

TEXAS HIGHWAYS--DAINGERFIELD S.P.--MALLORY

Story and photographs by Randy Mallory

GLORY DAYS *Fall's color fest at Daingerfield State Park*

Relax at one of East Texas' favorite state parks

As autumn cranks up the color in the foliage right before their eyes, Faith and Bill Biggs do their share of “oohing and aahing.” The Dallasites take the easy hike along the wooded shore of Lake Daingerfield each day of their RV-camping stay at Daingerfield State Park. They've also turned their wooded sojourn into personal therapy.

Bill says the hour-long trek through the tinted forest helps him keep in shape. Faith--who for decades has come here twice a year, on July 4th and again for fall's color fest--finds rejuvenation: “When you walk the trail around the lake, the ‘busy-ness’ of the big city just fades away.”

This time of year, across the woods and waters of this hilly 550-acre park, the most important “busy-ness” remains the metamorphosis of leaves. Wide-eyed visitors bask in the reds of sweet-gums, the oranges of oaks, and the yellows of elms.

The park's swim platform--brimming in summer with fun-in-the-sun bathers--now stands in silence amid deep blue waters. On a bench overlooking the serene scene, first-time visitors Joe and Kay Walker of Teague watch deep purple black-gums and evergreen pines sway in the

cool breeze. “We’d heard that the fall color at Daingerfield was something to see,” Kay says, “and we haven’t been disappointed.”

Ditto over at the Dogwood Camping Area, where two Louisiana couples set up camp. Roy Wright and George Cawthon rig their recreational vehicles for a weekend’s stay, as wives Kay and Dot, respectively, cut up vegetables for lunch.

“We traveled through this area last year and thought the park looked pretty,” says Roy, “so we wanted to come back and camp here in the fall.” Adds George, “This is our first time camping in Texas, and we just love all the colorful trees.”

Likewise for Lenny and Debbie Howell of Mesquite. “It’s been 20 years since we came here for fall color season,” Lenny says, strolling past the playground which overlooks reddish-brown bald cypress trees. “Remembering how nice it was, we just took a whim for the weekend and said, ‘Let’s do Daingerfield.’”

Since 1938, when the state park opened, “doing Daingerfield” has become a tradition for generations of solitude seekers and nature lovers. Park superintendent Kim Ochs estimates that Daingerfield gets some 144,000 day-visitors--folks who come mostly to fish, swim, and boat--plus another 22,000 who stay the night. The park sports 51 tent and RV campsites. Nine RV sites feature full hook-ups and pull-through spaces, attributes much-praised among “big trailer” travelers. For non-campers, the park offers three heated and air-conditioned cabins and one group lodge, complete with kitchenettes and bathrooms.

As many as 75 percent of park visitors hail from the Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex, which is located an easy 2-1/2 hours’ drive away. “People from the Metroplex like to come here because it’s so different from where they live,” the superintendent points out. “It’s a relaxing getaway for them. That’s why we get a lot of repeat guests.”

The relaxing getaway’s reputation for fall color draws much of that following.

But spring's the thing for other faithfuls such as Robbie Christopher of Dallas.

She likes the park's redbud trees and wisteria vines that splash the forest floor with shades of lavender. And she likes the graceful dogwoods whose white blossoms look like butterflies in flight. She comes, however, as much for camaraderie as for nature communing.

One weekend each spring, Robbie and 20 or so girlfriends leave their husbands behind and move into Bass Lodge, a rustic, five-bedroom facility situated on a steep hill overlooking the lake. Robbie, a former caterer and now a human resources specialist, takes care of the menu. Another "one of the girls," retired Dallas interior decorator Candace Love dresses up the lodge with fresh flowers, colorful throw-rugs, and cloths and candles for the tables.

Robbie says the women hike, canoe, and birdwatch. If they're lucky, they encounter some of the park's other wildlife--including white-tailed deer, armadillo, raccoons, and squirrels.

But mostly they just hang out together. "I began this ten years ago with friends from my neighborhood. Some have moved away, but still continue to come--one even comes from Seattle," she says. "We spend two days just catching up with each other."

A group of men gathered here in 1935, but not for a relaxing weekend retreat. They were LEMs (locally experienced men) who came as workers for President Franklin Roosevelt's Depression-era work program known as the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC). The job at hand: build a state park. (From 1933 to 1942, the CCC built 56 state parks in Texas.

Daingerfield is one of 31 which still exist.) (11)

One of the LEMs was Archie Gibbs who, at age 80, now lives in Daingerfield.

"We worked on the park during the day building the dam and the roads. Sometimes at night we'd work for the Army fighting forest fires nearby," he recalls. The project's 200 CCC workers lived in barracks on site. For recreation, they formed baseball and football teams and competed against area towns. (6, 11)

Archie remembers an even more popular form of recreation. The government tried to boost morale by holding dances at the park's newly-erected bathhouse-recreation center, complete with a live orchestra. "They advertised in the local papers to get girls to come out to the camp and dance with the boys," Archie says, "and they did."

The park's bathhouse-recreation center continued as a social gathering oasis for decades.

Carolyn Smires of nearby Hughes Springs hung out here as a teenager during the 1940s. "There was a jukebox, and we'd dance out under the stars at night. There was a concession stand for snacks. In the winter we'd build a fire in the pavilion's fireplace to stay warm," she adds. "We'd pitch in gas money for whomever had a car and head out to the park, because it was where the action was." Her Daingerfield High School class of '49 has held several class reunions at the park.

LaMond Verner (Mt. Pleasant High School, class of '54) remembers driving the 20 miles from his hometown to the park in a school bus for his senior class trip. "We spent all day swimming off the dock and playing with the girls," recalls LaMond, who now lives in Indian Trail, North Carolina. Back at the park last summer for a family reunion, he notes how little the place has changed.

Indeed, in the summer, clusters of teenagers and families lounge on the shady, grassy slope leading from the bathhouse to the swimming area. Thirty yards or so off the bank, youngsters leap with twists and turns from a spacious concrete swim platform. Beneath tall pines at water's edge, people in pedal boats and canoes explore the lake's shoreline.

In addition to swimming and boating, Lake Daingerfield offers excellent fishing for bass, catfish, crappie, perch, and chain pickerel.

Art Burkart of Dallas, a park regular for 15 years, remains a fishing fixture around the lake, where you'll find him tube-fishing several times a year, regardless of season. By late fall,

Art dons an insulated swim suit and hops into an inflated inner-tube to float and cast for black bass along the grassy edges of the lake.

“In a tube you feel changes in the water temperature, just like the fish do, so you’re more likely to know where they are,” Art says. But stay quiet and be patient, he advises. “The water’s so clear here (it’s spring-fed), that the fish can see what you’re doing and are easily spooked.” Who’s to argue? After learning the lake’s secrets, Art snags 12 to 15 large bass in a typical week’s stay.

Adds wife Jeanette, content to hold fort back at their 24-foot RV trailer home: “When the trailer’s freezer gets full, we know it’s time to head home.”

Freezer-full or not, Art’s hard to pull away from “his lake.”

“I usually get out on the water at 5 a.m. or so. At that time of day, it’s almost like having my own private lake. It’s so fantastic when the sun comes up and shines through the tall pine trees!

“I’m from Germany, and we love pine trees,” he says. “So this is a little bit of Germany for me.”

Like most Daingerfield devotees, the Burkarts brag not only about the park’s peacefulness and relaxing activities, but also about the friendliness of the Texas Parks & Wildlife Department employees here. Park superintendent Jim Ochs and his staff seem like family, they say.

There does seem to be a certain ease about Daingerfield State Park, a comfortableness which produces fond memories of fishing expeditions, reunions with family and friends, and gloriously lazy days in a natural setting untouched for more than 60 years.

Once back home, regulars and first-timers alike start thinking about coming back.

As spring fling fan Robbie Christopher puts it: “We have so much fun at Daingerfield that when one of our annual weekend retreats ends, we’re already thinking about the one next year. This is a very contagious place.”

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