# Collecting on Catahoula Lake

by Randy Bennett

**ABOUT CATAHOULA LAKE**

Catahoula Lake is a very unique and fascinating place. It is a shallow lake, located southeast of Pineville, Louisiana and is fed by the Ouachita, Red, and Little Rivers making it the largest freshwater lake in Louisiana. It is a low-lying, swampy area that receives annual flooding by the rivers named above and so does not function as a usable lake year round.

In 1958 it was designated as a National Wildlife Refuge. It seems that the lake is on the Southern Flyway and is the best duck hunting site in the state. As many as 75,000 ducks have been recorded there. Because of periodic and unpredictable flooding by the rivers that feed it, along with variable rainfall in the spring and summer months, the depth and size of the lake varied greatly from year to year. As a result, the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries, the U.S Fish and Wildlife Service and the U.S Army Corps of Engineers decided to build a series of dams with flood control gates in 1979.

In the early spring, the flood gates are opened and the lake is drained of water. By the time summer arrives, the bed is, for the most part, relatively dry. This allows desirable vegetation to grow and provides food for the ducks later in the year. In early September, they close the flood gates and the lake begins to fill again. The flood gates help provide a more consistent water level and thus a sustained successful hunting season for duck hunters is maintained.

There are a number of hardwoods that grow around the perimeter of the lake. However, the lake bed itself is primarily home to bald cypress, swamp privet and water elm. The bald cypress and swamp privet are not invasive species. However, water elm began taking over the lake bed and the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries, the U.S Fish and Wildlife Service and the U.S Army Corps of Engineers have been trying to eradicate water elm from the lake bed since the 1950's. However, water elm has proved to be a very prolific species in that

ideal environment and, despite efforts to eradicate it, water elm continues to maintain its foothold on the lake bed, making it more difficult for the ducks to easily feed on the grasses and seeds they are trying to cultivate.

In the 1980's and 90's, the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries ramped up their campaign to try and eliminate water elm from the bed of Catahoula Lake. They sprayed them with herbicide, but that proved to be cost prohibitive. They tried cutting them down, but they just sprouted back from the stumps. They even tried burning all the water elm. But nothing has proved to be successful.

It seems nothing can kill the all-powerful water elm, (except perhaps the overzealous bonsai enthusiast).

For bonsai enthusiasts, the situation is ideal. Between the time the lake is drained in late spring and once again filled in the fall, the growing season for the water elm is a short 4 months. This creates a very dense, twiggy canopy and naturally stunted growth. The water elm are submerged for about 8 months out of the year.

In addition to water elm, a number of excellent bald cypress have been collected from the area. Of benefit to the bonsai enthusiast in Catahoula Lake is the resident beaver population, which has an affinity for bald cypress growing near the shore of the lake. They will harvest cypress trunks about 3-5 inches in diameter, leaving stumps that explode with new growth and often form naturally hollow trunks. Below are 2 old black and white photos of bald cypress collected from the lake bed in July of 1984. The photos were taken in the spring of 1985.

**MY FIRST CATAHOULA LAKE COLLECTING TRIP**

I was struck with amazement the first time I was taken on a collecting trip to Catahoula Lake. It was in the early 1980's and a number of GNOBS members took a trip to collect water elm and bald cypress at Catahoula Lake. Vaughn Banting had organized it and there was no way I was going to be left out.

When we first walked out onto the lake bed to begin scouting for potential bonsai, I was truly astonished at the sheer number of water elm. There were thousands upon thousands as far as the eye could see; globes of dense foliage from one to five feet in height on flared bases – single trunks, double trunks, triple trunks and clumps. I wandered for over two hours, tagging tree after tree, finding excellent potential bonsai, but always looking for one that might be just a little bit better than the last one I tagged.

I collected four trees on that trip and learned a lot about collecting in this unique environment. I made a number of subsequent trips over the next few years and collected trees that developed into magnificent specimens.

The optimum time for collecting specimens from Catahoula Lake is in July and August. At this time, the lake bed is pretty dry, unless there have been recent rains, and you can drive your vehicle out onto the lake bed to save yourself some considerable walking. Unfortunately, it is incredibly hot and not the best time to dig trees out of the ground. So, we use a little different procedure when collecting at that time of year.

When a specimen is found that you wish to collect, you must first prune it back, eliminating all foliage that you are certain will not be needed for the design of the tree. The second is to spray the tops and underside of all the remaining foliage with a product called Wilt-Pruf. Wilt-Pruf dries quickly and is designed to seal the leaves to prevent transpiration. Once the remaining

foliage has been treated, the tree can be dug from the soil – even in July and August. Once out of the ground, we wrap the rootball in burlap and spray with water from a pressurized sprayer to saturate the burlap and dampen the root ball to prevent the roots from drying out. The Wilt-Pruf remains effective for about 4-5 weeks. By that time, the tree will have overcome transplant shock, roots will have once again begun to grow and the tree will begin putting out new growth with no ill effects.

Below are a couple of water elm that were part of an annual exhibit we held at Perrino's Nursery in the 80's. The clump planting was one of my trees that I had collected about 3 years prior. The single trunk specimen below was one of Vaughn Banting's. I do not remember how many years it had been in training when I took this photo.

**WATER ELM AS BONSAI**

Water elm respond very well to pruning. They typically grow in a multi-trunk form, similar to crepe myrtles, but you can also find them growing with a single trunk if you look hard enough. Water elm (Planera aquatica) is not really an elm – that is, it is not an 'Ulmus'. But the leaves and growth habit are similar to the elm. The leaves are simple and alternate along the shoots. The size of the leaves is similar to Chinese elm, but the leaves on the water elm are asymmetrical. The leaves are smooth, dark green and have serrated margins. The shoots and leaves are a reddish color as they emerge.

The bark is very smooth and grayish in color until the trees mature. After about 30 years, the bark begins to thicken and becomes quite dark and will partially exfoliate with each new season of growth. They are a vigorous grower and, like bald cypress, prefer a soil that remains moist. I know a lot of bonsai enthusiasts who lost their water elms by growing them in bonsai soil that dried out too quickly. Remember, they survive being totally submerged 7 to 8 months out of the year and grow in the bottom of a lake. You often collect them with dried moss (the type that grows underwater) covering the trunk and branches.

They respond well to pinching and pruning. They will tolerate being cut back severely and will throw out many new shoots below the cut area. The smaller shoots and branches can be wired and bent easily. However, once branches thicken and harden, the tissue becomes very stiff, making directional changes through wiring very difficult.

Below is a picture of a GNOBS "bring-your-own-tree" workshop with John Naka. The tree he is helping to design is a collected water elm from Catahoula Lake. The size, structure and root base are typical of water elm in that area.

**CATAHOULA LAKE COLLECTING TRIP 2018**

I had not been to Catahoula Lake since before Hurricane Katrina. Most of the members currently in the GNOBS have never been, but a number of people had heard me talking about collecting there and wanted to go. Since it had been so long since I had been there, my wife suggested that we scope it out before bringing anybody up there collecting. So, this past August, the two of us got up early one morning and drove to Alexandria. From there it is about a 30 minute drive to the lake. There are four different roads that lead to the lake. We went down the first one and drove for a ways out onto the lake bed. I was shocked! The thousands of trees, as far as the eye could see, were no longer there. There were some, but nothing like there used to be.

We drove down the second access road to the lake as far as we could. The road got very muddy and not wanting to get stuck, we left the truck and walked for quite a distance before getting to the lake bed. Again, pickings were slim. I was getting very discouraged about what I was seeing.

We did see some interesting sights along the way. The photo below is a water elm growing in the forest around the lake. It is the largest one I have ever seen at Catahoula Lake.

The photo below shows my wife, Teresa, standing next to a bald cypress. There are some magnificent old specimens at Catahoula Lake, if you take the time to look for them.

Having no luck at the second site, we went back to the truck and drove to the third, with the same outcome. Frustrated and disappointed, we drove back to Alexandria and got a room for the night.

The next morning, we had a good breakfast, loaded up the truck and headed back to New Orleans. On the way out of town, I called Jim Osborne and Dennis Burke and gave them the bad news. We had planned on coming up the following weekend to go collecting. They had never been there. After I hung up with Jim, Teresa said, "Look, we drove up here to check it out, but we didn't check out the last road. Let's go take a look. Besides, I've never seen the flood control dam and I'd like to see it." So I turned around to make her happy with no hope of seeing any decent collecting areas and drove to the fourth road that leads to one of the flood control gates.

We drove out to the dam, took a few pictures and found the dirt road that led to the lake. We drove through a gate and were able to drive out onto the lake bed and to my surprise, there were patches of water elm here and there – nothing like I had seen years ago, but there were still areas with hundreds of trees and good collecting potential. It would seem that the Wildlife and Fisheries people had been vigilant in their efforts to eradicate the water elm. But they still haven't gotten them all!

Teresa and I scouted around. We found a number of water elm with really nice bases and structure. When we once again reached an area with cell phone service, I called Jim and Dennis to let them know that the dig was back on.

We came up the following weekend. Luckily it was cloudy all day and so the heat was not too bad. We each found a few trees with some potential and went to pruning, spraying, digging and burlapping.

Below are the trees that we dug; a few cypress and water elm. Our intent is to share the development of them in the years to come.

The next day, I took the one tree that I collected, bare-rooted it and repotted it in a cedar grow box with Miracle-Grow Potting Mix. My reasons for using the Miracle-Grow stemmed from a desire to ensure that the rootball would stay moist.

I left the trunk quite high due to the fact that the shoots emanating from down low were quite long with very little foliage on them until much higher up on the shoots. I was not sure if I might suffer die-back on the shoots and so left substantial trunk length to allow for other shoots to pop – should they be needed.

The trunk measures just over two inches above the root base. The nebari, or root base, measures just over five inches. The trunk suffered some sort of trauma on one side while growing in the wild and has an area of dead-wood about an inch and a half wide on one side and extends from the cut I made at the top to about four inches up from the base of the tree. My intent is to make the dead area of the trunk a design feature in the finished tree by hollowing out the trunk in the dead area. The current height of the main trunk is just over 24 inches.

Below is a picture of the tree immediately after bare-rooting and potting in a grow-box. Since collecting the tree in August, it has sprouted a considerable amount of new growth and is doing very well.

The plan for developing it into a bonsai is as follows: It will be developed as a clump-style bonsai.

**Stage 1: (Growth for Size)** [This stage will be a two-year period for this tree.]

In January of 2019, I will eliminate some of the existing shoots emanating from the base, leaving 5 future "trunks' in the clump, including the large, main trunk. Next, I will wire the 4 shoots selected at the base of the main trunk, to remain as future trunks, to create movement. However, I will do very little pruning, if any, on the 4 small trunks that will remain part of the design. The tree **must** be allowed to grow freely to increase its strength and vigor.

The only pruning I will do will be to shoots that I wish to keep small. Right now, most of the shoots are about the same size. So some will be allowed to grow freely while others will be restrained to develop varying diameters among the shoots.

I will fertilize it throughout the 2019 growing season using a chemical fertilizer such as Osmocote. I will monitor the growth, remove and reapply wire as needed until the fall of 2019. In that the bark is thin, diligence will be required to avoid any scarring of the trunks.

In January of 2020, I will cut back the main trunk to a height of about 10-12 inches. I will hollow out the dead wood of the trunk at this time. In addition, I will severely cut back the

other “trunks” growing from the base, each according to their diameter at that time. This will encourage back-budding and begin the development of secondary and tertiary branching.

During the growing season, I will continue to fertilize with a chemical fertilizer. I will prune new growth back only twice: once in early June and again in September. This is to ensure that the tree will be at optimum strength and vigor in preparation for repotting the following winter.

**Stage 2: (Growth for Design)** [This stage will be a 2-3 year period for this tree]

In January 2021, I will prune the tree back again and repot it into an oversize bonsai container to begin reducing the size of the rootball and begin to restrict growth. At this time, I will bare-root the tree and change over to a 50/50 bonsai soil mix. I normally do not use a soil mixture so heavy in organic matter. But the water elm requires constant moisture and must not be allowed to dry out between watering. For the first year, I will mulch the top of the soil with sheet moss to ensure that the soil stays moist while the tree recovers.

During the growing season, I will shift over to all organic fertilizers. The object is to keep the tree healthy but to begin to reduce intermodal spacing and develop fine twigging and branch structure.

I will continue pruning and wiring for structure and branching for at least two year before repotting the tree into its’ final container.

Below is a sketch of my vision for the tree in the future. The sketch is based on the location and size of existing rootage. The smaller trunks are drawn using existing locations. The size difference will be developed during the next two years but they will be wired into position with movement this winter. The ramification of branches will be developed over a period of years. This is **Stage 3: (Growth for Refinement)** [This stage will be from year 5-6 onward] The location of the hollowed out trunk is based on the location and size of existing dead wood. I will share the development of this tree in the years to come.