This is the view from the north bank looking toward the College Park Housing Development. This development was started by Dr. Maurice Garrett and his brother in 1963 when they purchased the land from the last of the Ownbey heirs.

The island that Mr. Ownbey created is still in the center of the lake although there are now trees growing on it. The Garrett brothers spent most of the summer after they purchased the property bulldozing the lake back to its original size.

UNCLE BEN’S PLACE

Over 20,000 people celebrated the Fourth of July, 1924, waiting for a cross to burn. Ownbey Lake was the site of an all-day Ku Klux Klan picnic that took place on this date. The picnic area of the lake was used to hold many contests throughout the day. These were mainly to pass the time until dusk when the “real” show started. A parade of over 250 Klansmen started marching at the old high school on McPherson Street. The route continued around the square and south to Ownbey Lake. This was not only for men; three carloads of uniformed Klanswomen followed the men to the lake.

Once there, speeches were given by Z. A. Harris and Ralf Clarkson, who were national Klan representatives. At dusk an aerial fireworks display was given by Lt. Weber. When he started circling the area, he had a burning cross on the underside of his plane, and he continued with many colorful displays. The evening was to conclude with a Klan ceremony at which they were to burn a huge cross on the north bank of the lake. The cross broke when they were putting it up, so they used a smaller one. The whole ceremony was not completed because a huge crowd, estimated by the Kirksville Daily Express to number 20,000,000 people, had crowded into the grounds. A count of 500 cars was also taken by the Express. Parking was scarce; Robert Link remembers the cars backed up First Street so far they had to exit to the south. It was an event that people would not forget for many years, even after the Klan became a disgrace to the community.

The above event took place at what Mr. Link called the “Recreation Center” for Kirksville and the surrounding communities. Ownbey Lake was actually a farm pond that Benjamin F. Ownbey, Sr. had enlarged to approximately eight acres and made a recreation center by adding a dancing pavilion, bath

Benjamin Ownbey, in his seventies, is standing near his log cabin on the lake shore. Mr. Ownbey made many improvements to the pond, for example the addition of gas lamps around the area. One is visible to his right. (Photo courtesy of Robert Link)
houses, and boat rentals. Mr. Ownbey was the son of some of the first settlers in Adair County, Canada and Lucinda Ownbey. Born on December 8, 1848, at the family farm, two miles south of Kirksville at that time, he would grow up there, have his business and farm there, and after his death the land was turned into a Kirksville subdivision.

Mr. Ownbey spent his childhood working on the farm and attending public school. At the age of 21, he married Mary C. Simpson of Ohio. They continued to live on the family farm. The Ownbey's raised six children Ida, Halley, William, Robert (who died in infancy), Emma, and Benjamin, Jr.

In 1898 Uncle Ben opened his pond for public use. It quickly became a gathering place for the town. Many picnics, both large and small, took place on the 40 acres surrounding the lake. There was a concession stand for those who did not pack their own lunch.

The dancing pavilion was open to the public every Saturday night for dances. The college and organization also held events there.

Boats could be rented for 25 cents an hour. Most of these boats were rowboats, but at one time there was one that had an engine. The lake was stocked with bullheads and perch and some people would fish even though Mr. Ownbey did not always allow it. Bath houses were provided for a small fee for those who wanted to swim. Some of the boys who lived in the area would swim at the far end of the pond without permission. They were run off if caught; Mr. Ownbey was always afraid someone would drown.

These were all summer activities. The main event in the winter was Mr. Ownbey's ice business. There was some ice skating on the lake.

The Ownbey Ice business sold ice door-to-door all summer; this was before refrigeration. In order to store the ice, he had an ice house built close to the lake. It had four very large rooms and its walls were insulated with sawdust. When the ice was about ten to twelve inches thick, it was cut from the lake in one and a half by two foot pieces. It was then dragged into the ice house and covered with sawdust to prevent it from melting. He had seven wagons that would take the orders from their route and measure the amount of ice to the customer.

Mr. Ownbey died November 20, 1927. His daughter, Halley, ran the business until the Second World War when the community was finding better activities to take up its time. The land continued to be used as farm land until Maurice Garrett, D.O., and his brother bought the land and developed it.

By Renée Wilson

Ownbey Lake as it is today. The lake is still used for some recreational purposes by the residents of the College Park addition.

 Uncle Ben's Cabin: A small log house Mr. Ownbey built for the "heck of it." (Photo courtesy of Robert Link)