

3-2008

The Flow of the Neches

Francis E. Abernethy

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarworks.sfasu.edu/ethj>



Part of the [United States History Commons](#)

Tell us how this article helped you.

Recommended Citation

Abernethy, Francis E. (2008) "The Flow of the Neches," *East Texas Historical Journal*: Vol. 46: Iss. 1, Article 6.

Available at: <http://scholarworks.sfasu.edu/ethj/vol46/iss1/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by SFA ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in East Texas Historical Journal by an authorized administrator of SFA ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact cdsscholarworks@sfasu.edu.

THE FLOW OF THE NECHES

By Francis Edward Abernethy

Deep East Texas, the *real* East Texas, lies between the Trinity River and the Sabine. Some of East Texas might splash across these rivers onto Madison County in the west and Louisiana in the east, but the heart of it is that red-land, pine-forest region between those two river boundaries. And flowing through the heart of East Texas is the Neches River and all the smaller waters that pay it homage and tribute: the Angelina and the Attoyac – LaNana Creek and Wolf Creek and Village Creek – Pine Island and Little Gray's bayous – Rose Lake Drain, Cow Pen Branch, Walnut Run, Anderson Gulley, Sand Slough. They all give their all to the big Neches that gives its all back to the oceans of the world.

The Flow of the Neches is rich and red and sometimes so muddy that a Cajun could plant rice and raise a crop. Sometimes when the cicada calls, in the dryness of late summer and early fall, the water almost clears, running quiet and blue-green; and the Kentucky bass lie on the slow side of a down log and flash out at passing spot-tails and Hawaiian Wiggles. At all times the bream socialize in the brush piles, the drum croak at dusk in the deep bends, and big ops and blues cruise the riverbed, fattening on crawfish.

There are places in its northern beginnings where the river meanders through pastures and a small boy could hop across it. Farther down it stops to rest in ponds and lakes. Then it spills down a steep slope in Cherokee County, cutting a trench so narrow that the water shoots through a tunnel of cut banks and oak trees that shake hands and hug each other while the river passes beneath.

Farther south the river bottoms widen out and huge gum and pin oaks and white oaks join their crowns together and shade out all growth below. In some places you can see several hundred yards through the bottoms, and the waters flow through on the big rises to feed the roots of the old giants and fill the ox bows.

At the big bend at Hooks's camp, cypress trees line the banks and cover the little islands, and knees poke up to get a little sun and air. Upriver, if you hit the backwater in April, and the river rise is just right, you can float in on a surface of red where the mayhaws cover the water as far as you can see. And you can seine enough mayhaws in one haul to make two years of jelly.

The Attoyac joins the Angelina, and they both run down below Bevilport to meet the Neches at Dam B in Tyler County. After a brief rest, the Neches moves southward, making long, white-sandy beaches through the Big Thicket National Preserve to the Golden Triangle, leaving behind lakes and sand bars and old men sitting on the bank watching it all flow by.

The Neches gets big and slow and brackish after it flows under I-10 at Beaumont. Swamps and bayous stretch out from the banks on one side, build-

F.E. Abernethy is distinguished regents professor emeritus of English at Stephen F. Austin State University. This paper was presented at the Neches River Symposium "Shall We Gather at the River: Life Along the Neches," in October 1996.

ings and people on the other. Finally, it flows under the Rainbow-Sunshine Bridge, glides past Port Arthur, and joins waters with its brother river, the Sabine. Both have a happy reunion in Sabine Lake before they make their final exit through Sabine Pass to join all the waters in the world's ocean.

The Neches River rises about one mile south of Colfax in eastern Van Zandt County in Doyle Dove's cow pasture. The coordinates are N 32 29' 58.1" by W 095 44' 28.4," and the elevation is 545 feet, in case you are taking notes. We ran that baby down to his hole! Julius Burkett in Math printed out detailed area maps, and three of us – Pat Barton, Bill Clark, and I – cut its trail every time it crossed a road. We had given up on finding its ultimate beginning when we saw this hill side pasture where, according to Julius' map, it ought to begin. I knocked on the door at this house, and when this fellow came to the door, I told him we were looking for the source of the Neches. He said, "Let me get my shoes on." He was Doyle Dove and he gave us the grand tour of the Neches springs – and a slab of beef when we left, by the way.

The Neches comes out of the ground in a white, sandy trickle about six inches wide. Some hundred feet away, on the side of the same sandy hill, more water seeps out of cow tracks in the black mud. It all goes down the hill, and by the time these seeps and springs get to the bottom of the hill you have a respectable spring branch that could provide several families with water.

It flows southeast for 416 miles to its mouth on Sabine Lake, serving as a boundary stream and forming the county lines for most of the counties in Deep East Texas. Two major reservoirs are located on the Neches: Lake Palestine, near Tyler; and Dam B (Lake B.A. Steinhagen), near Woodville.

The Neches has a drainage area estimated at 10,000 square miles. Abundant rainfall in the basin results in a flow of some 6,000,000 acre-feet per year.

Those are the *statistics* on the Flow of the Neches.

To really *feel* the Flow of the Neches "ye must be baptized" in it, totally immersed! – like a Baptist, not splashed like a Methodist. You wade off of a sand bar until it lifts you up into its current, you glide like an alligator with just your eyes and nose and the top of your head showing, then you sink and roll like an otter till you have thoroughly purged yourself of all your sinful city ways and become a part of the woods and the water.

Or you can feel the Flow of the Neches if you float fifty miles of it with no motor and one paddle, as Hubert Mott and I did for six days in Easter of 1947, and found that for all its beauty it can test your endurance. The river was on a rise, and the third day out we drifted off into an oxbow and spent the entire day going around in a circle. At sundown we recognized a big down cypress that we had passed that morning; and we recognized our predicament and frantically started looking for any piece of dry ground we could find in those flooded bottoms.

Right at dark we finally located an island of mud about the size of a Mexican blanket. It was six inches out of the water at its highest, topped with

squishy, ankle-deep gumbo, and it harbored a prosperous snake population that peckishly and with many a backward glance gave up their territory at our insistence. We set up camp, such as it was. We had no firewood so we ate a can of pork and beans cold, except that Hubert cut up an onion in his and had indigestion.

It was a long night because we went to bed early, thinking it was better to lie in the mud than sit in it. We slept on two ponchos and under two blankets, and every time one of us touched the other, we popped awake, certain that snakes were creeping in amongst us. That was one of the longest nights I ever spent. We were off that island by the first gray light of dawn and eventually found the channel and a dry riverbank. We scrambled and ate every last egg we had. We saw one other person that whole trip.

Or another way that you can feel the Flow of the Neches is if you live on it like Old Man Ben Ramer did, who lived on the neatest river houseboat you ever saw. His territory was from Weiss Bluff down river to Pine Island Bayou. He frequently tied up where Village Creek runs into the Neches. During the late 1950s and early 1960s, I fished Village twice a week, and when Mr. Ramer was there we always visited a few minutes, not that he was all that sociable. He lived off the bounty of the Neches. He had trotlines, throw lines, and limb lines out all the time. He had traps set for 'coons, 'possums, and otters – whatever he could sell the hide and eat the meat. He had a feisty dog that helped him to a squirrel stew whenever the mood hit him, and he took a hog or deer off the bank any time he needed the meat. I visited him one afternoon right after he had pulled one of his own teeth with a pair of pliers. He was a real backwoodsman – one of the river bottom strain.

The Flow of the Neches, however, is more than the water that glides between its banks or the backwoodsmen and buck deer that live off its bounty. The Flow of the Neches is also its history that reaches back to its beginnings over 12,000 years ago at the end of the Time of Ice, the Pleistocene, and during the Time of the Great Melting and the Time of the Making of Rivers – when the ice and snows thawed and ran down the sides of what we now call America.

When the Neches was Pleistocene young, mastodons and mammoths, sabre-toothed tigers, dire wolves, horses, camels, and huge horned bison walked its banks and drank its waters. Soon thereafter, 10,000 years ago, the Paleo-Americans, the Old People, reached the Neches watershed. They had spears and atlatls in hand, and were searching for food to eat that would not eat them first. The Old People were hunters, and they lived among the big Pleistocenes until that race of wooly giants disappeared from the earth. Then they too disappeared, and that infinite variety of wanderers that we call Indians arrived on the Neches.

From the source to the mouth of the Neches, four Indian groups are historically associated with the river. They were the Caddo and Atakapans, who were here when Europeans first arrived, and the Cherokees and the Alabama-Coushatta, who came later.

Twelve hundred years ago, around 800 A.D., an Indian culture now known as Caddo became the people of the Neches. The land along the Neches still furnished food for carnivorous *homo sapiens* in the form of deer and bears, 'possums and 'coons and squirrels, and anything else that had meat on its bones. The Neches was in the path of the central flyway that brought ducks and geese by the thousands to the sloughs and backwaters. The river teemed with bass and bream, with carp, drum, and buffalo, and with all the kinds of catfish that still cruise those waters. The Caddos built elaborate fish traps and backwater weirs, and the eating was simply for the going and getting – fish every Friday; turkey every Sunday! The Caddos were gatherers of grapes and berries, pecans and walnuts and hickories and white oak acorns. And they planted corn and squash and beans.

The Caddos created an agrarian-hunting-gathering culture that became the most affluent and most advanced Indian culture that Texas was ever to know.

The Caddos called our river *Nachawi*, or *Bois d'Arc*, after the tree that furnished the wood for the Caddo bows. And the tribe of Tejas Indians that lived along its bank were named the Nachawi, which became "the Neches." The Neches River had many names during Spanish times: Mission River; St. Michael's River; The Most Holy Name of Mary River; the Mexican River; and the Nabadache. The Marquis de Aguayo in 1721 named it *Nuestra Senora de las Nieves*, *Our Lady of the Snows*, and it was sometimes called Snow River. That title honored a fourth century Roman manifestation of the Virgin, who caused it to snow on a Roman hill in August to mark the site of a chapel in her name. Good sense has prevailed, fortunately, and we remember it now by its Caddo Indian name of the Neches.

The Caddos camped on the upper Neches. The Atakapans lived on the lower Neches, from Hardin County to its mouth. The Atakapans believed that they came from the sea. To ease the burden of life, Kutnahin, their sun god, gave them sex and tobacco. The Atakapans were coastal hunters and clam diggers. They were described as squat and stout, with short necks and large heads. From all reports they were smelly from their use of rancid alligator grease to repel mosquitoes. The word *Atakapan* is Choctaw for "man eater," and they were practicing cannibals, both ritualistically and practically.

The Cherokees came late to the Neches River, arriving in 1820, after fleeing the advancement of the Anglos on the southeastern frontier. They settled on the upper Neches and spent two decades as a political bouncing ball among the Spanish, Mexican, and finally Texan authorities. Although Sam Houston had tried to take care of his brother Cherokees, when Mirabeau B. Lamar became president of the Republic his aim was to purge East Texas of Indians to make way for Anglo settlers. On July 15, 1839, a large contingent of Texans attacked the Cherokee camp on the Neches a few miles west of Tyler. The Cherokees led by their Chief Bowles, held, then retreated up the Neches River valley. On the second day the Indians were routed, losing over 100 of their warriors. The Texans, led by Thomas J. Rusk, burned their houses and torched

their fields and drove them across the Red River into Indian Territory. The only hero of the Battle of the Neches was Chief Bowles, who, in the thickest of the fight, conspicuously commanded his troops from his paint horse. In the end, he was shot and killed as he turned to face his foes.

The Alabama and the Coushatta Indians came to the banks of the Neches under the same Anglo pressures as the Cherokees. Unlike the Cherokees, the Alabama-Coushatta are still in East Texas at Indian Village in Polk County. The two tribes began arriving in the Big Thicket in the 1780s. The Coushattas settled on the Trinity around San Jacinto County. The Alabamas settled on the Neches in northwestern Tyler County, Peach Tree Village being the main village. The tribes remained neutral during the Texas Revolution, but came to the aid of the Texians during the Runaway Scrape that occurred after news of the Alamo and Goliad reached the settlers. Chief Colita of the Coushattas was the hero of that episode and is remembered in legend as swimming back and forth on his white horse helping the settlers cross the swollen Trinity and Neches rivers – and bringing them the good news after San Jacinto.

Like the Cherokee, the Alabama and Coushatta were moved during the Republic at the whim of politicians and incoming Anglo settlers, but because they were passive, out of sight, and on undesirable land, somehow they were allowed to stay. In 1854 they were finally given a reservation of their own in Polk County, where they are today.

The Spanish were the first Europeans to come to the Neches, and they were here in 1542. They were the ragged end of Hernando de Soto's expedition that had started out from Florida 600 strong in 1539. De Soto died and was buried in the Mississippi, and Luis de Moscoso led the 300 tattered survivors to East Texas looking for a route to Mexico. The Spanish made an aimless loop through San Augustine, Jasper, Woodville, Livingston, Groveton, and then up toward Nacogdoches and Alto and the large Caddo village of Guasco, on the east bank of the Neches, in Cherokee County. In 1542, Guasco – and its associated camps on the Neches, near where Highway 21 crosses the river – was an Indian "metropolis," the center of the most advanced Indian culture in the Southwest. And it remained so, at least for the next 150-200 years.

The Moscoso Expedition stopped at the Neches. It turned back to the Mississippi and eventually reached Mexico by boat.

The Spanish came back to the Neches River 150 years later, in 1690. This time they came to what they called "The Kingdom of Tejas." The first Caddos they had met greeted them with the word "Tejas," which meant *friend*, and the Spanish concluded that that was their name – and thereafter the land east of the Trinity River was known as *Tejas*, which became *Texas*. And if anything was ever "Deep in the Heart of Texas," the Neches River was. The first European settlement in that Province of Texas of today's state of Texas, for that matter, was in a Hasinai Caddo camp on San Pedro Creek, near where it emptied into the Neches. This was the Mission San Francisco de las Tejas. Soon thereafter they built another mission on the east bank of the Neches called *Santissima Nombre de Maria*, The Most Holy Name of Mary. This part

of the Neches in 1690 was still the center of the Hasinai Caddo world, as it was when Moscoso came in 1542 and called it Guasco.

The Tejas on the Neches tired of the Spanish as soon as the gifts stopped coming and their epidemics increased. The Tejas had absolutely no use for Catholicism. They had religion that served them well and answered their needs. They also had a well-structured agrarian society with a longstanding culture that held it together. The only things they wanted from the Spaniards were guns, axes, and blankets.

The Europeans brought guns, axes, and blankets, as well as priests and Bibles, but they also brought epidemical deaths that continued the devastation of the Caddos that had begun when the first Europeans came with de Soto and Moscoso. It is estimated that there were 200,000 to 250,000 Caddos in 1542 when Moscoso came to East Texas. By 1690, when the missions were established on the Neches, European induced diseases had reduced the population to around 8,500. That is a population loss of over ninety-five percent, if you want to put pen to paper. Every European, every blanket and Bible, would carry death with it, and before another century had passed a proud and prolific Caddo Indian nation on the Neches would be the tattered and scattered wandering remnants of a shattered past. The Atakapans to the south simply disappeared.

Hostility between the Tejas and the missionaries increased to such an extent that the Indians warned the Spanish that if they did not leave they would be massacred, so in October 1693 the religious buried the church bell and canons, set fire to Mission San Francisco, and retreated into the night with the Indians howling at their backs.

Guided by the Frenchman Louis St. Denis, the Spanish returned to the Neches along *El Camino Real*, The King's Highway, in 1716. They reestablished Mission San Francisco, this time on the east bank of the Neches among the Neches Indians, and they built five more missions to the east. They were met on the Neches by an Indian delegation, among whom was Angelina, a learned Indian woman reared in Coahuila. Angelina, who lived on what was to become the Angelina River, became thereafter the Spaniards' chief guide and interpreter. She was obviously greatly valued by the Spanish, who named the river after her, and she would have shaken her head in wonderment had she known that a river, a county, a college, and a whole page in a Lufkin telephone book would carry her name.

The Spanish lasted three years on this trip – until 1719 – before a threatening gesture by the French against the Los Adaes mission sent them all scurrying back to the newly constructed way station called San Antonio. At least all scurried except Father Margil, the patron saint of Nacogdoches. The good father who had retreated with his religious accoutrements packed on a donkey, awoke one morning soon after crossing the Neches to find that a panther had killed and eaten his donkey and that he was afoot. Invoking divine assistance, Father Margil called the panther out of his Neches River bottom lair, made him kneel, and then loaded him down with the dead donkey's burden. Then he made that panther carry that load all the way to San Antonio, at which point

he sent the panther back to the Neches bottoms after making him promise he would never eat another priest's donkey. I'll bet he never did. The neo-classicist Stephen F. Austin said that Margil legends must be true because several old ladies in Nacogdoches said they were.

The Marquis de Aguayo returned to East Texas in 1721, this time to stay. He had 500 soldiers, 137 settlers – male and female – 900 sheep, 4000 horses, 800 loaded mules, and 600 head of cattle – the first cattle drive in Texas. And can you imagine the trail they cut by such a multitude of hooves! But the Spanish had left the Neches as the center of their activities and had established Los Adaes, near Robeline, Louisiana, as the first capital of Texas.

The Neches as the centerline of the Province of Texas was just another river to cross in Spanish and, after 1821, in Mexican times. The Spanish-Mexican settlers remained in the eastern part of the Texas. But after 1800 the Anglos were coming and spreading out all over East Texas. Territorial conflicts immediately arose, conflicts which eventually led to a declaration of independence.

One Neches River legend grew out of that conflict.

The Orcoquisac Trail crossed the Neches in Tyler County at the Spanish Fort Teran and Boone's Ferry. The Trail originally connected the Caddos in the Nacogdoches area with the Orcoquisac Indians near Anahuac and with Atascosito Post, that became the town of Liberty. In one of the engagements in which the Anglos expelled the Mexicans from East Texas, the Mexican soldiers with all their goods headed south out of Nacogdoches on this trail. The Anglos caught up with the Mexicans just as they were crossing the Neches at Fort Teran, and a river battle ensued. Toward the end of the fight, the surviving Mexicans hauled one of the cannons up to a bluff overlooking the Neches and pushed it into the deepest pool in the river. It turned out that they had poured into the cannon a payload of gold and a chest full of diamonds and jewelry, which they had looted. The cannon is still there. You take the road west out of Colmesneil to Chester for about eight miles and turn north on the Fort Teran road on the west side of Sunnysdale Pasture, and if the weather has been dry you can eventually get to the Fort Teran crossing. The cannon, often sought but never caught, is still lying somewhere north of the Teran crossing, and if you find it you will never have to hit another lick in your life. But if you don't you will still have had a great drive down to the river, and you will be going through the old hunting grounds of the Alabama Indians who lived in Peach Tree Village and Fenced In Village for forty years before Anglos drove them off in 1844.

In the first half of the nineteenth century the Anglos drove just about everybody off except other Anglos. The Neches River drainage became the territory of white, Anglo-Saxon Protestants, and this is the culture out of which the backwoodsmen arose.

Most of the Anglos who came and settled along the Neches and its tributaries early in the nineteenth century were Southern hunters and gatherers whose generations had been moving westward through the woods since late in

the 1600s. They hunted the plentiful deer and wild turkey that were parts of the southern woodscape. They fished the waterways for food and trapped the woods for hides to wear and to sell at frontier trading posts. They slashed and burned and girdled to clear subsistence plots for raising corn, beans, squash, melons, and sweet potatoes – the same foods that the Indians raised. They herded hogs and cattle, marked them as their own, and turned them loose to feed and fatten on the mast and browse that the woods afforded.

These westerning Southerners were free rangers, moving on when the land or the game played out or when others moved in – or when they got the urge to see new country. They owned little, the least of which was the land, which they used as a commons, as did the Indians. And their cultural offspring used it likewise until the stock laws closed down the free range in the 1950s.

The settlers became more settled when the East Texas frontier ran out, when land became *owned* by others, when towns offered some families a better living, and when railroads and logging brought in an industrial way of life. The woodsmen remain, fewer all the time, of course, and deeper into the Neches and Anglina bottoms.

Most *modern* backwoodsmen are the remembrances of things past. They are the remnants of that genetic command to live in and off of nature and of that romantic inclination to live like the noble savage off the bounty of the land.

We are all of one faith, totally immersed in the magic and romance of the big woods and the river bottoms, and of the Neches River that is the heart of the land that we love to our deep heart's core – that we suffer with in a scorching drought and glory in during a crimson fall and are resurrected by when the dogwoods bloom white in the spring. The Neches is our river.