

A Strange Lake

by Liz Gibbons

After we set up our campsite we walked down to the lake. My Dad had explained a little about where we were headed on our drive to this state park. Yet as we approached the lake it felt like I was in a strange land, as if nature's rules had been changed. Tall trees or tree stumps were standing straight and tall throughout the entire lake, a forest of bald cypress trees growing in all that water. This was Reelfoot Lake in the northwest corner of Tennessee.

My Dad had explained that the lake was formed between November 1811 and February 1812 when there were a series of earthquakes, four of which were the largest that ever struck in the United States. Some of the quakes were so powerful they changed the course of a section of the Mississippi River. This area lies along the New Madrid fault line that covers parts of Indiana, Illinois, Kentucky, Tennessee, Missouri, Arkansas, and Mississippi. The New Madrid fault line covers an area six times larger than the San Andreas faultline in California.

In the early 1800's this land area all the way down to the state of Louisiana was virgin forest. There were a few white settlements sprinkled throughout the region. Among the inhabitants were a few scientists and educated people who wrote about their experiences. On the night of the first earthquake a man who operated a fleet of boats was awakened by a huge crashing sound and walls of water. A giant wave carried his boats a mile upstream. A woman described the earthquakes during the winter months when their sulfurous vapors would cause total darkness, and sometimes the quakes would cause the Mississippi to flow backwards for a few minutes. The strongest quake occurred on February 7, 1812, when waters from the Mississippi and its tributary, Reelfoot River, rose fifteen to twenty feet perpendicularly and fell a distance beyond their riverbanks forming Reelfoot Lake.

It was not earthquakes but loud music emanating from a popular bar across the road from the park that kept us awake long into our first night there. Added to our discomfort, the park was not well cared for. Picnic tables and rest rooms were filthy. The solution was to rent one of the nearby comfortable cabins. Attached to the rental office was a small dining room, and my Dad was informed that meals were included with the rental price. The food served was delicious and abundant. Meals were served on big ten inch plates. I recall our first meal included fried chicken, biscuits, and corn on the cob and fresh tomatoes from their garden, plus dessert.

With our food and sleep needs taken care of we rented a rowboat to explore the lake. These rowboats had a rowing mechanism different from any we had ever seen. There were two chairs attached to the floor of the boat so two people could row. The mechanism of the oars was arranged so that instead of moving backwards when you rowed, the boat moved forward so that you could see to avoid hitting stumps or trees that stuck up in the lake. We spent several days exploring the lake and surrounding region before moving on to explore other parts of Tennessee, Kentucky, and the Carolinas.

My Dad was adept at finding unusual or out-of-the-way places for us to visit on our annual summer vacations, so these vacations always proved very interesting.