

The Swan Boat cruises Deep Creek Lake one balmy summer day with Larry Madson (owner) at the wing (helm). In the swan are some guests enjoying the free ride. "She's a part of history at the lake," says Larry.



The Swan Lives On...

Written by **Sara Mullins**
Photography by **Lance C. Bell**

As in years past, boats will emerge from their winter hibernation for a summer of fun at Deep Creek Lake. Amidst all the speed boats, pontoon boats, jet skis, sailboats, canoes and kayaks, you just might catch a glimpse of the Deep Creek Lake Swan Boat as it quietly glides along, much like its namesake.

First launched on July 1, 1964, the Swan Boat evokes fond memories among many vacationers familiar with the Lake during a quieter era. Its builder was Noel Obenshein, a lifelong Garrett County resident and avid birdwatcher who loved to watch the Trumpeter Swans at the Lake. These elegant creatures served as the inspiration prompting him to build his unique boat.

Obenshein's Swan is essentially a pontoon boat, albeit with some unusual features. Measuring 21 feet long, it can carry up to eight adults at speeds up to 12 knots, thanks to the 40-horsepower, two-cycle engine housed in its tail. The head and neck extend upward to 14½ feet, but fortunately the Swan is equipped to "duck" obstacles like the old Route 219 Bridge or Glendale Bridge. Its eye sockets feature colored running lights on each side, with red on the port side and green on starboard. The Swan "calls" from an air horn mounted near its bill, which opens for maximum effect.

For 25 years, the Swan carried an estimated 7,000 passengers of all ages. But time and nature took their toll and by 1990, the Swan's excursions came to an end. Mr. Obenshein donated her to a local marina with the hope that she would be nursed back to health, but instead she languished in oblivion. Mr. Obenshein passed away in 1994.

But over the years, the Swan had become part of Deep Creek Lake's folklore, and some residents speculated as to the Swan's whereabouts and fate. One of them was Marc Madson. Marc shared stories of the grand old bird with his son Mac, who then asked where the Swan was. Thus began a quest to find her that resulted in the Swan's rescue from an ignominious nest between two rusty warehouses. Although her condition was diagnosed as beyond hope,

the Madsons decided it was worth replicating the Swan with the help of Ervin Sweitzer, a Grantsville native who, as a child, watched its construction.

The Madsons launched the new incarnation of the Swan during the summer of 2005 and continue to keep her healthy. Recent improvements include additional floatation in the bow and a fresh coat of paint. When not out on the water, the Swan rests out of the elements in a secure spot.

"It's a big monster," says Larry Madson, Marc's father. "It usually takes about 40 minutes of very careful maneuvering to get her in the water." The Swan launches from Deep Creek State Park and usually cruises around the Lake's Back Bay Area. Sometimes Marc takes her out on longer excursions.

The Madsons welcome company on the Swan if space permits. "If anyone wants a ride, just wave," says Larry. "If we see you, we'll pick you up. We especially love to take children." Larry might even push the horn for you so she'll open her beak. He says the Swan is also available for photo ops, on the water and at rest, dockside.

The return of the Deep Creek Lake Swan Boat mirrors that of her inspiration, the Trumpeter Swan. Once prolific, this majestic bird came close to extinction due to extensive hunting and loss of habitat as settlers swarmed into North America. Now the largest waterfowl in North America and one of its most rare native birds, the Trumpeter Swan has survived, thanks to a foundation of strong family bonds and human efforts. Like her counterparts in the wild, the Swan Boat, too, serves as a reminder that treasured traditions live on when people like the Madson family continue to care.

Note: Some material in this story came from "The Deep Creek Lake Swan – She's Back!" by Dan Whetzel, which appeared in the Spring 2005 issue of Mountain Discoveries and offers more detail regarding the Swan Boat's history. You can see the first story on www.mountaindiscoveries.com.