards farther out in the lake, with a steady traffic of swimmers to and fro.

Hudie Haston and I used to take turns doing tricks on the high slide, speeding down on hands and knees and rocketing out over the water as far as we could. Another interesting gambit was to hold a large heavy rock in your arms, using it to keep you submerged, while walking out to the diving platform then up the ladder. Then, still carrying the rock, you jumped off and walked back along the sandy bottom until you reached shore. From time to time the lake bottom in the swimming area was sanded, which greatly improved the swimming area. At all other points in the lake you could count on the bottom being muddy from erosion of

adjacent farm lands.

An interesting challenge to a girl friend was to dare her to swim with you across the lake, a distance of perhaps 200 to 225 yards. Out in the middle there were a couple of "snags"--old tree tops which served as a convenient rest stop going and coming. I wonder if those snags are still there after these 50 or 60 years? Maybe sometime I will try to find them again.

At the upper end of the lake, above the bridge, there were perhaps five or more acres of shallow water with a lot of willow growth, lily pads, cattails, marsh grass, etc. This used to be a good fishing area. But as years passed erosion from above the lake gradually filled in this area. I don't suppose there is any water at all today above the bridge. A fellow predicted some fifty years ago that "there wouldn't be a lake here twenty years from now." But he was mistaken, for farming has changed and most, if not all, the land area above the lake is in pasture, with very little soil erosion. So the lake remains, as it was for the most part. Perhaps not as deep, however. It would be interesting to learn just how deep, or shallow, it has become.

The custodian who followed Pat Albert was Curly Donovan, erstwhile painter around Stillwater, who came there from Nova Scotia after World War I. Other custodians followed in succeeding years, but I left Stillwater in July of 1933 and did not know them.

For perhaps 90 percent of its existence the lake water remained more or

afterward that the Ripley train bridge over the Cimarron River was washed out. I doubt it will ever be rebuilt.

Yost Lake was leased from the Santa Fe for a duck hunting club in 1900. H. B. Bullen built the first cottage (now Fred Jones') and Bob Lowry, a lawyer, had a houseboat. Charter members were H. B. Bullen, Bob Lowry, E. E. Good, C. A. Melton, and Frazier. Mrs. Bullen said that members who came in later were Dr. Barron, Dr. E. L. Moore, J. W. Baker, Dr. D. H. Selph, John Bishop, C. M. Jenkins, Clarence Neerman, Walter Hert, Wyche Murphy, and Val Schott. H. B. Bullen bought his share in 1911 and it was sold in 1971. Since Mr. Bullen was a charter member and he bought his share in 1911, that was probably when the club was set up to sell shares.

Yost was incorporated in 1928. In 1941 more land was purchased from a farmer to the west to the section line. This second portion of land cost \$2,800. In the early fifties the last purchase of land was made; this time from the Santa Fe. Bob Hert and Francis Escue went to the Santa Fe headquarters in Arkansas City, and after several meetings they bought the lake and the land on which the cabins are built for \$1,930.

During the time Fran (my husband) was on the board in the late 40s and early 50s, there were several improvements--a water system, electricity, and a sewer system put in.

We have three big water wells and tanks--two on the west side and one on the



twice a day. They usually blew special whistles for the people of Yost and there was lots of waving from everyone. We could hear the trains coming from quite a number of miles away, so, rowing boats or running, we headed toward the tracks to wave, laugh, and yell. Many a child rode the train out from Stillwater at two o'clock in the afternoon, and parents drove out that evening to pick them up for a ride back to Stillwater.

The land was bought from a family by the name of Yost; and the little depot, which was a boxcar set upon a foundation, had the name YOST printed in large letters outside on each end of the "depot." The inside contained nothing but two or three benches next to the walls. I have not found out the true spelling of the name; is it YOST or YOUST?

Santa Fe built the dam and the track over the dam. The water tank was very large with a large pipe which the engineers could let down for water to go into the boilers. This tank was just west of the little depot. Probably the foundations might still be seen.

People from all around Yost rode the train into Stillwater or on to Cushing and sometimes as far as Shawnee. They could go north in the opposite direction as far as Arkansas City. On one of the train's last trips Dorothy Gage took her three children, Mary Margaret, Virginia Ann, and John Charles, and I took my one, "Hap" Escue. We rode to Cushing where we got off to eat lunch. The train went on to Shawnee and when it returned to Cushing, it picked us up and back we came to Yost. It wasn't long

less muddy. Efforts were made from time to time to clear it up, either by introduction of moss (which brought disadvantages as well) or the dissolving of blue vitriol by hanging a gunny sack of the sulfide product off the end of boats and rowing them about. This apparently worked, because I do remember swimming and fishing in clear water from time to time in drouthy periods.

Fourth of July celebrations were a special occasion at Yost. Planned programs attracted hundreds of visitors; games were played, races run, swimming and diving contests conducted, and an awful lot of red soda pop and hamburgers were consumed. The day's events were followed by spectacular (to our youthful eyes) fireworks displays set off in front of cottages around the lake, sparklers, Roman candles, skyrockets, firecrackers, and "whizzers" of various kinds.

I found a section of sheet metal guttering and fastened it securely in front of our cabin from which I set off skyrockets that zoomed out over the lake, bursting into a blaze of colorful, falling sparks. I think there was one time when a rocket stick fell into a boat out on the lake, but no one was injured.

Yost provided perhaps the best opportunity for children to learn to handle a boat. I still have pictures of my son, Alan, learning to row in a fairly high wind one Sunday. This is a useful thing to know, and many hundreds of Stillwater children learned boathandling at Yost Lake.

Fishing and frog sticking were

interesting activities for many, both old and young. When that deep, booming sound of a grandfather bullfrog sounded from across the waters at dusk, it was a call to action for some who, with flash light and harpoon, shoved off and took out along the shoreline. Their efforts were often rewarded too.

Fishing was a more universal activity, indulged in by many men, boys, and a few women. Over the years Yost has certainly yielded up its share of bass, perch and crappie. But the most successful fisherman, in my memory, was Gordon Pulliam of Cushing, who I think was invited to come and purge the lake of its monster bass, which were eating all of the smaller fish and ruining the fishing for most of us. Pulliam was a bait caster and worked the deeper waters in the center of the lake. He was highly successful, where others failed, and usually came in with a big string of funklers that was the envy of us all, an envy that soon turned into disapproval because of his success.

Another activity, or perhaps, inactivity, worthy of mentioning was the pleasant habit for men (mostly) to sit on the lawn, in easy chairs, smoking pipes or cigars, and discussing politics or whatever in the cool of the evening. While the young folks were pursuing their various bents, we solved as many of the nation's problems then as similar sessions do today.

"Spooning" is, of course, an activity that never ends. There is just another generation doing it, and perhaps even more effectively than in my day, who knows? During the early 1920s when I was among that

Yost Lake was the recreational place for miles around. Randle Perdue, quite a sportsman, was out there many and many a time for hunting and fishing. South of the dam was quite a good place for game and, of course, in duck season the lake was full of the web-footed creatures.

Randle tells the story of a Mr. C. D. Jackson who went to the dam to shoot ducks. Randle and some others at the north end of the lake heard shot after shot. Then came Mr. Jackson running to the north end wanting to borrow some more shells. The men had a good laugh on him because what he was doing was shooting mudhens (coots), and, as everyone knows, the mudhens are not a "fit" duck for eating.

Mr. Purdue also told of rowing across the lake with Ed Gallagher. They were going duck hunting on a cold winter day, so they were equipped with heavy clothes, guns, decoys, dogs, et cetera. On their way across the lake the boat started taking on water and sinking. Of course the men panicked, and then they found out they could stand up in waist-deep water. The rest of this story is they rescued everything they could and drove back to town--wet and shivering--and no ducks! There are quite a number of men in Stillwater who, one way or another, had their fun at Yost Lake.

The Santa Fe Railroad bought this land for the lake in 1899 because they needed a water supply for their coal burning locomotives--and all the trains stopped here for a drink of water. A passenger train went by twice a day and the freight train also ran

problem of my forgetting to empty the water pans. The iceman finally graduated from the wagon to a little truck!

The entrance to the grounds was at the south end of the area grounds. We turned off the main section road and came east by the railroad track along the side of the very large water tank, and came on to the cabins or pavilion.

When the pavilion was first built, there were two or three bedrooms in the middle for persons who wanted to spend the night. The bedrooms didn't last long, however, and the pavilion became just an open recreational building. For many years parents sat in there conversing and watching their off-spring in the water. Some visitors spent nights in their wagons or tents and cooked on an open camp fire.

With Yost Lake in mind, I started talking to a little lady I was sitting by in a bank. Sure enough, she had been to Yost many times as a young girl. She lived about ten miles from Yost and the "young'uns" went there to go boating--that is, if they could find a friend who had a boat. The boat had to go in a wagon bed she said. This made me ask, "Then you all rode in a wagon?" Her answer--"No, honey, I had a boyfriend so we went in a buggy."

On the Fourth of July, as well as at other times, there were horse races. There is still an old hitching post back of one of the cabins which was used back in horse and buggy days when Yost Lake was young.

active generation I tried to uphold my part in this great endeavor and found Yost Lake a most useful situs, whether in teaching some tremulous young lady the first step in learning to swim (floating on the stomach with face under water), or pitching woo in a rowboat after dark.

This experience of taking her out in a boat, perhaps with a ukelele or maybe a portable phonograph and a Rudy Vallee record with the moonlight shimmering across the water, the sound of waves lapping against the boat, was calculated to keep our hearts young with joyful anticipation as we set about trying to find out all we could about that mysterious subject of sex. Often, of course, with inconclusive results; but we gave it our best.

Those were titillating days, indeed, for those of us who came of age in the early 1920s; as no doubt they have been for each succeeding generation of youths.

And so, for many reasons, the significance to Yost Lake to people in and around Stillwater, and especially for the youngsters, far exceeded its size as measured by acres or feet of water.

## Horrible Marine Disaster on Lake Yost

### The "Hunki Dori" Goes to the Bottom in the Midst of the Raging Tempest— Crew and Passengers Escape— First Mate and Pilot Perform Heroic Deeds No Loss of Life, However, Results

One of the greatest catastrophes ever chronicled in the annals of navigation in Oklahoma occurred at Yost Lake last Saturday night. The beautiful and stately "Hunki Dori," Captain Lowry, owner and commander, now lies at the bottom of the lake almost a total wreck.

Late Saturday evening she weighed anchor at High Bridge crossing, expecting to land at Railroad Point early Sunday morning. The weather being threatening, however, the crew under orders from First Mate Benham, temporarily in command, moored the stately craft at Willow Point for the night. The anchor was dropped in forty fathoms of water, the cable made fast to the wharf, and with slow fires under her boilers, the most of the crew was permitted to retire. The First Mate, however, remained on deck and Pilot Higgins kept his post at the wheel ready for any emergency.

## Memories of Yost Lake

One day recently I walked across Eighth Street with the green light at the same time as an elderly man. The weather usually being the opening subject of a conversation, he told me it had rained northeast of town that morning. Quickly my question was, "Did we get any rain at Yost Lake?" Then came the memories!

As a boy he had lived in the northeast part of town on their farm, it being where Wal-Mart now stands. He remembered riding in the iceman's wagon many times to get to Yost, and at Yost Lake he learned to swim. He couldn't remember any bath houses there so I guess they were built later. In those days, anyhow, the boys went swimming in their overalls. The old man hurried on so our conversation came to a close but my memories didn't.

The iceman did "cometh" to Yost nearly every day. I have the icecard that Mother put in the screen door for him to see. Fifty or seventy-five pounds of ice didn't last very long in the hot summertime. Our icebox was on an east porch. Dad had bored a hole in the floor under the icebox for the water to drain through. That solved the

mainly responsible for the organization.

Mr. Guss came through Stillwater last Friday on his way to Glencoe. He stopped at Yost for supper, a swim and some fishing. Knowing that he was from Guthrie, someone asked him how it was that he could fish in the lake when no one except members of the club had that privilege.

"Oh, I'm the daddy of this place, that's why," laughed Mr. Guss. Then he went on to explain how and why the lake came to be. Mr. Guss has been for many years a well known banker of Guthrie.

At two bells, the whole crew was hastily summoned from quarters and all hands were called on deck. A sudden shift of the wind hurled the ship with tremendous force abaft the cable. To the horror of all, it was at once seen that she had parted her cable and was drawing her anchor through the boiling seas at forty knots an hour. A panic fell upon the passengers, and the cries of women and children were such as to pall the stoutest heart. The anchor failed to hold, the the ship rushed through the churning seas of spray and foam in a west by south course. The man at the lead line took soundings every minute as she jumped through the cyclonic gales, and ere long went forth the ominous cry of "breakers ahead!" Immediately, the First Mate saw the hopeless peril of the ship, and through his trumpet gave the command to man the life-boat. The women and children, carefully supplied with life preservers, were first handed into the boats and launched into the darkness of the booming seas. Then the men were safely sent away. Then by twos and threes the brave crew, under the calm orders of the First Mate, deserted the doomed ship, until the spray from the breakers was drenching the pilot-house and the roar of the angry waters was almost under the prow. Only the brave First Mate and faithful Pilot Higgins remained unto the end.

Left to their own resources, these brave men determined to risk their lives for the safety of the ship entrusted to their care. They stripped to the waist in order to battle best with the angry seas when the vessel should go to pieces on the jagged rocks. Thus ready, they determined

to desert the ship only when the intruding waters put out the engine fires and the last small bottle floated forlorn and empty on the foaming waves.

Only one chance remained to save the ship from utter destruction. With the clear vision of every hero in the moment of extremity, Pilot Higgins saw a small opening in the jagged jaws of the breakers. With cunning hand, he revolved the wheel at lightning speed as the boisterous winds hurled her on the ledges of destruction. The calculation was true, and the staunch ship like a winged creature jumped through the aperture and escaped the cruel teeth of the angry breakers.

But before he could box the compass, the wind, as if angry at its defeat, hurled a mighty avalanche of waves after the flying ship. They caught her broadside on; she quivered in every beam; she careened heavily to one side, and toppled over on her starboard and sank to the bottom, in six inches of water and three feet four inches of mud.

Pilot Higgins and First Mate Benham were imprisoned in the pilot house. The door was down under one half inch of water, and their escape seemed hopeless. But with their naked fists they beat on the plate-glass window, finally smashing it into forty-one million, two hundred and forty-one thousand, six hundred and forty one and one half fragments. Through the aperture they crawled forth into the boiling seas, without much trouble, save that the right foot of the First Mate stuck in the hole, and was extricated with

Soon after the lake was finished, Mr. Guss conceived the idea of stocking it with fish. To carry out his idea, he secured a lease from the Santa Fe for the purpose, and then employed a man to get the fish for him. This man, a railroad employee who traveled along the line, running the various pumping stations, had a good bit of time on his hands, which at Pawnee he utilized in seining the stream there for fish. Bass, channel cat and croppie were the only ones taken, and for these Mr. Guss paid the man a dollar a hundred. Several thousand fish were thus put in the lake before anyone else knew about it.

About two years later the farmers near the lake began to find out that there were fish in the lake. They were not slow to take advantage of the fact, and soon stories of the fish caught there began to drift down to Stillwater. Citizens of Stillwater, realizing the possibilities in such a lake, became interested and wrote to the Santa Fe officials to inquire if the lake could be leased by them for a country club.

The Santa Fe replied that Mr. Guss of Guthrie had leased the place some two years before. The Stillwater people at once communicated with Mr. Guss and asked him on what terms he would turn over his lease. He replied that if a country club were organized, limited to fifty members, who would agree to keep up the place and enforce rules, he would turn over the lease to them in exchange for a life membership in it. This was done, and the country club became a reality. Robert A. Lowry was

## Origin of Yost Lake

U. C. Guss of Guthrie,  
Father of Popular Resort

There was a man visiting Stillwater the other day who has done more toward promoting the pleasures of the town than any other man. He was U. C. Guss of Guthrie, the man who founded Yost Lake. Many have enjoyed the lake with its boats, its swimming and its fishing, but few know the story of how it all came to be. This is the story as told to an Orange and Black reporter by Mr. Guss himself.

It was in 1898 or 1899 that Mr. Guss, as agent for the Santa Fe Railroad, came down through Pawnee, Payne, Lincoln and Logan counties, buying the right-of-way for the branch line from Pawnee to Guthrie. After the line was under way it was decided to build a lake and pumping station somewhere along the route. At Yost, the place finally selected, a temporary trestle had already been built across a deep ravine. The end of the ravine was built up, forming a high dam, over which the railroad tracks were built. Water flowing in made a lake covering thirty or more acres.

difficulty and much abrasion of cuticle.

Having escaped a watery grave, they perched, bleeding, naked, drenched and cold, with chattering teeth and hopeless heart, while the tempest raged and the wild seas howled about them, upon the rigging of the sunken vessel, and hallooed for two bells, seeking to attract the attention of some passing ship; but all in vain.

Finally, weak from loss of blood and numb from cold, Pilot Higgins fell from the rigging and was swept away by the angry floods. As he was going down for the last time, he stuck his feet down and discovered he was drowning in four inches of water. He immediately waded ashore, just as the sun was purpling the rims of dawn, and First Mate Benham followed him.

At a farm house near the shore, they were equipped each with a pair of overalls, and with neither hat nor shoes they reached Stillwater early Sunday morning, where nourishing food was furnished, their wounds dressed by competent surgeons and they were clothed with proper habiliments.

It is believed that no lives were lost, although none of the life boats have been heard from. The log-book is not accessible and the passenger list is missing. There are rumors of several "dead men" being in the lower hatch-way, which has not been searched, but the companion way is clear, and we believe the rumors are false.

It is claimed by some that a

failure to observe the requirements of Oklahoma's Marine laws led to the disaster; but Captain Lowry is positive that it was an "act of God," against which no possible precautions would have availed.

The damages will not be much for it is believed that a competent wrecking crew can raise the "Hunki Dori" with little difficulty. The Mate and Pilot lost their wardrobes, and acres of cuticle. Also several measures of fish bait in jugs. The latter, however may be recovered later. No insurance.

The above newspaper clipping was found in an old scrapbook in the files of Special Collections of the OSU Edmon Low Library. Since both the personal recollections of Frances Escue and L. D. Melton mentioned the Hunki Dori, we found the newspaper account of interest.

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### Editorial Policy

The *PAYNE COUNTY HISTORICAL REVIEW* is published quarterly by the Payne County Historical Society. It is distributed without additional charge to members of the Payne County Historical Society. Single issues, when available, may be purchased at \$2.50 each.

The *PAYNE COUNTY HISTORICAL REVIEW* welcomes reader's comments, news, or requests for information from readers. Family histories, memories, diaries, letters, histories or groups or institutions, articles, photographs, or maps are also welcome. No payment is made for articles published in the *REVIEW*.

Correspondence should be addressed to the Editor. The Society assumes no responsibility for statements made by contributors.

## Letter to the Editor

Dear friends:

A few lines to tell you how much I enjoyed the last issue of "Review," especially the article on "History of Oklahoma Territory." I was born on the claim my father staked in the Sac and Fox opening September 22, 1891, 1 mile south, 3/4 mile east of Ripley.

Alvan Mitchell and Little Tom and I were school mates. Martha Norton and husband George were neighbors to our family. The band stand Martha mentioned on page 35 has been restored and is used as a gazebo at Ripley High School.

The listing of towns and communities in Payne County brings to mind the Plumb post office established some 18 months after the Sac And Fox opening. It was located first on Highway 33 west of Cushing on the corner northwest of Kinsey's dairy. It later moved about 2 1/4 miles west (just west of Highway 18) on the north side of the road on what was later the George Gillespie farm. The spot was identified for years by the remains of a storm cellar. My Aunt Lizzie was the daughter of Robert Laughlin, the last postmaster at Plumb.

Thanks for letting me talk.

Sincerely,  
Harold R. Straughn

**Minutes**  
**Payne County Historical Society**  
September 17, 1985

Roxie Weber Plaza

The meeting was opened by President Lawrence Irwin. Treasurer Doris Scott reported a checking account balance of \$1,777.89, savings account balance of \$511.37, and a certificate of deposit of \$1,520.78.

President Irwin explained the committee system he was organizing. Each board member will be an advisor to a committee and members of the Society will be asked to serve. The committees are: library, publications, historic sites, program, membership, nominations, publicity, genealogical society liaison, historical society liaison, special events, David L. Payne park, and arrangements.

Linda Rosser from Oklahoma City gave an interesting program about apple peelers. Following the meeting she autographed her books. A portion of the proceeds from books sold will go to the Society.

Peggy McCormick  
Secretary

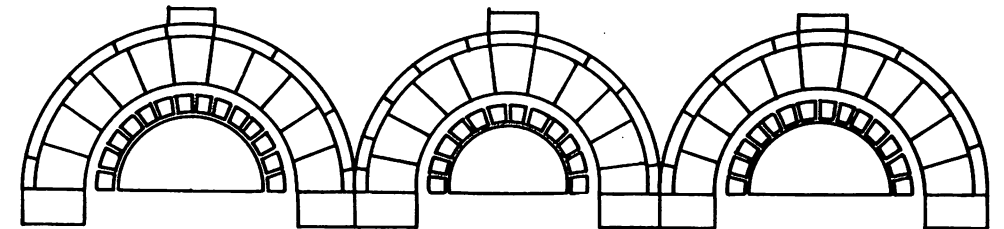
PAYNE COUNTY

# Historical Review

VOLUME VI

NUMBER 2

WINTER 1985



*PAYNE COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY*



### **Officers**

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Bill and Virginia Thomas, *Vice President*  
Peggy McCormick, *Secretary*  
Doris Scott, *Treasurer*

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Payne County Historical Society is organized in order to bring together people interested in history and especially the history of Payne County, Oklahoma. The Society's major function is to discover and collect any materials that may help to establish or illustrate the history of the area.

Membership in the Payne County Historical Society is open to anyone interested in the collection and preservation of Payne County history. Membership dues are: annual individual, \$10.00; annual family, \$15.00; annual contributing, \$25.00; institutional, \$20.00; sustaining, \$50.00; life, \$100.00 paid in one year. Membership applications and dues should be sent to the treasurer.

All members receive copies of the *Review* free. In addition, the Society sponsors informative meetings in September, December, March, and June. Board meetings are held on the second Tuesday of each month that a regular meeting is not held. Meetings are held at noon at the Luncheon Junction in downtown Stillwater. All members are encouraged to attend.

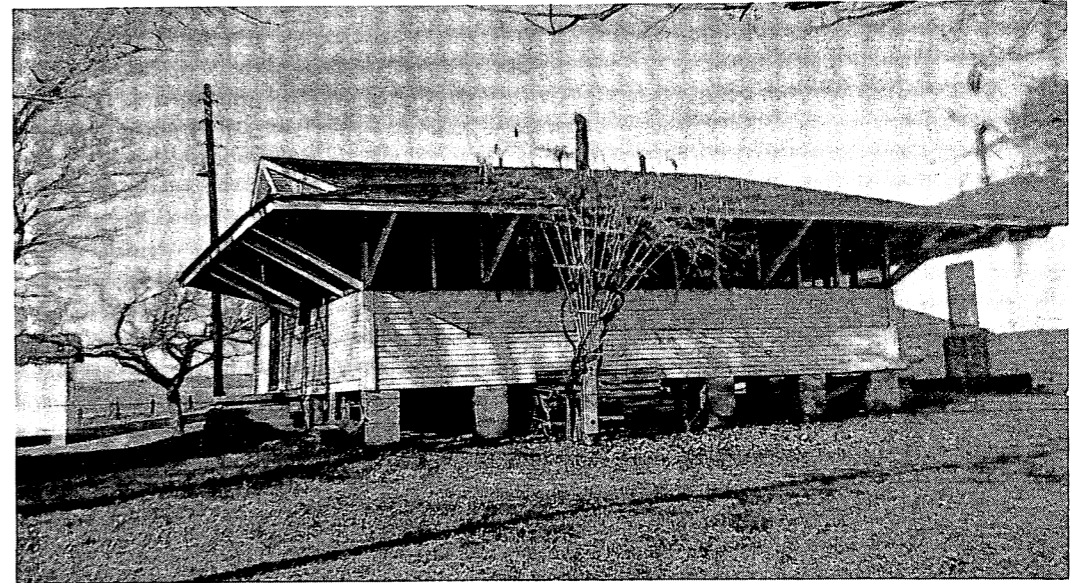
### **Cover Photo:**

C. A. Melton was one of the earliest citizens of Stillwater to take advantage of the many benefits available for his family at Yost Lake. In the early 1900s, he purchased this summer home. Many other families and organizations enjoyed the Meltons' hospitality here during the summers.

*Photo Courtesy of Mr. L. D. Melton*

PAYNE COUNTY

# Historical Review



**Payne County Historical Society**  
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