

“Ding” Darling’s legacy continues

By David Hotle | Feb 12, 2014

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A group of distinguished guests pour what will be the first half-gallon of water into Lake Darling today shortly after the dam gate was closed.

BRIGHTON – What Lucille Bonham had thought would be a once in a lifetime event ended up happening for a second time today as she was present at the second closing of the Lake Darling dam. While much of her memory of the first closing, which she attended with her daughter on Sept. 17, 1950, is lost to time, she recalls seeing Jay Norville “Ding” Darling speaking at the event that would create the lake that bears his name. She recalls shaking his hand and, while she doesn’t remember what he said, she remembers Darling as being very friendly.

“It was just a very special thing we were able to be a part of,” she said. “I didn’t want to miss out in this today.”

Today she walked with about 50 others along the former dam of Lake Darling to the gate of the new dam to watch it be set in place. Bonham spoke of how special the lake was to her and how she missed having it at the park.

The water from Lake Darling was drained in 2008 as part of what was supposed to be a two-year project to remove silt from the lake. The project is being funded from several sources, including a federal grant from Lakes Restoration. Fish and Wildlife Trust Funds and Marine Fuel Tax funds have all been invested in the project. There had been several delays, but Department of Natural Resources people predict the lake will have water in it again later this year.

Friends of Lake Darling president Fay Vittetoe led the group down the path to the outlet tower where the presentation was held. Along the way she pointed out several items and discussed the history of the park. Due to the 20-degree temperature, the ceremony was short. A larger ceremony was held in the Brighton Community Center. A line of people waiting to get inside extended out the door.

Speakers at the event included Sam Koltinsky, executive producer of documentaries “America’s Darling” and “Darling is Back,” who represented Ding Darling’s family; Kent Rice, the project engineer; Peter Morrison, grandson of Frank Miller of the Izaak Walton League and a proponent of the state park; and Jim Blakeney, grandson of Al Baldrige, a friend of Miller’s. Bruce Trautman, the deputy director of the Department of Natural Resources (DNR), made the formal dedication. Aaron Meader gave the invocation.

“The thing that is probably the most important thing about this project is that it is your project,” Trautman said to the group. “It is your state park and it is your lake. Never

once did I hear anyone say ‘ come do this for us.’ It was always ‘ what can we do for this project?’”

As the crowd watched, DNR fisheries management technician Vance Polton turned the crank on the outlet tower to close the dam.

Vittetoe discussed the importance of conservation. She handed out ceremonial bottles of water for the honorary gate setters to pour into the lakebed, thus starting the process of refilling the lake. She also gave silver dollars for the group to throw, honoring a tradition that began in 1950. She said that 12 silver dollars were thrown and that Feb. 12, 1962, was the day that Ding Darling had died.

As the coins flew through the air into the lakebed, Vittetoe spoke through time with Ding Darling.

“Ding Darling, your legacy lives on,” she said.

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