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Lake Darling gets a second chance at life

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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-to-1 watershed, we would not build a lake today,” retired DNR fisheries biologist Don Klein said.

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However, it was a showcase on Sept. 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, The Des Moines Register reported. 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

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as chief of what would become the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. He was the driving force behind the 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," Klein said.

The lake was drained in 2008. Since then, engineering, archeological and construction efforts — as well as 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," fisheries technician Vance Poulton said.

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 and boat ramps. Even the lodge along the lake is only seven years old.

"Everything is new, except the ground it is built on," Poulton said.

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 of 60 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 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 pointed to ponds, stretching across property lines.

"Without landowners, we would not have any of this done,"



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Simmons said. "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 indicated 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 told the lake supporters. "Lake Darling is back. It surely would not have happened without you."

Joe Wilkinson, information specialist for the Department of Natural Resources, is the Press-Citizen's outdoors columnist.

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