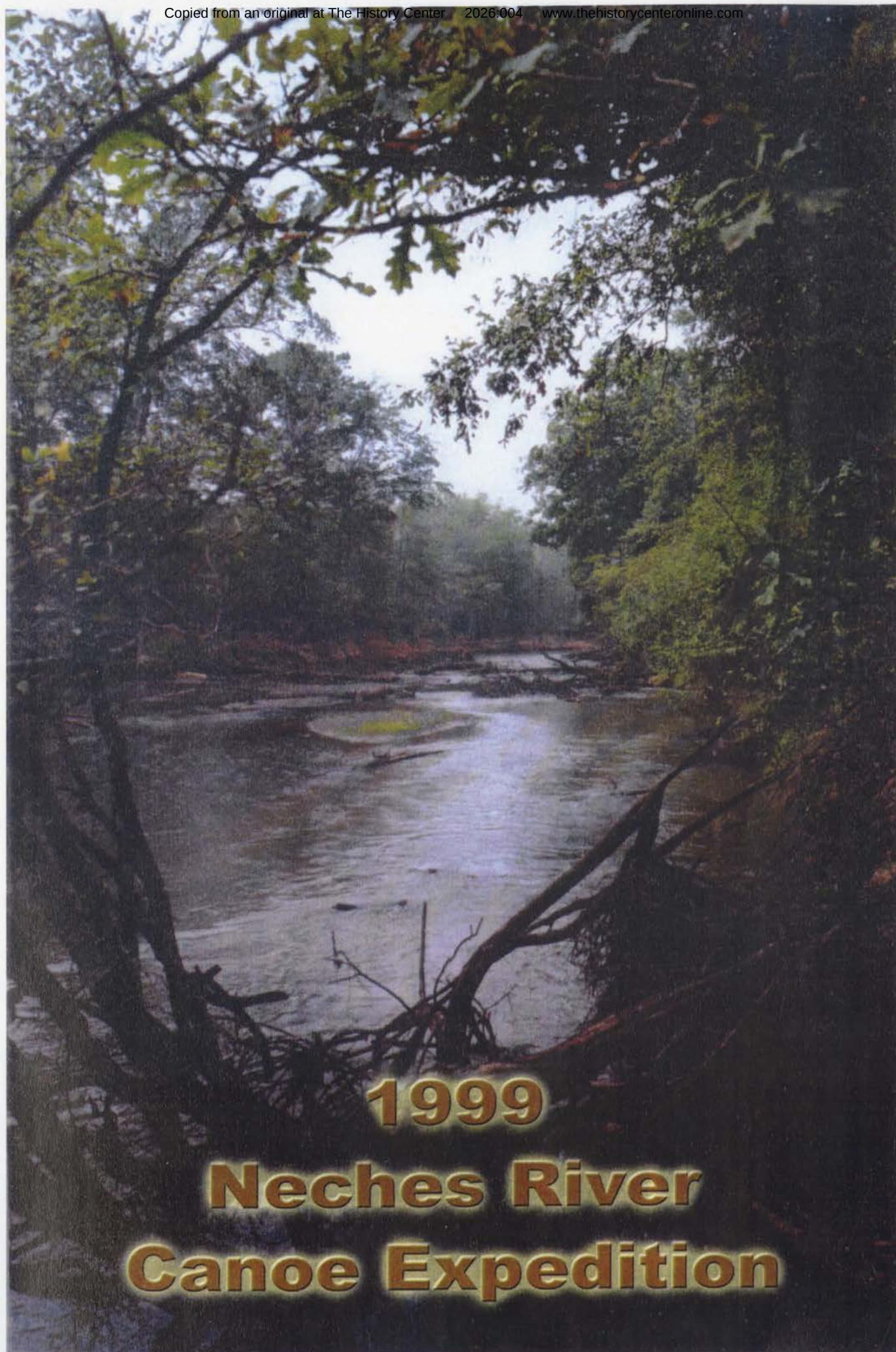




1999
Neches River
Canoe Expedition

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Address: Lufkin, Texas

Occupation: Real Estate Broker, Retired

Affiliation: East Texas Forest & Wildlife Coalition

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INFORMATION ON RIVER TRIP

Name: Richard Donovan

Address: Lufkin, Texas

Occupation: Real Estate Broker, Retired

Affiliation: East Texas Forest & Wildlife Coalition

Interests: East Texas environmental issues and preservation of wildlife habitat

Goal: To call attention to the natural beauty of the Neches River ecosystem and the recreational opportunities available along this historic watercourse

Plan: To canoe from U. S. Hwy 175, just south of Lake Palestine, to B. A. Steinhagen Lake, a river distance of approximately 200 miles

Route: Depart from the U. S. Hwy 175 bridge, just south of Lake Palestine. Take out at the boat ramp just west of the U. S. Hwy 190 bridge at B. A. Steinhagen Lake

Estimated time to complete: Two to three weeks. I will leave the river only to attend worship services or in case of an emergency.

This stretch of the Neches River is the last piece of any wild and scenic river left in East Texas and, except for the Rio Grande, maybe in the entire state. The more beautiful Angelina River disappeared in the 1960's when the Sam Rayburn Dam was built.

The first Anglo settlers began appearing along the river even before Stephen F. Austin founded his colony in 1820. These first settlers usually were "running from something" and disappeared into the forest wilderness. They brought with them a way of life that endured almost unchanged until the 1960's.

Modern scholars have defined their way of life as a hunter-hoekman-farmer society. Of the three, farming was allocated the least amount of time. Free range for livestock and unlimited hunting and fishing were the keys to their survival. These were a tough, self-reliant people who lived off the land with

HISTORY

The Neches River rises in Van Zandt County and flows some 416 miles to its mouth in the Gulf of Mexico. In its watershed can be found some of the most diverse hardwoods remaining in East Texas. These great hardwood forests are being cleared at an ever-increasing rate, but their early abundance helped sustain both red and white men for generations.

Indian populations along the river reached their peak during the Caddoan period. The Caddos called the Neches the "Snowy River" because of its many gleaming white sandbars or beaches. It acquired its present name from Spanish Explorer Alonzo De Leon who took the name from the Neches Indians, one of the southern Caddoan tribes living along its banks.

The Cherokee and Shawnee were the most powerful Indian tribes to inhabit this area. Both these tribes made attempts to co-exist with the white settlers, but were driven from Texas by President Mirabeau Lamar following the 1838 Killough Massacre in which thirty whites were killed. Many people were also pressing Lamar to evict the Indians so that they could claim their lands.

Early Texas pioneers found abundant fish and wildlife along the Neches. Numerous scouts wrote and told of existing on daily kills of venison, turkey, and squirrel. As recently as the early 1900's, black bears, wolves, and cougars could be found in the bottomlands. However, with the disappearance of the forests and the food they provided, these great symbols of wildness receded into history. (The last black bear was killed probably in 1962.) Some animals that almost disappeared are making a comeback: alligator, beaver, turkey, and bald eagle.

The first Anglo settlers began appearing along the river even before Stephen F. Austin founded his colony in 1820. These first settlers usually were "running from something" and disappeared into the forest wilderness. They brought with them a way of life that endured almost unchanged until the 1960's.

Modern scholars have defined their way of life as a hunter- stockman- farmer society. Of the three, farming was allocated the least amount of time. Free range for livestock and unlimited hunting and fishing were the keys to their survival. These were a tough, self-reliant people who lived off the land with

skills that had been handed down for generations. Many of these skills had been learned from Indians. These stockmen turned their hogs and cattle loose in the river bottoms where they thrived on the abundant mast provided by the rich bounty that fell from the hardwoods. These feral animals would have been uncontrollable except for the stockmen's valuable cur dogs. These dogs were as valuable as any possession a man could own.

The hunter, stockman, farmer prevailed along the Neches until the passage of the stock laws in the 1950's. The final blow to the river strain came with the closing of the woods to hunting. The timber companies had always been fearful of posting their lands, fearful that their woods would be burned in retaliation. There was a saying of the woods folk, "Where my dogs don't go, pines won't grow." Taking advantage of the stock laws, the companies began closing the woods by leasing their lands as hunting clubs. They sometimes very shrewdly hired some of those men forced off the land as pasture riders or enforcers.

In the early 1800's the Neches was a major artery of commerce. In 1840 the steamboat "Angelina" plied the Neches waters and opened up the East Texas interior to a booming trade with New Orleans and Galveston. The steamboat's dominance was brief. Railroads began to replace them by the 1870's. The last of the steamers, the "Neches Belle", made its final run in 1894.

The Neches and its watershed remained, essentially, a wilderness until the coming of the lumber mills at the close of the century. Those big mills were too numerous to mention, but most resembled the mill located at the ghost town "Old Aldridge". The skeletal remains of this once-thriving sawmill can be seen on the banks of the Neches just east of Upland Island Wilderness.

World War II and the decade following presented additional demands for the river's bottomlands. America and Mexico were building railroads, and they needed crossties. "Peckerwood" mills sprang up all along the Neches, and what hardwoods remained were sawn into crossties. The peckerwood mills primarily focused their efforts on the creeks and streams that watered the Neches. Like the timber barons that preceded them, they logged an area until the timber was exhausted, then quickly moved the sawmill to another location and were cutting again. While these loggers were cutting, they removed the last remnants of the great Neches cypress trees that the early Spanish explorers' journals had described in awe.

The Neches River is a great treasure for East Texas and will be even more valuable to future generations as wild areas are lost to urbanization. For years there have been many calls to designate the Neches as a "Wild and Scenic River". The wild and scenic designation would preserve what remains of the river's verdant bottomlands, wildlife, and shadowed forest for present and future generations to savor. Opposition from special interest groups has, so far, prevented this beautiful and historic river from being protected.

environments, possess outstandingly remarkable scenic, recreational, geological, fish and wildlife, historic, cultural, or other similar values (including ecological values), shall be preserved in free-flowing condition, and that they and their immediate environments shall be protected for the benefit and enjoyment of present and future generations."

The National Park Service, in its Nationwide River Inventory (NRI) (1982) identified the Neches River between Lake Palestine and B. A. Steinhagen Lake for potential designation as a Wild and Scenic River. The NRI found that this segment of the Neches has "outstandingly remarkable" scenic, recreational, fish and wildlife value.

Texas Parks and Wildlife Department in 1973 proposed that the 178 miles of the Neches River between Lake Palestine and B. A. Steinhagen be given status as a specially designated waterway.

In 1989, American Rivers (Washington, D.C.) conducted a survey of rivers to determine which of this country's rivers have rare or highly significant biological value. An abundance of rare plants and animals were found along the Neches. The U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service indicate that additional study will be necessary to determine whether these rare species should be listed as threatened or endangered. (We were unable to verify that this study was ever done.) In 1992, American Rivers included the Neches in its "Outstanding Rivers List for Texas."

The U. S. Forest Service in 1987 began managing public lands along the river to "ensure wild status". The 1987 Forest Plan stated that, "The potential exists for designation of the Neches River as a segment of the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System of Waterways."

POLITICAL AND GOVERNMENTAL ACTIVITY REGARDING THE NECHES RIVER

What is a Wild and Scenic River? The Wild and Scenic River Act of 1968 prescribes a process for designating rivers to this system. The Act states "...certain selected rivers of the Nation which, with their immediate environments, possess outstandingly remarkable scenic, recreational, geologic, fish and wildlife, historic, cultural, or other similar values (including ecological values), shall be preserved in free-flowing condition, and that they and their immediate environments shall be protected for the benefit and enjoyment of present and future generations."

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The U. S. Forest Service in its Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) for the Revised Land and Resource Management Plan of 1996 comments as follows: "The Neches River is one of the most scenic waterways in East Texas. It normally has sufficient water for recreational use for most of its length, and its lower section is essentially free-flowing despite the reservoir upstream. The area receives significant recreational use by canoeists and fishermen. The presence of Davy Crockett and Angelina National Forests adjacent to the river, and unique features such as Big Slough and a waterfall give this section potential for Scenic River status."

The initiative for applying for Wild and Scenic Rivers status normally comes from state governments. In the 1990 Texas legislative session, a bill that would have initiated establishment of a protected river system for Texas did not pass, (House Bill 1990 and Senate Bill 1205).

Again quoting the U. S. Forest Service FEIS, "Some private land owners and industry oppose Wild and Scenic River designation. Industry has been very concerned about protection that could limit future industrial use of Texas Rivers." This statement begs the response, "What about the people?" Does it matter that the people of East Texas have had enough of their streams polluted or clear cut, or flooded by massive dams?

To be sure, the big timber companies are not overly eager to have the Neches designated a Wild and Scenic River. It would be the end of their clear cutting of hardwoods along a narrow portion on the river corridor. But, they would release far less land with a protected river than with a dam that destroys not only acres but also hundreds of square miles of forest.

No, it's the dam builders and those who buy and sell water that do not want the Neches to remain wild and free flowing. There are currently proposals for at least three dams to be built across the Neches. The Rockland Dam has been much in the news lately. The dam builders and water sellers are using all their political muscle to line up members of the Texas house and senate behind legislation that would allow them to begin building the Rockland Dam immediately.

*We don't know much about solitude these days,
nor do we want to. A crowded world thinks that
aloneness is always loneliness, and that to seek it is perversion.*

The people of East Texas should know some of the consequences of the
Rockland Dam. It would:

John Graves, Goodbye to a River

1. Erase 80 miles of our last natural, free-flowing river
2. Drown 197 square miles of forest above the dam
3. Dry up 218 square miles of forest below the dam
4. Exterminate the food supply of thousands upon thousands of birds and animals that depend upon the river's hardwoods for nesting and food.
5. Depress Gulf fishing by reducing nutrients that flow into Sabine Lake and Sabine Pass estuaries.
6. Wipe out the entire Neches River Valley biological corridor
7. Cost in excess of one billion dollars

*8:30 a.m. I crossed the bridge over the Neches River. Ed Furman of
Palestine was with me. We were going for us. Zach Maxwell of The
Lufkin Daily News arrived minutes later.*

*Put the canoe into the water, had a brief conversation with Zach and Jay, and
shoved off down the Neches. Ed Furman suggested I try his paddle, and it is
great! Very light weight, and the blade is set at an angle to the handle. Makes
steering much easier.*

*Lake Palestine acts as a giant settlement bowl, so the water is almost clear with
a slight greenish tint.*

*Immediately below the bridge are sandstone banks covered with moss and fern.
Even in this dry season, spring water is dripping into the river.*

Surprisingly, the river's current is quite strong.

*Encountered four tree falls within first 30 minutes. Was able to go underneath
two of them, but it was necessary to drag the canoe over the top of the other
two.*

*Have seen countless ducks: green heads, teal, and two wood ducks. The wood
ducks got right up beside the canoe. Beautiful!*

*Cat squirrels have kept up a steady chorus since I put in the river. Only when
four red-shouldered hawks began circling low overhead did they hush.*

*The river channel on this north end isn't very deep; thus, one can step out into
the forest in many places.*

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Crossed part of the river the scenery has changed. The forest has been clear-cut. Hundreds of large hardwood stumps are growing in the water's edge.

John Graves, Goodbye to a River

Two comments: NECHES RIVER CANOE EXPEDITION

An old homestead sits just off the river, and a sound seldom heard anymore
Saturday, October 2, 1999 the river. Two hours have sped the canoe and are
baying their warning of my approach. I slide quickly past.

8:50 a.m.: Arrived at Hwy. 175 bridge over the Neches River. Ed Furman of Palestine, President of East Texas River Runners, and Jay Graham of the Jacksonville Daily Progress were there waiting for us. Zach Maxwell of The Lufkin Daily News arrived minutes later.

The current takes me quickly past a wild persimmon tree loaded with ripe fruit.
Put the canoe into the water, had a brief conversation with Zach and Jay, and shoved off down the Neches. Ed Furman suggested I try his paddle, and it is great! Very light weight, and the blade is set at an angle to the handle. Makes steering much easier.

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Seventy-five years ago these pastures were probably growing King Cotton
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seems, a mile. Trees have been cut so close to the river's edge that their tops
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The river makes an abrupt left turn and brings me almost face-to-face with a
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trip to hurry to shore, but so
many birds are protruding from the log that his progress is slow.
Cat squirrels have kept up a steady chorus since I put in the river. Only when four red-shouldered hawks began circling low overhead did they hush.

The river channel on this north end isn't very deep; thus, one can see out into the forest in many places.

ink cans and plastic bottles of every shape and color
are caught in large drifts.

Page 2

Crossed under the abandoned railroad trestle of the SSW Railroad. Along this part of the river the scenery has changed. The forest has been clear-cut. Hundreds of large hardwood stumps are everywhere. Many of the trees were growing in the water's edge!

Two cormorants flushed ahead of me. Later they circled overhead.

An old homestead sits just off the river, and a sound seldom heard anymore reverberates up and down the river. Two hounds have spied the canoe and are baying their warning of my approach. I glide quickly past.

The river channel narrows even more, and trees of all kinds reach across and touch. A good, strong spring flows in, nourishing the river.

The current takes me quickly past a wild persimmon tree loaded with ripe fruit. If I had seen it sooner, I would have sampled the fruit. Really, my excuse for not stopping was, "We haven't had a frost yet."

I paddle under a couple of wooden bridges. This appears to be cattle country. Seventy-five years ago these pastures were probably growing King Cotton instead of cattle. I surprise a small herd of crossbred Brahms; some are belly deep in the water, drinking.

A whitetail doe snorts her warning and, stamping her front legs, trots unhurriedly away. The sandbars are dotted with deer tracks.

Fresh hardwood stumps begin to appear on the west bank and continue for, it seems, a mile. Trees have been cut so close to the river's edge that their tops fell into the water. Thankfully, the trees growing next to the river's edge were spared.

The river makes an abrupt left turn and brings me almost face-to-face with a bandit-faced raccoon. He is out on a tree trunk that extends about four feet above the water and almost across the river. He tries to hurry to shore, but so many limbs are protruding from the log that his progress is slow.

Kingfishers have darted in front of the canoe all day.

The river, generally, is clean; but at almost every treetop or log that lies in the water, large numbers of drink cans and plastic bottles of every shape and color are caught in large drifts.



End of first day

Route through a tree-fall



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3:50 p.m.: Arrive at 747, or Carey Lake, bridge and stop for the day. to pull you through, Hester?" Without waiting for my reply, she wades out, grabs the canoe,

This nine or ten miles of the Neches really have been a pleasant surprise. The clean water, strong current, sandbars and shalebars, rock outcrops, abundant wildlife, and much outstanding scenery makes this stretch a day to remember. Another important plus for sun-conscious Texans is the abundance of shade. The narrow channel allows the trees to provide a cool cover everywhere there wasn't pasture or clear-cuts.

I immediately break a rule I have laid down for myself - not to travel past 5:00 p.m. The Carey Lake bridge isn't a very good place to put in or take out, but it can be done without too much trouble. The litter here is terrible, and the road to the launch site may be impassable in extremely wet weather. bend with a small sandbar inside the bend. White oaks and water oaks line the opposite bank with

Sunday, October 3, 1999 leaning over the water. At the point of the sandbar the river is no more than 20 feet wide.

Bonnie and I attended church services at the Jacksonville church of Christ. Stopped by Wal-Mart for a few last-minute essentials. am, I hurriedly begin to make camp.

I pushed off from the Carey Lake bridge at 2:00 p.m. I haven't looked at a thermometer, but I know the temperature is in the high 80's. The sky is a bright blue and not a cloud in the sky. The sun looks like a bright fall pumpkin in a field of blue. really, it is up, and I can think about food. The text has taken so much time that it is rapidly getting darker.

The river surroundings are mixed on the route to the Hwy. 79 bridge. Some of it still has old growth hardwoods growing along its banks. Some of it, sadly, has been logged heavily. Some loggers do not even leave the trees growing along the edge of the water. Others do. The Texas Forest Service issues recommendations for leaving Streamside Management Zones (SMZ's) along watercourses. They issue comprehensive recommendations for all logging practices in their Best Management Practices (BMP) program.

It is dark as I crawl into my tent. The past-white musk shells that litter the The blackgums are beginning to announce the coming of autumn. Their leaves are beginning to turn various shades of red, purple, and orange.

The sounds of night begin with the frogs. It seems like thousands of them, but, The river moves me on. In the distance I can see someone fishing on a sandbar. It turns out to be an attractive woman about 40, and her hook is caught on a limb. As I glide by I give the line a jerk, and it pops free. Immediately below her is a treetop across the river; and another, younger woman, sitting in a lawn chair, casting into the river. I begin trying to thread the canoe through the contemplate. If those stars are really stars of other solar systems, and they have planets revolving around them; surely, the chances of life "out there" must be better than even.

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maze of limbs, and the younger woman says, "Would you like for me to pull you through, Mister?" Without waiting for my reply, she wades out, grabs the canoe, and quickly leads me out into open water. I thank her, and the current moves me on.

I cross under Hwy. 79 bridge at 5:10 p.m. Travel time from Carey Lake bridge is three hours and ten minutes.

I immediately break a rule I have laid down for myself – not to travel past 5:00 p.m., but I am looking for the perfect campsite.

At 5:45 p.m. I find it! The river makes a sharp 90-degree bend with a small sandbar inside the bend. White oaks and water oaks line the opposite bank with river haw and river birch leaning over the water. At the point of the sandbar the river is no more than 20 feet wide.

Knowing that darkness comes quickly in the river bottom, I hurriedly begin to make camp.

I break out the small tent that I purchased from Academy in Houston especially for this trip. I soon wish I had read the instructions. Anybody can assemble a small tent! Finally, it is up, and I can think about food. The tent has taken so much time that it is rapidly getting darker.

I grab a roll of summer sausage and a box of crackers – my first supper on the Neches River Canoe Expedition.

There are almost no mosquitoes. They usually avoid sandbars, plus the dry weather has removed most of their breeding pools.

It is dark as I crawl into my tent. The pearl-white muscle shells that litter the sandbar give an eerie look to the place as dusk turns to darkness.

The sounds of night begin with the frogs. It seems like thousands of them, but, to my disappointment, there were no bullfrogs. Owls begin to call back and forth to one another. Across the river the acorns keep up a steady "ker plop" into the water all night.

Stars! I only can see straight up, but the stars are too numerous to even contemplate. If those stars are really suns of other solar systems, and they have planets revolving around them; surely, the chances of life "out there" must be better than even.

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Monday, October 4, 1999

Fish striking in the water not 20 feet from my tent awaken me at dawn. I can hear feral hogs grunting and eating acorns somewhere nearby. The temperature is 60 degrees.

At 6:45 a.m., it is light enough; I roll out of the tent. Breakfast is a cinnamon bun from Wal-Mart and a cup of hot coffee. Ducks are calling from the river as I break camp, load the canoe, and shove off.

Hawks are circling overhead and screaming their joy to be alive as I slip through the water.

Generally speaking, the hardwood forest along the river is beautiful to behold even though there are small pockets of clear-cutting. I will never understand why a landowner would allow the trees to be cut right to the water's edge.

I suspect that I may have seen the highlight of my trip this morning. A large water oak had fallen across the river, and some ducks were up under it, feeding on acorns. A coyote had seen them and had walked out on the log attempting to get closer. He was so intent on the ducks that he didn't see me. I got within ten feet of him.

It is amazing what one can see gliding silently through the water in a canoe.

I hear a roar ahead and see two concrete abutments. It looks like an abandoned bridge but turns out to be a five-foot waterfall. At the last minute I pull to the west bank and walk to take a look.

There is a 70-year-old man fishing just below the falls. He tells me it used to be a hydroelectric generator here. He says the plant was before his time, but the spillway was here as long as he can remember. He tells me this is called Rocky Point.

Tuesday, October 5, 1999
I began preparing to drag the canoe up the bank and around the falls when a young man lays down his fishing rod to give me a hand. He says he is from Elkhart. I now know that good folks live in Elkhart too!

Soon a load of men, women, and children of all ages arrive and they all begin to fish. I wonder why the children aren't in school.

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At 1:30 p.m., I devour a couple of Nutri-Grain cereal bars, and I am back on the water.

A snake has caught a frog. I can hear the frog's pitiful cries. I stop paddling and study the left bank. Suddenly, part tumbling, part crawling; a brown water snake makes his way down a steep incline with his dinner in his mouth.

Steep sandstone banks with small springlets trickling out here and there make me wonder if there aren't other springs close by.

I haven't gone a mile when I hear the sound of running water. There, under the canopy of a twisted elm tree, is a rushing stream of fresh spring water cascading into the river. At the top of the sandy bank the stream forms into a perfect little basin. I seize the opportunity to take a much-needed bath. The water is cold!

The Neches is full of surprises. I no sooner decide that it has gotten wider and that the current has slowed when suddenly it is choked to no more than 20 feet wide and makes a torturous S curve between sheer banks on both sides. It gives me a fast ride for about two minutes and tests my meager paddling skills.

There has been evidence of beaver since the beginning of this trip, but today is the first time I have seen one of the animals.

Today really has been a wildlife day. Gray squirrels have been everywhere. A white-tailed doe studied me from the bank before bounding away. The coyote, beaver, and a couple of nutria, plus the snake and frog, round out the list.

Two great white herons and two great blue herons were the bird highlights of the day. Of course, there were, it seemed, hundreds of ducks, kingfishers, and hawks. Two black vultures allowed me to pass underneath their perch in a dead snag without flying away.

It looks almost like another world here - nothing but flat country and a tangle of
Tuesday, October 5, 1999

The sky was filling with clouds when I crawled into my tent last night at dark. Rain seemed to be the forecast, but the morning dawned bright and clear with 52 degrees.

There is the sound of a machine running close to the river, and I stop and find a young man enjoying life. He is lying in the back of a pickup sipping a Coke. He-

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Last night was very quiet; a couple of owl hoots was it. The crows were the first to make a sound this morning. As I began to move about I heard the woof, woof, and crashing of limbs that told me I had interrupted the feeding of a small herd of feral hogs. *he says he is drinking the last one.*

A couple of cups of coffee and the last of my cinnamon buns, and I load up the canoe. *we give them a call. He says he would. (Just a little insurance, it won't hurt if they both call.)*

The run to Hwy. 84 is pretty uneventful. I saw hawks, ducks, and a great white heron. A heron can lift his body almost straight up, but it reminds me of an old man trying to get up out of a chair. Even laboring as he is, the bird makes it look graceful. *would see.)*

I hear the cars on Hwy. 84, but I don't need the sound to let me know. *sausage.* Beverage cans, old chairs, tires, all the trappings of man tell me I am nearing civilization. *have to resort to cooking soon.*

These are majestic oaks along here too. They are draped with Spanish moss and give a look of southern charm to the place. There are four men fishing in the shade of the ancient trees. Two of them have their hooks hung. I offer to help, but they decline my offer. *they come close to camp and spend about five minutes all howling at once. They are probably just getting ready to pack up for*

I arrive at Hwy. 84 at 11:00 a.m. Stop and wait for a fisherman to show up, but no one does. Just as I am about to leave, a man stops to turn around. I ask him if he will call my home to let my family know I am o.k. He agrees and drives away.

For the next couple of miles below Hwy. 84 the area is very flat, causing the river to take many different channels. The people of the North would call this a braided river. Whatever you call it, paddling is very difficult. Sometimes I chose a wrong channel and had to backtrack and try another. *Hawks are circling and screaming overhead as I push into the water.*

It looks almost like another world here – nothing but flat country and a tangle of river haws. *would any distance until I encounter a mammoth pine log blocking the river. I bank the canoe to search for a way to portage around the log.*

Finally, I break out into an area of forest and high banks. A nice spring is flowing from the bluff bank on the west side. *I decide to portage my gear to a sandbar down river and drag the canoe over*

There is the sound of a machine running close to the river, and I stop and find a young man enjoying life. He is lying in the back of a pickup sipping a Coke. He

Page 8

must work for the man running the machine. I introduce myself. I can tell he isn't very impressed. I must be pretty scruffy and dirty after having fought my way through these flatlands. He tells me his name, Vernon Thompson. I try to mooch a Coke, but he says he is drinking the last one.

I tell Vernon that my family hasn't heard from me in a couple of days and would he please give them a call. He says he would. (Just a little insurance, it won't hurt if they both call.)

The river is getting wider with much higher banks. Another spring flows from a bluff bank just below Hopson's Crossing. (Vernon told me that would be the next bridge I would see.)

At 5:10 p.m. I make camp on a flat sandbar. Supper consists of Vienna sausage, a tortilla, and cheese crackers with a cup of hot chocolate. My junk food is going fast. I may have to resort to cooking soon.

Sometime during the night I dimly hear dogs baying in the distance. I hear a man yelling and guess its probably someone coon hunting.

Just before dawn a pack of coyotes come close to camp and spend about five minutes all howling at once. They are probably just getting ready to pack up for the winter.

Temperature at 7:00 p.m. is 72 degrees.

Wednesday, October 6, 1999

Two cups of coffee feel good at this 41-degree temperature this morning.

Hawks are circling and screaming overhead as I push into the water.

I haven't traveled any distance until I encounter a mammoth pine log blocking the river. I bank the canoe to search for a way to portage around the log. Overcup acorns cover the hard, dry ground.

I decide to portage my gear to a sandbar down river and drag the canoe over the top of the log.

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While I work I listen to someone squirrel hunting with a .22 caliber rifle. Of all the hunters I have heard since leaving Hwy. 175, this is the only one using a .22. Squirrel hunting with a .22 was my passion when I was a youngster. Denman Dunkin and I spent many hours hunting the Neches bottomlands of southern Angelina and Jasper counties.

The canoe is across the log, and the gear is stowed. I shove off from the sandbar.

I haven't traveled a quarter of a mile when I see a hunters' camp: pickup, tent, and all the trappings. I'll bet they are having a good time. They'll have some good stories to tell too.

Just below the hunters' camp, a spring as big as my arm is flowing into the river.

A little blue heron fishing along the water's edge almost lets me pass; but at the last minute, his courage fails and he takes to wing.

The sound of rushing water lies ahead, and I see what looks like a giant dump truck load of boulders in the river. I steady the canoe and shoot through the brief turbulence.

The thermometer shows 76 degrees, but in the sun it is hot. A flat, black gravel bar offers a place to clean out the canoe. The debris from passing through treetops and the mud off my feet from frequent ins and outs has it looking like a pigsty.

The swift, cool water over the rocks looks inviting to me. As soon as the housework is done, I sit and let the water rush around me.

The river makes another of its many 90-degree bends, and I meet two great blue herons head-on. They are flying side by side just above the water. To flee from me, one begins to lift itself to clear the trees in front of him. The other veers hard to the left and heads into forest. I watch in amazement as the giant bird threads his way up and through the trees until he is clear.

Many tree falls later I make camp on a small sandy hammock that is formed by a small swale that probably carries a lot of water during rainy season.

Today was a very hard day. I make a cup of hot chocolate and sit for a few minutes to allow the fatigue to drain out of my body.

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After a brief rest, I heat a cup of Smack Cajun Chicken Soup. I recommend it! When the noodles were gone, I crumbled crackers into the broth, and that was good too.

The tent goes up quickly, and I have a few minutes before dark, so I read a little in the Bible that Bonnie thoughtfully packed in my box.

The thermometer shows 72 degrees when I crawl into the tent.

Thursday, October 7, 1999

Another glorious 42-degree sunshiny day greets me as I crawl from the tent. That first cup of coffee is always so good!

I didn't really sleep too well last night.

I had heard some coyote pups about 300 yards east of camp while I was putting up the tent. They yelped and barked until it was time for the adults to make a hunt. Then some of the most spectacular howling I have ever heard took place - many long, drawn-out, mournful howls.

I suppose the adults then left to hunt because the pups, or whelps, resumed their yipping and barking.

Hours later the return of the adults and the sounds of celebration awakened me.

In addition to the coyotes, the giant red oak that covers my tent was the feeding place for a couple of flying squirrels. Their "chip, chip" call and the constant rain of acorn debris on and around my tent was enough to keep me awake.

This is the prettiest campsite I have had. The swale runs inland from the river and fans out into a broad depression. The ground is already carpeted with autumn leaves. The white oaks, water oaks, black gums, pines, red oaks, and sweet gums are all at least 24 inches in diameter. Mixed in with these beautiful giants is an understory of ironwood, elm, holly, and haw. Squirrels are singing everywhere.

As I begin to break camp, the bright morning sun is being hidden by thin, white clouds that are moving in from the southeast.

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This northern part of the Neches makes me wish I knew more geology. There is an impermeable stratum of mostly black sandstone that frequently is visible in the river's banks. Associated with this black stratum are numerous seeps and, sometimes, strong springs. The immediate vicinity of these seeps usually contains luxuriant growth of royal and cinnamon ferns. At times this formation juts out into the river and forms a flat, smooth shelf that would be ideal for picnicking or camping when the river water is low.

Many times these black outcrops signal swift water and a 30-second ride through a Neches rapid.

On the west side of the river the bank is worn smooth around a Tarzan rope tied to a limb overhanging the water. There must be a county road nearby. Something about kids make them want to go swinging out over water, let go, and make a big splash.

There, half submerged, is what appears to be a shopping cart. I have much more respect for these carts since a Wal-Mart manager told me they cost them approximately \$60.00 each.

Straight ahead in a giant red oak that has toppled into the river, a cormorant holds his wings out to dry after spending his morning diving for fish. He lets me get as close as he dares, then takes flight.

The nearby forest and river has been quiet this morning. Even the normally raucous crows have been silent.

The sky looks even more threatening so I pull to a protruding shelf of the black rock and quickly cook a bowl of rice for lunch. I get busy getting my slicker available out of the gear box and let the rice boil over on the stove.

A light rain begins as I slip the canoe into the water. I decide at the last minute not to put the slicker on, just yet.

The sprinkle lasts for only a few minutes but looks as if it may resume at any time. The wind picks up and grabs the old-fashioned bow of the canoe, and I have to struggle to keep it pointed downstream. I am thankful when the river makes a bend and the wind comes at me from the side. This has its perils too, especially when trying to navigate through a maze of jutting logs, limbs, and submerged "all of the above". The canoe can be pointed in just the precise direction, and a strong blast of wind will slide the entire craft sideways.

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I see two cabins today. One looks new and part of it appears to be walled with the fabric you see at plant nurseries. You can see through it, but it breaks up the sun's rays.

The next structure looks like a pavilion or arbor found at old cemeteries. Maybe it belonged to someone who liked to have big parties.

I pass a large hand-lettered sign nailed to a tree that proclaims: Bull Creek Hunting Club Keep Out. Another Tarzan swing hung nearby.

Tall, stately short leaf pines are becoming more abundant on the bluff banks of the river. Their height and smooth brown bark make them stand out among the hardwoods.

An osprey comes in low over my left shoulder, makes a graceful low swoop, and climbs to about 100 feet, then turns a hard left and disappears down the river. Not many of those in East Texas.

My watch tells me that I am running behind schedule. I have told Bonnie that I would be at the Hwy. 294 crossing at 4:00 p.m. It is now 3:30 p.m., and I can't even hear the traffic on the highway. Another huge tree fall looms ahead in the river.

Just a mile or so above Hwy. 294, a strong spring-fed creek rushes into the river. I don't stop.

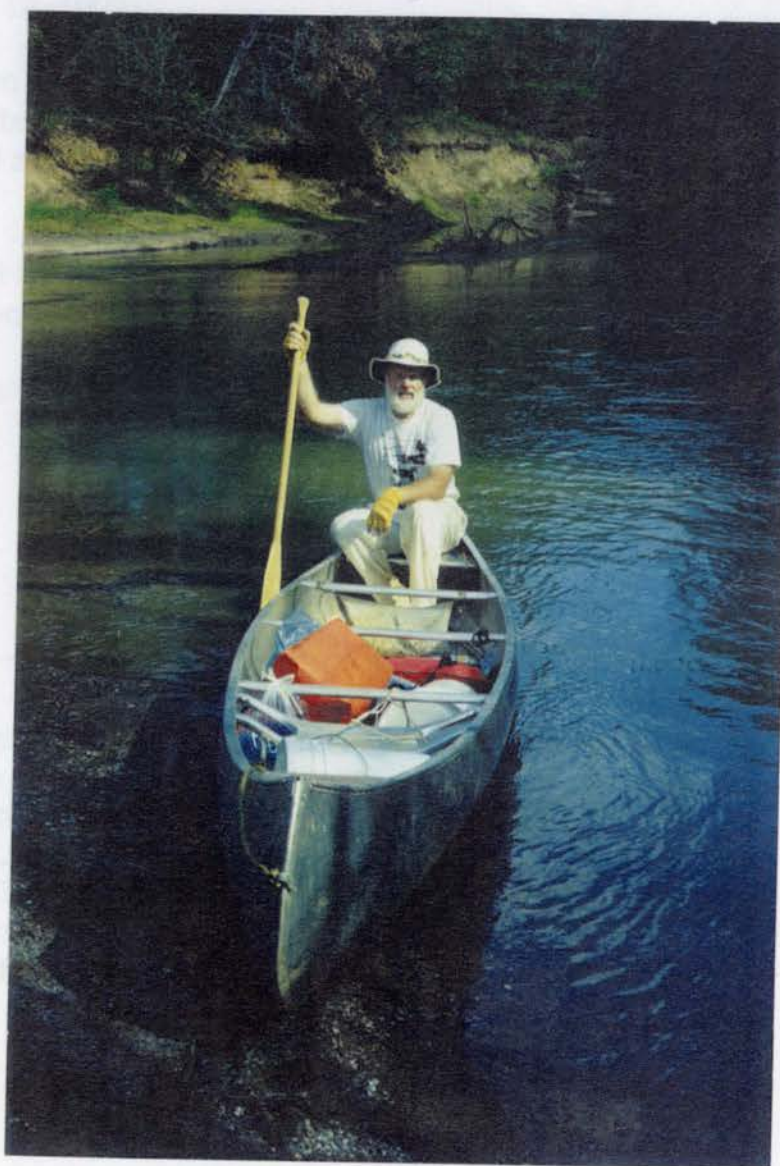
Finally, at 6:00 p.m. I round a curve and see a white pickup ahead. Bonnie is there with some cold water and a thermos of hot chocolate. Gina is with her.

To my surprise, Zach Maxwell with The Lufkin Daily News, Katrina Berry with KTRE-TV, and Jay Graham with the Jacksonville Daily Progress are waiting too.

The news media folks tell me we are in for two, maybe three, days of rain, so I elect to tie up here until it blows over. I pray for rain. My job will get progressively easier with each additional foot of water in the river.



End of four days in
"wilderness" (above)



Clean and refreshed —
Hwy. 294 (at right)

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NECHES RIVER CANOE EXPEDITION

The rain that was forecast never materialized, but I took the opportunity to pick up supplies and to re-outfit my gear. The big plastic storage box and the seven-gallon water can had been major hindrances while threading the canoe through the tree falls. Both containers stuck up about four inches above the gunwales and caught every limb that I tried to pass.

I hope I solved the problem by switching to two five-gallon plastic buckets, gallon water jugs, and two dry bags Gina let me borrow.

Attended church at Central church of Christ Sunday morning.

Sunday, October 10, 1999

Shoved away from the Hwy. 294 bridge at 3:00 p. m. There were a few treetops just south of the bridge, but the river soon straightened out, and I made good time until I found a small grove of ironwoods growing at the upper edge of a sandbar.

Pitched camp and had a bowl of Smack freeze-dried Chicken with Noodles. It was good, but I prefer the Cajun flavor.

It was 72 degrees when I crawled into the tent. Almost no sound except a few frogs.

Monday, October 11, 1999

The thermometer reads 60 degrees at 7:00 a. m.

I fire up the little stove, make coffee, and have a cinnamon bun that I got at Brookshire's Fresh Market. I count my blessings as I sit on the riverbank, and watch the sun coming up, sipping hot coffee, and munching on a cinnamon bun.

The water was as smooth as glass when I pushed off at 9:00 a. m. About 11:00 a. m. the wind came up, and, sometimes, strong gusts would fill the river channel with clouds of river birch leaves. It made paddling difficult.

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I pass numerous black gravel beaches then come to a sandy delta deposited in the river by a strong, little spring creek. Looking up the creek, you could see it twisting and turning between leaf-strewn, sandy banks...a really nice spot! About one mile farther on down the river, I find another spring creek, but it is much smaller.

The river flows clear of windfalls for a while and is swift in areas of rock outcrops. I make good time.

The skeletal remains of pilings that once supported a bridge protrude up from the water. I suppose it was the Hwy. 21 bridge many years ago.

The map says that I have passed the mouth of Bows Creek. I feel certain the creek takes its name from the last Texas Cherokee Chief.

The Neches forms the western boundary of Cherokee County through here. The Cherokees and a few Choctaws once owned a large part of this country.

I say owned; it had been promised to them by the Spanish, Mexicans, and, finally, by Sam Houston.

As the American settlers pushed west through the southeastern states, the Indians that lived there were either killed or had to flee west.

Some Cherokees came to East Texas while it was still ruled by Spain. The Indians made application for title to the land from the Spanish monarchy, but bureaucratic bungling and slow communication with Europe prevented title transfer before the Mexican revolution. The Cherokees made another trip to Mexico City and petitioned the Mexican government. They were assured that title would be forthcoming quickly. Once again, with all the upheavals in Mexico, ownership was not conferred before the Texans revolted from Mexico.

300 Sam Houston assured the Indians that the lands they claimed would be deeded to them as soon as Texas won her independence. The Texas legislature failed to follow through on this promise. Mirabeau Bonaparte Lamar, the second elected president of Texas, sent word to the Cherokees to get out of Texas. (Texans, since early on, had had a particularly bad reputation with all Indians.)

Chief Bows said they would leave if they could stay until their crops were harvested. Lamar said, now; and Bows said, we must fight.

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The battle that ensued in Cherokee and Van Zandt Counties killed many of the Indians, and many more died of cold and hunger in the trek to Oklahoma. When Chief Bowls' body was found he was wearing a sword given to him by Sam Houston.

I look up as my canoe glides under the old San Antonio road on Highway 21. This route dates back to Spanish ownership of Texas and served as the immigration route for many Americans into early Texas. For much of the time it was only a trail through the forest.

Immediately below the bridge a blue smoke spirals upward from a campfire in the Neches Bluff Campground. I see no one.

A short time later the familiar yellow and black signs tell me I have entered the Davy Crockett National Forest. I begin to look for a place to camp.

Two fox squirrels are making such a fuss in a black gum just above my head that I have to stop and listen to them for a minute.

For supper I have a package of Lipton Noodles and Sauce. Cooks in seven minutes and is good.

I know it's time for bed when I hear a barred owl say, "Who Who Who Youuuu?" Besides, I am tired!

I can hear coyotes faintly yipping and barking.

Tuesday, October 12, 1999

It is 60 degrees at 7:00 a. m.

The fox squirrels are back at it again, scolding and chattering. Some distant coyotes did a little yelping just before dawn.

Sitting here with my coffee, I count at least fifteen gums that have been killed, or severely damaged, by beavers. Some of the trees are 30 inches, plus or minus, in diameter. A red-bellied woodpecker is drilling on one at this moment. He is still hard at work when I push off, and squirrels are everywhere.

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The river has lost its clean look and has taken on a grayish cast. The current isn't as strong except when the channel narrows for some reason or other. There are some parts of the riverbanks in this area that are really pretty... fifteen-foot-tall sandstone in hues of brown to gray, covered with ferns and moss of varying colors. Wax myrtle is present occasionally.

Wednesday, October 13, 1970

Four belted kingfishers really put on a show. They chased each other back and forth in front of and behind the canoe for a mile, it seemed. Every few minutes they would give a burst of their tch, tch, tch call, reminding me of an old WW I movie dogfight.

A coot isn't the most aerodynamically designed bird on the river. He must get up speed for takeoff by running on top of the water. The one I surprised started his run but didn't have room to get airborne, so he plowed full speed into a pile of tree trunks. After falling back into the water and collecting himself for a second or two, he got pointed straight down the river and made his getaway.

There is an almost new four-foot stepladder and an eight-foot section of stockade fence lodged up in a tree. If my canoe would hold it, I would like to have the ladder.

I enter the big slough wilderness area, and I choose to stay in the river...hope this was the right choice.

I detect movement on the west bank and rest my paddle on my knees. A black (PWR) pineywoods rooter sow and three shoats come to the water to drink. They all wade in, then see the canoe. They freeze, trying to decide what it is. The sow snorts, and they lunge up the bank spraying water everywhere as they go.

Approaching a clump of river haws, I hear thrashing and sliding. I give a couple of quick strokes with the paddle and break into the open just in time to see the violent swirl of water where an alligator has just disappeared. I drifted downstream for a few yards and waited, but he didn't reappear.

The bottomlands in here are spectacular – giant oaks, gums, hickories, and the usual array of understory trees.

I spy a good place to camp, so I pull to shore and walk into the Davy Crockett National Forest.

Looking up the path this creek follows as it disappears into the woods shows a winding course through leaf-strewn sandy hills.

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For supper I have Idahoan mashed potatoes and crackers. Just add hot water and eat from the cup.

There must be 50 or more black and turkey vultures sitting in trees around a small clubhouse perched high above the water on a bluff bank. The reason for their congregating turns out to be the carcass of a deer.

Wednesday, October 13, 1999

As I paddle by, my presence creates an almost surreal scene. The vultures take great birds floying the air with their wings at the same time reminded me of scenes from Alfred Hitchcock's "Birds". When A cow is bawling in the far distance.

This river has twisted and turned so many times, the sun is lost. It rose in the north this morning.

I study the map to try and figure out where I am. I decide I am lost and give up.

For breakfast I have Alpine Aire Blueberry Honey Granola. Just add water and eat from pouch. It really wasn't too bad. Maybe I just wasn't really hungry. I eat an apple.

Yesterday I had about four or five miles of good, open water and made good time. Maybe the same will hold for today.

I can see a big logjam just below camp. So I just pack my gear below before I load it into the canoe.

I made it through the Big Slough Canoe Trail area with considerable difficulty. Big Slough, as a canoe trail, is probably history except in times of high water. That is a loss because you see so much more when the water is low. I would hope that somehow they could open up the river and slough again.

The river shows many faces today. Sometimes it sprawls deep and wide with no more current than a pond. At other times it is choked down between fifteen-foot-high sandstone banks and a current that pushes the little canoe at a fast clip. My favorite is the shallow, gravel bottom areas where the water is swift, noisy, and as close as you will get to rapids on the Neches.

I encounter a sandy delta extending out almost across the river. The sand is being deposited by a clear, spring-fed creek that enters from the west bank. Looking up the path this creek follows as it disappears into the woods shows a winding course through leaf-strewn sandy hills.

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The river silently moves me on.

There must be 50 or more black and turkey vultures sitting in trees around a small clubhouse perched high above the water on a bluff bank. The reason for their congregating turns out to be the carcass of a deer.

As I paddle by, my presence creates an almost surreal scene. The vultures take flight. The swish, swish of all these great birds flaying the air with their wings at the same time reminded me of scenes from Alfred Hitchcock's "Birds". When they had all taken flight the sky was black with birds.

This is, as I count, the third deer carcass I have seen. Some guys open the season a little earlier than others do.

Some lucky individual has a 14' Weldcraft boat and a new Johnson outboard motor chained to a tree.

Just below, I can see a gas-fired BBQ grill and a cook shed.

The noise of rushing water tells me I am about to get a fast ride; and, sure enough, the longest run of swift water I have encountered moves the canoe along at a brisk pace for several hundred feet. I find another rapids very similar to this one later this afternoon.

I had left U. S. Forest Service land earlier; but as I round a bend, directly in front is a towering bluff bank topped with tall shortleaf pines. Nailed to a tree is the black and yellow sign denoting USFS land.

A steel bridge looms ahead. I assume it to be FSR 534. A spring creek enters the river just below the bridge.

The canoe comes to a scratching, screeching halt. I have run aground on a wide gravel bar that extends across the river. Nothing to do but get out and push until I reach deeper waters.

A flat sandbar offers a good place to beach the canoe, so I pull over to make camp. At the top of the bar it is easy to tell that this place is used, occasionally, to launch boats. I walk up and am greeted by a picturesque little road that winds around, almost like a tunnel, through towering hardwoods. I resist the temptation to walk down it. I haven't seen any posted signs near here, but there may be one 50 feet down river. One sad note I make is the number of fresh Budweiser cans strewn on the ground.

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This is one of the most tiring days I have had, or maybe it is just catching up with me. At any rate, I put up the tent and am soon in it.

Temperature at 7:00 p. m. is 74 degrees.

Thursday, October 14, 1999

At 7:00 a. m. it is 56 degrees and a bright blue sky.

I haven't said anything about the songbirds I have seen and heard. Every day, especially in the mornings, the forest is alive with a chorus of many songbirds. Some I can identify, and others I cannot.

As I was preparing to make these notes a warbler of some kind was in a tree directly above, belting out a melodious tune that belies his tiny body size. Two owls were directly across the river not making the traditional owl sounds but more of the ha ha, who who, ho ho variety.

Now I hear a flicker on a dead tree and a woodpecker on another one.

Suddenly, the sounds of the forest change. Men have arrived to work, and the sounds change to the angry roar of chainsaws and giant trees striking the earth.

The river has opened up and allows an opportunity to paddle. I stroke on one side until I am tired, then change sides. I repeat the procedure over and over stopping occasionally to thread my way through logjams. I am making good time for a change.

It seems most clubhouses along the river never quite get finished. I passed one earlier that was sided with Temple foam sheathing. I wonder how long it has been since they quit making that product.

The clubhouse that gets my vote, so far, for being most memorable is the old yellow school bus that someone parked at the river's edge a mile or two above the Hwy. 7 bridge. Of course, it hasn't been used in ages. Just an old derelict to remain there for decades until it finally rusts away.

The noise of a powerful diesel engine greets me as the Hwy. 7 bridge comes into view. A highway construction crew has a giant water pump set up at the boat dock, and water trucks are scurrying back and forth.

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The canoe scrapes to a halt at the dock. I drag it up on the bank sufficiently to keep it from floating off and start walking toward one of the little service station-grocery stores located on the Angelina County side of the river.

A young man wearing a black T-shirt that reads, "6th Annual Pineywood Stock" on the back looks to make sure I am not pilfering his tackle box and resumes watching his bobber. Fish aren't biting, he says.

I don't see how he can fish with that pump roaring the way it is.

Butch Sorenson was minding the store today and sold me a good, cold Dr. Pepper. I called Bonnie to come pick me up. I need water and supplies (and a hot shower).

Bonnie arrives, and we begin loading the gear into the truck. A tanned, friendly man approaches Bonnie and asks, "Ain't that the man that's canoeing down the river?" Bonnie assures him that it is the one and the same. "Well, he is sure welcome to tie up at my pier," he says, pointing a hundred yards down river. I introduce myself and learn that my benefactor's name is Johnny Steele. He asked some questions about the conditions I had encountered upstream, (logjams, etc.), and he tells me I can expect more of the same on the way to Hwy. 94. I appreciate his hospitality and interest in this expedition. Before we go, Mr. Steele goes to his pickup truck and brings a tiny baby gray squirrel for us to see.

Richard M. Donovan



Campsite on a sandbar

Whose river is this?



Page 2

NECHES RIVER CANOE EXPEDITION

I am momentarily out of the treelogs when I see a five-foot alligator lying on its back. He doesn't appear unduly alarmed at my approach until I am within about 100 feet, then he slides into the water.

As I shove off from Mr. Johnny Steele's dock (Hwy. 7) at 8:05 a.m., I welcome the fog that hangs over the river. I can look directly at the sun; the fog robs it of its brightness. She wheels and is gone.

I come to the fork in the river; the old channel is to the left, the new to the right. I turn right.

The sun quickly burns away the fog, and a strong south wind begins to blow. It gives me a fit with the canoe; and when a big gust blows, the oaks rain acorns into the river.

In the midmorning sun I see the white underbody and legs of a white-tailed deer. It moves off before I can see if it is a doe or a buck.

The river changes itself and everything around it. The new channel I am following isn't as wide as it has been and is much more blocked by fallen trees.

But the water isn't loyal to this either. There are already new high water "cut offs" that the water takes during times of abundant rainfall. Someday these will be the new river.

As the river twists and turns, it is eroding the bank on the outside of the curve and building up the opposite bank on the inside of the curve.

Two pines come into view; one is four feet in diameter, the other slightly smaller. The earth has been cut from under both of them. How do they hang there? Following this winter's rains they probably will fall and block the river.

The forest's stillness is broken by the snort of a deer that makes me strain to see him. No luck! He has seen me first.

This is wild and remote through here, mostly hardwoods; but there are tall, stately pines on the small hills and ridges.

The canoe clears a tree fall, and at least 20 gaudily dressed wood ducks lift into the air, head straight down river, then peel around and come back between the canoe and the sun, flashing their shadows as they streak overhead.

Page 2

I am momentarily out of the treetops when I see a five-foot alligator lying on an oak log that spans the river. He doesn't appear unduly alarmed at my approach until I am within about 100 feet, then he slides into the water.

A white-tailed doe daintily dips her head to drink before she realizes that there is a strange object on the water. She wheels and is gone.

Two fat black hogs are busily rooting on a sandbar and fail to see the canoe until I am very close. With much woofing, they enter the forest and are joined by at least twenty more, judging by the sounds they make.

Today has been difficult. I look for an early campsite and decide on a low, flat sandbar at 4:10 p. m. The sandbar is covered with deer tracks, and a sweet gum across the river has turned a brilliant purple.

I took on new provisions, so tonight I am having Nissin Hot Sauce Beef. On a scale of five stars, this stuff rates a strong four. It's good! Just add water and eat.

Temperature is 72 degrees at 7:00 p. m.

Log jam at abandoned TSE trestle

Saturday, October 16, 1999

It is 62 degrees and foggy at 7:00 a m.

At 2:35 a m. I was startled awake by a terrific, loud noise that lasted for three or four seconds. My first thought was "thunderstorm", but there wasn't a cloud in the sky. When the noise subsided, I realized it was a large, dead tree that had fallen. No wind, no rain, it was just its time.

Every time I touch the tent, water cascades down on me. Condensation has collected inside the tent.

As I ease the canoe into the water at 8:20 a. m., visibility is almost nil. Slowly I inch along until the sun begins to burn through.

Numerous clubhouses begin to appear on the Angelina side of the river. Up ahead, gleaming through the fog, is an array of lights. It appears to be a very large building, but as I draw closer it turns out to be a little red shack with electric lights strung all over the outside. I assume the owner left for squirrel hunting before daylight.



Around one log, over another

Log jam at abandoned TSE trestle



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Farther on I make out two men standing at the water's edge. "Have you had much trouble coming down the river?" one asks. I acknowledge that I have. One of the men says, "We are behind you 100%." "Yes," agrees the other, "Keep up the good work."

From Hwy. 7 the river banks have been tough, sticky mud. Having passed the mouth of the Old River, I still find plenty of mud, but rock and gravel begin to reappear. Much of the time the river bottom is sandy.

At the mouth of the Old River, I found myself reminiscing about my friends, Jack Sweeny, Ray Rector, and Shorty Turner and all the good times they had in the Old River Club.

I can hear traffic on Hwy. 94 when I detect a small waterfall ahead. I steer the canoe hard left and have no problem. The river channel quickly becomes mud, narrows, and is choked with logs.

At 11:30 a. m. I arrive at Hwy. 94 bridge, walk to a nearby store, use the phone and call Bonnie to pick me up.

Sunday, October 17, 1999

Attended church at Central church of Christ, and at 4:00 p. m. I pushed away from the Hwy. 94 bridge. Wind was gusting from the north, and the sky was gray and threatening.

The abandoned TSE Railroad trestle looms ahead, its pilings holding an array of various sized logs to block my path. The river is very wide and shallow. Much of the bottom is gravel, stone, or sand.

Two dogs are "cold trailing" less than 100 yards away as I make camp. Shortly, they seemed to strike a hot trail, and it appeared I was going to hear a good chase, then, nothing. The dogs simply quit.

The wind is getting stronger. I crawl into the tent for the night. I hope this new tent doesn't leak!

I see my first geese of the season, southbound in a long, sweeping V with three fragments irregularly trailing behind. More of them keep coming, and I hear them honking into the night.

Richard M. Donovan

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NECHES RIVER CANOE EXPEDITION

Monday, October 18, 1999

I lie in my sleeping bag listening to the sprinkle of rain hitting the tent. At about 7:00 a. m. it quits. I roll out of the tent, make a quick cup of coffee, pack the gear, and am paddling down the river by the time the next shower arrives.

The cold air contacting the warm water causes little wisps of vapor to rise above the water. A north wind is blowing.

Two doe deer stand atop a tall bluff bank and study my approach for a few seconds; then, turning, they lift their flags and jog stiff-legged into the brush.

The rain has stopped, and I see the blue smoke of a campfire. I think of a cup of hot coffee. I arrive at the smoke and see no one, only a dirt road leading away from the river. Hunters probably had camped here.

Numerous shacks and clubhouses begin appearing on the Angelina side of the river. All are deserted except one. Once again, I see smoke and a pickup truck. As the current takes me past, I shout, "Hello, the camp" but get no response. There have been a few of them scattered along the river, but today I begin to

Straight down the river is a craggy old snag, forked at the top, sticking 30 feet above the water. On each fork is a great blue heron silhouetted against the gray sky. One quickly takes to wing, but the other remains until the canoe is almost underneath.

Eight great blue herons rise up from behind a fallen water oak. They are in no

The rain resumes, and I begin to look for a place to pitch camp. It is raining hard now, and I hear the sound of a freight train. I must be closer to Hwy. 59 than I thought. I abandon the thought of camping and really begin to ply the paddle. By the time I reach the boat ramp at Hwy. 59, it is 6:00 o'clock, and rainwater is sloshing in the canoe. The birds take their comfort zone, they take to the air in a flurry of wings.

I walk to the Hendry's house and call Bonnie for transportation home. Mrs. Hendry makes me a cup of scalding coffee. I stand on the front porch, savoring the hot liquid as it warms me. Her husband majestically down a long, sandy spit to drink from the river. When he sees me, there is no reaction time; he simply

Today was really spectacular. Giant forests, high hills, and rocky cliffs, and some fast-flowing rapids. Not much wildlife, but the scenery makes it worth the effort. forest.

I sit there breathless, and re-live the incident again and again.

Richard M. Donovan

Page 2

NECHES RIVER CANOE EXPEDITION

The sky is clear, and I feel good so I paddle late, 7:00 p. m. I have to use a
Tuesday, October 19, 1999

Today I am scheduled to meet the news media at the Hwy. 59 bridge at 3:00 p. m. Will stay home until about 1:30 p. m., then go and try to clean the inside of the canoe. It is full of mud, water, and debris of all kinds – leaves, twigs, etc.

The sky is cold and gray when I wave goodbye to Bonnie at the Hwy. 59 bridge at 4:00 p. m. A north wind is blowing.

By 5:00 p. m. the clouds are beginning to break up, and one hour later, it's a beautiful fall evening.

I pass a cozy little red cabin perched high upon a cliff. The river is cutting under the cabin despite sacks of cement and rocks the owner has put in various places. Some of the big trees have already toppled over.

On the Angelina side, I see an oil well drilling rig. I am surprised they are drilling here. Thought oil prices were too low.

There have been a few of them scattered along the river, but today I begin to see stately cypress trees – numbers of them standing in the water, sometimes putting up knees higher than a man's head. The Neches was famous for its cypress 100 years ago.

Eight great blue herons rise up from behind a fallen water oak. They are in no hurry to gain altitude but just fly a short distance and begin their quest for fish and frogs until my approach makes them repeat the process.

There is a major pile of logs ahead. Darting in, out, and around the logs are blue wing teals. When my approach exceeds their comfort zone, they take to the air in a flurry of wings.

This is it! A fine eight-point buck steps from the forest, lowers his head, and sniffs the air. Sensing no danger he walks majestically down a tiny, sandy spit to drink from the river. When he sees me, there is no reaction time; he simply explodes. He wheels so quickly his hooves throw sand into the water. Then, with no more than three leaps, he is up the sand bar and disappears into the forest.

I sit there breathless, and re-live the incident again and again.

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The sky is clear, and I feel good so I paddle late, 7:00 p. m. I have to use a flashlight to set up camp. The canoe is hugging the bank, so the deer do not see me.

A brilliant, three-quarter moon lights the river. All is quiet; not even the frogs make a sound. Then, in the distance, I hear an owl that is quickly answered by another near camp. They repeat a couple more times, then silence. They are playing. A breeze nudges the canoe toward some brush and limbs, and I

My camp is on a sandy hammock that was laid down by the river decades ago. River haws form an arch that shelters my tent.

Wednesday, October 20, 1999

Temperature at 7:30 a. m. is 39 degrees. River water temperature is 62 degrees.

The air is brisk, and the sunlight is filtering through the leaves when I crawl from the tent. My breath comes out as bursts of steam. Crows are making sure that everyone is awake. I paddle on, and Mr. Bacon's boat motor propeller resumes hitting logs and sandbars.

By the time I have broken camp and had my second cup of coffee, the sun has cleared the treetops. Its warmth feels good on my back. and a coke. I imagine what the hot water will feel like and accept without hesitation. After the

I shove the canoe into the water at 8:50. The river is filled with soft steam and makes looking for logs difficult. to go before I sleep". Before leaving, I ask him to call Doris and let her know where and when I estimate the next pick up

Ahead, through the steam and fog, I detect movement and see a doe watching me and raising and lowering her tail. Then I can make out another one standing by her; and ten feet below them, another doe stands at the water's edge. Some

They linger yet another few seconds while the doe at the water's edge scrambles up the steep bank. Then with flags raised, they quickly hide themselves in the forest. Polk County side.

Large quantities of Chinese tallow trees began appearing along the river's edge, north of Hwy. 59 bridge. The trend continues today. This plant may become to the forests what water hyacinth has become to our lakes. scattered along the

The sky is bluer than blue, and the sun quickly begins to warm things up. I take off my long sleeve shirt. is feeding a small stream of fresh water into the river.

I decide to make camp on a white sandbar 200 yards below the mouth of the creek.

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On the Angelina side of the river, 300 yards down, is a spike buck and another deer I cannot determine. The canoe is hugging the bank, so the deer do not see me.

I barely move the paddle through the water, not making a sound. The deer move out of my sight, but I can plainly see their reflection in the water. They are playing. A breeze nudges the canoe toward some brush and limbs, and I work the paddle as frantically as I dare.

The canoe breaks into the open, and there stands a six-pointer and a three-pointer. They still don't see me, and the six-pointer walks into the river, belly deep to drink. If I had been able to hold a camera instead of the paddle, I could have gotten an excellent picture.

A motor starts up downstream and roars and growls as it strikes logs and hits sandbars. Soon the boat comes into sight; and the operator, I later learn, is Mr. Bacon of Corrigan. He hailed me to stop and said, "I been seeing you and reading what you are doing. They been talking about building that dam nearly all my life." After a brief visit, I paddle on; and Mr. Bacon's boat motor propeller resumes hitting logs and sandbars.

Mr. Ed Havard invites me into his clubhouse for a shower and a coke. I imagine what that hot water will feel like and accept without hesitation. After the shower, we sit on the front porch of his log house and sip coffee. Reluctantly, I tell Mr. Havard that "I have miles to go before I sleep". Before leaving, I ask him to call Bonnie and let her know where and when I estimate the next pick up to be.

There are rapids just below his cabin. The river runs against 30-foot sandstone banks on the Polk County side. Water is trickling down the face of the stone banks. Both hardwoods and pines are growing atop the cliffs, providing some really beautiful scenery. Moments later a small, sandy, spring-fed stream enters from the Polk County side.

The Neches forks ahead. I can't decide which fork to take. The river fork forms a small, sandy island and quickly rejoins itself again. The island is covered with tall, straight cypress trees. These and other cypress trees scattered along the river give it character and charm.

The mouth of Biloxi Creek is feeding a small stream of fresh water into the river. I decide to make camp on a white sandbar 200 yards below the mouth of the creek.

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I have a quick bowl of Maruchan Picante Chicken Flavor noodles with vegetables. It is good. I didn't forget the hot chocolate.

Temperature at 7:00 p. m. is 54 degrees.

Thursday, October 21, 1999

Temperature at 7:30 a. m. is 37 degrees. A slight breeze is blowing from the north, and the sky is clear.

I break camp quickly, anxious to be on my way. Around the first bend in the river, I see two deer. One is a doe; the other is partially hidden. They seem to be eating acorns underneath a huge post oak.

A quarter of a mile downstream, I interrupt a small doe at the river's edge. She is standing at the foot of a 30-foot bluff bank; and when she turns to flee from my appearance, she tries to go straight up the bank. She makes it to the top; and, I think, manages to get one foot over when, either her strength fails, or the ground fails. At any rate, she tumbles all the way to the bottom. She tries again, but this time she takes the climb at an angle and succeeds.

This is the last deer I will see until just before camp. A large, very dark-brown doe runs away at my approach. This deer was unusually dark in color.

The shortage of wildlife today as compared with yesterday probably lies in the condition of the forest. Yesterday's forest was a more mature hardwood forest; whereas, today's ruin reveals a forest that is at least 30 years away from being a dependable mast producer. Even the cypress disappeared from the river's edge for several miles.

There is so much of East Texas history connected with this river. Today the canoe carried me past four, long ago abandoned, railroad trestles. All that remains are their slowly rotting pilings. Some of the pilings appear not to be creosote. Maybe they are cypress. Wouldn't it be interesting if we could know the stories these trestles could tell?

There have been numerous clubhouses for the past couple of days. Some are quite appealing, and I wonder how it would be to spend a couple of days there. Most of them, though, are ramshackle and sadly in need of repair.

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I have been told that one small clutch of clubhouses I will pass is called "Robbers' Roost". I look as I go by. I don't see any robbers. This is probably just a place where some old roosters come and hang out.

Shortly after I passed the mouth of Piney Creek, I left Polk County behind and picked up Tyler County on the west bank of the river.

The Neches has become the Neches of my youth. The channel is wide and deep, and the water runs a khaki color. The farther south I paddle the more plentiful the sandbars and occasional black gravel bars become.

There, to my left, is the mouth of Shawnee Creek. In the files of my memories are the days spent hunting in these woods with a man gone but alive in my thoughts. His name was Denman Dunkin.

Shawnee Creek also marks the place where Angelina County ends and Jasper County begins. Both of these counties (Jasper and Tyler) would have to be on my list of the five prettiest counties in East Texas.

Across the river from the mouth of Shawnee Creek is the site of old Ft. Teran. Legend had it, back in the 1950's, that the Spanish had been forced to abandon a small shipment of gold at this site. The gold was, supposedly, hidden in a small natural cave in the rock hill near the fort.

I visited the site numerous times as a youngster and was always amazed at the small shafts that gold seekers had chiseled deep into that rock, looking for the cave and gold. One gold seeker was killed with dynamite that he, obviously, was ill trained to handle.

The Neches begins to make another significant change on its journey south, especially on the Tyler County side. Many sections of the west bank are carved from solid rock. The tops of these banks and the hills that soar up behind them are forested with a mixture of shortleaf pine and mixed hardwoods.

The campsite for tonight is chosen for its accessibility. In rainy season, water will be roaring through here.

Many, if not most, of the times I dipped the paddle into the water today it struck the sandy bottom. The channel has become so wide and the water so shallow in many places that it easily could be waded with a common pair of rubber boots.

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Temperature at 7:00 p.m. is 62 degrees.

When Texas held its convention in Austin to withdraw from the Union and join the Confederacy, a Mr. Best was the delegate from Angelina County. Mr. Best gave Angelina County the distinction of being one of the few counties that chose Friday, October 22, 1999. He voted against secession.

Temperature at 7:00 a. m. is 40 degrees.

Just below the campsite is a tall cypress with so many knotholes I suspect the squirrels become confused. A big, crimson-crested "Indian Hen" pileated woodpecker is industriously scouring it for his next meal. He stops his work occasionally to utter his strange, piercing call.

There are giant boulders and great slabs of rock scattered everywhere as if by a mighty, angry hand. The river has become a series of riffles and small waterfalls. I thought the canoe would capsize a couple of times.

Yes! The Caddos had it right. This is truly the "Snowy River". The glistening sandy beaches would make the seashore envious.

I lay the paddle down and let the current carry the canoe. As many times as I have seen this river and the lands that surround it, I never appreciated the beauty that it held.

My reflections were brief. Straight ahead was a long, wide delta of glistening white sand pushed into the river by Billiams Creek. Billiams Creek is one of those spring-fed treasures of Tyler County. The stream of water flowing into the muddy river is crystal clear and of significant volume. I stop and walk on the sand.

Two personal observations I will make. Today there is much more vegetation growing on the sandbars and beaches than there was in the 1950's. Also, I noticed a really significant increase in the amount of algae growing on logs and rocks in the water somewhere between Hwy. 94 and Hwy. 69. It continues.

The appearance of Billiams Creek lets me know that I have completed the big loop in the river called "Best Bend". The Bests were early settlers of Texas and, for generations, lived a good life mostly off the fruits of the land.

NECHES RIVER CANOE EXPEDITION

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When Texas held its convention in Austin to withdraw from the Union and join the Confederacy, a Mr. Best was the delegate from Angelina County. Mr. Best gave Angelina County the distinction of being one of the few counties that chose to remain part of the Union. He voted against secession.

There is a crew of men working at the Hwy. 69 bridge when I arrive at 11:00 a.m. They are laying conduit for a fiber-optic cable that will allow the transfer of so much information so much faster that soon everybody will know everything.

Bonnie picked me up at 12:00 noon.

Richard M. Donovan

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NECHES RIVER CANOE EXPEDITION

Monday, October 25, 1999

The temperature was about 38 degrees at 8:00 a.m. when I nudged the canoe into the water at Hwy. 69 bridge. Steam was rising from the water, and two hawks were circling and screaming overhead.

Around the first bend a clubhouse sits in the place where the Dunkin Ferry once hauled passengers across the river for a fee. This was one of the last operating ferries on the Neches.

A few moments later the abandoned T & NO Railroad trestle loomed ahead; and immediately past that, the river carried me into the jewel of Angelina and Jasper Counties – Upland Island Wilderness. Within this wilderness can be found rolling hills of longleaf pines and river bottom hardwoods too numerous to note here. In some areas of the bottom lands a sea of palmetto flourishes beneath the hardwoods.

A number of champions call Upland Island home. The national champion American snow-bell tree, national champion barberry hawthorn, and the largest Florida basswood ever reported live here.

The national champion longleaf pine was found here until a windstorm in 1989 snapped the top off the giant. Growth rings indicated this Goliath was a growing tree when the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock.

The 165-foot state champion cherrybark oak sinks its roots into the rich wilderness soil, as does state champions shagbark hickory and parsley haw.

Other national marvels and botanical oddities make a visit to this wilderness a rewarding family outing.

Fifty minutes of leisurely paddling brings me to the Rocky Shoals Waterfall. I wait almost too long to beach the canoe. The falls make quite a roar as the water cascades over the edge and falls some two or three feet.

ORV (off-road vehicle) riders have discovered the falls and have beaten out a pretty fair trail through the wilderness to reach them. Of course, it is illegal to bring a motorized vehicle into the wilderness.

Immediately below the falls I expertly guide the canoe through the tricky gun site rapids and sit a little straighter on the seat with my chest out a bit.

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Graham Creek appears on my left. I have hunted many times up and down this creek. The palmetto stands in Graham Creek bottom are one of the most confusing places I have ever been. It is very easy to become lost in there on a cloudy day. It is true wilderness.

I encountered many long, flat rock ledges today, just above water level, that would make ideal spots for picnics or just, simply, rest stops.

I come to the mouth of a picturesque creek on the Jasper County side. The crystal clear water runs through a bending channel that is lined with cypress trees, and the water empties into the Neches at the foot of a boulder-strewn hill. This would be Falls Creek, I guess.

From the Tyler County side another of those rushing, clear streams pushes snow-white sand into the river. There aren't many creeks in the world that are any more appealing than these are.

No more than a mile or two downstream a small brook enters from the east bank and makes a noisy, little three-foot water fall.

If I were going to visit Old Aldridge Ghost Town, I would beach the canoe here and make the short hike to the old buildings. This is also a good place to connect with the Sawmill Hiking Trail that runs between Bouton Lake and Boykin Springs. This is a hike worth your time no matter where you access the trail.

The canoe is filthy. I stop at the next sandbar and wash the inside.

Numerous rapids have been a treat today. The canoe ran aground on rocks a couple of times, but I managed to keep it upright.

The first two-thirds of the trip from Hwy. 69 to Hwy. 255 are scenic with cypress trees, snow-white sandbars, rocks, clear creeks, and ferns of various kinds. For the most part, the forests along the banks contain a pleasing mix of hardwoods and pine.

In the last one-third of that stretch, the river becomes very wide, loses its current, and begins to show the appearance of becoming B. A. Steinhagen Lake.

Its time to look for a campsite for the night, and I angle for a sandbar downstream. As I pull close to shore and round the bend, I am within 75 feet of a six-foot 'gator lying on the sandbar. Another 50 feet downstream, a five-foot 'gator lies on a log. They both splash into the water as the canoe approaches.

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I seek a campsite elsewhere. signs of fall as well.

At 4:30 p.m. I cross under Hwy. 255 bridge. Ten Lake will reveal a memorable

Make camp and have a bowl of Fantastic Cajun Rice & Beans. On a scale of 1 to 10, this rates about a 4. today. Twenty-three of 'em. I saw almost all sizes, small, medium, and large. Large as in very BIG.

Temperature at 7:00 p.m. is 57 degrees.

One lying on a sandbar had to be seven feet long. Another I saw swimming could have been larger.

Tuesday, October 26, 1999

Alligators are only needed animals and stick warm, sunny spots when not

Temperature at 7:00 a.m. is 37 degrees.

The moon was as bright as day last night. It is clear and brisk this morning. Steam fairly boils up from my coffee cup, and my breath is a cloud of vapor.

Yesterday as I neared the 255 bridge, I began to pass many riverfront residences. This morning I can hear their roosters crowing and dogs barking.

There isn't a ripple in the water. The canoe slices through the water almost effortless with every stroke of the paddle.

A great blue heron "croank, croanks" his irritation at the approach of my canoe, then spreads those tremendous wings and gracefully lifts into the air.

Numerous clubhouses and residences line the riverbank. One frame house of Cajun style caught my attention. It was unpainted, with two stovepipes protruding through the roof. Blue smoke was curling gently upward from both pipes. It just looked cozy, nestled there by the river. Three large dogs came tearing out of nowhere and stood barking at the water's edge until I was out of sight.

Yellow signs on either side of the river tell me that I have entered State Wildlife Management areas. This is "forks of the river" country.

I think I identify the Angelina River channel, but I am not certain.

Chinese tallow trees grow on almost all available land in and around the part of the lake I am seeing. Some of the leaves are beginning to turn flaming red, purple, and orange.

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The cypress trees are showing signs of fall as well.

In a couple of weeks, a boat ride on Steinhagen Lake will reveal a memorable autumn scene.

Alligators were the show today. Twenty-three of 'em. I saw almost all sizes, small, medium, and large. Large as in very BIG.

One lying on a sandbar had to be seven feet long. Another I saw swimming could have been larger.

Alligators are cold-blooded animals and seek warm, sunny spots when not hunting for food.

As I approached such spots, I would hug the shore closely enough that they could not see the canoe until it was within 75 to 100 feet. They can move with unbelievable quickness. They make a terrific splash when they hit the water, thrashing that great tail.

There, up ahead, is the Hwy. 190 bridge.

I am ahead of schedule. My ride home won't be here until Thursday afternoon. That's o.k. I'll spend the time resting and fishing.

The plans were to spend one night at the Martin Dies, Jr. State Park just west of the bar ditch boat ramp.

I beached the canoe and walked over to select a site. The first thing I saw was a "For Day Use Only" sign. What a blow!

There is a Texas Parks & Wildlife truck parked near the washrooms. A man is loading his tools, preparing to leave. I hurriedly approach and ask if I can camp there for a couple of nights.

The man, Mr. Jerry Morrison, patiently listens to my story and suggests that he go get a pickup and take the gear and me to the camping park.

What a friendly thing to do! I am not sure I have enough paddling left in me to get there, even if I knew how to get there.

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Martin Dies, Jr. State Park is one of the top state parks that we have. The scenery is spectacular. The panorama of the smooth waters of the lake dotted with cypress trees is special, but my pleasure is the trees.

The campground is a microcosm of East Texas trees. Great swamp chestnut oaks, magnolias, white oaks, black gums, and towering pines are visible from the campsite. Many are dripping with Spanish moss.

The facility is clean and very well cared for. Lakeside campsite #44 is where they put me. First thing is to put the tent up and let it dry of last night's dew and condensation.

"Red sky in the morning, sailors take warning. Red sky at night, sailors delight." I grew up hearing one form or another of this old adage. Its origin goes back before Christ.

Sailors must be delighted tonight. The western sky is a big splash of red. Several more days of good weather lie ahead.

The hot chocolate tastes good as I sit and slowly sip it and watch night fall.

The sun moves quickly. You don't realize it during the day. From the time the bottom of that big orange orb first touches the horizon, in five minutes it is gone...until another day.

An armadillo appears from nowhere. He ambles here and there rooting up the neatly mowed grass along the water's edge. Suddenly, as if he has someplace to go, he scurries off, dragging his tail behind him, and disappears into the gathering dusk.

This truly remarkable journey is ended --two hundred miles, plus or minus, of the historic and beautiful Neches River. Some of the wildest country left in East Texas. I floated past the ghosts of many along the way. The Caddos, Cherokees, Shawnees, and Spanish Friars raised their hand as the canoe slipped by.

Then I heard the baying of dogs, the shouts of men, and the crack of rawhide whips as the hogs and cattle were punched out of the thickets for slaughter or marking.

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REFLECTIONS AND AFTERTHOUGHTS

Finally, there is the swish, swish sound of hard metal against soft wood, followed by the crashing thud of a 300-year-old tree striking the ground. Amidst all of this din was the lowing of oxen, the cursing of men, and the familiar crack of the whip.

It was all there. I saw it and heard it. I shall never forget the sights, sounds, and scents of the Neches. They will remain a part of me as long as I am.

The Neches of 1999 is still a wild and scenic river. With a minimum of work this historic waterway could provide outdoor adventure and recreation for thousands of Texans every year.

From U. S. Highway 175 in the north to U. S. Highway 190 in the south, the Neches meanders through two National Forests and mile after mile of remote river bottom woodlands. Its course is marked by sandstone outcrops, sticky clay, glistening sandy beaches, and a few small waterfalls. Numerous clean, clear spring-fed streams flow into the river on its way south. Boaters and canoeists would find the Neches a beautiful river on its way south. Sandy beaches ideal for camping, picnicking, and just, general living.

Richard M. Donovan
10-29-99

An abundance of wildlife calls the Neches bottomlands home. The dry weather preceding my trip dried up all but the most vigorous springs and seeps. A lack of places to drink caused many animals to rely on the river for water. This afforded me an ideal opportunity to see wild creatures as I paddled quietly along. Few days passed that I didn't see numerous white-tailed deer. At sundown the animals of the night took center stage. The coyotes and owls left me some haunting memories. Neither will I soon forget the sight of alligators sliding almost noiselessly into the water or thrashing wildly through grass and weeds at the surprise approach of my canoe.

The birds I saw were too numerous to deal with in this space. Wading birds, swimming birds, songbirds, and soaring birds. They are all there in profusion!

East Texans seem to have forgotten that fall, winter, and early spring are the time to enjoy the great outdoors. Sure, we have days of cold temperatures; but they are usually brief and are followed quickly by southerly winds and bright sunshine. In the Yukon and Alaska, thousands of people from Europe and the U. S. spend thousands of dollars to canoe in summer weather not nearly as pleasant as ours is in the winter.

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REFLECTIONS AND AFTERTHOUGHTS

Canoes are unobtrusive; they don't storm the natural world or ride over it, but drift upon it as part of its own silence. As you either care about what the land is or is not, so do you like or dislike quiet things...

Chances for being quiet nowadays are limited.

John Graves, *GOODBYE TO A RIVER*

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From U. S. Highway 175 in the north to U. S. Highway 190 in the south, the Neches meanders through two National Forests and mile-after-mile of remote river bottom woodlands. Its course takes it through sandstone outcrops, sticky clays, glistening sandy beaches, rock-filled rapids, and a three-foot waterfall. Numerous clean, clear spring-fed streams nourish the river on its way south. Boaters and canoeists would find the rock ledges and white, sandy beaches ideal for camping, picnicking, and just, generally, having fun.

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The weather for my Neches River Canoe Expedition was almost perfect. I got wet one evening. I had plenty of advance warning – dark clouds, sprinkles, and a little thunder, but I chose to make it to U. S. Highway 59. The mornings that the thermometer read in the 30s and 40s made it a pure delight to get up and sip that first cup of scalding coffee. Except for the time I got wet, I wasn't uncomfortable a moment of the entire trip.

There were several things I noted on the expedition that were disappointing. A couple are downright untenable.

I was truly shocked to find that there are only three places in the entire 200 miles that I paddled where a canoe or boat can be launched or retrieved safely. There is a reasonably good launch facility at U. S. Highway 84, and Texas Parks and Wildlife have provided good ramps at Texas Highway 7 and at U. S. Highway 59. (When I was there, the dock at Highway 7 was being overrun with heavy water trucks and a huge noisy pump). Texas Parks and Wildlife have another launching ramp a mile or so below Texas R road 255, but the road leading into this ramp is almost impassable in dry weather much less during rainy season.

This arrangement may be satisfactory for motor boats, though I doubt it; but it excludes all but the most dedicated canoeists and kayakers from the river. There isn't a single place on the river for a one-day family outing. Canoeists either have to stay overnight or risk injury and/or automobile damage getting their craft into or out of the river.

The Neches has several areas where tree falls make boating difficult, if not impossible. These areas are usually found at the extreme distances from the boat ramps. Fishermen and boaters usually keep the river open for several miles up and down the river from each launching site. The Big Slough Loop in the Davy Crockett National Forest has probably become unusable for most canoeists and kayakers except in times of high water.

It would seem to this writer that both the Texas Highway Department and Texas Parks and Wildlife could come up with the paltry funds necessary to build a couple more boat ramps and to open a narrow four-foot wide alley through the tree falls. My guess is that there are scores of young men doing time in jails or penal institutions that would relish an opportunity to work on these projects.

Beavers are doing unacceptable damage to the trees all up and down the river. They are particularly lethal to the gums (black gum, Tueplo gum, and sweet

Richard M. Donovan

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gum), but they attack other trees as well. It isn't uncommon to see three and four-foot diameter giants dead or dying because one of these furry creatures has eaten away the bottom two feet of its bark. We simply do not have enough big bottomland trees left to permit this destruction. I am not calling for the extermination of the beaver, just that their numbers need to be kept within acceptable limits.

For at least 40 years, sincere efforts have been made and significant amounts of money spent to "educate the public" on the evils of litter and pollution. "Don't Mess With Texas" can be recited by every Texan between the ages of 8 and 80.

Beverage cans, oil cans, paint cans, Coleman propane canisters, and plastic containers of all shapes and sizes are to be found in great drifts along the Neches. Anywhere there is a log across the river at water level or a treetop that skims the surface, piles of these items are evident. From my own unscientific survey, Budweiser is the choice of those adult beverage drinkers who prefer to pop a top and toss. Pepsi is highly preferred by those who like their beverage sweet and carbonated.

The State of Oregon seems to have put the right handle on this problem. A significant deposit is paid on almost every can or bottle sold.

Another observation I made was that somewhere north of U. S. Highway 59, the algae on rocks and logs seem to become conspicuously more luxuriant and flourishing. This may indicate that something is being introduced into the river that is causing these plants to flourish.

Our goals at the beginning of the Neches River Canoe Expedition were to:

- (1). Call attention to the recreational opportunities that the river offers.
- (2). Make the public aware that the Neches should be designated a "Wild and Scenic River."
- (3). Remind East Texans that our fall, winter, and early spring weather is ideal for enjoying the great outdoors.

I am confident we accomplished all three goals. The Neches wasn't unappreciative; in return it rewarded me with a once-in-a-lifetime adventure and a passion to keep it wild and free.

Richard M. Donovan

November 2, 1999

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Richard Donovan grew up hunting and fishing along the creeks and streams of the Neches River in East Texas. Following graduation from Zavalla High School in 1954, he earned a BBA degree from Stephen F. Austin State University.

He spent the next 20 years working for Temple Industries, now Temple-Inland. In 1976, Richard and his wife Bonnie opened Donovan Real Estate, Inc. in Lufkin and operated that firm until its sale in 1996.

The Donovans are now retired and living on a wooded two and one-half acres in Lufkin. Their time is spent working on issues important to the East Texas Forest and Wildlife Coalition, a group they helped form to preserve a remnant of wildlife habitat in East Texas.