

LAKE DARLING: TAKE TWO

With a few twists from above, the outlet pipe sealed shut. Looking on atop the Lake Darling dam, the crowd cheered as the ceremonial first water (a half dozen water bottles turned bottom side up) was poured into the expanded, 304-acre lake bed. For good luck, a dozen people flung dollar coins; recreating a story from the original 'gate setting.'

And so begins 'Lake Darling; Take Two.' Gone are 60 years of silt and nutrients which washed in from the 12,500-acre watershed above the state park and lake, near Brighton in Washington County. One estimate is that the muck trucked out would fill a football field...12 stories high.

"With that 47:1 (acre ratio) watershed, we would not build a lake today," admitted retired DNR fisheries biologist Don Kline.

However, it was a showplace on September 17, 1950. Park namesake—and legendary conservationist—Jay N. 'Ding' Darling was on hand for the dedication of what was then the largest artificial lake in Iowa.

Spectators lined the dam and seven high school bands played. It was a 'huge crowd,' as reported in the Des Moines Register. That's where Darling won two Pulitzer Prizes during his tenure in the first half of the 20th Century, as a biting editorial cartoonist.

From there, he stepped into the pre-war Roosevelt administration as chief of what would become the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service. He was the driving force behind establishment of tens of thousands of acres of national wetlands; funded in large part by another Darling legacy; the federal Duck Stamp. He also convened and became the first head of the National Wildlife Federation.

Over the years, though, that oversized chunk of heavily farmed watershed in Washington, Keokuk and Jefferson counties filled in much of the lake.

"In the '70s, it would flow in hot chocolate brown," noted Kline. The lake was drained in 2008. Since then, engineering, archeological and construction efforts...as well as a gotta-see-it-to-believe-it cooperation between landowners, government agencies, donors and other players went to work. Now, they wait for their \$16 million investment to fill.

"Obviously, we get this snow to melt. There is a little water seeping out of the ground already. We expect with a normal (spring) that by the end of April, the lake will be full," estimates fisheries technician Vance Polton. Small fish are to be stocked in early summer. With substantial in-lake habitat, plenty of food and no large predators yet, that will mean great fishing in two to three years.

There won't be much access to the lake this summer anyway. Construction will wrap up this year on a new campground, water and sewer

system, roads, boat ramps. Even the 'old' lodge along the lake is only seven years old. "Everything is new, except the ground it is built on," grinned Polton.

With substantial snow and temperatures in the teens, Wednesday's cold weather gate setting was a bit more subdued than the first time around. Still, as the crowd grew to almost 100 in the nearby Brighton Community Center, nine hands went up when the call went out for any 1950 attendees.

But the real story, *this time around*, shows up on a tour around the lake. There, 162 conservation projects are in place; ponds, terraces, water control basins, soil holding grasses and other conservation measures.

Watershed coordinator Stan Simmons points to ponds, for instance, stretching across property lines.

"Without landowners, we would not have any of this done," Simmons flat out declares. "Everything that happens up here is on land. It is owners cooperating with each other. Problems did not start at line fences. They did not stop at line fences. Many times, landowners had to work together to get problems solved. And we were very successful, in most instances."

Those conservation practices slow down water moving down the watershed. Silt, nutrients and other contaminants drop out of the flow. Of those 160 projects, 72 involved two or more landowners working together. A study of the drainage area indicates that three-fourths of the private land causes a 95 percent reduction in sediment that ends up in the lake. Even on the remaining private land, a high percentage of the runoff is controlled.

That means clear water reaching the lake; a lake that the Brighton community hopes to take to the bank.

"With 100,000 people living within a half hour of the 'new' lake, an \$8.5 million economic impact is predicted," DNR fisheries biologist Chad Dolan, noted for the lake supporters. "Lake Darling is back. It surely would not have happened without you."

Darling Legacy Continues at Hoover Library

Wednesday's Lake Darling gate setting came on the anniversary of its namesake's death, (in 1962). His larger than life legacy continues a half century later, with an exhibit at the Herbert Hoover Library in West Branch. 'The Hidden Works of J.N. 'Ding' Darling' will continue through May 24.

He was the subject of a 2013 TV documentary, 'America's Darling; The Story of Jay N. 'Ding' Darling,' produced by Samuel Kotinsky. The piece, which featured Darling's grandson Kip Koss, tracked his early days in Sioux City, his rise to the top of the high impact world of political cartooning in the 1920s and 30s...and his larger than life impact on 20th Century conservation.

At this week's ceremony, Koltinsky returned to Iowa; three months after Koss died. "He was excited about the lake restoration; the cooperative partners involved. You are building a story for the next generation (and) leaving such a wonderful legacy." Koltinsky also announced he is developing a follow up documentary; 'Darling is Back.'