

Orlan Love, The Gazette's outdoor writer since 1994, graduated from Marquette University in 1977 with a degree in journalism, after [...]

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New life for Iowa's downtrodden Lake Darling State Park

Lake, dedicated in 1950, will have a grand opening for the public in late summer or early fall

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BRIGHTON – Lake Darling State Park a few miles west of here will be 64 years old this year, but it will be like new after a 12-year, \$16 million renovation that reached a major milestone Wednesday with the closing of a new dam to refill a long-dry lake.

Scores of park supporters and state and local officials clapped mitten hands at a 10 a.m. ceremony as Department of Natural Resources fisheries technician Vance Poulton turned a wheel to close the dam's gate, beginning the impoundment of Honey Creek that should refill the 304-acre lake in a matter of months.

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Dr. Fay Vittetoe, president of Friends of Lake Darling, talks about the new dam during the second formal setting of the gate at Lake Darling State Park in Clay Township on Wednesday, February 12, 2014. The first gate closing was on September 17, 1950. Lake Darling will now start filling the 304 acre area with water after a \$16 million dollar restoration project which started in 2008. (Stephen Mally/The Gazette-KCRG TV9)

“The most important thing to note on this occasion is that it’s your project, your state park, your lake,” Department of

Natural Resources Deputy Director Bruce Trautman said.

That theme – that it took local vision, perseverance and cooperation to refurbish a downtrodden park and lake – was echoed in remarks by other officials later in the morning at the Brighton Community Center.

The lake had been drained in 2008 after the dam had been discovered to be leaking. Several obstacles, including bad weather and lengthy endangered species and archaeological studies, slowed the process of replacing the dam, said Don Kline, a retired DNR fisheries biologist.

Meanwhile, the Friends of Lake Darling, spirited volunteers led by local veterinarian Fay Vittetoe, raised money, undertook projects and forged alliances that helped convince the DNR to refurbish the 1,400-acre park.

"This is basically a brand new park," said Tom Basten, southeast supervisor for the DNR's State Parks Bureau.

Lake Darling State Park, dedicated in 1950, will have a grand opening for the public in late summer or early fall.

"We're hoping to open by midsummer, weather permitting," Bastian said.

The renovation includes a new dam, new sediment catch basins in the watershed, two silt dams in the lake, shoreline riprap, fishing jetties and piers and a new accessible fishing trail.

The new dam will raise the lake level two feet.

The upgraded park will feature new roads, a new campground with 50 amp service, new boat ramps, new shelter at boat rental area, new sand on the beach, new waterlines throughout the park, two new shower buildings, new dump station, new fishing bridge, new trail bridge and a new park lodge.

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Iowa DNR Fisheries Management Technician Vance Polton cranks the handle to close the dam gate as he stand on the baffle riser during the second formal setting of the gate at Lake Darling State Park in Clay Township on Wednesday, February 12, 2014. The first gate closing was on September 17, 1950. Lake Darling will now start filling the 304 acre area with water after a \$16 million dollar restoration project which started in 2008. (Stephen Mally/The Gazette-KCRG TV9)

The large-scale restoration began in the early 2000's with the installation of numerous watershed features for the control of erosion and nutrient run-off and, ultimately, to improve water quality.

Lake Darling Watershed Coordinator Stan Simmons said the project could never have gotten off the ground without the cooperation of watershed landowners, more than 80 percent of whom installed ponds, terraces and other conservation practices to limit the amount of soil and fertilizer flowing into the lake.

"Eighty percent landowner participation makes us feel very comfortable with our investment," said George Antoniou, the DNR's lakes restoration coordinator.

The in-lake and park renovation phases of the project began after a complete draw-down of the pool in 2008.

While the lake was dry, 309,000 cubic yards of sediment was removed from its bed, replaced with in-lake fish structure and 13,000 feet of shoreline rip rap, said DNR fisheries biologist Chad Dolan, who has managed the lake since Kline's retirement.

Dolan said the park anticipates about 74,000 household visits per year, which would place it in the top third of Iowa's most popular state parks. Those visitors are expected to contribute \$8.5 million to the local economy each year, he said.

Kline said the lake's water, which he once described as "hot chocolate," will be clear to depths of 4 feet, greatly enhancing the environment for both aquatic species and people.

"The key to a good state park is a good body of water," said Todd Coffelt, chief of the DNR's State Parks Bureau.

The crowd gathered for the morning ceremony included several people who had been there on Sept. 17, 1950, for the initial setting of the dam gate.

"There were thousands of people there, dressed to the nines, for that first closing," said Shirley Schooley of Brighton, then a Brighton High School freshman and the majorette of the band that played during the ceremony.

Documentary filmmaker Samuel Koltinsky, who is working on a film about the lake and park's namesake, said pioneer conservationist and Pulitzer Prize-winning editorial cartoonist J.N. "Ding" Darling would certainly have approved of the rebuilding effort, which demonstrates Darling's belief in conserving natural resources and working together to realize a vision.

After the second gate setting, Vittetoe said, "I hope we don't have a third. I hope we have it right this time."

Kline said the lake's fundamental problem was that its 12,500-acre watershed was too large for a 302-acre lake. "Today we would not build a lake with a ratio as high as 40 to 1," he said.

Soil conservation measures both in the park and in the watershed should ensure that the lake remains clear for generations, he said.

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