

# Hooked on Fishing Park

by Nate Herman

That scorching hot July day in 2007 is forever etched into my memory. Landowner Jim Dixon had called our company to treat algae in a pond behind his seafood shop. When I first stepped foot on the property and started looking around, my jaw literally dropped to the ground. This was absolutely the most amazing fishing property I had ever seen in central Illinois. My mind rocketed past the algae problem and was racing a gazillion miles an hour about endless possibilities this unique place has.

The property covers approximately 15 acres and consists of a series of three springs and three fishing ponds nestled in a mature, park-like setting along the banks of the Illinois River. The springs start in the northeast corner of the property and are about 3 feet deep, 30 feet wide and 100 feet long. They flow directly into each other, then through a culvert and into pond number one. The first pond drains into the second and third ponds. Gravity shuffles water through each of these ponds and out to feed the Illinois River. Pretty much the neatest setup I have ever seen!

The artesian water flows directly out of the ground in some places, but the majority of the water comes out of 1.5" pipes that are pushed into the ground about 15 feet deep. The artesian water has so much pressure coming out of these pipes, that we were able to make little fountain caps that shoot the water about 3 feet into the air. I have heard tales there is more than one million gallons of water flowing through those ponds every day, and I don't doubt that a bit.

The three ponds range from 1.5 to 2 acres each, and only six feet deep. With so much fresh water flowing through them daily, these ponds don't need to be any deeper to keep enormous amounts of fish alive through hot summers and cold winters. The ponds are oval shaped and bordered completely with railroad tie retaining

walls and gravel walkways. They are just set up for easy access to unbelievable fishing water!

The meeting with Mr. Dixon went great! I gave him a fair price to treat his algae and he graciously accepted. I asked if I could just look around the property a bit and then come back the next day to treat the algae. He could sense I was pretty intrigued with the property. I think my daydreaming eyes, open jaw and drool dribbling down my chin onto my neck must have tipped him off. Anyway, I spent the afternoon just exploring this run-down gem of a property.

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Later that evening Mr. Dixon called, asking me to stop by his office after I finished treating algae. At the meeting we talked about the history of the property as Jim gave me a grand tour of the entire premises. I soaked up every bit of information about this historic place. In the early 1930's this place was believed to be the first fee fishing ponds in the nation. The Dixons trapped fish from the river, stocked them in the ponds, and let people pay a few cents to come and catch their dinner. Literally hundreds of people would fish at these ponds every week.

I was just completely fascinated with the whole experience! This place was just the coolest place ever, and built completely by hand. Mr. Dixon's father and uncles were some extremely hard working, fish raising geniuses. Their fee fishing operation was successful and

ran strong all the way until 1992. At that time, fish were becoming much harder for them to come by (legally), maintenance of the ponds and landscape was demanding, and the next generation of Dixons were needed to run the rapidly expanding seafood business.

At the conclusion of the meeting Mr. Dixon offered a bit of a business proposition. He could tell from the first time we met that he basically owned me! He had the remote, and I was his toy car with a freshly charged battery. The ponds had been sitting idle for 16 years, and there was quite a bit of maintenance work piled up that needed to be done with the spring pipes and landscape. I gladly agreed to take care of the manual labor and Jim would pay for the materials. For my end of the bargain, I got complete access to property!

My brother Justin and I jumped right in, literally. The culverts, drains, and spring pipes needed cleaning out and we had to get wet to get to them. Even in the heat of the summer we could not stay in that water too long, it is cold coming out of the ground. We spent pretty much every spare moment for the rest of the summer working, cleaning, experimenting, testing water, and fishing at our new playground. There were still some huge carp and catfish swimming around in the ponds.

Our first fish experiment was rainbow trout. We knew rainbow trout would live year round in Pond 1, because it always stayed well below 70 degrees even through the hottest summer days. There is also a pretty strong current that runs around the pond caused by rushing water from the springs. In October we stocked 150 one pound rainbow trout. We fed them a heavy diet of Purina's AquaMax 600 and those fish did not merely survive, they thrived! Those fish were growing faster than I had ever seen a fish grow before. By December most of them were pushing two pounds apiece!



*Top left: We built this deck so people can watch the water movement and observe fish. Bottom left: We cleaned up around the ponds and now are ready for guests. Above: We wanted to make sure the ponds could raise good fish. They can.*

In January, 2008, I started taking clients on guided fishing trips for these incredible fish. Anglers were having so much fun fishing open water in winter for rainbow trout, I decided to stock 400 more from 1-3 lbs. There are not many places in Illinois to catch trout, and the lore of the place lured local sportswriters to check out what was going on. We spent the rest of the winter guiding and showing clients our new playground.

It was on one of these fishing trips that the very beginnings of the "Hooked On Fishing Park" began to take shape. As I was showing one of my regular pond management clients, Mike O'Reilly, around the property, I could see the exact same look on his face that Jim Dixon must have seen on my first visit. He was listening to what I was saying, but I could see he was deeper in thought! Mike is co-owner of Timber Creek Land Company. His company transforms regular land into world class hunting and fishing properties and I stock and manage all of their new lakes for them. Not only is Mike an avid fisherman, but he also is actively involved in

teaching the next generation how to fish. He has held and sponsored quite a few fishing derbies for kids on some of his hybrid bluegill ponds.

Over the next few weeks, meetings and conversations with Mike would always end up talking about the new ponds and springs I was experimenting with. After spending some time researching the unbelievable history of the Dixon's fishing operation and quite a few miniature "brainstorming sessions" about the endless possibilities of this place, we both decided that this would be the perfect place to teach local children how to fish. Not only would this place be perfect for education, but it would also be a place easily made handicapped-accessible for seniors and special needs people.

Although we had a clear vision of how we would like to utilize this unique property for the benefit of the entire community, we had a few hurdles to overcome. First and foremost, we did not own the land. Even though we knew the Dixons were a great cornerstone family in the community, we did not imagine they would be as generous and trusting as they were.

They have been in business since 1896! After a handful of meetings and presentations about our future plans for the place, they gave us a long term lease on the property.

That was not the only obstacle we had to resolve. We still have to figure out the best way to pay for all the necessary improvements, how to organize volunteers needed to keep the place running smoothly, and how to best utilize this amazing resource to get the entire community Hooked on Fishing! Our mission is to teach the sport and joy of fishing to local children, senior citizens and special needs groups by providing equipment, place and education free of charge.

We are currently still working on these and many other aspects of making this place a success. We are currently on track and scheduled to open on May 1st of 2009. Our website is [www.hookedonfishingpark.org](http://www.hookedonfishingpark.org). We will be updating the website regularly with information, photos, and videos of the entire project as we progress.

