

Story and photos by Randy Mallory

## Salmon Lake Park Bluegrass and Memories

The scene along the sandy lane leading into Salmon Lake Park looks more like the back lot of a movie studio than the place for a bluegrass music festival.

A blue 1939 Ford sedan waits for 13-cents-a-gallon gasoline outside Jake's Filling Station. In the distance, the make-believe community of Salmon Switch spreads out before you, its windmill and elevated water tank marking the center of town. At a bright red depot, people relax on the platform as if waiting for a train. Across the way, others mosey down an Old West-style raised boardwalk that connects the two-story hotel, barber shop, and cafe.

Then lively music breaks out from a nearby oak grove with the assurance that, yes, this is the right place! A fiddle's melody soars above the thump-thump of an upright bass, and both blend smoothly with the rhythms of a flat-top guitar, mandolin, dobro, and five-string banjo.

If it's Labor Day weekend at Salmon Lake Park in the East Texas hamlet of Grapeland, it's time for bluegrass!

Day and night across the 20-acre park, bluegrass music fills the air during what has become one of the state's longest-running annual bluegrass festivals. On stage, big-name acts like the New Tradition and Gov. Jimmie Davis draw several thousand fans who applaud adoringly from lawn chairs brought from

home. But some rarely get to the stage. They're too busy making their own music.

Bluegrass players of all ages and abilities jam together in pairs, clusters of three or four, or impromptu bands of a dozen or more. They run through traditional tunes under shade trees, beside old shacks, or sandwiched between several hundred RV's that festival-goers pull into the park for the three-day musical happening. "This is known as a parking-lot picker's place," explains fiddler Robert Ceder of Austin. "There's always lots of good players who like to jam with anyone who comes along."

For more than 20 years, Floyd and Fannie Salmon have welcomed bluegrass devotees and newcomers as if they were both part of the family. Ask pickers and grinners during festival time, and you'll find out the feeling's mutual.

Guitar player Jim Glenn of Sealey says "it's like a family reunion here," a common sentiment among park regulars. Adds mandolin player Jim Schoggins of Tyler, "You see the same people at every festival. In fact, it may be the only time of the year they see each other. It's that family feeling, as much as the music, that we come for."

Marie Carter of Whitehouse agrees: "One of the best things is the people that come here. Bluegrass people are the nicest in the world, unspoiled and real down to earth."

Frank Baird of Spring Creek, member of a bluegrass club near Houston, has attended 15 festivals in a row. "It's so relaxing to see people sitting around playing music together. And there's so much to see and do for the whole family. I saw my granddaughter catch her first fish here."

More than fish has come from Salmon Lake. The evolution of the park and its bluegrass festivals also sprang from its clear waters.

In 1960 Floyd Salmon bought land just west of Grapeland and built the small lake as a water supply for his cattle. His kids and their friends knew a good swimming hole when they saw one. For more than a decade, the Salmons invited family, friends, and church groups to cool off in their spring-fed lake, and, as Floyd puts it, "one thing led to another."

In 1972 Floyd's father, Jake, suggested they collect a small entrance fee from summertime swimmers. A friend from church later pointed out that the lake would make a perfect setting for family reunions. Having just gone into the building-moving business, Floyd brought in an old general store which he refurbished and renamed the Crazy Horse Saloon, and began renting it for get-togethers. Next came the first of several lakeside cabins available for overnight stays.

Then in 1976 friend and longtime bluegrass musician Earl Garner of Elkhart suggested adding bluegrass music to the park's growing repertoire of family-oriented fun. The Salmons have held a festival every Labor Day weekend since, produced in cooperation with Joe Featherston of Chandler, who books the stage acts. (The Salmons also host a jamming-only Fun Bluegrass Weekend each April.)

Salmon Lake festivals spotlight traditional music twice a year, yet old times are not forgotten the rest of the year at Floyd and Fannie's nostalgic park.

To date, Floyd has moved in and restored 30 to 40 old buildings (he stopped counting), as well as mule-drawn equipment and other memorabilia which recall his East Texas upbringing.

An old store and filling station remind him of the nearby community of Salmon's first store, which Floyd's grandfather built and his family operated until "mom got tired of farm life and wanted to move the six miles into Grapeland."

An old dairy barn, peanut thrasher, and syrup mill recollect hard work...and rich rewards. Then there's a former coffin shop from the Teens and a horse trough from the Twenties, both used in Grapeland, and the schoolhouse Floyd attended in the Forties, now a meeting room. Floyd moved in several houses from a coal mine, as well as an old dental office, a railroad section house, the post office from the ghost town of Augusta, and a late 1800s dog-trot home from Palestine, now Salmon Switch's "hotel."

Fourteen of the refurbished old buildings provide lodging for festival-goers and year-round visitors. Others serve as recreational halls, concession stand, and meeting rooms for reunions, weddings, and parties. All told, the Salmons can accommodate up to 67 people overnight, plus spaces for as many as 400 RV's and primitive campers. The park even features a 1,700-foot airstrip.

RV clubs flock to the park in the spring and fall when the woods come alive with color. Summers bring reunions and watersports galore on Salmon Lake, which now sports sandy beaches, fishing piers, a swimming platform, and an elevated diving board.

But when Labor Day rolls around at Salmon Lake Park, thoughts turn to one thing: bluegrass.

"Our first festival brought in 250 people, now we get over 3,000 a year," Fannie reports. "Everybody said this would be a good place for a festival and that bluegrass people were really good guests," adds Floyd, who grew up listening on the radio to the music of the late Bill Monroe, the recognized father of bluegrass. "They were right. These are the kind of people we like. They really are like family."

As pickers and grinners relax surrounded by nostalgia, toe-tapping to their beloved music, they'll agree in a heartbeat: Bluegrass and memories-- now that's a tradition worth keeping!

