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Hundreds celebrate Shabbona Lake State Park

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Kerry Novak remembers when Shabbona Lake State Park was “just a half pile of dirt.”

Almost 38 years later, the man-made lake that now spans 318 acres was celebrated Monday as a treasure of the county and a major economic driver after it has welcomed more than 12 million visitors since opening in the 1970s.

Novak, who serves as superintendent of the park, was joined by hundreds of students and residents at Indian Creek High School to celebrate the success of the state park and pay homage to the staff, volunteers and “founding fathers” that have made the park the second-largest tourist attraction in the county behind Northern Illinois University.

“I really thought it would be a huge success, but I didn’t think this big,” said Novak, who has worked at the park since 1973. “You just enjoy coming to work everyday here.”

Those at the ceremony were treated to a trip down memory lane courtesy of Porter Martin, one of the park’s six founding fathers. Martin recalled getting the first ticket issued at the state park, the integral role of former state Sen. Dennis Collins in making the park a reality and some of the initial backlash residents had toward the idea of opening a state park in Shabbona.

“I don’t think any of us had quite this much in mind when we started,” Martin said.

Despite being one of the founders of the lake, Martin deflected all the praise to the staff, volunteers and state legislators who continue to improve the park. One organization that has helped the park draw visitors is the Lions Club.

Local chapters of the club helped push for handicap accessibility, which resulted in all areas of the park including piers, hunting areas and campsites becoming accessible for handicapped visitors. The organization also hosts the Handicapped Children’s Fishing Derby and Ski for Sight – a cross-country skiing event for the visually impaired.

For state Sen. Christine Johnson, R-Shabbona, the lake also is a place where she learned important life lessons. While Johnson was on hand to present a special plaque to Grace Catron – the park’s 12 millionth visitor – she took time to urge the high school students in attendance to take advantage of the park.

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Johnson said working at the park raising catfish when she was 16 years old helped her learn responsibility and have a better appreciation for nature after realizing how many come from urban areas just to reconnect with the land.

“It provided me with a lot of experiences that helped me later in life,” she told the students.

Local residents were not the only people honored during the ceremony.

Steve Ortiz, chairman of the Prairie Band Potawatomi Nation, came up from Kansas to take part in the ceremony and offer a brief history of his tribe’s time in the area and the work the tribe did to help make the lake a reality.

For all the spiritual and historical value of the land that Ortiz highlighted, there is an equal amount of financial value for the county.

Both Marc Miller, director of the Department of Natural Resources, and Debbie Armstrong, executive director of DeKalb County Convention and Visitors Bureau, touted the park’s economic contributions.

Miller said more than \$4.2 billion is generated through hunting, fishing, camping and other outdoor activities at state parks. Armstrong noted the park’s importance to the \$71.6 million the county receives in tourism. About 80 percent of the park’s visitors are from outside the county.

“I consider it the crown jewel of DeKalb County,” Armstrong said.