



SAPPA LAKE WAS FILLED with water flowing from Sappa Creek for almost 30 years, starting in the 1930s. The lake was used for swimming and fishing until it filled in with silt in the mid '60s. — Photos from Decatur County Museum collection



THREE MEN FROM THE Civilian Conservation Corps surveyed the land before beginning work on the lake and shelter house at the area now known as Sappa Park.

Shingles on shelterhouse will help restore old park

By **KIMBERLY BRANDT**

The Sappa Park Restoration Committee has raised \$5,000 and is preparing to order shingles to re-roof the historic shelter house at the park, although the group needs about \$2,000 more to do the entire roof.

In 1935, the Civilian Conservation Corps, which hired young men to do public projects during the Depression, started building the shelter house and clearing the lake area northeast of Oberlin.

While the men were stationed here, they also built the caretaker's home. The federal government paid the men and they lived in a campsite located in the northeast part of Oberlin. An original basement from the camp is now part of the Darroll Banzet home.

Mr. Benton said that the committee has been researching the lake, which once held water, and what has happened since then. What they have found is that the federal government turned the land over to the state, which used it as a state fishing lake, and then it was bought by the city to become a park.

From what Mr. Benton and Gary Anderson, who is also on the committee, can find, when the lake was built, the city and county raised about \$30,000 to purchase the land, which totals about 480 acres.

At that time all the land in that area, including what is now Sappa Youth Ranch, was part of the recreation/conservation project, said Mr. Anderson. This includes the caretaker's residence which is now used at the youth ranch.

From the 1930s to the mid-'60s, water from

Sappa Creek filled the lake bed and many spent their summer days lying on the sandy beach at the back of the shelter house, boating and swimming.

The lake slowly filled with silt, said Mr. Benton. There may have been some mistakes when building the lake, Mr. Anderson said, and later, when it started to fill in, they built the dam up instead of pulling the silt out of the bottom of the lake.

In 1987, a group here organized to see what they could do with the land and lake, said Mr. Benton. They ran into some problems finding documentation on who owned the water rights.

"The lake could hold water again," said Mr. Benton, "but the city no longer owns the rights. The state sent a letter to the city about a meeting for water rights and the city didn't show."

However, the city has no record of receiving this letter. Even though the city doesn't own the rights, Mr. Anderson said that the committee wants to make the area useful again.

Mr. Benton said that the lake will hold water if the flood gates are closed, but it will dry up again if there isn't water flowing into it at all times, and without the water rights this won't happen.

At the end of the last summer, Mr. Benton, City Administrator Gary Shike and Connie Grafel, marketing director of the Oberlin-Decatur Economic Development Corp., took U.S. Rep. Jerry Moran to the park. Mr. Benton told the congressman that they are interested in applying for grants from the government based on the fact that the park was a government

project. The committee has since applied for two grants but they haven't received either, but they are continually in contact with Rep. Moran.

The next idea is to try to work with the state Department of Wildlife and Parks and look into making the area a wetlands.

"Wetlands would be a home for animals," said Mr. Benton. "It would also mean possible fishing and wading depending on the depth of the water."

The wetlands would only include the land closest to the beach next to the shelter house. Before this happens, however, the committee has made the structure its first priority.

The roof is showing wear and tear, said Mr. Benton. The committee has raised about \$5,000 but he said that he thinks it will cost another \$2,000 for all the shingles and roofing supplies.

The committee would like to order the shingles so that work can begin around April or May in what Mr. Benton calls an "old-fashioned barn raising." He said they will be asking for groups to volunteer time on a weekend to help re-shingle the building and will ask other groups to possibly provide lunch for that day.

Mr. Benton will meet with the city council on Thursday night to let them know where the committee is on the project, since the city owns the land.

Donations can be sent to P.O. Box 231, Oberlin, and checks made out to Sappa Park Restoration Committee. Mr. Benton said that all money collected will be used on the park.



NATIVE RESOURCES WERE used for the park property, including these trees that a young man chopped to be made into posts and picnic tables.



JACK BENTON, REP. JERRY MORAN and City Administrator Gary Shike walked through the center hall at the shelter house to show the congressman where the beach used to be.

— Herald staff photo by Kimberly Brandt