

Big Cypress Bayou History

The city of Jefferson is home to a natural wonder of Texas, the Big Cypress Bayou. To the untrained eye this bayou appears to be just an average swamp, but it is much more than that and has a special place in this town's history. Situated on Big Cypress Bayou, Jefferson claimed to be the "River port to the Southwest" in its early years. Today, however, that is no longer the case.

Big Cypress Bayou can indeed own up to its reputation as a natural wonder because it is the only "natural" lake in Texas, a fact that most native Texans do not know. The area is a series of wetlands around Jefferson, which make up part of the largest Cypress forest in the world. Surprisingly, though the wetlands are a natural habitat, they would not be the way they are today without the involvement of humans. Bayou features were altered by humans in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. A log jam in 1799 on the Red River caused the Big Cypress to overflow the low-lying area that is now Caddo Lake. The backed-up waters impeded navigation on the Red River, but allowed Jefferson to thrive and grow.

In 1835, Captain Henry Shreve, the namesake of Shreveport, Louisiana, led the way to clear up parts of the log jam, which had become known as the Great Raft. Life along the bayou continued to flourish until the last portions of the Great Raft were removed in 1873. At that point in time, the waters of Big Cypress Bayou began to dry up; as did the economic fortunes of the area because of the dependence on shipping. In the early twentieth century, plans were made to build a dam for the bayou in hopes of re-establishing shipping transportation. While a dam was eventually built, the riverboats never returned to their previous use levels and Jefferson never reclaimed its dominant inland port stance.

Today, though the Big Cypress Bayou is not used for transportation, local residents have found new benefits of the wetland area. With restored natural beauty, the bayou is a great spot for avid naturalists and those eager to see for themselves the famous bayou. The city even offers riverboat tours of Big Cypress Bayou; the company can be found just one block away from the bayou in downtown Jefferson. So as you take in the dawning Cypress trees and Spanish moss of Big Cypress Bayou, recall their story of persistence and rejuvenation over the past couple of centuries in this natural swampland wonder.

Source(s):

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