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A River Creeps Through It

BY MILTON JORDAN

Along the banks of a slough in West Virginia, not East Texas,
an American poet considered,

A little cloud of inaudible gnats
in a shaft of morning sunlight

He compared that cloud to the shadows of a middle-aged
catfish in the shallows of the slough. The poet, Franz Wright,
then asked:

God, what is the meaning of
this minute.
Tell me; I ask you.
I have already been here
forever, he replies
and think I'm going to stay

I cannot speak to the eternal presence of the divine along
the sloughs or back waters of our East Texas rivers. If we are
searching for something real, though, something at least almost
permanent, we could not find a better place to look than along
these rivers and the sand ridges that separate them. Rivers write
their own dissertations along their banks and under the roots of
trees upon them. In East Texas we hear them read in low gurgles
or occasional rushes through the narrows. We see a few visual
aids still present in the pine forests and on the sandy meadows.

I am enough of an incarnationist to think that God chooses
to show up in all sorts of worldly places. In one of my sources

*Milton Jordan is the immediate past president of the East Texas
Historical Association. This was his presidential address, presented at
the 2010 Fall Meeting in Nacogdoches.*

I learned that God came to dwell along a Middle Eastern river from which my family takes its name. Richard Donovan in his book, *Paddling the Wild Neches*, reminded me of an East Texas prophetic writer, Archer Fullinghim of the *Kountze News*. Fullinghim once wrote in his column, "Both Barrels," "I am sure the Holy Spirit lives in the bottom lands along the Neches River in East Texas." Another of our prophetic writers, Fullinghim's contemporary Roy Bedichek, used a slightly different image to describe his experience walking through a stand of uncut first growth timber along the Neches. It was, he wrote, "An island of life in the midst of a weary land."

The Neches was my father's river. He lived much of his life along it from Edgewood near its head to Beaumont and Port Neches at its mouth, Jasper and Keltys in between. My earliest memories are of a small town in Camp County along Cypress Creek. When it gets closer to Louisiana they call the Cypress a bayou. It empties into Caddo Lake. We lived in Pittsburg, up at the northern end of East Texas, for seven years. In the midst of elementary school we moved three hundred miles south and lived for ten years along Goose Creek in a town once named for that sluggish stream.

I have always been fascinated by these creeks and rivers around us, the San Jacinto and the Trinity, Buffalo Bayou, and Attoyac Bayou. Even in elementary school it dawned on me how significant the confluence of Buffalo Bayou with the San Jacinto was to the battle fought on that plain and the bogs around it. Our history is inseparable from our geography, and our geography is determined by the rivers that creep through it.

Wherever you are in East Texas geography, a river is creeping along—or dammed—very near your place. If not a river then a creek or a bayou is within easy reach. The preservation and restoration of these streams is essential to the vitality of our region. And, the identification and preservation of the scenes and stories along them is essential to maintaining our historic and cultural heritage. The scenes and the stories of our ancestors, their friends—and their enemies—keep disappearing in the face

of rapid development, poorly thought through.

Survey work at archaeological sites now inundated by Lake Wright Patman, for example, identified numerous villages occupied along the Sulphur River before major European contact with the native folks there. These sites are no longer available to us. In an interview with the archaeologist, Curtis Tunnell, Dan Utley asked how much archaeology he thought he salvaged from McGee Bend on the Angelina before that dam went in. "Probably just a fraction of one percent." Curtis said. "There must have been many hundreds or several thousand sites in that area. We only worked in a dozen or so and only took samples out of those. . . We were getting an extremely small sample out of all those sites." Those sites are now under water—or silt.

Cultural resource professionals like Curtis Tunnell are often employed to conduct mitigation research before valuable historical evidence is completely destroyed by public highway or dam construction. More often than not, private development projects make little or no effort to salvage any such evidence. Ever larger reservoirs to provide water for expanding urban areas come with a price. Quarter or half-mile wide super freeways between those areas and multi-acre asphalt parking lots in suburbs around them are at least as costly. Beyond the economic and environmental cost-benefit balance, we especially are concerned with the great loss of archaeological, cultural and historic resources and records.

Surely, we share the concerns of many for the environmental values lost to such development projects. Our concern, though, our primary concern, is with the historical and cultural records and resources we are losing. The rivers of East Texas attracted folks to them long before any written records were kept. The rivers provided a relative ease of travel and nourished life in the dense forest. Here along these rivers then are the scenes and stories of countless generations who have traveled on them and settled between them. We are the ones to identify and preserve those scenes. We are the ones to research and tell those stories.

The European segment of those stories likely begins with

Luis Moscoso, who inherited the ragged remains of the DeSoto expedition. According to Jim Bruseth and Nancy Kenmotsu, in their essay, 'From Naguatex to the River Daycao,' Moscoso came south from the Great Bend of the Red River in the summer of 1542. He may well have crossed the Neches just southwest of here in his unsuccessful effort to reach New Spain. The local folks must have thought this an odd group of travelers. Some were riding strange large animals and dressed in fancy armored outfits. Most were shuffling along draped in rags. With the help of archaeologists like Bruseth and Kenmotsu, we learn that even before these hopelessly lost Spaniards, people along these streams were encountering strange travelers.

Certainly in the four hundred-fifty years since then a remarkably diverse bunch of people have wandered through and settled in East Texas. Scattered all around us, everywhere from the Sulphur and the Cypress to Sabine Lake and Trinity Bay, are the cultural, historical, and social records and resources of these peoples, their lives and the communities they established. We are letting way too many of these records and resources slip away, not only because they disappear under various development projects, but more important for us, because we are not as active as we could be in searching out and telling their stories. I certainly regret my own failures to go with my father and later with my oldest sister to check out scenes and stories they knew well along the Neches.

In their collection, *Making East Texas, East Texas*, editors Bruce Glasrud and Archie McDonald remind us that East Texas is more than a compass reference. We do not say eastern Texas. This is a region of a state, to be sure, but it is a state of mind as well, they tell us. I take that to mean that the scenes and stories of how and where we lived with one another are essential to understanding what makes East Texas, East Texas today. When we are looking for some of those things almost permanent, look for places where, long after Moscoso, other Europeans settled the red hills and prairies along the Neches and our other streams. Search for the stories of the slaves and servants who came with

them. Think of the local folks native to this area and those driven here by European settlement elsewhere who lived around and among them. Most of their stories still wait for someone—maybe on of us—to tell them.

In his book *Texas Riverman*, William Seale tells one of these stories. Captain Andrew Smyth traveled on the Neches and the Angelina from early Republic days to the end of Reconstruction. In his Preface to the new edition of the book, Seale tells us that in those days “The riverways of East Texas provided a freedom of movement that the muddy, stump scattered frontier roadways could not provide.” Stories of rivermen and steamboaters and their families still wait to be told from Smithport to Bevilport to Port Neches.

Thad Sitton and Jim Conrad tell us of another group of East Texans in their book *Freedom Colonies: Independent Black Texans in the Time of Jim Crow*. They identify nearly three hundred of these “freedom colonies” along the river bottoms of East Texas and up on the sand ridges between the creeks. At the turn of the last century most Texas African American landowners lived in these formal or less formal communities of black farmers and stockmen scattered across the eastern half of Texas. These were people who, by fact and by law, were marginalized and shut out of opportunities open to many of their neighbors. Yet, in the face of these nearly impossible conditions they established something of permanent value. Residents of these communities built homes, commercial and agricultural enterprises, and churches and schools often housed in the same buildings. Thanks to our friends O. L. Davis, and Gwen and Ted Lawe and others, we know that many of these communities later built new schools with the help of the Rosenwald Fund. Julius Rosenwald began funding the building of schools for African Americans in the rural south at the end of World War I. In the next fifteen years over five hundred of those schools were built in Texas, more than half of those in our East Texas area. Most of their stories are yet to be told.

Jonathan Gerland, in a presentation at an earlier Association

meeting, told us of another group of folks, marginalized and shut out of most opportunities. Although they did not share fully in the rewards, crews of Mexican Americans provided labor on the rail lines and in the forests that was essential to the early East Texas timber industry. In their online digital project at Sam Houston State University, "Democracy and Diversity in Walker County," Rosanne Barker, Jeff Littlejon, Bernadette Pruitt, and others tell us several such stories like that of Boettcher's Mill. At the beginning of the twentieth century Baldwin Boettcher, an immigrant from Germany, established a sawmill in Montgomery County. When harvestable timber in that area gave out, his son Ed Boettcher re-established the mill in Walker County. The community of Boettcher's Mill, reconstructed just outside of Huntsville, housed the mill workers and their families. A significant number of these families were Mexican immigrants. The community also housed African American and Anglo American workers and their families.

These are a few stories of people who, against very difficult odds, established lives and communities that offer us glimpses, at least, of near permanent value. These are stories of people who "Make East Texas, East Texas." We can hope their stories direct our attention to the hundreds of scenes and stories like them waiting for East Texas historians to identify and to tell. Surely we are grateful that battle sites like the plain of San Jacinto are preserved. We appreciate the recording and telling of stories of military engagements and their strategies and tactics. The sites of where we fought with one another, though, are usually well preserved. The stories of how we fought with one another are oft retold.

Scenes and stories of where and how we lived with one another are often neglected. Freedom Colonies such as Fodice in Houston County, or workers' communities like Boettcher's Mill in Walker County, more often disappear and take their stories with them. We might be about our business as historians—professional and amateur—finding and preserving these sites and recording and telling these stories. Ask yourself what songs

the people sang. Find out who made the music. Look for those places where sharing and cooperation were the tactics, and where the people's strategy was to create or recreate community. Look for those places. Tell those stories.

Let me paraphrase an old Yiddish proverb from a collection called "Perek." It is not up to us to complete the task, but neither are we free to desist from it.

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